

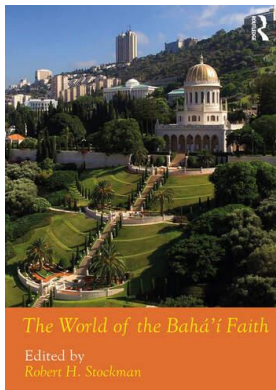
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

Robert H. Stockman

The Universal House of Justice

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Todd Smith

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11

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Todd Smith

This chapter describes the significance of the Universal House of Justice for the development of the Bahá'í community as well as for the well-being of humanity as a whole. To understand the singular role of this global institution, the chapter first provides an overview of the Covenant that Bahá'u'lláh made with His followers and the essential place of the House of Justice within this Covenant. The chapter then discusses how the House of Justice was first established in 1963 and the manner in which it is regularly elected. Finally, it considers the unique station of the House of Justice as well as the powers and duties it exercises in guiding the Bahá'ís around the world in their efforts to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and promote the unity of humankind. Particular emphasis is placed on its mandate to preserve the sacred text, facilitate growth, and enact legislation. It is recommended that this chapter be read along with the chapter 'The Writings of the Universal House of Justice' (Smith), which offers further insights into the vast range of its guidance as it relates to advancing social, material, and spiritual development at the individual and collective levels.

Unity and the covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is understood by Bahá'ís to be unparalleled in the annals of human history. It ensures that the Faith will remain united—a feat never before achieved by any religious or social movement for any meaningful length of time. Each religion of the past has invariably fallen into schism mainly because, upon the passing of its Founder, disagreements arose over the issue of succession and thus over whom the followers should turn to in order to ensure the lasting cohesion of the faith. Directly related to this problem were questions that would emerge over how to interpret the meaning of the sacred text, when written, as well as over matters not expressly addressed in the text itself. Rival interpretations and solutions would be advanced in response, and power struggles would inevitably ensue, leading to the creation of different sects.¹

To prevent the Bahá'í Faith from suffering the same fate, an instrument was needed not only to avert conflict and contention after the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, but also to canalize the forces unleashed by His revelation and 'insure their harmonious and continuous operation' (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*) in bringing about a world civilization. This instrument, anticipated in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book, and articulated in a tablet He called the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, or 'the Book of My Covenant' (*Tablets*), is the institution of the Covenant.

Indeed, '[t]he pivot of the oneness of mankind' is understood by Bahá'ís to be 'nothing else but the power of the Covenant' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd in Shoghi Effendi 1944). This Covenant is referred to as the Lesser Covenant and was established by Bahá'u'lláh with His followers. It is distinguished from the Greater Covenant established by God, whereby God always provides the necessary guidance that humanity needs through His Messengers. Humanity's obligation to the Greater Covenant is to recognize these Messengers at the time of Their appearance and to follow Their teachings.

Fundamental to the Lesser Covenant is Bahá'u'lláh's appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as both His successor and the interpreter of His teachings. The duty of His followers is to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá on matters pertaining to the development of the Cause and for authoritative interpretations regarding the meaning of the text, particularly in cases of disagreement. In line with the independent investigation of truth—a key principle of the Bahá'í Faith—believers are encouraged to study the writings of the Faith and to arrive at their own understandings of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, but they are proscribed from declaring their own interpretations as authoritative or from seeking to impose their views on others. Aside from the sacred text itself, there can be only one source of authority if the Cause is to be held together, flourish, and promote the betterment of humanity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, known as the Centre of the Covenant, in turn perpetuated the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh through His own Will and Testament.² In this document, He safeguards the unity of the Faith by establishing the institution of the Guardianship and appointing His oldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian of the Faith. All believers are enjoined in this document to turn to Shoghi Effendi as the centre of the Cause after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and as the authorized interpreter of the writings of the Faith, which now included those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. Finally, the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the Universal House of Justice, which, as was known by the Bahá'í community at the time, was first ordained by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in other tablets and thus explicitly instituted in the sacred text as an indispensable feature of the Lesser Covenant. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will specifically outlines the method by which the House of Justice is to be formally established and the scope of its functions.

Towards the establishment of the Universal House of Justice

Prior to reading the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi assumed that he would be given the responsibility of convening the election of the Universal House of Justice, not having any notion that he would, in fact, be appointed the Guardian of the Cause. Then, shortly after his appointment, Shoghi Effendi considered whether or not it would be timely to establish the Universal House of Justice. He knew that 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had contemplated its formation during His lifetime and had, in fact, made arrangements for its election in the event that the threats being made on His life materialized (Universal House of Justice 2008a).

After consulting with a number of knowledgeable believers from both the East and the West, Shoghi Effendi ultimately decided that the community needed first to strengthen itself administratively at both the local and national levels—that is, devote its energy to laying the necessary foundations for the establishment of the Universal House of Justice by first raising up a sufficient number of institutions that would govern the affairs of the believers in localities and countries around the world. These institutions are currently referred to as local Spiritual Assemblies and national Spiritual Assemblies and will in the future be referred to as local Houses of Justice and national Houses of Justice. Also foreseen among the necessary steps was 'the appointment of the International Bahá'í Council and its evolution into an elected body', which was to be 'the precursor to the Universal House of Justice' (Universal House of Justice 2008a) and the formation

of which was announced by Shoghi Effendi in a cablegram dated 9 January 1951, where he states that it

is invested with threefold function: first, to forge link with authorities of newly emerged State; second, to assist me to discharge responsibilities involved in erection of mighty superstructure of the Báb's Holy Shrine; third, to conduct negotiations related to matters of personal status with civil authorities.

Raising up these institutions was a predominant objective of Shoghi Effendi's thirty-six-year ministry. The fruition of this process would be the election of the Universal House of Justice, described by him (1947) as the 'last and crowning stage in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh'.

Shoghi Effendi passed away in 1957, having served as the Guardian of the Faith for thirty-six years and having ensured that the laws and principles of the Faith were promulgated and applied according to the requirements of the times, that the Faith was protected from schism and external attacks, and that the fundamental elements of the Administrative Order were firmly established. During the course of his ministry, he also wrote many millions of words delineating the essential features of the teachings; translating the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá; narrating the history of the Faith; systematically coordinating the growth and consolidation of the Bahá'í community; and providing guidance on all aspects of Bahá'í community life. He thereby guaranteed that the institution of the Guardianship would continue to exert its influence over the progress of the Cause throughout the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.³

Upon his passing, the leadership of the Faith was provisionally taken up by the Hands of the Cause of God, senior institution members who were themselves appointed by Shoghi Effendi between 1951 and 1957 to help promote the propagation and protection of the Faith worldwide. The Hands of the Cause, also referred to as the 'Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic world commonwealth' (Universal House of Justice 1974), faithfully continued his work, guiding the worldwide Bahá'í community to the stage when, in 1961, the International Bahá'í Council became an elected body and, finally, to when the Universal House of Justice could be established in 1963.

Election of the Universal House of Justice

As noted earlier, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament outlines the general manner in which the Universal House of Justice is to be elected—namely, by universal suffrage consisting of a three-stage process. The precise details of this process are not fixed, but it is presently arranged as follows.

During the first stage, believers are organized into electoral units, and they participate once a year in what are called unit conventions. At these conventions, adult believers elect one or more delegates in proportion to the population of the unit area in which they reside. During the second stage, the elected delegates for that year convene during the Riḍván period (late April/early May) at an annual national convention to elect nine members of the national Spiritual Assembly for their country. They also consult with the national Assembly on the development of the Faith in their country and offer recommendations for its continued advancement. Finally, during the third stage, all members of the national Spiritual Assemblies from around the world gather once every five years during the Riḍván period at the spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith in Haifa, Israel, for the International Bahá'í Convention. There, they elect the nine members of the Universal House of Justice, who then serve for five years on this body until the next international convention. Unlike all the other institutions, only men are eligible to be elected to the Universal House of Justice. The reason for this provision is not presently known,

but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that its wisdom ‘will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon’ (*Selections*). What is clear, however, is that this restriction is divorced from any notion that men are superior to women. The writings of the Faith are unequivocal about the equality of women and men, and both are eligible to serve on all the other institutions of the Faith.

At each stage of the electoral process, all voting is done by secret ballot and in the absence of any campaigning whatsoever. While all delegates and members of institutions strive to serve to the best of their abilities, no one puts him- or herself forward as the best candidate or even aspires to be elected. There are similarly no nominations or any discussions among believers about who has or does not have the right qualifications for membership. Such measures afford each believer at every stage of the electoral process the opportunity to vote with the greatest degree of liberty possible. Specifically, the individual is free from the influences of partisanship, backbiting, propaganda, or other forms of loaded language that can unduly plague one’s conscience when casting a ballot. The individual is also free to choose from among all adult believers as opposed to just those few who may otherwise deem themselves worthy or have the resources to draw attention to themselves.

At the same time, the individual is encouraged to keep certain qualities in mind when casting his or her ballot. For the membership of the Universal House of Justice, one is advised to consider individuals who are, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, ‘manifestations of the fear of God’, ‘daysprings of knowledge and understanding’, ‘steadfast in God’s faith’, and ‘well-wishers of all mankind’ (*Will and Testament*). When electing members of any institution, electors are also urged, according to Shoghi Effendi,

to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.

(1925)

On 21 April 1963, one hundred years after the declaration of Bahá’u’lláh, the Universal House of Justice was elected for the first time. At the convention, called by the Hands of the Cause, who had ruled themselves ineligible for election to this supreme institution, ballots were received from all members of the fifty-six national Spiritual Assemblies then in the world. Two hundred and eighty-eight members of these assemblies were able to attend the convention in person. It was a momentous occasion. Once again, five-and-a-half years after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Bahá’í community had a centre of authority, an institution which, along with the Guardianship, is one of the twin successors of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and thus secures ‘the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of the Faith’ (Universal House of Justice 1996).

Significance of the Universal House of Justice

The role of the Universal House of Justice is considered by Bahá’ís to be without parallel. It is referred to as ‘the supreme organ of the Bahá’í Commonwealth’ (Shoghi Effendi 1929) and as ‘a House which posterity will regard as the last refuge of a tottering civilization’ (Shoghi Effendi 1933). The station and functions of this global institution are stupendous in scope. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in His Will and Testament: ‘Unto this body all things must be referred. It enacteth all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text. By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved’.



Figure 11.1 Seat of the Universal House of Justice.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

As such, the House of Justice complements the institution of the Guardianship, which, owing to the writings and legacy of Shoghi Effendi, is ever present in and fundamental to the unity and development of the Cause. As alluded to earlier, his writings are inextricably linked to the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are also the source to which all the institutions—including the Universal House of Justice—and individual believers turn for authoritative interpretations of the fundamental tenets of the Faith. Without them, it would be impossible for the Bahá'í community to bring into effect the world order envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. As explained by the Universal House of Justice itself:

While the line of Guardians has ended, the Covenant is preserved. The vast body of interpretations of Shoghi Effendi informs the decisions of the Universal House of Justice as the Faith continues its onward march. The unity of the Faith is safeguarded, and the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's great purpose for humanity assured. 'The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation,' Bahá'u'lláh has stated. 'Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men's fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure'.

(2008a)

Moreover, while both institutions, according to Shoghi Effendi (1930), 'apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world', they are also complementary in that they fulfil different functions. As we have seen, the Guardian is the interpreter of the Word of God and thus 'reveals

what the Scripture means' (Universal House of Justice 1965). The House of Justice, on the other hand, is 'invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings' (ibid.). In this respect, neither can 'infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other' (ibid.). Instead, these twin successors 'supplement each other's authority and functions, and are permanently and fundamentally united in their aims' (Shoghi Effendi 1934).

Responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice

As to the specific powers and duties of the House of Justice, it is responsible for the affairs of the peoples of the world and for solving the ever-changing problems that must necessarily arise as humanity advances on its path towards a world civilization that reflects its inherent oneness. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets*) states the following in His Tablet of *Ishráqát* (Splendors):

Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. . . . It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them. All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice.

In other words, the House of Justice is the final arbiter on all questions pertaining to the social and spiritual evolution of humanity towards the new world order envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. Its solutions to problems as they arise, moreover, are considered infallible and thus binding. Bahá'u'lláh affirms that 'God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth' (qtd in Shoghi Effendi 1934). 'Abdu'l-Bahá, elaborating on this point, explains in His Will and Testament that God ordained the Universal House of Justice 'as the source of all good and freed from all error'. He further states:

It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself.

(ibid.)

It is not possible in this chapter to outline, let alone explore, the full range of matters for which the Universal of Justice is responsible. To gain a sense of the magnitude of its role, however, it is helpful to quote from *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (1972), which states that the House of Justice is invested with the powers and duties to

advance the interests of the Faith of God; to proclaim, propagate and teach its Message; to expand and consolidate the institutions of its Administrative Order; to usher in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh; to promote the attainment of those spiritual qualities which should characterize Bahá'í life individually and collectively; to do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace; and to foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world.

According to this same document, the House of Justice also has the duty to render judgements in cases where Bahá'í laws have been breached; develop the spiritual and administrative centre

of the Bahá'í Faith in Haifa and 'Akká; safeguard the inviolability of the sacred texts of the Faith and ensure that they are preserved, analysed, and classified; oversee the publication of these texts and their translation into English and other languages; administer the flow of financial resources; cultivate relations with governments and other organizations of civil society; and defend human rights and uphold human honour. Among other responsibilities, it is, moreover, 'invested with the more general functions of protecting and administering the Cause, solving obscure questions and deciding upon matters that have caused difference' (Universal House of Justice 1969). The remainder of this chapter briefly examines the powers and duties of the House of Justice as they pertain to preserving the integrity of the sacred text, guiding the unfoldment of the Cause, and enacting legislation.

Safeguarding the inviolability of the sacred text and the integrity of the teachings

The Bahá'í Faith allows the widest possible latitude for believers to explore the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and share with each other their various interpretations. Freedom of conscience and the liberty to exchange insights are pivotal to the generative power of the Cause. At the same time, and as alluded to earlier, no individual perspective on any matter concerning the teachings carries a modicum of authority in the community. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh has decreed that no individual believer can establish him- or herself as an expert on any subject concerning the revelation, much less aspire to arrogate any power to him- or herself or form a following. Doing so would directly contravene the central purpose of the Lesser Covenant, which is to maintain the unity of the Cause while also upholding the central principle of the independent investigation of truth. Instead, the individual is enjoined to offer his or her insights in a spirit of humility and with the conviction that understanding evolves through application, consultation, and ongoing meditation on the meaning of different texts.

If, however, disagreement over the interpretation of a particular text does become a potential source of disunity, it can be referred to the House of Justice, which may choose to elucidate the matter. Elucidating the matter does not mean that the House of Justice provides an infallible interpretation of the text in question. It does mean, however, that it renders a definitive explanation that settles the matter until it decides otherwise. By accepting the elucidation as authoritative and acting accordingly, the community maintains its unity while also championing the individual's right to freedom of conscience. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns of the damage that can result without the conclusions of the House of Justice:

[T]he deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.

(qtd in Universal House of Justice 2008b)

The House of Justice also renders decisions on matters pertaining to its legislative function, discussed later, or that determine 'what must be done in cases where the revealed text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit' (Universal House of Justice 1998). The believers,

then, obey its decisions because they understand that such obedience is consistent with the will of God, promotes harmony in the community, and contributes to the welfare of humanity, which is, consciously or not, striving to realize its inherent oneness. This is not a blind obedience, but rather one grounded in the mindful conviction that true freedom entails loyalty to a divinely appointed authority untainted by worldly trappings. As such, it is an obedience that safeguards the integrity of the teachings of the Faith along with the individual's personal relationship to them. With the passing of Shoghi Effendi, only the Universal House of Justice can ensure such a dynamic balance between collective harmony and freedom of thought—a balance which is so essential to the vitality of religious faith and the progress of humankind.

Guiding the unfoldment of the Faith

As explained in a letter written on its behalf (1996), the House of Justice has 'the responsibility for ensuring the unity and progress of the Cause of God in accordance with the revealed Word'. To this end, the Bahá'í community has been carrying out its endeavours within the context of a series of global plans, which derive their ultimate mandate from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plans, which began during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi in 1937 and which are now coordinated by the House of Justice. These plans are of varying durations, so far lasting anywhere from one to ten years. Their overall aim has been to enable the community to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh progressively and thereby effectuate individual and social transformation for the betterment of humanity. Having 'labored assiduously within the framework of the global Plans issued by the House of Justice', the community has thus 'succeeded in establishing a pattern of Bahá'í life that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards the spiritual revival of society' (Universal House of Justice 2006).

Critical to channeling these energies is the focus the House of Justice places on capacity building among a growing number of Bahá'ís and their collaborators. Because of this focus, the Faith 'has made significant strides in multiplying its human resources through a program of training that reaches the grassroots of the community and has discovered methods and instruments for establishing a sustainable pattern of growth' (ibid.). The programme of training has been especially vital in developing the knowledge, qualities, attitudes, and skills needed to carry out various acts of service. For more on this theme, the reader is referred to the companion chapter to this one, 'The Writings of the Universal House of Justice' (Smith), which also discusses the interactive relationship between the experience the Bahá'ís and their collaborators generate and the guidance the House of Justice continuously provides to further cultivate the community-building process.

Also critical to channeling the energies of the community is an evolving Administrative Order. While certain institutions, such as local Spiritual Assemblies and national Spiritual Assemblies (to evolve into local Houses of Justice and national Houses of Justice), will exist throughout the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, there is provision in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh for other institutions and agencies to be established as the House of Justice deems necessary. As explained in the chapter on Bahá'í administration (Smith), the institutions of the Faith emerge and develop in response to the dynamics of growth. One example is the Regional Bahá'í Council. Having gained experience with regional bodies in different countries in recent years, the House of Justice decided in 1997 that the time had come 'to formalize a new element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, to be designated as "Regional Bahá'í Councils"' (1997). This institution was given certain functions associated with the expansion and consolidation of the Faith that had previously resided with the national Spiritual Assemblies of those countries. There are now Councils in multiple countries around the world.

Enacting legislation

Finally, a fundamental way in which the House of Justice guides the development of the Faith is by determining when and where certain laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh should be applied. It does so by taking into account the conditions of society and the state of civil law where such laws are being considered for application. Many laws were applied during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi since the conditions for their application were propitious at the time. These include the laws of fasting, saying one's obligatory prayers, obtaining parental consent for marriage, and avoiding alcoholic drinks. On the other hand, he delayed the implementation of other laws pending the emergence of more favourable circumstances. As Shoghi Effendi explains:

[T]he Laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Aqdas are, whenever practicable and not in direct conflict with the Civil Law of the land, absolutely binding on every believer or Bahá'í institution whether in the East or in the West. Certain laws . . . should be regarded by all believers as universally and vitally applicable at the present time. Others have been formulated in anticipation of a state of society destined to emerge from the chaotic conditions that prevail today.

(qtd in the Introduction to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

More recently, the Universal House of Justice has deemed it suitable to apply additional laws of the revelation. For example, along with reciting the daily obligatory prayer, it is now universally binding for Bahá'ís to repeat the Greatest Name—Alláh-u-Abhá ('God is the Most Glorious')—ninety-five times each day. This law was not required of Bahá'ís in the West until 1999. In its letter explaining the implementation of 'this simple act of worshipful meditation', the House of Justice highlights the connection between individual devotions and community life and also connects it to the law of the House of Worship (the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*). It states (1999):

The spiritual growth generated by individual devotions is reinforced by loving association among the friends in every locality, by worship as a community and by service to the Faith and to one's fellow human beings. These communal aspects of the godly life relate to the law of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* which appears in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Although the time has not come for the building of local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs*, the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all and the involvement of Bahá'í communities in projects of humanitarian service are expressions of this element of Bahá'í life and a further step in the implementation of the Law of God.

On this point, it is worth noting that in its Riḍván 2012 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, the House of Justice announced that the time had come for the building of five local and two national Houses of Worship where conditions were favourable.

As discussed earlier, the House of Justice also has the prerogative to enact laws that are not expressly revealed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* but which are nonetheless indispensable for promoting the betterment of humankind and the welfare of the Bahá'í community itself. A recent example is the clarification of certain provisions of the Bahá'í (Badí') calendar, which Bahá'ís were called upon to adopt in 2014 '[in] keeping with the principle governing the gradual unfoldment and progressive application of the Teachings' (Universal House of Justice 10 July 2014). While the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá each outlined certain features of this calendar, it was left to the House of Justice to decide on 'the means for the determination of Naw-Rúz, the accommodation of the lunar character of the Twin Holy Birthdays within the solar year, and the fixing of the dates of the Holy Days within the Badí' calendar' (*ibid.*).

Subsidiary provisions such as these are necessary because, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, ‘the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place’ (qtd in Universal House of Justice 1966). Unlike the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which are immutable—that is, until the revelation of the next Manifestation of God—those legislated by the House of Justice can be repealed or abrogated by that same body as changing circumstances warrant. Through the decisions of the House of Justice, therefore, ‘the channel of Divine guidance, providing flexibility in all the affairs of mankind, remains open’ (Universal House of Justice 1963).

This distinction highlights a key feature of the Bahá’í Faith, namely, the dynamic interplay it maintains between the virtues of consistency and flexibility. Specifically, the inviolable laws and ordinances enjoined by Bahá’u’lláh are, as explained by Shoghi Effendi (1930), supplemented by those requirements ‘deemed necessary’ by the House of Justice ‘to incorporate into [the machinery of the Cause] in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements’. ‘The first,’ Shoghi Effendi continues, ‘preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society’ (ibid.). Many ethical questions, for example, will have to be addressed in the future as a result of the ongoing advances in science, medicine, and technology.

Conclusion

Bahá’u’lláh states the following in His Tablet of Maqṣúd (*Tablets*): ‘The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.’ Through His Covenant, Bahá’u’lláh has confirmed that the members of Bahá’í community will always have a centre of infallible authority to turn to, thus guaranteeing the community’s enduring and evolving unity. The Universal House of Justice is now this centre of authority with the responsibility of addressing matters pertaining to realizing the world order envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. As such, and among many other powers and duties, it solves problems that require elucidation or may be a source of dispute, administers the growth and affairs of the Cause, stipulates the laws and ordinances required for the continual evolution of the community, and provides a continual flow of guidance that stimulates and frames the efforts of the Bahá’ís and their collaborators to promote the oneness of humankind.

Notes

- 1 It is worth mentioning that the same can be said of all social movements, no matter their origins. Invariably, they have all succumbed to the forces of disputation. Marxism is a clear case in point as it has fragmented into multiple forms. The same can be said of any ideological position. Being a liberal today means many different things, which causes varied political tensions, as does being a conservative.
- 2 There is much to say about the importance and content of this document, which articulates the main features of the Administrative Order of the Bahá’í Faith, is considered the ‘Charter of Bahá’u’lláh’s New World Order’ (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*) and, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, ‘constitutes the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá’í Faith’ (Shoghi Effendi 1929). To this end, interested readers are encouraged to read the chapters in this volume on the Covenant (Vafáí), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Alkan), the writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Yazdani), and the Administrative Order (Smith).
- 3 See the chapter ‘Shoghi Effendi’ (Hollinger) and the chapters about the writings of Shoghi Effendi in English and Persian (Hutchison and Yazdani) in this volume for more information on his ministry.

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