

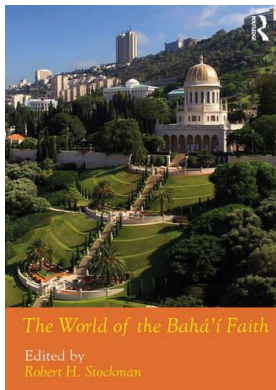
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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1

OVERVIEW

The Central Figures, the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Covenant

Shahin Vafai

This chapter offers an overview of the Central Figures and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith from its inception in 1844 until today. The Bahá'í Faith is based on the teachings of three Central Figures: the Báb (1819–1850), Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921). Their successors were the two principal institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order—the Guardianship, which was occupied by Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) from 1921 until 1957, and the Universal House of Justice, which, since its establishment in 1963, has been the Head of the Bahá'í Faith. In addition to exploring the claims, authority, and functions of these Figures and institutions, the discussion that follows briefly summarizes their history and achievements. Also examined in this chapter is the Bahá'í concept of the Covenant, the arrangements described in Bahá'í texts for the succession of authority and the means for the maintenance of the unity and integrity of the Bahá'í Faith. Subsequent chapters examine the lives and writings of the Central Figures and Shoghi Effendi as well as the establishment of the Universal House of Justice and its communications.

The Báb

The first of the Bahá'í Faith's Central Figures was Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad, a native of Shiraz, Iran, who came to be known as the Báb ('the Gate'). In the 1840s, the Báb, a merchant in His twenties, advanced the twofold claim of being the Mouthpiece of God on earth and the Herald of One greater than Himself. As to the former claim, He asserted that He was a Prophet or 'Manifestation of God', like Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and other Founders of the world's great religions. The Báb, moreover, averred that He was the long-awaited promised one, in particular, the Qa'im and the Mahdi awaited by Muslims.

The Báb's explanations of the station, functions, and relationship of the Manifestations of God laid the doctrinal foundations of the Bahá'í Faith, revealing the nature of His own claim and how He related to His followers. The Báb taught that God is inaccessible to humanity and that the only path to knowing God is recognizing His Manifestation. Therefore, whoever recognizes the Manifestation of God 'hath known all that is true and right, and hath attained all that is good and seemly' (The Báb, *Selections*, 11). He also declared that the Manifestations did not present conflicting approaches to God; rather, They have appeared in the world as part of one spiritual process, like the repeated appearance of the same sun: 'The process of the rise and

setting of the Sun of Truth will thus indefinitely continue—a process that hath had no beginning and will have no end' (The Báb, *Selections*, 106).

In addition to declaring Himself a Manifestation of God, the Báb maintained that He was the forerunner of, or 'the Gate' to, One greater than Himself. This figure, whom the Báb referred to as 'Him Whom God shall make manifest', would have the mission of inaugurating an era of righteousness and peace. The writings of the Báb are replete with references to 'Him Whom God shall make manifest'. Many references in the Báb's writings implied the fairly imminent appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest, such as nine or nineteen years after the time of the Báb.

The Báb's claims evoked an immediate response from His countrymen. Within a few years of the declaration of His mission, thousands from all classes of Persian society, including the Shah's emissary (Siyyid Yahyáy-i-Dárábí), who had been delegated to investigate the Báb's assertions, had been won over to the Báb's religion. Threatened by the Báb's growing movement, the organized forces of church and state quickly arose in opposition to Him and His followers. Supported by the Muslim religious hierarchy, Persian authorities arrested and exiled the Báb and incarcerated Him for over three years. They also took the life of nearly every one of the leading figures in the Bábí community. When such actions did not have the desired effect, Mírzá Taqí Khán, the Grand Vizir of Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, ordered that the Báb be put to death. The order was carried out in July 1850 in the city of Tabriz, where a firing squad publicly executed the Báb before thousands of onlookers. In the years immediately preceding and following the Báb's death, some 20,000 of His followers were killed for their religious beliefs.

Beyond the influence the Báb had on the lives of thousands of Persians during and immediately after His ministry, who accepted His claims and were even willing to suffer for His Cause, His long-term impact may be measured in other ways. The Báb left a permanent legacy through His extensive writings, comprising approximately five million words, which continue to be studied more than a century and half after His death. The continuing influence of the Báb is most prominently seen in the millions of followers of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide who regard Him as one of the two Founders of their religion; study His life and teachings; recite His prayers; annually commemorate His birth, declaration, and martyrdom; and pay homage at His Shrine. The bicentenary of the birth of the Báb, which occurred in 2019, was celebrated by Bahá'í communities in thousands of localities around the world.

Bahá'u'lláh

The highest ranking of the Bahá'í Faith's three Central Figures was Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, surnamed Bahá'u'lláh ('the Glory of God'). Bahá'u'lláh was an early follower of the Báb, who had commissioned His first disciple, Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í, to deliver His message to Bahá'u'lláh. In turn, Bahá'u'lláh immediately accepted and arose to champion the Báb's Cause. Due to His prominence and defense of the Báb's Faith, Bahá'u'lláh was persecuted, like many of the Báb's followers. In 1852, a couple of obscure youth, believing that Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh had been responsible for the Báb's death, made an unsuccessful attempt to kill the Sháh. Though Bahá'u'lláh had no involvement in the matter, He and many other followers of the Báb were arrested. He was confined for some four months in the infamous 'Black Pit' dungeon in Tehran. Bahá'u'lláh would later describe, in an epistle to Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, that it was during this imprisonment that He received the first intimation of His mission:

O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons*, 98; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 102)

This experience occurred in the ninth year following the inauguration of the Báb's religion. However, it was not until 1863—nineteen years from the inception of the mission of the Báb—that Bahá'u'lláh publicly disclosed to others His claim to be the one anticipated by the Báb and God's previous Manifestations.

The Persian authorities released Bahá'u'lláh from prison in 1853 and decreed that He go into exile. Declining an offer from the Russian government for refuge in Russia, Bahá'u'lláh chose instead to go, with His family, to Baghdad in the Ottoman Empire. The nearly decade-long period Bahá'u'lláh was in Baghdad witnessed some of His most important literary works. Among these were the 'Hidden Words', a collection of moral aphorisms that constitute the essence of His ethical teachings, as well as the 'Seven Valleys', His greatest mystical composition. The most important book Bahá'u'lláh wrote during this time was the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (the Book of Certitude), the preeminent doctrinal work of His ministry. As Bahá'u'lláh's prestige grew in Baghdad, Persian authorities—fearful of the renewal of the influence of the Bábí religion—urged the Ottoman government to exile Him farther away from Persia. Ottoman authorities acceded to the request and in 1863 effected Bahá'u'lláh's transfer to Istanbul. Immediately before His departure from Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh declared His mission to His companions. Over time, as Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be 'Him Whom God shall make manifest' and the promised Manifestation of God became known, the vast majority of the Báb's followers accepted Him. Bahá'u'lláh would later describe the period of His declaration in Baghdad as the 'Most Great Festival' and the 'King of Festivals' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 112).

Following Bahá'u'lláh's transfer to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Persian officials feared that He might attract prominent persons there, so they pressed Ottoman authorities to relocate Him, this time to a more remote location. Four months after arriving in Istanbul, Bahá'u'lláh and His family were exiled to the city of Edirne, located at the western edge of the empire, where He lived for just under five years. When this action did not extinguish Bahá'u'lláh's influence, Ottoman authorities decided to take more drastic action by exiling Him, His family members, and some of His devotees to the prison city of 'Akká in the Holy Land. In late August 1868, Bahá'u'lláh and His companions arrived in 'Akká, where He was initially incarcerated in a prison within the prison city. He was subsequently transferred to house arrest. However, as the local population, including officials, became familiar with Bahá'u'lláh, He became a respected figure, and His conditions of confinement were relaxed, though He nominally remained a prisoner for the rest of His life.

During His years in Edirne and 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation of His mission took a new form: collectively to the kings and rulers of the world and individually to several of them. He addressed Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Azíz, Náşiri'd-Dín Sháh, Napoleon III (twice), Queen Victoria, Tsar Alexander II, Pope Pius IX, and other political and religious leaders (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons*; Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 171–76, 206–13). Bahá'u'lláh enunciated, in the course of these epistles and in other writings during His twenty-four years in 'Akká, spiritual and social teachings and concepts related to the governance of society. He described His mission as 'to build anew the whole world' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 100). Of the principles set forth in these writings, the most vital is that of the oneness and wholeness of the human race. 'The earth', He affirmed, 'is but one country, and mankind its citizens' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 250). Further, 'The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 286).

Bahá'u'lláh wrote His most important work—the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ('The Most Holy Book')—a few years after His exile to 'Akká. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh set forth His major laws and ordinances on prayer, fasting, marriage, divorce, inheritance, burial, and other matters. Further, the Book contained various exhortations and prohibitions and discussed

spiritual concepts and principles. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas is distinctive among the holy books of the world's faiths in that it addressed issues that historically have been the cause of division in religion: namely, questions of succession, interpretation, and administration following the passing of the founder of the religion. In it, Bahá'u'lláh pointed to one who would succeed Him: 'When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root' (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 121). He also identified one who, after His passing, would be an interpreter of His writings: 'refer ye whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him Who hath branched from this mighty Stock' (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 174). In the Kitáb-i-'Ahd (the Book of the Covenant), Bahá'u'lláh quoted the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and made explicit what had been implicit in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: namely, identifying His eldest son, 'Abbás Effendi (later known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá or 'Servant of Bahá'), as the figure alluded to in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 221). In yet another work, in reference to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh emphasized: 'Whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My Beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me' (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 135).

As detailed further later in this chapter, Bahá'u'lláh also established in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in His other writings an 'Order'—a system of governance—that had the potential to administer His Faith for centuries into the future. Through His appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor and authorized interpreter, Bahá'u'lláh established a Covenant with His followers that was intended to preserve the unity and integrity of His Faith. This Covenant was perpetuated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá through the Administrative Order that Bahá'u'lláh had created and whose features 'Abdu'l-Bahá would elaborate. The essence of the Covenant is, according to authoritative Bahá'í texts, the continuation of divine guidance after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh through the presence in the world of an institution to which His followers could turn and which can state the will of God. Whereas the absence of a clear, explicit, and written designation of the successor of the Manifestation of God has in the past led to dissensions, controversies, and schisms, Bahá'u'lláh sought to prevent that situation from occurring in His religion by instituting the Covenant. Thus, for followers of Bahá'u'lláh, the authoritative Bahá'í texts determine the questions of succession, interpretation, and administration. Because of the clarity of those texts, if an individual attempts to claim authority, create division, or deviate from the original teachings, it is recognizable by the community of followers and can be remedied (see chapter 34 on the Covenant). The efficacy of these arrangements is evidenced by the fact that nearly 175 years after its founding and despite occasional attempts to create division within the Bahá'í Faith, it has maintained its unity—a historic achievement given the diversity of humanity represented within its pale.

In 1892, after nearly forty years of exile and, at times, imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh passed away near 'Akká, where His remains were interred. His burial site became a shrine—a location of pilgrimage for His followers and the point to which they turn when reciting their daily prayers. In spite of the severe restrictions imposed on Him, He had attracted to His religion many thousands from various races, ethnicities, and religions in more than a dozen countries. Bahá'u'lláh had also left behind the equivalent of one hundred volumes of His writings, which comprise nearly seven million words. Through these writings as well as the Covenant and the Administrative Order He instituted, Bahá'u'lláh had laid the groundwork for a worldwide community of adherents, who within a century of His passing would number in the millions and be found in nearly every country in the world.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The third of the Central Figures of the Bahá’í Faith was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who, unlike the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, was not a Manifestation of God. However, He held a unique position as Bahá’u’lláh’s designated successor, the authorized interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s words, and the exemplar of Bahá’u’lláh teachings. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself explained,

To ward off . . . dissensions . . . and prevent any person from creating a division or sect . . . Bahá’u’lláh . . . appointed a central authoritative Personage, declaring Him to be the expounder of the Book.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 538)

According to Bahá’í texts, the authoritative interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are divinely guided statements of what the Word of God means.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá led the worldwide Bahá’í community from 1892 until His passing in 1921. Like Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had for much of His life remained under government-mandated restrictions that limited His movement until 1908, when He and other religious and political prisoners in the Ottoman Empire were released. Soon after, He embarked upon a three-year tour through Egypt, Europe, and North America to promote Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. In the course of His travels, He taught His Father’s Faith in private interviews and in hundreds of public talks before audiences that, at times, exceeded a thousand people. In these presentations, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained Bahá’u’lláh’s principles of the unity of humankind, the independent investigation of the truth, the harmony of science and religion, the oneness of religions, the equality of men and women, and the realization of world peace, among others. These talks were delivered in churches, synagogues, universities, civic gatherings, and other public fora. While in the United States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke about race unity at the fourth annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through these travels in the West, correspondence with friends and sympathizers in that region of the world, and the visits of Western pilgrims to the Holy Land, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was able to establish the Bahá’í Faith in North America and Europe.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s legacy includes other accomplishments. In the latter part of His life, He oversaw the construction, on Mount Carmel in Haifa, of a shrine for the Báb, whose remains His followers had preserved and concealed for more than half a century after His execution in 1850. Moreover, through ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s encouragement, Bahá’ís spread their religion to Europe, North America, the Far East, and Australasia. He guided the development of Bahá’í communities in these lands through thousands of personal letters He wrote to Bahá’ís, often in response to their communications. He directed the local Bahá’í community of a few thousand believers in Ashkhabat, in Russian Turkmenistan, in building the first House of Worship in the Bahá’í world. Called the ‘*Mashriqu’l-Adhkár*’ (the dawning place of the mention of God) and combining the elements of worship and service, this structure would provide a model for Houses of Worship that Bahá’ís would build around the world in succeeding decades.

The written works of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá comprise several million words. These writings, which, along with the writings of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, constitute the sacred scriptures of the Bahá’í Faith, provide interpretation, explanation, and application of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. His most important work is likely His Will and Testament, which perpetuated Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant by clarifying and expanding upon the institutions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order. Among His other important works are *Some Answered Questions* and *The Secret of Divine Civilization*.

Whether in encouraging interracial gatherings (and even interracial marriage) while in the United States, in urging interreligious harmony in the Holy Land, or in advocating for the harmony of the East and the West on multiple continents, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sought to give practical expression to Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching of the oneness of humanity. The effects of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life and teachings in promoting unity were seen in the diversity of the many thousands of devotees who, during His life, had committed themselves to advocating for those same principles in thirty-five countries around the world. When He passed away in Haifa in late 1921, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s funeral was attended by no fewer than ten thousand people of every class, race, and religion in the land, including dignitaries of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze communities, who paid tribute to His accomplishments in advancing concord, peace, and service to humanity (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 312–13; *Star of the West* 1922: 259–67).

The Bahá’í Administrative Order

Among ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s most significant achievements was guiding Bahá’ís in the erection of the Administrative Order that Bahá’u’lláh had established. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá’u’lláh had written:

The world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.

(Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 181)

In that same book and in His other writings, Bahá’u’lláh had identified the elements of this Order. He had explicitly referred to the institution of the ‘House of Justice’: ‘It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them’ (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, 68; *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 42). Moreover,

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.

(Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*, 129)

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* also anticipated another institution—the hereditary institution of the Guardianship—which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would later formally establish.

In addition to instituting an international House of Justice, Bahá’u’lláh also called for the establishment of local Houses of Justice:

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá [nine]. . . . It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly.

(Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 30)

During His lifetime, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged the formation of these local Houses of Justice, which He advised should temporarily be called ‘Spiritual Assemblies’ and set forth many

principles related to their functioning, including their election and decision making, through a process called ‘consultation’. In His writings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also expounded on the institution of the House of Justice at the international level, which He termed the ‘Universal House of Justice’. He explained its powers, delineated the method of its election, and even contemplated its formation at a time when His life was in danger. Furthermore, in His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called into being ‘secondary Houses of Justice’, at a level between the local and international Houses of Justice Bahá’u’lláh had ordained. These secondary Houses of Justice, called ‘national Spiritual Assemblies’, were first elected in the 1920s in a number of countries.

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also formally established the institution of the Guardianship and outlined its essential functions (Will and Testament 20–1). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declared that the Guardian was ‘the expounder of the words of God’ and the person towards whom all believers should turn. Although the Guardian did not have the same station as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, they both had the authority to interpret Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament made clear that both the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice were pillars of Bahá’u’lláh’s Order and described that they would be guided, calling on Bahá’ís to follow them:

The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty [Bahá’u’lláh], under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One [the Báb]. . . . Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Will and Testament, 21)

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá likewise referred to another institution: the ‘Hands of the Cause’, designated individual Bahá’ís who had the responsibility of protecting and propagating the Bahá’í Faith and educating and encouraging members of the Bahá’í community. This institution, which Bahá’u’lláh had also referred to, would in later years emerge as a major element of the Bahá’í Administrative Order.

Thus, in summary, the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice were to be the chief institutions of the Bahá’í Administrative Order. The elements of that Order under them were to consist, on the one hand, of elected councils at the local and secondary levels that exercise authority (Spiritual Assemblies) and, on the other, of individual Bahá’ís, who lack authority but who exert moral and intellectual influence and are appointed for the purposes of promoting the well-being of the community (Hands of the Cause and their auxiliaries).

Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith

In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian and Head of the Bahá’í Faith. Following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in late 1921, Shoghi Effendi assumed this office and led the Bahá’í world community until his own passing in 1957. During his ministry, Shoghi Effendi initially focused the attention of Bahá’ís on building up the institutions of the Administrative Order that Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had established. He encouraged Bahá’ís to form local and national Spiritual Assemblies. Through his communications, Shoghi Effendi educated Bahá’ís in how Spiritual Assemblies were to be elected: democratically through secret-ballot elections devoid of nominations or campaigning. And he elaborated upon the principles of consultation that Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had written about.

In the late 1930s, after a sufficiently broad basis of Spiritual Assemblies had been elected, Shoghi Effendi wrote that the time had come for the Bahá'í community to expand its size and reach through systematic teaching plans—outreach to the wider society. These plans were based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, His charter for the worldwide propagation of the Bahá'í religion. Such efforts culminated in 1953 with the launching of an international plan of ten years' duration for the spread of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world. In the absence of clergy or professional missionaries, the Bahá'í community expanded as individual Bahá'ís travelled or relocated to new areas and taught their Faith to others. Before his passing, Shoghi Effendi led the worldwide Bahá'í community in establishing twenty-six national Spiritual Assemblies and over a thousand local Spiritual Assemblies. Bahá'ís resided in over three thousand localities and had a worldwide population that probably numbered a few hundred thousand.

During his ministry, Shoghi Effendi also developed the international centre of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Akká and Haifa, laying out formal gardens around the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, building the superstructure of the Shrine of the Báb, and erecting the International Archives Building, where original writings and artifacts related to the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith would be maintained. Finally, Shoghi Effendi educated Bahá'ís about the Bahá'í teachings through his interpretations and explanations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá; his writing of *God Passes By*—a history of the first century of the Bahá'í Faith—and his translations into English of a number of major works of Bahá'u'lláh from the original Arabic and Persian. Shoghi Effendi's writings do not form part of the Bahá'í sacred writings, but they are authoritative statements that continue to guide Bahá'ís.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament had specified the conditions under which Shoghi Effendi could appoint a successor Guardian. Shoghi Effendi's successor had to be from among the 'Aghṣán' (Bahá'u'lláh's male descendants) who possessed certain spiritual qualities. His appointment was to be confirmed by a group of nine Hands of the Cause—Bahá'ís appointed by the Guardian for the purpose of protecting and propagating the Bahá'í Faith. But by the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing, there were no male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh who could be considered for appointment as Guardian; Shoghi Effendi had not had any children, and there were no other eligible descendants. Therefore, adhering to the provisions set forth in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi did not appoint a successor, and the line of Guardians ended with him. Significantly, Bahá'u'lláh had in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* anticipated the institution of the Guardianship (with a reference to the 'Aghṣán') and envisaged the possibility of a break in the line of the Aghṣán (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 42).

The ten-year international teaching plan that Shoghi Effendi had initiated was to run from 1953 to 1963. Following Shoghi Effendi's passing in November 1957, the Hands of the Cause, who numbered twenty-seven, directed, with the support of the national Spiritual Assemblies, the affairs of the worldwide Bahá'í community in their capacity as 'Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth', a designation Shoghi Effendi had conferred upon them. By 1963, the Bahá'í community's execution of its ten-year plan produced an increase in the number of national Spiritual Assemblies to fifty-six, the number of local Spiritual Assemblies to over three thousand, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided to over eleven thousand worldwide. One of the most important decisions made by the Hands of the Cause was calling for the election of the Universal House of Justice to take place in 1963. The Hands asked that they themselves not be voted for.

The Universal House of Justice

In April 1963, representatives of the then-existing fifty-six national Spiritual Assemblies convened in Haifa to elect the nine members of the first Universal House of Justice, the international

institution ordained by Bahá'u'lláh to guide the worldwide Bahá'í community. Following the election, the Universal House of Justice assumed leadership of the worldwide Bahá'í community. It established its seat in Haifa. Since then, the Universal House of Justice has been elected every five years by the members of the national Spiritual Assemblies. At the Twelfth International Bahá'í Convention, held in 2018, some 1,300 members of national Spiritual Assemblies representing over 160 countries participated in person in the election of the Universal House of Justice.

Bahá'u'lláh had invested the Universal House of Justice with the authority to legislate on those matters not explicitly and outwardly recorded in His writings. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, 'Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament, 39). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further commented upon the wisdom of the legislative authority of the Universal House of Justice:

Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place. Therefore the House of Justice will take action accordingly.

(Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, 85)

The Universal House of Justice can supplement but never invalidate or modify what has already been formulated by Bahá'u'lláh. It can, however, alter its own laws.

While, ultimately, the major function of the Universal House of Justice will be that of legislation, it also has the authority, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, to 'administer its [the Faith's] affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions' (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 148). The authority and responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice derive from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi.

Since its formation in 1963, the Universal House of Justice has guided Bahá'ís through a series of global plans that have spread and strengthened the Bahá'í community, to the point that the Bahá'í Faith now has 'a numerically significant and organized following' in over two hundred countries—more countries than any other religion except Christianity (*2002 Britannica Book of the Year* 2002: 302). The Universal House of Justice has also overseen the development at the Bahá'í World Centre of the gardens surrounding the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, which have been recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and receive over half a million visitors per year. The expansion of the Bahá'í World Centre has likewise included raising up edifices and capacities for the administration of the Faith worldwide, the preservation and organization of the Bahá'í Writings, and research into those writings. Additionally, the House of Justice has guided the translation and publication of the Bahá'í Writings and promoted Bahá'í principles related to peace and religious unity. This includes its issuance of major statements, such as 'The Promise of World Peace' as well as its message on elimination of religious prejudice addressed to the world's religious leaders.

Since 1996, the Universal House of Justice has led the Bahá'í world community—now made up of several million followers—in promoting the development of local communities through activities open to the public that focus on the spiritual education of children, the moral empowerment of young people, the exploration and application of spiritual principles by adults, and the collective worship in devotional gatherings for those of all ages. However, perhaps the greater accomplishment of the Bahá'í community under the leadership of the Universal House

of Justice has been to demonstrate that its community-building activities can be established in every corner of the world and can appeal to peoples of all racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. Through such activities, the Bahá'í world community is seeking to demonstrate that Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the unity of humankind, as set forth in His writings and as safeguarded by His Covenant, can be a practical reality.

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