

# **Bahá'í History. By: Moojan Momen and Peter Smith (1993)**

This article is intended to be a general survey of the history of the Bahá'í Faith. The first part consists of a very brief overview of the main events in Bábí and Bahá'í history. Much of this material is dealt with in more detail in other articles. In the second part of the article, a series of themes that have developed in the course of Bahá'í history will be examined.

Although much of the existing knowledge is provisional in nature and much research remains to be done, the main outlines of Bábí and Bahá'í history are generally clear. There is, however, no such thing as a single correct view of Bábí-Bahá'í history. The academic study of the Bahá'í Faith is in its infancy and some aspects of the historical account are still controversial. The following short article necessarily neglects aspects of this uncertainty and controversy.

## **I – Major events in Bábí and Bahá'í history**

Although the Bábí movement is separate from the Bahá'í Faith and should be treated so, Bahá'ís regard the Bábí movement as inextricably bound up with the origins of their own Faith and thus consider the start of the Bábí movement in 1844 as the start of their own religion. This is not just a theological viewpoint grounded in the Bahá'í belief that the Báb, while an independent Manifestation of God (q.v.), was nevertheless the precursor and announcer of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, it is also a historical fact that the vast majority of Bábís became Bahá'ís and thus the Bábí movement merged into the Bahá'í Faith. Thus, whilst the Bábí religion should be seen as an independent movement with its own distinctive ethos and values, its significance here is as a background to the Bahá'í religion which emerged from it.

### **1. The Early Bábí Movement (1844-53)**

The Bábí movement began in mid-nineteenth century Iran.

**a. Shaykhism** The Bábí movement had its origins in the Shaykhí movement, a heterodox school within the Twelver branch of Shí'í Islam (q.v.). Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (q.v.) had developed a series of philosophical and mystical views. These had led to his being condemned by other Shí'í `ulamá. Prior to his death in 1826, Shaykh Ahmad had appointed one of his pupils, Sayyid Kázim Rashtí (q.v.), as the leader of this group. Under the latter, the Shaykhí movement was subjected to even more criticism by other Shí'í `ulamá and gradually drew away from the main fold of Twelver Shí'ism.

From the viewpoint of Bábís and Bahá'ís, the most important aspect of Shaykhism was the teaching that many of the concepts within Shí'í Islam that were understood as literally true should in fact be understood metaphorically as spiritual truths. This applied in particular to Shí'í eschatology, the expected re-emergence of the promised Hidden Imám. The Shaykhís taught that instead of a literal re-emergence of a man who had gone into

hiding one thousand years ago, the return of the Imam might be understood spiritually and metaphorically. Furthermore, in their lectures, the Shaykhí leaders are reported to have considered the return of the Imam to be imminent. There was also an emphasis on a living charismatic authority, a concept that was to prove of great importance in the transition to Babism.

**b. The Early History of the Bábí Movement (1844-48)** When Sayyid Kázim died in Karbalá, Iraq, in January 1844, he did not appoint a further leader to the Shaykhí movement. According to reports in Bahá'í histories, he ordered his disciples to disperse and seek out the one whom they were to follow. As a result of this, a group of young Shaykhí students came to Shiraz in 1844. Here they accepted the claims of Sayyid `Alí Muhammad, who took the title of the Báb (q.v.). The Báb called his earliest disciples the "Letters of the Living" (q.v.) and ordered them to disperse throughout Iran and Iraq and spread his teachings. This initial expansion followed the existing network of Shaykhí communities, but later came to include non-Shaykhís as well (see Smith and Momen, "Bábí Movement").

The exact nature of the early claims of the Báb was somewhat ambiguous, probably intentionally so. Some considered that he was just a representative of the Hidden Imam, but those of the `ulamá who had a chance to examine his writings could see that his claim was much more extensive in that he was claiming the same prerogatives as the prophet Muhammad. This led many of the `ulamá to oppose the new teachings. Thus as the movement spread throughout much of Iran and Iraq, there were confrontations between the `ulamá and the Bábís, some of which led to violence and persecution.

The Báb himself performed the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1844. It appears that it was his intention to proceed from Mecca to Karbalá where he had instructed his followers to gather. But the Letter of the Living who had gone to this region, Mullá `Alí Bastamí (q.v.), had been seized and put on trial in Baghdad in January 1845. Hearing of the reception accorded to his emissary, the Báb decided to return to Shiraz. He was, however, forced to leave that city after a year as a result of increasing opposition. He transferred to Isfahan, where he was protected for a time by the powerful governor of that city, Manúchihr Khán (q.v.). After the latter's death on 21 February 1847, however, the Báb was taken on the orders of the government to the fortress of Mákú in the far northwest of Iran. From this time on, the Báb was to remain a prisoner, being transferred to the fortress of Chihríq in April 1848.

**c. The Bábí Upheavals 1848-53** The year 1848 marks an important turning point in the history of the Bábí movement. Four events during this year served to produce a marked change in the fortunes of the new religion. The first was the promulgation by the Báb of the Persian Bayán, the book of his laws; the second was the Báb's open declaration at his trial in Tabriz (July 1848) that he was the Hidden Imám, the promised Mahdí that the Shí'ís were awaiting; the third was the conference of Badasht (q.v.), in the summer of this year, at which a group of prominent Bábís gathered and proclaimed the independent nature of the Bábí religion. These successive events removed the veil of ambiguity from the claims of the Báb, making it clear that he claimed a station equal to the Prophet

Muhammad and was thus abrogating the Islamic dispensation. This challenging proclamation led many of the `ulama to increase their denunciations and they called on the government to take action against the Bábís.

A fourth critical event occurred towards the end of 1848. It was during the disturbances that occurred after the death of Muhammad Sháh in September 1848 that some Bábís who were coming from Mashhad under the leadership of Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í (q.v.) were attacked in Mázandarán. Having killed some of their attackers, they took shelter in the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí (q.v.). For the first time, the government was asked to lend its support against the Bábís, and troops and cannon were sent to assist the local forces in an all-out attack on them. The resultant armed struggle at Shaykh Tabarsí (q.v.) was to last seven months. The Bábís, who were joined by Quddús (q.v.), a leading Letter of the Living, may have numbered some 600. Those who were not killed in the fighting eventually surrendered on the offer of an amnesty, upon which most of them were captured and later executed.

The Shaykh Tabarsí upheaval was followed by further armed conflict at Nayríz (q.v.) in the south (May-June 1850), at which the Bábís, numbering about a thousand and led by Vahíd (q.v.), were again tricked into surrendering and were then massacred. At the much more prolonged upheaval at Zanján (q.v.), on the road between Tehran and Tabriz (May 1850-January 1851), gradual attrition was responsible for the eventual defeat of some two thousand Bábís led by Hujjat (q.v.).

These violent incidents have created an impression of general Bábí militancy which may or may not be justified. Certainly, there were Bábís who adopted a militant attitude towards their opponents, but there were many others who did not. Whatever the case, after 1848, all Bábís were subject to a series of severe attacks. These included the public execution of some of the religion's prominent members in Tehran in February 1850 and the execution of the Báb in Tabriz in July 1850.

Following the execution of the Báb, the Bábís were leaderless and in disarray. A number of persons came forward to claim leadership. The Báb had written of "He Whom God shall make manifest" (q.v.), a messianic figure that would come after him. But none of the claimants were able to unite the Bábís under his leadership. Matters became much worse after a small group of Tehran Bábís made an attempt on the life of the Shah in 1852. The attempt was unsuccessful and the result was an intense persecution that claimed the lives of most of the remaining leading Bábís, including Táhirih (q.v.), the foremost female disciple of the Báb and one of the Letters of the Living. There was also a second upheaval at Nayríz (October-December 1853).

## **2. The Bábí Collapse and Revival (1853-66)**

The Bábí movement was crushed; its leading figures were mostly dead; the remnants of its followers were either driven underground or into exile. It appeared that nothing would remain of the movement. Crucial to the survival of the movement was the small band of Bábí refugees that now gathered in Baghdad (q.v.), which lay in the territory of the Ottoman Empire. Among these was Mírzá Husayn`Alí Núrí Bahá'u'lláh (q.v.). Another

was Mírzá Yahyá Subh-i-Azal (q.v.), Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother, who claimed the leadership of the Bábí community on account of a letter of authority that had been sent to him by the Báb. But Azal proved ineffective as a leader and it was Bahá'u'lláh, over the course of a decade, who assumed the effective leadership and sought to raise the morale of and reorganize the Bábí community both in Baghdad and throughout Iran.

During the period of his exile in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh initiated a number of new directions for the Bábí movement. First, he began to write books in a plain style that was easily understood by ordinary Iranians. His works such as the Book of Certitude (q.v.) were able to make a direct appeal to literate Iranians (rather than the indirect appeal mediated through members of the `ulamá as had been the case with the Báb's writings). These were enthusiastically received by many Bábís and other Iranians. Second, he entered into dialogue with Iraqi Sunnís, including some of the `ulamá. Third, while the Shaykhís and early Bábís had been somewhat antagonistic to the more mystically inclined Sufís, Bahá'u'lláh spent some time at a Sufi center in Sulaymáníyyih (q.v.) and later through books such as the Seven Valleys (q.v.) and the Four Valleys (q.v.) expressed Bábí religious themes in Sufi terms.

The resurgence of the Bábí movement led to renewed fears on the part of the Iranian government. They asked the Ottoman government to take steps against Bahá'u'lláh. The result of this was an edict from the Ottoman authorities that Bahá'u'lláh should be brought to the capital, Istanbul. Just as he was leaving Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh spent twelve days (22 April- 3 May 1863) at a place that Bahá'ís call the Garden of Ridván (q.v.), just outside Baghdad. Bahá'ís believe that during these twelve days, Bahá'u'lláh made a declaration of his station as a new Manifestation of God (q.v.) in succession to the Báb. The exact details of this declaration are not known and it was not at first widely circulated. Thus when Bahá'u'lláh arrived in Istanbul (q.v.) and four months later was sent on to Edirne (q.v., Adrianople) in European Turkey, he was still regarded as a leader of the Bábís both by the Bábís themselves and by the government.

### **3. The Emergence of the Bahá'í Faith (1866-92)**

It was while he was in Edirne that Bahá'u'lláh openly announced his claim to be "He Whom God shall make manifest," the messianic figure promised by the Báb. Bahá'u'lláh's claim was opposed by Azal. Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be "He Whom God shall make manifest" superseded Azal's position and the latter refused to accept this. As the split between the two became known in Edirne, it was to Bahá'u'lláh that the overwhelming majority of the Bábís turned. Bahá'u'lláh also sent emissaries to Iran with the same result. Most of the Bábí remnant became Bahá'ís, with only a small number coming to form a separate Azalí community.

Azal's opposition caused grave problems for Bahá'u'lláh. Eventually it was in part to lead to the further exile of Bahá'u'lláh to Akka (q.v.) in Syria. This occurred in 1868 at the instigation of the Ottoman authorities. At first Bahá'u'lláh was kept in strict confinement in the barracks, and later confined to a house in the city. Eventually Bahá'u'lláh was allowed to leave the city and take up residence outside the city walls. Major developments during this period include the instructions or encouragement given by

Bahá'u'lláh for a number of his followers to take up residence in other countries, such as Egypt, Caucasia, Turkmenistan, and India, thus spreading the new religion; the resurgence of persecutions in Iran as the vigour of the new movement began to make itself felt; the initiation by Bahá'u'lláh of a series of letters to many of the leading rulers of the world, announcing his message to them; and the production by Bahá'u'lláh of a number of books in which he laid out the laws of his religion as well as the social principles which would act as the basis for the world peace which he advocated.

This period also saw a significant breakthrough in the appeal of the religion with the conversion of Jews and Zoroastrians in Iran (and also later Levantine Christians). This contrasted with the Bábí movement which was essentially confined to Shí'í Islam. Bahá'u'lláh had laid the groundwork for this breakthrough as early as the Baghdad period when he addressed a number of Biblical themes in his *Book of Certitude* and *Jawáhiru'l-Asrár* (q.v.). But it was, in particular, the work of Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání (q.v.), relating the Bahá'í Faith to Jewish and Biblical prophecies and themes that took this process further.

#### **4. The Ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá (1892-1921)**

`Abdu'l-Bahá was the successor of Bahá'u'lláh as leader of the Bahá'í Faith.

**a. Early Years of `Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry (1892-1911)** In two important writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (q.v.) and the *Book of the Covenant* (q.v.), `Abdu'l-Bahá was designated by Bahá'u'lláh as the sole authorized interpreter of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as the center of authority to whom all the Bahá'ís must turn after Bahá'u'lláh's death.

The most pressing problem for `Abdu'l-Bahá during the years immediately following the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892 was the sustained opposition of his half-brother, Mírzá Muhammad `Alí (q.v.). The latter accused `Abdu'l-Bahá of claiming for himself a station equal to Bahá'u'lláh and was able to draw over to his side the majority of those Bahá'ís living in the Haifa-Akka area as well as Jamál Burújirdí, a leading Iranian Bahá'í, and Ibrahim Kheiralla (q.v.), the man who had taken the Bahá'í Faith to America. But the majority of the world Bahá'í community remained faithful to `Abdu'l-Bahá. Mírzá Muhammad-`Alí's activities culminated in a period of renewal of the strict incarceration of `Abdu'l-Bahá within the walls of Akka from 1901 to 1909. After this, Mírzá Muhammad-`Alí's influence waned.

Undoubtedly the most significant development for the future of the religion was the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to North America. The Bahá'í Faith was established in North America through the efforts of Ibrahim Kheiralla and then spread from there to Europe and Australia. Soon there was a flow of American and European pilgrims coming to Akka.

This Western expansion, though limited in scale, for the first time made the Bahá'í Faith genuinely international. It was no longer confined to a Muslim milieu (see "Expansion and Distribution"). New formulations of the Bahá'í teachings in Western and Christian

terms were developed, `Abdu'l-Bahá himself played a major role in this reformulation, as in *Some Answered Questions* (q.v.) in which he dealt with religious and philosophical themes and in his talks delivered during his Western tours (*Paris Talks*, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*), in which he dealt with social questions.

**b. `Abdu'l-Bahá's journeys to the West and after (1911-21)** Following his release from confinement in 1909, `Abdu'l-Bahá moved to Egypt. In 1911, he made a journey to France and Britain, followed the next year by a much more extensive sojourn in North America and several countries in Europe. These journeys did a great deal to establish the Bahá'í Faith in the West. Not only did it allow the Bahá'ís in those countries direct and personal contact with the charismatic figure of `Abdu'l-Bahá, but it introduced the religion to a wide range of people who would not otherwise have heard of it. `Abdu'l-Bahá's numerous public addresses to universities, churches, synagogues, mosques, and philanthropic societies had the effect of gaining for the religion a large number of new admirers and adherents. `Abdu'l-Bahá's talks were to form the basis of the standard presentation of the Bahá'í teachings, especially the social teachings, for many decades after.

Other events of importance during `Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry were: the transfer of the remains of the Báb from Iran to Akka and their entombment in a shrine built by `Abdu'l-Bahá on Mount Carmel; the writing by `Abdu'l-Bahá of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, which were to become the master-plan for the spread of the Bahá'í Faith; the first steps in the building up of the modern administrative institutions of the Bahá'í Faith in both the East and West (see "*Administration, Bahá'í*"); the measures taken by the Bahá'í community of Ashkhabad in Russian Turkestan to develop many aspects of Bahá'í community life, culminating in the erection of a *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (q.v.); the activities of Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání (q.v.) in teaching the Bahá'í Faith at the University of al-Azhar, the foremost place of learning in the Islamic world; and the extensive international travels of a small number of Bahá'ís, which helped to create the feeling of a worldwide religion.

## **5. The Ministry of Shoghi Effendi (1922-57)**

Shoghi Effendi was the successor of `Abdu'l-Bahá as leader of the Bahá'í Faith.

**a. The Development of the Bahá'í Administrative Order (1922-c.1937)** The appointment of Shoghi Effendi as "*Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith*" was something of a surprise to the Bahá'í world. It became known only after `Abdu'l-Bahá's death on 28 November 1921 and the reading of his *Will and Testament* (q.v.) in January 1922.

Shoghi Effendi decided that his first priority would be to build up the Bahá'í administrative order. He concentrated for the first two decades of his ministry on this task: establishing the local assemblies; giving advice about their functioning; setting out the procedures for Bahá'í elections and consultation; creating the national assemblies and national conventions; ensuring their correct functioning; advising on the committee structures for these assemblies; and sorting out the proper relationships between these various bodies.

In addition, Shoghi Effendi initiated a major program for the development of the Bahá'í World Center (q.v.). He acquired buildings connected with Bahá'í history and planned the extension and beautification of the gardens around the buildings. Shoghi Effendi also made a major contribution to the development of Bahá'í literature in English, vastly increasing the range and quality of this by his books and translations.

During this period, the Bahá'í Faith experienced a number of reverses: the highly-developed Bahá'í community of Ashkhabad, following sustained persecution by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s and 1930s, was dispersed; the German Bahá'í community, which was the largest in Europe, was persecuted and its institutions disbanded by the Nazi authorities; there were further persecutions instituted by the Pahlavi government in Iran denying the Bahá'ís many basic human rights; the House of Bahá'u'lláh (q.v.) in Baghdad was seized by Shí'í Muslims and could not be regained despite the support of the League of Nations; and the courts in Egypt delivered a series of judgments against the Bahá'ís.

**b. The Systematic Spread of the Bahá'í Faith (c.1937-63).** Having substantially achieved his initial goal of setting up the Bahá'í administration, Shoghi Effendi then set this administration to work on a succession of plans for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith. Since it was the American Bahá'í community that had pioneered much of Shoghi Effendi's development of the Bahá'í administration, it was also this national community that received the first of the assigned national plans: the first Seven Year Plan (1937-44), in which they were directed to establish the Bahá'í Faith in Latin America. By the late 1940s, almost every national Bahá'í community was engaged on a plan of expansion.

Then in 1953, Shoghi Effendi launched the first global plan, the Ten Year Crusade (q.v.). The twelve national spiritual assemblies then in existence were each given responsibilities in this plan that aimed to disperse the Bahá'í Faith over the whole world.

**c. The Interregnum of the Hands of the Cause (1957-63)** Shoghi Effendi passed away on 4 November 1957, having appointed no one to succeed him in the leadership of the Bahá'í Faith. The only group who appeared to have any basis of authority for leading the Bahá'í Faith were the Hands of the Cause (q.v.), who had been appointed by Shoghi Effendi as “the Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth” (MBW 127). Thus this group of individuals took over the responsibility for taking the Ten Year Crusade initiated by Shoghi Effendi to its conclusion in 1963.

The Hands of the Cause held a series of Conclaves. At the second of these, in 1958, they decided to bring into being, at the end of the Ten Year Crusade, the Universal House of Justice, an institution ordained by Bahá'u'lláh and stated by `Abdu'l-Bahá to be under divine guidance. In this the Hands of the Cause were opposed by one of their number, Charles Mason Remey (q.v.).

## **6. The Universal House of Justice (1963-)**

With the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963, the Bahá'í Faith moved into

a new phase of its development in that the leadership of the religion changed from appointed individuals to an elected council. This transition is regarded as signalling the beginning of a new epoch in Bahá'í history.

The Universal House of Justice decided to continue the pattern set by Shoghi Effendi in that the further progress and development of the religion was to occur within the framework of a series of international plans. This has led to an unprecedented growth of the religion, great internal changes and developments, the increasing involvement of the Bahá'í community in society, and a gradual emergence from obscurity in the public realm.

Unprecedented growth led to a decisive shift in the composition of the Bahá'í community internationally. Despite widespread geographical expansion, the Faith had hitherto remained predominantly Iranian in membership, with a small but significant minority of Westerners. From the 1960s onwards, the majority of Bahá'ís increasingly came to be drawn from the rural masses of the "Third World". Referred to by one authoritative source as the second most widespread religion in the world after Roman Catholicism (see Barrett 6), the Bahá'í Faith has come to assume some of the characteristics of a world religion: a remarkable transition from its origins 150 years ago as a "heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot" (GPB xii) of an obscure grouping within Shí'í Islam.

## **II – Themes in Bábí and Bahá'í history**

One way of analyzing the history of the Bahá'í Faith is to look at a number of themes or motifs that run through it.

### **1. Leadership and internal opposition**

For much of its history to date, the Bábí and Bahá'í Faith has been under strong personal charismatic leadership. Much of the strength and cohesion of the movement has been the direct result of the personal loyalty of the individual Bábís and Bahá'ís to these successive leaders. This intense devotion and loyalty to the leader was the natural result of both their personalities and abilities and the fact that they were considered to be Manifestations of the Divinity, in the case of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, or had been clearly appointed to be under direct, infallible divine guidance, in the case of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. This is an important point to note as it explains the overwhelming dominance of these central figures during their respective periods of leadership. It was not so much that these successive leaders imposed an authoritarian control over the religion as the fact that their charismatic authority at the center of the religion inhibited the development of other centers of authority and influence.

The charismatic authority of the leaders of the religion was maintained in a number of ways. The most important was probably personal contact. Undoubtedly, meeting with the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and, to a lesser extent, Shoghi Effendi, was a major psychological and spiritual event in the lives of many of the followers of the religion, reinforcing and increasing the level of their commitment and faith. The fact that both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh "revealed" their works at great speed and often in an Arabic style

resembling the Qur'án was considered a major proof of their mission. This is because the Qur'án is itself considered an inimitable miracle by Muslims. (The literary quality of the works of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi was also of a high order.)

The charisma attaching to Bahá'u'lláh was, in large measure, passed on to `Abdu'l-Bahá. This was partly because of the great stature that `Abdu'l-Bahá had gained during his father's lifetime, being entrusted with much of the day-to-day affairs and correspondence. Another major factor was the doctrine of the Covenant (q.v.), meaning a covenant made between each leader and the Bahá'ís regarding the next source of leadership. Great stress was laid upon the doctrine of the Covenant in both the East and the West. The result was that it has been possible for a wide variety of opinions and beliefs to co-exist within the Bahá'í community as long as the ultimate loyalty of the individual Bahá'ís lay with the Center of the Covenant, `Abdu'l-Bahá and his successors.

Shoghi Effendi made a determined effort to downplay the role of personal charisma in the leadership of the Bahá'í Faith and to replace this with a charisma of office. In his dealing with individual Bahá'ís as well as with Bahá'í institutions, he always directed their attention away from himself as a person and towards the Bahá'í Administration (q.v.) and the institution of the Guardianship (q.v.). He discouraged photographs of himself from being circulated and forbade the celebration of any anniversaries connected with himself personally.

The Universal House of Justice continued this process of "institutionalizing" charisma. By dint of being stated in the Bahá'í scriptures to be divinely-guided, it continues to hold a high degree of charismatic authority but only at an institutional level; the individual members of the institution have little personal charisma and often act in ways to discourage the development of such.

**a. Imprisonment, exile, and problems of communication** Almost from the very beginning of the religion, its leaders have been either imprisoned or in exile or both. The Iranian Bahá'í community was also subjected to sporadic persecution and harassment making the receipt or dispatch of Bahá'í communications difficult. This has presented the religion with major problems in terms of communications between the leadership and the followers. Clearly for leadership to be effective, there must be a free flow of communication between the leader and the followers.

This problem was solved in essentially the same manner for the whole of what Shoghi Effendi has termed the Heroic Age of the Faith (the period from the Báb's declaration in 1844 to the passing of `Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, see "Ages and Cycles"). Communications were maintained in two main ways. First, there was a constant flow of pilgrims making their way to where the leader was (Mákú and Chihríq in the time of the Báb; Baghdad, Edirne, and Akka in the time of Bahá'u'lláh; and Haifa, Akka and Egypt in the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá). On their way there they would take with them letters and messages from the believers in their area; on their return they would take back letters from the leader as well as their own personal experiences and reminiscences with which to inspire the believers at home as well as on the way home.

The second way in which communications were maintained was through the flow of letters carried by full-time couriers (Mírzá `Alí Sayyáh in the time of the Báb; Shaykh Salmán and Hájí Amín in the time of Bahá'u'lláh). These would travel through Iran collecting letters and gifts from the believers and then make their way to the leader. On their way back they would proceed to an intermediate staging post where a Bahá'í scribe was resident (Mullá `Abdu'l-Karím Qazvíní in Qumm or Qazvín in the time of the Báb; Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín in Mosul in the time of Bahá'u'lláh). He would make numerous copies of the leader's letters thus increasing the effectiveness of the communications with the believers.

Although the Western Bahá'ís used the postal services from the start, the Eastern Bahá'ís tended not to do so until after the First World War. The flow of pilgrims was just as important to the Western Bahá'ís as to the Eastern ones, as witnessed by the large number of accounts of pilgrimages published in the West during `Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry.

**b. Internal Opposition** Because of the importance to the Bahá'í Faith of central authority, the Bahá'í leadership has always treated internal dissension and opposition to the center of the religion as a serious matter. Indeed this has become enshrined in Bahá'í theory in the doctrine of the Covenant. Those Bahá'ís who have opposed the leadership are therefore called Covenant-breakers (q.v.).

The first episode of internal opposition to the central authority arose during the time of the Báb. A group of three Bábís, led by Mullá Javád Baraghání, traveled to Shiraz in 1845 but became jealous of the high position accorded to Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í and started to cause dissension. Eventually they traveled to Kirmán where they joined up with the Báb's opponent, the Shaykhí leader, Mírzá Muhammad Karím Khán (q.v.). The Báb refers to these three in much the same terms as the later Covenant-breakers are referred to in the Bahá'í writings (DB 159-62).

The sustained opposition of Azal to the leadership of Bahá'u'lláh, and of Mírzá Muhammad `Alí to `Abdu'l-Bahá, have been referred to above.

Shoghi Effendi faced opposition from a number of sources: Mírzá Muhammad `Alí's supporters caused a few problems immediately after the passing of `Abdu'l-Bahá; there was opposition to the erection of the Bahá'í administration in North America; and acts of disobedience caused the eventual expulsion of almost all of Shoghi Effendi's own family. This last was to have important consequences in that there remained no-one whom Shoghi Effendi could appoint to succeed him as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith in accordance with the Will and Testament (q.v.) of `Abdu'l-Bahá.

After the passing of Shoghi Effendi, there was undoubtedly a leadership crisis in the Bahá'í Faith. With no appointed leader, the Hands of the Cause took over the role of guiding the affairs of the Bahá'í Faith at the world level. They were soon challenged in this by one of their number, Charles Mason Remey (q.v.). Remey claimed that since Shoghi Effendi had appointed him the chairman of the International Bahá'í Council (q.v.), a forerunner of the Universal House of Justice, and since the chairman of the

Universal House of Justice was to be the Guardian, this constituted his implicit appointment as the next Guardian. This claim was rejected by the Hands of the Cause since Remey did not satisfy the other conditions laid down in the Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá, notably that the line of Guardians be lineal descendants of Bahá'u'lláh. Remey's support came from some Bahá'ís in the United States, France, Pakistan, and elsewhere but it was never an appreciable number and they were soon split into a number of feuding factions. There have been no major episodes of internal opposition since Remey.

## **2. Legalism**

Religious legalism may be defined as the concern with structuring society according to the provisions of a holy law. Among the religions of the world we can see this best exemplified in the orthodox forms of Islam and Judaism. Among some of the Bábís in the early period, there was a great emphasis on keeping to the Islamic holy law and indeed this was also stressed in the writings of the Báb during this period. Ironically, after the Báb issued his own laws with the promulgation of the Persian Bayán, the emphasis on legalism declined. This was probably partly because the Bayán could not be widely distributed and also because there was no confirmation in the Bayán of the Islamic practice of regarding the actions of the Prophet (the Sunna) as providing legal norms. Thus a large part of the legalistic superstructure was dismantled at a stroke. All that remained was a bare outline of prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and some other ritual matters.

The role of legalism in the Bahá'í Faith can be subject to various interpretations. On one hand, a quite detailed set of laws regulating personal behavior and social relationships has developed, but on the other, Bahá'u'lláh gave no indication that the Bahá'ís were to establish any form of legal system similar to Islam. Indeed, he specifically discouraged the Bahá'ís from gaining the sort of book learning that went with the Islamic legal system. Furthermore, the following of Bahá'í laws and ethics was to be left largely to individual conscience rather than becoming a matter for communal regulation as occurs in Islam.

In his development of the Bahá'í administration, Shoghi Effendi stressed on several occasions that these institutions should not become legalistic bureaucracies and he discouraged the development of too much procedure and regulation. Similarly, the Universal House of Justice, though it is specifically empowered in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to enact new supplementary legislation has, thus far, largely confined itself to statements of general moral principle rather than elaborating on the existing corpus of Bahá'í law.

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í Faith has a number of personal and social laws which it is expected that Bahá'ís will obey. Insofar as the frequent or flagrant breaches of some of the social laws by the members of the Bahá'í community are made the concern of the local spiritual assembly (q.v), legalism must remain an element in the Bahá'í community.

## **3. Gnosticism and Mysticism**

Gnosticism is the belief that there exists a hidden salvatory knowledge. This theme was very strong in Shaykhism which had extensive roots in the esoteric tradition of Shî í

Islam. This was carried over into the Bábí movement. The Báb's writings were greatly concerned with revealing the esoteric meaning of the Qur'án. In doing so he made use of numerology and cabalistic analysis. Indeed, the concept of numerology became incorporated into the writings of the Báb at all levels, as well as into the communal structure. The number nineteen (equivalent to wáhid, unity) was everywhere, from the number of chapters in the books of the Báb to the groupings of Bábís into cells of nineteen each. The Báb also gave detailed instructions for the construction of talismans.

With the advent of the Bahá'í Faith, the gnostic element declined sharply. Indeed, it was insisted that this was the day in which all hidden meanings were to be revealed. Only a small numerological and talismanic residue remained with any degree of official sanction (for example, the use of the numbers nine and nineteen in many aspects of the Bahá'í community life and even religious architecture; and the use of "the Greatest Name", q.v., symbol on rings). A number of unofficial "popular" practices have, however, also persisted (for example, among Iranian Bahá'ís, the use of rock sugar left in the holy shrines with the intention of gaining spiritual potency for curing illness), although these are dying out to a large extent.

Conversely, as the gnostic elements decreased in the Bahá'í Faith, the mystical elements increased. Bahá'u'lláh himself wrote a number of works on mystical themes, including the Seven Valleys, the Four Valleys, and a number of his poems. This has meant that although up to the present mysticism has remained very much a minority interest in the Bahá'í community, there is a potential for further future development. There is, however, a pronounced emphasis in much of the Bahá'í community on spirituality (prayer, meditation, the centrality of the spiritual in the affairs of life, etc.).

#### **4. Sacrifice**

The theme of self-sacrifice and the related theme of detachment from the material world is one that runs strongly in most of the major religions of the world. The ultimate expression of this is represented by the martyr who gives up life itself for the sake of his or her faith. This theme has also been very strong in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. The Bábí period saw a great wave of persecution engulf the new religion. This persecution became paradoxically a source of strength and justification for the religion because of the way that Shí'í Islam has always represented the Shí'í Imáms as themselves being subjected to persecution and martyrdom. Even the opponents of the Bábís are reported to have been touched by this paradigmatic parallel.

The number of Bábís that became martyrs during this period is impossible to assess but it must have been at least four thousand. But it is not so much the numbers that are important for later generations of Bahá'ís as the way that some of these martyrdoms occurred. On numerous occasions the Bábís were offered their lives if they recanted but they refused. These sorts of scenes have been utilized as the Bahá'í Faith spread to the Christian West to draw parallels between the spirit of the Bábís and that of the early Christian martyrs. More frequently the parallel has been drawn between the life and martyrdom of the Báb and that of Christ.

**a. The inheritance of the martyrs** It was Shoghi Effendi, in particular, who put the devotion and sacrifice of the early Bábís forward as an example for the subsequent generations of Bahá'ís. He edited and translated *The Dawn-Breakers* (q.v., a history of the Bábí period) in order to put this before the Western Bahá'ís more sharply. He characterized the Western Bahá'ís as the spiritual descendants of “the Dawn-breakers” (ADJ 7).

Within the Bahá'í scriptures, the theme of sacrifice in terms of the ordinary life of the believer is linked to the concept that in order to progress spiritually we must become detached from this material world. This detachment does not primarily mean a physical detachment—*austerity, monasticism, or asceticism*—but rather a mental and emotional detachment. The theme of sacrifice is frequently evoked in various aspects of Bahá'í community life: giving to the Bahá'í funds, sacrificing one's ego in the course of consultation, etc.

The themes of sacrifice and martyrdom came back to the fore in the Bahá'í world with the eruption of persecutions in Iran following the revolution there in 1979. The effects of this persecution were directly felt far a field and vividly communicated to all Bahá'ís through the extensive Iranian Diaspora. The entire Bahá'í world rallied to the defence of their Iranian co-religionists. The Universal House of Justice continued the pattern set by Shoghi Effendi in setting the sacrifice and devotion of the Iranian believers as an example to the rest of the Bahá'í world and stressing that the appropriate response to this tragedy was a redoubling of dedication and service to the religion.

**b. The pattern of the Persecutions** The persecutions of the Bábís and Bahá'ís, which have occurred principally in the Middle East, have followed a discernible pattern. During the early Bábí period (1844-48), the opposition was led by the *`ulamá*, who regarded the teachings of the new religion as a direct challenge to Islam. The government, at first, largely stood back from the debate between the Bábís and the *`ulamá*. But at a later stage when the debate of words evolved into armed clashes, the government lost no time in backing the *`ulamá* and sending its troops against the Bábís. The response of the ordinary people in each place tended to depend on the response of the *`ulamá*, whose lead they were prepared to follow. The attitude of the Bábís themselves was somewhat variable. Under the threat of attack, they banded together to defend themselves. But others took a more aggressive attitude; for example, the group who attempted to assassinate the Shah in 1852.

After the holocaust that marked the end of the Bábí period, there was a change in the nature of the persecutions. The emerging Bahá'í community also faced a great deal of persecution but the grounds were no longer purely religious. Reasons for the persecutions included such factors as bolstering the personal prestige of a local figure, financial manipulations, and local political struggles. In these cases, a religious motivation was often spuriously invoked. For these purposes, the Bahá'ís, and specially the more prominent ones, were eminently suitable pawns, belonging as they did to a minority group that was not under the protection by any outside state or agency (as the Christian and other minorities were). The *`ulamá* were again the principle instigators of these

persecutions but the state was now for the most part opposed to the civil disturbance caused by these episodes. Indeed, agitations against the Bahá'ís was not infrequently a means for the `ulamá and others to foment anti-government disturbances. As far as the people are concerned, there were many that had secret sympathy for the Bahá'ís, but it was still the case that the `ulamá were able to lead the crowd to perpetrate barbarous cruelties on occasions. The Bahá'ís themselves showed a marked change of attitude from the Bábí in that, on Bahá'u'lláh's instructions, they no longer made any attempt to defend themselves.

In the 1920s, a further change occurred, resulting principally from political changes in the Middle East. New secular nationalist governments came to power and the influence of the religious classes declined. Instead of physical violence inflicted upon individuals, the persecutions of the Bahá'ís became institutionalized. The main form of persecution now became the imposition of civil disabilities upon the Bahá'ís: limiting their abilities to obtain education, employment, and voting rights; refusal to recognize their marriages and births; prohibition of publication of their books; and closing down Bahá'í schools and other Bahá'í institutions. The main perpetrator of these persecutions was the state itself. Moreover persecutions of this nature began to occur in other countries of the Middle East: notably Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, etc., and also in the Soviet Union. The attitude of the Bahá'ís also underwent a change in that they now took a more active (although still non-violent) stance. Wherever possible, action was taken through the courts of the country concerned. Otherwise appeal was made to international opinion and even to international institutions such as the League of Nations and the United Nations.

In recent years, a new element has been added to the persecutions. With a rise in fundamentalism in many religious communities in the world, persecutions became once more motivated by religious factors. In Iran, where the religious authorities succeeded in taking over secular power, this religious persecution was reinforced by institutionalized persecution. In many of the Islamic countries, the secular authorities, fearing the power of the fundamentalist resurgence, have also taken action against the Bahá'ís as a way of shoring up their Islamic credentials.

## **5. Millenarianism**

There has been a strong millenarian theme running through Bahá'í history from its earliest roots in the Bábí period. Within a few months of his declaration in 1844, the message of the Báb had caused a great stir of millenarian expectation in Karbalá so noticeable that it was reported upon by the British Consul in Baghdad (BBR 83-90). The Báb's pronouncement in 1848 that he was indeed the Imám Mahdí further fuelled this trend.

A further aspect of this was the concept of return (q.v., raj`a), which the Báb interpreted as a typological phenomenon: that there will appear persons who have the characteristics of the Imáms of the past and their opponents. This meant that such events as Shaykh Tabarsí became seen in terms of a re-enactment of the martyrdom of the Imám Husayn at Karbalá.

The Báb set up his own millenarian expectation by prophesying the advent of a messianic figure, “He Whom God shall make manifest”. Bábí millenarianism was for Bahá’ís, fulfilled by Bahá’u’lláh. In the more fully developed Bahá’í view, Bahá’u’lláh is considered to be the fulfillment of the messianic expectation of all religions: the tenth avatar for Hindus, the return of Buddha for Buddhists, the Messiah for Jews, and the return of the Christ spirit for Christians and Muslims.

Bahá’u’lláh, in turn, set up a number of millenarian expectations. One aspect of these is certain statement in the Bahá’í writings referring to a future global catastrophe. Much more important is the promise of a more distant future “Golden Age” of universal peace and prosperity to be brought into being through the Bahá’í administrative order and the social teachings. Thus, the theme of millenarian expectation has in the Bahá’í Faith been transformed into the theme of social reformism. Another aspect which at present is of little concern to Bahá’ís because of its remoteness is Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that there will be another Manifestation of God in not less than one thousand years.

## **6. Social Reform**

The transformation of the world envisaged in the millenarian theme is given practical expression in the form of the current of social reconstruction and reform running through the Bahá’í teachings and activities.

The Báb’s writings themselves contain little in the way of a social reform program. But some of the Báb’s actions, such as his appointment of a woman as one of his leading disciples, implicitly represented a new pattern of social order.

It was principally during the Akka period that we find the question of social reform coming to the fore in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh (see TB). As to actual social change consciously sponsored by the Bahá’í community, this dates largely from the time of `Abdu’l-Bahá. In the last few years of the nineteenth century, `Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged the Iranian Bahá’ís to set up schools and health facilities. These efforts were much assisted by a number of Americans who moved to Iran. In their own country, American Bahá’ís took an active role in the movement to advance the social situation of Afro-Americans.

During the early part of Shoghi Effendi’s ministry, Bahá’í efforts in this direction diminished as most Bahá’í activity was directed into the building up of the administrative order. The administrative order itself was, however, to be a valuable foundation for later work in this area.

In recent years, under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice, social reformism has again assumed a prominent place with the introduction of numerous social and economic development programs throughout the Bahá’í world. This has been mainly in response to the large numbers of Third World villagers who have entered the religion in the last three decades. In these areas, development programs have been added to Bahá’í activities as soon as the Bahá’í community structure has been established and is functioning. Prominent among the social concerns of Bahá’ís throughout the years (and now reflected

in the development programs instituted) have been the concern for education and literacy, and the advancement of women. More recently there has been an additional concern with agriculture, health, cultural development and the environment. An important element in this work has been the increasing links built up with international organizations such as the United Nations through the Bahá'í International Community (q.v.).

### **7. Liberalism and Authoritarianism**

Liberalism is the attitude that religion should be adapted so as to be compatible with the rationality of the modern world and the needs of society. The Bahá'í emphasis on religious rationality and social reform make it appear to be a highly liberal religion, but against this must be set the strong emphasis on authoritative leadership towards whom obedience is expected through the doctrine of the Covenant (an attitude that would tend to work against liberalism). This has resulted in a certain amount of tension between these two orientations in Bahá'í history, almost exclusively among the Bahá'í communities of the West. (The attitude of liberalism should not, however, be confused with a liberal morality; the Bahá'í Faith emphasizes a traditional morality for individuals.)

Any tendency towards institutional authoritarianism is to some extent neutralized by the encouragement of the independent investigation of religious reality. Dogmatic positions are generally not emphasized and there is a right to free speculative, intellectual thought. With regard to the administration of the Bahá'í Faith, however, although the Bahá'í institutions operate through processes that include consulting with the generality of the Bahá'ís, there is an expectation of loyalty and obedience to the decisions of the central figures and institutions.

### **8. Universalism**

Closely linked to liberalism in the Bahá'í Faith is the theme of universalism. This is linked to the belief that God's guidance and grace are available universally to all humankind. In the Bahá'í Faith this has led to two distinct religious attitudes: the conviction that all peoples will find their highest religious aspirations fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith; and the belief that the Bahá'í Faith is an inclusive religious movement with little need for barriers between members and non-members.

This first attitude has been a consistent theme since the last century and has led to deliberate systematic efforts to extend the Bahá'í message as widely as possible throughout the world among every ethnic and linguistic grouping. It is, however, an exclusivist view in that it considers that its eventual aim is that all people become Bahá'ís.

The second attitude has been more variable, and in the West, a definite tension between inclusivist and exclusivist policies developed. This tension was linked to a wider tension between liberalism and authoritarianism. Thus, during the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá, there was a fairly loose, inclusivist interpretation of who was a Bahá'í. Anyone who was sympathetic to the teachings was often counted as a Bahá'í, no matter if they were also members of another religion or held views which the majority of Bahá'ís would not

subscribe to (including elements of the occult, socialism, etc). In the early years of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi introduced a large degree of order to this situation restricting membership to exclude those who retained membership of other religions and defining more closely the essential beliefs of the Bahá'ís. Thus in the course of introducing the requisite degree of order necessary to institute the Bahá'í administration, Shoghi Effendi moved the Bahá'í Faith somewhat away from universalism and liberalism. Moreover, it would probably be true to say that the type of person who came to administrative prominence during this period when Shoghi Effendi was concentrating on administrative matters tended towards authoritarianism and centralization. We find, for example, Shoghi Effendi writing on several occasions dissuading the American National Spiritual Assembly from enacting unduly restrictive legislation and over-centralization. In recent years, this tendency has begun to reverse itself with, for example, the automatic inclusion of Bahá'í children onto Bahá'í membership lists, the relaxation of the standard of Bahá'í knowledge required of new converts, and the devolution of decision-making about teaching plans from Haifa to the level of national assemblies and even, to a large extent, to local assemblies.

There is also a cultural aspect to Bahá'í universalism, in that worldwide the Bahá'ís represent a religious community of considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. Thus, in the first two decades of the present century, the American Bahá'í community emphasized the theme of the unity of East and West and set up close ties with their Iranian co-religionists. The Iranian Bahá'ís in turn drew great strength and comfort from the universality of the Faith as evidenced by the expansion of the Faith in the West as well as the presence among them of American Bahá'ís as travelers and residents.

This cultural universalism has again become much more marked in the Bahá'í community in recent years with the influx of large numbers from the "Third World". This has led to the emergence of new cultural styles and a marked ethnic diversification within the Bahá'í community. Whereas formerly the only foreign Bahá'ís commonly encountered in any given country were Iranians and Americans, the increasing diversity of the Bahá'í world is making itself felt in the numbers of "Third World" and other Bahá'ís traveling and residing outside their own countries thus strengthening the feeling of the universality of the Bahá'í teachings. It is also this universalism that stimulates the Bahá'í international activities at the level of the United Nations.

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**Note:**

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