Women in the Baha'i Faith

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Bahá'í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá'í Writings, is the chief responsibility of the mother." The Universal House of justice, the supreme governing body for the Bahá'í world, asserts that the corollary to this is that the financial responsibility for supporting the family rests with the husband. The exclusion of women from the Universal House of justice (which will be discussed later) has tended to perpetuate arguments for "separate but equal spheres" in other realms as well. At the same time, Bahá'í ideals for a new world order cannot be attained without a change in societal structures, with women playing a leading role:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting-force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals — or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.

Many Bahá'í women today have tried to hold together all of these statements in the writings by exhibiting the "supermom" syndrome: fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers while attempting to excel in their chosen careers. Needless to say, this doubling of duties creates tremendous stress for these women. Bahá'ís are often unaware of the historical contexts in which various pronouncements regarding women were made, and this creates great confusion regarding their proper understanding. This issue is confounded by the fact that the development of the Bahá'í faith in its early formative period took place in two radically disparate cultures and continents. Originating in Iran in the middle of the nineteenth century, the religion spread to North America in the 1890s. While Bahá'í theology was born in the context of a nearly homogeneous Islamic Shi'ite culture, its administrative structure developed in the United States. In the course of this chapter I will trace the role of women within the Bahá'í faith from the time of its inception as the Babi movement, through its introduction to the West, until the present time. I will examine both the scriptural status of women as well as the reality of their position within the Bahá'í community. While Bahá'í communities exist in nearly all countries, I will restrict my discussion to Iran and North America, since sufficient documentation exists only for those two areas, and developments in those religions have largely determined the direction taken by the rest of the Bahá'í world.

TAHIRIH: A BAHA'I PARADIGM OF WOMANHOOD

Nearly every religion has its paradigm of the "ideal" woman. In

Hinduism this has been Sita, the perfect wife who remains faithful to her husband at all costs. In Christianity the most eminent woman is the Virgin Mary, symbol of motherhood. Islam has Fatimih, daughter of Muhammad, who models the roles of mother, wife, and daughter together. Tahirih, the most well-known woman in Babi-Bahá'í history, presents a startling contrast to the former models. This gifted poet of nineteenth-century Iran, far from being a dutiful daughter, continually opposed the theological positions of her father, Mulla Salih, a prominent Muslim cleric of Qazvin. Neither is she admired for her success as a wife and mother, since her estrangement from her husband resulted in her forced separation from her children as well. In 1844 C.E. (1260 A.H.) Siyyid Ali Muhammad al-Bab secretly revealed himself to be the Qa'im, the messianic figure expected by the Shi'ite Muslims. He selected eighteen followers as his chief disciples and entitled them, along with himself, the Nineteen Letters of the Living. At the time, Tahirih was a leading figure within the Shaykhi sect. Although she had never met the Bab, she immediately embraced his religion and was appointed a "Letter." Tahirih, whose given name was Fatimih Bigum Baraghani, was the daughter of the leading clerical family of Qazvin. She had received an excellent education in all the traditional Islamic sciences and was able to translate many of the Bab's writings from Arabic into Persian. Despite her background, Tahirih's writings were fiercely anticlerical. Basing her authority on her claim to an inner awareness of God's purpose, she instituted a number of innovations within the Babi community. Claiming that much of Islamic law was no longer binding upon Babis, she refused to perform the daily ritual prayers. But her most audacious act was occasionally to appear unveiled in gatherings of believers.

According to Abbas Amanat, this was probably the first time an Iranian woman had considered unveiling at her own initiative. The circle of women who gathered around Tahirih in Karbila, and later Qazvin, Hamadan, Baghdad, and Teheran, were perhaps the first group of women in those regions to have attained an awareness of their deprivations as women. Yet Tahirih's activities did not represent a woman's liberation movement in the modern sense. For Tahirih, removing the veil was primarily an act of religious innovation. Neither the writings of Tahirih nor the Bab concern themselves with the issue of women's rights as such. Apparently Tahirih experienced the Bab's revelation as liberating, whether or not it addressed itself to the status of women per se.

Tahirih's activities created much controversy within the Babi community itself. Many Babis did not view the Bab's revelation as requiring a total break with the past or with Islamic law. They regarded Tahirih's behavior as scandalous and unchaste. For this reason, the Bab gave her the title by which she is now

known, Tahirih, meaning the "pure." The opposition of the non-Babi ulama (Islamic clergymen) went much deeper. During the month of Muharram, 1847, Tahirih deliberately excited their reaction by dressing in gay colors and appearing unveiled instead of donning the customary mourning clothes to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. She urged the Babis, instead, to celebrate the birthday of the Bab, which fell on the first day of that month. The enraged clergy incited a mob to attack the house where she was staying. Finally the governor intervened and had Tahirih placed under house arrest before having her sent to Baghdad.

Accompanied by the leading Babi women of Karbila, along with a number of devoted male followers, Tahirih set out for Baghdad, where she continued her activities, offering public lectures from behind a curtain. This aroused further opposition and caused her to be imprisoned in the house of the mufti, or leading Sunni cleric of Baghdad. But she was not tried for apostasy, since the usual penalty for that crime (death) could not be applied to women. Meanwhile, her family in Qazvin was quite disturbed by her activities. Her unveiling, in particular, led to rumors of immorality. Tahirih's father dispatched a relative to Iraq who induced the governor to order her return to Iran. Wherever she traveled en route, more excitement was raised. In the village of Krand some twelve hundred people immediately offered her their allegiance.

In Kirmanshah her presence caused such an uproar that the Babis were attacked by a mob and driven out of the city, but not before Tahirih had expounded the teachings before its leading women, including the governor's wife. In Hamadan Tahirih met with both the leading ulama and the most notable women of the city, as well as members of the royal family. On the arrival in Qazvin, her husband, Mulla Muhammad, from whom she had been long estranged, urged her to return to his household. She told him:

"If your desire had really been to be a faithful mate and companion to me, you would have hastened to meet me in Karbila and would on foot have guided my howdah all the way to Qazvin. I would, while journeying with you, have aroused you from your sleep of heedlessness and would have shown you the way of truth. But this was not to be. Three years have lapsed since our separation. Neither in this world nor in the next can I ever be associated with you. I have cast you out of my life forever."

Tahirih's uncle and father-in-law, Muhammad Taqi, had a reputation for being virulently opposed to both the Babis and the Shaykhis. On numerous occasions he incited mob violence against them. After one of these incidents, Mulla Abdu'llah, a Shaykhi and a Babi

sympathizer, decided to retaliate. When Mulla Taqi appeared in the local mosque to offer his dawn prayers, Mulla Abdu'llah fatally stabbed him and fled. This led to the arrest and torture of many of the Babis in Qazvin. Tahirih was implicated as well. In order to stop this orgy of violence, Mulla Abdu'llah turned himself in. Despite this the other Babis were not released and many were executed. Tahirih escaped with the assistance of Bahá'u'lláh, who hid her in his home in Teheran. Later, following a general call to Babis to gather in Khurasan, Tahirih and Bahá'u'lláh traveled to a place called Badasht, where some eighty-one Babi leaders met to consider how they might effect the release of the Bab, who was then imprisoned, and to discuss the future direction of the Babi community in the face of growing persecution. At the meeting tension developed between Tahirih — who headed the more radical Babis advocating a complete break with Islam as well as militant defense of their community — and the more conservative Quddus — who initially advocated policies aimed at the rejuvenation of Islam and prudent accommodation with religious and secular power.

Babis generally accepted Quddus as the chief of the Bab's disciples, but Tahirih reportedly said in regards to him. "I deem him a pupil whom the Bab has sent me to edify and instruct. I regard him in no other light." Quddus denounced Tahirih as "the author of heresy." At one time when Quddus was rapt in his devotions, Tahirih rushed out of her tent brandishing a sword. "Now is not the time for prayers and prostrations." she declared, "rather on to the battle field of love and sacrifice."

Her most startling act was to appear before the assembled believers unveiled. Shoghi Effendi vividly describes that scene:

"Tahirih, regarded as the fair and spotless emblem of chastity and the incarnation of the holy Fatimih, appeared suddenly, adorned yet unveiled, before the assembled companions, seated herself on the right-hand of the affrighted and infuriated Quddus, and, tearing through her fiery words the veils guarding the sanctity of the ordinances of Islam, sounded the clarion-call and proclaimed the inauguration of a new Dispensation. The effect was instantaneous. She, of such stainless purity, so reverenced that even to gaze at her shadow was deemed an improper act, appeared for a moment in the eyes of her scandalized beholders, to have defamed herself, shamed the Faith she espoused, and sullied the immortal Countenance she symbolized. Fear, anger, bewilderment swept their inmost souls, and stunned their faculties. Abdu'l Khaliq-i-Isfahani, aghast and deranged at the sight, cut his throat with his own hands. Spattered with blood, and frantic with excitement, he fled away from her face."

Unperturbed, Tahirih declared, "I am the Word which the Qa'im is to utter, the Word which shall put to flight the chiefs and nobles of the earth!" Tahirih, much to the dismay of many Babis, finally won Quddus over to her point of view. He conceded that Islamic law had been abrogated. So complete was their reconciliation that the two departed from Badasht riding in the same howdah. When they neared the village of Niyala, the local mulla, outraged at seeing an unveiled woman sitting next to a man and chanting poems aloud, led a mob against them. Several people died in the resulting clash and the Babis dispersed in different directions. Pitched battles raged between the Babis and government forces between 1848 and 1850 in the Iranian province of Mazandaran and in the cities of Zanjan and Nayriz. Tahirih remained in hiding, moving from village to village for about a year. Around 1849 authorities arrested her on charges of complicity in the assassination of her uncle. They brought her to Teheran where they imprisoned her in the in house of the kalantar (mayor). The kalantar's wife soon became very attached to Tahirih and women again flocked to hear her discourses.

On July 9, 1850, the Bab was executed in Tabriz by order of the shah. Two years later a small group of Babis sought to take revenge by assassinating the shah. The attempt failed and general massacre of Babis ensued. The government decided to execute Tahirih as well. She was taken to a garden and strangled to death. Her body was thrown down a well. Her last words (perhaps apocryphal) are reported to be. "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."

WOMEN IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHA'U'LLAH

The writings of Bahá'u'lláh unequivocally proclaim the equality of men and women, asserting that "in this Day the Hand of divine grace hath removed all distinction. The Servants of God and His handmaidens are regarded on the same plane." Elsewhere he suggests that differences between the sexes are the result of "vain imaginings" and "idle fancies," which by the power of his might had been destroyed. He further insists on the education of girls.

Yet Bahá'u'lláh's writings do present some problems from a feminist standpoint. The Kitab-i-Aqdas, the book that contains Bahá'í sacred law was written in Arabic, a language that by its nature requires the male gender to be used for collectives. Most of its admonitions and laws are addressed to men. A literal reading of its text would suggest that divorce was solely the male's prerogative. Bigamy appears to be permissible, although monogamy is preferred. Should a marriage be contracted on the basis of a woman's virginity, and the man subsequently discover she was not a virgin, the marriage could be repudiated and the dowry forfeited, although Bahá'u'lláh states that it would be preferable to conceal the matter and forgive. In certain

contexts, women are given special treatment. They are exempt from the obligation to perform pilgrimage. They are also exempt from the daily ritual prayers and fasting during their menses. Other exemptions exist for pregnancy and nursing. Most problematic is Bahá'u'lláh's reference to "the men of the House of justice," which has been interpreted as excluding women from the highest administrative body in the faith. This androcentric view, which a cursory reading of the text gives, is not, it should be recognized, the manner in which Bahá'ís have typically understood the Aqdas. Bahá'u'lláh's son, Abdu'l-Bahá, whom Bahá'ís recognize as the authorized interpreter of the sacred writings, stated that since bigamy was conditioned upon equal treatment of both wives, which is impossible, monogamy alone is permissible. Shoghi Effendi further states that women have the same rights as men to sue for divorce and that the requirement for virginity can certainly be applied to either sex. Only in the case of membership in the Universal House of justice has the male-oriented language been taken literally. When read within the context of nineteenth-century Iran, the Kitab-i-Aqdas presents some startling contrasts to the norms of male-female relations. While the Aqdas makes it optional for women to perform the obligatory prayers or fast during their menses, within Islam they are not permitted to do so at all, since they are regarded as ritually unclean at such times. Many of the laws contained in the Aqdas were addressed to specific concerns raised by individuals, usually male, within the community. For instance, Bahá'u'lláh made parental consent a prerequisite to marriage. The question immediately arose as to whether this was binding on men as well as women, and if it were binding on women who had been previously married. Bahá'u'lláh refused to make any distinction between male and female in this regard, insisting that this regulation existed solely for the unity of the family and had nothing to do with the status of women. Most startling is Bahá'u'lláh's treatment of sexual issues. The sexuality of women, in both Judaism and Islam, has been seen as a potentially dangerous force that threatens the honor of the family and, indeed, the whole social fabric. The duty of male relatives to defend that honor historically has led to the strict seclusion of women. Women who violated sexual mores were commonly killed whereas men received the death penalty only if they had intercourse with a married women, thus violating another man's rights. But according to the Aqdas, adulterers are subject to a fine, not the death penalty. Bahá'ís are even discouraged from divorcing on the grounds of adultery. Control of sexuality in the Aqdas is a matter of great spiritual significance, with important social implications, but it is not treated as the glue of community life.

Bahá'u'lláh's treatment of certain economic issues in regards to

women is somewhat more problematic and has raised a certain amount of controversy lately. The inheritance laws presume a situation where the male is the primary breadwinner of the family. These laws are quite complex, but generally speaking, in the case of intestacy, female heirs are awarded only half of what their male counterparts receive. In this they are similar to Islamic inheritance laws, which are, however, binding on all with or without a will. This led some Bahá'ís to assert that the law of intestacy represents what ought to be normative among Bahá'ís. Men retain their position as the primary breadwinners of the family, with certain rights and responsibilities. A patrilineal, though not patriarchal, society is thus maintained. Such an arrangement is necessary to insure the participation of the male in family life.

Others, including this author, have argued that since Bahá'u'lláh requires all believers to write a will, what he has written in regards to intestacy is exceptional, not normative. The Aqdas describes an equitable distribution of property within the context of nineteenth-century Iran and is thus more descriptive than prescriptive. The Aqdas also excludes non-Bahá'ís from inheritance entirely, a provision made in a situation of oppression and persecution where Bahá'ís were commonly disowned by non-Bahá'í relatives. Shoghi Effendi states that under normal circumstances it is only fair for Bahá'ís to provide for non-Bahá'í relatives, and emphasizes the need for all Bahá'ís to write wills to do so. The Bahá'í claim to equality of sexes, many hold, would be meaningless if it did not embrace the economic sphere. Perhaps the key issue in this debate revolves around the yet unresolved issue of the treatment of scripture. The more conservative believers interpret the sacred writings in an absolute, timeless sense, minimizing their cultural context. They therefore draw essential principles from all parts of scripture equally. The more liberal understanding regards the historical situation within which such writings were revealed to be essential for meaningful exegesis. it holds that the most meaningful portions of scripture are those that depart radically from the cultural context in which they were written. In regards to gender relations, the conservative approach leads to a situation where equality is enjoined in the spiritual realm but social inequalities are allowed to persist.

Another issue that might be raised with regard to Bahá'u'lláh's writings is the use of gender in connection with the deity. It has been argued, with good reason, that the exclusive use of male gender in referring to God leads to a perpetuation of male dominance. Bahá'u'lláh's legal writings were composed in Arabic, a language which necessitated the use of the male gender when referring to God. In order to preserve the integrity of the text, Shoghi Effendi has stated that it is impermissible to change the gender of the writings

even in the use of prayers. Bahá'u'lláh's more mystical writings, however, are in Persian, which has no gender. Nevertheless, these writings have, without exception, been translated into English using the male gender. The mystical-erotic language employed in many of these texts, which refer to God as the beloved, might suggest that the female gender would be more appropriate. Sufi mysticism often depicts God as a beautiful woman and Bahá'u'lláh's Persian writings utilize much Sufi imagery.

FROM EAST TO WEST

In 1892 Bahá'u'lláh passed away, leaving the leadership of the Bahá'í community in the hands of his eldest son, Abdu'l-Bahá. The following year, a Bahá'í convert of Lebanese Christian background, Ibrahim Kheiralla, introduced the religion to the West. As was the case in nearly all religious groups in nineteenth-century America, women played a prominent role. Female converts generally outnumbered men by two to one. The August 20, 1910, issue of Bahá'í News stated "nine-tenths of the active workers in the Cause in the West are women." Not all Bahá'í men were delighted with this state of affairs. The same issue of Bahá'í News contained a letter from Charles Mason Remey complaining that in most Bahá'í localities women performed the bulk of the work, holding Bahá'í meetings in the early afternoons when men were unable to attend. Women, he held, were content simply to attend meetings, but men needed to do work and very few localities were organized for "efficient work." The belief existed among many American Bahá'í men that women ought to confine their activities to the teaching work, leaving administrative activities to men. This opinion was apparently reinforced by many of the Iranian Bahá'í teachers sent to America by Abdu'l-Bahá. In the fall of 1899 Edward Getsinger organized a "Board of Counsel" for the Bahá'ís of northern New Jersey. Isabella Brittingham was appointed corresponding secretary but was not a voting member of that body. In March 1900 Thornton Chase reported that Chicago had formed a "Board of Counsel" consisting of ten men. Later that year Abdu'l-Karim Tihrani reorganized the board, expanding its membership to nineteen and including women. The following year Mirza Assadu'llah isfahani again reorganized the governing body, insisting only men could be elected. At that time the board began calling itself the House of justice. Some Bahá'í women expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement, complaining that "Mirza Assad'ullah ignored us, although they were all invited to meet with us, and he established a House of justice of men only.

Perhaps most distressed with these developments was Corinne True, who appealed to Abdu'l-Bahá to rescind the directive confining membership on the House of justice to men. She received a reply from Abdu'l-Bahá in June 1902 but refrained from sharing it with the

Chicago Bahá'ís until the fall of that year. The letter read:

"Know thou, O handmaid, that in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in his own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revelers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them....
The House of justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men, this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon. As to you, O ye other handmaids who are enamored of the heavenly fragrances, arrange ye holy gatherings, and found ye Spiritual Assemblies, for these are the basis for spreading the sweet savors of God, exalting His Word, uplifting the lamp of His grace, promulgating His religion and promoting His Teachings, and what bounty is there greater than this."

Earlier, Corinne True along with Ella Nash had organized a ladies' auxiliary board which, after this letter, became known as the women's assembly of teaching. in practice this body functioned as a parallel institution to the Chicago house. It appears this body was able to maintain control of much of the funds of the Chicago Bahá'í community, perhaps because the main contributors were women. The Chicago house frequently found itself without adequate financial support. At times their relations were anything but harmonious.

Thornton Chase, regarded as the first American Bahá'í, strongly opposed the participation of women on Bahá'í administrative bodies in communities where there were men available to serve. He believed women were much too emotional for these functions and that Bahá'u'lláh explicitly excluded their participation as "business controllers". Abdu'l-Bahá, however, did not seem to question women's abilities as planners and administrators. In 1903 the Chicago House of Spirituality determined to build a house of worship similar to one recently begun by Bahá'ís in Ishqabad, Russia. In 1906 Mrs. True visited Abdu'l-Bahá in Palestine. At that time Abdu'l-Bahá gave her specific instructions regarding the construction of the Chicago temple. immediately afterward, Thornton Chase arrived in Palestine for his own pilgrimage. In response to Mr. Chase's questions regarding the temple, Abdu'l-Bahá responded that he had given complete instructions to Mrs. True and that Chase should consult with her. When it became apparent that the construction of a house of worship constituted a more formidable task than the Chicago Bahá'í community was then capable of undertaking. Corinne True urged the forming of a national Bahá'í body for that purpose. With the approval of Abdu'l-Bahá, delegates representing Bahá'í communities throughout North America elected the Bahá'í temple unity executive board in 1909. Of the nine members chosen, three were women, with

Corinne True serving as financial secretary. Some of the Bahá'í men objected to this "seeming open-handed kidnapping ... of various institutions of the Cause by women." Others defended the women, insisting that at this stage the Bahá'í faith required the kind of "mothering" that only women could provide. By 1925 the executive board evolved into the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. In 1909 Corinne True received a letter from Abdu'l-Bahá in response to her insistent questioning on the issue of women serving on the Houses of justice. It read:

"According to the ordinances of the Faith of God, women are the equals of men in all rights save only that of membership on the Universal House of justice, for, as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of justice are men. However, in all other bodies, such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly, and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all right with men."

Unlike Abdu'l-Bahá's previous correspondence, this letter seemed to exclude women's participation only on the, as yet, unformed international Bahá'í body not on the local or national houses of justices. At least this was the understanding of Corinne True, who again began to agitate for the election of women to the Chicago House of Spirituality. Not all Bahá'ís agreed with this interpretation, however, viewing it as a repetition of the Abdu'l-Bahá's ruling in his earlier letter. Thornton Chase, irritated by True's activities, wrote in 1910:

"Several years ago, soon after the forming of the "House of justice"... Mrs. True wrote to Abdu'l-Bahá and asked if women should not be members of that House. He replied distinctly, that the House should be composed of men only, and told her that there was a wisdom in this. It was a difficult command for her to accept, and ever since (confidentially) there has been in that quarter and in those influenced by her a feeling of antagonism to the House of Spirituality, which has manifested itself in various forms....
Mrs. True received a Tablet, in which it was stated (in reply to her solicitation) that it was right for women to be members of all "Spiritual Gatherings" except the "Universal House of justice," and she at once construed this to mean, that women were to be members of the House of Spirituality and the Council Boards, because in some of the Tablets for the House, it had been addressed as the "Spiritual Assembly" or "Spiritual Gathering." But the House of Spirituality could not so interpret the Master's meaning."

Further investigation on the part of the Chicago House of Spirituality showed that elsewhere in the United States Abdu'l-Bahá had authorized the election of both men and women to local bodies.

They therefore concluded that "in organizing Spiritual Assemblies of Consultation now, it is deemed advisable by Abdu'l-Bahá to have them composed of both men and women. The wisdom of this will become evident in due time, no doubt. Apparently the members of this body expected that when local and national bodies became official "houses of justice" women would be removed from membership, but until then men would have to put up with the situation. The all-male administrative bodies finally were completely dissolved by Abdu'l-Bahá in his visit to America in 1912.

FROM WEST TO EAST

The introduction of the Bahá'í faith to America had a profound effect on the position of Bahá'í women in Iran. Western Bahá'ís began traveling to Iran, where they spoke to Bahá'í gatherings. In the opening years of the twentieth century Iranian Bahá'í women were still excluded from participation in Bahá'í administrative institutions, had little access to education, and, in most cases, still wore the veil. Charles Mason Remey, who published a pamphlet relating his experiences in Iran in 1908, observed that many Persian Bahá'í women expressed dissatisfaction with this state of affairs and began to agitate for change. He described one incident where he was speaking to a Bahá'í gathering where men and women were separated by a curtain. Remey was asked by his hostess to describe the activities of Bahá'í women in America. As he did, the hostess became more and more excited and finally drew back the curtain and urged the other women present to remove their veils and join the men. The men made room for the newcomers by withdrawing, somewhat uneasily, to the far side of the room. Bit by bit the men regained their composure, but then the women became rather embarrassed. Suddenly "all arose and like a flock of affrighted birds fluttered from the room." Remey ended his account by suggesting that Western Bahá'í women begin corresponding with their Eastern sisters. His hope was that eventually several would be able to settle in Iran as teachers and physicians.

The following year Dr. Susan Moody arrived from Chicago to join a small group of Iranian Bahá'í doctors in establishing a hospital in Teheran. Over the next few years, Elizabeth Stewart, a nurse, Dr. Sarah Clock, and Lillian Kappes, a teacher, joined her. At this time a number of girls' schools were operated on an informal basis by Bahá'í women. Since, with the assistance of American Bahá'ís, the community had maintained a highly reputed boys' school, Dr. Moody persuaded the executive committee of that school to adopt one of these girls' schools as a separate department. Eventually this school became one of the finest girls' college preparatory schools in Iran. In 1911 Godseah Ashraf became the first Iranian Bahá'í woman to travel to America for the purpose of pursuing

graduate work in educational psychology. She then returned to Iran and taught in Bahá'í schools. During Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West in 1911-1912, he made more explicit Bahá'í teachings with regard to women's rights, stressing especially the need for women's education, the lack of which he viewed as the sole reason for the perceived inferiority of women. He deemed the education of mothers so essential to the proper upbringing of children that he held that the education of daughters should take precedence over that of sons. But Abdu'l-Bahá did not restrict women's function in society to the home. He urged women to excel in all the arts and sciences and, further, expected their participation on an equal footing in the political sphere as well. He stated that women's political participation would be a prerequisite for peace. The only field (aside from membership on the Universal House of justice) where Abdu'l-Bahá did not extend full and equal participation was in military endeavors, since he regarded the taking of human life incompatible with women's role as mothers. Copies of Abdu'l-Bahá's talks were distributed throughout Iran, and these, along with the influence of American Bahá'ís residing in Iran, awakened Iranian Bahá'í women to possibilities unthought of in previous generations. Apparently they began to advocate the immediate abolishment of the veil, as well as women's full participation in administrative affairs. Abdu'l-Bahá was not entirely pleased with these developments, for, besides the stress and disunity these issues were creating within the Bahá'í community itself, he felt that actions such as discarding the veil would bring on needless persecution in an already volatile situation. Abdu'l-Bahá pleaded with the Iranian women not to do anything "contrary to wisdom." Women's assemblages at this time should be confined to educational matters so that "differences will, day by day, be entirely wiped out, not that, God forbid, it will end in argumentation between men and women." Their efforts should be in the spiritual, not the political realm. Abdu'l-Bahá would in time insure that they achieved full equality with men in all areas. in the meantime they ought not to agitate against the men for such changes. He chided the women for their impatience, saying "this newly born babe is traversing in one night the path that needeth a hundred years to tread.

While women were allowed to vote within the Iranian Bahá'í community, it was not until 1954 that they were permitted to serve on Bahá'í institutions. As late as the 1970s one observer could only count two women delegates out of the more than one hundred attending the national Bahá'í convention in Teheran. Yet when the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran were arrested and executed in 1981, the chairperson was a woman, Zhinus Mahmudi.

In recent years Bahá'í institutions throughout the world have made a

concerted efforts to insure equal participation of Bahá'í women on them. Female membership in the higher institutions in the Americas and in Europe appears to be between 30 and 40 percent, while in Asia and Africa it remains at 10 to 20 percent. The numbers of women serving on national spiritual assemblies in the world has increased from 34 in 1953 to 354 in 1985.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps no other religion offers a stronger scriptural basis for women's rights or a richer history for women to draw on than does the Bahá'í faith. Yet cultural barriers, rigidity of certain administrative structures, conceptions of authority, and literalistic interpretations of scripture have at times militated against the ability of women to obtain full equality within the Bahá'í community. Whereas all Bahá'ís in theory believe in the equality of men and women, there is no unanimity as to what that equality means. In many instances Bahá'í conceptions of equality have distanced them from more radical forms of Western feminism. Whether or not Bahá'í women will fully utilize the, potentialities of Bahá'í scriptures and history, or whether they will be relegated to "separate but equal spheres" that perpetuate structures of male dominance, remains to be seen. There exists no single theory of Bahá'í feminism, but Bahá'ís, men and women alike, are agreed on one principle: hierarchical systems that place men above women in a divinely ordained order have no sanction within the Bahá'í scriptures. In this respect the Bahá'í faith is unique among revealed religions.

Notes

1. Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 108.

2. Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Women (Oakham: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986), 10.

3. Ibid., 29.

4. Ibid., Shoghi Effendi, entitled the Guardian served as head of the Bahá'í community from 1921 to 1957

5. Tahirih is not in the theological sense the most important woman in Babi-Bahá'í history; that distinction belongs to Navvab, the wife of Bahá'u'lláh and Bahiyyih Khanum, his eldest daughter. Of the first figure, however, very little has been written in English, or to my knowledge in Persian. Bahiyyih Khanum is much better known, since she served as the de facto head of the Bahá'í community several times. She has usually been depicted as playing a supportive role in relation to Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, although in the opinion of this writer she was much more of an independent actor. She has not attracted as much attention as Tahirih, about whom numerous (partly fictionalized) biographies exist. Tahirih is, in a word, a legend,

and as such plays a much more important role among Bahá'ís as the paradigm of womanhood. Both in Iran and America, her name is probably the most popular Bahá'í name given to girls.

6. Nineteen letters make up the Arabic phrase Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim, which introduces all but one of the surihs of the Quran. Hence the number nineteen has been endowed with great spiritual significance.

7. The Shaykhi school, founded by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsai (d. 1826) is a small sect within Twelver Shiism, which differs from the majority in that it denies the absolute authority of the mujtahids (ayatollahs) and holds to a less literal understanding of the resurrection. Nevertheless, they believed strongly in charismatic leadership and apparently, at this time, expected the eminent appearance of the Qa'im. Most of the early Babis were drawn from this sect. Tahirih had left Qazvin around 1843 in order to meet Siyyid Kazim Rashti, the Shaykhi head. He died shortly before her arrival. Supported by the widow of Rashti, Tahirih moved into his household where she taught classes and apparently assumed control of the more radical elements of the community there.

8. Abbas Amanat, Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 306-7.

9. The Bab's teachings certainly aimed at improving the condition of women by abolishing the temporary marriage allowable in Shi'ite Islam as well as instant divorce, but their position could hardly be regarded as equal.

10. Tahirih would, under normal circumstances, remain veiled. She removed it only when she had a particular point to make, no doubt because of its shock appeal.

11. Nabil-i-A'zam, The Dawnbreakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1979), 273-4.

12. After describing this incident, Abdu'l-Bahá remarks: "These things would take place before the reality of this Cause was revealed and all was made plain. For in those days no one knew that the Manifestation of the Bab would culminate in the Manifestation of the Blessed Beauty (Bahá'u'lláh) and that the law of retaliation would be done away with, and the foundation-principle of the Law of God would be this, that "it is better for you to be killed that to kill;" that discord and contention would cease, and the rule of war and butchery would fall away. In those days, that sort of thing would happen" (Memorials of the Faithful, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette,

1971, 198-99.)

13. Tahirih's father remained convinced of her innocence as well as her chastity, but the accusations caused him untold grief. At one point, the prayer leader at the Friday mosque or Qazvin read a verse mocking Mulla Salih: "No glory remains on that house/From which the hens crow like the cocks." Mulla Salih was said to have remained silent, as tears ran down his cheeks to his beard (Amanat, Resurrection,322).

14. Dawnbreakers, 297.

15. H. Nugaba'i, Tahirih (Teheran: 128 Badi/1972 C.E.), 60.

16. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By (Bahá'í Publishing Committee, Wilmette), 32.

17. Ibid.

18. Bahá'u'lláh apparently proved instrumental in bringing about the reconciliation. His subsequent actions show that he himself, while advocating a total break with Islam, believed in nonviolent means for attaining the Babi aims.

19. Execution by strangulation was probably chosen to avoid the prohibition of shedding a woman's blood. Bahá'í children were later executed in a similar manner.

20. God Passes By, 75.

21. Peter Smith, The Babi and Bahá'í Religions (Cambridge, 1987), 92-93.

22. Research Department of the Universal House of justice, Women (Oakham: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986), 2.

23. Ibid., 1.

24. The basic contents of the Kitab-i Aqdas can be found in A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitab-i Aqdas (Haifa: Universal House of justice, 1973). This author made use of a manuscript copy of the Arabic text as well as several unpublished translations.

25. The independent investigation of truth is a paramount principle within the Bahá'í faith and Bahá'ís are free and, indeed, enjoined to pursue their own understanding of the sacred text. Only Abdu'l-Bahá (d. 1921) and after him, Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957) were authorized to make authoritative interpretations binding upon the body of believers. This is in direct contrast to the Shi'ite practice of having a select group of clerics (muitahids, now commonly known as ayatollahs) who alone are deemed capable of interpreting scripture. The laity must "imitate" (taqlid) one of these leaders in all matters of divine law. Bahá'u'lláh has forbidden both this form of interpretation and "blind imitation." Shoghi Effendi is regarded as

infallible in his interpretations of the sacred text, and the Universal House of justice is considered infallible in matters of legislation. This infallibility appears to me to be primarily an issue of moral immaculacy, since if the House of justice makes a decision based on misinformation, it can be changed. Whether or not the accuracy of Shoghi Effendi's interpretations are likewise subject to his having had correct information regarding the context of the revealed scriptures, is an issue, which, to my knowledge, has never been addressed.

26. R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram offers some valuable insights into these issues in Dialogue, vol. 2, no. 1, 19-25.

27. This argument is made by Linda and John Walbridge in "Bahá'í Laws and the Status of Men" in World Order, Fall 1984. 25-36.

28. Responses to the Walbridge thesis can be found in "A Question of Gender:A Forum on the Status of Men in Bahá'í Law", Dialogue, Fall 1987, vol. 2, no. 1, 14-34.

29. In this regard it should be noted that the inequality of women in Islam, as stated in the Quran, rests on economic grounds: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women. Because God has given the one more than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in absence what God would have them guard." (Quran 33:35).

30. In 1902 Abdu'l-Bahá urged the Chicago House of justice to rename itself the house of spirituality in order to insure that no one should imagine its aims to be political. Later local and national bodies became known as spiritual assemblies and the term house of justice was reserved for the world administrative body: the Universal House of justice. In the early part of the twentieth century the use of most of these terms was quite fluid. "Spiritual Assemblies," for instance, referred to nearly every sort of Bahá'í gathering or body. in the future local and national bodies will be called houses of justice.

31. Cited in "The Service of Women on the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith" an unpublished paper by Anthony Lee, Peggy Caton, Richard Hollinger, Ma@an Nirou, Nader Saiedi, Shahin Carrigan, Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, and Juan Cole (undated), 15-16. Much of what follows in this section has been derived from sources cited in this paper, although my interpretation of that material differs in that this paper argues that the 1909 letter did not necessarily refer to the Universal House of justice as we now understand it. While it is true the word usage has sometimes changed within the Bahá'í writings, I do not think this is the case here. Abdu'l-Bahá used that word in its present technical sense as early as 1903 when writing his will and testament.

32. Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), 79-80.

33. Chase to Scheffler, 5/10/10, Chase Papers, National Bahá'í Archives. Cited in Anthony Lee et al., "Service," 32. The same year Thornton Chase wrote in a letter to Mason Remey: "women are emotional, uncertain, unsteady, unwise in business affairs, carried away by 'devotion,' given to dreams and imaginations, and I am convinced that as long as the Cause in this land is so largely in the hands of women, it CANNOT PROSPER.... As long as the 'feminine element' dominates the movement, it cannot be carried on wisely and well" Chase to Remey January 19, 1910, National Bahá'í Archives).

34. Bruce Whitmore, The Dawning Place (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 36.

35. Ibid., 23-24.

36. Cited in the May 31, 1988, letter of the universal house of justice to the national spiritual assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand.

37. The universal house of justice was first elected in 1963.

38. Chase to Remey, 1119110, Chase Papers, National Bahá'í Archives. Cited in Anthony Lee et al., "Service," 32.

39. House of Spirituality (Albert R. Windust, librarian to Board of Consultation, Kenosha, Wis., 7/23/10, House of Spirituality Papers, National Bahá'í Archives. Cited in Anthony Lee et al., "Service."

40. Shoghi Effendi, as well as the Universal House of justice, have held that references to male membership in the House of justice refer specifically to the Universal House of justice and will never be applied to local and national bodies. The Universal House of justice seems to hold that Abdu'l-Bahá, in his 1909 letter, was merely clarifying the points in his 1902 letter, and that there was therefore no real change in policy. This would presume that Abdu'l-Bahá, in his first letter to Corinne True, did not really understand the intent of her question and was ignorant of the controversy in Chicago, which caused her to write to him. However, Nathan Rutstein, Corinne True's biographer insists, "Certainly Abdu'l-Bahá was aware of what was happening. The House of Spirituality sent Him weekly reports, and Mirza Asadu'llah was in contact with Him" 32. The position of the Universal House of justice is that "the law regarding the membership of the Universal House of justice is embedded in the Text and has been merely restated by the divinely appointed interpreters. It is therefore neither amenable to change nor subject to speculation about some possible future condition." They go on to say "the important fact to remember is that in the face of the categorical pronouncements in Bahá'í Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership of the Universal House of

justice does not constitute evidence of the superiority of men over women" (May 31, 1988). From the standpoint of the Universal House of justice this matter is immutable because of Bahá'í positions with regard to authoritative interpretation and not because of any view of the status of women as such.

41. Observations of a Bahá'í Traveller (n.p., 1908), 76.

42. R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, "American Bahá'í Women and the Education of Girls in Tehran, 1909-1934." In Iran (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986), 181-210.

43. Besides carrying the general meaning "wisdom" (hikmat) has a technical meaning in many of the Bahá'í writings. To act according to wisdom generally infers behaving such a way as not to attract opposition toward the Bahá'í faith in a situation where persecution or misunderstanding might otherwise result even when it is necessary to compromise some Bahá'í principle to do so. Acts of providence which might otherwise be seen as negative are also described as having a "wisdom" if they benefit the progress of the religion in some unforeseen way.

44. Portions of this letter are contained in Women.
5-6. Unfortunately no further information or even the date are provided regarding it, so I have been forced to be a little speculative regarding its context. The final line quoted is a well-known Persian proverb.

45. Peggy Caton, Equal Circles, xvi. (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1987).

46. Mrs. Mahmudi had been a scientist of national prominence in Iran, where she served as president of the Iranian School of Meteorology. Unlike persecutions of the previous century, the Islamic republic of Iran has shown no reticence about executing female Bahá'ís. On June 18, 1983, ten Bahá'í women were hanged in Shiraz. Since then all Bahá'í institutions in Iran have been disbanded.

47. Statistics on the participation of women in Bahá'í institutions can be found in Dialogue, Summer/Fall 1986, 3:1.

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