

Shoghi Effendi was born in 1897 into a turbulent environment at a time of rising global ferment. Almost half a century earlier his great grandfather, Bahá'u'lláh, had been officially banished from His native Persia as a consequence of charges imputed to His leadership in the founding of a new religion; before that, Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner, the Báb, had been put to death under dramatic circumstances. Bahá'u'lláh's exile took him to Iraq and Turkey, in each of which He was confined as a prisoner for a number of years. It was during these years that He announced His mission as the bearer of a new revelation from God. Bahá'u'lláh was further banished to a prison in Acre, Palestine, arriving there with His family in August 1868. He was released from strict confinement after a few years but remained under detention in that area, where He passed away in 1892. His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who had shared in His Father's exile and imprisonment, succeeded Bahá'u'lláh as head of the Faith and the appointed interpreter and exemplar of His teachings.

Shoghi Effendi, the firstborn of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's eldest daughter, Díá'íyyih Khánúm, grew up under the sheltering eye of his beloved grandfather. Except for his sojourns abroad as a student and other occasional travels, this scion of a historic family of Persian exiles lived and worked in the land of his birth. His life encompassed the dosing years of Ottoman rule, the entire span of the British mandate, and virtually a decade of the independent State of Israel — altogether a period marked by social and political turmoil involving the upheavals of two world wars.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in November 1921 marked the beginning of an unusual career for Shoghi Effendi. Nothing had prepared the Bahá'ís then scattered among some thirty-five countries for the conspicuous part that he was destined to play in the making of their community. Consonant with his total dedication to the service of his grandfather, Shoghi Effendi's great aspiration was to acquire the ability to translate the Bahá'í writings into perfect English. His innocence of any desire beyond such aspiration was shattered by the shock he sustained upon learning from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament of his appointment as interpreter and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. He was then only twenty-five and still a student at Oxford. His sudden awareness of this new responsibility overwhelmed him, so much so that he absented himself from the Holy Land for some months to collect his strength for the tasks ahead.

The young Guardian began his ministry in the unsettled aftermath of World War I. He was faced with the daunting challenge of rallying the forces and concentrating the efforts of loosely connected groups and isolated individuals who were for the most part unschooled in the details of the belief and practice of their new religion. If he were to succeed, he had not only to win their adherence to the fundamentals but also to imbue them with a vision that would penetrate and transcend the gloom of the times. The matrix in which the Guardian must function was set by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, Who declared the oneness of humankind to be the central principle of His Revelation. If Bahá'u'lláh was the author of this world-embracing concept, His immediate successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was the architect of the System that must realize it,

and Shoghi Effendi, the latter's successor, would be the builder of the structure that would enable that System to function. The Guardian explains the thrust of Bahá'u'lláh's intentions in these words:

For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these, He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth.

Shoghi Effendi set about his task with efficient energy, There was a divine Plan to be pursued. It required the raising up of new institutions, the execution of worldwide teaching programs, the protection of the Faith from the attacks of its adversaries-all a part of the process of building the new World Order proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. Thus Shoghi Effendi's challenge was to do more than explicate the sacred texts: he had to direct and guide his trust through the permutations of individual and Social transformation; he had to forge a Bahá'í community. His exegetical works were written to serve these essential purposes.

At the outset Shoghi Effendi focused on building the local and national institutions specified in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thus in a letter to the Bahá'ís in North America, dated 23 March 1923, he called for the formation through election of local spiritual assemblies, emphasizing their "absolute necessity" in providing the "firm foundation on which the structure of the Master's Will is to be reared in future." In this same letter he issued a similar call for the formation of national spiritual assemblies under which the local ones would function. In the West, particularly in 'North America, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1912 had stimulated great interest in the Bahá'í teachings and had drawn many to acceptance of the Faith, the words of this letter had a revolutionary effect.

A course was now set for the formation of a different kind of community with its own laws and procedures-a community dependent for its existence on voluntary effort and individual initiative. Through successive elaborations of the processes initiated-calling for elections without campaigning and nominations, for consultation as the basis of decision-making, and for the establishment of a fund supported by voluntary contributions for which receipts must be issued-Shoghi Effendi urged and guided the creation of local and national spiritual assemblies, It was an effort that changed the character of thought and behavior in the management of the spiritual and practical affairs of a clergyless religious community.

With the necessary organization in place, Shoghi Effendi turned the attention

of the Bahá'ís toward the systematic propagation of the Faith. In 1937 the Bahá'ís of North America embarked on a seven-year program of expansion and consolidation, their first organized attempt at responding to the series of fourteen letters known collectively as the Tablets of the Divine Plan, addressed to them by 'Abdu 'I-Bahá between March 1916 and March 1917, during the time of World War I. Although a conference was held in New York City as early as 1919 where the fourteen Tablets were displayed and discussed, the implications of these communications from 'Abdu'l-Bahá were not immediately understood. It remained for Shoghi Effendi years later to set in place the organization and to provide the amplification that would guarantee a systematic implementation of their world-encompassing directives. Through his frequent letters and cablegrams, Shoghi Effendi gradually trained the Bahá'ís to recognize and accept the necessity of a sustained response to these directives. It took a series of such communications from the Guardian over a period of two years to bring the North American Bahá'ís to the degree of action for which he had long hoped.

The first Seven Year Plan encompassed the Western Hemisphere, operating for the most part during World War II. Three objectives were specified: opening all unopened provinces of Canada and states of the United States to the Faith by establishing at least one local spiritual assembly in each of them; taking the Faith to other countries in the hemisphere; and completing the exterior ornamentation of the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the West, which at that time was being built in Wilmette, Illinois, north of Chicago. At the end of the Plan in April 1944 all objectives had been achieved. A pattern had now been set for more extensive teaching and consolidation programs. A second Seven Year Plan was launched by the North American Bahá'ís in April 1946, which, together with plans of shorter duration undertaken by national communities elsewhere, ensured the extension of the Faith to other countries in other continents.

The second enterprise preceded the ambitious Ten Year International Teaching Plan initiated by Shoghi Effendi in 1953, at which time there were 12 national spiritual assemblies and 250 local spiritual assemblies in the world. At his death in 1957 at about the midpoint of the Plan, Bahá'í communities had been established in some 200 countries and dependent territories and the number of national and local spiritual assemblies had increased to 26 and 1,000, respectively. At the conclusion of the Ten Year Plan in April 1963, the centennial anniversary of the declaration by Bahá'u'lláh of His prophetic mission in Baghdad, His Faith had become a world religion. The execution of the Plan involved the dispatch to territories all over the globe of large numbers of Bahá'í teachers, known as pioneers. The stories of their exploits chronicle an astonishing record of human adventure and endurance. That Shoghi Effendi was able to inspire such a movement of volunteers, who were untrained in missionary work and whose sole qualification was the high degree of their devotion to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, is an impressive index of the dynamism of his Guardianship.

SHOGHI EFFENDI'S interpretations of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were largely oriented to action. To a great extent they were responses to the expressed or demonstrated needs of the community. He seemed completely to avoid gratuitous, random interpretations of the sacred texts; the questions and needs of the community determined his exegetic Output.

The interpretive powers of the Guardian were, it is important to reiterate, not self-arrogated but were conferred upon him through an act of appointment deriving from a source authorized by Bahá'u'lláh, Who, Bahá'ís believe, is a Messenger of God come to establish an independent dispensation. It is rare in human history to encounter one who has been assigned such a role by a recognized divine authority. Bahá'u'lláh shed light on the meaning of the office of interpreter when He wrote that the hearts of those who are the "appointed interpreters" of the Word of God are the "repositories of its secrets" and are the "only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom." Thus, in this context, Shoghi Effendi's treatment of every issue the Bahá'ís might bring to his attention regarding their development as individuals and as members of institutions and of communities was inextricably linked to his designated role as "Expounder" of the Word.

Interpretation of holy scripture has, of course, been fundamental to the existence of religious communities throughout the ages. In the past each community has met the need for such interpretation according to its own insights. As in most instances no one was recognized as having been authorized by the religion's Founder to be the interpreter of His words, individuals who assumed the role were not able to overcome the protests of those who disagreed with their offerings. The consequent conflicts arising from a variety of interpretations have led to irremediable schism and a history of chaos among people claiming to belong to the same faith. This has been disastrously contrary to the intention of every revealed religion to create a unified community. It is, therefore, of crucial importance that the Founder of a religion principally concerned with achieving the unity of the human race should have made specific arrangements to secure it against the divisiveness of conflicting, unauthorized interpretations of its sacred laws and ordinances. In the light of past experience, the explicit, authoritative appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then Shoghi Effendi, as interpreters stands as a distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í Faith.

It is also important to recognize that Shoghi Effendi's function as interpreter was inseparable from his designation as Guardian, The absorption of the two into an indivisible whole ensured both explication of the theory and actualization of the practice of the new Faith. His interpretive work must be seen within the context of his broad responsibilities as the successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "For he is, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá," His Will and Testament states, "the guardian of the Cause of God and the beloved of the Lord must obey him and turn unto him."

The Guardian was as a telescope with a clear lens through which others might see Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in bold relief In a sense he made himself

transparent so that the recipients of his explanations and guidance could fix their sight on Bahá'u'lláh as the source of their motivations and on 'Abdu'l-Bahá as their exemplar. In a critical sentence Shoghi Effendi clarified his attitude in this respect: "The fact that the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not necessarily confer on him a station co-equal with those Whose words he is called upon to interpret." He was vigilant in avoiding an imposition of his personality that might in any way dim the preeminence of the Central Figures of the Faith. Although he met and talked with the many individuals who came (as pilgrims to the World Center of the Faith, he did not visit Bahá'í communities and did not circulate photographs of himself. His instruction to the Bahá'ís not to commemorate events associated with his life is an impressive example of the self-effacement that characterized his relationship to these Figures.

The writings of Shoghi Effendi, for the most part, comprise an estimated thirty-six thousand letters and messages addressed to institutions, national and local communities, the world community, and individuals. A large portion of these communications is the result of the vast correspondence he conducted with individuals, a correspondence that produced an immense treasury of guidance on a remarkably wide range of subjects. Some of the Guardian's letters and messages were voluminous enough to be published separately as books; others have been drawn together in published anthologies. He wrote a stupendous history of the first hundred years of the Bahá'í Faith. In addition, he provided translations of major works by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The literature of interpretation has taught Bahá'ís how to believe, how to act, and how to grow spiritually, These in a broad, practical sense mean among other things: how to manifest justice in their deeds and relationships; how to acquire the virtues of a chaste and holy life; how to eliminate racial and other forms of prejudice; how to translate the inherent equality of women and men into social practice; how to preserve the salutary essentials of politics; how to be loyal citizens without indulging in partisanship; how to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility; how to appreciate diversity in the human family; how to be servants to their fellow humans of whatever background; how to uplift victims of oppression; how to develop a world-embracing vision, to appreciate the basic oneness of the revealed religions, to acquire the virtues of world citizenship.

If Shoghi Effendi made indelible impressions on minds and hearts, he also left ineradicable marks on the ground, superb evidences of his aesthetic acuity. His close personal attention to the physical development of the Bahá'í World Center, which is situated in the twin cities of Acre and Haifa, actuated his creative energies. The buildings designed and erected at his initiative, his direct involvement in their interior decoration, the extensive gardens he himself designed to provide a proper ambiance for the holiest sites of the Faith, have all ensured a legacy of beauty for generations to come. There was

in these actions a means of educating the community as well; for through them Shoghi Effendi demonstrated how the sacred should be revered.

SHOGHI EFFENDI'S labors revolved around explicating and actualizing the pivotal Bahá'í principle, the oneness of humankind. The global community he raised up is meant to embody that all-embracing code. But this core principle established by Bahá'u'lláh is not simply the motto of a religious congregation. This principle puts the world on notice that human evolution has reached the stage, of its consummation, and it sets the goal toward which all effort on the planet must now be oriented. Early in his Guardianship, Shoghi Effendi dismissed the notion that this principle could be regarded as a "mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism" or that it should merely be identified with "a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood." Though its message applies to the individual, he elaborated, it is primarily concerned with "the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family." The result it seeks, therefore, is "a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units."

The urgency of the revolutionary goal of oneness is all the more pressing for at least two reasons: the chaotic state of the world demands it; more particularly, the new potentialities of the human race make it necessary and inevitable. Taken together, the unprecedented advances in science and technology during this century are only one example of the burgeoning of these inherent human powers. It is a burgeoning that Bahá'u'lláh associates with the coming of age of humanity in the new day that He came to usher in. "Every creature," He averred, has been "endowed with all the potentialities it can carry." The many new discoveries of intellectual and natural resources appear to affirm it; and it seems demonstrable, for example, in as basic a material as sand when one considers its use in the manufacture of the computer microchip.

In the context of the goal of world unity, the twentieth century must be viewed as a critical part of a period of transition from the present chaos to a wholly new state of society, a period in which the ground is being laid for a coming Golden Age for the entire planet. The tumultuous dynamics of this transition are being played out through a twofold process, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum," Shoghi Effendi writes, "to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive." The integrating process itself comprises two parts which though essentially related are outwardly separate, both leading to the same bright prospect: world peace. One is to lead to a preliminary stage, the other is to consummate the peace in which a new civilization will emerge and flourish.

Bahá'í literature refers to the two parts of this integrating process as the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace. The former is to be achieved through the reaction of political leaders to the painful consequences of a twentieth-century world shrunken into a neighborhood by the advances of science

but morally and socially deranged by its spiritual disorientation. The actions of world leaders that brought about the League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations offer hints as to the nature of the course to be taken. The latter is to be attained through the eventual spiritualization of the planet, a much more protracted and profound undertaking involving the inner transformation of the individual inhabitants of the earth through their voluntary acceptance of the principles enunciated by the latest divine Messenger. The progress of the Bahá'ís in swelling their numbers to millions in an parts of the world committed to the way of Bahá'u'lláh is indicative of the possibilities for this ultimate goal.

For Bahá'ís, the transition, with all its horrors and frustrations, is the natural consequence on a global scale of the way in which a person evolves to adulthood from adolescence — a period in the life of an individual when the struggle and rebelliousness of youth must, with the onset of maturity, eventually yield to a resolution of conflicting tendencies or else suffer the recurrent crises of a disoriented personality. The processes involved in the experience of the individual are also reflected in those of a society at the threshold of its coming of age, Humanity as a whole is as yet reluctant to yield to the new situation; hence it remains ill-prepared to extricate itself from the strife and confusion in which it is enmeshed. Shoghi Effendi devoted much attention to explaining the paradoxes of the "simultaneous processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other," which characterize the current state of affairs in the world.

Historians and social scientists pondering the twentieth century might well pause to examine Shoghi Effendi's commentaries on the ills and portents of this "Age of Extremes," as Eric Hobsbawm has called the period. Thinkers interested in sorting out the challenges posed by the bewildered state of so-called "post-Communist" or "post-Capitalist" society could encounter much in his writings to stimulate their outlook. They would be treated to unusual perspectives in his explanations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portentous description of the twentieth century as the "Century of the revelation of reality and, therefore, the greatest of all centuries." as the "century of lights," as the "sun of previous centuries, the effulgences of which shall last forever." They would discover, too, in Shoghi Effendi's majestic and evocative prose a source of intellectual and spiritual refreshment. For, indeed, he was a master writer who succeeded in distilling the virtues of language, making it reflect the spirit and wholesomeness of truth.

SHOGHI EFFENDI created a literature that appealed to the mind and the heart. His power of persuasion was formidable; his employment of logic compelling; his timing dramatic; his combined use of praise, censure, and exhortation inspiring action on the part of the recipients of his messages. The voluminous outflow from his pen initiated, encouraged and sustained the establishment and consolidation of Bahá'í administrative institutions, the prosecution of teaching programs, and the nurturance of community life. At the same time the

community benefited from the inspired vistas his writings presented, which enabled them to see beyond the topsy-turvy state of society to the peace-fashioning goal of their Faith. They were invited into a realm of thought by which they could achieve a soul-satisfying transcendence while attending to the practical circumstances of life in a time of cataclysmic disturbances.

Galvanized by the energy of his messages and the vision they projected, Bahá'ís embarked successfully on the vast enterprise of erecting the banner of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith in countries throughout the world, engaging ordinary people from the widest range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in efforts by which a renewal of civilization might be effected. An emergent community has sprung up. Here is a global laboratory in which an unprecedented transformation in individual and collective behavior is progressing toward the realization of the world-shaping principle of the oneness of humanity. In it can be discerned, thanks to the indispensable guidance of Shoghi Effendi, the glimmerings of a new world order.

That such a figure should have lived in the twentieth century adds a dimension to the annals of the period that cannot for long be ignored. Shoghi Effendi's Guardianship was not merely a significant transitional episode in the development of a religious community. If the claims of Bahá'u'lláh are to be understood aright, that Guardianship bodes well to be increasingly regarded as a wellspring of authentic guidance from which the forces of civilization will draw renewed virtue for at least a full millennium.

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