



al-mim, esm Allah al-jamal) and Hands of the Cause of God. The latter group consisted of four individuals: Hajji Molla ʿAli-Akbar Šahmirzadi, Hajji Mirza Mohammad-Taqi Abhari (Ebn Abhar), Mirza Mohammad-Hasan Adib-al-ʿolamaʿ, and Mirza ʿAli-Mohammad (Ebn Asdaq). Their functions seem to have been to promulgate Bahaʿism, to organize the community of believers in Iran, to advance arguments against opponents (particularly against the Azali Babis), and to preserve doctrinal unity.

On the death of Bahaʿallah in 1892, the rank of esm Allah seems to have fallen into desuetude (partly through defection), but the four Hands continued to function under the direction of Bahaʿallah’s son and successor ʿAbd-al-Bahaʿ. The latter referred in writing to a number of individuals as ayadi, but made no formal appointments to this position. He did, however, define their functions more clearly in his Will and Testament (Alwah-e wasaya), where he also indicated that his successor, the future Guardian of the Cause (waliy-e amr Allah), was to appoint such individuals and direct their activities. In effect, these Hands were to form a religious aristocracy under the leadership of the head of the faith. Shoghi Effendi, who succeeded to the position of wali in 1921, made only eight posthumous appointments, for the most part westerners, between then and 1951. In that year, he appointed twelve living Hands, three each in Israel, Iran, America, and Europe. In 1952 the number was raised to nineteen, a figure maintained by new appointments following the deaths of several individuals until 1957, when the total was again raised to twenty-seven.

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On the death of Shoghi Effendi in November, 1957, it was the Hands as a whole rather than the International Bahaʿi Council in Haifa which assumed interim control of the affairs of the religion. Following a Conclave in Haifa in late November, it was announced that Shoghi Effendi had left no will and no heir and that there could be no succession. A body of nine Hands, designated Custodians of the Faith, remained in Israel to direct Bahaʿi affairs internationally; these include Mason Remey, president of the International Bahaʿi Council, who in 1960 claimed to be the “Second Guardian” of the faith, as a result of which he was excommunicated by his fellow Hands. Further Conclaves of the entire body of Hands were held annually (except for 1962) until 1963, when the election of the first Universal House of Justice (bayt al-ʿadl al-aʿzam) took place. This latter body now took overall charge of the Bahaʿi community, including the direction of the work of the Hands which was now concerned principally with the areas of propagation and protection of the faith. Significantly, the authority to excommunicate or reinstate dissidents continued to rest with the body of the Hands, subject to the approval of the House of Justice.

In 1968 an important development occurred when the House of Justice, seeking to overcome the problems raised by the fact that they could not, technically,

appoint further Hands (something only another Guardian could do), established eleven Continental Boards of Counselors (hayʿat-e mošawerin-e qarraʿi) in order to extend the functions of the Hands into the future. This new institution has since grown in numbers and influence, with responsibility for regionally-appointed Auxiliary Boards (hayʿat-e moʿawenat, originally created in 1954 to assist the Hands), themselves now seconded by Assistants (mosaʿedan) in individual localities. An International Teaching Center (dar al-tablig-e bayn-al-melali), composed of Hands and Counselors and based in Haifa, was created in 1973. As the surviving Hands die out, the influence and authority of the Counselors appear to grow.

It is of interest to note how this increased administrative complexity has been interpreted in official Bahaʿi pronouncements. The Universal House of Justice, National Assemblies, and Local Assemblies together constitute the rulers (omaraʿ) of the community (and, of course, of the predicted Bahaʿi World State), while the Hands, Counselors and Auxiliary Board Members (with their Assistants) are the learned (ʿolamaʿ). Thus, although according to the prescriptive theory Bahaʿism is without a formal clergy, there does, in fact, exist a hierarchical organization which differs from the clergy of other religions only to the extent that one clergy does from another. Trained scholars for the purpose, however, are conspicuous by their absence from the ranks of the Bahaʿi ʿolamaʿ, a fact of sociological significance. Although the members of this hierarchy have little official power, they do, in fact, wield considerable influence within the Bahaʿi community and are treated with considerable deference.

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