

An Analysis of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*

William S. Hatcher

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Rarely, if ever, have subtle and vexatious theological questions been settled at an early stage in the history of a revealed religion. In itself this is not surprising, given the typical pattern of development of such religions. To begin with, there appears the founder, a powerful and charismatic figure whose personality totally captures the loyalty and devotion of his followers, generating at the same time intense jealousy and enmity within various segments of the established society. This early polarization between believers and non-believers tends to create extraordinarily sharp boundaries between the (initially) small community of the faithful and the larger society

As a consequence, interactions between the society and the nascent community are charged with strong and often explosive emotions. On the one hand, the believers pursue, with a single-mindedness sometimes bordering on obsession, the task of leading as many non-believers as possible to an acceptance of the new faith. On the other hand, the established society reacts as best it can, running the gamut from studied or mocking indifference to active and sometimes brutal repression. On the whole, it is a heroic period characterized more by action than reflection in all quarters. It is certainly not a social context that lends itself to the pursuit of a dispassionate philosophical analysis of subtle or intricate metaphysical concepts.

Of course, there is no doubt that the founder will teach concepts that are novel and attractive—perhaps even revolutionary—and that these teachings may account, to a considerable extent, for the influence the founder exerts on others. But as long as the founder is there to respond to questions and to settle differences of interpretation between individuals or groups within the community of believers, unity of doctrine is maintained primarily through the force of the founder's personality. It is when the founder has passed away and the initial heroic period of the faith has receded into history that difficult doctrinal issues may well provoke splits within the community, unless some indelibly clear and generally recognized mechanism has been provided by the founder for the resolution of such questions in his absence. Moreover,

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lacking such a mechanism, there is the further risk that no satisfactory resolution of the questions at issue will ever be achieved by any school of thought. In this way, the history of religious thought, and especially theological thought, is largely a history of unresolved controversies and conflicts.

In the light of this history, the Bahá'í community is very fortunate that its founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), did indeed provide for the authoritative resolution of doctrinal differences by designating his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as sole interpreter of his writings and teachings. Acting upon this conferred authority, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in turn designated his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957), to succeed him in this interpretive function. It was in accordance with this mandate, unique in religious history, that in 1934

Shoghi Effendi wrote *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, the work which is the subject of the present essay.¹

The Position of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* within the Corpus of Shoghi Effendi's Writings

Besides discharging his many administrative functions as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani was a prodigious writer and translator. In the course of his ministry, he produced a number of remarkable English translations of works by other authors in Persian and Arabic, wrote a comprehensive history of the first one-hundred years of the Bahá'í Faith, and authored a series of profoundly original essays devoted to acute and comprehensive analyses, in the light of various Bahá'í principles, of certain cultural and social trends in the modern world.

Of all the original works of Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* stands out as being the only one almost totally devoted to a consideration of fundamental theological and philosophical issues. Of course, it would surely be a mistake to categorize or classify Shoghi Effendi's writings in any simplistic manner. For instance, in the course of his history of the Bahá'í Faith, *God Passes By*,² Shoghi Effendi discusses a number of philosophical and theological issues (e.g., in his résumés of the contents of certain books by Bahá'u'lláh). Nevertheless, our own discussion of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* in what follows will focus exclusively on its philosophical and theological aspects.

From any point of view, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* stands out as a work of fundamental importance, for in it Shoghi Effendi not only clarifies definitively a number of essential questions regarding the Bahá'í Faith (e.g., the exact rank and nature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá) but also deals with a number of controversial issues related to other historic faiths (e.g., the notion of divine

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Incarnation in Christianity). One sees here much more than just the functionally authoritative interpretation of an appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith (as important and interesting as that is); one sees a profound philosophical intellect at work, an intellect that moves easily in the universe of philosophical concepts, capable of grasping the most subtle nuances of complex issues.

There are, in fact, indications that Shoghi Effendi himself regarded *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* as a work of particular importance. In her biography of Shoghi Effendi, *The Priceless Pearl*, Rúhiyyih Khánum states: "However Shoghi Effendi felt . . . about his other writings, I know from his remarks that he considered he had said all he had to say, in many ways, in the *Dispensation [of Bahá'u'lláh]*."³ Thus, the importance we attribute to *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* in the present essay seems justified.

The Philosophical and Theological Context of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*

¹Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1960, 65 pages).

²Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974).

³Rúhiyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 213.

Viewed in its broadest and most fundamental context, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* is concerned with the ongoing and eternal encounter between God and humanity—between us and the One who created us. As humans, we encounter or experience the divine in at least three ways. First, through the orderly, regular, and lawful character of the physical universe, we encounter God as Creator, as that universal and unlimited Force responsible for all other forces and entities in existence.

Second, we encounter God through the Person of the various Manifestations or Revelators who have appeared in history. These are the founders of the great religions, the divine Messengers who, Bahá'ís believe, are all God-sent and divinely endowed with superhuman capacities enabling them to become the vehicles of God's Self-revelation.

Third, we experience God as an indwelling spirit within our own hearts. That such an experience is real, and not just some form of self-generated illusion, is attested by Bahá'u'lláh in words such as these:

That the heart is the throne, in which the Revelation of God the All-Merciful is centered, is attested by the holy utterances which We have formerly revealed. Among them is this saying: "Earth and heaven cannot contain Me; what can alone contain Me is the heart of him that believeth in Me, and is faithful to My Cause."⁴

One of the fundamental tasks of theology is to arrive at a coherent model of these three human experiences of the divine. We need a consistent

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theological framework that will enable us to understand how these three encounters with God relate to each other. Indeed, many of the concepts about God that the Bahá'í writings identify as false or mistaken can be seen to derive from an unbalanced perspective on these three basic experiences.

Let us examine this briefly.

Mystics have tended to emphasize God as indwelling spirit and to underrate the importance of God as authoritatively and specially revealed through the Manifestations. Orthodox and fundamentalist followers of a given religious tradition have tended to follow narrow and literal interpretations of the teachings of the Manifestation, often neglecting the richness and diversity of valid spiritual experience. Sometimes they appear to force religion into a mold that is primarily a reflection of their own human limitations rather than of the true spirit of their tradition's venerated founder. Fundamentalists have likewise tended to discount scientific knowledge and thus to underrate the knowledge of God that can be gained through a study of creation. Finally, those who place an exaggerated emphasis on God as revealed through the physical creation have often tended to view God as an impersonal, absolute principle rather than as what Shoghi Effendi calls "that invisible yet rational God"⁵ who is a loving Being. Viewed against this background, *The Dispensation of*

⁴Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 186.

⁵Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 20.

Bahá'u'lláh appears as a careful and perfectly balanced exposition. of the Bahá'í conception of how these various historical and personal encounters between God and humanity relate to each other.

The Structure and Scope of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*

Certain writings of Bahá'u'lláh suggest that only in the Bahá'í revelation has humankind at last been granted a full and complete expression of the concept of the Manifestation as God-sent intermediary between God and humanity. Since it is through the Manifestations that we get our fullest understanding of God, it becomes doubly important to gain an adequate understanding of the Bahá'í concept of the nature of the Manifestation. This concept is expressed not only in Bahá'u'lláh's writings but in every aspect of his earthly life. It therefore stands to reason that certain aspects of these questions could only be understood fully after the life of Bahá'u'lláh had been completed.

To begin with, then, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* is an articulation, by an authoritative and designated interpreter, of the theological significance of the completed lives of the three central figures of the Bahá'í religious dispensation, Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Indeed, the sixty-page essay is divided into four sections of which the first three are devoted to a study, respectively, of these "central figures." The fourth and last section explicates the spiritual and historical significance of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, that system of laws and institutions established by Bahá'u'lláh to safeguard the unity and integrity of the Bahá'í community after his passing.

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Thus, at least at first glance, the structure of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* appears to be extremely simple and straightforward. However, this initial impression is quickly dispelled by the power and density of Shoghi Effendi's writing, by the number and complexity of the themes treated in the course of the exposition, by the abundant citations from both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í sources, and finally by the frequent and sometimes subtle literary and historical allusions. Rather than attempting any exhaustive description of this work, we will approach our study by means of a series of categories relating to basic questions about the nature of God and of his Manifestations.

The first category concerns the nature of the revelatory event that occurs when a Manifestation appears in history. What is the exact nature of the Manifestation and what is his relationship with God, on the one hand, and with the rest of humankind, on the other? Each major faith system has given a characteristic answer to this question.

One of the major religious systems previous to the Bahá'í Faith is Christianity, whose theological cornerstone has become its incarnation doctrine of revelation. According to this conception, the Being or Essence of the God of creation (i.e., the Originator of all the forces and entities in reality) became incarnate in the human person of Jesus Christ. Adherence to this doctrine has led Christians generally to affirm two further derivative notions, first, that God's Self-revelation in Jesus was absolute, total, and unique (once and for all), and, second, the so-called trinitarian doctrine that God exists in three distinct forms.

In other words, whatever other difficulties the doctrine of divine incarnation may have, it has led Christians to reify the three basic types of God-human encounter, ascribing a distinct mode of divine existence to each:

God, encountered as Creator, exists in his mode as Father; encountered within the person of Jesus Christ, He exists (and preexisted) as Son; within the human heart, God is held to exist in yet another mode, that of the Holy Spirit.

However derivatively, the Christian trinitarian doctrine clearly tends to dilute the uncompromising monotheism that is held by Jews, Muslims, and Bahá'ís to be one of the most fundamental and precious legacies of revealed religion. Moreover, although trinitarianism appears to solve the problem of reconciling and explaining the three basic encounters between God and humanity, the solution it offers only creates the greater problem of reconciling the tripartite Godhead with Itself. At least one strain of Christian theology, namely that of Roman Catholicism, appears to take the basic position that the trinitarian nature of God is a mystery of faith which cannot be resolved in terms of human logic.

Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of the incarnation doctrine is made unequivocally clear in various passages in his writings, such as the following: "Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and

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reveal it unto men. He is, and hath ever been, immensely exalted beyond all that can either be recounted or perceived."⁶

In Islam, no single, clear paradigm of the nature of divine revelation, comparable to the pervasive incarnational doctrine of Christianity, seems to have emerged. On one hand, the Qur'án pointedly condemns trinitarianism as an idolatrous and blasphemous adding of gods to God (Qur'án 5:77, 28:88) and Muslims have always held that Muhammad was in no wise divine but rather an ordinary human chosen by God as an instrument for divine revelation. On the other hand, Muslims also hold that the Qur'án is the literal and preexistent Word of God.

One of the most challenging (if somewhat obscure) conceptions of revelation to emerge from Islam is that of the Sufi mystics who held that Muhammad and other divine messengers were manifestations of the divine essence. Though this doctrine is undoubtedly more subtle than the Christian one, and definitely avoids the incarnationalist notion that the divine essence actually appears in human form, it nonetheless has pantheistic tendencies, holding as it does that whatever manifests the essence of God must, in some sense, partake of that essence.

In *Some Answered Questions*⁷ and in a philosophical essay written as a youth at Bahá'u'lláh's

⁶Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 49.

⁷Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984).

behest,⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá carefully refutes this Sufi notion of revelation. 'Abdul-Bahá's discussion of these questions turns on his crucial distinction between two basic modes of generation: manifestation and emanation. Manifestation means the appearance of the same thing in another form, whereas emanation means the generation, by some agent, of that which is ontologically different from this agent.⁹ Because the essence of God is held to be absolute and unchanging, the only manifestation of that essence is that essence itself. It cannot appear in any other form than the one in which it (eternally and absolutely) is.¹⁰ But God, as Creator, has the capacity to emanate (from his essence or by its agency) that which is different from his essence. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the first emanation from God's essence is his spirit or attributes, and it is these attributes which become manifest (represented in another form) in the Manifestations (divine revelators).¹¹

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Thus, the Bahá'í view of revelation is that the divine revealers are perfect manifestations (representations in human form) of the first emanation (the attributes) of the essence of God. Hence, they are neither incarnations of the essence of God (the Christian paradigm) nor manifestations of that essence (the Sufi notion). Yet, they are not ordinary humans either, since, according to the Bahá'í view, ordinary humans are not endowed with the capacity to manifest the attributes of God perfectly. However, ordinary humans do have the God-given capacity to reflect or mirror the divine spirit in an imperfect and relative manner.

This, then, is the Bahá'í way of reconciling the three classic modes of divine-human encounter. God as "father" (creator) is the essence of God, which cannot be known directly and which generates (emanates) every other reality. However, there is a unique reality that is the first or highest thing emanated by God's essence, namely, God's spirit or attributes. It is this spirit we encounter in the personalities of the Manifestations as son (that which is directly generated by the "father"). It is also this same spirit that we experience, albeit relatively and imperfectly, within our own hearts.

In *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* Shoghi Effendi deals incisively with these various notions and issues, giving a powerful summary of the Bahá'í conception of the nature of the Manifestations:

The divinity attributed to so great a Being [the Manifestation] and the complete incarnation of the names and attributes of God in so exalted a Person should, under no circumstances, be misconceived or misinterpreted. The human temple that has been made the vehicle of so overpowering a Revelation must, if we be faithful to the tenets of our Faith, ever remain entirely distinguished from that "innermost Spirit of Spirits" and "eternal Essence of Essences"—that invisible yet rational God Who, however much we extol the divinity of His Manifestations on earth, can in no wise incarnate His infinite, His unknowable, His incorruptible and all-embracing Reality in the concrete and limited frame of a mortal being. Indeed, the God Who could so

⁸'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Commentary on I was a Hidden Treasure" in *Collected Letters*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Kurdistan Scientific Press, 1330 A.H.) 2-55. For discussion of the contents of this essay by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, see J. R. Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," *Bahá'í Studies*, vol.9 (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982) 25-29.

⁹See, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of these concepts in *Some Answered Questions* 205-7; 290-96.

¹⁰See, for example, *Some Answered Questions* 206, as well as J. R. Cole's discussion in the work cited in note 8 above.

¹¹See, for example, 'Abdul-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 203 and 207.

incarnate His own reality would, in the light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, cease immediately to be God. So crude and fantastic a theory of Divine incarnation is as removed from, and incompatible with, the essentials of Bahá'í belief as are the no less inadmissible pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God—both of which the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh emphatically repudiate and the fallacy of which they expose.¹²

After quoting a series of passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh so as to confirm and support this summary statement, Shoghi Effendi continues by asserting the incompatibility of Bahá'í belief with all exclusiveness claims applied to any of the Manifestations, including Bahá'u'lláh:

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... the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified.¹³

Against the background of these basic, general truths and within the context of these fundamental concepts and principles, Shoghi Effendi establishes, based on texts of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the uniqueness of the Bahá'í revelation in all of religious history. Let us turn now to a consideration of these more specific questions.

The Specific Character and Distinctive Features of the Bahá'í Revelation

One unique aspect of the Bahá'í revelation stressed by Shoghi Effendi in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* is the twofold station of the Báb, both as an independent Manifestation of God and as the precursor and herald of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: "There can be no doubt that the claim to the twofold station ordained for the Báb by the Almighty... constitutes the most distinctive feature of the Bahá'í Dispensation."¹⁴ Moreover, in his station as the Qá'im, the Báb is held to have revealed twenty-five of the twenty-seven letters of knowledge, the other two letters representing the sum of all divine revelation from Adam through Muhammad.¹⁵ Thus, not only is the Báb an independent Manifestation of God, his revelation surpasses in greatness the sum of all previous revelations.

Understanding the exalted rank of the Báb's revelation can serve, in turn, as a tool for understanding the even more elevated rank of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, for as Shoghi Effendi explains, the Báb testifies in his own writings to the incomparable greatness of the revelation for which his was but a preparation:

He Whom Bahá'u'lláh has acclaimed in the Kitáb-i-Iqán as that promised Qá'im Who has manifested no less than twenty-five out of the twenty-seven letters which all the Prophets were destined to reveal—so great a Revealer has Himself testified to the pre-eminence of that superior Revelation that was soon to

¹²Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 20-21.

¹³Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 23.

¹⁴Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 31.

¹⁵Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 33. The Qá'im ('He Who will arise') is the title of the Promised One of Shí'í Islam.

supersede His own.¹⁶

Shoghi Effendi then quotes a number of passages from the Báb's writings (in particular, from the Persian *Bayán*)¹⁷ in which the Báb makes

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unequivocally clear that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is to be regarded as immeasurably greater in scope and intensity than his own.

Another evidence of the greatness of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the interpretation given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of a Zoroastrian prophecy which states that in the latter days of human history, the sun must stand still in each of three separate instances, first for ten days, then for twenty days, and finally for an entire month.¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the first instance refers to the Islamic dispensation, which lasted exactly ten lunar centuries from the death of the last Imám in 260 A.H. to the beginning of the Bábí dispensation in 1260 AH. The second instance refers to the dispensation of the Báb, which lasted exactly twenty lunar years until 1280 A.H. Finally, he explains, the third instance refers to the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Since a month represents the maximum time it takes for the sun to pass through a sign of the Zodiac, the "month" referred to in the prophecy represents a period (or term) of maximum possible duration. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá interprets this as applying not to the dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh (the period until the coming of the next Manifestation) but to a new cycle inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh—a cycle that will last, he affirms, at least five-hundred thousand years (and thus witness the coming of many Manifestations).¹⁹

It is thus a distinguishing feature that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation initiates not only a new religious dispensation but in fact a new age of human history:

The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh should indeed be regarded, if we wish to be faithful to the tremendous implications of its message, as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations. These, beginning with Adam and ending with the Báb, have paved the way and anticipated with an ever-increasing emphasis the advent of that Day of Days in which He Who is the Promise of All Ages should be made manifest.²⁰

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi explains that the new age inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh represents the age of maturity or adulthood in the collective development of humankind.²¹ In the light of this analogy with the stages of development in the life of an individual, we can understand that, just as the various stages of childhood development are incomplete in themselves and look forward to their full expression in adulthood, so the religious dispensations previous to that of Bahá'u'lláh have anticipated their fulfillment in the coming

¹⁶Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 8.

¹⁷Excerpts in English are printed in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976) 75-114.

¹⁸Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 9-10.

¹⁹Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 10.

²⁰Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 11.

²¹See, for example, extracts from the writings of Shoghi Effendi, *Call to the Nations* (Charam: W & J. Mackay, 1977).

age of maturity. The greater power and intensity of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, relative to previous dispensations, is therefore necessary for it to play its predestined

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role of effecting the greatest transition in human history—the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the collective life of humanity.²²

Indeed, Shoghi Effendi quotes passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that make it clear the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh not only surpasses in power all the past revelations but all future ones as well. "That which hath been made manifest in this pre-eminent, this most exalted Revelation, stands unparalleled in the annals of the past, nor will future ages witness its like."²³ In other words, the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the greatest single outpouring of divine revelation that human history will ever witness.²⁴

Having so carefully documented and discussed these distinguishing features of the Bahá'í dispensation, Shoghi Effendi nevertheless takes great pains to underscore the essential oneness of all revealed religion and to emphasize the continuity of the progressive revelations from God to humanity through the succession of Manifestations:

That Bahá'u'lláh should, notwithstanding the overwhelming intensity of His Revelation, be regarded as essentially one of these Manifestations of God, never to be identified with that invisible Reality, the Essence of Divinity itself, is one of the major beliefs of our Faith—a belief which should never be obscured and the integrity of which no one of its followers should allow to be compromised.

Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfilment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the Religions that have preceded it. . . . It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. . . . These divinely-revealed religions are doomed not to die, but to be reborn.²⁵

²²For the individual, adolescence represents that intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood when one is physically mature but emotionally and spiritually immature. Physical (or material) development in the collective life of humankind is represented by science and technology, while spiritual development is reflected primarily in the quality of human relationships. The age in which we now live is adolescent in the precise sense that it is characterized by great scientific and technological development coupled with a relatively immature quality of human relationships at all levels. This immaturity in human relationships is reflected by the prevalence within all societies of unbridled competition, conflict, aggression, and violence. To achieve its collective maturity, humanity must therefore develop new social structures which favor cooperation and unity instead of competition and conflict, and it must also develop a new consciousness—that of the oneness of humankind.

²³Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* 11-12.

²⁴As is clear from the two passages quoted on the following page, this in no way implies that Bahá'u'lláh is a Manifestation superior to other previous or future Manifestations. The intensity and power of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is proportional to the divinely ordained task it must fulfil of catalyzing the process of establishing a united and peaceful world.

²⁵Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* 22.

The thoughtful reader of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* of whatever religious or philosophical background, who bears in mind the spirit of competition and conflict that so frequently prevails among the various religious communities of the world, cannot help but be impressed with Shoghi Effendi's unequivocal reiteration, at this particular point in his essay, of the fundamental Bahá'í belief in the overriding oneness of religion and in the relativity of religious truth. By this strong statement of principle, Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that, however great may be the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh as compared with other revelations, past or future, those features of the Bahá'í Faith that distinguish it from other religions are, in the end, less important than those fundamental characteristics it shares with all revealed religions:

It should. . . be borne in mind that, great as is the power manifested by this Revelation and however vast the range of the Dispensation its Author has inaugurated, it emphatically repudiates the claim to be regarded as the final revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. To hold such a conception of its character and functions would be tantamount to a betrayal of its cause and a denial of its truth. It must necessarily conflict with the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.²⁶

The Bahá'í Faith would seem to be unique among the religions of the world today in its adherence to and proclamation of this principle of the fundamental unity of all revealed religion. This, then, is yet another distinctive characteristic of the Bahá'í Faith, but one that binds it closer to other religions rather than setting it apart from them.

The Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

In his discussion of the twofold station of the Báb, Shoghi Effendi quotes appropriate passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that make it abundantly clear Bahá'u'lláh regarded the Báb as an independent Manifestation of God, the reason for the shortness of whose dispensation is a "secret" and a "mystery."²⁷ The cited passages also show that Bahá'u'lláh consistently defended and proclaimed the prophethood of the Báb, even while proclaiming the exalted station of his own revelation. Indeed, one of the major works of Bahá'u'lláh, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,²⁸ which articulates Bahá'u'lláh's conception of progressive revelation, is written in the form of a protracted defense of the Báb's prophethood.

Shoghi Effendi has elsewhere commented on the shortness of the Báb's dispensation in the following terms:

²⁶Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 23.

²⁷Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 32.

²⁸Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán, The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983).

The Bábí Dispensation was essentially in the nature of a religious and indeed social revolution, and its duration had therefore to be short, but full of tragic events, of sweeping and drastic reforms. These drastic measures enforced by the Báb and His followers were taken with the view of undermining the very foundations of Shi'ih [*sic*] orthodoxy, and thus paving the way for the coming of Bahá'u'lláh. To assert the independence of the new Dispensation, and to prepare also the ground for the approaching Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh the Bab had therefore to reveal very severe laws, even though most of them, were never enforced. But the mere fact that He revealed them was in itself a proof of the independent character of His Dispensation and was sufficient to create such widespread agitation, and excite such opposition on the part of the clergy that led them to cause His eventual martyrdom.²⁹

Let us now turn to a brief consideration of the station and role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and as the authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. However, Shoghi Effendi stresses that 'Abdul-Bahá's station cannot be considered as "one whose function is to be confined to that of an authorized interpreter of His Father's teachings."³⁰

Indeed, although Shoghi Effendi has declared that the Báb's twofold station is the "most distinctive feature of the Bahá'í Dispensation" (see footnote 14 above), he nevertheless describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá as, "One Who, not only in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh but in the entire field of religious history, fulfils a unique function."³¹ Unlike the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not a Manifestation of God and therefore "does not inherently possess that indefinable yet all-pervading reality the exclusive possession of which is the hallmark of Prophethood..."³² However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is "the perfect Exemplar., the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal," the one in whom "the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized."³³

An accurate and balanced understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station avoids the extremes both of underestimation and overestimation:

Exalted as is the rank of 'Abdul-Bahá, and however profuse the praises with which . . . Bahá'u'lláh has glorified His son, so unique a distinction must never be construed as conferring upon its recipient a station identical

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with, or equivalent to, that of His Father, the Manifestation Himself... those who overestimate 'Abdul-Bahá's station are just as reprehensible . . . as those who underestimate it.³⁴

Undoubtedly, one of the fundamental reasons for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's importance in the Bahá'í revelation

²⁹Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 77-78.

³⁰Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* 41.

³¹Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 39.

³²Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 47.

³³Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 42.

³⁴Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 44-45.

is the vast range of conditions and circumstances of his long and eventful life and their extraordinary accessibility to history. Indeed, the Báb was executed in 1850, only six years after the beginning of his ministry in 1844, having spent much of those six years imprisoned under government decree in remote corners of Persia. Although Bahá'u'lláh's ministry lasted for a full forty years (1852-1892), most of those years were spent in various conditions of restriction, confinement, banishment, and prison. Of course, during this period Bahá'u'lláh was closely observed by a considerable number of individuals, both hostile and friendly, who have recorded their impressions. Nevertheless, his confinement has robbed history of the possibility of observations under a wide variety of circumstances and conditions.

All of this contrasts sharply with the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who shared his father's imprisonment, who suffered further imprisonment after Bahá'u'lláh's death, but who was subsequently able to travel throughout Europe and North America, speaking from hundreds of platforms in universities, churches, synagogues, union halls, etc., and meeting extensively with people from all walks of life. Literally thousands of these individuals have left documented accounts (often in intimate detail) of their meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the powerful spiritual effect these encounters had on their lives. This extensive, historically authentic documentation of so rare a life will undoubtedly constitute a source of profound spiritual inspiration for generations, indeed for millennia, to come.

The Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith

In the final section of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi discusses the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, developing and elaborating a cogent historical perspective, the first elements of which had already appeared in earlier essays.³⁵ He divides the Bahá'í Faith into three ages: first, the Heroic and Apostolic Age, from its beginning in 1844 until the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921; second, the Formative Age, beginning in 1921 and continuing until some, as yet undetermined, future date; and, third, the Golden Age, which will begin at the close of the current Formative Age and will be of long but as yet unspecified duration. As the name implies, this third age will represent the apogee and full efflorescence of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

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The transition from the Heroic Age to the Formative Age is marked, first, by the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the last of the three central figures³⁶ of the Bahá'í Faith, and second, by the publication of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament.³⁷ In this document, 'Abdu'l-Bahá built on the foundation laid in Bahá'u'lláh's writings³⁸ and, invoking the interpretive authority conferred upon him by his father, elaborated and developed the fundamental features of the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi characterizes the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "the perpetual, the indissoluble link which ['Abdu'l-Bahá] . . . has conceived in order to insure the continuity of the three ages that constitute the component parts of the Bahá'í

³⁵See, for example, "The Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh" in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1955) 51-68.

³⁶Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* 39.

³⁷'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971).

³⁸In particular, in Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

Dispensation.”³⁹

The Administrative Order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh and further elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not only the basis upon which the life of the worldwide Bahá'í community is currently organized but is, in fact, the “nucleus., the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind.”⁴⁰ Referring to the three ages of the Bahá'í Dispensation mentioned above, and with conscious oversimplification, we might say that the Administrative Order was conceived and elaborated during the Heroic Age, that it is being implemented within the Bahá'í Community during the Formative Age, and that the Golden Age will occur when this Administrative Order will have evolved into the World Order.

The two chief institutions of the Administrative Order, called by Shoghi Effendi its “twin pillars,”⁴¹ are the institutions of Guardianship (represented by Shoghi Effendi himself) and of the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi begins by stressing the uniqueness of this system and its institutions in all of religious history:

It should be noted.. . that this Administrative Order is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances [The Universal House of Justice]. Therein lies the secret of its strength, its fundamental distinction, and the guarantee against disintegration and schism.⁴²

He then explains that “these twin institutions ... should be regarded as divine in origin, essential in their functions and complementary in their

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aim and purpose.”⁴³ Moreover, their fundamental object is “to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings.”⁴⁴

With reference to the complementarity of the institutions of Guardianship and of the Universal House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi quotes selected passages from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which establish that the primary function of the Guardian is interpretation while that of the Universal House of Justice is legislation. He then elaborates upon this in the following terms:

From these statements [in 'Abdul-Bahá's Will and Testament] it is made indubitably clear and evident that the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters nor expressly revealed in the teachings.

³⁹Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 51-52.

⁴⁰Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 52.

⁴¹Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 55.

⁴²Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 53.

⁴³Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 56.

⁴⁴Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 56.

The interpretation of the Guardian, functioning within his own sphere, is as authoritative and binding as the enactments of the International House of Justice, whose exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed. Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other. Neither will seek to curtail the specific and undoubted authority with which both have been divinely invested.⁴⁵

Each of these two principal branches of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is supported by a number of ancillary institutions. In the case of the Universal House of Justice, the ancillary institutions are the national and local assemblies; for the Guardianship, the Hands of the Cause and, more recently, the International Teaching Centre and the Continental Boards of Counselors with their Auxiliary Boards and Assistants. Whereas membership in the national and local assemblies and the Universal House of Justice is by election, membership in the various boards is by appointment for a specified term.⁴⁶

The complementarity and separation of function described above with reference to the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice extend to

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the two branches of the Administrative Order they represent: all decision-making authority is in the hands of the assemblies and the Universal House of Justice; while the Boards of Counselors and Auxiliary Boards play the role of counselors and advisors (but not interpreters of the sacred writings, the function of interpretation being strictly confined to the Guardian).

Having clearly delineated the fundamental nature and functions of the principal institutions of the Administrative Order, Shoghi Effendi turns to a consideration of the theory upon which it is based. He begins by stressing the uniqueness of the Bahá'í system among all previous forms of secular or religious government. "It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions."⁴⁷ Although the Bahá'í system has elements of each of the main forms of human government, it also differs significantly from them and cannot, therefore, be identified with any such system.

The democratic aspect of the Bahá'í system is reflected in the fact that the members of the local and national assemblies and of the Universal House of Justice are all elected for specified terms of office in a secret ballot vote. However, once elected, these institutions are "to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates

⁴⁵Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 57-58.

⁴⁶The only exception to this principle of term appointment was for the Hands of the Cause, who were appointed for life. The succession of Guardians was through lineal descent, but Shoghi Effendi passed away in 1957 without issue, thus ending the anticipated succession. Since it was only the Guardian who could appoint the Hands, that particular Institution will also disappear when the last of those Hands appointed by Shoghi Effendi will have died. There are, of course, many details and ramifications connected with the functioning of the Administrative Order. As there are several works that deal with these details, and as such an analysis is not contained in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* itself, they will not be discussed in the course of this essay.

⁴⁷Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 60.

and promptings of their conscience"⁴⁸ rather than to implement the will of the majority of those who have elected them. Thus, in the Bahá'í system, the mandate of the elected institutions derives from a commonly recognized authority (the writings of Bahá'u'lláh) rather than arising from the electors themselves as in a democracy.

The Bahá'í Order also has some autocratic or monarchical elements: for example, the hereditary nature of the Guardianship.⁴⁹ However, the separation of function described above in which only the elected institution (the Universal House of Justice), and not the Guardian, has the right of legislation clearly removes from the Guardianship anything remotely resembling the power of kingship or of dictatorial authority. Furthermore, the Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood or clergy, and the members of the various boards of counselors and advisors "have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations..."⁵⁰ There is consequently nothing in the

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Bahá'í system corresponding to the role played by priests or clergy in other systems of religious organization.⁵¹

Nor can the Bahá'í Administrative Order be viewed as some form of aristocracy or oligarchy. Even though certain individuals (i.e., the Hands of the Cause or the Counselors) have been singled out to play a special role and function, decision-making authority rests entirely in the hands of elected institutions, which function as corporate bodies by majority vote. Thus, no single individual has legislative power or even discretionary authority (unless such discretionary authority has been temporarily granted by an elected institution).

Summing up his analysis of the theory underlying the Bahá'í Administrative Order, Shoghi Effendi notes that "whereas this Administrative Order cannot be said to have been modelled after any of these recognized systems of government, it nevertheless embodies, reconciles and assimilates within its framework such wholesome elements as are to be found in each one of them."⁵²

In the concluding paragraphs of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi returns to the theme of the fundamentally spiritual and universal character of the Administrative Order, stressing the central role it must play in bringing about the Golden Age of the Bahá'í dispensation. "[This Administrative Order] will

⁴⁸Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 61.

⁴⁹It has already been mentioned in footnote 46 that Shoghi Effendi died in 1957 without any heir to succeed him as Guardian. The Guardianship was the only hereditary Institution of the Administrative Order.

⁵⁰Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 95.

⁵¹In fact, in several passages in his writings, Bahá'u'lláh has explained that humanity has now reached a stage in its evolution when it will never again need those who would assume the role played by priests and other ecclesiastics in the past. To institute such a function in the present day would not only be useless, Bahá'u'lláh explains, but would actually create unnecessary conflict and discontent.

⁵²Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 62.

come to be regarded . . . as the chief agency empowered to usher in the concluding phase, the consummation of this glorious Dispensation."⁵³ He speaks of this consummation as "the advent of that golden millennium—the Day when the kingdoms of this world shall have become the Kingdom of God Himself, the Kingdom of Bahá'u'lláh."⁵⁴

Let us recall the basic philosophical context of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, which is nothing less than the theme of the eternal encounter between God and humankind. We have seen in our discussion above how, based on the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi has clearly articulated the Bahá'í understanding of three basic human experiences of God: the experience through nature of God as Creator; the experience of God as a prophetic presence in the person and in the works of the divine Manifestations; and the experience of God as indwelling spirit within the individual human heart. In the light of *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, we can now understand that, by instituting on earth the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Dispensation, God has made available

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to humankind an entirely new experience of Himself—the experience of the divine presence within a collective institution whose members are ordinarily endowed human beings.

This understanding of the nature of the institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is strikingly anticipated in the following statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with which we conclude our brief study of this profound and fascinating subject:

The Spiritual Assemblies to be established in this Age of God, this holy century, have, it is indisputable, had neither peer nor likeness in the cycles gone before. For those assemblages that wielded power were based on the support of mighty leaders of men, while these Assemblies are based on the support of the Beauty of Abhá [Bahá'u'lláh]. The defenders and patrons of those other assemblages were either a prince, or a king, or a chief priest, or the mass of the people. But these Spiritual Assemblies have for their defender, their supporter, their helper, their inspirer, the omnipotent Lord.⁵⁵

⁵³Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 64.

⁵⁴Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation* 65.

⁵⁵'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 82.