

Shoghi Effendi Expounder of the Word of God ¹

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When, in 1921, Shoghi Effendi acceded to the office of Guardianship of the Bahá'í Faith, he was in his second year as a student at Balliol College, Oxford. The traumatic shock of the Master's passing had barely given way to consciousness of unbearable loss, when the second blow fell with the reading of the Will and Testament, and this totally dedicated, modest young man faced the awe-inspiring, appalling prospect of his appointment. He was overwhelmed. After a brief stay in Haifa he committed the care of the Faith to the Greatest Holy Leaf and retired for eight months to solitude and preparation.

Upon his return to Haifa it quickly became apparent that he had assumed the full responsibilities of his office, while more gradually it was realized that the functions of that office were unique in the history of the world. Present-day visitors to the World Centre, students of the Revelation and the hosts of new believers now entering the Cause rapidly become aware of his mighty works. They see the magnificent gardens at Bahji and on Carmel, the Shrine of the Báb, the International Archives Building, the great arc which he created on the Mountain of God upon which Bahá'u'lláh has established His throne; his translations into English of the Sacred Word are the daily food of anglophone believers and the foundation of translations into other languages; one whole generation and more witnessed the rise of the Administrative Order under his direction, responded to his constant call to spread the knowledge and establish the institutions of the Faith throughout the earth, and all stand amazed at the vast range of his achievements and

¹ This essay was originally presented to the Ninth Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*, November 1984 in Chicago, where it was read on behalf of the author.

the character of his leadership, a leadership which evoked in a handful of ordinary people powers and capacities which they did not know they possessed and which enabled them to achieve, under his guidance, tasks inconceivable and impossible without his God-given genius.

But all these are ancillary to the two great functions of our beloved Guardian, bounties flowing out to us and posterity from his own character and total dedication to the Cause of God. In the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha the two essentials of his appointment are protection of the Cause – *'the mighty stronghold shall remain impregnable and safe through obedience to him who is the Guardian of the Cause of God'* – and exposition – *'He is the Expounder of the Word of God'*. It is the latter function which we are now to consider. It would be wise, however, in passing, to recognize that all his works, whether of exposition, translation, construction, propagation, protection, development, literary, executive, administrative or historical are of one piece, not separate activities, but each affecting all and all affecting each, summed up in the magic words, 'Guardian of the Cause of God'.

The situation facing Shoghi Effendi in November 1921 was truly daunting. The Bahá'í world community consisted of a few thousand dedicated zealots in Persia, ready then, as now and always, to suffer torture and death rather than deny their Faith, a handful of believers in the West, and a few individuals scattered in a very small number of countries. There were no Hands of the Cause. There was no National Spiritual Assembly in existence and not even the rudiments of the Administrative Order were generally known. Bereft of their all-glorious Master, the Centre of the Covenant, invested with supreme authority by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, where were these spiritually illumined, eager, loyal, but uninformed and desperately anxious believers to turn for guidance and a source of authority? The appointment of a successor was balm to their souls and all hearts turned in relief and gratitude and love to the lone, young scion of nobility who was now to embark upon his destiny. This is not the occasion to examine the defection and activities of the Covenant-breaking members of Bahá'u'lláh's Own family and one or two supreme egoists who sought leadership, but the subject cannot go unnoticed for it added tragedy to the burden of the young Guardian.

That great institution, the secondary House of justice, now known as the National Spiritual Assembly, was created and established by 'Abdu'l-Baha in His Will and Testament, the document which proved to be the Charter of the Administrative Order. One of Shoghi Effendi's first acts was to call to the attention of the believers in the West the 'vital necessity of having a Local Spiritual Assembly in every locality where the number of adult declared believers exceeds nine, and of making provision for the indirect election of a Body that shall adequately represent the interests of all the friends and Assemblies . . .'¹ He later specified the methods and circumstances of these elections.

This first act of exposition is of supreme interest, for it not only established basic administrative institutions, but very emphatically dwelt upon the spirit of unity in the Cause, and

clearly indicated that in this new day of God, executive authority is to be exercised by institutions which operate by consultation, and not by individuals. It is the first intimation of how the Guardian would discharge the duties of his high office, particularly the raising of the Administrative Order. Firmly basing his directives on the explicit Text (in this case the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), which he quoted, he then applied the provisions of the Will and Testament relating to the subject, added further passages from the Master's Writings about Local Spiritual Assemblies, their duties, conditions, attitudes, method of consultation, and the obligation of all believers to be loyal and obedient to them, and *not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly*. He clarified the relationship between the local and national bodies and declared that they would, in future, be designated Houses of Justice. In later letters he confirmed that the present Spiritual Assemblies would evolve into those basic institutions of the Bahá'í World Common-wealth. In other words he uncovered, expounded and implemented what was already in the Sacred Text.

The Expounder does not add to the Revelation although his exposition and interpretation have the same validity as the Text itself. It is clearly recognized that Shoghi Effendi made no changes and added nothing new to the Revelation. He disclosed to our astonished eyes and expounded what had already been enshrined in the Writings by the three Central Figures of our Faith. He initiated and supervised the practical application to Bahá'í affairs of directives, injunctions, laws and ordinances in the Sacred Text as he was guided to do, clearly indicating that the Administrative Order of the Faith will 'as its component parts, its organic institutions, begin to function with efficiency and vigor, assert its claim and demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind'.²

The Guardian disclosed three Charters within the Sacred Text for the three major activities which he initiated. The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá he characterized as 'the Charter of the New World Order which is at once the glory and the promise of this most great Dispensation', and the Administrative Order 'the framework of the Will itself . . .'. The Will is therefore the Charter for the development of the Administrative Order. The *Tablet of Carmel* is the Charter for establishing the administrative centre of the Faith on that holy mountain; *'Erelong will God sail His Ark upon thee . . .'* is Bahá'u'lláh's apostrophe. The Charter for the great programme of teaching which he initiated is 'Abdu'l-Baha's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, fourteen letters addressed during World War I to the believers in various parts of North America. Everything he did derived from the Sacred Text, interpreted and expounded with his God-given authority, itself explicitly conferred .in the written Word.

Upon this theme we may note that while the Guardian subordi-nated his entire will and desire to the exposition and implementation of the Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh Himself did not invent World Order. The Bahá'í Administrative Order, the Christ-promised Kingdom of God on earth, the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh – synonyms for that unity of the human race which

Bahá'u'lláh, in numberless texts, has declared to be the purpose of Almighty God – is not a new concept. It is implicit in the act of creation, explicitly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Baha in this remarkable passage from His Writings in which He comments on why Bahá'u'lláh accepted such terrible sufferings: *'His reason for putting on the heavy iron chains and for becoming the very embodiment of utter resignation and meekness, was to lead every soul on earth to concord, to fellow-feeling, to oneness; to make known amongst all peoples the sign of the singleness of God, so that at last the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things would bear its destined fruit ...'*³ That primal oneness preceded the creation and God Himself deposited it at its heart. Its fruition is the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh which, Shoghi Effendi says in *The Goal of a New World Order*, represents the consummation of human evolution. I also refer you to George Townshend's *The Promise of All Ages*, Chapter One, 'The Epic of Humanity', which opens with this wonderful sentence: 'Bahá'u'lláh revealed a sublime vision of human history as an epic written by the finger of God and proceeding along an ordered course to a climax, the nature of which was exactly defined before the story opened and the appearance of which at the date ordained by the Author no human misunderstanding nor opposition could prevent or postpone.'

There is also Kant's perceptive statement in his *Essay on Eternal Peace*: 'The history of the human race, viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a political constitution, internally and externally perfect, as the only state in which all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed.'⁴ The concept has inspired the ideals, the hopes, the dreams of humanity throughout the ages.

The greatness of this Revelation is seen, therefore, in the fact that Bahá'u'lláh presides – not only in His Own Dispensation but throughout the Bahá'í cycle – over the fulfilment of God's purpose for humanity. Being in the station of *He doth whatsoever He willeth*, the World Order which He propounds is therefore His Own, and is properly called the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It must be realized that in organic growth there are other factors involved than the potentiality within the seed. We are capable of producing what God has deposited within us. *Show forth that which ye possess* says Bahá'u'lláh. But we can only do so under the influence of the Sun of Truth, and until that Sun shines with its full meridian splendour we cannot attain maturity either in our personal lives or socially. Again it is Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation which shines from the zenith and brings to fruition the seed of human life.

From this it is apparent that Shoghi Effendi, the appointed Expounder of the Bahá'í Revelation, is the one human being in all history, whether of the past or the future, to have the greatest influence on the shape and *modus operandi* of human society. For he is the one who understood the vision of the Revealers and expounded and applied Their intentions in practical terms to the organization of the world. There cannot be, on this planet, a greater social or political unit than World Order. And it is Shoghi Effendi who, while not the Architect of that consummation, is certainly its chief builder and engineer. He it is who carefully nurtured this

tender seedling at its birth, sustained it with the life-giving provisions of 'Abdu'l--Bahá's Will and Testament, challenged its growing strength with gradual application of more and more of the creative provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's law, infused into it the powerful spirit of his all encompassing vision and finally launched it, firmly founded on the rock of the Covenant and protected within the divinely appointed structure of the very Kingdom of God on earth, on its world-encircling, redemptive mission.

But although the ultimate shape of human society is now being forged, individual progress within that form is never-ending. For the virtues, qualities and honours of men are limitless, deriving from God in Whose image man is made. Thus while men may develop within that mature system they cannot become mature outside it. Only within that divine shelter is it possible. This whole subject is perspicuously presented in Shoghi Effendi's World Order letters. Expounding 'the principle of the oneness of mankind', he declares in *The Goal of a New World Order*: 'Let there be no mistake . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds – creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world – 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 principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.'⁵

In the later *The Unfoldment of World Civilization* he writes: 'The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the *coming of age of the entire human race*. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, not even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture – all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era – should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.

"That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of an individual and the development of the fruit must, if we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh, have its counterpart in the evolution of the organization of human society. A similar stage must sooner or later be attained in the collective life of mankind, producing an even more striking phenomenon in world relations, and endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide, throughout the succeeding ages, the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny. Such a stage of maturity in the process of human government must, for all time, if we would faithfully recognize the tremendous claim advanced by Bahá'u'lláh, remain identified with the Revelation of which He was the Bearer. '6

Those early believers on whose shoulders we now stand – a debt we can never forget or repay – although beatified by their recognition of the Promised One of all ages, were, nevertheless, insofar as His Revelation was concerned, largely uninformed, naive and not yet weaned from the old order which Bahá'u'lláh was rolling up. Yet they were the Guardian's soldiers – the army of life: he trained them, enlarged their vision, and led them on to victory.

The late Hand of the Cause H. M. Balyuzi related that even the erudite among the Persians, who could read the entire Sacred Text in its original, were not exempt from the general simplicity. He maintained that the Báb's statement '*Well is it with him who fixeth His gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh . . .*', was understood by them to refer to Bahá'u'lláh's literary style. It was Shoghi Effendi who put the capital 'O' to that Order – a device not used apparently in Persian orthography.

The Guardian's first World Order letters gradually brought the friends to a more adequate understanding of the significance of the New Day. His gentle but firm exposition and educative method are seen in his early letters – 1922 and 1923 - in which he discouraged them from un-Bahá'í individual activity and urged them to operate through the Local Spiritual Assemblies. But it was *The Goal of a New World Order*, released at the end of 1931, which galvanized the already expanding world community, widened its horizon, thrilled its soul and prepared it for the spate of expository instruction which thereafter flowed from his pen. In this essay, in language at once forceful and uplifting, he made it clear that the current systems and attitudes of the world were, in face of the needs of a maturing humanity, moribund and lamentably defective, incapable of repair or improvement:

'If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the mutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, - political and economic theories are solely

designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.

'... The principle of the Oneness of Mankind - the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve - is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. ¹⁷

It was apparently still necessary, ten years after the Master's ascension, to correct these inadequate and limited views. And it was in this essay that he began to stress the cataclysmic nature of this age of transition when the old order is being rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead.

Such was the nature of Shoghi Effendi's exposition of the Word of God – an astonishment and a new breath of life to all who had thought religion to be limited to ‘the spirit of brotherhood and good-will’, to idealism and the expression of vague and pious hopes, to personal salvation, requiring the believers to have patience and firmness in faith – that the Promised One would bring about Kingdom of God on earth in His Own good time. It was Shoghi Effendi who said, in effect, Oh no; you must study and toil and sweat and sacrifice and God of His bounty will reward your efforts. He uncovered for us all that marvellous guidance and direction of which we knew nothing, led us into his dynamic programme for building that Kingdom of God on earth – long anticipated, Christ- promised, and now to be ushered in through our services to the King of Glory.

The Goal of a New World Order, which so thrilled, challenged and uplifted the Bahá'í world, was followed three years later by *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, a letter which the Guardian himself described as a statement of ‘certain fundamental verities’, ‘certain truths which lie at the basis of our Faith’. It has been referred to as Shoghi Effendi's own confession of faith. It is the appointed Ex-pounder's presentation of the stations of Baha'u'llah, the Bab and 'Abdu'l-Baha, of the transition from 'the Heroic and Apostolic Age' of the Faith to its Formative Age through the ‘indissoluble link’ of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha, a summation of the spirit and chief provisions of that historic document and a marvellous pre-sentation of the unique and distinguishing features of this Supreme Revelation, which make it ‘unlike the dispensations of the past’. He emphasizes the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice ‘permanently and fundamentally united in their aims’. Without deep

study of this basic document, no Bahá'í can claim to be truly knowledgeable of his Faith. Indeed no one can have a deep, authentic knowledge of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh without study of all these expository and exegetical works of the Guardian.

The Unfoldment of World Civilization describes the two processes at present operating in the world, disintegration and construction. The former affects every department of human life, is universal and accelerating. The latter has two aspects, the gradual spread of Bahá'u'lláh's universal principles to become the hallmark of a modern outlook, and the emergence of a world community bearing His Name and dedicated to the building of 'the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop'. Its closing paragraphs present an enthralling picture of the unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh – a portrayal so compelling that it has been quoted again and again and has even been read to the assembled Senate of the United States by one of its members who presented it as his adopted vision of the brotherhood of man. It is a passage which all Bahá'ís might well commit to memory.

The Advent of Divine Justice dwells upon the preponderating role that North America is called upon to play in the promotion of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It sets out the high standards of conduct, moral rectitude, freedom from prejudice, chastity and nobility required of Bahá'ís and challenges the Bahá'í communities there to scale the heights of self-sacrifice and devotion which will enable them to meet their destiny.

The Promised Day Is Come is an historical work expounding the direct effect of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh upon the fortunes of humanity at large, and of the particular monarchs whom He addressed. The disruption of the world is portrayed as both divine chastisement and purification, while the condign punishments visited upon those rulers who either scorned or neglected His message are related directly to their responses. '*For what thou hast done*', Bahá'u'lláh wrote to Napoleon III, '*thy kingdom shall be thrown into confusion, and thine empire shall pass from thine hands, as a punishment for that which thou hast wrought.*' Within months Napoleon went down to defeat at Sedan.

God Passes By, the Guardian's monumental yet concise history of the first hundred years of the Bahá'í era, singly and by itself establishes the fact of his God-given genius and divine inspiration. Couched in the form of history, it is supremely a work of exposition, showing how the new Revelation reshapes the attitudes and conventions which have crystallized from former dispensations, into universal views, morals and standards, bringing about a 'new-race of men' able to bear and practise all the implications of the oneness of mankind and bring about the Most Great Peace.

Even so brief and inadequate a comment on Shoghi Effendi as the Expounder of the Word of God as may be given in the short span allocated to this presentation cannot fail to mention his translations. To enumerate them is not necessary to this scholarly gathering but we may regard

them from a point of view not yet given prominence by Bahá'í scholars. I refer to the Guardian's life-long effort to bring into relatedness differing cultures of the East – represented by Persia – and the West.

Dissociated at the very bases of their societies in their religious assumptions, social conventions, forms and aspirations, it was the Master's longing to see them embrace as long-lost lovers and the chief motivation of His revealing *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Shoghi Effendi, without in the least compromising the accuracy of his translations, expended great effort to make the exalted, richly decorated language of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation – a miracle to Persians and Arabists – acceptable to western literary usage. All his translations are imbued with this intention, which is exposition of the highest order, befitting the universality and integrity of the Cause of God. This subject is dealt with in considerable detail in Chapter Six of my *Life of George Townshend*, with particular reference to *The Dawn-Breakers* and the Guardian's insistence that Mr. Townshend write the Introduction.

Some inkling of the bounties conferred upon mankind by the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God may be obtained from a study of the enormous contrast between the development of that Cause in *this* Dispensation and in previous ones. The rise of Christianity, chronicled by Bishop Barnes, is a record of formulation of creeds, crystallization of doctrines, disputation in councils and inevitable schism. Our beloved Guardian, trusted by God with supreme authority, was indeed the guardian of our unity, our educator, guide and true brother – the Expounder of the Word of God.

In conclusion let me share with you two brief paragraphs from Shoghi Effendi's exposition of the vision and declared intention of Bahá'u'lláh:

‘A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.’⁸

And:

‘Let no one, while this System is still in its infancy, misconceive its character, belittle its significance or misrepresent its purpose. The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God's immutable Purpose for mankind in this day. The Source from which it derives its inspiration is no one less than Bahá'u'lláh Himself. Its shield and defender are the embattled hosts of the Abhá Kingdom. Its seed is the blood of no less than twenty thousand martyrs who have offered up their

lives that it may be born and flourish. The axis round which its institutions revolve are the authentic provisions of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Its guiding principles are the truths which He Who is the unerring Interpreter of the teachings of our Faith has so clearly enunciated in His public addresses throughout the West. The laws that govern its operation and limit its functions are those which have been expressly ordained in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The seat round which its spiritual, its humanitarian and administrative activities will cluster are the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár and its Dependencies. The pillars that sustain its authority and buttress its structure are the twin institutions of the Guardianship and of the Universal House of Justice. The central, the underlying aim which animates it is the establishment of the New World Order as adumbrated by Bahá’u’lláh. The methods it employs, the standard it inculcates, incline it to neither East nor West, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither rich nor poor, neither white nor colored. Its watchword is the unification of the human race; its standard the “Most Great Peace”; its consummation 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.⁹

NOTES

1. Letter of 5 March 1922, published in *Bahá’í Administration*, New York, 1936 and *Unfolding Destiny*, London, 1981.
2. Shoghi Effendi, in 'The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh', *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, Wilmette 1938, p. 144.
3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 263.
4. 1795; published Boston, 1914 under the title *Eternal Peace and Other Essays*. Cited in Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1926), p. 308; and in Hofman, *The Renewal of Civilization*, chapter 2.
5. Shoghi Effendi, in 'The Goal of a New World Order', *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 42-3.
6. *ibid.* pp. 163-4.
7. *ibid.* pp. 42-3.
8. *ibid.* p. 204.
9. *ibid.* pp. 156-7.