



THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

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THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH
AN UPDATED AND REVISED EDITION

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PREFACE TO THIRD EDITION

This introduction to the Bahá'í Faith was originally published by Ward Lock Educational in 1980 for use in schools in their series 'Living Religions'. It quickly found a wider readership, was reprinted five times during its first five years and has been published in Russian, German, Danish, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Braille editions. When Ward Lock discontinued the 'Living Religions' series, this volume was published in a second edition by the United Kingdom Bahá'í Publishing Trust in 1989. It has now been extensively revised and updated and several new sections have been added in this third edition to reflect the rapid and significant developments that have taken place in the world-wide Bahá'í community over the last two decades.

During recent years Bahá'í literature has been greatly enriched with the publication in English of a number of books of Bahá'í scripture. In addition, Bahá'í authors in many parts of the world and from many different disciplines have contributed to the wealth of books about the Bahá'í Faith, the relevance of its teachings to the challenges of the twenty-first century and its relationship to the wider world community. In this brief introduction, I have been able to refer to only a few of these books but I hope that the web sites provided along with an expanded bibliography will enable readers to find out more about whatever most interests them.

I acknowledge a debt of gratitude to all those Bahá'í authors who have so greatly enriched my understanding of this, the youngest of the world's divinely-revealed religions. I am very grateful to all those who publish Bahá'í literature, especially to Nosrat Dehghan whose prompt and helpful attention to all my queries has greatly assisted the revision process. I am deeply grateful to my husband Richard for his loving support, his patience and invaluable technical assistance.

Finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Philip Hainsworth, co-author and friend, who passed away in 2001 and who is sorely missed. Without his extensive knowledge of and long experience in Bahá'í community development, his enthusiasm and hard work, the publication of the first edition of this book and all that has flowed from that would not have been possible.

Mary Perkins

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INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í Faith is the religion of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. The name Bahá'u'lláh is Arabic for 'The Glory of God', and a Bahá'í is a follower of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's living religions. It began in Írán in the nineteenth century and today comprises a community of more than six million people who live in thousands of cities, towns, villages and rural areas in 191 independent nations and in 45 dependent territories or overseas departments. Its members are now drawn from over two thousand ethnic and tribal groups and its membership cuts across all existing boundaries of class and race. Bahá'í literature has been translated into more than 800 languages.

Although it began in a Muslim country, Írán, the Bahá'í Faith is as distinct from Islám as Christianity is from Judaism, and it is a world religion which has spread to almost every corner of the globe.

The Encyclopedia Britannica recognizes the Bahá'í Faith as the second-most widely spread independent religion in the world. It includes within its membership a cross-section of the human race and offers to the whole of humankind a way to love and unity, to justice and peace, which is satisfying, challenging and inspiring.

The human race, so rich in its diversity of colour, culture, tradition and experience must, if it is to be united in carrying forward an ever-advancing world civilization, be offered a new way of life, simple in its basic features but sufficiently complex in its detailed application to cater for all its needs and aspirations.

The Bahá'í Faith offers this new way of life. This book serves as an introduction to the faith; it does not in any way attempt to deal with all the many aspects of this new world faith but it is a fairly comprehensive textbook written to give enough of its history, teachings and objectives to encourage further study.

It is a study which, we believe, will be exciting and rewarding.

Mary Perkins
Philip Hainsworth

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The photographers' names and the pages on which their photos are used are as follows: Margo Akermark p 64; Michael Banister p 48; Geoff Collins pps 58-9; Koosha Dehghan pps 38 & 112; Jamie Dillier p 117; Richard Francis p 30; David Frankel p 104; Matt Galligan p 94; Nayyeer Ghadirian pps 31 & 54; Francisco Gonzales pps 114, 116, 118, 120 & 135; Nahid Hossaini (Azadeh) p 134; Ramin Hosseini pps 55 & 111; Shiva Kujiro p 100; Melody Logue pps 105 & 130; Joel Meulemans pps 36-7 & 52-3; Sina Mostavafi p 121; Nik Outchunis pps 65, 110 & 128-9; Keith Plant p 119; Blake Read pps 49, 65 & 74; Anis Sami Silva pps 57 & 73; Alex Stacanov pps 128-129.

SOME NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

There is always a difficulty, when translating from one language into another, in finding words which match exactly. It is even more difficult, when the script is different, particularly when there are sounds in one of the languages which are not exactly represented by any letter in the other. Sometimes, when translating a sound into English, a letter has to be modified by putting an accent on it, or a 'dot' underneath it, or underlining two letters to give one different sound. This is known as 'transliteration', and unusual dots, commas and underlinings as the 'diacriticals'.

An additional difficulty with translations of the original Bahá'í Writings is that some were written in Arabic and others in Persian; not only are there many words which are common to both languages, but they sound and are written differently. This is because scholars have, in the past, used varying methods of transliteration.

The ones used in this book conform as closely as possible to the standard recognised by Bahá'í writers throughout the world.

Some examples are: 'a' is short as in 'band', while 'á' is long as in 'father'; 'i' is short as in 'fit' while 'í' is long, as 'ee' in 'feet'; zh sounds as 's' in 'pleasure'; a dot under 'h', 'š', 't', 'z' requires a stressed, explosive pronunciation; when found under 'd' it changes the sound to 'z' as in 'zebra'.

The words 'man' and 'mankind' are used extensively in the English quotations from the Bahá'í Writings. In Arabic and Persian these words denote both men and women.

HOW THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH
BEGAN

The land of Írán

Írán consists of a large plateau surrounded on all sides by high mountains with a great salt desert at its centre. To the west is the plain of the Tigris, to the east the Indus valley, to the north the Caspian Sea and the Turanian desert, and to the south the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

In order to appreciate the environment into which the Bahá'í Faith was born, it is important to realize that in the early 1800s the whole area of the Middle East was in a state of political, economic and social decline.

The people of Írán, who in previous centuries had produced great civilizations, were by 1800 weakened and isolated from the main currents of world affairs. A few people lived in great luxury while many suffered through poverty, disease and ignorance. Attempts at reform were hindered by widespread corruption, bribery and malpractice on the part of the government. Most of the people

of Írán were Muslim but there were also people of the Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Faiths living in the country. There was much mutual hatred and intolerance between the followers of these different faiths. Yet Írán, or Persia as it was known, was of great significance to both Muslims and Christians, having been mentioned in a number of places in their scriptures. The Reverend H. Bonar, a Christian scholar writing on Biblical prophecy in the early part of the nineteenth century, accepted the prophecies about Assyria, Elam and Persia, but confessed to being unable to explain why these places should, 'in the latter days', be so blessed.

The Search for the Promised One

In the late eighteenth century, a learned and saintly Muslim called Shaykh Aḥmad set out on a journey from his home in the north-east of the Arabian peninsula. He was prompted to travel by his conviction that 'the Promised One' mentioned in the Islamic scriptures would shortly appear on earth.

Shaykh Aḥmad believed that this holy messenger of God whose coming was prophesied was a great world teacher expected by all the peoples of the world. His appearance on earth, Shaykh Aḥmad believed, would mark the beginning of a new age for humanity, an age when the different religions would become united and all peoples would live in peace.

Shaykh Aḥmad went first to Najaf and then to Karbilá, cities holy to the Muslims. The Imám Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, had been martyred at Karbilá. In Karbilá Shaykh Aḥmad began to preach and teach but later moved into Írán. A young man named Siyyid Kázim (Siyyid is a title meaning that the person is a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad) heard of Shaykh Aḥmad's teachings and travelled

BELOW: The house of the Báb in Írán, where he proclaimed his mission



across the country to meet him.

Shaykh Aḥmad greeted the young man joyfully. He knew that he had found someone with whom he could share all his knowledge and the longings of his heart. Together they studied and prayed, travelled and taught.

Shaykh Aḥmad appointed Siyyid Kázim as his successor and after his teacher's death, Siyyid Kázim remained at Karbilá and continued to teach there. One of those who came to learn from the Siyyid was a young man called Mullá Ḥusayn. Mullá Ḥusayn was a pure-hearted and eager seeker after truth and a brilliant scholar. Siyyid Kázim knew that he could trust Mullá Ḥusayn completely; he had great confidence in the young student's abilities and sent him on a special mission to Írán.

In due course Siyyid Kázim became increasingly aware of the imminence of the dawn of a new revelation and endeavoured to lift the veil that might prevent his disciples from recognizing God's treasure when he was revealed. He

told them:

“He is of noble lineage...a descendant of the Prophet of God...He is young in age and is possessed of innate knowledge. His learning is derived not from the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad, but from God. My knowledge is but a drop compared with the immensity of His knowledge, my attainments a speck of dust in the face of the wonders of His grace and power...He is of medium height, abstains from smoking and is of extreme devoutness and piety.”¹

Siyyid Kāzim urged his followers to scatter far and wide to look for the Promised One, to give up their careers, their belongings, even, if necessary, their lives, in their search.

Mullá Ḥusayn returned from Írán to find that his teacher had died. He spent forty days in prayer and fasting, preparing his heart for the journey of search. Some of his fellow students, inspired by his example, began to do the same. When the forty days were over, Mullá Ḥusayn set out on his journey with his brother and his nephew, who were both barely twenty years old.

The three young men left Karbilá with no clear idea of where they should first look. They prayed earnestly for guidance from God, and Mullá Ḥusayn found himself being drawn, by the inner prompting of his heart, towards Shiráz, a city in the south of Írán. Shiráz is a beautiful city, famous for its poets, its flower gardens and nightingales.

Mullá Ḥusayn and his companions arrived at the city gate late one afternoon. They were dusty, hungry and tired. Mullá Ḥusayn sent his companions on ahead into the city and lingered for a while outside the city gate, wondering what he would find in Shiráz that might lead him to the Promised One.

As he stood outside the city gate, a young man with a

radiant face and wearing a green turban (an indication that he was descended from the Prophet Muḥammad) approached him. The young stranger smiled and welcomed Mullá Ḥusayn to Shiráz as if he were a long-lost friend. His radiance and serenity, his purity, courtesy, and dignity made a strong impression on the travel-weary Mullá Ḥusayn who was filled with joy in the stranger's company. The young stranger invited Mullá Ḥusayn to enter the city and refresh himself at his house. Mullá Ḥusayn explained that he had sent his companions on ahead and that they would be waiting for him. *“Commit them to the care of God. He will surely protect and watch over them”*² said the young stranger and he escorted Mullá Ḥusayn into the city of Shiráz.

The Declaration of The Báb

The young man who met Mullá Ḥusayn outside Shiráz was named Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad. He was descended through both of his parents from the Prophet Muḥammad. He was born on October 20, 1819. His father had died when he was young and he had been brought up by an uncle. When this uncle first sent his nephew to school, the teacher sent him home, saying that there was nothing that he could teach the boy that he did not already know. ‘Alí-Muḥammad had an extraordinary innate knowledge that he had not learnt from books or from any other person. This innate knowledge enabled him to answer the most difficult questions which his teachers could not themselves answer.

In his early teens ‘Alí-Muḥammad began to work for his uncle as a merchant at the port of Būshihir and in Shiráz. He was soon respected for his modesty and fairmindedness in business, for his devotion and humility, for the depth and breadth of his knowledge and for the sweetness and nobility of his character. At the time that he met Mullá Ḥusayn he



was twenty-five years old and had been working for fewer than ten years. He was married and had lost his infant son, his only child, shortly after the baby was born.

This was the young merchant who met Mullá Ḥusayn and then led him courteously to his home, a modest house in a quiet corner of Shíráz. Mullá Ḥusayn felt a growing sense of peace and happiness in the company of his host. It was time for the evening prayers observed by all Muslims. The two young men knelt in prayer and Mullá Ḥusayn prayed earnestly that this strange encounter might somehow help him in his search for the Promised One. When they had said their prayers, they sat and spoke together. Overwhelmed by the great kindness, dignity and courtesy of his host, Mullá Ḥusayn unburdened the deepest longings of his heart. He spoke of the journey and search that he had undertaken. 'Alí-Muḥammad listened attentively and then asked whether Siyyid Kázim had given any indications as to how his followers would recognize the Promised One. Mullá Ḥusayn repeated the description given by Siyyid Kázim: "He is of a pure lineage, is of illustrious descent...He is endowed with innate knowledge...is free from bodily deficiency..."³

There was silence in the room for a few moments when Mullá Ḥusayn finished speaking. Then Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad spoke quietly but in tones of strength and power.

"Behold, all these signs are manifest in Me!"⁴

Mullá Ḥusayn was greatly surprised. He began to protest, saying that the Promised One he sought was a man of unsurpassed holiness and the cause he was to reveal was a cause of tremendous power, but even as he spoke he experienced a sense of awe and remorse. He ceased to protest. He eagerly took out a paper which he had written some years

earlier. It was an attempt he had made to explain some of the most difficult teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad and Siyyid Kázim. He asked his host to look at the paper. His host then said, as Mullá Ḥusayn listened with astonishment and joy, *'Now is the time to reveal the commentary on the Súrih of Joseph'*.⁵

The Súrih of Joseph (a súrih means chapter) is a chapter in the Qur'án. Mullá Ḥusayn had once asked Siyyid Kázim to write a commentary on that chapter. "This is, verily, beyond me" Siyyid Kázim had replied. "He, that great One, who comes after me will, unasked, reveal it for you."⁶

As Mullá Ḥusayn recalled these words spoken by his teacher, his host took up his pen and began to write. He chanted the words in a melodious voice as he wrote them down. He did not pause in his chanting or his writing until a whole chapter, the Súrih of Mulk, was completed. Mullá Ḥusayn sat listening, enraptured by the sweetness of his voice and the power of the words he uttered.

The declaration that he was indeed the Promised One was made by the young merchant of Shiráz to Mullá Ḥusayn two hours and eleven minutes after sunset on 22 May 1844. It is a date and time that is celebrated by Bahá'ís as the beginning of a new era in human history.

"O thou who are the first to believe in Me!" were the exact words he spoke to Mullá Ḥusayn. *'Verily I say, I am the Báb, the Gate of God, . . .'*⁷

The name Báb means 'the gate' and the Báb claimed to be the Gate to a new age of peace and universal brotherhood. He said that his mission was to foretell the coming of another, much greater messenger who would shortly appear. He referred to this great messenger as 'He whom God shall make manifest' and spoke of him as one who would unite all people and establish a just and lasting peace on earth.

All through that night Mullá Ḥusayn sat and listened, oblivious of time and of the companions who awaited him, as the Báb continued. While the city slept around them, the Báb warned Mullá Ḥusayn that he must tell no one, not even his companions, of what he had seen or heard.

"... Eighteen souls must," said the Báb *"in the beginning, spontaneously and of their own accord, accept Me and recognize the truth of My Revelation. Unwarned and uninvited, each of these must seek independently to find Me."*⁸

As the call to morning prayer was raised from the minarets of Shiráz, Mullá Ḥusayn left the house of the Báb. Joy, wonder, excitement, and awe filled his soul.

*"... the knowledge of His Revelation" he said, 'had galvanized my being. I felt possessed of such courage and power that were the world, all its peoples and its potentates, to rise against me, I would, alone and undaunted, withstand their onslaught. The universe seemed but a handful of dust in my grasp.'*⁹

Forty more days passed before the other disciples of the Báb began to recognize him. Gradually, spontaneously and completely independently of one another, some in fasting and prayer, some in dreams and visions, they recognized the station of the young merchant of Shiráz. They had all been students of Siyyid Kázim and seemed to be attracted to Shiráz by that same power that had drawn Mullá Ḥusayn to the city. The last to arrive was Quddús. He reached Shiráz dust-stained and travel weary. On seeing Mullá Ḥusayn in the street, he eagerly asked for news of the search. Mullá Ḥusayn tried to pacify him, but without success, for Quddús had seen the Báb walking in the street.

"Why seek you to hide Him from me?" Quddús cried out to the astonished Mullá Ḥusayn. *'I can recognize*

Him by his gait. I confidently testify that none besides Him, whether in the East or in the West, can claim to be the Truth. None other can manifest the power and majesty that radiate from His holy person.”¹⁰

The Báb called together those disciples who had reached Shiráz and told them to scatter throughout Írán to spread his teachings and to prepare men’s hearts for the coming of ‘Him whom God shall make manifest’. He stressed the great responsibility that they carried, urged caution and moderation and warned that they would face torture and death as a reward for their efforts.

“... I am preparing you’ he told them “for the advent of a mighty Day. Exert your utmost endeavour that, in the world to come, I who am now instructing you, may, before the mercy-seat of God, rejoice in your deeds and glory in your achievements...Scatter throughout the length and breadth of this land, and, with steadfast feet and sanctified hearts, prepare the way for His coming. Heed not your weaknesses and frailty; fix your gaze upon the invincible power of the Lord, your God, the Almighty. Has He not, in past days, caused Abraham, in spite of His seeming helplessness, to triumph over the forces of Nimrod? Has He not enabled Moses, whose staff was His only companion, to vanquish Pharaoh and his hosts? Has He not established the ascendancy of Jesus, poor and lowly as He was in the eyes of men, over the combined forces of the Jewish people? Has He not subjected the barbarous and militant tribes of Arabia to the holy and transforming discipline of Muhammad, His prophet? Arise in His name, put your trust wholly in Him, and be assured of ultimate victory.”¹¹

The Ministry of The Báb

The followers of the Báb set out to joyfully spread his teachings. The message that they gave sparked off tremendous excitement in Írán. People thronged to hear them and the fame of the Báb grew swiftly. Rich and poor, simple and learned, town-dweller and villager alike wanted to know more. A number of learned and highly respected religious teachers became followers of the Báb. The authorities became alarmed and reacted swiftly. When Quddús and an elderly companion began to spread the Báb’s teachings in Shiráz, they were seized by the authorities of that city, their beards were burned, their noses pierced. Through these incisions cords were passed and with this halter they were led through the streets. They were beaten and sent out of Shiráz with a warning that if they tried to return they would be crucified.

The Báb was put under house arrest as a wave of passionate enquiry rocked the country. The Sháh sent Vahíd, a most trusted adviser, and a learned, influential and highly respected man, to investigate the cause of the excitement. Vahíd became a devoted follower of the Báb after just three interviews with him and at once began to spread his teachings.

The Grand Vizier, the chief minister of the Sháh, became extremely worried. He was frightened that the Báb might influence the Sháh if they should meet. He therefore imprisoned the Báb at Máh-Kú in the north of the country.

The people living around Máh-Kú were simple farmers, ignorant of the world beyond their own hills and hostile to outsiders. The prison governor was at first hostile to the Báb but soon realized that he was no ordinary person. He began

to love and revere the Báb. The local farmers felt the influence of the prisoner in their lives. They came to stand beneath the prison walls in the hope of hearing him chant his prayers. They asked for his blessing on their daily work and called on each other to speak the truth in his name.

Visitors came from far and wide. The governor allowed them in and became daily more devoted to the prisoner in his charge.

Again the Grand Vizier became alarmed and sent the Báb to a more remote prison at Chihriq. The governor of Chihriq prison was the Sháh's own brother-in-law. He was harsh and unpredictable and at the outset acted with great severity but he too yielded to the fascination of the Báb. Again the local people began to love and revere him. Again the visitors streamed to Chihriq. One visitor was a man from India who reached Chihriq dressed as a hermit. He had been a prince in his own country but had seen the Báb in a vision and had given up his wealth and position to look for him. The Báb sent him back to India to spread the teachings.

Persecution of the Báb's followers increased as the teachings spread in Írán. The Báb's first disciples and hundreds of those who had responded to their message were cruelly tortured and killed. Had they recanted their faith, they would have lived.

The Báb's own uncle, who had reared and educated him, was killed because of his belief in the mission of his nephew. The Báb was filled with anguish and sorrow at the deaths of his followers. While in prison in Chihriq he wrote down a great many of his teachings. He knew that his own death would come soon.

In 1850, unable to stop the spread of the movement, the authorities decided to execute the Báb in an attempt to stamp out the heresy once and for all. Thus, after three

years of relative freedom and three of captivity, the Báb's six-year ministry was hastening to its spectacular climax.

The Execution of The Báb

The Báb was taken to Tabriz. As he was led into the city a young man threw himself at the Báb's feet and begged to be allowed to die with him. The young man was arrested and condemned to die with the Báb.

On his last night on earth the Báb was radiant and joyful. He knew that his mission was accomplished despite all opposition. Early next morning the Báb was interrupted as he was dictating last minute instructions to a companion. Soldiers sent from those responsible for the Báb's imprisonment attempted to hurry the Báb away but he spoke to the official in charge saying:

*"Not until I have said to him all those things that I wish to say can any earthly power silence Me. Though all the world be armed against Me, yet shall they be powerless to deter Me from fulfilling, to the last word, My intention."*¹²

In a sequence of events remarkably similar to those experienced over eighteen centuries earlier when Jesus received his sentence without fair trial, the Báb was taken to the home of three eminent religious leaders to obtain the necessary death warrants. Not one of them condescended to face the Báb, as the documents were already written, signed and sealed.

The Báb was led through the crowded streets where about 10,000 people had thronged to Tabriz to watch him die.

The leader of the regiment ordered to execute the Báb was a Christian named Sám Khán. He was impressed by the

goodness and humility of the Báb and was deeply troubled by the task ahead of him.

'I . . . entertain no ill-will against you,' he told the Báb. 'If your Cause be the Cause of Truth, enable me to free myself from the obligation to shed your blood.' *'Follow your instructions,'* the Báb replied *'and if your intention be sincere, the Almighty is surely able to relieve you from your perplexity.'*¹³

The Báb and his young companion were suspended by ropes against the wall of the barrack square and seven hundred and fifty soldiers of Sâm Khân's regiment took aim at them and fired. When the smoke from the fire cleared a great shout went up from the crowd. The Báb was nowhere to be seen and the young man who had been tied up with him was standing unharmed. There was a frantic search for the Báb. They found him finishing his instructions which had earlier been interrupted.

'I have finished My conversation. . .,' the Báb told those who found him, *'Now you may proceed to fulfill your intention.'*¹⁴

Sâm Khân ordered his own regiment out of the barracks and refused to have anything more to do with the execution of the Báb. Another regiment was called in. This time the bodies of the Báb and his companion were shattered to pieces, though their faces were hardly marred.

The execution took place at noon on 9 July 1850. At the same hour a fierce storm broke over the city. Strong winds blew and dust darkened the skies for the rest of the day. The bodies of the Báb and his companion were thrown outside the city walls and forty soldiers were set on guard so that the followers of the Báb should not rescue them. Despite this guard, the Báb's followers managed to rescue the re-

mains of the bodies and hide them in a place of safety.

The Báb and his Message

The Báb claimed to be the bearer of an independent revelation from God and the herald of a greater messenger than himself. He changed the Islamic laws and ceremonies concerned with prayer, fasting, marriage, divorce and inheritance. In his writings his constant theme is the coming of 'Him whom God shall make manifest'. He extols the greatness of the messenger who is to come and urges his followers to hurry to him when he appears even if they have to crawl to him over snow. "... *I Myself am,*" the Báb wrote, *'but the first servant to believe in Him and in His signs, and to partake of the sweet savours of His words from the first fruits of the Paradise of His knowledge.'*¹⁵

The Báb believed that God's next messenger would appear very shortly after his own death.

Two years after the Báb was shot, three of his young followers, crazy with grief and despair at the death of their leader, attempted to assassinate the Sháh. The weapon they chose was quite unsuitable for their purpose and the Sháh was only slightly wounded. But their act triggered off a wave of persecution against the Bábis. The authorities whipped up popular support for a campaign of vengeance and determined to rid themselves of the Bábis.

Men, women and children were tortured and killed in ghastly massacres. Foreign residents in Írán kept to their houses for fear of witnessing savage scenes of torture and killing in the streets and the most able and distinguished of the Báb's followers, a man named Bahá'u'lláh, was thrown into prison.



ABOVE: View of the Prison of Máh-Kú. The castle is at the base of the overhanging rock above the village

Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh means in Arabic 'The Glory of God' and was a name mentioned by the Báb. Bahá'u'lláh, whose name at birth was Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí, was born into one of the leading noble families of Írán. His father was a prominent minister at the court of the Sháh. He was born in Tíhrán on November 12, 1817.

Bahá'u'lláh was surrounded from birth by riches, comfort and elegance. His clothes were of the finest silk, his food the best that wealth and position could provide. His family owned fine houses. In common with his young noble contemporaries, Bahá'u'lláh received instruction in the main teachings of Islám, the literature and poetry of Írán and was taught calligraphy. Bahá'u'lláh, like the Báb, possessed an extraordinary knowledge that was not gained from a teacher or from any books. Men marvelled at the breadth and depth of his knowledge and at his exceptional powers of logic and reasoning. At the age of seven he represented his father in a property dispute at the court of the Sháh and won the case for which he argued.

His exceptional knowledge did not make him proud. He was modest and genial, sympathetic and very kind. His tastes were simple. He loved the countryside, birds, trees, flowers and animals and preferred to spend his time in the country rather than at court. He did not spend his money on personal luxuries but on helping the poor and needy. He married young, as was the custom at the time. His wife was from a very wealthy family but her tastes were similar to her husband's. Together they worked to help those less fortunate than themselves. Their doors were always open to those in need of food, shelter and help. They were given the names 'The Father

and Mother of the poor'. When Bahá'u'lláh's father died, his position at court was offered to his son but Bahá'u'lláh refused to accept it.

In the summer of 1844, just three months after the Báb declared his mission, Mullá Husayn carried to Tihrán a scroll of the Báb's writing and saw that it reached the hands of Bahá'u'lláh. On reading the scroll, Bahá'u'lláh immediately recognized the claims of the Báb and became his follower. He was twenty-seven years old at the time. Bahá'u'lláh never met the Báb but was in constant correspondence with him and he gave whole-hearted support to the spread of the Báb's teachings. In doing so, he put himself on the side of a little-known movement which was directly opposed to the privileges of his own class.

While the Báb was in prison, Bahá'u'lláh lent every possible assistance to his persecuted followers. He was twice imprisoned and once deliberately drew the anger of a mob upon himself rather than allow his companions to suffer. He was beaten and pelted with stones. Undaunted and with tireless energy, Bahá'u'lláh supported, advised and assisted the persecuted Bábís. When the Báb knew that he would soon die, he sent to Bahá'u'lláh his pens, seals and papers. It was at Bahá'u'lláh's initiative and on his explicit instructions that the remains of the Báb were removed from Tabriz to Tihrán and hidden in a place of safety. In the days following the attempt on the Sháh's life, Bahá'u'lláh was a guest of the Grand Vizier. His friends begged him to hide until the tumult was over, but Bahá'u'lláh refused to do this. Instead, he rode towards the army camp where his own seizure and arrest were being planned.

Bahá'u'lláh was stripped of his outer garments and was put in chains. He was made to walk, bare-headed and bare-footed under the midday sun, to prison in Tihrán. A large crowd had gathered to hurl stones and insults at him.

Bahá'u'lláh asked his guards to slow down in order to enable an old woman who wanted to throw a stone, to catch up with the procession.

*'Suffer not this woman,' he said, 'to be disappointed. Deny her not what she regards as a meritorious act in the sight of God.'*¹⁶

The prison to which Bahá'u'lláh was taken had originally been a reservoir for one of the public baths of the city. He was led down a pitch-black corridor and down three flights of steps. The prison chamber was dark, damp and verminous. A hundred and fifty fever-ridden men were kept there with scarcely any clothes and no bedding. They were for the most part murderers, highwaymen and robbers. Bahá'u'lláh and a number of other Bábís were chained among them.

Bahá'u'lláh was placed in stocks, and heavy chains were secured over his shoulders so that he could neither stand up nor lie down. The chains cut into his flesh and he bore the marks of them for the rest of his life. For three days he was given no food or drink. The authorities did not dare execute Bahá'u'lláh, as he was held in such high esteem but that did not prevent his enemies from attempting to kill him by poisoning his food. Though it made him very sick, the attempt failed. Each day the guards came to fetch out one of the Bábís to face torture and death. Each time a Bábí went to his death from that prison, he came first to ask for Bahá'u'lláh's blessing before hurrying joyfully to die. Bahá'u'lláh comforted and encouraged all the prisoners. He taught the Bábís to chant prayers as they sat in their chains. First one row would sing *'God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-Sufficient'* and the other row would reply: *'In Him let the trusting trust.'*¹⁷ The prisoners sang with such joy and so loudly that the sound of their chanting could be heard by the Sháh in his nearby palace.

Bahá'u'lláh was kept in the prison under these appalling

conditions for four months. He became very ill, his neck was galled, his back was bent and he could scarcely walk. While in that prison, Bahá'u'lláh had a mystical experience which taught him that he himself was 'the One whom God shall make manifest' the holy one whose coming the Báb had foretold.

*During the days I lay in the prison of Tíhrán, though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear.*¹⁸

Later in life, Bahá'u'lláh wrote of this experience in a letter to the Sháh:

*O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. And He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven, and for this there befell Me what hath caused the tears of every man of understanding to flow... His all-compelling summons hath reached Me, and caused Me to speak His praise amidst all people.*¹⁹

Those who had ordered his imprisonment could find not one shred of evidence to prove that Bahá'u'lláh had been an accomplice in the attack on the Sháh. The Russian Minister to the Sháh's court exerted his influence to get Bahá'u'lláh released from prison, offering him asylum in Russia. Reluctantly, the Sháh gave his consent for Bahá'u'lláh's release.

Thus in December 1852, the four months' confinement in the abominable pit known as the Síyáh-Chál, came to an end. It was in this subterranean dungeon, however that Bahá'u'lláh, 'Wrapped in its stygian gloom, breathing its fetid air, numbed by its humid and icy atmosphere, his feet in stocks...'20 witnessed the birth of the Bahá'í revelation.

Bahá'u'lláh was stripped of his wealth and possessions and, preferring the edict of banishment imposed by his own government to the asylum he was offered in Russia, was given one month in which to remove himself and his family from the country.

As his property had been confiscated, Bahá'u'lláh was not able to make adequate provision for the journey. It was midwinter and very cold, and his wife Navváb was pregnant. Bahá'u'lláh was very sick and the journey to Baghdád took three months. The exiles travelled over snow-covered mountains along rough mule tracks, the nights were spent in primitive shelters without adequate food or bedding and Bahá'u'lláh's wife sold the silver buttons remaining from her few dresses in order to buy flour to feed the children.

Exile in 'Iráq

Bahá'u'lláh arrived in Baghdád, 'Iráq, on 8 April 1853, frail and ill. It had not been thought likely that he would survive the rigours of such a journey or live long after it. He did, however, recover his strength and spent ten years in 'Iráq.

His influence was soon felt by the dispirited, confused and leaderless followers of the Báb he found there. At this, his own half- brother grew jealous of him, so without a word of warning to anyone, Bahá'u'lláh left the city one night, determined to stay away in order to avoid being a source of conflict and dissension among the Bábís. It was only one year after his arrival in Baghdád.

Bahá'u'lláh spent the next two years living alone as a hermit in the mountains of Kurdistán. The people of Kurdistán were a proud and warlike people, renowned for their hostility to the Persians. Though living in isolation, Bahá'u'lláh soon gained a reputation for his great kindness and wisdom. Learned men of the region sought him out. He was loved and respected by learned and illiterate alike and gradually the fame of the wise and holy man living in the mountains reached Baghdád.

Once his family heard of the wise hermit in Kurdistán, they knew that it was Bahá'u'lláh and sent a messenger to beg him to return, which he did exactly two years after his departure (19 March 1856).

In Bahá'u'lláh's absence, the condition of the Bábí community had gone from bad to worse. He spent the next seven years educating and training the Bábis in the basic teachings of the Báb. By precept and example, by his written and spoken words, he effected a transformation in the Bábí community and proved himself the only person capable of ensuring the stability and integrity of their character, the purity of their motives and the excellence of their conduct. Bahá'u'lláh and his companions lived simply and austere. They had very few material possessions but they lived in great joy.

The Kurdish mystics and the other religious teachers who had visited Bahá'u'lláh in the mountains now came to Baghdád to find him. Many became his followers. Poets, mystics, government officials and princes sought his company. Those who were sick and suffering came to him, those who sought justice thronged to his door. The great number of visitors and pilgrims included Christians and Jews as well as Muslims. During the years in Baghdád verses streamed from the pen of Bahá'u'lláh. '*The Book of Certitude*', his major theological work, was written in the space of two days and two nights.

In Baghdád he wrote '*The Hidden Words*', a short but compelling book of spiritual guidance, and '*The Seven Valleys*', a mystical work written in response to questions from the Sufi mystics.

With a mandate from the Sháh a concourse of Muslim leaders in Baghdád, jealous of his growing influence, tried to discredit him and asked him to perform a miracle that would satisfy all concerned. Bahá'u'lláh agreed to perform any miracle they asked but they could not agree on what to request and his challenge was never taken up.

The Íránian consul in Baghdád, alarmed at Bahá'u'lláh's growing fame, began to agitate for his further banishment. He obtained an order of banishment. The Governor of Baghdád admired Bahá'u'lláh greatly and it was only after five successive orders of banishment had reached him that he reluctantly informed Bahá'u'lláh that the Sultán of the Ottoman Empire had ordered Bahá'u'lláh's transfer to Constantinople.

The announcement of Bahá'u'lláh's banishment caused uproar in the city. Hundreds of people crowded into the streets around his house weeping and lamenting his departure. The crush became so great that Bahá'u'lláh moved out of the city to a garden on the far side of the river. He stayed there for twelve days cheering and encouraging his followers. Many of them knew intuitively that he was the one of whom the Báb had spoken but Bahá'u'lláh had never spoken to anyone of his mission. Here, in the garden of Ridván, he made a formal declaration to some of his followers that he was indeed 'Him whom God shall make manifest', transforming their great sorrow into joy.

This public announcement that he was the 'Promised One' of all religions, that his faith was for all mankind and that a new day had dawned in human history, lasted for a period of twelve days, from 21 April to 2 May 1863. It became known as the Festival of Ridván, and is commemorated annually throughout the Bahá'í world as the holiest and most significant of all Bahá'í

festivals. No fewer than three of the nine Bahá'í Holy Days occur during this Rídván Festival.

Exile in Turkey

Bahá'u'lláh's journey of exile to Constantinople (Istanbul) was a triumphal procession. He was respectfully met and courteously entertained by the officials and notables of the towns and villages through which he passed. In Constantinople his government's ambassador to the city was urged by his rulers in Tíhrán to stir up hostility against the exiles and the ambassador painted a picture of Bahá'u'lláh as a proud and arrogant person who had no respect for law and who was working to destroy the Ottoman regime.

When Bahá'u'lláh had been only four months in Constantinople, the Íránian and Ottoman rulers cooperated to secure yet another exile. An order was issued demanding his immediate removal to Adrianople (Edirne). It was December and the coldest winter in living memory. Bahá'u'lláh, his family and his companions had to make a hurried departure without adequate provisions. They travelled through rain, ice and snow across a bleak and windswept landscape. The journey took twelve days; they had to make several night marches and arrived in a state of exhaustion.

Bahá'u'lláh spent five years in Adrianople. He was, by this time, officially a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire but no charge was brought against him.

In Adrianople the faith underwent a severe internal crisis, caused by the jealousy of Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother, Mirzá Yahyá and another man named Siyyid Muḥammad. It was Mirzá Yahyá who had been jealous of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdád and who had created difficulties in Constantinople. He had now become so consumed with jealousy that he tried to kill Bahá'u'lláh by poisoning his food. Bahá'u'lláh was made very ill by the poi-

son and suffered from the effects of it for the rest of his life.

While in Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh formally proclaimed his mission to the kings and rulers of the world and its religious leaders. Here, and later in 'Akká he wrote individual letters to the monarchs of Europe in which he called on them to recognize his faith. He also urged them to settle the differences that divided them, to reduce their armaments and take better care of their people.

In a letter from 'Akká to Queen Victoria, Baha'u'llah wrote:

*That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician.*²¹

It is related that Queen Victoria's comment on reading the letter was "If this is of God, it will endure; if not, it can do no harm.." ²²

The mission of Bahá'u'lláh, revealed to him in the Siyáh Chál, Tíhrán, but kept concealed for ten years, had been publicly announced in the Rídván Garden, Baghdád, and was now, in the middle of 1868, being proclaimed individually and collectively to the rulers of the world. Napoleon III; the Czar of Russia; William I of Prussia; Francis-Joseph of Austria; Pope Pius IX; the Sultán of Turkey and the Sháh of Írán were all addressed by Bahá'u'lláh during his proclamation. It was during this period in Adrianople that the Bahá'í greeting, 'Alláh-u-Abhá(God is All-Glorious) came into use, and the followers of Bahá'u'lláh became known as Bahá'ís. The Bahá'ís in Írán and 'Iráq were bitterly persecuted and many were killed but the movement continued to spread. Some of the Bahá'ís travelled from Írán and 'Iráq to Adri-

anople in the hope of seeing Bahá'u'lláh.

The Turkish authorities in Adrianople treated Bahá'u'lláh with great respect. This did not please the Íránian consul in the city. Mirzá Yahyá and Siyyid Muḥammad assisted the consul in his task of ensuring a further banishment for Bahá'u'lláh. They sent false accusations to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople, accusing Bahá'u'lláh of plotting to overthrow the Ottoman regime.

The Governor of Adrianople, who held Bahá'u'lláh in great esteem, several times denied these accusations in writing but the central authorities eventually sent an order of banishment.

One morning, Bahá'u'lláh's house was surrounded by soldiers and the inhabitants of the city, Christian and Muslim, wept openly in the streets as the orders were read out. Several consuls of foreign powers resident in Adrianople offered to intercede on behalf of the exiles but Bahá'u'lláh declined these offers of help.

B a n i s h m e n t to the Holy Land

Soldiers escorted the exiles from Adrianople to Gallipoli. No one knew their final destination or what was planned for them. At Gallipoli orders were issued that Bahá'u'lláh and his followers, together with a few of the followers of Mirzá Yahyá, were to be sent to prison in 'Akká, while four of Bahá'u'lláh's followers were to go to Cyprus with Mirzá Yahyá and his companions. As they left Gallipoli, Bahá'u'lláh warned his followers that the journey ahead of them would be worse than anything yet encountered. He advised anyone who did not feel strong enough to face it to leave at once, as they would be unable to leave later. No one left.

'Akká was a penal colony in a remote corner of the Otto-

man Empire. The worst criminals from all parts of the Empire were sent there. The water and air of 'Akká were foul and the place was overrun with vermin and full of disease. It was said of 'Akká that if a bird flew over the city, so putrid was the air that it would fall down dead. The sea journey to 'Akká was one of miserable discomfort. At Haifa, Mirzá Yahyá and his companions in exile left the main party for Cyprus.

On arrival in 'Akká, on 31 August 1868, the exiles were met by a hostile crowd of townspeople who had been told that the Bahá'ís were the vilest and most despicable of criminals. The crowd hurled stones and insults and spat on the prisoners.

The edict of perpetual banishment imposed on Bahá'u'lláh and his followers was read aloud from the steps of the mosque as a warning to the townspeople to have nothing to do with the prisoners. The order was one of strict imprisonment. The Bahá'ís were forbidden to associate with each other or with the townspeople. Bahá'u'lláh himself was confined in a mud-floored cell that was open to wind and rain while the rest of the party were crowded into a few separate rooms nearby. On the first night in prison they were given no food or drink. All except two fell ill with malaria and dysentery and three died.

The Bahá'ís in Írán and elsewhere did not know where Bahá'u'lláh was or even if he was still alive. When news reached them, some set out on foot for the prison city. At first they could not get into the city but stood for hours and sometimes days beyond the second moat in the hope of glimpsing Bahá'u'lláh at the cell window. Some brought plants with them, refusing to drink the little water they carried across the desert and saving it to keep the plants alive. They made a garden with these flowers outside the city.

Mirzá Mihdí, Bahá'u'lláh's second son, fell through an

unguarded skylight in the prison roof and died as a result of the injuries he sustained. His last request to his father was that his own life might be accepted as a ransom for those who were unable to get access into the prison. A few months later the prison accommodation was needed by the Turkish army. The exiles were moved out into a house in the city where they were kept in very crowded conditions.

Gradually however, the changes that had taken place in Baghdád, Constantinople and Adrianople began to occur in 'Akká. The prison governor, the officials of the town and the townspeople began to recognize Bahá'u'lláh's innocence and his exceptional qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, who took upon himself the work of Bahá'u'lláh's household affairs, was a loved and respected figure. The governor of the prison sent his own son to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for his education. This governor wished to render some act of service for Bahá'u'lláh, who suggested that he rebuild the town aqueduct which had been in disrepair for thirty years. When Bahá'u'lláh had been nine years in the city the edict of perpetual banishment was completely ignored by the prison governor and the officials. 'Abdu'l-Bahá rented a pleasant home outside the city for his father, and Bahá'u'lláh, who had not seen trees and flowers growing for nine years, moved out of the city. Two years later, a spacious mansion which had just been completed at Bahjí was rented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and it was in that mansion that Bahá'u'lláh spent the last thirteen years of his earthly life.

With the day-to-day administration of affairs in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's hands, Bahá'u'lláh was free to devote his time to writing. He rarely gave personal interviews but his influence was widely felt and the rulers of Palestine envied his power and influence.

Professor E.G. Browne, a distinguished Orientalist from Cambridge, spent five days at Bahjí and has left this account

of an interview with Bahá'u'lláh.

... In the corner where the divan met the wall sat a wondrous and venerable figure...The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet-black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie. No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before One who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!

A mild dignified voice bade me be seated, and then continued:

"Praise be to God that thou has attained!...Thou has come to see a prisoner and an exile...We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment...That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled – what harm is there in this?...Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come... Do not you in Europe need this also? Is not this that which Christ foretold?...Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind...These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family...Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory

in this, that he loves his kind...”²³

Bahá'u'lláh visited Haifa four times in the last years of his life and pitched his tent on Mount Carmel. He pointed out to 'Abdu'l-Bahá a piece of land on the rocky hillside where the remains of the Báb should be buried. There are gardens and terraces on the hillside now, green lawns, flowing fountains and avenues of shady cypresses surrounding a beautiful building of white marble under which the remains of the Báb and his young companion are laid to rest.

On 29 May 1892, Bahá'u'lláh's earthly life ended. The bells of 'Akká which, twenty-four years earlier, had warned the people of the coming of the exile, tolled out his passing and a multitude of people walked out to the mansion at



ABOVE: The Prison in 'Akká where Bahá'u'lláh was held.
The two windows on the left are the rooms he occupied

Bahjí and wept bitterly. There was a week of mourning during which the notables and government officials paid their respects. A telegram was sent to the Sultán of the Ottoman Empire which read 'The Sun of Bahá has set'.²⁴

As Shoghi Effendi, great grandson of Bahá'u'lláh and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith wrote in his survey of the first hundred years of Bahá'í history, 'With the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh draws to a close a period which, in many ways, is unparalleled in the world's religious history...An epoch, unsurpassed in its sublimity, its fecundity and duration by any previous Dispensation...had terminated'.²⁵



ABOVE: Close up of the window of Bahá'u'lláh's cell
in the Citadel in 'Akká

‘A b d u ‘ l - B a h á

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh, was born on the night of 23 May 1844, the same night on which the Báb declared his mission to Mullá Ḥusayn. He was eight when Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned in Ṭihrán. A mob sacked the family home and they were forced into hiding for a time. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá accompanied his parents into exile and he recognized his father’s station ten years before Bahá’u’lláh made his declaration in the Garden of Ridván. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was thus the first person to believe in the mission of Bahá’u’lláh. He was nine at the time.

When Bahá’u’lláh left Baghdád for the mountains of Kurdistán, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grief was intense. He spent much of the two years that Bahá’u’lláh was away copying and memorizing the writings of the Báb. He was overjoyed at his father’s return and from that time onwards he was Bahá’u’lláh’s closest companion. He never received a formal education but learnt all that he knew from Bahá’u’lláh. He was an active, happy person. He inherited his parents’ love of nature and the countryside. His favourite sport was horse riding. On the journey from ‘Iráq to Constantinople, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá supervised the feeding and the accommodation of the entire party of exiles. At night he guarded his father’s carriage. In Adrianople he gradually took over the day-to-day administration of Bahá’u’lláh’s affairs. He began to be known as ‘The Master’, a title given him by Bahá’u’lláh, though after the passing of Bahá’u’lláh he referred to himself simply as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the servant of Bahá. He shielded his father from those who were merely curious visitors but recognized with an extraordinary insight those who were seeking truth. He was loved by very many and respected

even by those who wished him ill. He was gentle, generous and unfailingly kind.

In ‘Akká he married Munírih Khánum, the daughter of two early followers of the Báb. The marriage was a very happy one but of the nine children born, five died.

As soon as the restrictions on the prisoners began to be relaxed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became a familiar figure in the mean and crowded streets of ‘Akká. He helped everyone he could, regardless of their colour, creed and background. He went to the poorest homes where he washed and comforted the sick. His own wants were very few. He lived simply and dressed inexpensively but his appearance was always spotless. He worked early and late and spent a large part of each night in prayer and meditation. He loved children, and loved to give presents and to make people happy. *‘My home’, he said, ‘is the home of laughter and mirth’.*

After Bahá’u’lláh’s passing from this life, his written Will and Testament was read out to his family. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was appointed by Bahá’u’lláh as the head of the Bahá’í Faith and as the only authoritative interpreter of the Bahá’í teachings. He called on all the Bahá’ís to turn to and obey ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Despite this clear directive, some of Bahá’u’lláh’s own family, motivated by envy and jealousy, refused to do this. They worked steadily to destroy ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s authority.

As a result of their activities, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spent the years from 1901-08 once again in strict confinement in ‘Akká. In 1904 and 1907 two commissions were appointed by the Ottoman authorities to enquire into charges made against him. False evidence was supplied to both commissions by corrupt witnesses and in 1907 his exile or execution was about to be recommended to the Sultán when the revolt of the Young Turks caused a change of the regime in the Ottoman Empire. All political and religious prisoners of the Ottomans were set free.

During these years of trouble and difficulty, 'Abdu'l-Bahá worked steadily on. He looked after the hungry and sick people in 'Akká and he kept up an enormous correspondence with Bahá'ís in many countries. In the face of persistent attacks by his own relatives, he constructed a simple stone shrine on Mount Carmel on the exact site pointed out to him by Bahá'u'lláh as the final resting place for the remains of the martyred Báb. As soon as he was freed from prison, 'Abdu'l-Bahá began to plan a journey to Europe and America.

Poor health delayed his immediate departure but in August 1911 he started his journey to the West. He was then in his late sixties and had spent nearly sixty years in exile, some in prison, living continually with persecution and hardship.

In September 1911 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in Britain and his first public address in the West was given at the City Temple Church in London.

During his next two years he travelled in Europe and America spreading the Bahá'í teachings with the utmost wisdom and with complete devotion. Much of his time was spent in giving addresses and receiving visitors. He travelled cheaply avoiding all ostentation and unnecessary expense. In the United States he went from coast to coast and delivered more than 140 addresses in that country and Canada.

'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to Haifa in 1913. When the first World War broke out, he was once again a prisoner of the Turkish authorities. During the four years of isolation and danger, 'Abdu'l-Bahá began to organize an intensive agricultural operation near Tiberias in order to grow wheat for the people of Palestine. He continued his serene life of prayer and charity to all. As the war ended, his own life and those of his immediate family were in grave danger. The Turkish authorities threatened to crucify 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his family on the slopes of Mount Carmel. When news of

this threat reached London, General Allenby was ordered to extend every protection and consideration to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He took Haifa several days before it was believed possible for him to do so and his cable to London read: 'Have today taken Palestine. Notify the world that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is safe.' After the war was over, the British government conferred a knighthood upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in recognition of his work for the peace and prosperity of the area. He accepted the honour but never used the title.

On 28 November 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away in Haifa. Up to the last few days of his life, he lived and worked as he had always done, with no thought for his own rest or comfort. At his funeral, Jews, Muslims and Christians paid tribute to him and mourned with the Bahá'ís their great loss in his passing.

'A b d u ' l - B a h á ' s Unique Position

'Abdu'l-Bahá occupies a unique position unknown in any previous religion. While his station was essentially a human one, he was at the same time the perfect exemplar of the Bahá'í teachings and was endowed with a superhuman knowledge. As the appointed successor to Bahá'u'lláh he was as a stainless mirror reflecting to all humankind the light of the manifestation of God. Under his continuous and specific instructions, the unity of the Bahá'ís was preserved and the Bahá'ís began to build an administrative order in accordance with the outline drawn up by Bahá'u'lláh. In his many letters and addresses he explained more fully the general principles drawn up by Bahá'u'lláh and their application in the world. His daily life was an example of complete devotion to God and service to humanity under the most difficult conditions.

Growth of the Bahá'í Faith During the Lifetimes of its Three Central Figures

During the ministry of the Báb (1844-50) his faith had reached only Persia and 'Irāq, but from 1853-1892, the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í Faith was taken to thirteen other countries. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are the twin founders of this new world religion, but due to the special position of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the 'Exemplar' and the "Centre of the Covenant", his writings also form part of Bahá'í scripture. From the time Bahá'u'lláh passed away until the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the faith spread to another twenty-two countries, raising the total to thirty-seven by the end of 1921. Even at that early date, with the faith not even eighty years old, it could be classed as a world religion as the countries opened included China, Burma, Australia, Russia, eight European and three African countries, Brazil, Canada and the United States of America.

From a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

O peoples of the world! The Sun of Truth hath risen to

illumine the whole earth, and to spiritualize the community of man. Laudable are the results and the fruits thereof, abundant the holy evidences deriving from this grace. This is mercy unalloyed and purest bounty; it is light for the world and all its peoples; it is harmony and fellowship, and love and solidarity; indeed it is compassion and unity, and the end of foreignness; it is the being at one, in complete dignity and freedom, with all on earth.

The Blessed Beauty saith: 'Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch.' Thus hath He likened this world of being to a single tree, and all its peoples to the leaves thereof, and the blossoms and fruits. It is needful for the bough to blossom, and leaf and fruit to flourish, and upon the interconnection of all parts of the world-tree, dependeth the flourishing of leaf and blossom, and the sweetness of the fruit. For this reason must all human beings powerfully sustain one another and seek for everlasting life; and for this reason must the lovers of God in this contingent world become the mercies and the blessings sent forth by that clement King of the seen and unseen realms. Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being. Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consid-*



ABOVE: Looking into the bay of Haifa from the city walls of 'Akká

eration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.

*In this day, the one favoured at the Threshold of the Lord is he who handeth round the cup of faithfulness; who bestoweth, even upon his enemies, the jewel of bounty, and lendeth, even to his fallen oppressor, a helping hand; it is he who will, even to the fiercest of his foes, be a loving friend. These are the Teachings of the Blessed Beauty, these are the counsels of the Most Great Name.*²⁶*

* titles which refer to Bahá'u'lláh

CHAPTER

2

WHAT BAHÁ'ÍS BELIEVE

The Oneness of Humanity

...There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God.²⁷

All men are the leaves and fruit of one same tree... they all have the same origin. The same rain has fallen upon them all, the same sun makes them grow, they are all refreshed by the same breeze...the whole of humanity is enveloped by the Mercy and Grace of God. As the Holy Writings tell us: All men are equal before God. He is no respecter of persons.²⁸

The principle of the oneness of humanity is the pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. He explains that humanity has evolved socially through different stages of development just as an individual human body has evolved physically through different stages of growth. In early times men lived in isolated family groups, these family groups evolved into tribal units,

later on these tribal units evolved into city states and finally into nations. World unity, Bahá'u'lláh teaches, is the final stage in the evolution of humanity towards maturity.

The purpose of his coming to earth, Bahá'u'lláh explains, was to enable humankind to become united. He wrote:

*'We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth.'*²⁹

His teachings, he says, are for every person living on the planet, for world unity involves everyone and no soul must be left out. The unity towards which humankind is evolving is not a dull uniformity but a unity in diversity, for in the Bahá'í teachings every group of people can find the highest possible expression of their own particular ideals and aspirations. At the same time, every group or nation can share the heritage and achievements of all other nations and peoples on earth.

*'...The glory of humanity,' Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, 'is the heritage of each one,'*³⁰

World unity will be built upon individual recognition of this oneness of humanity as the central spiritual principle of life today. Unity will not be imposed from above by any powerful group but will evolve gradually in human consciousness, until all people everywhere realize that *'the world, is but one country, and mankind its citizens'*³¹

This change in consciousness will lead to an organic change in society such as the world has not yet experienced. The planetary civilization which will evolve will be of a richness and diversity that we can hardly at present even imagine. Bahá'u'lláh has brought specific guidance for humanity to enable the world to pass from disunity to unity.

*O contending peoples and kindreds of the earth! Set your faces towards unity, and let the radiance of its light shine upon you.'*³² *'...Be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body.'*³³

*He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body.'*³⁴

The Oneness of Religion

*The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion.'*³⁵

Bahá'ís believe that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin. They have all been revealed by God to men in different places and different ages according to the evolving needs and capacities of the people amongst whom these religions began. No age has ever been without guidance from God and as long as there are people on earth, God will give them guidance. God himself is above and beyond human understanding.

His guidance is given to us through his messengers, perfect and stainless souls who are referred to as manifestations of God. The manifestations of God are not God themselves but they are like perfect mirrors reflecting the light of God to humanity. They are like the rays of the sun which transmit the light of the sun to earth; they are intermediaries between God and humankind. They reflect, in their lives and teachings, the perfections of God. Through these manifestations, God causes man to know and love Him. Knowledge of God is only possible for us through these manifestations, and the knowledge of their perfections is the fullest knowledge of God to which our finite minds can attain.

*...As a token of His mercy...and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self.*³⁶

The appearance of a manifestation of God on earth is so rare an event in human history that we only have the names of a few, Krishna, Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Each one was bitterly opposed, ridiculed, scorned and ill-treated by the people among whom they first appeared. Only a few of their contemporaries recognized their station. Gradually, others grew to recognize them. After their lives on earth were over, they were and still are loved, revered and followed by millions. Alone and unaided by any earthly power, they established their sovereignty over the hearts of men. They are the true educators of humanity whose purpose is to draw us ever nearer to God and to assist in the advancement of human civilization.

Bahá'u'lláh has explained clearly the dual station of the manifestations of God which past ages have found so confusing. Each manifestation has a divine station. Each and every one has been endowed with all the attributes of God. They can therefore be regarded as one soul and the same person.

*If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of Being.*³⁷

At the same time, each manifestation has a distinct individuality and appears in this world as a human person, different in appearance, background and personality to any



ABOVE: The Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

who have lived on earth before. Each time such a manifestation appears on earth, it is as if the spirit of all the former manifestations returns with him. He builds on what the previous manifestations have taught, brings a new message which is particularly appropriate to the age in which he appears and looks forward to the coming of the next manifestation. As they appear to be as other ordinary mortals in their physical aspect, each one of us is able to exercise free will in choosing whether or not to recognize the manifestation of God for each age. Bahá'ís revere all these founders of the world's divinely-revealed religions and regard their scriptures as sacred.

Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís believe, is the latest of these messengers to appear on earth. He explains that every religion is made up of two parts, spiritual teachings and social teachings. On the higher spiritual level there is a wonderful harmony between all the great religions. The differences exist at a social level and are about religious practices, laws and observances. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the social aspects of religion are not eternal and unchanging but that they change in every age according to the needs of the people.

Differences also arise within and between different religions, as a result of man-made additions to the original teachings. The purity of the message becomes distorted by the followers. It is for this reason that God sends another message to renew and develop the spiritual message previously given. Every divinely-revealed religion goes through the stages of birth, growth and decay. When the period of decay is reached, a new seed is planted in the hearts of men by a new messenger and a new growth begins.

Bahá'u'lláh's mission is to bring about unity among the religions of the world. Religion, he teaches, is the foremost agency for the peace and orderly progress of the world. World peace will involve a world-wide renewal of religion.

Relationship

to the Natural World.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that not only has God revealed Himself through spiritual teachings brought by the manifestations of God but that there is a second source of revelation available to humankind in the world of nature. As 'Abdul-Bahá explains:

There are two Books: one is the Book of creation and the other is the written Book. The written Book consisteth of the heavenly Books which are revealed to the Prophets of God and have issued forth from the lips of His Manifestations. The Book of creation is the preserved Tablet and the outspread Roll of existence. The Book of Creation is in accord with the written Book. . . .

When thou readest the written Book thou wilt become aware of the mysteries of God, but when thou gazest at the Book of creation thou wilt observe the signs, symbols, realities and reflections of the hidden mysteries of the bounties of His Holiness the Incomparable One. ³⁸

In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

...Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a symbol of His majesty, a token of His power, a means of admittance into His straight Path. ³⁹

The attitude of reverence for the natural world which these teachings call forth in humankind provides a spiritual and ethical foundation from which we can begin to repair the damage which we have inflicted on our planetary home

over the centuries. Bahá'ís see it as a spiritual obligation to work in harmony with the natural world, to preserve and enhance biodiversity, to find truly sustainable ways of living through which the natural ecology of the planet can be preserved and nurtured and the human-created economy can be redirected in ways that will protect and enhance this diversity.

Bahá'ís have a great respect for the knowledge and wisdom of the planet's indigenous peoples, many of whom have lived in harmony with their environments for millennia.

Elimination of Prejudice

Prejudice, whether of religion, race, class, nation and colour has been and still is the most fertile cause of war; all the divisions, hatred and warfare in the world are caused by one or other of these prejudices. The true remedy for such prejudices is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind. Once a person has gained a spiritual awareness of the unity of mankind, he can overcome his own personal prejudices. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that we should regard the different races and nations with the eye of oneness:

Verily, the words which have descended from the heaven of the Will of God are the source of unity and harmony for the world. Close your eyes to racial differences, and welcome all with the light of oneness. We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations, ... that all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled. ⁴⁰

'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

In the estimation of God, there is no distinction of color; all are one in the color and beauty of servitude to Him. Color is not important; the heart is all-important. It mattereth not what the exterior may be if the heart is pure and white within. God doth not behold differences of hue and complexion. He looketh at the hearts. He whose morals and virtues are praiseworthy is preferred in the presence of God; he who is devoted to the Kingdom is most beloved. In the realm of genesis and creation the question of color is of least importance. ⁴¹

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. ⁴²

Harmony of Religion and Science

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that religion and science are in harmony with one another. True religion and true science have never contradicted each other. They are complementary aspects of one truth.

Both are progressive. Religion is gradually revealed to man by God. Man gradually discovers the mysteries of science through his own powers of investigation. Both forces are needed by man. Religion is the aid he needs for his spiritual growth. Science is the means by which he can advance materially. Religion and science are described by Bahá'u'lláh as the two most potent forces in the world of existence.

...Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which

*the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall in the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.*⁴³

True civilization will become a reality on earth when men realize their need for both science and religion. Both the founders of religions and the pioneers of science have suffered scorn and denial from their contemporaries. Conflict has arisen among their followers as a result of human error usually caused by ignorance and prejudice.

*'Religion and science walk hand in hand, and any religion contrary to science is not the truth.'*⁴⁴

It is interesting, in the light of the Bahá'í teachings, to find that the most recent advances in science emphasize the



ABOVE: The shrine of the Báb, showing some of the terraces, looking up Mount Carmel

BELOW: View of the shrine of the Báb looking down from the top of Mount Carmel and showing part of the terraces



oneness of the entire universe and the interdependence of all created things.

Independent Investigation into Truth

Bahá'u'lláh does not wish anyone to accept his revelation blindly. He asks each individual to look into it for himself, to use his own eyes and ears, his own faculty of reasoning and to make up his own mind.

This is the first time in human history that the independent search for truth has been a practical possibility. As more people learn to read and write, they will be able to decide for themselves about the truth or falsity of Bahá'u'lláh's claim. It will no longer be necessary, as it has been in the past, for a certain group of people to present the religion to the rest. Genuine independent investigation demands of humankind much more than a blind acceptance of a faith taught by someone else.

Bahá'u'lláh explains that each person must detach himself from inherited belief and prejudice. He must abandon at the outset the idea that he is right and everyone else is wrong.

...When you meet those whose opinions differ from your own, do not turn away your face from them. All are seeking truth, and there are many roads leading thereto...

Do not allow difference of opinion, or diversity of thought, to separate you from your fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute...

*Rather, search diligently for the truth and make all men your friends.*⁴⁵

A genuine search for truth by all peoples will lead to unity. *...Truth is one in all the religions, and by means of it the unity of the world can be realized.*

*...If only men would search out truth, they would find themselves united.*⁴⁶

The Nature of God

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that man's finite mind will never understand God, for the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. It is like expecting a table to have an intellectual understanding of the mind of the carpenter who made it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

*...man cannot grasp the Essence of Divinity, but can by his reasoning power, by observation, by his intuitive faculties and the revealing power of his faith, believe in God, discover the bounties of His Grace.*⁴⁷

While men cannot understand the essential nature of God, they can be certain that the divine reality exists:

*Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being, Whose image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation. All existence is dependent upon Him, and from Him is derived the source of the sustenance of all things...*⁴⁸

God is to be regarded as the fashioner of the universe and at the same time, a personal, loving parent to every human being who has ever lived and will ever live. Each one of the founders of the world's great religions has shown a way towards a more fulfilling life. These founders of religion, the manifestations, are the link between God and man. Bahá'u'lláh relates that God has caused these:

*...luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence.*⁴⁹

Humankind can learn more of God and draw nearer to him by turning to these manifestations.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

...So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished among men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite



mind and are conditioned by its limitations...From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapped in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence. Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure.⁵⁰

The Nature of Man

The human species, while sharing close physical kinship with the animal kingdom, is a higher form of life than the mineral, vegetable and animal creation. God has given man reason and intellect. He has also given man a soul capable of knowing and loving God.

O SON OF MAN!

I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do

thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.⁵¹

... From among all created things He hath singled out for His special favor the pure, the gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory.⁵²

Every individual has the capacity, by turning to a manifestation of God, to attain the qualities and attributes that are of God; love, truth, mercy, justice and every individual has free will to decide whether or not he or she will turn to the teachings of God. All people are equal in the sight of God but each soul is a unique creation with varying ability and capacity. All that a human being might potentially achieve, he or she will only achieve by his or her own efforts.

Each human being has a spiritual higher nature which he or she must develop in order to know and love God. Each also has a physical, animal nature. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that man's body should be the willing servant of the soul. Man's greatest

BELOW: Gardens surrounding the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahjí



happiness lies in spiritual, not physical, contentment.

The Soul of Man, Life and Death

The soul, being a spiritual and not a physical reality, is not destroyed when the human body dies. The soul is connected with the body during man's life on earth in the way that a light is reflected in a mirror. Should the mirror be destroyed, the light will continue to shine.

Each soul comes into existence at conception and is a unique creation. Physical existence on earth is a stage of existence when a human being has the chance to develop spiritual capacities, such as being truthful, compassionate, loving and generous. We shall need these qualities after our physical existence

BELOW: Gardens surrounding the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahjí



so they are developing here on this earth in the same way that a child develops in the womb its eyes, ears, nose, hands and legs. The child in the womb does not yet use them but its future existence will be limited without them.

The existence of the soul after death is as different from the life we know as the life of a child in its mother's womb is different from its life outside the womb after it is born. The soul, freed from the body much in the way that a captured bird is freed from a cage, will continue to progress and advance towards God. Our progress in the next world will depend in large part on the efforts that we have made here. 'Heaven' and 'Hell' are not places but states of being, Heaven is nearness to God and Hell remoteness from Him. These states of being exist in this life as well as the life beyond. In the same way, life and death as spoken of in the scriptures, refer to an individual's spir-

itual life or lack of it. The death of the body is not something to be feared but welcomed as a birth into a fuller life.

O SON OF THE SUPREME!

*I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendour. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?*⁵³

*...Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty...Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the people of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise...If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God...his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station...*⁵⁴

Evolution

The Bahá'í teachings tell us that nothing in the physical universe is static; everything is in the process of composition or decomposition. This principle is applicable not only to inanimate objects, but also to all forms of life. Thus the biological species which make up the plant and the animal kingdoms have gradually evolved from earlier and simpler forms. The same is true of man. Bahá'ís, therefore, acknowledge that the physical body

of man has evolved and developed over a period of millions of years. Bahá'ís believe, however, that the essential quality of man, the human spirit or soul, is a special creation of God which distinguishes him from the animal kingdom.

Good and Evil

Bahá'u'lláh explained that there is only one force in the universe, the benevolent power of the one all-powerful God whose love and goodness are infinite. It therefore follows that evil, where it can be seen, is not a positive thing in itself but is the absence of good. Evil is the absence of good in the same way that darkness is the absence of light.

If a man acts in an evil way, this is because his lower, animal nature is more developed than his higher, spiritual nature. The remedy is for that person, with the assistance of others, to develop his higher nature.



ABOVE: International Bahá'í Archives, in the background is the shrine of the Báb

All men have desires. They can be observed in the smallest children. Desire is a praiseworthy quality if directed towards the good of that individual and the rest of humanity. Desire is to ask for something more, it is an impulse that God has given man so that he may strive to acquire knowledge, to acquire perfections of character and draw nearer to God.

Good is found in obedience to God's commands; evil is when man knowingly turns away from Him. While Bahá'u'lláh gives strength, courage, and purpose to man and emphasizes the merciful and forgiving nature of God, it still is made clear that man cannot escape his individual responsibility for using or mis-using the powers and talents God has given to him.

...Know thou that all men have been created in the nature made by God, the Guardian, the Self-Subsisting. Unto each one hath been prescribed a pre-ordained measure, as decreed in God's mighty and guarded Tablets. All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth...Men, however, have wittingly broken His law. Is such a behavior to be attributed to God, or to their proper selves? Be fair in your

*judgement. Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves.*⁵⁵

How an Individual Should Live

Behaviour

A Bahá'í should be known by his deeds rather than by his words. The qualities that Bahá'u'lláh stresses are those given emphasis in all the major religions. An individual should strive to be honest, loving, courteous, forgiving and generous. He should honour his parents, be hospitable and faithful. He should accept God's will with a happy heart. There is a particularly strong emphasis on trustworthiness. Gossip and backbiting are strongly condemned. Kindness to animals is particularly emphasized.

Bahá'u'lláh does not approve of asceticism but says that men should enjoy those good things of life that God has given them. The path to God may lead through material



ABOVE & NEXT PAGE: National Bahá'í festival in United Kingdom 2008

poverty or through great wealth or possessions. Bahá'u'lláh advises his followers not to be troubled by poverty nor confident in riches. The greatest blessing man can have is a tranquil heart and this can only be attained by living in accord with the divine teachings.

Prayer and Fasting

Prayer

Prayer is absolutely necessary for man's spiritual growth. Food helps his body to grow, prayer feeds his spirit. Bahá'u'lláh has made a daily prayer obligatory for all Bahá'ís but they may choose a long prayer, one of medium length or a short one.

Prayer is much more than a mere reciting of words. it involves our whole attitude, to life, thankfulness, reverence and attentiveness. 'Abdu'l-Bahá told the Bahá'ís that he prayed that their lives might be beautiful prayers of praise and service.

'Know that nothing will benefit thee in this life save supplication and invocation unto God, service in His vineyard, and with a heart full of love, to be in constant servitude unto Him'.⁵⁶

There are many prayers written by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The following are three short prayers revealed by each of these three central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

O Lord! Unto Thee I repair for refuge, and toward all Thy signs I set my heart.

O Lord! Whether traveling or at home, and in my occupation or in my work, I place my whole trust in

Thee. Grant me then Thy sufficing help so as to make me independent of all things, O Thou Who art unsurpassed in Thy mercy! Bestow upon me my portion, O Lord, as Thou pleasest, and cause me to be satisfied with whatsoever Thou hast ordained for me. Thine is the absolute authority to command.⁵⁷

O my God! O my God! Unite the hearts of Thy servants, and reveal to them Thy great purpose. May they follow Thy commandments and abide in Thy law. Help them, O God, in their endeavor, and grant them strength to serve Thee. O God! Leave them not to themselves, but guide their steps by the light of Thy knowledge, and cheer their hearts by Thy love. Verily, Thou art their Helper and their Lord.⁵⁸

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life.

O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.⁵⁹

The Fast

From 2nd to 20th March each year, Bahá'ís, between the ages of 15 and 70 who are in good health, do not eat or drink between the hours of sunrise and sunset. Those who are traveling are exempt from the Fast together with expectant, nursing mothers and women during their time of menstruation and any individual whose health would be compromised by observ-

ing the physical fast. The outward, physical fast is a symbol of the inner, spiritual cleansing and preparation for a new year in which all believers can participate.

The Fast is a time of spiritual renewal. It is a time when Bahá'ís make an extra effort to correct lazy and harmful spiritual habits that may have developed during the year. The purpose of the Fast is to draw nearer to God.

Daily Study

Bahá'ís are directed by Bahá'u'lláh to spend some time at the beginning and end of each day in reading from the Bahá'í writings and in meditating prayerfully on what they have read. They should do this to refresh and renew their minds, not to tire them. Bahá'u'lláh says that it is better to read a short passage with joy and gladness than a long one carelessly.

Service To Humanity

If we love God and want to follow His teachings, we will serve our fellow men. Bahá'u'lláh gives the service of humanity great importance in his teachings. When our motive is pure and disinterested and founded on our love for God, then our actions in the service of our fellows are prayer, worship and unity with God.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that men should regard their daily work as worship of God. Man is not made just to work but work is made for man. It should be some activity that will ennoble and exalt men, not degrade them. In placing great value on the work done by farmers, craftsmen and others who do physical labour, Bahá'u'lláh abolishes the prejudices against manual labour which have developed in many cultures. A person's work

should not be considered drudgery or a necessary chore, but done in the spirit of service to humanity it is worship of God.

Teaching the Faith

There are no ministers or clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Each Bahá'í is a Bahá'í teacher and each considers it a duty and privilege to spread the Bahá'í teachings. A Bahá'í teacher must have a firm belief in God and must strive to live up to the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'u'lláh says that the best way to teach is first of all, to teach oneself and live by the teachings and thus teach by example. Where words are necessary, they should be used with the utmost wisdom. Bahá'ís are urged to share the teachings with all but if people do not wish to hear about them, Bahá'ís should respect this, pray for them and leave them on their path to God.

Abstinence from Drugs and Alcohol

Bahá'u'lláh forbids the taking of intoxicating drinks and narcotics of any kind, except as remedies properly prescribed by a doctor in cases of illness. He states that both alcohol and narcotics can harm both body and mind.

Obedience to Governments

Bahá'ís must respect and abide by the laws of the land in which they live. Where changes in the law are necessary for the protection of human rights, these changes must be sought by non-violent means. As supporters of a world peace-keeping force, Bahá'ís are not pacifists but seek peaceful solutions wherever possible.

The Newer Patriotism

A Bahá'í is a world citizen. Patriotism is a natural human loyalty. There is nothing wrong with sane and intelligent patriotism but it is no longer sufficient in the twenty-first century. A greater loyalty is now needed to the planet itself. This can only be developed through a spiritual awareness of the oneness and wholeness of the human race. Bahá'u'lláh states: *'It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens'*.⁶⁰

The Family

Happy and united families are the foundation stones of a harmonious and stable society. Monastic celibacy is forbidden to Bahá'ís and marriage is strongly encouraged but it is not obligatory.



ABOVE : Details of the gardens surrounding the shrine of the Báb.

In the Bahá'í Faith, marriage is exalted as an expression of God's purpose.:

*And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation...'*⁶¹

Marriage provides the best possible conditions for the spiritual and physical well-being of men and women. In this relationship they can best help each other to develop their full human potential, to grow spiritually and become self-sacrificing.

The primary purpose of marriage is stated to be the rearing of children.

*...He saith, great is His glory: "Enter into wedlock, O people, that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants; this is one of My commandments unto you; obey it as an assistance to yourselves"*⁶²

ABOVE : Details of the gardens surrounding the shrine of the Báb.

As parenthood is the first and foremost duty for a husband and wife, it is this aspect of marriage which is perhaps most closely linked with fulfilling God's purpose for man. The most effective way of imparting to children an understanding of God's purpose for man is through example, so the goal is clear to Bahá'í parents.

Recognizing the love of God to be the true source of love among men, partners in marriage seek the support of their love for each other in their love of God. Happiness in marriage depends on it.

*'...Real love is impossible unless one turn his face towards God and be attracted to His Beauty.'*⁶³

The fundamental qualities which link the soul with God – loyalty and faithfulness – must also become the foundation binding lovers in marriage. The most precious expression of this loyalty and faithfulness is chastity.

Briefly stated the Bahá'í conception of sex is based on the belief that chastity should be practiced by both sexes, not only because it is in itself highly commendable ethically, but also due to its being the only way to a happy and successful marital life...

The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse, but condemns its illegitimate and improper expressions such as free love, companionate marriage and others, all of which it considers positively harmful to man and to the society in which he lives. The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established. The Bahá'ís do not believe in the suppression of the sex impulse but in its regulation and control.⁶⁴

Marriage is the foundation of a good family; good families in turn are the foundation of a stable civilization.

*Know thou that the command of marriage is eternal. It will never be changed nor altered. This is a Divine Creation and there is not the slightest possibility that change or alteration affect this Divine Creation...'*⁶⁵

The qualities of loyalty and faithfulness are vital in marriage. As sex relationships of any form outside marriage are not permissible, Bahá'ís are encouraged to marry while young. Divorce is possible for Bahá'ís but it is strongly discouraged and is sought only as a last remedy when all attempts at reconciliation have failed.

The arrangement of marriages by parents for their children is forbidden. Bahá'ís must choose their own marriage partners. Once they have made their choice, they must seek parental approval. A Bahá'í marriage cannot take place unless the consent of all living natural parents is obtained. When the two families involved are united in their approval of a marriage, it is more likely that the marriage will have a better chance of success.

Bahá'ís are allowed to choose a marriage partner from any religious or racial background. As Bahá'ís regard the whole of mankind as one family, it is common to find marriages between persons of very different racial or cultural backgrounds. These marriages draw the families thus linked into ever wider circles of unity and thus promote the oneness of mankind.

A Bahá'í is not allowed to have more than one spouse at a time but if a man becomes a Bahá'í when he already has a number of wives, he must continue to provide for them all and no new marriages may be contracted.

The form of marriage service is extremely simple. The man and woman say to each other, before witnesses, 'We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.'⁶⁶ The couple may choose music, prayers, and readings to be used at the ceremony.

If the law of the land does not recognize Bahá'í marriage, a couple must have a civil marriage to be followed by the Bahá'í ceremony on the same day. If a Bahá'í marries a non-Bahá'í, the Bahá'í may participate in the religious marriage of the other providing he or she is not being committed to any laws of the other's faith.

The rights of all members of the family must be respected while the unity of the family is sustained. The children have certain obligations to their parents just as the parents have certain obligations to their children. It is the duty of the parents, by example, to teach their children the love of God and of their fellow men. Bahá'u'lláh also says that it is the responsibility of the parents to make adequate provision for the teaching and education of their children. Should the state not make proper provision, and the parents are unable to do so, the community and friends should help with the guidance of the Local Spiritual Assembly. (For an account of the Local Spiritual Assembly see p.96)

Equality

of Men and Women

The building of a true Bahá'í marriage is dependent on another of Bahá'u'lláh's principles, that of equality of men and women.

The equality of the sexes is for Bahá'ís a spiritual and moral principle essential for the development of a just society. Without the full utilization of the talents and qualities

of both men and women, full economic and social development for humanity is impossible.

*The world of humanity has two wings - one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly.*⁶⁷

*...As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.*⁶⁸

Bahá'u'lláh said that women should be educated to the same standard as men and that they should have equal rights with men in society. If there is not enough money in a family to educate both a son and daughter, the parents are advised to spend the money on the daughter's education, for she is the potential mother and the first teacher of a new generation.

Bahá'u'lláh stated that no one can prevent or delay equality for women. He also said that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, war will cease. These changes will not come about unless women themselves make a great effort to develop their full potential. They will have to strive:

*'...To attain greater perfection, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all in which she has been backward, so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment.'*⁶⁹

In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains what will happen as women take their rightful place in society:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind.

*But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.*⁷⁰

Universal Compulsory Education

Another important principle of Bahá'u'lláh is that everyone should receive a basic education so that all men and women will be literate.

Knowledge is one of the greatest gifts of God to man and those who deprive themselves of an opportunity to gain knowledge will live a more limited life than their fellows. The knowledge that is worthy of humanity is the study of such arts, sciences, crafts and skills that will benefit men and improve the quality of life on earth. Prejudice is often founded on ignorance and the spread of education will help to remove prejudices between people.

All people are different in capacity and ability. The education given to children should be such as to enable each child to achieve his or her full potential and should encourage constructive cooperation among children.

*Bahá'u'lláh has announced that inasmuch as ignorance and lack of education are barriers of separation among mankind, all must receive training and instruction. Through this provision the lack of mutual understanding will be remedied and the unity of mankind furthered and advanced. Universal education is a universal law.*⁷¹

*The education of each child is compulsory...In addition to this widespread education each child must be taught a profession, art, or trade, so that every member of the community will be enabled to earn his own livelihood. Work done in the spirit of service is the highest form of worship.*⁷²

The Importance of Agriculture

The Bahá'í Faith is unique among existing world religions in the emphasis which is given to agriculture in its scriptures. In the Tablet of the World, Bahá'u'lláh lists a number of principles which are essential to the building of a just and peaceful world. He writes:

*... Special regard must be paid to agriculture. Although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others.*⁷³

During his years of exile in Iráq, while living in Baghdád, Bahá'u'lláh directed his followers to grow crops on land outside the city. On the very brink of exile to Constantinople in the spring of 1863, while preparations were being made for the journey, he was directing the believers to continue their farming and was issuing instructions as to how the coming harvest should be distributed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá directed and participated in the growing of food in the Holy Land. It was as a result of his foresight and the strenuous farming activities of the Bahá'ís that famine was avoided in what was then Palestine during and after the First World War.

Bahá'u'lláh refers to agriculture as '*this vital and important matter*'⁷⁴ and stresses that it will play a central role in a stable and peaceful world. A Bahá'í perspective is summarized in the following words:

...The Bahá'í teachings assert that hunger will be eliminated when people and government embrace jus-

tice as an operating principle; when permitting poverty and inequality to degrade any human life is understood to be an assault on the dignity of the entire human race; when the oneness of humanity is the pivotal value around which human relationships are organized. Justice is also key to solving environmental problems associated with agriculture, according to the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'u'lláh calls on human beings to be: *'The embodiments of justice and fairness amidst all creation'*⁷⁵ implying that the circle of unity must be expanded to encompass the myriad species with which we cohabit this planet - and the planet itself. Though revealed before the term ecology had been coined, the Bahá'í teachings offer a distinctly ecological perspective which requires our species to treat the natural world with respect and to act as its trustee answerable to its Creator for its sustainable development.⁷⁶

Unfolding

a World Civilization

Human society is evolving in the direction of world unity. We have already evolved small units, the family, the tribe, the city, the state and the nation. Each stage of development has been necessary and suitable for humankind. The next step is the creation of a peacefully united world commonwealth. The basis of such a unity must be a spiritual one but there are certain steps that the nations of the world can take which will assist in the peaceful evolution of a united world.

These are:

- (a) The elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty both within and between nations.
- (b) The establishment of an international auxiliary lan-

BELOW: A view of the Bahá'í gardens in Haifa



guage. This language would be taught in all schools in addition to the children's mother tongue.

- (c) The development of a world commonwealth and parliament with just representation of all peoples.
- (d) The formation of a federal Tribunal and an International Executive adequate to enforce its authority on



- every recalcitrant member of the commonwealth and to safeguard the rights of all and to resist aggression.
- (e) The selection of a world script, a world literature and a uniform and universal system of currency, weights and measures to simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the races and nations of mankind.

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith wrote in 1936:

...In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human

inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.⁷⁷

Five years earlier, In 1931, Shoghi Effendi had written:

The call of Bahá'u'lláh is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formula 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 immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interest of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.⁷⁸

CHAPTER

3

HOW THE BAHÁ'ÍS LIVE

The Power of the Word of God

In one passage, Bahá'u'lláh counsels:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of

BELOW: Study circles among some Bahá'ís in Africa



*the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.*⁷⁹

Anyone reading this will realize that these standards of perfection are far above what most of us can reach in our daily lives. However, just as Jesus exhorted his followers to strive for perfection in their lives, so too do the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá counsel us to *'become the spiritual essence and the very radiance of humankind, binding the hearts of all with bonds of love'*⁸⁰

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

BELOW: Social and economical development among some Bahá'ís in Africa



*...Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.*⁸¹

The transforming power of the words revealed by the central figures of this faith are the keys to personal transformation. The word of God, in every age, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

*...is the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world - a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times.*⁸²

Each time that this word is revealed anew, Bahá'u'lláh further explains, it provides a fresh energy that quickens the souls of humankind.

O FRIEND OF MINE!

The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable... The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the

*doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked...It is an ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things. Everything which can be perceived is but an emanation therefrom.*⁸³

'Abul-Bahá states:

*Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity.*⁸⁴

Bahá'ís, therefore, seek to align themselves with this new creative spiritual force through prayer and meditation on the revealed word and by studying it with prayerful attention. Each individual has a responsibility to nurture and nourish his or her own soul with this spiritual food and the basic spiritual practices of daily prayer and meditation on these writings are essentially personal and private.

*... Sanctify your souls from whatsoever is not of God, and taste ye the sweetness of rest within the pale of His vast and mighty Revelation ...I have perfected in every one of you My creation, so that the excellence of My handiwork may be fully revealed unto men. It follows, therefore, that every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified... the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself.*⁸⁵

Core Activities

While nothing can take the place of this individual responsibility and initiative, Bahá'ís all around the world are finding that there are several very effective ways of both nurturing themselves and others with the spiritual abundance which is contained within the Bahá'í revelation.

They do this by holding devotional meetings either in their homes or at a Bahá'í centre or some other suitable location. At such meetings, prayers and readings from the Bahá'í writings and from other sacred scriptures are shared in a joyful atmosphere. Such meetings can take a myriad forms, there are no set rituals and individuals are encouraged to make use of music, poetry, drama and all forms of creative art to enrich the meetings.

Another way that Bahá'ís enrich their spiritual understanding both individually and as a community is by holding study circles where a specific course of study of the Bahá'í writings is followed regularly and systematically. Such meetings are open to all and are specifically designed so that anyone interested in learning more about the Bahá'í Faith is welcome to attend.

*My holy, My divinely ordained Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh writes, may be likened unto an ocean in whose depths are concealed innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster.*⁸⁶ and he states that if we immerse ourselves in the ocean of his words we will discover these pearls of wisdom that lie hidden in its depths. He explains that the word of God has manifold meanings and that its meaning can never be exhausted. Thus, the process of deepening one's understanding of this word is a life-long process. When people meet together in a spirit of fellowship, mutual respect and with humility study the

word of God together, their shared insights can greatly increase the understanding of all. Where literacy rates amongst a population are low, these classes are organized in such a way that people can be taught to read while studying for themselves the words of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Thus, Bahá'ís all over the world are engaged in creating a culture of learning which draws its strength and vitality from this individual encounter with these creative words. Service projects arise organically from this process of study as the believers seek to improve the well-being of all in their communities by applying the principles they are studying to the challenges they and their friends and neighbours encounter in their daily lives.

Other activities that Bahá'ís are engaged in worldwide are the holding of children's, junior youth and youth classes. Their goal is to raise young people without prejudices and these classes are open to all. There is a strong emphasis on the spiritual and moral training of children in the Bahá'í writings. In their classes children are given a sense of their spiritual inheritance from the world's divinely-revealed religions including learning about the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdul-Bahá writes of this work:

*The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favour of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory. If a child be trained from his infancy, he will, through the loving care of the Holy Gardener, drink in the crystal waters of the spirit and of knowledge, like a young tree amid the rilling brooks. And certainly he will gather to himself the bright rays of the Sun of Truth, and through its light and heat will grow ever fresh and fair in the garden of life.*⁸⁷

There are junior youth classes for the twelve to fourteen year olds which are increasingly being taught by young Bahá'ís who have already or are still attending youth classes. Youth are undoubtedly the most effective teachers of the junior youth age group, especially when they can participate together in service projects for the wider community.

This Unique, this Wondrous System

The questions now arise - how is all this accomplished in a faith where there are no priests or ministers? And how is it that this faith, which has spread to every corner of the globe, has maintained its unity? For the Bahá'ís are, perhaps, the most diverse yet unified people on this planet. How has this come about?

Bahá'u'lláh has brought not only a wealth of spiritual and social teachings but has given a detailed blueprint of an administrative order through which these teachings can most effectively flow. This is the first time in recorded human history that the founder of a revealed religion has also given such exact and specific guidance on how his message can reach all peoples. Bahá'u'lláh refers to this new administrative system in these powerful words:

*The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System - the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.'*⁸⁸

And Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, whose life and work will be described shortly, has written of it:

...this Administrative Order is fundamentally differ-

ent 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. Therein lies the secret of its strength, its fundamental distinction, and the guarantee against disintegration and schism.⁸⁹

It is through this remarkable administrative system, as yet in the early stages of its establishment, growth and development that every Bahá'í, whether man or woman, youth or child, can be part of a vibrant, rapidly-evolving, astonishingly-diverse, world community of peoples. It is within this framework that new ways of relating to and working with others the world over can be found and new methods and skills of consultative decision-making can be learned. So rich is this administrative order in new structures and features that much of the remaining text of this book will be devoted to it. It has evolved gradually, beginning in the lifetimes of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu-Bahá.

Chapter 1 of this book brought us to the end of the Heroic or Apostolic Age of the faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Almost fifty years of divine revelation, and nearly thirty years of inspired interpretation had come to an end. Over 20,000 martyrs, described by Shoghi Effendi in his book *God Passes By* as 'a galaxy of God-intoxicated heroes' ⁹⁰, had given their lives in Persia and imparted 'in their turn an added impetus to the steadily gathering momentum of God's nascent Faith' ⁹¹. The faith itself had, in stretching across the globe, reached thirty-five countries.

In accordance with the terms of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's eldest grandson, was appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi was, when he thus became head of the faith, twenty-four years old and was a student at Balliol College,

Oxford, working hard to equip himself to be the translator of Bahá'í scripture and was completely unaware of the staggering role his grandfather had planned for him.

When 'Abdu'l-Baha died in 1921, Shoghi Effendi was called back to Haifa where 'Abdu'l-Bahá had lived and where he is buried. There he learned, for the first time, of the provisions made in his grandfather's will. He did not return to Oxford but immediately took up the heavy burden of responsibility that his grandfather had laid upon him.

With the burial of Bahá'u'lláh in Bahjí near 'Akká, and the Báb and, now, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sharing a shrine on Mount Carmel, Haifa, the Holy Land became, for the Bahá'ís, the heart of the entire planet.

The Guardianship

of Shoghi Effendi

With the establishment of the Guardianship and many years later, the election of the Universal House of Justice – its international governing body – the spiritual as well as the administrative centres of the faith were, unlike those of most other world religions, in one and the same place. Also unique were the terms of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will which, by virtue of the power of divinely-guided interpretation it gave to the Guardian, protected the faith from the division and schisms which have dissipated the spiritual forces of earlier religions.

Under the Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi, the faith gradually spread to more and more countries, Bahá'í literature was translated into many more languages and a new world community began to emerge.

The groundwork for many of the advances which have taken place in the Bahá'í world since 1921 was laid down,

BELOW: 1. A Bahá'í youth from Australia. 2. Children's class choir that performed at a national convention in Rwanda



BELOW: 1. Bahá'ís from native American background perform a dance at international Bahá'í conference in Montreal, 1982. 2. Children studying at a Bahá'í school in Puca Puca, Bolivia



to a great extent, by Shoghi Effendi. It was his energy, his genius, his dedication and complete devotion which was the driving-force behind the great spiritual enterprises which achieved these successes; the development of the world-wide administrative order; the extension and beautification of the world centre of the Bahá'í Faith in the Holy Land and the translation of many of the Bahá'í writings into English. Much has been written about the life and achievement of Shoghi Effendi who worked himself to a relatively early death at the age of sixty in November 1957, but the most comprehensive study is the 450-page tribute, *'The Priceless Pearl'* written by his widow, Canadian-born Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum.

It is far too early to assess fully the amazing contribution Shoghi Effendi made to world history, and very little is known about him in the non-Bahá'í world. Were his written English the only evidence of his genius it would suffice to astonish any sincere investigator.

His written work includes an 181,000-word history of the

first Bahá'í century and his monumental published letters between them contributed another 300,000 words. In addition, many thousands of letters were written to individuals, groups, committees, and local and national assemblies.

He also wrote extensively in Persian and Arabic and a total of almost 15,000 of his authenticated letters have been collected, studied and microfilmed. His superb translations from Persian and Arabic into English of Bahá'í literature must, in all, total over three-quarters of a million words in the most exquisite and apt English imaginable. It was in this translation work that his powers of interpretation came frequently into play, and scholars in the original languages often find their understanding increased after studying Shoghi Effendi's English translations. His genius was not confined to his English, however, for his attention to detail when giving the different teaching plans to national assemblies; his concept and design of the gardens round the shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel and around Bahjí, 'Akká; his understanding of human nature as seen when counselling and

inspiring people of all classes and religious backgrounds, and the simplicity of his personal life, were all part of the uniqueness of Shoghi Effendi, the first and only Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith.

He died of a heart attack after a bout of Asian Flu while visiting London with his wife in November 1957 and is buried in the New Southgate Cemetery, London N11. Through his life and works however, the Guardianship of the Bahá'í Faith remains as one of the 'twin pillars' of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Universal House of Justice

Although Bahá'u'lláh had clearly given the laws and ordinances to his followers and these have been carefully explained and interpreted by his successors there is a continuing need for authoritative rulings on the application of these laws and teachings to an ever-evolving society and on matters not clearly specified in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh made provision for this in his writings by instituting an elected body to be known as the Universal House of Justice.

*It is incumbent upon the members of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He verily is the Provider, the Onmiscient.*⁹²

In his 'Will and Testament', 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

*...Unto the Most Holy Book everyone must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself.*⁹³

In clarifying still further the powers of this Supreme Body, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his 'Will and Testament' continued:

*...And inasmuch as this House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same... This it can do because that law formeth no part of the Divine Explicit Text.*⁹⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will therefore provided for all contingencies – a guardian of the faith with powers of interpretation of scripture and the elected Universal House of Justice to give authoritative decisions on the application of the laws and on all matters not recorded in Bahá'í scripture. Writing on these twin institutions in 1934 the Guardian said:

...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.⁹⁵

It was not until the one hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh (21 April 1963) that the conditions were right for the election of this important body and on that date, in Haifa, at the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith, representatives of the fifty six national spiritual assemblies then in existence, performed the task, as anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh himself and as spelled out in detail by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Under its guidance the Bahá'í world community continued expanding at an increasing rate and the unity of the faith and its singleness of purpose have remained unimpaired. Whereas

man-made institutions tend to be prone to divisions as their basic membership increases, the Bahá'í administrative order, due to its unique scriptural origin, becomes stronger, more unified, more efficient as its world-wide membership grows.

In 1972 the Universal House of Justice published its own constitution which embodied all the specific scriptural provisions for its foundation, its powers and duties. In the by-laws of this constitution details were given of the nature of an international convention which would be held every five years to elect the members of the Universal House of Justice.

Every five years since 1963 the Universal House of Justice has been elected by the members of the national spiritual assemblies of the Baha'i world. These international conventions, held in Haifa, bring together an astonishing variety of peoples from all over the world who elect their international governing body by secret ballot, without any canvassing or electioneering, but in an atmosphere of prayer, devotion and great joy. Those unable to attend in person are able to vote by mailing their ballots. The international convention also provides a unique opportunity for delegates from all over the world to consult together.

H a n d s of the Cause of God

References were made in Bahá'í scripture to the appointment of a very small group of Bahá'ís who, because of their outstanding personal qualities, would be chosen to give a unique form of service to the faith. While the first Hands of the Cause were appointed by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained in his *'Will and Testament'*, how they were to be appointed in future and the duties they would perform.

*The Hands of the Cause of God must be nominated and appointed by the guardian of the Cause of God. All must be under his shadow and obey his command.*⁹⁶

The obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God are to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things. They must manifest the fear of God by their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words.

*This body of the Hands of the Cause of God is under the direction of the Guardian of the Cause of God. He must continually urge them to strive and endeavor to the utmost of their ability to diffuse the sweet savors of God, and to guide all the peoples of the world, for it is the light of Divine Guidance that causeth all the universe to be illumined.*⁹⁷

Thirty-two Hands of the Cause were appointed by Shoghi Effendi during the years 1951-57.

It was as 'Chief Stewards' that the Hands of the Cause of God took over the reins of the affairs of the Cause after the sudden and unexpected passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, until the Universal House of Justice was elected in 1963.

A u x i l i a r y Board Members

In April 1954, the Guardian called upon those Hands of the Cause then appointed to select, in each continent and from among the resident Bahá'ís of that continent some believers, to be known as 'Auxiliary Board Members' who would 'act as deputies, assistants and advisors of the Hands'. These Auxiliary Board Members worked directly under the guidance of the Hands of the Cause and although subject to the overall requirements of the Bahá'í administration were not directly involved in it.

Continental

Boards of Counsellors

According to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian had to appoint his successor from among his descendants but Shoghi Effendi had no children nor was there anyone who could measure up to the high standards indicated in the Will. It was also clear that only the guardian could appoint Hands of the Cause.

When the Universal House of Justice was elected in 1963, one of its first tasks was to examine Bahá'í scripture and the writings of Shoghi Effendi to see if there was any provision at all for another guardian. If there could be no guardian who would arrange for the appointment of more Hands of the Cause? On 6 October 1963, the following announcement was made:

After prayerful and careful study of the Holy Texts bearing upon the question of the appointment of the successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God and after prolonged consultation which included consideration of the views of the Hands of the Cause of God residing in the Holy Land, the Universal House of Justice finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.⁹⁸

In November 1964 the Universal House of Justice further announced that after giving its full attention to the matter and studying the sacred texts and hearing the views of the Hands of the Cause themselves, it had arrived at the following decision:

NEXT PAGE: Bahá'ís working at the Bahá'í World Centre



There is no way to appoint, or to legislate to make it possible to appoint Hands of the Cause of God.

Responsibility for decisions of matters of general policy affecting the institution of the Hands of the Cause, which was formerly exercised by the beloved Guardian, now devolves upon the Universal House of Justice as the supreme and central institution of the Faith to which all must turn.⁹⁹

In 1968 the Universal House of Justice announced the formation of eleven 'Continental Boards of Counsellors', three boards each for Africa, the Americas and Asia and one each for Europe and Australasia and wrote:

...Their duties will include directing the Auxiliary Boards in their respective areas, consulting and collaborating with National Spiritual Assemblies, and keep-

ing the Hands of the Cause and the Universal House of Justice informed concerning the conditions of the Cause in their areas.¹⁰⁰

This decision immediately freed the Hands from the administration of the Auxiliary Boards and the letter from the Universal House of Justice made the position quite clear:

The Hands of the Cause of God are one of the most precious assets the Bahá'í world possesses. Released from administration of the Auxiliary Boards, they will be able to concentrate their energies on the more primary responsibilities of general protection and propagation, "preservation of the spiritual health of the Bahá'í communities" and "the vitality of the faith" of the Bahá'ís throughout the world. ¹⁰¹



ABOVE: Bahá'í House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois USA

International Teaching Centre

In June 1973 the Universal House of Justice announced the formation of yet another institution for this continually expanding community. Anticipated in Bahá'í writings, this new body would consist of all the Hands of the Cause around the world plus three Counsellors and would, among its other duties:

...coordinate, stimulate and direct the activities of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and act as liaison between them and the Universal House of Justice.

...be fully informed of the situation of the Cause in all parts of the world and to be able, from the background of this knowledge, to make reports and recommendations to the Universal House of Justice and give advice to the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

...be alert to possibilities, both within and without the Bahá'í community, for the extension of the teaching work into receptive or needy areas, and to draw the attention of the Universal House of Justice and the Continental Boards of Counsellors to such possibilities, making recommendations for action.¹⁰²

Local Spiritual Assemblies

In his writings, Bahá'u'lláh has referred on many occasions to the local Houses of Justice. In *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, his Book of Laws, he wrote:

*The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá (9)... It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth.*¹⁰³

'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to these bodies as 'Spiritual Assemblies' and in one passage wrote:

*...These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.*¹⁰⁴

The formation of local Spiritual Assemblies is therefore a goal for every group of Bahá'ís the world over and in enlarging upon their function the Universal House of Justice wrote in March 1974:

The divinely ordained institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly operates at the first levels of human society and

is the basic administrative unit of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. It is concerned with individuals and families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock.

Strengthening and development of Local Spiritual Assemblies is a vital objective...and, above all, will demonstrate the solidarity and ever-growing distinctiveness of the Bahá'í community, thereby attracting more and more thoughtful souls to the faith and offering a refuge to the leaderless and hapless millions of the spiritually bankrupt, moribund present order...

...The friends are called upon to give their whole-hearted support and cooperation to the Local Spiritual Assembly, first by voting for the membership and then by energetically pursuing its plans and programmes, by turning to it in time of trouble or difficulty, by praying for its success and taking delight in its rise to influence and honour. This great prize, this gift of God within each community must be cherished, nurtured, loved, assisted, obeyed and prayed for.

Such a firmly-founded, busy and happy community life as is envisioned when Local Spiritual Assemblies are truly effective, will provide a firm home foundation from which the friends may derive courage and strength and loving support in bearing the Divine Message to their fellow-men and conforming their lives to its benevolent rule.¹⁰⁵

The local Spiritual Assemblies are, except in special cases, elected annually on the first day of the Ridván Festival (i.e. from sunset 20 April to sunset 21 April). The members are elected by secret ballot, without any nominations or canvassing, from among all the adult believers in the town, village, district or other area for which the Assembly will be responsible. These areas vary from country to country but are always the smallest recognized civil administrative unit of that country.

In March 1923 Shoghi Effendi spelled out some of the duties of these Spiritual Assemblies:

The matter of Teaching, its direction, its ways and means, its extension, its consolidation, essential as they are to the interests of the Cause, constitute by no means the only issue which should receive the full attention of these Assemblies...

They must endeavour to promote amity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and whole-hearted cooperation for the service of the Cause.

They must do their utmost to extend at all times the helping hand to the poor, the sick, the disabled, the orphan, the widow, irrespective of colour, caste and creed.

They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as the spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for the education of children, institute, whenever possible, Bahá'í educational institutions, organize and supervise their work and provide the best means for their progress and development...¹⁰⁶

National Spiritual Assemblies

'Abdul-Bahá when describing in his Will and Testament how the Universal House of Justice should be elected, referred to 'secondary Houses of Justice' and in 1923 the Guardian called upon certain countries to form National Spiritual Assemblies. From his letter we read:

Its immediate purpose is to stimulate, unify and coordinate by frequent personal consultations, the manifold activities of the friends as well as the local Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with

the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.

It serves also another purpose, no less essential than the first, as in the course of time it shall evolve into the National House of Justice...which according to the explicit text of the Testament will have, in conjunction with the other National Assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world, to elect directly the members of the International House of Justice, that Supreme Council that will guide, organize and unify the affairs of the Movement throughout the world.¹⁰⁷

In the years that followed, more and more National Assemblies came into existence and gradually, through the guidance given to them by the Guardian, their functions became clear and they gained in strength and authority. As soon as possible after the formation of a National Spiritual Assembly it seeks to obtain a legal identity and it becomes incorporated in whatever way is possible best to embody the universal standards for such Bahá'í administrative bodies as are clearly described in Bahá'í writings. Local Assemblies may similarly be incorporated as this is further evidence of their stability and permanence.

Convention

National Assemblies the world over are elected by delegates who normally meet at a National Convention during the Ridván Festival (i.e. between 21 April and 2 May). The Convention has three main functions; firstly to receive the reports of the outgoing National Assembly, secondly to elect the new National Assembly, and thirdly to consult with the incoming assembly.



Officers

All assemblies, both national and local, elect by majority vote from their nine members the officers of Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer, but no officer has any powers other than those given by the assembly itself.

Bahá'í Elections

The pattern of Bahá'í elections set by the Guardian in his early letters to the American Bahá'í community is so completely different from anything we can find in the world of politics that it is worthy of close examination. The elections are yet another aspect of the distinctive nature of Bahá'í life. They bring about a balance between authority and freedom which can be found in none of the existing political systems of the world. With the supreme authority of the word of God on the one hand and the absolute freedom of the individual believers to vote for whomever their consciences lead them to choose on the other, a system of ideal government at local, national and international levels is found in the Bahá'í world community.

The voter, quietly and in a prayerful attitude, secretly records his vote, is free from any pressure and is confident of the rightness of the outcome when all the votes are counted. Whoever is elected by the method of plurality voting which is adopted throughout the Bahá'í world at all levels (except for the majority vote used for officer elections), is immediately and wholeheartedly accepted by the elector-

OPPOSITE PAGE: A view of the resting place of Shoghi Effendi, in New Southgate Cemetery, London England

ate. The following paragraph written in 1925 primarily for delegates at a national convention sets a standard for all Bahá'í elections at whatever level:

...How great the privilege, how delicate the task of the assembled delegates whose function it is to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause! If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. Hence it is incumbent upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.¹⁰⁸

High Administrative standard

Once elected, the members of every Bahá'í administrative body have before them a standard to achieve which seems almost impossible to attain but which is the goal of every Assembly whether it be among the peoples of London, New York, Tokyo, Tíhrán or Buenos Aires or among the Pygmies in the forests of Central Africa, the Lapps of Finland or the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. The following quotations touch briefly on some of the elements of this high standard:

Let us...remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set

forth his views...

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other.

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interest of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations.

They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take



the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause...

Let it be made clear to every inquiring reader that among the most outstanding and sacred duties incumbent upon those who have been called upon to initiate, direct and co-ordinate the affairs of the Cause, are those that require them to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve. Theirs is the duty to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments, the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote...¹⁰⁹

Bahá'í Consultation

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on consultation bring a new depth and dimension to a familiar word. Bahá'í consultation is both a process of spiritual growth and a practical method of decision-making, suited to the co-operative capacity of humanity. Through the art or skill of consultation, Bahá'ís are able to search out the truth, find appropriate solutions to difficult problems and generate new ideas. It is a process which Bahá'ís learn to apply in all areas of their lives, in cop-

ing with individual and family problems, in their work and in their Bahá'í community life. '*...consultation, 'Bahá'u'lláh wrote, 'is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.'*¹¹⁰ It is the key to well-being both for individuals and societies.

During the consultation Bahá'ís learn to develop their own spiritual and intellectual capacities as they learn to work harmoniously with others. It is a challenging skill to learn for it demands spiritual effort from each individual. '*True consultation, 'Abdul-Bahá wrote, 'is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love.'*¹¹¹ There are no parties, cliques or factions, therefore no-one has to lobby support for an idea or defend an idea against those of others. Bahá'ís constantly refer to the body of spiritual principles which are contained in the Bahá'í writings and place great importance on objective fact-finding before consultation begins. All members then contribute their ideas, views and opinions and, in doing so, learn to let go of the idea so that it is no longer 'theirs' but becomes the property of the group consulting. It is thus a process of acquiring spiritual detachment from one's own ego. During such a process it becomes possible to achieve more objectivity than when people are confronting each other's ideas and competing for the support of others present.

In addition, all ideas must be given equal attention, regardless of the formal education and material circumstances of the person expressing them. Thus, Bahá'ís learn to separate ideas from personalities. It is recognised that ideas will often clash; indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained '*...The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.'*¹¹² Bahá'í consultation provides a means by which the clashing of ideas will bring creative and effective results while the degree of harmony amongst those consulting will be increased and strengthened.

The freedom to express one's views according to conscience is an essential part of Bahá'í consultation but this must always be done with moderation, courtesy and without belittling the thoughts of other. In the supportive atmosphere created by prayer, individual spiritual effort and by following the directions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to turn their hearts '*...to the Kingdom on High'*¹¹³, new creative energies are released. Often the eventual decision will be quite unlike anything suggested by any one individual but is a totally new idea born out of the consultation.

In Bahá'í community life everyone in the community is free to participate in the consultative process and is encouraged to do so. Consultation will often be used by a group of Bahá'ís who simply want to understand a situation more clearly and hear how everyone feels about a situation. However, when decisions must be made by Bahá'í assemblies, another principle comes into play. Once a decision is made by an assembly as a result of consultation, all must wholeheartedly support it and act upon it, even if they themselves spoke against it and voted against it, if a vote was necessary. While unanimous decisions are desirable, they are not an essential requirement but the principle of the willing acceptance of a majority vote underlies the functioning of all Bahá'í Assemblies. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that the Bahá'ís must '*in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.'*¹¹⁴

Consultation is no easy skill to learn but it is an essential element of the Bahá'í World Order.

*'The principle of consultation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, 'is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice'*¹¹⁵ and Shoghi Effendi wrote that: Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order.¹¹⁶

Nineteen Day Feast

It will be seen later that in the Bahá'í calendar there are nineteen months and on the first day of the month there is held a unique meeting. It is a spiritual meeting and also an administrative occasion for it is the time when the Local Spiritual Assembly consults with its community, acquaints the community with its plans and seeks consultation on the affairs of the community. This meeting is called a 'Nineteen Day Feast'. Although the feast consists of three separate parts, they are arranged so that the whole occasion is one of great spiritual upliftment and helps to deepen the unity of the friends. Only registered Bahá'ís may be present at the Nineteen Day Feast. Bahá'ís who are not in their home community are encouraged to attend the Nineteen Day Feast of the place they are visiting. The first part of the Feast is essentially devotional and appropriate selections from Bahá'í scripture are read, sung or chanted. This period is followed immediately by the consultation period under the directions of the Local Spiritual Assembly, reports are made on the various activities of the local assembly and any of its committees and the treasurer on the state of the local fund. When the consultation period is concluded, there is a social time when the friends have refreshments which may vary from a simple glass of water to a substantial meal.

The Nineteen Day Feast is therefore yet another distinctive feature of the Bahá'í community and part of the life of every Bahá'í.

It is of interest to note that a child or infant may be registered as a Bahá'í by its parents and will be instructed in the laws, teachings and history of the faith. He or she will be encouraged to study religion widely and know the basic elements and history of all the world's religions. At the age of 15

the Bahá'í child must then assume responsibilities as a Bahá'í (though as we have seen he or she may not vote in Bahá'í elections until the age of 21).

Where a Bahá'í community has joyous, vigorous and fruitful Nineteen Day Feasts it is certain that the community will be active, growing and united.

Assistants

to Auxiliary Board Members

It should be noted that Hands of the Cause and Boards of Counsellors work directly with National Spiritual Assemblies. Auxiliary Board members work closely with local assemblies and individual believers. The Hands and the Counsellors, being appointed respectively by the Guardian and by the Universal House of Justice, are not part of the 'elected side' of the Administrative Order and are not eligible for election to the National Assemblies while they serve the friends in the positions to which they have been appointed. Board members are, however, encouraged to appoint 'Assistants' to carry out specific tasks for them and these assistants may remain on any administrative body to which they are elected or any committee to which they have been appointed, either by a local, or by the National Assembly. The work of the Assistants is to help the Auxiliary Board members to achieve specific tasks and also involves encouraging believers to turn spontaneously to their Auxiliary Board members for inspiration and to the Assemblies for guidance and direction.

On 1 October 1969 the Universal House of Justice further clarified the respective roles of elected and appointed members as follows:

It is the responsibility of Spiritual Assemblies, assisted by their committees, to organize and direct the teaching work, and in doing so they must, naturally,

BELOW: International Teaching Centre in Haifa, Israel



also do all they can to stimulate and inspire the friends. It is, however, inevitable that the Assemblies and committees, being burdened with the administration of the teaching work as well as with all other aspects of Bahá'í community life, will be unable to spend as much time as they would wish on stimulating the believers.

Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers. It is the principal task of the Auxiliary Boards to assist in arousing and releasing this power. This is a vital activity, and if they are to be able to perform it adequately they must avoid becoming involved in the work of administration...¹¹⁷

BELOW: International Bahá'í Archives in Haifa, Israel



Committees, Local and National

Members of local and National Assemblies are elected for the qualities of loyalty, devotion, ability and experience, but they are rarely specialists in every field of community activity. Committees of experts are therefore appointed.

All committees are responsible only to the assembly which appointed them. They meet, elect their officers, consult on their activities, carry out their specific terms of reference and report, as required, to the administrative body which appointed them.

Leadership therefore in the Bahá'í community is not found in individuals but in the elected administrative bodies and these bodies seek to use the expertise, the zeal and the enthusiasm of the members so that all believers may fully participate in whatever field their interests lie. This personal involvement and commitment is another exciting and distinctive aspect of Bahá'í life.

The Twin Pillars

It is clear, therefore, that there are two 'sides' to the world-wide Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh. On the one hand is the 'appointed' side with the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith appointed in the *'Will and Testament'* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; the appointment by the Guardian of the Hands of the Cause; the appointment by the Universal House of Justice of the Counsellors who, in turn, appoint Auxiliary Board members and who in their turn appoint their Assistants. On the purely administrative side, the community of the believers elect their Local Spiritual Assemblies and their delegates, their delegates elect the National Assemblies and the members of the National Assemblies elect the members of the Universal House of Justice.



ABOVE: A view of the shrine of the Báb at night in Haifa

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, in his letter of 8 February 1934, subsequently published under the title *'The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh'*, spoke of the two institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as the '... twin Pillars that support this mighty administrative structure'. In the next paragraph of that same letter he wrote:

...these twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh should be regarded as divine in origin, essential in their functions and complementary in their aim and purpose. Their common, 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. Acting in conjunction with each other these two inseparable institutions administer its affairs, co-ordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions. Severally, each operates within a clearly defined sphere of jurisdiction; each is equipped with its own attendant institutions – instruments designed for the effective discharge of its particular responsibilities and duties.¹¹⁸

In explaining it further, the Universal House of Justice wrote in 1965:

Unity of doctrine is maintained by the existence of the authentic texts of Scripture and the voluminous interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, together with the absolute prohibition against anyone propounding 'authoritative' or 'inspired' interpretations of usurping the function of the Guardian. Unity of administration is assured by the authority of the Universal House of Justice. 'Such', in the words of Shoghi Effendi, 'is the immutability of His revealed Word. Such is the elasticity which characterizes the functions of His ap-

pointed ministers. The first preserves the identity of His Faith, and guards the integrity of His law. The second enables it, even as a living organism, to expand and adapt itself to the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society.¹¹⁹

Finally, as we look at this unique pattern for a 'New World Order' we see how it fulfils 'the practical realization of those ideals which the prophets of God have visualized and which from time immemorial have inflamed the imagination of seers and poets in every age'. These words were taken from one of the earliest 'World Order' letters addressed by Shoghi

Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West written in 1930. It deals specifically with the differences between the Bahá'í Faith and the ecclesiastical organizations of other religions and this chapter could well close with a few more sentences from this highly significant letter.

...Bahá'u'lláh...has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit...He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has...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, ...and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth...¹²⁰

The Bahá'í Fund

With the rapid spread of the Bahá'í Faith around the world, the building of its beautiful Houses of Worship in all the continents, and the purchase of many thousands of local and national Bahá'í centers or headquarters, with many hundreds of national and local endowment, Bahá'í schools, training institutes and other institutions, the question is often asked, 'Where does all the money come from?'

Only Bahá'ís may contribute to the Bahá'í fund. No teaching may be done, no property purchased, no endowment established and no Bahá'í activity may be carried out with monies except those which have come from a recognized Bahá'í source. To contribute to the Bahá'í fund is an obligation upon every Bahá'í. The amount he or she gives, when it is given, what form the donation takes, whether it be given for the general use of the administrative body to which it is donated or whether it is earmarked for a special purpose, are all left to the conscience of the individual believer. The giving is done



ABOVE: A group of Bahá'ís chanting in the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney, Australia

quietly and privately, from the individual believer to the local, national, or international treasurer.

Should a non-Bahá'í try to insist on giving a contribution it would be made clear that such monies could not be used for the work of the Bahá'í Faith, but would be donated to some charity. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

I feel urged to remind you of the necessity of ever bearing in mind the cardinal principle that all contributions to the Fund are to be purely and strictly voluntary in character. It should be made clear and evident to every one that any form of compulsion, however slight and indirect, strikes at the very root of the principle underlying the formation of the Fund ever since its inception...¹²¹

The supply of funds...constitutes...the life-blood of those nascent institutions which you are labouring to erect. Its importance cannot, surely, be over-estimated. Untold blessings shall no doubt crown every effort di-

rected to that end...¹²²

We must be like the fountain or spring that is continually emptying itself of all that it has and is continually being refilled from an invisible source. To be continually giving out for the good of our fellows undeterred by the fear of poverty and reliant on the unfailing bounty of the Source of all wealth and all good – this is the secret of right living.¹²³

Social and Economic Development

While social and economic development has become a major international concern in recent decades, it has been for the Bahá'ís a natural outcome of their local and national growth for over one hundred years. Bahá'í communities in Írán launched a comprehensive educational programme which was so successful that, by the 1930's, illiteracy had



ABOVE: Bahá'í House of Worship in Kampala, Uganda



ABOVE: Bahá'í House of Worship in Panama

BELOW: Bahá'í House of Worship in Samoa



been greatly reduced, the need for the emancipation of women had been fully accepted and a general appreciation of the importance of science and the ways of achieving good physical health had been realized. The Bahá'ís established the first school in Írán for the education of girls. By the 1970s the Bahá'ís had achieved a literacy rate of one hundred percent among women under forty, compared with a national average of twenty percent.

Bahá'í community development begins with the believers applying to the lives of their communities the spiritual principles of the Bahá'í teachings. This process, combined with the 'rectitude of conduct'¹²⁴ required of individuals, and the practice of the skill of Bahá'í consultation, leads to increased self-reliance. As the Bahá'ís discover how to improve the conditions of their own lives, they are able to extend the benefits of their work to others. The key to the success of the work is the unity, both of spirit and action, which the Bahá'í teachings enable them to achieve. Service to all, re-

BELOW: Bahá'í House of Worship in Bahapur, India



gardless of gender, creed, color or nationality is an essential ingredient of Bahá'í community development. Thus, development projects are designed to engage and benefit all members of a local community, not just the Bahá'ís. The experience gained, when development is aligned with spiritual principles, makes each project a centre of learning in which individuals discover the untapped capacities that they possess. While all projects aim to improve the conditions of life in a given community, the major emphasis is directed towards increasing the capacity of individuals and thus the entire community for self-improvement.

In 1983 an Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá'í World Centre to assist with the promotion and co-ordination of Bahá'í development work. Bahá'ís are now involved in several thousand grass-roots initiatives in more than one hundred countries world-wide, often in co-operation with other non-political development agencies. Although they are able to achieve a high degree of international collabora-

tion through their world-wide administrative system, Bahá'í development springs from the grass roots and receives its driving force from this source. The local spiritual assemblies, elected annually, provide an ideal vehicle for the ongoing monitoring, maintenance and evaluation of development projects.

In the areas of greatest material need, Bahá'ís are establishing tutorial schools to promote basic literacy where there are no primary schools accessible to the local people. They have established health clinics, village vegetable gardens, reforestation projects and alcoholism counselling. They have founded rural radio stations which incorporate programmes designed to educate communities in agriculture, health and related matters and which also help to celebrate local indigenous cultures. As a consequence of the emphasis given to the role of women in promoting development and establishing peace, particular attention is given to the needs and aspirations of women.



ABOVE: Bahá'í House of Worship in Frankfurt, Germany

Bahá'í Houses of Worship

In the days to come there will be Bahá'í Houses of Worship in every town and village but at the moment they are only being built on the basis of one per continent or island group, though many temple sites, currently over 120, have been purchased for future development. With a membership which is relatively small it is considered more important to give most of the Bahá'í contributions to help spread the faith and to assist the believers in the developing countries, thus carrying out one of the principal Bahá'í teachings, the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty. This leaves the building of beautiful Houses of Worship for the future when many more millions will have embraced the Faith. The Houses of Worship already built, or in the process of being built, demonstrate the new concepts of worship and will gradually be developed as examples of what



ABOVE: Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney, Australia



these institutions will be like in the future.

There will be a central House of Worship which will be nine-sided, have its doors open to all peoples and will be domed. Within its walls only the human voice will be raised either singing, chanting or reading and no musical instruments will be used. Only selections from the holy scriptures of different religions will be used and no preaching or administrative activity will take place in the House of Worship. As the institution develops, there will be built around the central House of Worship, accessory buildings such as a school for science, a hospice, a hospital and home for orphans. In other words, the House of Worship, according to Bahá'í understanding, caters not only for the spiritual needs of the community it serves but also its social, educational and humanitarian needs. Its proper name in Arabic

means 'Dawning-place of the praises of God.'

Presently there are completed Houses of Worship in Wilmette, USA; Kampala, Uganda; Frankfurt, Germany; Sydney, Australia; New Delhi, India and also in Panama City and Western Samoa. Work has begun on the construction of a House of Worship outside Santiago in Chile. In Wilmette, Kampala, Frankfurt and Sydney the national headquarters are in the vicinity of the central Houses of Worship.

B a h á ' í World Centre

The administrative centre of the Bahá'í world is situated on Mount Carmel, in accordance with the directions of



Bahá'u'lláh, in close proximity to the shrine of the Báb. Bahá'u'lláh is buried at Bahjí, near to 'Akká, a short distance along the coast from Haifa. For Bahá'ís, the shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are the most holy places on the planet. Every year, thousands of Bahá'í pilgrims visit the area to pray and meditate at these shrines and to visit other places in the area connected with the history of the faith.

The International Archives Building, the International Teaching Centre, the seat of the Universal House of Justice and the Centre for the Study of the Texts are situated along an arc-shaped walkway which follows the contour of the mountain above a Monument Garden in which several of Bahá'u'lláh's family are buried. From this spiritual and administrative nerve centre, guidance flows out from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assemblies. Information from the National Spiritual Assemblies provides reports and information from the grass-roots level of Bahá'í communities worldwide to the Universal House of Justice. Through the World Centre, the Baha'ís of the world are able to share news, ideas and plans with ease and are able to function as an organically united world community. A staff of over seven hundred people from more than sixty countries, many of whom are volunteers, serve at the World Centre.

The process of creating this World Centre, funded entirely by voluntary donations from the Bahá'ís of the world has taken over one hundred years. In 1987 the last stage in this work began with the construction of the two newest buildings on the Arc, the International Teaching Centre and the Centre for the Study of the Texts. In addition, ground was broken for the creation of nineteen terraces on the hillside where the shrine of the Báb is situated. The number nineteen represents the Báb and his eighteen disciples. The ter-

races both encircle and radiate outwards from the shrine, all of their lines and curves directing attention to the building at their heart. The gardens were constructed as a gift of peace to the world at large and are now open to the public for spiritual enrichment without entrance fees. The latest technologies in water-saving have been incorporated into the design and local plants that need little water to thrive have been planted. Around the edges of the formal gardens, wild spaces have been left which now support birds and other creatures which had not been seen in the city for many decades. During the construction period the Universal House of Justice explained that:

The beauty and magnificence of the Gardens and Terraces now under development are symbolic of the nature of the transformation which is destined to occur both within the hearts of the world's peoples and in the physical environment of the planet.¹²⁵

A series of stairways runs up through the terraces from the foot of Mount Carmel almost to its peak. A stone staircase of beige stones is flanked by two streams of running water that cascade gently down the mountainside, flowing through shallow pools at each level. The gardens were designed not only to showcase the shrine of the Báb but also to create a spiritual atmosphere that will bring to the minds of visitors the themes of unity in diversity, harmony and peace.

The project was completed by 2001 and on May 22nd of that year, 2,400 Bahá'ís from 180 countries, together with 600 guests, attended an official inauguration ceremony.

A statement by the Universal House of Justice, which was delivered at the official opening of the gardens and terraces, contains these words:

...The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a

momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia. That our Earth has contracted into a neighborhood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. Death pangs are yielding to birth pangs. The pain shall pass when members of the human race act upon the common recognition of their essential oneness. There is a light at the end of this tunnel of change beckoning humanity to the goal destined for it according to the testimonies recorded in all the Holy Books.

The Shrine of the Báb stands as a symbol of the efficacy of that age-old promise, a sign of its urgency. It is, as well, a monument to the triumph of love over hate. The gardens which surround that structure, in their rich variety of colors and plants, are a reminder that the human race can live harmoniously in all its diversity. The light that shines from the central edifice is as a beacon of hope to the countless multitudes who yearn for a life that satisfies the soul as well as the body.¹²⁶

The Bahá'í Calendar

There is a surprising number of calendars in use around the world and it is essential, if real world unity is to be achieved, that there should be one calendar that is recognized and acceptable world over. It is an essential part of the distinctive Bahá'í life that all the Bahá'ís the world over observe, in their religious activities, a calendar which was inaugurated by the Báb. This calendar brings some entirely new ideas in the measurement of time and the fixing of dates. The solar year was adopted but it begins, like the ancient Persian New Year and the modern Iranian Naw-Rúz, with the March equinox (21

BELOW AND NEXT PAGE: A panoramic view of the shrine of the Báb



March). It is therefore astronomically fixed and the Bahá'í era commences with the year of the Declaration of the Báb (1844).

In the Bahá'í year there are 19 months of 19 days each, making a total of 361 days, so between the 18 and 19 month there

are four or five 'intercalary days'. The nineteenth month is a month of fasting in preparation for the celebration of the New Year's Day (Naw-Rúz). The Báb named the months after the attributes of God and the Bahá'í day starts and ends at sunset.

The names of the 19 months are as follows:

Month	Arabic Name	Translation	First Days
1st	Bahá	Splendour	21 March
2nd	Jalál	Glory	9 April
3rd	Jamál	Beauty	28 April
4th	'Aẓamat	Grandeur	17 May
5th	Núr	Light	5 June
6th	Raḥmat	Mercy	24 June
7th	Kalimát	Words	13 July
8th	Kamál	Perfection	1 August
9th	Asmá	Names	20 August
10th	'Izzat	Might	8 September
11th	Mashíyyat	Will	27 September
12th	'Ilm	Knowledge	16 October
13th	Qudrat	Power	4 November
14th	Qawl	Speech	23 November
15th	Masá'il	Questions	12 December
16th	Sharaf	Honour	31 December
17th	Sultán	Sovereignty	19 January
18th	Mulk	Dominion	7 February
19th	'Alá	Loftiness	2 March

During the year there are special feasts and anniversaries as well as the days of fasting, and these are listed as follows:

Feast of Riqḍán (Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh) 21 April – 2 May 1863

Feast of Naw-Rúz (Bahá'í New Year), 21 March

Declaration of the Báb, 23 May 1844

Day of the Covenant, 26 November

Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, 12 November 1817

Birth of the Báb, 20 October 1819

Birth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 23 May 1844

Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, 29 May 1892

Martyrdom of the Báb, 9 July 1850

Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 28 November 1921

Period of the Fast, 19 days beginning with the first day of the month of 'Alá, 2 March

During the Bahá'í year there are nine holy days on which all work is suspended. Three of these are in the period which commemorates the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh and there is one for the Declaration of the Báb while two of them mark the birthdays of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and two commemorate their deaths. The ninth one is the New Year's day.

A World-Embracing Vision

Much emphasis has been paid in this part of the book to the distinctive character of the Bahá'í life and the way the Bahá'í community functions and observes its special calendar. It must not be thought, however, that the Bahá'ís seek to work in seclusion or form 'communes' or are in any way isolated from their fellow human beings. On the contrary, they seek at all times to be fully involved in whatever activity seems to serve the best interests of their fellow-men and of mankind as a whole. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *"Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self."*¹²⁷

In The Tablet of the World, he states:

...Of old it hath been revealed: 'Love of one's coun-

*try is an element of the Faith of God.' The Tongue of Grandeur hath, however, in the day of His manifestation proclaimed: 'It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.' Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse and set a new direction to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy Book.*¹²⁸

When the first astronauts ventured into space, they saw the earth from a distance, a beautiful, fragile sphere swathed in clouds where no man-made boundaries and frontiers between nations were visible. Through the photographs taken from space we all have an opportunity to share in something of what they saw and realized. We are one people living on one planetary home. Bahá'u'lláh wrote over a century ago: *This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation.*¹²⁹

Bahá'ís delight in this knowledge and seek every opportunity to work with those who share this vision of peace and justice and who are working to achieve it. All Bahá'ís are encouraged to participate as fully as possible with movements that are universal in spirit and are working for one or more of the Bahá'í principles, while distancing themselves from partisan politics of any kind. The opportunities at the present time for working with others towards the shared goals of peace and justice are almost limitless.

The Bahá'í International Community

The League of Nations was the first international forum where Bahá'ís were able to present the principles which they understand to be necessary to the creation of a just society.

In 1945 Bahá'ís were present in San Francisco at the conference at which the United Nations Organization came into being. In 1948 eight National Assemblies were collectively recognized as an International Non-governmental Organization under the title 'Bahá'í International Community'.

The Bahá'í International Community is an international non-governmental organization co-operating closely with the United Nations to achieve the goals of world peace, universal human rights and the full economic and social development of the peoples of this planet.

In 1970 the Bahá'í International Community was granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), with the U.N. International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 1976, and with the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 1989. In the same year a working relationship with the World Health Organization was established. The B.I.C. maintains an office at the United Nations headquarters in New York and regional commissions in Addis Ababa, Bangkok and Santiago and has representatives at U.N. offices in Nairobi, Rome and Vienna. The Bahá'í International Community established its own Office of the Environment in 1989 and, in 1992, an Office for the Advancement of Women. Both of these function as adjuncts to the United Nations Office.

The Bahá'í International Community participates actively in the work of an increasingly wide range of United Nations organizations. As a result of its worldwide scope and its strong links to its grassroots membership, and because it is, and is recognized as, entirely non-partisan in its approach, the Bahá'í International Community is frequently invited to present papers in large international forums. In such global gatherings, the Bahá'ís have the opportunity to suggest how Bahá'u'lláh's teachings offer practical solutions to specific global challenges.

BELOW: Pillars of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel



The Bahá'í International Community is currently focusing its energies in four major areas: human rights, moral development, the advancement of women and global prosperity. The B.I.C. advises and assists Bahá'í national communities to participate in both dialogue and action on these themes in their own countries. It also produces *'One Country'*, a newsletter which has won a number of awards and which features news of Bahá'í activities at the United Nations and around the world.

The Promise of World Peace

and the Prosperity of Humankind.

In October 1985, before the start of the United Nations International Year of Peace, the Universal House of Justice published a letter addressed to all the peoples of the world. The letter is called *'The Promise of World Peace'* and it opens with these stirring words:

BELOW: Bahá'í children near the Bahá'í House of Worship in Kampala, Uganda



The Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts, of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision, and for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise, is now at long last within the reach of the nations. . .

Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth.¹³⁰

This letter challenges us to closely examine the root causes of war and conflict and to pay particular attention to the current 'paralysis of will' which 'is rooted. . . in a deep-seated conviction of the inevitable quarrelsomeness of mankind'.¹³¹ The letter calls for a re-examination of the roots of this erroneous belief. This is one of the many challenges that

this ground-breaking document offers to the reader.

As well as challenges, the letter offers a fresh perspective on our current dilemma and provides grounds for hope. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

A candid acknowledgement that prejudice, war and exploitation have been the expression of immature stages in a vast historical process and that the human race is today experiencing the unavoidable tumult which marks its collective coming of age is not a reason for despair but a prerequisite to undertaking the stupendous enterprise of building a peaceful world...¹³²

Whatever suffering and turmoil the years immediately ahead may hold, however dark the immediate circumstances, the Bahá'í community believes, that humanity can confront this supreme trial with confidence in its ultimate outcome. Far from signaling the end of civilization, the convulsive changes towards which humanity is being ever more rapidly impelled will serve to release the 'potentialities inherent in the station of man' and reveal 'the full measure of his destiny on earth, the innate excellence of his reality...'¹³³

In March of 1995, a statement entitled '*The Prosperity of Humankind*' was presented to the United Nations World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen. The document states in its opening paragraphs:

Throughout the world, immense intellectual and spiritual energies are seeking expression, energies whose gathering pressure is in direct proportion to the frustrations of recent decades. Everywhere the signs multiply that the earth's peoples yearn for an end to conflict and to the suffering and ruin from which no land is any longer immune. These rising impulses for change must be seized upon and channelled into over-

coming the remaining barriers that block realisation of the age-old dream of global peace. The effort of will required for such a task cannot be summoned up merely by appeals for action against the countless ills afflicting society. It must be galvanized by a vision of human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term - an awakening to the possibilities of the spiritual and material well-being now brought within grasp. Its beneficiaries must be all of the planet's inhabitants, without distinction ...¹³⁴

... it is no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic development to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise is capable of meeting humanity's needs. Optimistic forecasts about the changes it would generate have vanished into the ever-widening abyss that separates the living standards of a small and relatively diminishing minority of the world's inhabitants from the poverty experienced by the vast majority of the globe's population.

This unprecedented economic crisis, together with the social breakdown it has helped to engender, reflects a profound error of conception about human nature itself. For the levels of response elicited from human beings by the incentives of the prevailing order are not only inadequate, but seem almost irrelevant in the face of world events. We are being shown that, unless the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals. That purpose must be sought in spiritual dimensions of life and motivation that transcend a constantly changing economic landscape and an artificially imposed division of human societies into 'developed' and 'developing'.¹³⁵

The statement then delineates a strategy for social and

economic development drawing on the concepts which have been described briefly in earlier sections of this book. Taken together, *'The Promise of World Peace'* and *'The Prosperity of Humankind'* provide a powerful springboard for action in the closely interwoven challenges of creating a just and peaceful world where the prosperity of all will be assured. In a world still riven by conflict, strife and ever-widening gaps between the affluent and the materially-deprived, these two documents are as relevant today as when they were written. They deserve the thoughtful attention of all who are engaged in the manifold aspects of this urgent and all-important work.

We will close this brief survey of these two challenging documents with a few paragraphs taken from the final section of *'The Promise of World Peace'*.

The source of the optimism we feel is a vision transcending the cessation of war and the creation of agencies of international co-operation. Permanent peace among nations is an essential stage, but not, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, the ultimate goal of the social development of humanity. Beyond the initial armistice forced upon the world by the fear of nuclear holocaust, beyond the political peace reluctantly entered into by suspicious rival nations, beyond pragmatic arrangements for security and co-existence, beyond even the many experiments in co-operation which these steps will make possible lies the crowning goal; the unification of all the peoples of the world in one universal family.

. . . An urge towards unity, like a spiritual spring-time, struggles to express itself through countless international congresses that bring together people from a vast array of disciplines. It motivates appeals for international projects involving children and youth. In-

deed, it is the real source of the remarkable movement towards ecumenism by which members of historically antagonistic religions and sects seem irresistibly drawn towards one another. . .

In contemplating the supreme importance of the task now challenging the entire world, we bow our heads in humility before the awesome majesty of the divine Creator, Who out of His infinite love has created all humanity from the same stock; exalted the gem-like reality of man; honoured it with intellect and wisdom, nobility and immortality; and conferred upon man the 'unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him', a capacity that "must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation."

We hold firmly the conviction that all human beings have been created "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization". . . We reaffirm the belief that the "potentialities inherent in the station of man, the full measure of his destiny on earth, the innate excellence of his reality, must all be manifested in this promised Day of God." These are the motivations for our unshakeable faith that unity and peace are the attainable goal towards which humanity is striving.¹³⁶

As this already turbulent century began, in the message delivered in Haifa when the gardens and terraces surrounding the shrine of the Báb were officially opened on May 22nd 2001, the Universal House of Justice explained that the inextinguishable spirit of hope felt by the Bahá'ís of the world:

...stems from words such as these from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh:

"This is the Day in which God's most excellent fa-

*vors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace has been infused into all created things.”*¹³⁷

May all who strive, often against great odds, to uphold principles of justice and concord be encouraged by these assurances.¹³⁸

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* These are compilations from Bahá'í writings.

** Where two dates are given, the first is the original date of publication and the second the latest edition or reprint.

"Visit the official international Bahá'í website <www.bahai.org> to access further information on any of the topics mentioned in this book.

Visit the authoritative online source of the Bahá'í sacred writings <www.reference.bahai.org> to read more from the Bahá'í writings quoted in this book."

Since we have deleted all the websites I listed in the text, I feel that these few lines are necessary to show that we are truly in the twenty-first century, where, for so many people, the internet is a major part of their lives.

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