

Bahá'í History in the Formative Age The World Crusade, 1953–1963*

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Abstract

The evolution of the Bahá'í community from its obscure and persecuted origins to world encirclement has been rapid. At the time of Bahá'u'lláh's death in 1892, there were followers in fifteen countries. By late 1921 when Shoghi Effendi's assumption of the Guardianship was decreed in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'ís were resident in thirty-five countries. A period of consolidation followed, in which Shoghi Effendi sought the administrative and doctrinal maturation of Bahá'í communities emerging in diverse sociopolitical and religious contexts. This article considers the essential features of the last significant phase of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, the decade of the World Crusade, 1953–1963. In doing so, it seeks to raise questions concerning the contemporary practice of historical Bahá'í scholarship.

Résumé

L'évolution de la communauté bahá'íe, depuis ses origines, lorsqu'elle était obscure et persécutée, jusqu'à maintenant où elle embrasse le monde entier, fut très rapide. A l'époque du décès de Bahá'u'lláh, en 1892, la Foi comptait des adeptes dans quinze pays. Vers la fin de 1921, lorsque Shoghi Effendi en devint le Gardien conformément au Testament d'Abdu'l-Bahá, des bahá'ís vivaient dans trente-cinq pays. Une période de consolidation s'ensuivit, durant laquelle Shoghi Effendi encouragea la maturation administrative et doctrinale des communautés bahá'íes émergeant des divers contextes socio-politiques et religieux. Le présent article porte sur les caractéristiques principales de la dernière phase importante du ministère de Shoghi Effendi, c'est-à-dire la croisade mondiale de dix ans, de 1953 à 1963. Ce faisant, l'article soulève des questions concernant les pratiques contemporaines quant à la recherche sur l'histoire de la foi bahá'íe.

Resumen

La evolución de la comunidad bahá'í desde sus comienzos hostigados y desconocidos hasta rodear el planeta entero ha sido rápida. Al tiempo de pasar Bahá'u'lláh de este mundo había adherentes en quince países. A fines de 1921, al asumir Shoghi Effendi la Guardianía decretada por la Voluntad y Testamento de 'Abdu'l-Bahá, los bahá'ís residían en treintaicinco países. Siguió un período de consolidación, durante el cual Shoghi Effendi buscó la maduración administrativa y doctrinaria de comunidades bahá'ís que emergían al marco de contextos sociopolíticos y religiosos diversos. Esta disertación examina las características esenciales de la última etapa significativa del ministerio de Shoghi Effendi, la década de la Cruzada Mundial, 1953–1963. Al hacerlo, intenta la reflexión referente al ejercicio contemporáneo de la erudición histórica bahá'í.

Shoghi Effendi pictured the World Crusade as the next phase in the gradual unfoldment of the destiny of the Bahá'í Community. The "Heroic" Age (1844–92) had witnessed tumult and persecution during the ministries of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; and the "Apostolic" Age (1892–1921) was typified by acts of loyalty and devotion to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. By 1953, the "Formative" Age of the Bahá'í Faith was entering its fourth decade (having commenced at the same time Shoghi Effendi assumed the Guardianship). The moment had arrived for Shoghi Effendi to inspire and lead the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in a global missionary enterprise.¹ Whereas Shoghi Effendi's own life came to an untimely end near the plan's mid-point, the ten momentous years of endeavor continued. By its end, the Bahá'í community and its institutions had greatly expanded their geographical scope as well as ethnic and linguistic composition; extended and consolidated their administrative functioning; strengthened their legal status; developed their physical infrastructure; and consolidated and beautified the holy places associated with their origins. The emergence of Bahá'í communities in virtually all parts of the planet fulfilled aspirations detailed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his Tablets of the Divine Plan and provided the administrative foundations that made possible the establishment of the Universal House of Justice in 1963.

Bahá'í Historiography

Because of its Middle Eastern origins, historiography of the Bahá'í Faith has focused on the religion's links with Islam and its origins in Persian society.² Examination of Bahá'í communities in regional and global historical contexts is of more recent origin,³ and much history remains unwritten. For instance, although almost three decades have elapsed since the completion of the Ten Year Plan, no comprehensive account of this masterful missionary enterprise has yet been written.⁴ Although some official documentation of the Ten Year World Crusade (and of subsequent plans) has appeared, and, despite the historical sensibility of the Bahá'í community in other contexts (e.g., the extensive treatment of history in the writings of the central figures; the reverent treatment of "sacred relics" of the "Heroic Age" of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions; and concern for locating and preserving all traces of the most pivotal events, places, and persons of significance to that period), considered treatments of later Bahá'í history remain scant.⁵

There are many reasons why this is so. The number of scholars engaged in historical discourse has remained small, and their efforts, no matter how prodigious, have not kept pace with the rapid expansion of the Bahá'í community worldwide. Perhaps, also, Bahá'í communities have considered the writing of Bahá'í history as premature and as an activity best undertaken at some undefined future time—a view held notwithstanding the fact that *The Dawnbreakers*, the precious record of events central to the Bábí period, 1844–1850, exists solely on account of the diligent gathering of oral testimonies by Nabíl, soon after their occurrence. Furthermore, despite the fact that unique materials are in the possession of most national Bahá'í communities, few such materials have been professionally organized into usable archives.⁶

In the absence of thorough written histories, the major part of historical knowledge of Bahá'í communities in the first half of the twentieth century is biographical or else contained in official records. On the one hand, biographies, while valuable in themselves, do not necessarily seek to provide a wide perspective on a particular period of time or Bahá'í community and often focus quite legitimately on an individual perspective. Official accounts, on the other hand, usually consist of chronicle and narrative, and less often place the activities of Bahá'í individuals or communities in their social and religious context.

A more telling reason for the lag in writing Bahá'í history than those mentioned above concerns the practical as well as intellectual complexity of the task. The intrinsically global character of the Bahá'í religion cannot be retrieved or sufficiently elaborated through the use of national intellectual frameworks in which much social-science discourse occurs. Furthermore, there are heavy implications for the collection and processing of discrete historical data. Now that Bahá'í communities are well established on each of the five continents, the attraction of writing histories of Bahá'í communities on each continent contains the danger of losing sight of the global pattern at the core of Bahá'í belief and action. And yet for the foreseeable future, no single researcher possesses the resources to undertake an effective global study and will be limited both by the time that would be required to become thoroughly familiar with so great a range of diverse cultures and Bahá'í communities, and by limited access to source materials. Present conditions favor active collaboration and cooperation among Bahá'í scholars in the writing of Bahá'í history.

Bahá'í History to 1953

The history of the Bahá'í Faith 1921–53 (when it comes to be written) will no doubt depict the establishment of local and national Bahá'í communities in accordance with the underlying laws of Bahá'u'lláh, the legacy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the direction of Shoghi Effendi. It will narrate the emergence of a new religious culture and the foundations of the Bahá'í administrative order. In essence, Shoghi Effendi fostered the establishment of National Spiritual Assemblies and the prosecution of teaching plans in the period leading up to 1953, in preparation for the orchestrated global campaign subsequently known as the "Ten Year World Crusade."

In the oldest Bahá'í communities (which were in the Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa and which, apart from the Persian community, remained numerically small), three National Spiritual Assemblies were formed by the mid-1930s and by the 1950s had already undertaken a series of coordinated teaching plans.⁷ In Western countries, National Spiritual Assemblies had been formed in North America,⁸ Australasia,⁹ and Europe.¹⁰ The states of central, east, and west Africa remained mostly under colonial rule when the Bahá'ís of the British Isles coordinated an African teaching plan in the years preceding the Crusade, 1950–53, and no national bodies had been established on that continent before 1953. In the vast nations of the Soviet Union and China, only the smallest remnants of Bahá'í communities survived the anti-religious purges of Communist authorities (Hassall, "Notes on the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions"). In the Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist societies of South and South-East Asia, where several Bahá'í communities also traced their origins to the nineteenth century, only one National Spiritual Assembly (covering India, Pakistan, and Burma) had been established by 1953.¹¹

As the number of National Spiritual Assemblies grew, Shoghi Effendi began referring to a world-embracing missionary enterprise. In November, 1951, he announced that four “intercontinental conferences” were to be held in 1953; in December, 1951, and February, 1952, he appointed the first and second contingents of Hands of the Cause. In March, 1952, the “Global Crusade” was given its name. The Guardian explained that it constituted the “third and final stage of the initial epoch in the evolution of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Master Plan ...”

Table: National Spiritual Assemblies that Participated in the World Crusade

Year Established	National Spiritual Assembly
1923	Great Britain
1923	Germany and Austria
1923	India, Pakistan, and Burma
1924	Egypt and Sudan
1925	United States
1948	Canada
1931	Iraq
1934	Persia (Iran)
1934	Australia and New Zealand
1951	Central America
1951	South America
1953	Italy and Switzerland

(Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 107). It commenced in the course of the Holy Year (October, 1952–October, 1953) held to mark the centenary celebration of the birth of the Bahá’í revelation and concluded with the first Bahá’í World Congress—the “Most Great Jubilee”—in London in April, 1963. By 1953, there were Bahá’í communities in some 128 countries and territories.

The specific goals of twelve plans were announced at Ridván (21 April) 1953. Each of the twelve participating National Spiritual Assemblies was challenged to consolidate its domestic position and to propagate the Bahá’í teachings in additional territories on one or more of the four continents—Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia (the latter including Oceania or “Australasia”). Several national communities were allotted tasks on the one continent, often in adjacent territories. Thus, six National Spiritual Assemblies undertook activities in Africa (India, Pakistan, and Burma; the British Isles; the United States; Egypt and Sudan; Iraq and Persia); six in Asia, (India, Pakistan, and Burma; Iraq; Persia; the United States; Canada; and Australia and New Zealand); four in Europe (the United States; the British Isles; Germany and Austria; and Italy and Switzerland) and four in the Americas (the United States; Canada; Central America; and South America). Seven of the twelve National Spiritual Assemblies coordinated activities on two continents, four on just one. Only the Bahá’ís of the United States were given tasks on all four continents.

Shoghi Effendi’s approach to the task of “mission” differed from modern Christian and Islamic missionary practice: few missionary endeavors have selected the whole world for a simultaneous program of outreach. Furthermore, whereas Shoghi Effendi’s plan allowed for the movement of individuals to remote and extremely isolated locations, traditional wisdom had seen a concentration of a mission’s resources in a few strategic locations; and whereas conversion of non-Western peoples has often been coupled with efforts to “civilize” tribal societies and to alter their mode of production, the Bahá’í approach remained liberal in most matters pertaining to culture and economics. In like manner, whereas missionization relied on the accumulation of resources in the home base for use in the mission field, transfer of funds during the Crusade years seems to have been mostly for the purchase of property. Furthermore, whereas mission societies invariably engaged in business enterprises to ensure their economic viability in the mission field, there was no official involvement in commerce by Bahá’í institutions.

The attitude with which Bahá’ís endeavored to spread their beliefs in new cultures marks another departure from traditional processes of “missionization.” The Bahá’í writings present clear instructions that the Bahá’í teachings cannot be forced on anyone and that the process of propagation includes obtaining the consent of the listener. For these reasons, among others, those who travelled to teach their religion were described as “pioneers” rather than as “missionaries”: they were volunteers and not in the pay of a missionary body, and they were sharing their beliefs without subsequently seeking to depend for their sustenance on those whom they attracted into the Bahá’í Community.

Social and Political Context

The decade 1953–63 coincided with considerable social and political turmoil in world affairs. Global combat had ceased following the allied victory in World War II, but militarism continued during the Cold War (1947–90), which pitted the so-called superpowers and their allies in geopolitical struggle and ideological difference: the Berlin blockade (1948–49), the Korean War (1950–53), construction of the Berlin Wall (1961), the Indo-China War (1945–75), and the Cuban missile crisis (1962)—were only the more notable episodes in this tense period of history, which was also marked by the aftermath of the Communist victory in China (1949); discovery of the excesses of Stalinist rule in the USSR following that leader's death in 1953; atmospheric testing and proliferation of thermonuclear weapons; the elaboration of apartheid in South Africa; and the rise of anti-colonialist and nationalist movements throughout Africa and Asia. It was in the context of such global convulsions that Bahá'í pioneers sought to transcend cultural, religious, and political boundaries to plant the seeds of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order.

Aims of the World Crusade

The purpose of the World Crusade, as described by Shoghi Effendi, was to extend the reach of Bahá'u'lláh's call "over the entire surface of the globe" (*Citadel of Faith* 111), to "assemble beneath its sheltering shadow peoples of every race, tongue, creed, color and nation" (*Citadel of Faith* 114). It was a "Spiritual Crusade" (*Citadel of Faith* 106, 110–11), the "most prodigious, the most sublime, the most sacred collective enterprise launched by the adherents of the Cause of God in both hemispheres since the early days of the Heroic Age of the Faith—an enterprise which in its vastness, organization and unifying power" which had "no parallel in the world's spiritual history" (*Citadel of Faith* 119).

The Crusade's four broad aims were (a) the development of institutions at the World Centre; (b) consolidation of the twelve communities undertaking the plans; (c) consolidation of all other territories already open; and (d) the opening of the remaining "chief virgin territories" around the globe. Shoghi Effendi assigned responsibility for the plan's twenty-seven specific objectives to institutions at the World Centre and to the twelve existing National Spiritual Assemblies. Tasks to be undertaken in Asia, Africa, Europe, and America were officially announced at intercontinental conferences held in 1953 in Kampala, Chicago, Stockholm, and New Delhi. At each conference a message was read by his special representative. National Spiritual Assemblies planned their activities cooperatively, and volunteers were called on for immediate entry to the pioneer field. In 1958 a further five conferences were held (in Kampala, Sydney, Wilmette, Frankfurt, and Jakarta¹²) to mark the mid-point in the Crusade and to give impetus to the tasks of consolidating recent growth and achievements.

Given the universal nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and mission, it would be mistaken to expect anything less than a global aspiration. It is for this reason that all preceding activities by Bahá'í communities in numerous individual countries are regarded as elements of one unified program. If Christian civilization was characteristically based on pastoralism and Islamic civilization on commerce (to characterize these civilizations in broad terms, following Sopher, *Geography of Religions*), the emerging Bahá'í community embraced the entire planet and all social and cultural systems within it, rather than favoring any sub-strata. Israel is the "Holy Land" for Bahá'ís, but geographical proximity to the Bahá'í shrines is not an element of faith—indeed, the sacrifice involved in remaining in remote outposts in the service of their religion is considered admirable. Furthermore, the spacing of such institutions as *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs* (Houses of Worship), publishing trusts, and educational institutions on the various continents and the choice of location for significant gatherings of Bahá'ís at periodic international conferences are indicative of the global distribution pattern contained within the Bahá'í system.

Four Main Phases of the Crusade

The goals of the Crusade were carried out in four distinct yet interwoven phases. Emphasis was placed in the first year, 1953–54, on the settlement of pioneers in 131 new territories. The first pioneers to settle in these areas were given the title "Knights of Bahá'u'lláh" by Shoghi Effendi, who first referred to the "Knights" in a cable of 28 May 1953, which called for the "dispersal, immediate, determined, sustained and universal" of pioneers "throughout the unopened territories of the planet." He announced his intention to inscribe, in chronological order, the names of the "spiritual conquerors" on an illuminated "Roll of Honor, to be deposited at the entrance door of the inner sanctuary of the Tomb of Bahá'u'lláh, as a permanent memorial of the contribution by the champions of His Faith at the victorious conclusion of the opening campaign of the Global Crusade...."¹³

In the subsequent decade, 127 of 131 virgin territories were opened (with the remaining four being opened by 1990) by Knights of Bahá'u'lláh who eventually numbered no less than 256.¹⁴ It proved impossible to enter some lands under Communist rule—Albania, Estonia, Finno-Karelia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Mongolia, Rumania, Sakhalin Island, Ukraine, and White Russia. To most areas, however, the Knights were followed in subsequent years

by others numbering approximately 1000. The North American community was encouraged to scatter its pioneers “as widely as possible,” to available posts in any of the national plans. This first phase was conducted by Shoghi Effendi with considerable urgency and witnessed endeavors of considerable heroism.

Most Bahá’í communities in the newly opened territories, however, while significant in their diversity and number, remained negligible in size for at least the next decade. Twenty of the national bodies established by 1963 consisted of twenty Bahá’í localities or less,¹⁵ and a further twenty-one comprised between twenty-one and forty-nine.¹⁶ It appears, thus, that the growth of national bodies was rapid in the final years of the Crusade and that more than half were established on a base of a relatively small number of local Bahá’í communities and institutions.

Apart from the issue of numerical growth, the universal mandate of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings was tested during the period 1953–63. Whereas successful proliferation to all corners of the globe could not prove absolutely the scriptural claims of being a world religion of considerable spiritual potency and efficacy, failure of the Bahá’ís to complete their ambitious program would have cast doubt on their abilities (at least for the present) to complement religious belief with social practice: a world religion without a world following remains somewhat utopian, or at the least, idealistic.¹⁷

In the Crusade’s second phase, 1954–56, emphasis was placed on the acquisition of sites for local and national Hazíratu’l-Quds (headquarters), future Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs, and national endowments. The North American community was given responsibility for assisting other National Spiritual Assemblies in these and other tasks (*Citadel of Faith* 106–9). By 1963 sites for forty-five Mashriqu’l-Adhkárs and for forty-nine national Hazíratu’l-Quds had been purchased, and the “first dependency” (a retirement home) of the Wilmette Mashriqu’l-Adhkár had been established.

The third phase of the Crusade, 1956–58, focused on the continued multiplication of the number of Bahá’í centres and the establishment of Regional and National Spiritual Assemblies. Between 1956 and 1963, the number of National Spiritual Assemblies increased from 12 to 56. In Africa, four Regional Spiritual Assemblies were established at Ridván 1956, which evolved into a larger number of Assemblies in 1964. In Asia, the National Spiritual Assembly of India, Pakistan, and Burma separated into two regional bodies at Ridván 1957. Regional Bodies for Southeast and Northeast Asia were also formed in 1957.

In the Western Hemisphere, progress toward administrative autonomy was more rapid. In North America, Alaska formed its own National Spiritual Assembly at Ridván 1957, as one of four regional bodies on the continent. In 1961, these evolved into twenty-one National Spiritual Assemblies in the Western Hemisphere. New Zealand established a National Spiritual Assembly separate from Australia in 1957. The South Pacific Regional Assembly established in 1959 existed until divided into two in 1964. In 1958 a national body was formed in France. In 1959 National Spiritual Assemblies were established in Austria, South Pacific, and Burma; twenty-one were established in Latin America in 1961; eleven in Europe, plus another in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1962.

In each of these regional bodies, Bahá’í communities gained experience in Bahá’í administration and gained familiarity with Bahá’í approaches to decision making through consultation and representation through election and delegation. In Islamic countries, including Iran, women were for the first time allowed to participate in the administration of local and National Spiritual Assemblies.

The years of the World Crusade demonstrated that Bahá’í communities had the capacity not only to establish localities in diverse cultures but also to develop patterns of geographical and social distribution as well as distinct organizational machinery and means for territorial expansion, suggesting differences between it and other religious systems having aspirations limited to a single ethnic community or collection of ethnic communities (Sopher, *Geography of Religions*). The four most numerically significant communities as of 1963 were spread across several continents: Iran (1285 localities), the United States of America (1714), Central and East Africa (2061),¹⁸ and India (2098).

Forty-seven new National Spiritual Assemblies were established between 1953 and 1963, bringing the worldwide total to fifty-six. Each of the new National Spiritual Assemblies framed a constitution, and thirty-four obtained legal status. The number of local Spiritual Assemblies had risen from 611 to 3,551; and the number of centres from 2,425 to 11,210. In a single decade the Bahá’í Faith spread to 131 additional countries and territories around the globe, from 128 in 1953 to a total of 259 (*The Bahá’í World* 13: 459–78). More substantial communities had emerged in a further eleven communities: North East Africa (88 localities), North East Asia (89), Australia (124), Germany (170), British Isles (204), Canada (245), North West Africa (265), South and West Africa (305), South Pacific (308), Bolivia (537), and South East Asia (763).

This expansion of Bahá’í communities implies a considerable increase in the numbers of ethnic groups, races, and tribes represented; the numbers of languages spoken within it; and the numbers of schools and institutes established by it. Persian Bahá’ís, particularly, had faced the challenge of defining their belief universally (the universal Bahá’í religion happened to have its origins in Persia) rather than ethnically (the Persian Bahá’í religion

spread to other places).¹⁹ Given the emergence of large non-Persian, indeed non-European, Bahá'í communities, ethnically based definitions of the Bahá'í community offered by some commentators must be set aside.²⁰

Table: Objectives of the World Crusade

	Asia		Australasia		Africa		Europe		Americas	
	G	A	G	A	G	A	G	A	G	A
Countries to be opened	41	43	-	-	33	37	30	21	27	30
Languages requiring literature	40	90	-	-	31	82	10	11	10	37
Build Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	-
Purchase Mashriqu'l-Adhkár sites	2	9	1	1	2	5	2	8	3	23
Establish National Spiritual Assemblies	10	8	1	1	3	3	13	13	21	22
Acquire National Hazíratu'l-Quds	9	9	1	1	3	3	15	14	21	22
Incorporate National Spiritual Assemblies	12	5	1	1	3	1	13	7	2	3
Establish Publishing Trusts	2	2	-	-	1	1	1	1	2	3
Establish Israel Branches of National Spiritual Assemblies	2	2	1	1	1	-	2	1	1	2

G= Goal A= Achieved

In addition to a proportionally large increase in the membership of Bahá'í communities, the fourth and final phase of the Crusade, 1958–63, witnessed the erection of Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs in Kampala, Uganda and Sydney, Australia. Another near Frankfurt, Germany, was soon after completed. Additional Crusade objectives included the translation of Bahá'í writings into new languages (220 new language translations were achieved) and the enhancement of Bahá'í literature generally. Seven new publishing trusts were established. In addition to numeric expansion, other unique objectives were accomplished. Holy sites in Iran and Iraq were acquired and beautified. In Shiraz, preliminary measures were undertaken toward construction of the tomb of the wife of the Báb. The Sýfih-Chál in Tehran and the fortress of Chihríq were purchased. In Iraq, the remains of the father of Bahá'u'lláh were identified and reinterred.

Developments at the World Centre

The Development of Bahá'í Institutions

During the years of the Crusade, significant evolution of Bahá'í institutions occurred. In Israel, Shoghi Effendi extended land-holdings on the plain of 'Akká and surrounding the holy sites on Mt. Carmel and further developed gardens and buildings in the area surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh (the Haram-i-Aqdas). He oversaw the construction by 1957 of the International Archives building. Furthermore, in the years prior to the Crusade as well as those immediately before his death, Shoghi Effendi secured much of the land on which the buildings constituting the "Arc" could be completed at a later date.

Apart from such physical developments, Shoghi Effendi elaborated in the period 1952–57 the functions and powers of the institution of the Hands of the Cause. Following the appointments made in 1951 and 1952, the Guardian appointed a third group in October, 1957 (Haney, "The Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God" 333–94). The Hands were, he had stated in a cable of 29 February 1952, "invested in conformity with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament, twofold sacred function, the propagation and preservation of the unity of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh...." They were to propagate and preserve the unity of the Bahá'í Faith and were "destined to assume individually in the course of time the direction of institutions paralleling those revolving around the Universal House of Justice ..." (*Messages to the Bahá'í World* 21).²¹

The establishment of "Auxiliary Boards" by the Hands of the Cause in 1954 further elaborated the administrative principle that leadership operate through both elected and appointed institutions. Thirty-six members were appointed to five boards: 9 each in America, Europe, and Africa, 7 in Asia, and 2 in Australasia. Until 1957,

Board members had the functions of both protection and propagation of the Bahá'í Faith. In 1957, additional boards were appointed, specifically for protection of the Bahá'í Faith. The number of Auxiliary Board members expanded.

The Guardianship and Evolution of the Universal House of Justice

The International Bahá'í Council (IBC), established by the Guardian in January, 1951, assisted him in the course of the Crusade, particularly in consolidating the relationship between the World Centre and the newly established State of Israel and in acting on behalf of the Guardian in communications with the growing number of national Bahá'í communities.²² Membership of the International Bahá'í Council as first constituted included Benjamin Dunham Weeden and Gladys Anderson Weeden, Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum as liaison between the Guardian and the Council, Charles Mason Remey as president, Amelia Collins as vice-president, Jessie Revell as treasurer, Ethel Revell as Western assistant-secretary, and Lotfu'llah Hakím as Eastern assistant-secretary. The Council was later enlarged by the appointment of Ugo Giachery member-at-large, and Leroy Ioas, who became secretary-general (*Messages* 22). On 4 May 1955, the Guardian raised the membership of the Council to nine, by the addition of Sylvia Ioas. At Ridván 1961, the Council became an elected body.²³ At Ridván 1963, the members of the fifty-six established National Spiritual Assemblies participated in the election on Mt. Carmel of the first Universal House of Justice.

In the 1950s considerable contact was established with the newly created State of Israel. President Ben Zvi visited the Guardian in April, 1954, and numerous other public officials were also received at the Bahá'í Shrines. The establishment of a Bahá'í Department within the Ministry of Religious Affairs was followed by acceptance of the status of Bahá'í marriages and recognition of Bahá'í holy days.

Momentarily, the untimely death (1957) of Shoghi Effendi in the middle of the Crusade threw the Bahá'í community into grief. He left neither heir nor will and testament, and in a subsequent period of uncertainty the Hands of the Cause exercised their "stewardship," culminating in the election of the Universal House of Justice (Rúhíyyih Khánum, *Ministry of the Custodians*). During the same period Mason Remey, one of the Hands of the Cause, harbored and eventually acted on an ill-conceived aspiration to claim the Guardianship—an action judged by the Hands to be a transgression of the "Covenant," resulting in his expulsion from their ranks and from the community of believers. Despite this crisis brought by challenges to the legitimacy of Bahá'í institutions, the Hands of the Cause supervised the successful completion of virtually all Crusade goals.

To date, little has been written about relations and method of operation between the central institutions of the Faith—Shoghi Effendi, and later the International Bahá'í Council and the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land—and National Spiritual Assemblies as well as the various local and regional levels of Bahá'í administration on the various continents. Similarly, relations between national administrative bodies and regional and local administrative bodies are yet to be examined. Knowledge of how this global system operated in diverse cultural contexts will aid in understanding the Bahá'í administrative order. It might be assumed that the appointed arms of the system functioned differently in different locations, particularly where the concept of "authority" differed across cultures. In this context, the exercise of local autonomy, as opposed to centralized or external decision-making, has yet to be explored.

Legal Recognition

The objective of securing a firm legal basis for emerging Bahá'í institutions was pursued at numerous levels during the Crusade. Additionally, steps were made toward the elaboration and implementation of Bahá'í law. It was easier to obtain legal recognition in Western states than in Eastern states, primarily due to the more secular approach to law existing in Western societies. In fact, attempts by Bahá'ís to secure legal status in Islamic countries during the years of the Crusade may have brought their existence to the attention of hostile forces and precipitated their persecution. In Third World states, many of which still had colonial status in the 1950s, attempts to obtain legal recognition were more often thwarted by restricted or otherwise inadequate legal regimes than by consciously applied obstruction.

Within Bahá'í communities, Bahá'í laws and ordinances were enforced selectively rather than uniformly. The law of Huqúqu'lláh applied within Middle Eastern societies, but not in the West. Laws of personal status (marriage, divorce, etc.) were applied in Western Bahá'í communities but not in a number of Third World communities where requirements regarding morality and prohibitions on alcohol and drugs were introduced more gradually.

In Eastern societies, where the personal status of Bahá'ís was recognized due to traditional demarcation between religious (Islamic) and secular legal systems, the task of obtaining legal status for Bahá'í laws formed part of the Crusade's objectives. Yet while Shoghi Effendi had anticipated the establishment of a Bahá'í Court in Israel (a preliminary measure to the creation of the Universal House of Justice), the Hands of the Cause and later the International Bahá'í Council found it impossible to attain this goal "in the manner stipulated by Shoghi Effendi."

Nor was it possible to establish Bahá'í Courts as planned, in Tehran, Cairo, Baghdad, New Delhi, Karachi, and Kabul.

It was possible, however, to establish legal entities in Israel representing the National Spiritual Assemblies of the British Isles, Australia, Iran, Canada, New Zealand, Alaska, and Pakistan, which, added to those already existing, raised the number to eleven. The transferral of ownership of Bahá'í properties and holy sites to these legal entities during the lifetime of Shoghi Effendi and again during the crucial period immediately after his passing, assisted the Hands of the Cause in keeping these places in Bahá'í hands. In fulfillment of one of the World Centre's objectives for the Crusade, some progress was made toward codification of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, a task later completed under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

The Bahá'í International Community

In 1948 the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) was recognized as a nongovernmental organization affiliated with the United Nations Organization. Within a decade, several factors had combined to raise its profile within the Organization and with other non-governmental agencies. First, the BIC participated actively in the UN's social and economic agenda. A "Bahá'í Declaration on Human Obligations and Rights" was submitted in 1947 and "Proposals for Revision of the United Nations Charter" in 1955. Other statements were presented endorsing the Genocide Convention (1959), and in 1960 a statement was presented to a meeting of the United Nations Office of Public Information concerning the UN's program for new nations ("The Bahá'í Faith and the United Nations," *The Bahá'í World* 19: 378). In addition to such involvement in dialogue concerning international law and development policy, the Bahá'í International Community sought assistance for the Bahá'ís persecuted in Iran in 1955,²⁴ and in Morocco in 1962.²⁵

Persecution of the Persian Bahá'ís in 1955 resulted in consolidation of Bahá'í institutions on other continents. Persecution of the Egyptian Bahá'ís seriously inhibited their activities and prevented them from achieving all of their allotted Crusade tasks. The uneasy existence of Bahá'ís in Islamic countries was eventually felt by all Bahá'ís when the crowning event of the Crusade, a congress intended to be held in the vicinity of the Garden of Ridván in Baghdad in April, 1963, was by necessity held instead in London.

Discussion

In the Crusade's opening years, Shoghi Effendi had steered an infant religious community toward rapid administrative cohesion, global collaboration, and spiritual maturity. The Crusade was part of the "minor plan of God,"²⁶ set in a context of the spiritual, moral, social, and political crises in world affairs—as exemplified by the degeneration of morals and breakdown of families, the extension of corruption, particularly in business and government, the spread of materialism from the West to other continents, the ideological conflict between East and West now known as the Cold War, and the potential for global armed conflict.

The Crusade occurred during the period of post-war reconstruction, and many pioneers arrived at their posts at the same time as a rejuvenated and worldwide outpouring of missionaries of other religions. In later scholarship, the reception of Bahá'í pioneers and institutions by secular officials and governments will of necessity be examined: what was the effect and the value, for instance, of gaining legal recognition for Bahá'í institutions around the world? What impact did Bahá'í communities have on public life and morals, particularly in small states where the presence of Bahá'í pioneers was noticeable? Or were the Crusade years too soon for such relationships to evolve? Such questions can only be answered through empirical research.

During the Crusade, also, Bahá'í pioneers came into contact with virtually all the world's living faiths, creeds, and ideologies. Bahá'í communities were thus engaged in religious encounter not only with the historical religions—Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and the innumerable sects and denominations of which they are composed—but also with Communism in the Soviet Union and China and their adjoining territories, and materialism in Western societies and European societies in particular. Close examination of the pioneer experience should therefore contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and other belief systems in both Western and non-Western societies.

Despite the numbers of pioneers who dispersed during the Crusade, the phenomenon of pioneering has attracted little critical study. Momen has pointed out that as early as 1947 Shoghi Effendi had advised those who were taking the Bahá'í message to diverse cultural groups that the "fundamental prerequisite" for their success was "to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the diverse races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract" (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 25; cited in Moojan Momen, "Learning from History" 66). Given such guidance, it would be illuminating to consider the impact of pioneering on the core Bahá'í community (Did it imply a drain of that community's most talented and vital members? With what attitudes did pioneers enter foreign cultures? What

was the nature of the interaction between Bahá'í communities, as they undertook prosecution of joint goals of the Crusade?). The pioneers included rich and poor, young and elderly, educated and uneducated. Some were self-employed, while others required jobs. Their length of stay in the pioneer field ranged from a matter of weeks for some, to the remainder of their lives for others. If there were different “styles” of pioneering, these remain to be articulated. Obviously, the experience of pioneering differed greatly according to the qualities of the pioneer and the territory and culture entered. These and many other questions await further study.

There were instances of “mass conversion” on most continents during the World Crusade, detailed examination of which has barely begun. Smith has identified conversion motifs such as universalism, legal rationalism, social reconstructionism, millennialism, and esotericism in the rise of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths—although his empirical study mostly concerned Western communities (Smith, *Bábí and Baha'i Religions*). Research is required on the conversion motifs present among South Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Central Africans. How is it possible that illiterate and isolated villagers could comprehend the religious and social teachings of a religion that preached global unity? How could people whose life experience only brought them into contact with people of similar ethnicity understand allegiance to a “universal” religion? What has been the impact of this religion on their concept and practice of ethnicity? The rise of ethnonationalism in the late twentieth century requires development of the notion of “unity in diversity,” and study of the operation of diverse ethnicities within the worldwide Bahá'í community that first emerged during the Crusade decade could be an invaluable starting point.

A final question to be asked concerns the hermeneutical value of Bahá'í history: What meanings can be extracted from the human and social experiences of the Crusade decade? This question may be asked of individual experience, as well as of group experience. The study of the evolution of Bahá'í communities through the efforts of individuals explores Bahá'í approaches to history, biography, and psychology. In exploring motivations and intentions, such study requires methodological tools with which to interpret human actions and psychological models premised on a dualism of the “higher self” and “lower self” in creative tension. Such study relies also on ideas concerning the purpose of existence, which will in turn facilitate interpretation of the movements of actors operating within this “Bahá'í” worldview.

More broadly, one may well ask how description of the evolution of the Bahá'í community informs the theological claims of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi's emphatic assertion was that the efforts of the Bahá'ís during the World Crusade fulfilled the promises of Daniel which refer “specifically to the spread of the Faith over the face of the earth,” something that would occur “when the Bahá'í Faith is firmly established in all the virgin areas outlined in the Ten-Year Crusade, and the other goals of the Crusade are completed” *Lights of Guidance* 432).

This article has sought to point briefly to some issues pertinent to contemplating a history of the World Crusade. This Crusade constituted a unique decade of activity that prepared the foundations for the Bahá'í community's subsequent worldwide consolidation and emergence from obscurity. It tested the resources, raised the vision, strengthened the faculties of an infant religious community, and steered it toward rapid administrative cohesion, global collaboration, and spiritual maturity.²⁷ In addition to fulfilling prophecies in the Book of Daniel, the World Crusade, more than any previous Bahá'í enterprise before or since, planted the seeds of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order in virtually every human community on the planet.

Notes

1. A portion of Shoghi Effendi's correspondence with Bahá'í communities and institutions during the Crusade is available in such collections as *Dawn of a New Day: Messages to India 1923–1957, Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950–1957, Arohanui: Letters from Shoghi Effendi to New Zealand 1923–1957, Unfolding Destiny, and Messages to the Antipodes*.

2. See Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts*; Moojan Momen, “The Social Basis of the Bábí Upheavals in Iran (1848–53)” 157–83. For a full description of Bahá'í origins and beliefs, see Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*; also, William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*.

3. See, for example, Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, “The Bahá'í Faith 1957–1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments”; Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins 1892–1900*; Richard Hollinger, ed., *Community Histories*.

4. The most complete survey of the Ten Year Plan appears in *Bahá'í World 1954–63: “International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities”* 245–309; Marion Hofman, “Five Intercontinental Conferences” 310–32. Other important Bahá'í sources include *Bahá'í News* (USA), and Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*. For an overview

of the growth of the Bahá'í Faith during the Ten Year Plan and since, see Smith and Momen, "The Bahá'í Faith 1957–1988."

5. Although the appearance of successive volumes in the series *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* by Kalimát Press should be noted. These begin with Moojan Momen, ed., *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*; Juan R. Cole and Moojan Momen, eds., *From Iran East and West*.

6. The author has used the professionally maintained Bahá'í archives in Australia, the United States, and New Zealand, and wishes to acknowledge their invaluable assistance. He has also seen the lamentable condition of Bahá'í historical records in a number of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries, and has on one occasion recommended the establishment of a regional archival depository for small communities unable to establish their own. Such an initiative would have the advantages of saving priceless records from decay and improving their accessibility to researchers. Records could be returned to their national donors when they are in a position to maintain them adequately.

7. National Spiritual Assemblies were formed in Egypt and Sudan (1924), Iraq (1931), and Persia (Iran) (1934). Specific teaching plans were undertaken in Iraq (1947–50), Egypt and Sudan (1948–53), and Iran (1946–50).

8. A National Spiritual Assembly had been established in the United States and Canada in 1925 (Canada established a separate National Spiritual Assembly in 1948), and Bahá'í communities throughout North, South, and Central America conducted a series of plans from the late 1930s that provided a model for subsequent plans on other continents. The first "Seven Year Plan" (1937–44) established at least one center in each state and province of North America and in every Republic of Latin America. By the end of the second plan, 1946–53, there were 200 local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs) in North America and some sixty groups in Latin America. Separately, plans were undertaken by the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1948–53, and Central America, 1952–53. National Spiritual Assemblies were established in Central and South America in 1951.

9. A National Spiritual Assembly was established for Australia and New Zealand in 1934 and a teaching plan conducted 1947–53.

10. A National Spiritual Assembly was formed in the British Isles in 1923, and the British Bahá'ís conducted a teaching plan 1944–50. An additional plan was undertaken 1951–53. Progress in Western Europe was comparatively slow. Of several continental Bahá'í communities, only those in Germany and Austria (the National Spiritual Assembly of which also dated from 1923) were sufficiently consolidated to undertake a systematic teaching plan prior to the World Crusade (1948–53). The National Spiritual Assembly of Italy and Switzerland was established, the last of the twelve "national" communities participating in the World Crusade, at Ridván 1953.

11. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, Pakistan, and Burma was established in 1923, and its communities undertook two teaching plans, 1946–50, and another of 19 months, September 1951–April 1953. By 1953, Bahá'í communities had also been established in some satellite states within the former Soviet Union and in the Far Eastern societies of China and Japan.

12. The Jakarta conference was relocated to Singapore when the Indonesian government withdrew approval for the conference at the last minute. See Marion Hofman, "Five Intercontinental Conferences."

13. An article on the Knights of Bahá'u'lláh by this author is to appear in the forthcoming *Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. The "roll of honor" was, as promised, deposited in the vicinity of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh during commemorations attending the centenary of his ascension, in 1992.

14. Some territories were designated as "virgin" territories even though there is clear evidence of prior activities by Bahá'ís. The Society Islands, for instance, were referred to in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Heeding that call, John and Louise Bosch travelled to Tahiti for five months in 1920. Their account of their visit, "A Trip to Tahiti," was published in *Bahá'í World* 3: 368–71. A Christian minister from these islands is reported to have corresponded with 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Bahá'í World* 1946–50, 492). Furthermore, Miss Ariane Drollet (Vermeesh) became a Bahá'í through the Bosches and subsequently visited them in San Francisco before returning to Tahiti in 1924. Her father had also visited the San Francisco Bahá'ís (*Star of the West* 15.6: 178.) (In the 1950s, her daughter married Jean Sevin, a French pioneer to the islands.) Despite the ample evidence of Bahá'í contact with the French Polynesians, Shoghi Effendi nominated the islands a "virgin territory," and Australians Greta Lamprill and Glad Park were named Knights of Bahá'u'lláh after pioneering there for brief periods.

15. Luxembourg (4 localities); Cuba, Paraguay, and Uruguay (5 each); Finland (10); El Salvador (10); Arabia (12); Jamaica (13); Peru (14); Austria (14); Belgium (15); Norway (15); Colombia (15); Dominican Republic (15); Haiti (16); Venezuela (16); Guatemala (18); Portugal (18); Denmark (19); and Honduras (20).

16. Argentina, Iraq and Ecuador (21 localities); Sweden (23); Spain, Nicaragua, and Turkey (26 each); Holland (27); Chile (34); Burma (35); Italy (36); Costa Rica (39); Alaska (40); Pakistan (40); France (41); New Zealand (42); Panama (42); Mexico (43); Ceylon (now Sri Lanka, 44); Brazil (46); and Switzerland (49).

17. The present essay would seem to support Seena Fazel's recent assertion "...the criteria of geographical distribution with sociocultural diversity are the most appropriate ones for world religion and...the Bahá'í Faith meets these criteria" ("Is the Bahá'í Faith a World Religion?" 13).

18. This included the Belgian Congo, French Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius, Chagos Archipelago, the Seychelles, the Comoro Islands, Ruanda-Urundi, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar.

19. For discussion of Persian ethnicity and Bahá'í belief, see John Davidson and Marjorie Tidman, eds., *Integration and Cultural Diversity*; Graham Hassall, "Persian Bahá'ís in Australia"; and Chantal Saint-Blancat, "Nation et religion chez les immigrants iraniens en Italie."

20. Eric Bishop disregards the supranational Bahá'í community and describes Bahá'í as one of the "lesser groupings" within Islam, together with Yazdis, Druzes, and Mandaeans ("Islam in the Countries of the Fertile Crescent"). H. A. R. Gibb noted that Bahá'í "has had some success in Persia and the United States, and its headquarters are in Haifa in Palestine," and regarded Bahá'í as a "new religion, now definitely outside the pale of Islam" (*Islam: A Historical Survey* 127).

21. Amelia Collins was appointed a Hand 22/11/46, the only surviving appointee before the 1951 appointments. The **first contingent** of twelve Hands of the Cause, December 24, 1951: Holy Land: William Sutherland Maxwell, Charles Mason Remey, Amelia Collins; Persia: Valíyu'lláh Varqá, Tarázu'lláh Samandarí, 'Alí-Akbar Furútan; America: Horace Holley, Dorothy Baker, Leroy Ioas; Europe: George Townshend, Hermaun Grossmann, Ugo Giachery. A **second contingent** of seven, raising the total to nineteen, was appointed on 29 February 1952: Canada: Siegfried Schopflocher; United States: Corinne True; Persia: Dhikru'lláh Khádem, Shu'á'u'lláh 'Alá'í; Germany: Adelbert Mühlshlegel; Africa: Músá Banání; Australia: Clara Dunn (cable 29 February 1952—*Messages* 21). The number of Hands was kept at one *váhíd* (19) until 1957, when the Guardian raised the number to twenty-seven. Other Hands were appointed singly: Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm 26/3/52 (cable 26 March 1952—*Messages* 132); Jalál Kházeh 7/12/53 (*Messages* 55); Paul E. Haney 19/3/54 (*Messages* 57); 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá 15/11/55; Agnes B. Alexander 27/3/57. Final **third contingent** of eight was appointed in October 2, 1957: Enoch Olinga, William Sears, John Robarts in West and South West Africa; Hasan M. Balyúzí and John Ferraby in the British Isles; H. Collis Featherstone and Rahmatu'llah Muhájir in the Pacific; and Abu'l-Qásim Faizi in the Arabian Peninsula.

22. The IBC was "to conduct negotiations related to matters of personal status with civil authorities" (*Messages to the Bahá'í World* 7).

23. Its members were Jessie Revell, treasurer; 'Alí Nakhjavání, president; Lotfu'lláh Hakím; Ethel Revell; Charles Wolcott, secretary-general; Sylvia Ioas, vice-president; Mildred Mottahedeh; Ian Semple, assistant-secretary; and Borrah Kavelin as member-at-large. See *Messages to the Bahá'í World* 19, 31, 86, 128, 149, 13.

24. Bahá'í International Community, *Bahá'í Appeal for Religious Freedom in Iran*. On persecution of the Bahá'ís at this time, see Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*; Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power*; and Dilip Hiro, Iran under the Ayatollahs.

25. In December, 1962, fourteen Bahá'ís were tried in criminal court in Nador, Morocco, and found guilty of corrupting youth, forming an illegal association, and seeking to destroy Islam and the Moroccan State. The verdicts were overturned on appeal to the Moroccan Supreme Court. One commentator has suggested the Bahá'ís were caught in power plays between the Islamic clergy and the monarchy (Waterbury, "Kingdom-Building and the Control of the Opposition in Morocco").

26. The Bahá'í writings distinguish the work of the Bahá'í Community toward world unity (the "Minor Plan") from the processes working toward world unity embodied in world affairs in general (the "Major Plan").

27. The Hands of the Cause, writing at the conclusion of the Crusade in 1963, summarized its accomplishments in twenty-three points (Hands of the Cause Residing in the Holy Land, *The Bahá'í Faith 1844–1963*).

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