

Foreword: Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

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Unique among the religions of the world, the Bahá'í Faith rests on the foundation of four decades of Divine Revelation, during which period Bahá'u'lláh disclosed its teachings, designed to give rise to a spiritual and social transformation unparalleled in recorded history. The writings of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Faith and its authoritative interpreter, are indispensable for an accurate understanding of the principles of a religion which illuminates the entire range of human understanding, including such disciplines as history, psychology, economics, sociology, theology, and philosophy, and which provides profound insights into human nature, the spiritual dimension of creation, and the dynamics of social change. This volume has been prepared as an aid to the study of these precious writings, guiding the student to a fuller awareness of the truths they convey, and leading to a deeper perception of the stupendous achievements of Shoghi Effendi in his thirty-six year ministry. It is difficult to see how any present-day Bahá'í can claim to have a systematic and balanced understanding of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh without having made a careful and painstaking study of this priceless legacy bequeathed to the present and future generations of the Bahá'í Dispensation by its beloved Guardian.

Never before in the history of the world has humanity been blessed with a Covenant like that of Bahá'u'lláh, among whose features was provision of a means for authoritative interpretation following the passing of the Manifestation of God. Thus, in 1963, when the Universal House of Justice was brought into being and had begun to carry out its assigned functions to "guide, organize, and unify the affairs" of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world, following the passing of Shoghi Effendi, it was able to write that "The revealed Word, in its original purity, amplified by the divinely guided interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, remains immutable, unadulterated by any man-made creeds or dogmas, unwarrantable inferences, or unauthorized interpretations."

That the Covenant prescribed an institution providing authoritative interpretation has far-reaching consequences, indispensable for the realization of the goals of the Faith, This institution assures the integrity of the Faith and guards against that slow but steady corruption of the teachings over a period of decades and centuries, often by well-meaning believers, which occurred in all the preceding religions and which has been a predominating factor in their internal dissension and loss of influence, their antagonism toward other systems of belief, and their degeneration into intolerance and fanaticism. As the Universal House of Justice has pointed out, "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 or usurping the function of the Guardian."

That authoritative interpretation is vested exclusively in the Guardian, following the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has both a liberating and a beneficially restricting effect on members of the Faith. No individual believer can claim that his views are other than his own; he cannot insist upon the superiority of his own understanding of the teachings on the basis of his length of membership in the Faith, the number of books he has studied, his academic accomplishments, or his scholarly reputation in the community. Genuine respect for differing views, unfailing courtesy in considering what others have to say, and sincere admiration for the distinguished achievements of those whose efforts to acquire understanding have been prodigious, must never degenerate into an unquestioning acceptance of the views of other Bahá'ís about the meaning of the teachings.

A hallmark of the Bahá'í Faith is the strong encouragement it gives to the individual to acquire and express his own understanding of the Bahá'í teachings, liberating the mind to develop and apply its powers and to contribute to the enlightenment of others. The Universal House of Justice has written that "such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings." It is also cautioned that "although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís." The central purpose of this volume is that, through study of the writings of Shoghi Effendi, the reader will be aided to base his understanding on the authoritative interpretations of the Guardian, and through this means, to develop his own comprehension of the Bahá'í teachings and their effect on human society.

The writings of Shoghi Effendi disclose an inspiring vision of that glorious world of the future toward which humanity is steadily and inexorably evolving,

and for the attainment of which the Bahá'í Revelation has been disclosed. This vision of world unity, in which individual mercy and social justice are blended harmoniously, is both inspiring and reassuring. It motivates those who are labouring ceaselessly in all parts of the world to establish the Bahá'í Administrative Order as a precursor to the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, that Order within which humanity will find an abiding and enduring tranquillity in the years to come, and provides them with an orientation for the actions which they are called upon to take today in establishing the foundations for the world order institutions of the future. It also provides a welcome reassurance to those who might wonder whether social organization on a global scale will retain adequate freedom for individual discretion, diversity, and initiative, and will allow the spiritual life of humanity to flourish.

In his writings, the Guardian traces in some detail the dynamic interplay between the constructive and destructive forces at work in the world today; by this means he provides a comprehensive model in which to view the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a framework within which the course of present-day events can be assessed and the immediate future anticipated. Such a perspective is of particular value at this time when the changes on the world scene are so dramatic, and the fulfilment of prophetic expectation is so striking. He casts new light on the process of social change and on the successive stages through which the Bahá'í community will pass, in its evolution from a small band of heroic and beleaguered adherents, to a vast multitude of peoples creating a world civilization destined to flourish in the millennia to come. Recent developments in mathematics have illustrated how an almost imperceptibly small modification to one element of a strongly nonlinear system can give rise to a total change in the state or condition of that system; this discovery provides a useful insight into the manner in which so revolutionary a change in the global social system is being effected by a Revelation which was ignored by the generality of mankind in the decades immediately following its advent.

One of the most challenging issues raised by the sceptical and dubious is that the aims of the Faith appear utopian and impractical; world unity and universal peace, an unrealized dream from the dawn of recorded history, seems to be an unrealistic expectation in a century of global warfare and fragmentation. Surely, it is argued, these praiseworthy ideals cannot be brought into being simply by the expression of noble sentiments or even by widespread adherence to a common set of exalted values. This concern may best be resolved through a careful study of the Guardian's writings, and through reference to the means he outlines, and the measures he instituted, to translate the vision of a new world into a practical reality. Embedded in these writings are to be found illuminating examples of his systematic and realistic approach to planning the accomplishment of vast goals, using the available resources to best advantage, effecting an efficient coordination of diverse activities, and exercising the necessary patience and restraint to ensure that progress was made on a secure foundation. His writings demonstrate that the Bahá'í principles provide the means by which the visionary goals of the Faith are to be attained, and

illustrate the practical application of these principles. His approach to the propagation of the teachings and the establishment of its institutions is guided by an unshakable faith in the ultimate triumph of the Cause and is distinguished by a consistent adherence to principle which serves as a model to all Bahá'ís in their daily lives.

Within the writings of Shoghi Effendi is to be found illuminating commentary on contemporary events, clarifying their significance in relation to the unfoldment of the Plan of God for mankind. The implications of the formation of the League of Nations, the rise of materialistic philosophies, the economic and social chaos of the nineteen-thirties, the global and regional wars of the twentieth century, the inauguration of the United Nations, the influence of the United States of America in international affairs, and the antagonisms of the bipolar world which emerged from the second world war, are among the events considered. The Guardian's consideration of these matters offers to all Bahá'ís an instructive example of how the insights of the teachings can be used to illuminate what is happening in the world today and to set it into perspective in such wise as to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of these teachings, but without intruding into the realm of partisan politics.

Throughout the entire course of the Bahá'í Dispensation, believers will be astounded by the power of the Guardian's mind, his prodigious accomplishments, and the eloquence of his pen. The study of the writings of Shoghi Effendi will repay the effort devoted to it a thousandfold, in the profound understanding which it will provide of the wondrous Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One.

PETER J. KHAN
Haifa, August 1991

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