

Shoghi Effendi Rabbani

Grandson of `Abdu'l-Bahá and his successor, Shoghi Effendi was born in Palestine in 1897 and received an Oxford education. As head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 until his death in 1957, Shoghi Effendi translated the most important of Bahá'u'lláh's scriptures into elegant English, wrote extensive interpretations and explanations of the Bahá'í teachings, built the Bahá'í organizational system and oversaw the spread of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide.

The Bahá'í scriptures constitute the books, essays and letters composed by Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. Together they comprised nearly 60,000 letters, a significant portion of which are available in English; the content of this scriptural corpus is encyclopedic in nature. The Bahá'í teachings are those principles and values promulgated in the Bahá'í scriptures, and touch on nearly every aspect of human life.

Central Bahá'í teachings are: the "oneness of God," that there is only one God and that God is actively concerned about the development of humanity; the "oneness of religion," that God sends messengers such as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh to humanity to educate it in morals and in social values; and the "oneness of humanity," that all humans come from the same original stock and deserve equal opportunities and treatment.

The teachings also include: a detailed discussion of the spiritual nature of human beings, prayers and religious practices to foster spiritual growth, a strong emphasis on the importance of creating unified and loving families, and a prescription for solving the social ills of human society.

The Bahá'í community consists of those people who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh as God's messenger for this day and who are actively trying to live by, and promulgate, the Bahá'í teachings. The community has no clergy and a minimum of ritual. Independent investigation of truth, private prayer and collective discussion and action are the favored modes of religious action. Usually Bahá'í communities have no weekly worship service; rather, a monthly program called "feast" is held that includes worship, consultation on community business, and social activities.

Through a process that involves no campaigning and nominations, each local community elects annually by secret ballot a nine-member local spiritual assembly. The assembly coordinates community activities, enrolls new members, counsels and assists members in need, and conducts Bahá'í marriages and funerals. A nine-member national spiritual assembly is elected annually by locally elected delegates, and every five years the national spiritual assemblies meet together to elect the Universal House of Justice, the supreme international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. Worldwide there are about 20,000 local spiritual assemblies; the United States has over 1,400 local spiritual assemblies and about 120,000 Bahá'ís.

THE BAHÁ'Í VIEW OF THE CHALLENGES FACING HUMANITY

The Bahá'í scriptures emphasize that the challenges facing humanity stem from two sources: age-old problems that could have been solved long ago had humanity accepted and acted on the moral and spiritual values given it by God's messengers; and new challenges stemming from the creation of a global society, which can be solved if the moral and spiritual principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh are accepted and followed. Chief among these principles are:

Racial unity. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators and blights human progress. Bahá'u'lláh's call that all humans accept and internalize the principle of the oneness of humanity is partly directed at destroying racist attitudes.

Emancipation of women. The denial of equality to women perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. Even though he lived in the 19th-century Middle East, Bahá'u'lláh called for the equality of women and enunciated their full rights to education and work.

Economic justice. The inordinate disparity between rich and poor is a source of acute suffering and keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt effectively with this issue. The Bahá'í scriptures offer a fresh approach, including such features as a new perspective concerning money, profits, work and the poor; an understanding of the purpose of economic growth and the relationships between management and labor; and certain economic principles, such as profit sharing.

Patriotism within a global perspective. The Bahá'í scriptures state that citizens should be proud of their countries and of their national identities, but such pride should be subsumed within a wider loyalty to all of humanity and to global society.

Universal education. Historically, ignorance has been the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples and the perpetuation of prejudice. The Bahá'í scriptures state that every human being has a fundamental right to an education, including the right to learn to read and write.

A universal auxiliary language. A major barrier to communication is the lack of a common language. Bahá'u'lláh urged humanity to choose one auxiliary tongue that would be taught in all schools in addition to the local native language, so that humans could understand each other anywhere they go on the planet.

The environment and development. The unrestrained exploitation of

natural resources is a symptom of an overall sickness of the human spirit. Any solutions to the related crises of environmental destruction and economic development must be rooted in an approach that fosters spiritual balance and harmony within the individual, between individuals, and with the environment as a whole. Material development must serve not only the body, but the mind and spirit as well.

A world federal system. The Bahá'í scriptures emphatically state that for the first time in its history, humanity can and must create an international federation capable of coordinating the resources of, and solving the problems facing, the entire planet. A high priority needs to be given to the just resolution of regional and international conflicts; responding to urgent humanitarian crises brought on by war, famine or natural disasters; forging a unified approach to environmental degradation; and establishing the conditions where the free movement of goods, services and peoples across the globe becomes possible.

Religious dialogue. Religious strife has caused numerous wars, has been a major blight to progress, and is increasingly abhorrent to the people of all faiths and of no faith. The Bahá'í view that all religions come from God and thus constitute valid paths to the divine is a cornerstone of Bahá'í interfaith dialogue. Bahá'u'lláh calls on Bahá'ís to consort with the followers of all religions in love and harmony. Because Bahá'ís share with other religionists many common values and concerns, they frequently work with local interfaith organizations.

THE BAHAI RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES FACING HUMANITY

Bahá'ís have responded to the challenges facing humanity in two ways: internally, by creating a Bahá'í community that reflects the principles listed above and that can serve as a model for others; and externally, to help heal the damage that inequality, injustice and ignorance have done to society.

The international Bahá'í community contains within it 2,100 ethnic groups speaking over 800 languages. In some nations minority groups make up a substantial fraction of the Bahá'í population; in the United States, for example, perhaps a third of the membership is African American, and Southeast Asians, Iranians, Hispanics and Native Americans make up another 20 percent. Racial integration of local Bahá'í communities has been the standard practice of the American Bahá'í community since about 1905. Women have played a major, if not central, role in the administration of local American Bahá'í communities, and of the national community, since 1910. American Bahá'ís have been involved in education, especially in the fostering of Bahá'í educational programs overseas, since 1909.

Worldwide, numerous Bahá'ís have become prominent in efforts to promote racial amity and equality, strengthen peace groups, extend the reach and effectiveness of educational systems, encourage ecological awareness and

stewardship, develop new approaches to social and economic development, and promote the new field of conflict resolution. The Bahá'í Faith runs seven radio stations in less developed areas of the world that have pioneered new techniques for educating rural populations and fostering economic and cultural development. The Faith also conducts about 700 schools, primarily in the third world, as well as about 200 other literacy programs. Bahá'í communities sponsor 500 development projects, such as tree-planting, agricultural improvement, vocational training and rural health-care. The Bahá'í international community is particularly active at the United Nations and works closely with many international development agencies. Many national and local Bahá'í communities have been active in promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation.

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