The Baha'i Faith

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CHAPTER VII

THE BAHA'I FAITH

"BAHA'U'LLAH!" They speak the name softly, accenting the second and last syllables. In spite of the foreign tang they make it sound beautiful, like the name Jesus for devoted Christians, like Jehovah God for die Witnesses on Main Street, like Father Divine for the reborn and angels in the Peace Mission Kingdom. Bahá'u'lláh is the "Splendor of God," the Persian messiah. He is more than that. He is the Great Prophet in whom all nations and all religions should be united. To three thousand Americans he is the "hope of the world." They are members of a "world religion" and call themselves Bahá'ís.

"Bahá'u'lláh!"

The name was dramatically brought to America with the World Congress of Religions in 1893, an occasion so in keeping with the message of Bahá'u'lláh that Bahá'ís feel it all belongs in a prophetic plan. Here, at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, it seemed that all nations, tribes, and religions were brought together for the deliberate purpose of creating interfaith understanding. Oriental priests mingled with the clerics of the West. For two months Jew, Christian, Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Taoist, and Confucian, together

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with many lesser-known groups, sought a common denominator of belief which would unite all religions against irreligion. On the thirteenth day, one of the delegates arose to say:

"In the Palace of Bahji, just outside the Fortress of Akka, on the Syrian coast, there died a few months ago, a famous Persian sage, Bahá'u'lláh — the 'Splendor of God' — who regards all nations as one, and all men as

brothers. He uttered sentiments so noble, so Christ-like, that we repeat them as our closing words: 'All nations should become one in faith and all men brothers; the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; diversity of religions should cease and differences of race be annulled. Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather, glory in this, that he loves his kind.'"

These words, although reflecting so perfectly the spirit of the Congress, were lost in the sensationalism of the gay nineties' "World's Fair." The representatives of the faiths of the universe went back home; the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran were taken, each by his particular adherent. Missionaries returned to proselytize, each for his own belief. But a few spiritual gypsies, remembering, looked eastward wistfully. They believed that Bahá'u'lláh had not only an idea, but a divine revelation. By a special providence and their own pursuing, they got hold of his writings, "tablets," filled with wisdom, symbolism, and authority. They translated from the Persian such works as Seven Valleys and Four Valleys, a treatise on the journey of the soul to its final unfoldment; Hidden Words, a summary of the truths inherent in revelations; and the Book of Certitude, in which was interpreted the oneness of all faiths.

For many Americans, these sacred writings had the spirit

and sweep of prophecy, and they were ready to accept Bahá'u'lláh as the mouthpiece of God. These were not people whom the churches had passed by; some of them had passed up the churches, feeling that creeds and sects were narrow and confining. To them Bahá'u'lláh's words came as a supreme challenge, "O ye people of the world! The Religion of God is for the sake of love and union; make it not the cause of enmity and conflict! By My Word shall the diverse sects of the world attain unto the light of real union!" Lured by this utopian promise, well-to-do pilgrims set out for the Syrian coast. There they found that the poor and the lowly were following the same star to the prison shrine of the Persian Sage.

"Bahá'u'lláh!"

I saw his words carved in the alabastrine arches above each of the nine doors of America's most magnificent religious structure, the Bahá'í House of Worship, in Wilmette, Illinois. I saw people of many races and creeds enter these doors to worship together, people who believed that the Prophet's dream to unite all religions had been fulfilled. What was the line interrupted by my heckler friend in Hometown long ago? "Creeds are but branches of a tree — " At last I had found a group which claimed to be the primal point of unity for the divergent branches of the world's tree of faith. They call their temple the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, a Persian word meaning the "source of the mention of God." They call it the "Tabernacle of the Great Peace" that proclaims the oneness of mankind. They call it the "Portal to Freedom," and for one familiar with Bahá'í history there is no more descriptive term.

It sounds back through more than a hundred years to Mirza Muhammad Ali. At sunset on May 23, 1844, this young reformer,

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pursued by suspicious rulers and indignant religionists, arrived at Shiraz, Persia. A disciple was waiting at the gates of the city. To him he confessed that he was the "Bab." He meant the "gate" through which a great new prophet should enter to unite all nations and all religions. In the midst of the squabbles of Moslem, Christian, and Jew, he dared accuse that all had forgotten their common origin. He contended that in the same Divine and Universal Will, God had revealed Himself through Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. These prophets were equal. They were mirrors reflecting God's glory, messengers bearing the imprint of the same Creator, torches lighted at one immortal fire. In the Great New Prophet, God's spirit would again be manifest. But Persia was not America and Mirza Muhammad Ali was hated by all faiths. Like John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness, who prepared the way for the Founder of Christianity, the Bab was destined for martyrdom. He was jailed with his disciples in prison barracks in the city of Tabriz. The day of execution was set for July 8, 1850.

When the guards came for the Bab he was seated at his prison table talking to a disciple. He begged them to allow him to finish his conversation. They refused. But as he was dragged from the room, he cried, "No earthly power can silence me until I have said all I must say to this disciple!"

Thousands of spectators crowded the roofs of buildings and jammed the streets through which they hauled him. In a gateway between two barracks, a crosspiece was fastened. Seven hundred and fifty men with rifles were ranged in three files for the killing. The Bab was lifted up. The heavy ropes that bound his wrists were fastened to a spike in the crosspiece,

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and he hung suspended above the ground. Orders for the killing were given in rapid succession; three times, two hundred and fifty rifles fired at the dangling figure. When the smoke cleared, the Bab stood on the ground unhurt. The gunmen's bullets had severed the ropes and set him free. There was a moment of fierce silence. Then the spell was broken by convulsive excitement. Spectators struggled in frenzied escape from this incredible portent. The would-be executioners cried, "Miracle! Miracle!"

Their frantic, disordered search led finally to the Bab's cell. There he sat with his disciple, speaking as calmly as though there had been no interruption. They stopped in the doorway, reluctant to seize him again. In a few moments he rose from his chair. Walking toward them, he said, "I have finished my conversation. Now you may fulfill your intention."

Once more he was suspended in the gateway before a new firing squad. The spectators climbed back to the roofs. For a moment the crowded street was hushed. Then the rifles spoke again, and the body of Mirza Muhammad Ali became a mass of bleeding flesh and shattered bone.

But his message lived. "I am but a letter out of that most mighty book and a dewdrop from that limitless ocean, but a Great New Prophet shall appear! Wait for him!"

Nothing could quench the messianic hope that had been awakened in the hearts of the Bab's disciples. Nothing could destroy the dream in which they saw mosque, cathedral, and synagogue blended into one house of worship to the living God. Known throughout Persia as Babis, they were subjected to imprisonment and death. Persian religionists felt themselves in danger of being absorbed and destroyed by this new

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and revolutionary faith. Political wrath burst upon the Babis when they were accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Ten thousand were killed between 1850 and 1860. Never since the time of the early Christians had followers of a new religion been so persecuted. If the Bab's "Promised One" did not come soon there would be none left to acclaim him, for the last remnant of those who believed were rounded up at Baghdad in 1863 to be shipped to a prison at Constantinople. While waiting deportation in an abandoned wilderness garden called Redvan, a man of fifty-one years, greatly respected among the Babis, rose prophetically, summoned his comrades around him, and said:

"This is the Day in which mankind beholds the Face, and hears the Voice of the Promised One! The call of God has been raised, and the light of His countenance has been lifted upon men.... Great indeed is this day! The allusions made to it in all the sacred Scriptures call it the Day of God! Bestir yourselves, for the promised hour is at hand!"

Bahá'u'lláh stood before the Babis in the person of Mirza Husayn Ali. He had been a disciple with them for nineteen years. He had suffered with them in their persecutions, gone with them through their blood baptism, spent years with them in the wilderness retreats. The son of a wealthy Persian, he had abandoned the world to follow the teachings of the "Oneness of All Mankind." It was he who had exclaimed after the killing in Tabriz, "My head longeth for the spears! The blood shed in the path of the Bab is more precious to me than all else!" Now he was transfigured. He no longer spoke as a Babi. He no longer was a Babi; he was the "Splendor of God !" As Jesus in His day, as Mohammed in his, so now Bahá'u'lláh!

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Babis who had been in hiding came fearlessly to Redvan. They wanted to be near him whether it meant deliverance or greater persecution. They were now Bahá'ís, the chosen of Bahá'u'lláh. For nine days in the shadows of this wilderness garden, the light o~ the "Splendor of God" shone upon their lives. For nine days, eighty disciples drawn from diverse faiths sat with their Master and heard his words of "hidden wisdom":

"Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another in the utmost love and harmony. So powerful is the light of unity that

it can illuminate the whole earth!"

The glorious tryst at Redvan was ended abruptly by the intrusion of the persecutors. Bahá'u'lláh and his Bahá'ís were carted off to Constantinople, then to Adrianople, and finally to Akka, a prison city to which only the worst criminals were sent. The disciples never doubted that their leader could have delivered them all, but great prophets never employ miracles to save themselves from suffering. Bahá'u'lláh was to spend his entire life as a prisoner. He was thrown into a filthy dungeon, shackled with a heavy chain that locked him to his prison wall. His followers were forced to watch as he was whipped and dragged through the narrow barrack passages of Akka.

Prison walls could not conceal the "Splendor of God." In the wide stretches of the desert and in the busy market places, people heard that the Promised One had been revealed. Those who had looked for his coming made pilgrimages to the prison-temple. Not permitted to enter, they waited until he showed himself at the window and raised his hand in blessing. When they wept for him, he called assuringly, "Fear not. These

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doors shall be opened. My tent shall be pitched on Mount Carmel, and the utmost joy shall be realized."

The faithful returned to their homes comforted, while the abbatial blessings reached beyond the circle of believers. From the hand of Bahá'u'lláh came a resistless tide of personal epistles, bearing commanding salutations:Hearken, O Sultan, to the speech of Him that speaketh the truth....

O King of Paris! Tell the priest to ring the bells no longer! The Most Mighty Bell hath appeared!

O Czar of Russia! Incline thine ear unto the voice of God.... All the atoms cry aloud: Lo! The Lord is come!

O King of Berlin! Give ear unto the Voice calling from this manifest Temple!

O Pope! Rend the veils asunder! The Word which the Son concealed is made manifest!

O Rulers of America and Presidents of the Republics therein! Hearken to the strains of the Dove on the Branch of Eternity singing the melody! There is no God but Me, the Everlasting, the Forgiver, the Generous!
Some laughed derisively as they read these messianic edicts; others put them quietly aside. Queen Victoria of England pondered over the lines, "The Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of the world, the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith."

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"If this be of God," she observed, "it will stand; if not, there is no harm done."

No outward change was effected. The roads of faith still ran their separate ways. But the Great Prophet had challenged the world, and Bahá'ís felt a ground-swell stirring beneath the religious consciousness of men everywhere.

In 1870, Bahá'u'lláh, through the intercession of influential Persians, rode from his barracks in the carriage of a Mohammedan sheik to the palace of Bahji within the prison city. He was still a captive, but here in comfortable quarters he was united with his family. Sometimes he was permitted to journey to Mount Carmel where, in lonely meditation, he knelt where the future shrine of the martyred Bab should be. Was it here that the organizational plans for the world-wide Bahá'í faith were born? Was it here that he received divine inspiration for his prolific literary works? There was little rest for him at Bahji, for the faithful and the curious milled about the palace grounds. Even the rulers who kept him imprisoned stood in awe at his popularity, wisdom, and works.

A noted Orientalist of Cambridge, who visited him, said, "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 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!"

Despite this growing process of deification, Bahá'u'lláh, like a good steward, prepared wisely for death. Having lived to

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reveal his message, dying, he thought only of its dissemination. From the "station of his Deity" he drew up his final will and testament which left no doubt about the "plan of God" concerning his successor. His eldest son should no longer be called Abbas Effendi. He was now Abdul-Baha, the Servant of Baha, and upon him the Covenant of the Cause should fall.

Thus with Bahá'u'lláh's death on May a8, 1892, the inviolable apostolic succession of the Bahá'í movement was begun. Enthusiastic followers immediately began to speak of Abdul-Baha as another prophet, a new Manifestation of God. They remembered excitedly that this son of Baha-'u'llah had been born in the very hour that the Bab first declared his mission. Aged disciples related how, as a boy of eight, Abbas Effendi was brought to his father's dungeon. In the deep shadows, his terrified eyes beheld the "Splendor of God" chained to the wall, his swollen and bleeding neck encased in a steel collar. From that moment the bond between them was more than that of father and son or master and disciple. At Redvan, as a young man of nineteen, he was the first to call his father the "Blessed Perfection." Along the flagging march to Akka, he followed the little exiled band and guarded Bahá'u'lláh's tent.

It was Abbas Effendi, as a mature disciple of the Cause of God, who persuaded the Persian sheik to effect the removal to Bahji. He had gazed so long upon the

glory of his father that Bahá'ís now saw that glory reflected in him. He quickly suppressed all attempts at deification. As the Bab was the gate through whom Bahá'u'lláh appeared, so, Abdul-Baha contended, he was merely the interpreter. But his supreme authority was not to be questioned. Bahá'u'lláh had referred to him as "the Center of My Covenant." He had made the

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commands concerning him explicit, "When the Ocean of My Presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation hath been completed, turn your faces towards Him whom God hath purposed, who hath branched from this Ancient Root!"

With this divine legacy, Abdul-Baha inherited his father's political and religious enemies. The accusation had not changed — the Bahá'ís were plotting to overthrow world governments and set up a theocracy. For forty years Abdul-Baha saw the world from behind prison walls. He saw ancient roads built for man's salvation so littered with strife, that they were leading to destruction. Pilgrims who came to him at Akka heard him say that it was not his intention to found another religion. There were too many already; there should be but one. All faiths should dissolve into the "Splendor of God." And there should be a temple, a home for the One Universal Faith. Such a sanctuary would be a mighty influence for the union of all men.

On his release from Akka bondage, August 31, 1908, when the Turkish revolution overthrew the Ottoman Empire and set all political and religious prisoners free, the man who had entertained pilgrims himself began a pilgrimage. He traversed his homeland, the Orient, and Europe in search of a suitable location for the first Bahá'í temple. During the days of Bahá'u'lláh, Russian Bahá'ís had undertaken the building of a house of worship in Ishquabad [sic. -J.W.]. But was Russia the proper setting? True, the light of divine revelation had always risen in the East and shed its radiance upon the West, but Abdul-Baha found the East a mélange of national suspicion and international discord. There was enmity among men who preached good will and impending threat of world war. Wondering

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whether in his day the West should be the source of more than mere reflected glory, he turned his face toward America.

In the spring of 1912, the Servant of Bahá'u'lláh bade his friends good-by with these words, "I am going to the United States to establish the fundamental principles of our Cause and to proclaim the oneness of the world of humanity and the equality of all men."

For the next nine months a Persian seer was in the American news. He was now sixty-four, a man prophetic in body and spirit. His eyes had a sorrowful, quietly longing expression, as one who brought with him a gaze that had rested much on God and longed that every man might see Him, too. His beard was snow-white and his long hair was covered with a small felt turban. His face was slightly wrinkled but his skin was radiant. He was of medium size, very strong

in form, muscularly built, yet sensitized by some mystical power. He traveled with a retinue of servants, secretaries, and devotees. He spoke no English, but in purest classical Persian greeted those who thronged about him in New York. A traveling companion interpreted his words, "I pray that you may be manifestations of the love of Bahá'u'lláh; that each one of you may become like a clear lamp of crystal from which the rays of the bounties of the Blessed Perfection may shine forth to all nations and peoples!"

He crossed the continent and visited America's great cities. Church, temple, and synagogue welcomed him. He met all creeds, classes, and races on their own level. Photographers persuaded him to pose for the press and the movies. He appeared in the Chicago Masonic Temple and in the Washington, D. C., Public Library Hall. He brought material and spiritual

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blessing to the slums of New York. He spoke in America s great universities. Columbia was impressed; the president of Leland Stanford said, "Abdul-Baha will surely unite the East and the West, for he treads the mystical way with practical feet."

His knowledge of world affairs marked him as a prophet. In Los Angeles in October 1912 he said, "We are on the eve of the battle of Armageddon. The time is two years hence, when only a spark will set aflame the whole of Europe. The social unrest in all countries, the growing religious skepticism antecedent to the millennium, and already here, will set aflame the whole of Europe. By 1917 kingdoms will fall and cataclysms will rock the earth."

He held out no hope that the Bahá'í faith could stem the onrush of Armageddon. Instead he said that war was inevitable. The old world had failed to develop the spiritual powers of the human heart in proportion to the outreaches of science.

Editorial comments were generous:
"No religious movement of recent times is nearly so significant as that of Bahá'ísm." — Portland Oregonian.

"The religion of the Bahá'ísts has nothing of the eccentricity or faddism of so many modern religions and none of their shallow philosophy. It is simply a synthesis of the noblest ethics of the world around one common center — love and good will to all men." — Boston Congregationalist.

"Bahá'ísm should be welcomed as one more indication of the drawing together of races and the coming co-operation of man in the establishment of what in both Eastern and Western language is called the kingdom of God." — The Christian Register.
Criticism generally was not directed at Abdul-Baha but, rather, against the fanatical devotion with which he was hailed

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by American zealots. Wherever he appeared, someone in the crowds claimed that a

glance from him had an electrical effect. Women came forward to kiss his hands. One enthusiast said that she "had seen God!" A minister, feeling the touch of Abdul-Baha's hand, said that his heart melted to tears, that his voice choked in his throat and that he could not have spoken a single word had his life depended on it. America was being initiated to a hypnotic spiritual power.

The climax of the grand tour was reached in Wilmette, Illinois, where an influential group of believers had selected a site for a temple. As early as 1903, a supplication had been sent to the Servant of Baha to which he had given his fervent assent. Abdul-Baha's endorsement of the "sacred spot" was graphically related to me as I rode up Sheridan Road one day with Albert Windust, one of the earliest American Bahá'ís.

"It was May first of 1912," he began, "that the Bahá'ís followed the carriage of Abdul-Baha along this very way. We had set up a tent on the temple site. Five hundred seats were arranged in three circles with nine aisles leading to the center area. That is the way he wanted it. We expected him to drive his carriage right up to the tent, so the people formed an avenue from the road to the entrance. But the Servant of Bahá'u'lláh surprised us all by getting out and walking briskly to the temple grounds. There, at high noon, he said, 'The power which has gathered you here today notwithstanding the cold and windy weather is indeed mighty and wonderful. It is the power of God, the divine favor of Bahá'u'lláh! Thousands of Mashriqu'l-Adhkars will be built in the Orient and Occident, but this, being the first one erected in the Occident, will be of greatest importance.' With these words, he took a golden trowel and broke the

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ground. Then he called for a workman's spade. After turning up some of the earth, he asked everyone to come forward and do the same. As they did, they announced their nationality. Thus, symbolically, all of us prepared for the ideal unity of which the Bab spoke and for which Bahá'u'lláh lived and died."

The record said that all of the major countries of Europe, the Near East and the Orient, the Jews of the world, and the North American Indians were represented that day.

In devout reminiscence, Windust went on: "When the last spadeful of earth had been turned, Abdul-Baha set down a common field stone and said, 'Now the Temple is already built!'"

To hear again of such indomitable faith made understandable the imprint which the son of Bahá'u'lláh left on American religious life. The temple was to cost over a million dollars, and in 1912 there was less than forty thousand in the Bahá'í treasury. Yet he said, "The Temple is already built!" Did he mean the "Temple of the Word" in people's hearts, or did he foresee the response of a believing and generous segment of the American public? All of the money came through voluntary subscription. Contributions, generally, were not large, but they ran the range from a peddler's donation on Chicago's south side to a gift

from the late movie actress, Carole Lombard. Soon, believers all over the world were sending their offerings. An anonymous giver sent a thousand dollars, simply addressed to "The Bahá'í House of Peace."

Abdul-Baha predicted that America, with this temple at Wilmette as headquarters, would lead all nations spiritually. He maintained that the American people were worthy of being the first to build the "Tabernacle of the Great Peace," and to proclaim the oneness of mankind. Bahá'ís felt that no greater

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commission had ever been sounded on American soil. From their temple at Wilmette a unifying truth should emanate to all the world.

The dome of the amazing structure now loomed in the distance. As we approached, I had to admit that it was indeed a composite of mosque, cathedral, and synagogue. The East was blended with the West in a magnificent allegory of architectural trends — Greek, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Byzantine. It was the kind of temple one would expect to glimpse just inside the pearly gates. It was patterned motion, the Taj Mahal of the Americas. In spite of the majestic austerity of the great, towering three-storied nonagon, two galleries, luxurious in their simplicity of line, encircled all with warmth and quiet welcome.

I stood for a moment in front of this alabaster house of worship, somewhat overwhelmed. Nine great pillars of white quartz rise in the form of a circle from deep within a caisson. These pillars frame nine sections of intricate masonry with recessed windows and nine cathedral doors, one in each section. This comprises the outermost unit or the first story. Within this, offset from it, the design is repeated in a loftier nonagon which rises triumphantly to supersede the first and form the second story. Between these pillars are sections of concave arcs and crystal latticework. From the interior of this second unit, nine majestic pylons thrust upward for a hundred and sixty feet, resolving into a clerestory of brilliant white filigree. It is granite spun into a texture of fine lace, so that one feels not massive weight, but is reminded, rather, of painstaking needlework faithfully embroidered into some ancient ecclesiastical robe.

"The nine pylons," Windust explained, "symbolize the nine

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living religions of the world. These, rising from a common base, the heart of man, reach upward toward God. The higher they rise, the nearer to one another they become, until, when they attain their highest goal, they become one. All great religions are unified in the Bahá'í faith."

It would be difficult to find a nobler ideal than this at the heart of any American religion. And yet a spirit of loneliness pervaded the temple grounds, and a sense of waiting hung over the glory of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. Even

though an occasional car stopped in the drive, the great doors seemed to call in vain to the races of men hurrying by. The feeling was so impelling that I turned to Windust and asked how he accounted for the fact that the Bahá'í faith with its all-inclusive aspect was still a "little-known" religion.

"We have ninety assemblies with a total of three thousand members in the United States," he replied defensively. "But one cannot measure the scope of the movement by these figures. We have always realized that Bahá'u'lláh's ideals must come through a slow, evolutionary process. But we have proudly watched their development in the affairs of men. We are convinced that the United Nations Organization is a gesture toward the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's message. Woodrow Wilson knew of the sacred writings before he went to the Hague with his plan for a League of Nations. I think it is highly significant that many world leaders are using Bahá'u'lláh's ideas effectively even though they do not acknowledge their divine origin."

It was a good argument, yet I detected a note of pain in Windust's voice that suggested how keenly he felt the ineptitude of men to get hold of Bahá'í teachings. It hinted of the

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tedious, stubborn manner in which humanity accepts all simple truths. But I knew that public opinion regarded the ninety assemblies, sparsely dotting the forty-eight states, as conclusive evidence of the limited progress of the American Bahá'í community. This is further emphasized by a comparison with other groups dating back to the year of the World's Congress of Religions. Christian Science, whose birthday closely approximates the advent of the Bahá'í faith into America, lays rightful claim to over 300,000 active members. I was ready to attribute such disproportionate growth, paradoxically, to the ambitious goals of Bahá'u'lláh's followers. The legacy of faith which he left to the world is definitely not egocentric. Personal emphasis in this religion is subordinated to the interglobal idea; salvation for the individual is attained by the vision of a common world citizenship. This would seem to be almost synonymous with the democratically interfaith platform of Father Divine; however, Divine's rugged, almost uncouth, appeal breaks with this world religion when he holds out unlimited glories for the individual. To the blackest sheep in his fold, he promises green pastures of peace, freedom from want and fear, and a ringside seat in the kingdom.

When I voiced these thoughts Windust contended that no one better supplemented faith with works than Abdul-Baha. During World War I, he so impressed British government representatives with his philanthropic work and sacrifices among the people of the Near East that a knighthood was conferred on him.

"His zeal for social betterment was perpetuated when he ordered that a community of peace should surround this temple," Windust persisted. "Bahá'ís will not rest until the vision of

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Abdul-Baha is completely realized. There," he pointed out, "a school will be built, there a hospital, here a college. There will be laboratories for scientific research, dispensaries for the poor, and homes for the aged and the needy. Doesn't this sound like a personal appeal?"

"But actually, Mr. Windust, Christianity is more than that; it is a personal religious experience. Christians build their hopes around such realities as repentance, restitution, and spiritual baptism. But these words have little place in your sacred writings. The way I interpret it, you believe that the transformation of life and character is the result and not the beginning of salvation."

"On that point," admitted Windust, "there is a difference in emphasis. The message of Jesus was designed for the individual; that is what was needed in His day. But when Bahá'u'lláh was revealed the world was ready for international social emphasis as well as the need for personal regeneration. Work, in the spirit of service, is accepted as worship."

So I was again reminded that one becomes a Bahá'í not for personal gain, but to serve mankind and to assist in the amalgamation of the many scuffling religious tribes of earth. The ideal is certainly not unworthy; yet, to the average American, it is likely to remain grandiose.

But I had come to Wilmette to meet the people who denied such contentions. I would soon know what these believers were like, for Windust had assured me that a cross section of American Bahá'ís could always be found here long before the hour of worship. A number had already gathered. They were walking through the grounds and lingering in the shadows of the temple.

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"Let us go up," Windust suggested. "Here, you see, are eighteen steps which surround the entire temple. In his day, the Bab surrounded himself with eighteen disciples. Nine, and multiples of nine, have special meaning for us.

The meaning for me as we ascended was lost in the temple's overpowering beauty. As I neared the pillars and archways, their interlaced designs became more and more incredible. The great ribs of construction carrying the tremendous weight had the appearance of fragile tapestry. Light seemed to be transmitted from behind the white, sensitized surfaces.

Suddenly my silent admiration was interrupted by the captivating patter of a bejeweled devotee of the faith. "Oh, Mr. Windust!" she rhapsodized, "I have just returned from a visit with the Blessed Guardian!"

She rapturously clasped her hands in an attitude of devotion, but, to me, it was unconscious vanity, for the gesture showed off to tremendous advantage the dazzling brilliance of two huge diamonds. I questioned whether she would be the most typical Bahá'í, but she would surely be among the most interesting.

"You know how you felt when you were with Abdul-Baha, Mr. Windust," the enchanted pilgrim continued. "It was the same with the Blessed Guardian."

Immediately I sensed that Bahá'ís believe that the power of attraction which was Abdul-Baha's was passed on to his successor, Shoghi Effendi, the grandson whom he designated as the "Guardian of the Cause" in his last will and testament. They accept the tradition of incarnated mystical power from the Bab to Bahá'u'lláh to Abdul-Baha to Shoghi Effendi.

"I paid my respects at the tomb of the Bab and at the hallowed shrine of Bahá'u'lláh," she was saying. "I visited all of our

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shrines on Mount Carmel. I was at Akka and in the Palace at Bahji. I walked in the garden at Redvan. Oh, but my visits with the Guardian of the Cause! There is a nameless something that comes over one when one sees him. His eyes! I have never looked into eyes like his in all my life.

"And, do you know, one morning I had the feeling that he was going to call me to speak to me privately? Why should he, I wondered, because there were surely more important people in the party of pilgrims than I? But, sure enough, a messenger came and said, 'The Guardian asks for you.' I walked on air! Almost his first words were, 'I have had you much on my mind. You are to carry a message back to America for me. Remind all of those who stand identified with the Faith of the Master's words, "The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold."'

"He wrote the words for me, but, do you know, when he read them to me they seemed already to be written in my heart? I never forgot them. One day I walked with the Guardian in the beautiful garden. 'Have you learned the words I gave you?' he asked. I repeated them for him. He turned to me with the most beatific expression I have ever seen. 'Good,' he said. 'Good. You have learned them with love and purity of motive, and they shall be to you and all who hear them as the rays of an effulgent Light.'"

"Everyone who has met the Guardian comes away impressed," Windust responded with his usual quiet enthusiasm. "Of course, you remember how we are admonished in the will

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of Abdul-Baha to take the greatest possible care of Shoghi Effendi so that 'no dust of despondency and sorrow will stain his radiant nature,' and that he may become 'a fruitful branch on the tree of holiness.'"

Such sanguine sentimentality would have been shockingly out of place elsewhere in America, but here, at the door of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, it seemed a part of Bahá'í liturgy.

"Oh!" came the emphatic response, "the Center of the Covenant required that to obey the Blessed Guardian is to obey God and to turn away from him is to turn

away from God. But one cannot fully understand until one has seen him," she concluded as she turned to go into the temple.

Engraved in the monumental archway above the door were the words: O RICH ONES ON EARTH! THE POOR IN YOUR MIDST ARE MY TRUST; GUARD YE MY TRUST Just now they seemed so significant that I read them aloud.

"One of our fundamental principles is based on that text," Windust explained. "We believe that extremes of wealth and poverty should disappear, and that everyone should live in comfort There are inspired utterances of the Great Prophet above each of the nine doors."

As we started around the temple I watched the people arrive for the service. I thought I must be seeing a small-scale reproduction of the World's Congress of Religions. Most of them entered through the "main door," which faces southeastward to Haifa. Above this door the "inspired writing" proclaims,

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THE EARTH IS BUT ONE COUNTRY; AND MANKIND ITS CITIZENS.
The other inscriptions were equally worthy of remembrance: THE BEST BELOVED OF ALL THINGS IN MY SIGHT IS JUSTICE; TURN NOT AWAY THEREFROM IF THOU DESIREST ME

MY LOVE IS MY STRONGHOLD; HE THAT ENTEREST THEREIN IS SAFE AND SECURE

THY HEART IS MY HOME; SANCTIFY IT FOR MY DESCENT

I HAVE MADE DEATH A MESSENGER OF JOY TO THEE; WHEREFORE DOST THOU GRIEVE?

MAKE MENTION OF ME ON MY EARTH THAT IN MY HEAVEN I MAY REMEMBER THEE

THE SOURCE OF ALL LEARNING IS THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, EXALTED BE HIS GLORY

While we stood before the ninth door reading, BREATHE NOT THE SINS OF OTHERS SO LONG AS THOU ART THYSELF A SINNER, a young Negro greeted Windust. I again felt the enthusiasm of belief reflected with genuine passion.

"Great words there!" said the Negro, putting his hands on his hips and gazing up with a conquering air.

"Great words of a great man," I admitted.

"Bahá'u'lláh!" A light, satisfied chuckle accompanied the word. "You know, my friends used to say to me, 'How you goin' to learn all them foreign names connected with that new religion?' 'What foreign names?' I says. 'Ain't I learned Bible names all the time? Is Bahá'u'lláh and Abdul-Baha worse than

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Melchizedek or Nebuchadnezzar? Is Mashriqu'l-Adkhar harder than Laodicea? When I think of Sunday-school words like the Edomites and the Jebusites, you think I'm goin' to have trouble with Babis and Bahá'ís?' These names are beautiful." He went on musingly, "Take the Baghdad garden, R-e-d-v-a-n. That's called Rizwan. Take Mirza Muhammad Ali. Mirza's Persian for mister. He was the Bab, you know. Bab means gate. He opened up for Bahá'u'lláh. Baha means

splendor. U'llah means Allah, or of God. There you got Splendor of God. Take Abdul-Baha. Abdul means servant, servant of Baha, servant of God. He was the exemplar. And the present leader, Shoghi Effendi. Shoghi means teacher. Effendi means master. There you got master teacher. Nothing to it! And they say, 'How you goin' to learn all them foreign names?'"

"Foreign names!" Windust repeated, shaking his head despairingly. "When anyone says that, it merely indicates how far we still need to go before we realize the Great Prophet's dream. That is one of the reasons why we advocate an auxiliary universal language. That is why we are interested in universal education. The world can be harmonized only through our universal religion."

"But isn't there a danger that Bahá'ísm will always remain an abstract, visionary symbol rather than a practical basis for world unity?" I protested.

"No, it's all worked out!" exclaimed the Negro and, with a faraway look in his black eyes, he recited what might have been an assignment from the Bahá'í catechism. "Unfettered search after truth and the abandonment of all superstition and prejudice. Religion must be a cause of love and harmony, else it is no religion. Religion must be in agreement with science, bringing

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faith and reason into full accord. Then shall the world be united."

He turned and entered the temple with a reverent pride which convinced me that his new religion meant more to him than merely a new vocabulary. He had conveniently blended it with his American heritage.

"We have no illusions about the difficulties and work ahead," Windust hastened, eager to temper the idealism of the Negro. "But we do have an organizational plan that will do the job. Each year every Bahá'í community elects a Local Spiritual Assembly. This is a board of nine that handles the affairs of the community. Any Bahá'í over twenty-one may be a member of this Assembly. We have no nominations, and so there is no electioneering. We vote by secret ballot, and the nine persons receiving the most votes are elected. Above the Local Spiritual Assembly is the National Spiritual Assembly found in every country where our faith is established. Its members are elected by delegates from local communities. Our National Assembly now has its office in the building over there on the lake shore." He indicated a modest white stone building. "The National Spiritual Assemblies will soon act as an electorate for the International House of Justice which will sit in Haifa as the legislative body for Bahá'ís everywhere."

Finally he concluded with an auspicious note in his voice:

"Think what will happen when, instead of a League of Nations or a United Nations Organization, there will be an International House of Justice stressing the principles of the Oneness of Mankind!"

"Do you really believe that the House of Justice has a better chance than other organizations to unite the world?"

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"I do, because Abdul-Baha promised in his will and testament that both the Guardian and the members of the House of Justice will be under the protection of God and, therefore, infallible. The Guardian was designated as the sole interpreter of the words of Bahá'u'lláh for the express purpose of preserving unity. This is the only way that sectarianism can be prevented. Of course, some, through a desire for personal leadership and power, have set up. groups of their own, but they will fail."

I knew that this was a reference to the New History Society, a group that refused to obey Abdul-Baha's last will and testament.

"Isn't it possible that this will happen again when Shoghi Effendi dies?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Bahá'ís who were faithful to the will and testament of Abdul-Baha are determined to maintain unity. The first-born of the Guardian's descendants will be his successor unless he does not possess the necessary spiritual and intellectual qualifications."

"And who decides that?"

"The nine Hands of the Cause. You see, the Guardian will choose teachers and helpers from Bahá'í communities throughout the world to assist in propagating the faith. All of these will be called the Hands of the Cause of God. This group will elect nine of its constituents to sit with the Guardian at Haifa. One of their duties will be to verify the choice of a successor.

As Windust completed his minute description of the Bahá'í organization, a young Chinese greeted him.

Turning to me, Windust said, "You will be interested in meeting this young man; he is an exchange student at the state university."

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"And what is your chief interest in the Bahá'í faith?" I queried.

"It is all good," the young man answered precisely. "It is the only basis of understanding between the East and the West. My interest was first aroused when I learned that Abdul-Baha had said, 'Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept.' The religion of my people was made up almost completely of practices and beliefs which I could not reconcile with science. That is why I could never feel that our forms of worship gave us what we needed. But I have found this great world faith in complete accord with science. That is as it should be, because religion and science cannot be separated. They are the two wings by which humanity rises."

In a lighter mood, he continued, "Of course, I like to play around with the numerological aspects of the faith, too!"

He smiled broadly as Windust raised a mildly restraining hand and, with a

sweeping gesture that took in the temple, went on, "Nine concrete piers sunk ninety feet below water level. Nine pylons. Nine columns with nine arches. All set in a nine-acre park with nine sides, nine avenues, nine gateways, and, some day, nine fountains! According to the Mohammedan calendar the Bab appeared in the year 1260. One — two — six — zero — that adds up to nine! According to the Christian calendar Bahá'u'lláh appeared in 1863; that is a multiple of nine. The Spiritual Assemblies have nine members. Nine Hands of the Cause will sit in Haifa. Nine is the number of perfection and, according to a Mohammedan tradition, nineteen represents the unity of all knowledge! The Bab had eighteen disciples. Counting him, that makes nineteen. Bahá'u'lláh made his

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pronouncement in Redvan nineteen years after the Bab's prophecy. The new Bahá'í calendar will have nineteen months of nineteen days each. And, Mr. Windust, did you ever stop to think that Louis Bourgeois, who designed the temple, died on August 19, 1936!"

Windust showed friendly interest in this speculation. "There is no doubt that the science of mathematics was given to the world through divine inspiration," he agreed warmly, as we started toward the door.

Here he introduced me to Edris Rice-Wray, a young medical doctor of Evanston. She was one of a volunteer staff of trained guides who conduct visitors through the temple and are equipped to interpret any aspect of the Bahá'í belief. I learned that visitors numbered 27,559 during the previous year. Among them were representatives of every state, practically every Latin American country, five Canadian provinces, and eighteen other countries. Two hundred ten thousand nine hundred and thirty have been registered since the guiding service was introduced in 1932.

I detected the same devotion in my guide that I had found in Windust. Her enthusiasm was even greater. She escorted me into the huge "lobby" which is formed by the convergence of the avenues leading from the nine doors. I was immediately struck by the unfinished aspect of the interior. Naked steel supports were in austere contrast to the intricate beauty of the galleries outside. Yet the upward sweep of the delicately perforated dome was breathtaking.

"Think how beautiful it will be when the glass dome is in place, catching the light diffused through the perforations," my

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guide envisioned. "The walls when finished will give the same effect."

She explained that this spacious lobby would serve as an auditorium reserved for worship only, but always open to the public for meditation and prayer.

"Services here will open with a cappella singing. Then there will be readings from the Words of God — the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, and, of course, the sacred writings of Bahá'u'lláh through whom man's redemption will come in our

day."

And so we came to the stumbling block in the Bahá'í road. In singular contradiction to unifying all religions, the Bahá'í faith is asking the world to accept another prophet. Would the Jews acknowledge the "Splendor of God" as one equal to Moses? Would Christendom ever accept the claim that Bahá'u'lláh is the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Christ's second coming? Could the Buddhists recognize him as another Gautama, or the Moslems another Mohammed? Would not all organized religions see in him a threat to their own prophetic messiahs? The fear that faith will be eclipsed rather than strengthened is the logical reaction of faithful adherents to other religions.

As if reading my thoughts, Dr. Rice-Wray was saying, "Of course, this may sound impractical to you, but wait." She touched the arm of a stooped old man. "Meet my Jewish friend," she said to me. "You were a shirt salesman in the South, weren't you, Sam?"

The man chuckled and said, "Many a Christian accused me of driving a hard bargain."

"And how did you feel about the Christians, Sam?" I asked.

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"I hated them," came the honest admission, "just as I hated Jesus. Often when I said the name, I'd spit."

"And now

"I do adore Him," and he nodded in deep sincerity.

The next person I met was a Bahá'í-Christian. She spoke to us about the blessings she had received at the recent Feast of Nawruz, the Bahá'í New Year celebrated in late February, and the Feast of Redvan, an anniversary observed on March twenty-first. My guide explained that both are solemnized by the giving of gifts and ministering to the poor and the sick. The newcomer spoke so enthusiastically about the joy of these days and the nineteen fast days preceding them that I thought she must surely be a member of the Spiritual Assembly.

"I'm really a Bahá'í-Methodist," she acknowledged, transferring a copy of Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words to her left hand and extending her right in greeting. "You know, none of the Bahá'ís have ever asked me to give up my church affiliation. To me this demonstrates what we really mean by the unity of all faiths. I'm a good Methodist and a good Bahá'í. You know, the Bahá'í faith is a spirit. I think it is the only spirit that has the answer for all problems. I talk about it wherever I can — even to my missionary society. It is surprisingly easy to merge Methodism into the larger unity of Bahá'í beliefs."

"I don't suppose you have ever been accused of being a better Bahá'í than a Methodist," I chided.

"I wouldn't say that." She laughed. "There was more than a bit of criticism when my son was married in a Bahá'í ceremony. But, you know, I've never been sorry. It was such a beautiful, simple service.

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"But since you have no ministers, what was the ceremony like?" I asked.

"There was piano music and readings from the inspired utterances. Then my son took his bride's hand and said aloud, 'We are content with the Will of God.' She completed the ceremony by saying, 'We are satisfied with the Desire of God.'"

"Is such a ceremony legally accepted by the state?" I asked. "In certain states the secretary and the chairman of an incorporated assembly may perform a marriage," Dr. Rice-Wray replied.

"I am sure all of the states will recognize it some day," the Bahai-Methodist avowed. "The combination of religious and civic orders must come before the world can have peace. As Abdul-Baha once said, 'We must come to the truth of God wherever we behold it.'"

When she left us, my guide candidly observed, "Many Protestants are like that when they first become interested in the Bahá'í faith. But eventually they find that church membership is binding. One cannot remain within the limits of denominationalism after becoming a part of this great World Religion."

"Was that your experience?"

"Not exactly. I was born in a Bahá'í homes My stepfather was a Unitarian minister until he met Abdul-Baha. But after that both he and my mother were approved by the Spiritual Assembly to give Bahá'í lectures wherever they were sent. You would call this missionary work, but it is a common service of the loyal Bahá'í, and we do it without thought of remuneration."

We had now reached the reception room downstairs where

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there was a generous display of Bahá'í publications. The books were for sale, but my guide hastened to assure me that purchases were completely voluntary. She emphasized that some of their books had been translated into over forty languages.

Recorded classical music from Foundation Hall announced the beginning of the service. While I consulted my program, Dr. Rice-Wray eagerly supplied interesting personal descriptions for the names I read. A "charming fashion artist from Marshall Field's" was in charge. We were to hear three speakers: a "brilliant Latin-American fellow" on The Unity of Religions; a "clean-cut American law student" on Peace Plans; a "dainty, flower-like Persian girl" on The Spiritual Challenge of the Bahá'í Faith.

"It's really a typical program," she ended. "Young America — young people of

the world standing together in the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer, for the Bahá'í faith is His kingdom come, His will being done on earth as it is in heaven."

Surrounded by the hundred or more worshipers, I felt that this was a microcosm of the great world of believers which Bahá'u'lláh had envisioned in his day. Bahá'ísm had not made the strides forward which other modern faiths had made, but the representation was, nevertheless, significant. Orientals, Negroes, and white representatives of who could tell how many nations and faiths; the Bahá'í-Methodist, clasping her copy of the Hidden Words; the bejeweled pilgrim with the words of the Blessed Guardian in her heart, quietly zealous Albert Windust — young and old waited with eagerness and confidence beneath the eternal vigil of the "Splendor of God."

When the music stopped, his words were read in quiet, chanting tones:

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"Blessed is he who proclaims the doctrine of spiritual brotherhood, for he shall be the child of light. Blessed is he whose heart is tender and compassionate, for he will throw stones at no one. Blessed is he who will speak evil of no one, for he hath attained to the good pleasure of the Lord. Blessed is he who teaches union and concord, for he will shine like a star in heaven. Blessed is he who comforts the downtrodden, for he will be the friend of God."

Blessed are the beatitudes of Bahá'u'lláh.

Books
Chronologies
Compilations
Compilations-NSA
Compilations-personal
Documents
East-asia
Encyclopedia
Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
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