

Holy Year, 1

By Duane L. Herrmann.

FROM April 21, 1992 to April 20, 1993, the Bahá'ís of the world have celebrated a Holy Year. The purpose of the year according to the Universal House of Justice, was special reflection on the "importance, the uniqueness, the meaning and the efficacy of the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh.

The Random House dictionary definition of a covenant, in the religious sense, is "the conditional promises made to man by God, as revealed in the Scriptures". The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is set forth in His book entitled the *Kitáb-i-Ahd* or the *Book of the Covenant*.

In the *Kitáb-i-Ahd*, the means for maintaining the unity of the Bahá'í Faith is clearly laid out. Bahá'u'lláh unequivocally wrote: "When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward him Whom God hath purposed, Who hath branched from this Ancient Root. The object of this sacred verse is none other except the Most Mighty Branch ('Abdu'l-Bahá)."

The establishing of this covenant marked a marvellous development in the history of the religions of the world. At no time before had the founder of a faith so clearly and certainly laid out the identity of His successor. Christ did not, Muhammad did not. For Bahá'ís, there was no excuse for disagreement on who was to head the Faith after Bahá'u'lláh.

This meant that anyone who proposed another leader of the Bahá'í Faith was simply in error and had turned away from the instructions of Bahá'u'lláh and could not be considered as His follower. This simple truth has preserved the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh from the schisms and



Bahá'ís from around the world attending the Centenary Commemoration of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh at the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahji, near Akka, Israel, May 1992.

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divisions which have plagued every faith from the time of the ascension of its founder. The unity of the Bahá'í Faith has been guaranteed. That unity is essential if the Bahá'ís are to show the way to the unity of the entire global human race. Unity is the first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh and His writings, when followed, ensure it.

Another bulwark of this covenant is the Universal House of Justice which Bahá'u'lláh called into being to crown His administrative order.

'Abdu'l-Bahá continued this unity by establishing the office of, and appointing, Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. He insisted so strongly on acceptance of the Guardian that for a Bahá'í to turn away from the Guardian or the Universal House of Justice was the same as turning away from God. In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty (Bahá'u'lláh). Whatever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them rebelleth against God." There can be no confusion on this matter.

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh and the unity of His Faith which it has maintained has profound implications for the future of the Bahá'í community and the world as a whole. There can never be a war between one faction of Bahá'ís and another. To be Bahá'ís, both factions would have to accept the covenant and when that happens there can be no conflict. If one group does not accept the covenant — they are not Bahá'ís. The inter-religious dissension and wars that have plagued mankind will not occur with Bahá'ís. This in itself will bring a great measure of peace to mankind.

And because Bahá'ís are drawn from all creeds, ethnic groups, races, nationalities and economic situations, they can help others like themselves accept differences in the human race as valued

aspects, not cause for suspicion. This side-effect will promote unity everywhere there are Bahá'ís. This is part of the power of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.

The existence of this worldwide, diverse but unified community is another subject on which the House of Justice exhorted the Bahá'ís to reflect. In the brief century and a half since the inception of the Bahá'í era, the creation of such a community is itself remarkable. Has there ever, in the history of the whole human race, been such an accomplishment? What other religion or empire has united millions of disparate individuals all over the globe into a self-conscious entity? It is only through the unifying power of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh that this achievement has been possible.

It is often easy to see the few Bahá'ís around and think: "Such a small number of people cannot really be significant." But these small groups of earnest and devoted Bahá'ís exist all over the planet. There is virtually no country, territory or island without some Bahá'ís present.

According to statistics gathered by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the Bahá'í Faith is the second most widespread religion around the world. And often these Bahá'ís have formed their segment of the Bahá'í administrative order — a network covering the planet. Such a network has never been achieved before, nor does it exist now among any other group of people.

As of late 1991, the Bahá'í world community could count more than five million adherents living in approximately 112,000 localities. There were 155 National Spiritual Assemblies coordinating the affairs of more than 20,000 local Spiritual Assemblies. This community is spread over 167 independent countries and 47 significant territories and islands representing 2112 tribes and minority groups. Such a feat has never been achieved before in the history of humankind in such a short time, less than 150 years. And it is not slowing down. Last April the number of National Spiritual Assemblies increased to

165 and other numbers also increased.

This success of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh in unifying such diverse and wide-ranging elements of humanity is also one of the subjects on which Bahá'ís were urged to reflect during this Holy Year. Could this success have been achieved without the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant? It is doubtful.

The first Holy Year of the Bahá'í community had a similar meditative

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purpose. It began on October 16, 1952 and ran until October 15 of the next year. The first Holy Year called the Bahá'ís to contemplate the circumstances surrounding the receipt of revelation by Bahá'u'lláh 100 years earlier, and to rededicate their lives to His service. During that Holy Year the first international teaching and development plan of the Bahá'í community was launched. As this second Holy Year closes, the sixth international plan will be initiated.

There are many parallels between these two Holy Years. Both have occurred during times of major developments at the Bahá'í World Centre. In 1952-53, the Shrine of the Báb on Mt Carmel in the Holy Land was being completed. During 1992-93 the terraces and gardens up and down the mountain from that shrine are being constructed. Forty years ago the number of countries open to the Bahá'í community more than doubled; now the Bahá'ís are witnessing vast areas of the globe newly opened to

the building of Bahá'í communities because of dramatic changes in the political situation in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Around the world, special commemorative events have constituted part of each Holy Year. The first major event of the 1992-93 Holy Year was the gathering in Israel of 3000 Bahá'ís from more than 200 countries and territories to observe the 100th anniversary of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh.

In November, 30,000 Bahá'ís from around the world gathered in New York to celebrate the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. For 100 years, the Bahá'í Covenant has operated to preserve the unity of the Bahá'í Faith and propel it forward in new directions and growth. It is to this process that Bahá'ís were to draw their attention during this past Holy Year.

These two events, gathering together in unity members of all races and peoples, served to demonstrate to the Bahá'ís themselves that the unity of humanity is truly possible. Never before had Bahá'ís been able to see, in one place, such dramatic evidence of their accomplishments. Those people who refuse to admit the possibility of harmony on this planet now have proof that it is possible. The whole human race can live in peace and diversity — it has begun.

The Bahá'í community emerged from its first Holy Year a truly worldwide community. The results of this current Holy Year cannot yet be imagined. ■

The Author

Duane L. Herrmann, Bahá'í since 1969, has had work published in *Herald of the South*, *Bahá'í News*, the *American Bahá'í Glory*, *Brilliant Star* and publications outside the Bahá'í community. He has published a book on fasting, three collections of poetry and chapters in three other books. He is listed in *Who's Who in Writers, Editors & Poets* and *International Authors and Writers Who's Who*.