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Shoghi Effendi and the American Dream

BY SANDRA HUTCHISON

*The continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God,
the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed,
where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled,
where the righteous will abide and the free will assemble.*

—‘ABDUL-BAHÁ

Shoghi Effendi and the Destiny of America

IN December 1938, as the Great Depression rounded out almost a full decade of economic devastation that seemed to lay to rest forever the American dream of material abundance for all, Shoghi Effendi, from war-darkened Europe, penned an epistle to his American coworkers about the glorious destiny of their nation. Published in 1939 under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*, it was addressed to the relatively small, yet highly diverse band of Americans who had enlisted in the ranks of the Bahá’í community and now turned to him, as the head of the Bahá’í Faith and its appointed Guardian, for direction on how to derive meaning from the social and economic chaos wrought by the 1930s.

The title of Shoghi Effendi’s letter was drawn from the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the

Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, and reflected Shoghi Effendi’s intention to place the hardships faced by the American Bahá’ís of the day in the context of the broader pattern of Bahá’u’lláh’s transcendent and universal principles, in particular, of His vision of social renewal for the age. “*Know thou of a truth,*” He had proclaimed as early as the mid-nineteenth century, “*these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice.*”¹

With chronic unemployment at home and a European war looming on the nor-rodistant horizon, calamities were certainly close at hand, and the future did not seem to augur well for peace and prosperity. But the very fabric of the times, Shoghi Effendi explained in his letter, was woven from a bewildering yet ultimately reassuring pattern of social decay and concomitant spiritual regeneration; as surely as the process of “disintegration” was evident in the society at large, so was the process of social renewal or “integration” taking place within the Bahá’í community. Social and spiritual renewal were, he assured his readers, the very spirit of the age:

Such simultaneous processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegra-

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1. Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990) All subsequent references to *The Advent of Divine Justice* are included in the body of the text in parentheses.

tion, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other, are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind. (72–73)

Born in turn-of-the-century Palestine into a Persian family exiled there two generations earlier, Shoghi Effendi grew up worlds and centuries apart from John Winthrop, whose shipboard sermon to the Puritan settlers arriving in America articulated one of the leitmotifs in that body of myths termed the

2. In his 1630 sermon to the Puritans who would found the Massachusetts Bay colony, John Winthrop used the phrase “a city set upon a hill” to describe his vision of the new settlement as a place in which all could see the piety of the elect (W. P. Kenny, “A City Set Upon a Hill: American Identities in the Northeast,” in *American Diversity, American Identity*, ed. John K. Roth [New York: Holt, 1995] 39).

3. As Kenny puts it in “City Set Upon a Hill” (39): “Three recurrent themes of American identity are implicit in Winthrop’s declaration. The first is the theme of American newness; what is here represented has never before been known on earth. The second is the theme of American identity; these European settlers manifestly have been led here for a purpose. The third is the theme of American exceptionalism; in carrying out its sacred destiny, America will not fall prey to the forces that have made the fall of civilizations the great subject of history.”

4. The idea that America, the New World, had a “mission to redeem the Old World by high example” was, as Harvard historian Frederick Merk explains in *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Vintage Books) 3, “generated in pioneers of idealistic spirit on their arrival in the New World . . . by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new heaven.” The notion that some “manifest destiny” gave America the right to expand its territory was an idea deeply embedded in the American psyche.

5. “The Mexican War and Manifest Destiny,” in *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, ed. Bernard Bailyn et al. (New York: Little, 1997) 611.

American dream: “the city set upon the hill.”² Yet, despite a gap of centuries and a difference in cultures, in many respects Shoghi Effendi’s vision of the American destiny echoes that shipboard dream with its assertions of American “newness,” American destiny, and American “exceptionalism.”³

The idea that America offered settlers from Europe a wide, open, new space where they could exercise their personal freedom and recreate themselves and their society was a belief shared by many arriving from the Old World of Europe. In the Puritans, who fled from religious persecution, such a belief inspired the hope of building a new Eden, which would set a moral example for the Old World society they had left behind; in many others, it generated the hope of a different kind of freedom in the form of social mobility achieved through a new-found economic prosperity.

The belief in the opportunities presented by the newness of the land was integrally linked with another belief, which also became central to the American identity—namely, that America was destined by Providence for some higher purpose, a “manifest destiny” to “redeem the Old World by high example.”⁴ In 1845 this idea took on a slightly different meaning as the term “manifest destiny” was coined by a democratic editor in response to European protest at America’s expansionism on the American continent, to describe America’s God-given right to “over-spread the continent” in order to provide land for its “multiplying millions.”⁵ Moreover, in fulfilling its “manifest destiny,” America would not fail, for, as Winthrop’s sermon further underlined, America was not like other nations: it was exceptional. The American nation had both a sacred destiny and the capacity to carry it out.

But broader and more far-reaching than the Puritan dream of a New-World garden for a recreated race that would set a high moral example for the Old World or even

than the recasting of that dream in a later century as expressed in the concept of a “manifest destiny,” Shoghi Effendi’s vision of the American destiny was of a nation that could, through rectifying its own moral life, bring about universal salvation. In the final pages of his 1938 letter, Shoghi Effendi triumphantly cited the words of his grandfather, ‘Abdul-Bahá, the appointed head of the Faith and interpreter of the Bahá’í writings before him:

The American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people. . . . The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually. (86)

Like ‘Abdul-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi proclaimed for the American nation a “glorious destiny ordained for it by the Almighty” (91). The American Bahá’í community would be in the forefront of the Bahá’í Faith worldwide, and the American nation preeminent in world affairs. But America could fulfill its high destiny only by eschewing contemporary values and integrating into American life the world-unifying teachings articulated by Bahá’u’lláh. With the American Bahá’ís at the nation’s heart “consummating its divinely appointed mission” to erect the new World Order of Bahá’u’lláh both at home and abroad, America’s leadership in world affairs, especially in the arena of peacemaking, Shoghi Effendi assured his readers, would become firmly established (91).

“Recurrent crises” such as war, Shoghi Effendi warned, would not cease to afflict the world as long as the “chill of irreligion” continued to creep “relentlessly over the soul

of mankind” (2, 5). Such calamities were integral to the times and reflected the ailing spirit of the modern age. However, far from boding ill, such agitations augured a new age of hope that would be initiated when the high moral standard implicit in the Bahá’í teachings began to manifest itself in the inner lives of the believers, resulting in a network of strongly functioning Bahá’í communities. Then, and only then, would the American dream of a new Eden in a new world be made manifest. Moreover, through the missionary efforts of the American Bahá’ís, that new Eden would be spread throughout the globe and a new earth established under a new heaven.

The Advent of Divine Justice

IT IS difficult to ascertain exactly how much knowledge of American culture Shoghi Effendi had absorbed when he wrote *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Undoubtedly, he had learned something about American history through his studies at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut and had gleaned something about American culture from contact with the faculty there, which was largely American.⁶ He would have grasped still more about the workings of the American mind from his long association with the American Bahá’ís. In his childhood and youth he had frequently met the Americans who came to Haifa and Acre on pilgrimage to the Bahá’í holy places, and he had followed avidly every detail of the trip ‘Abdul-Bahá took to America in 1912.

Later, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s secretary, Shoghi Effendi helped maintain ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s voluminous correspondence with the American believers, and, as head of the Faith after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in 1921, he initiated a fresh correspondence with the body of American believers as a whole, which he kept up until his death in 1957. Shoghi Effendi’s letters offered guidance, gave exhortations and expositions, and issued warnings on themes wide ranging and diverse, from the principles

6. The Syrian Protestant College is now known as the American University of Beirut.

and practice of Bahá'í administration to the fundamental tenets of the Bahá'í Faith and the role of the American Bahá'ís in bringing about the promised age of peace prophesied in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdul-Bahá.

The Advent of Divine Justice occupies a unique place in Shoghi Effendi's correspondence with the American Bahá'ís during the turbulent years leading up to World War II. Nor only does it contain a detailed description of the mission of the American Bahá'í community in establishing the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh and of the probable role of the American nation in future world affairs, the letter offers a critique of the moral life of modern-day America and unveils, for the first time in Shoghi Effendi's works, what could be described as a systematic Bahá'í code of ethics, universal in its possible application but designed to renovate individual and community life in America and to lend a fresh impulse to the dream embedded in the nation's beginnings.

As Shoghi Effendi explains in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the destiny of the American Bahá'í community and of the nation as a whole were intertwined. The fulfillment of each depended upon the successful prosecution of 'Abdul-Bahá's mandate to carry the Bahá'í teachings to all corners of the earth, a charge He gave to the American Bahá'ís in His Tablets of the Divine Plan. The pursuit of this mission, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained there, would bring them untold spiritual distinction:

The moment this Divine Message is carried forward by the American believers from the shores of America and is propagated throughout the continents of Europe, of Asia, of Africa and of Australasia,

and as far as the islands of the Pacific, this community will find itself securely established upon the throne of an everlasting dominion.⁷

As "the prime mover and pattern of future communities" that the Bahá'í Faith was "destined to raise up throughout the length and breadth of the Western Hemisphere" (6-7), Shoghi Effendi asserted, the American Bahá'í community was certain to have an impact not only on the moral life of America but on that of the entire planet. America was "the cradle, as well as the stronghold of that future New World Order," which, as Shoghi Effendi explained, was "at once the promise and the glory of the Dispensation associated with the name of Bahá'u'lláh" (6).

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi weaves 'Abdul-Bahá's vision of the American destiny into a rich tapestry of history and current events, linking it with the times and correlating it with the American experience. Framed by his own unique rhetoric and characteristic social analysis, the letter offered American readers of the day a paradigm for social reconstruction that made sense of the maelstrom of forces that was assaulting their fledgling community and their nation. As a student, and, increasingly, as his ministry progressed as a master of the classical English prose style handed down by writers such as MacCaulay, Gibbons, and Carlyle, Shoghi Effendi undoubtedly understood the need for imagery that appealed to the collective cultural imagination of his American readers and brought his social analysis home to them. Drawing upon the myths and metaphors that defined the making of their nation, Shoghi Effendi, in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, not only evoked but remade for his American readers that body of myths so integral to their culture: the American dream.

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan: Revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the North American Bahá'ís*, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993) 7.5.

Extending the American Frontier

OF the regional myths that, according to one critic, make up the American dream, the

myth of the Far West, is, without doubt, the most compelling and enduring in modern-day America.⁸ As the same critic, Robert Deamer, explains, "it is, in a very direct and basic way, Americans' stance toward the frontier, toward the West, and toward their own westering experience that has defined their character, their culture, and their myths of place." Perhaps the myth of the Far West endures because it is, as Deamer points out, "the least geographically definable of American myths of place."⁹ As Thoreau puts it, "frontiers are not east or west, north or south," but "wherever a man fronts a fact."¹⁰ "[T]he American dream of the West," Deamer writes, "does not inhere in a literal frontier: it inheres in a spiritual *crossing* of the frontier, in a fronting of primordial reality, in an achieved change in consciousness."¹¹

8. In his *The Importance of Place in the American Literature of Hawthorne, Crane, Adams, and Faulkner: American Writers, American Culture, and the American Dream, Studies in American Literature*, vol. 7 (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) 7:1, Robert Deamer writes: "the American dream is, as I hold, a cluster of myths which happen, mainly, to be myths of place."

9. Deamer, *Importance of Place* 8, 13.

10. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1937) 410.

11. Deamer *Importance of Place* 13.

12. Shoghi Effendi, "America and the Most Great Peace," in *The World Order of Baha'u'llah: Selected Letters*, new ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 74, 74-75.

13. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, intro. George Townshend, new ed. (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 279-95.

14. As Deamer points out: "The Adamic vision of life, of Thoreau's 'waking dream' (defined in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and achieved in *Walden*), of the rebirth into 'new youth' is what D. H. Lawrence defined as the 'true myth of America'" (Deamer, *Importance of Place* 16). For the D. H. Lawrence reference quoted by Deamer, see *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1951) 64.

Precisely because of its highly metaphorical nature, the Far West has long served as the scene for the enactment of that drama of consciousness that is the yearning to escape from civilization and to find new horizons for being. The westering experience, as Shoghi Effendi defines it in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, carries forward this symbolic meaning into a broader context: that of religious history. Quoting 'Abdul-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi explained in a 1933 letter to his American coworkers the "strange phenomenon" of the westward migration of religious truth: "*From the beginning of time until the present day . . . the light of Divine Revelation hath risen in the East and shed its radiance upon the West. The illumination thus shed hath, however, acquired in the West an extraordinary brilliancy.*"¹²

Here, the "West" represents not only a social but also a spiritual frontier, a place where it is possible to cast off Old-World religious systems, or "tradition," and to embrace fresh metaphors conducive to new ideals of selfhood and society. As *The Advent of Divine Justice* makes clear, in the vision of Shoghi Effendi, the American nation is at the very heart of a new "West." Perhaps it is because the migration of the new Faith to America's shores symbolizes the kind of "spiritual crossing," to which Deamer alludes, that Shoghi Effendi imbues 'Abdul-Bahá's journey there in 1912 with such significance in his history of the first hundred years of the Faith, *God Passes By*.¹³

What, then, was the "fact" the new Faith "front[ed]" when it crossed the ocean with 'Abdul-Bahá to America? For Shoghi Effendi, as for many writers and thinkers, America's great strength as a nation lay in its youthfulness,¹⁴ a virtue that was bound up with other qualities such as "high intelligence," "unbounded initiative," and "enterprise" (20). The very newness, the freshness of the nation made it receptive to the new way of life prescribed by the Bahá'í Faith.

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi

Effendi unfolds a breathtaking vision of the spiritual transformation of the nation that would take place as a Bahá'í code of ethics took root in the robust, young culture of America. For Shoghi Effendi, as for 'Abdul-Bahá, America was clearly the ideal "frontier" upon which the new religious teachings could flourish, a frontier that would, in turn, serve as the point of embarkation for carrying the Bahá'í teachings to other countries of the globe.

In the spiritual geography mapped out in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan, the American frontier is extended far beyond the physical boundaries of the nation. In that seminal teaching charter, 'Abdul-Bahá entrusts to the American Bahá'ís the responsibility of raking the Bahá'í teachings to every land. Two decades after 'Abdul-Bahá authored these tablets, Shoghi Effendi began the difficult task of developing systematic plans to translate 'Abdul-Bahá's words into action. The American Bahá'í community, Shoghi Effendi reminded his American readers in his 1938 letter, already had an impressive record of accomplishments by spiritual "pioneers" (9), Bahá'ís whose "qualities of audacity, of consecration, of tenacity, of self-renunciation, and unstinted devotion" had "prompted them to abandon their homes, and forsake their all, and scatter over the surface of the globe" (9). They had established the Bahá'í Faith in such "highly important and widely scattered centers and territories" as Germany, the Far East, the Balkan States, Scandinavia, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand, and the Baltic States (9).

But the time for individual acts of consecration was over, Shoghi Effendi explained to his American readers, and the time for a more concerted national effort had come. Shoghi Effendi's Seven Year Plan for teaching the Bahá'í Faith, unveiled to the American Bahá'ís the year before he wrote *The Advent of Divine Justice*, had as its goal the introduction of the Faith into an "unbroken chain"

of Republics, stretching from Mexico to the farthest reaches of South America, thus linking newly established Bahá'í communities to their "mother Assemblies in the North American continent" (71), with Panama in the special position of uniting East and West (70).

Yet America's destiny was only beginning to unfold. As "the ambassadors of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" (74), the North American Bahá'ís had the mandate to take the Bahá'í teachings to all parts of the globe, and as "the chief creator and champion of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh" (11), the American Bahá'í community was bound not to cease until it had fostered in the local peoples the capacity to establish "institutions, both local and national, modeled on . . . [its] own" (13).

Other plans would follow, for, as Shoghi Effendi reminded his American readers, the completion of the Seven Year Plan would result in the establishment of only one center of activity in each of the republics of the Western Hemisphere whereas the fulfillment of 'Abdul-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan implied the "scattering of a far greater and more representative number of the members of the North American Bahá'í community over the entire surface of the New World" (12). "With their inter-American tasks and responsibilities virtually discharged," he elaborated, "their intercontinental mission enters upon its most glorious and decisive phase" (13). A crusade of even greater magnitude lay before America, one that would entail its spreading the Faith to all five continents.

As was the case with all the global strategies he developed to meet the goals of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teaching charter, Shoghi Effendi couched his directives to the American Bahá'ís in a rhetoric both powerful and appealing. In his 1938 letter, Shoghi Effendi cast familiar motifs in new molds shaped by the Bahá'í teachings. Just as the concept of "pioneering" must have had special resonance for his American readers, calling to mind as it would

have the spirit and adventures of those early Americans who had transformed the country in a few short centuries from a wilderness to a leader among nations, so would another American motif closely related to it have had special significance for his American readers: the frontier.

The frontier archetype, so variously represented in American literature, has always been central to the American culture and identity. Integrally linked to America's "Western and Adamic myths of separation, freedom, and self-creation" in the wilderness as well as to the "Adamic myth of freedom and rebirth in a pristine natural world *beyond* the frontier," the archetype represents a form of self-redefinition, a kind of transformation and redemption, as a result of the change of consciousness that attends the radical break from familiar, well-inhabited spaces.¹⁵

In *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, Mark Twain strongly hints that Huck will find redemption, at last, by "setting out for the territories ahead of the rest."¹⁶ Similarly, for the early American Bahá'ís, merely following the Bahá'í teachings, let alone carrying out 'Abdul-Bahá's mandate to spread them worldwide, performed the same radicalizing function that the challenge of physical geography had served for those who opened up the wild western spaces of the American nation: it carved out and created a psychic frontier that not only permitted but demanded their release from American social and cultural norms.

Embracing the Bahá'í teachings placed the American adherents of the religion on the "frontiers" of American culture, clearing for them a wide, open space for personal trans-

formation and offering them a broader sense of identification with the world beyond their own national boundaries. In short, the new Faith gave them the imperative to expand both their physical and psychic frontiers and an opportunity to leave culture, country, and familiar values behind, preparing them to receive the new code of ethics outlined by Shoghi Effendi in *The Advent of Divine Justice*.

Redefining the Ethical Imperative

As American literature and history amply demonstrate, the frontier archetype is associated with such extreme forms of individualism as those that reach their nadir in those mythic communities of violence described as the "Wild West," communities in which the self-reliance necessary for survival on the frontier generates a law that asserts itself only through the barrel of a gun. In the modern context, however, such an ethic is clearly antithetical to real community-building, and the bankruptcy of the frontier archetype for contemporary American culture manifests itself, in its most extreme forms, in the phenomena of the urban cowboy and the terrorist.

The individualist ethos reflected in the myths of the Wild West has been revealed to be as ill-suited to the modern American city as its counterpart of achieving redemption in what remains of a vanishing wilderness is to its proponents in the contemporary counter-culture. Just as the rampant spread of industrialism and the rapid encroachment of civilization into America's wild, open spaces has relegated the Thoreauvian dream of self-sufficiency on the land to the romantic past, so has the growing complexity and interconnectedness of a society that is, at once, modern, urban, and global, revealed the moral flaw at the heart of the frontier archetype: its inability to generate an ethic capable of fostering and sustaining community life in a pluralistic society.

15. Deamer *Importance of Place* 2, 4.

16. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: Norton, 1962) 226.

Shoghi Effendi's 1938 letter outlines a system of ethics that addresses this flaw. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi invites his readers to meditate upon "the imponderable, the spiritual, factors, which are bound up with their own individual and inner lives, and with which are associated their human relationships" (21). Since the fewness of their numbers rendered them incapable for the time being of "producing any marked effect on the great mass of their countrymen," Shoghi Effendi explained, the American Bahá'ís were to "focus their attention, for the present, on their own selves, their own individual needs, their own personal deficiencies and weaknesses. . . ." (20–21).

In the ethical universe delineated by Shoghi Effendi, the "wilderness" is redefined as that place where the individual conscience, prone to temptation and error, is in danger of being led astray by its own self-serving impulses and egocentric concerns. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi directs his readers' attention to the moral frontier that lies within the human heart. America's frontier culture could be purged from the excesses to which it is prone, his letter suggests, only if the battle that once raged without—pioneers against the environment, the North against the South, whites against indigenous peoples—was now fought within the individual soul.

The twin obligations of the American Bahá'ís were, on the one hand, "to weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies . . . inherited from their own nation" and, on the other, "to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those characteristics . . . so indispensable to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith" (20). Eschewing such "patent evils" as "materialism," "racial prejudice," "political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards," they were to cultivate "those essential virtues of self-re-

nunciation, of moral rectitude, of chastity, of indiscriminating fellowship, of holy discipline, and of spiritual insight" (19), virtues that would, in time, fit the American Bahá'ís for "the preponderating share" they would have in creating "that World Order and that World Civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need" (19–20).

The success of America's teaching mission, Shoghi Effendi emphasized, would depend upon the degree to which the American Bahá'ís conquered the frontier within. He outlined "three spiritual prerequisites for success" upon which not only the teaching plans but all other projects would depend: "a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color" (22). Armed with such "weapons" as "rectitude of conduct," "holiness and chastity," and an "interracial fellowship completely purged from the curse of racial prejudice," the "invincible army of Bahá'u'lláh," in one of the "potential storm-centers" of battle, was to launch a "double crusade, first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that had entrenched themselves in the life of their nation" (41, 42, 41).

Shoghi Effendi's reinterpretation of the frontier archetype in his 1938 letter is timely and significant. His vision of the pioneer is not of the self-made man or woman taking nature or the law in his or her hands but of the individual contributing through sacrificial service to an orderly expansion of communities of the faithful to extend a world-embracing, peacemaking Faith to new lands not only "west" of a well-defined border—meaning, familiar culture—but throughout the globe. As Shoghi Effendi enumerates them in his 1938 letter, the prerequisites for success in pioneering to new frontiers do not depend

on individual daring and bravado but upon the refinement of the individual character.

The ethical code outlined in *The Advent of Divine Justice* does not merely seek to make peace with diverse ethnicities, condemning racial atrocities such as chattel slavery and the Indian wars that have marred American history; it consciously celebrates pluralism. In Shoghi Effendi's vision, the moral refinement of the individual ultimately demands a redefinition of individualism itself so that the act of setting out for the frontier is no longer seen as a step toward union with, and, hence, spiritual salvation, in a pristine wilderness but rather as the first step toward extending a universal code of ethics salutary for a worldwide community.

America and the Most Great Peace

OF all the American motifs that Shoghi Effendi adapted in his 1938 letter, that of the nation's mission and destiny is perhaps most critical to his remaking of the American dream. Expanding upon both the Puritan idea of America as a "city set upon the hill" that would redeem the Old World by the example of its high moral standard and upon the idea of a "manifest destiny" that entitled America to "overspread the continent," Shoghi Effendi describes an America that would extend its influence throughout the globe by setting and enforcing a high standard of justice and by keeping world peace. In the final pages of *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi takes up a theme he explores in a 1933 letter to the American Bahá'ís entitled "America and the Most Great Peace."¹⁷

As its "cradle and champion," the American Bahá'í community had played and would continue to play a critical role in establishing

the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The "creative energies" already released by the "first stirrings" of that order in America, he explained, had "endowed that nation with the worthiness, and invested it with the powers and capacities, and equipped it" to, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophetic words, "lead all nations spiritually" (86). Shoghi Effendi elaborated:

The potencies which this God-given mission has infused into its people are, on the one hand, beginning to be manifested through the conscious efforts and the nationwide accomplishments, in both teaching and administrative spheres of Bahá'í activity, of the organized community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the North American continent. These same potencies, apart from, yet collateral with these efforts and accomplishments, are, on the other hand, insensibly shaping, under the impact of the world political and economic forces, the destiny of the nation, and are influencing the lives and actions of both its government and its people. (86)

It was, as Shoghi Effendi emphasized in his 1938 letter, a crucial "epoch in the world's history" and a critical "stage in the Formative Period of their Faith," a time both of "glorious opportunities" and "tremendous responsibilities." Indeed, "these times, so fraught with peril, so full of corruption" were nonetheless "so pregnant with the promise of a future so bright that no previous age in the annals of mankind," he asserted, could "rival its glory" (43). While the American Bahá'í community was rectifying its own inner life in preparation for its assault on the decadence of the nation, other developments were taking place in the political sphere and steering the American nation in the direction of its special destiny.

What role would America play in the shifting balance of world affairs? The world was "contracting into a neighborhood," Shoghi Effendi observed, and one wracked by social

17. See Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 71-94.

upheavals. In an ever-contracting world increasingly afflicted by wars and political upheavals, America "must assume the obligations imposed by this newly created neighborhood," he concluded. "Paradoxical as it may seem," he continued, "her only hope of extricating herself from the perils gathering around her is to become entangled in that very web of international association which the Hand of an inscrutable Providence is weaving" (87–88).

In short, America was destined to play an important role in the future world order as a peacebroker for the nations. Moreover, in terms of a specific foreign policy, Shoghi Effendi predicted that America would establish a "closer association" with the "Republics [of America]" and opt for "increased participation, in varying degrees, . . . in the affairs of the whole world" (90). The nation had come of age when its federal unity had been achieved and its institutions firmly established; now its "further evolution," as "a member of the family of nations" would continue until America would,

through the active and decisive part it will have played in the organization and the peaceful settlement of the affairs of mankind, have attained the plenitude of its powers and functions as an outstanding member, and component part, of a federated world. (90)

However, it would take a "world-shaking ordeal," Shoghi Effendi warned, before the American nation would emerge "consciously determined to seize its opportunity, to bring the full weight of its influence to bear upon the gigantic problems that such an ordeal must leave in its wake," and exorcise, finally and decisively, the specter of war from the earth (90). Having weathered such an ordeal, America would then be ready to rise to the heights of its destiny. Shoghi Effendi concluded:

Then and only then, will the American nation, molded and purified in the cru-

cible of a common war, inured to its rigors, and disciplined by its lessons, be in a position to raise its voice in the councils of the nations, itself lay the cornerstone of a universal and enduring peace, proclaim the solidarity, the unity, and maturity of mankind, and assist in the establishment of the promised reign of righteousness on earth. Then, and only then, will the American nation, while the community of the American believers within its heart is consummating its divinely appointed mission, be able to fulfill the unspeakably glorious destiny ordained for it by the Almighty, and immortally enshrined in the writings of 'Abdul-Bahá. Then, and only then, will the American nation accomplish "*that which will adorn the pages of history,*" "*become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West.*" (90–91)

Remaking the American Dream

THE challenge facing Shoghi Effendi as the head of a religion only beginning to establish itself globally during some of the most turbulent decades of this century was to put into practice its world-unifying, integrative vision in a world that was, as so many of his letters to his American coworkers pointed out, on the verge of a vast and colossal disintegration. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi not only makes sense of that disintegration but offers a vision of social transformation that must have dazzled the eyes and piqued the imaginations of the members of the small band of converts to the new religion at whose head he stood.

In his 1938 letter, he paints a portrait of an America in which the social crises of economic depression and the coming war figure as part of a providential pattern of opportunities uniquely presented to the American Bahá'í community to purify itself and, in turn, to regenerate the nation in whose embrace it was evolving. But of equal

importance to the power of his message in *The Advent of Divine Justice* is the art giving life to that portrait. One cannot read Shoghi Effendi's masterful ethical treatise without being struck by his clear grasp of some of the central myths upon which American culture is built. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi reinterprets the westering experience, the frontier archetype, and the American mission and destiny, making them applicable to the times and to the goals of the Bahá'í Faith.

At the heart of Shoghi Effendi's epistle is an ethical treatise of remarkable scope and vision in which the essential ingredients for remaking the American dream are outlined. The frontier Shoghi Effendi enjoins his American coworkers to open up has not only a geographical but a spiritual dimension, and success as a pioneer on this new frontier depends, first, upon the rectification of the individual character and, next, upon the welding together of a diverse community of like-minded persons to exert the same refining influence on their communities, their nation, and ultimately the world at large.

Shoghi Effendi's subtle yet radical revision of the myths that make up the America dream

is, at once, practical and visionary. Set within the context of the far-reaching vision of Bahá'u'lláh, the new American dream that emerges in *The Advent of Divine Justice* is more universal than any of which John Winthrop could have conceived when he delivered his sermon to the Puritan settlers about to arrive on American shores several centuries earlier. Shoghi Effendi's new American dream is also critical of the debasing of the Puritan ideal of "the city set upon the hill" implicit in the belief that the play of a hearty and unrestrained individualism on America's wide, open spaces will confer economic prosperity on all who venture there. The ethics of Shoghi Effendi's new American frontier, rather, exploit the spiritual and cultural geography of America by recognizing in it an opportunity for the strengthening of rather than escaping from community life and the responsibilities it entails. Containing perhaps one of the most radical critiques of the American dream in contemporary theology, *The Advent of Divine Justice* also offers readers a remarkably visionary recasting of the national dream in terms still resonant with meaning today.