

# Shoghi Effendi's Concept of History

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## Abstract

The writings of Shoghi Effendi largely remain a vast, unexplored field of knowledge. Since the Guardian's writings are crossed-genred, any scholarly treatment of them will proceed from any one or more *foci* which include: the literary, the rhetorical, the historical, the administrative and strategical, the dramatic, the political and the theological. There are also questions arising from interpretation and translation. This paper focus on only one of these features — the historical. From a careful reading of the world order letters in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (1938), *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939), *The Promised Day Is Come* (1941), *God Passes By* (1944) and even the Epilogue from his translation of *Nabil's Narrative of the Dawn-Breakers* (1932), it becomes apparent that Shoghi Effendi has an orderly, dynamic and coherent concept of history. This paper will consider certain defining features of this concept. They include: (1) Providential History (2) Periodisation: Cycles, Ages and Epochs (3) History as Identity-Creation: The Mission and Self-Consciousness of the North American Bahá'í Community (4) Palingenesis and Transitional History (5) The Punctuation of Crises, Setbacks and Reverses (6) The Retrospective (7) Teleological History (8) Organically Whole History

## The Word "History" Is Problematic

At the outset, we should recognize that the word history is itself ambiguous and requires closer definition. C.S. Lewis, the great English scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature, has identified six commonly used meanings of the word history: (1) the total content of time: past, present and future (2) the past only "in all its teeming riches" (3) what is discoverable about the past from surviving evidence (4) the findings of professional historians (5) "A...that version of the matter so discovered which has been worked up by great historical writers," i.e. Gibbon or Mommsen. (6) "A...that vague, composite picture of the past which floats, rather hazily, in the mind of the ordinary education man."<sup>[1]</sup> But what the Guardian would refer to as "history" would indicate those advances in civilization, those noteworthy developments and significant events, the institutes that have been founded by the prophets, and the communities established in their name. Such a concept must include considerations of morality, spirituality and ethics. For as `Abdu'l-Bahá has argued, and in this, as in all things, Shoghi Effendi closely follows him: "AA superficial culture, unsupported by a cultivated morality, is as "a confused medley of dreams," and external lustre without inner perfection is "like a vapor in the desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water."<sup>[2]</sup> This

is one of the meanings of `Abdu'l-Bahá's secret as alluded to in the title of his treatise, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (1875), that "true civilization" has an ethical and spiritual basis, without which it is not worthy of the name.

Philosopher-historian, William H. Dray, in his cogent study *Philosophy of History* (1964) identifies three types of historical theories or non-theories as the case may be: (1) historical nihilists: those who deny any meaning to history. (2) historical sceptics: those who assert that we cannot know whether or not there be either pattern or meaning in history. This would be the viewpoint of postmodern historians. (3) those who assert that meaning may indeed be found in history. This last approach, dead since the Enlightenment, was revived in the twentieth century and can be found in the works of Arnold Toynbee, Christopher Dawson, the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and in the metaphysical system of G.W.F. Hegel and his dialectic of freedom and necessity.<sup>[3]</sup> It would also correspond to the Guardian's concept of history.

### **(1) Providential History**

Providential history is, of course, a theological overview of history. As I am using the term, it is being conflated and equated with prophetic history and is defined by at least five conceptual elements some of which have already been mentioned in the Abstract: (1) God's lordship over all includes overlordship of history. (2) A Divine Plan may be discerned within the baffling, infinite number of composite events that has occurred or is occurring within the temporal flux. (3) The prophets are the founders of civilizations, the main educators of humanity, and the main instruments of the Divine Plan. (4) This Divine Plan drives history toward a *telos* or final "end"<sup>[4]</sup> (goal) which is the unity of the human race and ultimately the birth of a world civilization. (5) Those events which at face value appear to be adverse (disasters, crises, defeats, reverses or setbacks), prove in the end to contain some hidden wisdom and serve the ends, ways and means of Providence. This last point is particularly true of Bahá'í history.

Traditional and especially post-modern historians would find, of course, any theory of providential history completely outdated and quite unacceptable. English historian of Soviet Russia, E. H. Carr (1892-1982), a proponent of modified objectivity,<sup>[5]</sup> in a series of lectures given at Cambridge (January-March, 1961),<sup>[6]</sup> spoke on the relationship between history, science and morality. Carr argued that providential history, and what he viewed as extra-historical theories like it, should find no place on any serious historian's agenda. Carr did not object to the theorist's right to A...erect a super-historical standard or criterion in the light of which judgement is passed on historical events or situations — whether that standard derives from some divine authority postulated by the theologians, or from a static Reason or Nature postulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment."<sup>[7]</sup> Nonetheless he argued:

It is not that shortcomings occur in the application of the standard, or defects in the standard itself. It is that the attempt to erect such a standard is unhistorical and contradicts the very essence of history. It provides a dogmatic answer to questions which the historian is bound by his vocation incessantly to ask: the historian who accepts answers in advance to these questions goes to work with his eyes blindfolded and renounces his vocation.<sup>[8]</sup>

Carr's solution to this problem, at least as far as values are concerned, is a thorough-going historical relativism. All values, he argues, "...are in fact rooted in history." "...Every group has its own values which are rooted in history."<sup>[9]</sup> For Carr there can be no absolute values apart from historical context. Carr's Absolute, if he believed in one, since God and/or Revelation are excluded, would have to be history itself which is just as impervious to a facile definition as are the words

God, religion and revelation. Moreover, Carr's statement that all values are themselves rooted in history is begging the question (*petitio principii*). We have to ask ourselves what exactly is the nature of this history that he claims to lie at the root all values? Do the events of history create such values or are they created by them? We must know what is cause and what is effect. These are not rhetorical chicken-egg questions. The theory of providential history answers that values create history and not the reverse.

### **Example 1: The War Years (1939-1945): "Synchronization" as the Work of Providence**

Writing to the American and Canadian Bahá'í communities in 1938 during the prosecution of the first Seven Year Plan (1937-1944),<sup>[10]</sup> with characteristic foresight, Shoghi Effendi alluded to the imminent global conflict that was smoldering on the European continent,<sup>[11]</sup> and was soon to burst into flame on September 3, 1939:<sup>[12]</sup> "Who knows but that these few remaining, fast-fleeting years, may not be pregnant with events of unimaginable magnitude, with ordeals more severe than any that humanity has as yet experienced, with conflicts more devastating than any which preceded them."<sup>[13]</sup> In order to fortify the Bahá'ís for the ordeals that were about to encircle the globe, in addition to his repeated exhortations and encouragements, Shoghi Effendi also intimated his views on the workings of what he called "synchronisation" between upcoming catastrophic world events and the steady course of the world-wide expansion of the Bahá'í Faith. Not only were his words heartening to those Bahá'ís who were already within earshot of the rumblings of the Second World War but they also indicated one of the basic components of his view of Providence. He wrote:

"Far from yielding in their resolve, far from growing oblivious of their task, they should, at no time, however much buffeted by circumstances, forget that the synchronization of such world-shaking crises with the progressive unfoldment and fruition of their divinely appointed task is itself the work of Providence, the design of an inscrutable Wisdom, and the purpose of an all-compelling Will, a Will that directs and controls, in its own mysterious way, both the fortunes of the Faith and the destinies of men."<sup>[14]</sup>

At the end of World War Two, the Guardian wrote in a cablegram of May 12, 1945:

"The cessation of hostilities in the European continent signalizes yet another chapter in the tragic tale of fiery trials providentially decreed by inscrutable wisdom designed ultimately to weld the mutually antagonistic elements of human society into a single, organically-united, unshatterable world commonwealth. They gratefully acclaim the signal evidence of the interposition of divine Providence which during such perilous years enabled the World Center of our Faith to escape what posterity will recognize as one of the gravest dangers which ever confronted the nerve center of its institutions."<sup>[15]</sup>

With these words, no sharp demarcation can be made between discernible secular history from the internal and less visible sacred events associated with the development of the Bahá'í Faith. For the Guardian, it is all one big history moving ineluctably toward its climax.

### **Example 2: The 1955 Persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís: One of the "Mysterious Dispensations of Providence"**

During the summer of 1955 the Iranian government and clergy launched what Shoghi Effendi called a "premeditated campaign" of persecution against the Bahá'í community. Fuller details of this incident may be found in Shoghi Effendi's letters of August 15 and August 20, 1955.<sup>[16]</sup> The persecution included the formal outlawing of the Bahá'í Faith in the Majalis, the

banning of Bahá'í activities, the destruction of the dome of the National Centre, and various abuses and atrocities committed in the provinces which included "the hacking to pieces" of seven believers living near Yazd, the desecration of the Báb's house in Shiráz, the occupation of Bahá'u'lláh's ancestral home in Tákur, the plundering of shops and farms, the desecration of cemeteries, the forcible entry and looting of private homes, forced marriages to Muslims, rape and murder. The Guardian, always ready to evaluate the gravity of historical events, described this persecution as A...more grievous than any of the intermittent crises which have more or less acutely afflicted the Faith since the inception, over thirty years ago, of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation...."

The response to the persecution was both decisive and instructive since it set a precedent of response for any future abuses. Shoghi Effendi directed the American Bahá'í Community to send appeals for protection to President Eisenhower. Local and National Spiritual Assemblies sent thousands of "appeals" to the Iranian government and the Shah. Appeals were lodged with the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the Social and Economic Council, "copies of which were delivered to the representatives of the member nations of the Council, to the Director of the Human Rights Division, as well as to non-governmental organizations with consultative status." The Guardian wrote further that the 1955 persecution led to "widespread publicity" that had attracted A...the notice of those in high places..." and which Shoghi Effendi saw as a prelude to A...the emancipation of these valiant sufferers from the galling fetters of an antiquated religious orthodoxy....will, in varying measure, have its repercussions in Islamic countries, or may be even preceded by a similar phenomenon in neighbouring territories, hastening and adding fresh impetus to the bursting of the bonds that fetter the freedom of the followers of God's infant Faith."<sup>[17]</sup>

## **(2) Periodisation: Cycles, Ages and Epochs<sup>[18]</sup>**

The Guardian has provided for the Bahá'í community its own periodisation, a basic technique of historiography. Beginning at the beginning, and following the teachings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, he wrote that the Declaration of the Báb marked the beginning of the Bahá'í Era and the inauguration of a new cycle in human history which is to last, according to the judgement of `Abdu'l-Bahá in a tablet to a Zoroastrian believer, some 500,000 years: Shoghi Effendi wrote: "May 23, 1844, signalizes the commencement of the most turbulent period of the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Era, an age which marks the opening of the most glorious epoch in the greatest cycle which the spiritual history of mankind has yet witnessed."<sup>[19]</sup> Then we have the assignment of ages. The first age is called in *God Passes By* and elsewhere the Heroic, the Primitive or the Apostolic Age. In *God Passes By*, he varies somewhat the nomenclature assigned to the divisions of time. The second age is called A...the Formative, the Transitional," or "Iron Age."<sup>[20]</sup> (The added designation is the Iron Age). Shoghi Effendi devotes a not inconsiderable portion of the Foreword of *God Passes By* to the establishment of "periods" (pp. xiii-xvi), by assigning four of them to the first century of the Bahá'í Era (1844-1944). In so doing, he supplies a necessary gage by which Bahá'ís may situate themselves within the temporal flux of their dispensation. Periodisation also serves two useful purposes: (1) it allows for the significant assessment of past events in order to better understand their import. (2) it sensitizes to the importance of the present moment and to the necessity of seizing present opportunities since they in turn will become the "stuff of history."

In addition to assigning periods and ages, the Guardian has also subdivided these ages into epochs. The Universal House of Justice determined, in its message of 16 January 2001 to the Bahá'ís of the world, that they were entering the fifth epoch of the Formative Age.<sup>[21]</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of the determination of these epochs,<sup>[22]</sup>

one must bear in mind the following point in order to avoid confusion. A two-track chronology of epochs is unfolding concurrently. While each of the Three Great Ages of the Bahá'í Faith is subdivided into epochs, `Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, as contained in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan to the North American Bahá'ís* (1916-1917), inaugurated another series of epochs.<sup>[23]</sup> The dates of the first epoch of this Divine Plan are 1937-1963, corresponding to the inception of the First Seven Year Plan (1937-1944) and concluding with the Ten Year World Crusade/Plan (1953-1963). We are currently in the second epoch of `Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan begun in 1964 with the Nine Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice.

Such an assignment of ages and epochs is not without precedent in religious history. St. Augustine in *The City of God (Civitas Dei)*, which narrated the history of the world from creation to the Last Judgement, and which attacked both the cyclical theory of history and the special destiny of Rome, assigned a scheme of Six Ages based on divisions of Old Testament history, with each age supposing to last for a thousand years, although Augustine softened this rigidity. The seventh age is eternity. Augustine more or less absorbed these ages into the simpler scheme of the Three Eras: (1) the Pre-Mosaic, or Pre-Legal. (2) the Legal which corresponded to the Mosaic Dispensation. (3) the Era of Grace, i.e. the Christian Dispensation. He also assigned to his periodisation The Four World Monarchies (Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome), with Christ's kingdom being the Fifth Monarchy. His new scheme was, of course, the two cities that coexist in history, Babylon and Jerusalem, the earthly and the heavenly cities, of which all human beings are members.<sup>[24]</sup>

### **(3) History as Identity Creation: The Mission and Self-Consciousness of the North American Bahá'í Community**

In both *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939) and the fifth world order letter "America and the Most Great Peace" (1933), the Guardian sets out the divine mission and signal accomplishments of the North American Bahá'ís whom he calls "the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of a heroic Age,"<sup>[25]</sup> the "champion-builders of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh..."<sup>[26]</sup> and describes them as holding a position of "undisputed leadership"<sup>[27]</sup> in the Bahá'í world. Preeminent among these accomplishments is the establishment of the Administrative Order on the North American continent and around the world and America's mission as the leading nation in the establishment of world peace. In his eulogies of the North American Bahá'í community, eulogies that find their origin in the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi is accomplishing something remarkable. He is actually creating a sense of historical self-consciousness which is a basic component of Bahá'í identity. In the subsection entitled "Chief Remaining Citadel" in the opening pages of *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939), the Guardian makes a major new statement on the mission and station of the Bahá'í community of North America. It is the identity-creating function of such passages that I am emphasizing, rather than the preeminence of position of North America as Shoghi Effendi has defined it. The following passage is only the preamble to a much longer eulogy, a text that is framed by no less than 13 rhetorical questions without a single paragraph break. Along the lines of Arnold Toynbee's "challenge and response" causal factor in making history,<sup>[28]</sup> this preamble establishes the record of the achievements of the North American Bahá'ís, despite the considerable obstacles and handicaps that confronted them. Each clause addresses a particular handicap or obstacle that has been faced and successfully overcome:

"A community, relatively negligible in its numerical strength; separated by vast distances from both the focal-center of its Faith and the land wherein the preponderating mass of its fellow-believers reside; bereft in the main of material resources and lacking in experience and in prominence; ignorant of the beliefs, concepts and habits of those peoples and races from which its spiritual Founders have sprung; wholly unfamiliar with the languages in



which its sacred Books were originally revealed; constrained to place its sole reliance upon an inadequate rendering of only a fragmentary portion of the literature embodying its laws, its tenets, and its history; subjected from its infancy to tests of extreme severity, involving, at times, the defection of some of its most prominent members; having to contend, ever since its inception, and in an ever-increasing measure, with the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and ingrained prejudice — such a community, in less than half a century, and unaided by any of its sister communities, whether in the East or in the West, has, by virtue of the celestial potency with which an all-loving Master has abundantly endowed it, lent an impetus to the onward march of the Cause it has espoused which the combined achievements of its coreligionists in the West have failed to rival."<sup>[29]</sup>

In such passages, the Guardian holds up the mirror of North American Bahá'í history in which this community doubtless saw itself with new eyes and for the first time. At the same time, he also provides a summary or outline of American Bahá'í history which future Bahá'í historians can use as the basis for their research.

#### **(4) Palingenesis and Transitional History**

The Guardian wrote that contemporary history is marked by a "dual phenomenon," the simultaneous disintegration and integration of the old and new world orders. The seminal passages that speak of this dual phenomenon are absolutely central to Shoghi Effendi's thought. He cannot be understood without our grasping this fundamental idea, for it is a leit-motif that runs through all his writings:

"We are indeed living in an age which, if we would correctly appraise it, should be regarded as one which is witnessing a dual phenomenon. The first signalizes the death pangs of an order, effete and godless, that has stubbornly refused, despite the signs and portents of a century-old Revelation, to attune its processes to the precepts and ideals which that Heaven-sent Faith proffered it. The second proclaims the birth pangs of an Order, divine and redemptive, that will inevitably supplant the former, and within Whose administrative structure an embryonic civilization, incomparable and world-embracing, is imperceptibly maturing. The one is being rolled up, and is crashing in oppression, bloodshed, and ruin. The other opens up vistas of a justice, a unity, a peace, a culture, such as no age has ever seen. The former has spent its force, demonstrated its falsity and barrenness, lost irretrievably its opportunity, and is hurrying to its doom. The latter, virile and unconquerable, is plucking asunder its chains, and is vindicating its title to be the one refuge within which a sore-tried humanity, purged from its dross, can attain its destiny."<sup>[30]</sup>

The motif of death and rebirth alluded to in this passage is very ancient. While the Bahá'í Faith rejects reincarnation, death and rebirth have both a scientific and conceptual usage in biology,<sup>[31]</sup> philosophy and theology. According to Geoffrey Nash, it was used by the Romantics as palingenesis<sup>[32]</sup> — the more usual biological term is palingenesis — and was employed, among others, by the Pythagoreans to indicate metempsychosis, and by Schopenhauer to designate the continued existence of the eternal will in each newborn individual.<sup>[33]</sup> The duality highlighted above by Shoghi Effendi is found especially in his dyadic expressions "death pangs/birth pangs"<sup>[34]</sup> that characterise the twin processes that define the modern age. These sets of binary relationships are found in other passages of his writings such as the Arise and of fall," "integration and disintegration," and "order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other."<sup>[35]</sup> With this last phrase, Shoghi Effendi has foreshadowed one of the key ideas in modern

chaos theory. What first appears to the observer to be only chaos, when viewed in a longer and larger perspective, may in fact signify the emergence of a new order of things. Thus the scientific, religious and mythic views converge on the point that order proceeds, and must proceed, from chaos. The stark contrast between these two simultaneous processes, the one a creative affirmation of life, and the other a thanatopsis<sup>[36]</sup> of a doomed civilization, points to the profound truth that new life springs from death in the grand continuum that is called existence. The death of the old world order does not mean annihilation but resurrection.

Further, his view of history marks a transition from "brutal nationalism"<sup>[37]</sup> to fraternal internationalism. Of this new age of fraternal internationalism, he wrote: "National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation."<sup>[38]</sup> His view of history, moreover, points to the coming maturity of the human race, "the coming of age of the entire human race," as it passes through its stage of adolescence, which he called A...the most turbulent stage of its evolution....when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax...."<sup>[39]</sup>

"The ages of its infancy and childhood are past, never again to return, while the Great Age, the consummation of all ages, which must signalize the coming of age of the entire human race, is yet to come. The convulsions of this transitional and most turbulent period in the annals of humanity are the essential prerequisites, and herald the inevitable approach, of that Age of Ages, "the time of the end," in which the folly and tumult of strife that has, since the dawn of history, blackened the annals of mankind, will have been finally transmuted into the wisdom and the tranquility of an undisturbed, a universal, and lasting peace, in which the discord and separation of the children of men will have given way to the worldwide reconciliation, and the complete unification of the divers elements that constitute human society."<sup>[40]</sup>

### **(5)The Punctuation of Crises, Setbacks and Reverses**

This next point I will touch on only briefly. The Guardian is emphatic that the history of both the Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í world is punctuated by crises, setbacks and reverses. In his letter of June 5, 1947 concerning the destiny of America, in which he acclaims "the immortal Woodrow Wilson" and expatiates on the potentially beneficial "preponderating influence"<sup>[41]</sup> exercised by the United States in world affairs, the Guardian wrote:

"Many and divers are the setbacks and reverses which this nation, extolled so highly by `Abdu'l-Bahá, and occupying at present so unique a position among its fellow nations, must, alas, suffer. The road leading to its destiny is long, thorny and tortuous. The impact of various forces upon the structure and polity of that nation will be tremendous. Tribulations, on a scale unprecedented in its history, and calculated to purge its institutions, to purify the hearts of its people, to fuse its constituent elements, and to weld it into one entity with its sister nations in both hemispheres, are inevitable."<sup>[42]</sup>

The same is true of the relationship of the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith and its interactions with the non-Bahá'í world. By means of crises, setbacks and reverses, opportunities are afforded to assist in the spread and eventual universal recognition of the Bahá'í Faith. His interventionist concept of history has it that the "Hand of Providence" may be seen to be working behind the scenes of world events, a Hand that will advance the Bahá'í Cause, and hasten the final completion of the gestating world order, until "...the consummation in world unity of the coming of age of the human race" shall be realised."<sup>[43]</sup>

## (6) The Retrospective

It is characteristic of Shoghi Effendi's sense of the auspicious passing of Bahá'í history to pause for a timely retrospective. This retrospective, usually made on an anniversary or holy day, provides the occasion for an evaluation or a summing up of the events that have carried the Bahá'í Faith into the present. In 1934, as the passing years approached the centenary of the Declaration of the Báb ten years later (1944), the Guardian engaged his readers in a review of the previous ninety years. This period is viewed as one of remarkable achievements. The successes won are based upon two major factors that become cornerstones in his view of history: (1) any present accomplishments are built upon the solid achievements of the past. (2) any successful movement in history must be grounded in divine truth.

"On the 23rd of May of this auspicious year (1934) the Bahá'í world will celebrate the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. We, who at this hour find ourselves standing on the threshold of the last decade of the first century of the Bahá'í era, might well pause to reflect upon the mysterious dispensations of so august, so momentous a Revelation. How vast, how entrancing the panorama which the revolution of four score years and ten unrolls before our eyes! Its towering grandeur well-nigh overwhelms us. To merely contemplate this unique spectacle, to visualize, however dimly, the circumstances attending the birth and gradual unfoldment of this supreme Theophany, to recall even in their barest outline the woeful struggles that proclaimed its rise and accelerated its march, will suffice to convince every unbiased observer of those eternal truths that motivate its life and which must continue to impel it forward until it achieves its destined ascendancy."<sup>[44]</sup>

While engaging in this backward glance, the Guardian assures his readers that the events that have transpired within the 90 year period are a sufficient guarantee of any future successes that the Faith will achieve: A...to visualize, however dimly, the circumstances attending the birth and gradual unfoldment of this supreme Theophany... will suffice to convince every unbiased observer of those eternal truths that motivate its life and which must continue to impel it forward until it achieves its destined ascendancy."<sup>[45]</sup> This is what might be called the proof from history.

## (7) Teleological History (Gk. *Telos*: end or goal)

Whatever current theories of the philosophy of history may be, it is abundantly clear that the Guardian's view of history is decidedly teleological (Gr. *telos*, end, completion). But teleology, since it constitutes a predictive grand scheme, runs counter to the spirit of the postmodern mind and is currently out of intellectual favour. The incisive Northrop Frye has remarked upon the loss of this teleological sense in modern times: "One of the most striking cultural facts of our time is the disappearance of this teleological sense. We tend now to think of our lives as being, like the long poem described by Poe,<sup>[46]</sup> a discontinuous sequence of immediate experiences."<sup>[47]</sup> However, philosopher of critical realism<sup>[48]</sup> and poet George Santayana, in explaining Herbert Spencer's views on evolution and substance, has argued that A...evolution must have a goal, it must unfold a germ in a determinate direction towards an implicit ideal; otherwise there would be no progress involved, no means of distinguishing changes for the better from changes for the worse."<sup>[49]</sup> Teleology, in our context, means that the Mind of God has determined the end-goal of human history and ultimately directs the historical process toward its achievement. The origins of teleology are found not only in rudimentary Greek science and philosophy; they are also Judaic in that history is seen to be moving toward the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. Yairah Amit, a contemporary Jewish scholar, has



clearly articulated this view and how it contrasted markedly from the mythical sense of time in the religions that preceded Judaism.

The concept of divinity as developed in biblical literature is of a single universal deity who manifests himself in history, conducts a continuous dialogue, direct or indirect, with humankind, and is not only a cosmic divinity in command of nature, but also a kind of providence, supervising human history and directing it. This concept gave rise to a new attitude to history, which came to replace mythology.<sup>[50]</sup>

But here is Shoghi Effendi's seminal text on this theme:

"The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture — all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Baha'i Era — should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop."<sup>[51]</sup>

## **(8) Organically Whole History**

One of the central concepts of the seventh world order letter, "The Unfoldment of World Civilization" is the presence and maintenance of "an organic and spiritual unity," also described simply as "organic unity." This key phrase applies not only to the internal workings of the Bahá'í Faith and its institutions but also to the future unified body of nations. This central concept is in turn linked to, and coherent with, another reality mentioned in the second world order letter, "The Goal of a New World Order" (1930), that of the "living organism." The concept of organic unity is closely tied to the last feature to be considered of Shoghi Effendi's concept of history — that Bahá'í history itself is an organic whole. The Guardian's schema clearly reflects a particular understanding of Bahá'í history as a process of orderly, holistic, evolutionary growth that drives toward self-fulfilment. Writing of the four periods that he identified in the first Bahá'í century in *God Passes By*, the Guardian wrote:

"To isolate any one of them from the others, to dissociate the later manifestations of one universal, all-embracing Revelation from the pristine purpose that animated it in its earliest days, would be tantamount to a mutilation of the structure on which it rests, and to a lamentable perversion of its truth and of its history.... These four periods are to be regarded not only as the component, the inseparable parts of one stupendous whole, but as progressive stages in a single evolutionary process, vast, steady and irresistible. For as we survey the entire range which the operation of a century-old Faith has unfolded before us, we cannot escape the conclusion that from whatever angle we view this colossal scene, the events associated with these periods present to us unmistakable evidences of a slowly maturing process, of an orderly development, of internal consolidation, of external

expansion, of a gradual emancipation from the fetters of religious orthodoxy, and of a corresponding diminution of civil disabilities and restrictions."<sup>[52]</sup>

A "vital link" has connected these Three Ages. The *Will and Testament* of `Abdu'l-Bahá "...has forged the vital link which must for ever connect the age that has just expired [Primitive/Apostolic/Heroic Age] with the one we now live in — the Transitional and Formative period of the Faith..."<sup>[53]</sup> His faith in the ultimate ascendancy of the Bahá'í Cause is based upon a firm conviction that the movement has taken root in the fertile soil of what the Greek fathers of the apostolic church called the *logos spermatikos* <sup>[54]</sup> which described the fecundating power of the Holy Word. Seed imagery is not, of course, exclusive to the Christian tradition. Just as the Báb referred to the Bayán as being in the stage of seed,<sup>[55]</sup> Shoghi Effendi makes use of this seed imagery to indicate evolution or gradation, in a process of gradual unfoldment with respect to the Three Ages of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faith: "The period in which the seed of the Faith had been slowly germinating [Heroic Age] is thus intertwined both with the one which must witness its efflorescence [Formative Age] and the subsequent age in which that seed will have finally yielded its golden fruit." [Golden Age].<sup>[56]</sup> This is obviously an image of organic wholeness.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the Guardian's writings reflect an orderly, evolutionary, dynamic and coherent concept of Bahá'í history. While Shoghi Effendi views of modern Bahá'í history are clearly at odds with current postmodern theories of history, which reject grand narratives and predictive teleological schemes, these elements are clearly present in the Guardian's concept. His view of history is both theological and dogmatic in that restores the workings of Providence to historical events. Central to his understanding is the interactive nature of the moribund old world order and the ascendant new one, through the "dual phenomenon" of palingenesis, by which the Bahá'í Revelation simultaneously brings about the death of the old order while it simultaneously builds up the life-giving institutions of the New World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

## Notes

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- <sup>[1]</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Historicism" in *Christian Reflections* Walter Hooper, ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967), p. 105
- <sup>[2]</sup> *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, translated from the original Persian text by Marzieh Gail (Wilmette: Illinois, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957), pp. 60-61.
- <sup>[3]</sup> *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), pp. 60B62.
- <sup>[4]</sup> The word end is not being used in an absolute sense, i.e. that nothing of significance will occur after the establishment of world peace and the eventual flowering of a world civilization. In the vast reaches of future time, there will necessarily have to be other ends and purposes that are fixed by God through a Divine Revelator or Revelators.
- <sup>[5]</sup> Carr writes: "The facts of history cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian. Objectivity in history — if we are still to use the conventional term — cannot be an objectivity of fact, but only of relation, of the relation between fact and interpretation, between past, present, and future." *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Middlesex, England, 1961 and 1990), p. 120.

[6] The George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures published as "*What is History?*" (1961).

[7] *What is History?*, p. 83.

[8] *ibid.*

[9] *ibid.*, p. 84.

[10] Shoghi Effendi announced this plan in a cablegram dated May 1, 1937 to the 1937 North American National Convention in order to "prosecute uninterruptedly teaching campaign inaugurated at last Convention in accordance with Divine Plan." and to complete the "exterior ornamentation of entire structure of Temple." *Messages to America: 1932-1946*, p. 9.

[11] The ominous events of 1938 and 1939 that foreshadowed the outbreak of war on September 3, 1939 were chiefly the acquisition of Austria, Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia and Memelland (the city of Memell and environs) in Lithuania by Germany and the acquisition of Ethiopia and Albania by Italy. All these events were violations of the Treaty of Versailles of June 28, 1919 which was, however, an oppressively vindictive treaty of 230 pages that only "sowed the seeds of future wars." The various peace treaties with Germany concluding the First World War were "conceived in hatred, vengeance, hypocrisy, and force..." J. Henry Landman and Herbert Wender, *World Since 1914* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, tenth rev. ed. 1959), p. 41.

[12] England and France declared war on Germany on this date following the invasion of the western Polish corridor by German armies on August 31.

[13] *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 72.

[14] *ibid.*

[15] *Messages to America*, pp. 80-81.

[16] See pp. 132-142 of *Citadel of Faith*. Subsequent references to this incident are taken from these pages.

[17] *ibid.*, p. 141.

[18] "The first seventy-seven years of the preceding century, constituting the Apostolic and Heroic Age of our Faith, fell into three distinct epochs, of nine, of thirty-nine and of twenty-nine years' duration, associated respectively with the Babi Dispensation and the ministries of Bahá'u'lláh and of `Abdu'l-Bahá. This Primitive Age of the Bahá'í Era, unapproached in spiritual fecundity by any period associated with the mission of the Founder of any previous Dispensation, was impregnated, from its inception to its termination, with the creative energies generated through the advent of two independent Manifestations and the establishment of a Covenant unique in the spiritual annals of mankind. & The last twenty-three years of that same century coincided with the first epoch of the second, the Iron and Formative, Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh — the first of a series of epochs which must precede the inception of the last and Golden Age of that Dispensation — a Dispensation which, as the Author of the Faith has Himself categorically asserted, must extend over a period of no less than one thousand years, and which will constitute the first stage in a series of Dispensations, to be established by future Manifestations, all deriving their inspiration from the Author of the Baha'i Revelation, and destined to last, in their aggregate, no less than five thousand centuries. (*Citadel of Faith*, pp. 4-5)

[19] *God Passes By*, p. 3.

[20] *God Passes By*, xiii.

[21] "With a spirit of exultation we are moved to announce to you: the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh now enters the fifth epoch of its Formative Age."

- [22] For a detailed account, see the memorandum prepared by the Research Department to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 5 February 1986. *Bahá'í Canada*, Jamál, B.E. 158, April 2001, vol. 13, no. 12, pp. 13-16.
- [23] "Bahá'í News," no. 265, March 1953, p. 4. Letter dated 18 January 1953 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, cited in a memorandum of the Research Department of 5 February 1986.
- [24] This paragraph has been summarized from Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), p. 59.
- [25] *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 7.
- [26] *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 74.
- [27] *ibid*, p. 72.
- [28] The challenge and response factor in making history belongs to Toynbee's theory of the "geneses of civilizations" in his monumental 10 volume study *A Study of History*. See II:V, "Challenge and Response," in vol. 1 of D.C. Somervell's abridgement (of II). (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 60-79.
- [29] *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 7-8.
- [30] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 17.
- [31] In biology it refers to the exact reproduction of ancestral features in the individual (ontogenesis).
- [32] Geoffrey Nash, *The Phoenix and the Ashes: The Baha'í Faith and the Modern Apocalypse* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984), p. 132.
- [33] "Palingenesis" in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1959).
- [34] *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 17.
- [35] *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 72-73.
- [36] From the Greek *thanatos* (death) and *opsis* (sight), meaning a reflection or musing upon death.
- [37] *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 35.
- [38] *ibid*, p. 204.
- [39] *ibid*, p. 202.
- [40] *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 117.
- [41] *Citadel of Faith*, p. 36.
- [42] *ibid*, pp. 36-37
- [43] *ibid*, p. 81.
- [44] *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97.
- [45] *ibid*, p. 97.
- [46] Frye is referring to the long poem as a genre as analysed by Poe in his essay "The Poetic Principle." According to Frye's interpretation of Poe, the long poem was "a contradiction in terms" since long poems consisted of "connective tissues of narrative or argument which were really versified prose."

Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi. Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1991), p. 32.

[47] Frye, *ibid*, p. 33

[48] The theory that the structure of reality, in addition to the physical and mental realms, also contains a third dimension of essences of substances.

[49] Quoted from "The Unknowable." The Herbert Spencer lecture of October, 1923 delivered at Oxford. American writer and editor Clifton Fadiman said he considered it a "masterpiece" and Santayana wrote of the address: "I think it is one of the most reasonable things I have written, reasonable, yet not cold, and I am encouraged to find that it has not been altogether forgotten." Letter to Clifton Fadiman quoted in *Reading I've Liked*, p. 211. Above quotation from p. 215.

[50] Yairah Amit, *History and Ideology: Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p.16.

[51] *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 163.

[52] *God Passes By*, xiv- xvi.

[53] *Dispensation*, p. 98.

[54] Reinhold Bernhardt, "Interreligious Images and Parables," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 5/1995/1, p. 63.

[55] "Today the Bayán is in the stage of seed; at the beginning of the manifestation of 'Him Whom God shall make manifest' its ultimate perfection will become apparent.... " Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 100.

[56] *ibid*, p. 144.