

Vision of Shoghi Effendi as Reflected in *the Advent of Divine Justice*

talk by Dr. Richard Thomas 1984-11 *

note: text in quotes is from Shoghi Effendi's The Advent of Divine Justice

I think the first thing that I should say is thank you for being so patient and sticking around. Several days ago, or about a week ago, three Bahá'í scholars at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Chicago walked into a room where they were to give their papers and there was absolutely nobody there. We sat around and sat around and nobody came, so finally we decided to have our own little group around the table. Later on, one or two people came in, but they were looking for other panels. And then as if that was not the worse thing that could happen to us, at the end of the session the non-Bahá'í commentator asked the very profound question, "What are you Bahá'ís doing here? You're just proselytizing!" So, it's really a great pleasure to have an opportunity to be here. And I'm going to try and summarize some of these things that I would like to say because it is very late, and you have been extremely patient.

What I would like to do is talk about the visions of Shoghi Effendi, or the visions that he had of the future, as expressed in The Advent of the Divine Justice, and just look at a few of these visions because the book is simply too comprehensive for me to survey all of the visions here today.

I particularly would like to look at the Seven Year Plan and the way in which Shoghi Effendi talked about the turmoils of the times and the possibilities of the future; talk a bit about how he envisioned the obstacles that would face Bahá'ís and then something about the "new race of men" that he envisioned; also a few things about the "spiritual prerequisites"; and then perhaps end with the "most... challenging issue".

During the late 1930's, it must have been tremendously reassuring to the Bahá'í communities in the United States and Canada when they received the long letter from Shoghi Effendi entitled The Advent of Divine Justice. The world-wide economic depression was spreading havoc in every sphere of human activity, superseded only by the ominous rumblings of the impending world war.

Few secular, religious and national leaders could see beyond the dismal present or envision much beyond their own groups' survival. Fewer still could feel or dare to speculate upon the possibility of a two-fold process in which an old world order was being rolled up while a New World Order was being unfolded. While many idealists dreamt of such a possibility, they did so with little direction and no spiritual power. The Bahá'ís however, not unaffected by the buffeting forces of the decade, were being guided by the appointed Guardian of their Faith who clearly envisioned the path through the dark days ahead. The Advent of Divine Justice was both their light and their map directing their steps towards the future.

* online at bahai-library.com/thomas_vision_advent_justice

Shoghi Effendi in the Advent provided the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada not only with the inspirations and the instructions to carry out their teaching mission, but also with clear visions of their glorious future. North American Bahá'ís were to see themselves as “the spiritual descendants of the Dawn-Breakers”, ushering in “not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter.”

Shoghi Effendi was very much concerned about how the Bahá'ís would face up to these responsibilities. His vision of a world civilization based upon the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan are the golden thread running throughout the book, and along these golden threads are other visions embodying the various opportunities for Bahá'ís who are steadfast. These visions represented the stages through which the North American Bahá'ís would have to pass on their way to realizing their spiritual destiny.

The most important of these visions related to the Seven Year Plan which was initiated in 1937 and was then in its second year, described by Shoghi Effendi as “the first and practical step towards the fulfilment of the mission proscribed in those epoch-making tablets.” Shoghi Effendi reminded the North American Bahá'ís whose visions might have been limited to the completion of the Seven Year Plan, that the consummation of that plan could “result in no more than the formation of at least one center in each of the Republics of the Western Hemisphere.”

Whereas the duties described in those Tablets called for a “wider diffusion and 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.” And even then, the mission of the North American believers would not end. Instead, according to Shoghi Effendi's vision based upon the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the North American Bahá'ís would carry forth into the “second century” of the Bahá'í Faith the “glorious work initiated in the closing years of the first.” In this mission they would, as envisioned by Shoghi Effendi, assist in guiding the activities of the “isolated and newly fledged centers, and in fostering their capacity to initiate in their turn institutions both local and national modeled on their own.”

This achievement would satisfy only the “immediate obligations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's divinely revealed plan.” Little by little, Shoghi Effendi carefully fed the North American believers his visions of the larger vision embodied in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Once their Inter-American tasks and responsibilities were discharged, he pointed out, then “their intercontinental mission” would enter upon its most “glorious and decisive phase”. A phase, which according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, would witness the American believers carrying the message of Bahá'u'lláh “from the shores of America” through “Europe...Asia...Africa...Australia and...the islands of the Pacific.

And once having accomplished this task, the American community, as promised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, would find itself "securely established upon the throne of an everlasting dominion." But even this great accomplishment would not mark the end of their mission. The future contains much more. "Who knows," Shoghi Effendi told the North American believers, "but that when this colossal task has been accomplished, a greater, a still more superb mission, incomparable in its splendor and foreordained for them by Bahá'u'lláh, may not be thrust upon them."

Shoghi Effendi knew only too well what awaited the small community of North American believers in the days ahead. They could not be expected to be spared the turmoil of the times. "The strongholds of such a Faith," Shoghi Effendi pointed out, "one by one and day after day, are to outward seeming being successfully isolated, assaulted and captured. As the lights of liberty flicker and go out, as the din of discord grow louder and louder every day, as the fires of fanaticism flame with increasing fierceness in the breasts of men, as the chill of irreligion creeps relentlessly over the soul of mankind, the limbs and organs that constitute the body of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh appear, in varying measure, to have become afflicted and the crippling influences that now hold in their grip the whole of the civilized world."

But the North American Bahá'ís had nothing to fear, for Shoghi Effendi's visions of the future placed all turmoil and disorder, then ravaging the world, including the Faith, in proper perspective. "Out of the turmoil and tribulation" of these times, "opportunities undreamt of would be born and circumstances unpredictable created", that would ultimately lead to the establishment of the New World Order. Although at the time the future looked bleak and the North American Bahá'í community was small in numbers, Shoghi Effendi assured them that they were the "chief remaining citadel, the mighty arm" holding "aloft the standard of an unconquerable Faith", and that they would be "universally regarded as the cradle, as well as the stronghold, of the future" world order.

Those of us too young to remember or who were not yet born can only imagine how Shoghi Effendi's visions of the possibilities awaiting the North American believers energized their spirits and illuminated their own limited vision. Think what it must have meant to those believers, so small in numbers and only in the second year of the first plan, to read the inspiring words of Shoghi Effendi urging them on to new possibilities beyond their wildest dreams.

In surveying the possibilities of the future, Shoghi Effendi mentions, "the election of the International House of Justice and its establishment in the Holy Land," "the gradual erection of the various dependencies of the First 'House of Worship' of the West", "the codification and promulgation of the ordinances of the Most Holy Book", the formation of officially recognized courts of Bahá'í law in certain countries of the east, the recognition by certain Islamic countries of the independent religious status of the Bahá'í national and local assemblies, the establishment and recognition of the Bahá'í Faith as a state religion, and finally the establishment of a Bahá'í nation, which as Shoghi Effendi envisioned

would, “culminate in the emergence of the world-wide Bahá’í commonwealth animated wholly by the spirit and operating solely in direct conformity with the laws and principles of Bahá’u’lláh.”

Achieving these possibilities of the future would not be easy. The task would “be long and arduous.” But the North American believers would succeed because they were “the champion builders of the mightiest institutions of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.” At times, the course Bahá’u’lláh had traced for them would be “lost in the threatening shadows with which a stricken humanity is now enveloped,” as Shoghi Effendi pointed out. Yet according to Shoghi Effendi’s vision, Bahá’u’lláh’s unfailing light would continue to shine upon the North American believers with “such brightness that no earthly dust would ever eclipse its splendor.”

Shoghi Effendi was no mere visionary ignoring the harsh realities of the present in some blind directionless quest or an amorphous future. His visions reflected the spiritual guidance of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as well as the two-fold process of destruction and construction which were simultaneously transforming the entire planet. These interactive scenarios occupied much of Shoghi Effendi’s vision of the future. Those Bahá’ís who witnessed the turmoil of the world through his vision tended to be less agitated by the threatening shadows.

Shoghi Effendi did not sacrifice an iota of harsh truth in his visions of the future. North American Bahá’ís were constantly cautioned about the obstacles that would be placed in their path. “Enemies... fierce, numerous and unrelenting” would arise with “every acceleration in the progress” of their mission. But, Shoghi Effendi reminded them, if the American believers persevered, “the invisible Hosts...must, as promised, rush forth” to their aid.

What kind of people would be needed to carry out the challenges of the Seven Year Plan and the subsequent plans? What type of people did Shoghi Effendi envision as the “spiritual descendants of the Dawn-Breakers” and the “champion builders of the mightiest institutions of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh”? And how would they contribute both to the teaching and consolidation of the Bahá’í Faith and the spiritual regeneration of their fellow countrymen?

First of all, in Shoghi Effendi’s vision, the “new race of men” which had been called into being by the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh would “remain wholly unrecognized and completely obscured” unless the Bahá’ís made “a sharp distinction” between themselves and “the people from which,” Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “God had raised them up.”

In particular, he mentions the United States. The American Bahá’ís of the United States were informed by Shoghi Effendi that they were not chosen by Bahá’u’lláh to play a leading role in the birth of the world civilization because of an inherent experience or “excellence, or a special merit” of their country or people. Instead, it was only because of “the patent evils...an excessive and binding materialism” of America and its peoples, that Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had singled them out to

become the “standard bearers of the New World Order”. For only in this way could Bahá’u’lláh, Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “demonstrate to a heedless generation His almighty power to raise up from the very midst of a people caught up in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most violent and long standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness, and laxity in moral standards, men and women who as time goes by will increasingly exemplify those essential virtues that will fit them for the prepondering share they will have in calling into being that world order and that world civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need.”

There before them, North American Bahá’ís had the visions of Shoghi Effendi to guide them to their highest spiritual potential. In these visions they could see themselves embodying the spiritual characteristics that would transform them into agents of great social and spiritual change, charged with the duty of laying “a firm foundation for their country’s future role in ushering in the Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh.” One cannot overestimate the spiritual and functional significance of Shoghi Effendi’s visions of the future.

As we read *The Advent of Divine Justice*, we should begin to realize that each of his visions carries within it not only spiritual goals but the necessary loving guidance to reach the goals. And yet within his visions are firm admonitions. Shoghi Effendi told the American Bahá’ís in no uncertain terms that the New World Order that they were struggling to establish could “never be reared unless and until the generality of the people to which they belong have been already purged from the divers ills, whether social or political, that now so severely afflict it.”

In order for the North American Bahá’ís to fulfil their spiritual destiny, they first had to meet certain spiritual requirements, which included, “a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative duties, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed or color.” Each one of these “spiritual prerequisites” as envisioned by Shoghi Effendi directly influences the establishment of the New World Order.

The first one, while “not exclusively, directed” to the “elected representatives,” was specifically addressed to them because of their responsibilities for laying a firm foundation for the Universal House of Justice.

The second spiritual prerequisite was addressed to the youth, who in the vision of Shoghi Effendi “would contribute so decisively to the virility, the purity, and the driving force of the life of the Bahá’í community. And upon whom must depend,” Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “the future orientation of its destiny and the complete unfoldment of the potentialities with which God endowed it.” In Shoghi Effendi’s view of the future, Bahá’í youth, if they remain chaste and holy, will contribute to the future progress and orientations of the youths of their country. This would be their special mission.

The third one, freedom from prejudice, unlike the other two spiritual prerequisites, was addressed to all Bahá'ís, "of whatever age, rank, experience, class or color." Perhaps no other problem concerned Shoghi Effendi more than racial prejudice in American society. He called it "the corrosion of which for well nigh a century has bitten into the fibre, and attacked the whole social structure of American society" and said "it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution." His vision of future race relations in the American Bahá'í community was uncommonly accurate for someone viewing such events from afar. He told black and white Bahá'ís that they had "a long and thorny road beset with pitfalls," which "still remain untraveled." And he cautioned them that "on the distance they cover and the manner in which they travel that road, must depend...the operation of those intangible influences which are indispensable to the spirit of triumph of the American believers and the material success of their newly-launched enterprise."

Shoghi Effendi's vision of future race relations within the American Bahá'í community allowed no compromise. Bahá'ís of all ages and social backgrounds were expected to contribute to the solutions of the vexing problems which stood in the way of the American community realizing its spiritual destiny. "Freedom from racial prejudice...should...be," Shoghi Effendi pointed out, "deliberately cultivated through their various and every-day opportunities, no matter how insignificant...whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, conferences, conventions, summer schools and Assemblies", social parties, and recreation grounds. And above else, he said, "freedom from racial prejudice" should become the keynote of the National Spiritual Assembly.

In sharp contrast to the prevailing racial theories and practices, Shoghi Effendi outlined what black and white American Bahá'ís should do to solve the racial problem within the Bahá'í community. Both races had to "contribute their share to the solution" of this vexing problem, "tear down the barriers that divided them" and "endeavor," Shoghi Effendi pointed out, "day and night, to fulfill their particular responsibilities in the common task which so urgently faces them." While he encouraged both races to "contribute their share to the solution to this problem", he reminded them of "the warnings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" and told them to "visualize, while there was yet time, the dire consequences that must follow if this challenging and unhappy situation that faces the entire American nation is not definitely remedied."

Unfortunately, America did not have long to wait. The dire consequences were only a few years ahead. In the early 1940's, the worst race riot in American history up to that time broke out in Detroit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Shoghi Effendi's visions of the dire consequences of unresolved racial conflicts in America had been all too painfully true, a truth that would become increasingly more apparent in the turbulent 1960's.

Shoghi Effendi's vision of how black and white American Bahá'ís should mutually contribute to racial harmony within the Bahá'í community in preparation for their role in helping their nation rid itself of racial conflicts, represented an approach unprecedented in American race relations. Both races were assigned specific responsibilities.

White Bahá'ís were to make “a supreme effort,” Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once and for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude to the members of the other race, to persuade them,” Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “through their intimate spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow healing wounds.”

Black Bahá'ís “through a corresponding effort on their part” were to “show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds.”

In the Guardian's vision of racial conflict resolution and the achievement of racial unity within the American Bahá'í community, neither race could place the burden of resolving the racial problems on the other race. “The solution of so vast a problem,” Shoghi Effendi stated, is not a “matter that exclusively concerns the other.” Again, he cautions black and white Bahá'ís that they should not think that the problem could be “easily or immediately resolved.” Furthermore, he added, they also should not “wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith.”

Rather, according to Shoghi Effendi's vision of American race relations, the Bahá'ís had to “believe and be firmly convinced, that on their mutual understanding, their amity, and sustained cooperation, must depend more than on any other force or organization operating outside the circle of their Faith the deflection of that dangerous course so greatly feared by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and the materialization of the hopes He cherished for their joint contribution to the fulfillment of that country's glorious destiny.”

The American Bahá'í community could not have asked for a more insightful, foresighted, and glorious vision of future race relations in their country. Drawing on the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi carefully charted how black and white American Bahá'ís could unify themselves within the community and based upon their unity go forth and teach their fellow black and white Americans lessons of love and unity. But as with other visions of Shoghi Effendi, harsh realities were not ignored. Only Bahá'ís could deflect the “dangerous course” of racial conflict in America. If they failed, their failure would delay the times when America would be able to fulfill her spiritual destiny.

The American Bahá'í community, therefore, had and still has a "Double Crusade" envisioned by Shoghi Effendi as the necessary process for establishing the foundation for the future role America will play in the establishment of the New World Order. "First, to regenerate the inward life" of their own country and "next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation." And once again, he outlined both the hardships and glories they would have to face in their future. Their Faith would be attacked, "their motives misconstrued, their aims defamed, their aspirations derided, their institutions scorned, their influence belittled, their authority undermined, and their Cause, at times, deserted by a few who will be either be incapable of appreciating the nature of their ideals or unwilling the bear the brunt of the mounting criticism which such a contest is sure to involve."

But they should not fear, for in Shoghi Effendi's clear visions of the unfolding of the New World Order, all these negative influences and events are essential elements in the process. "The voice of criticism," Shoghi Effendi pointed out, "is a voice that indirectly reinforces the proclamation of its Cause. Unpopularity but serves to throw into greater relief the contrast between" the Faith "and its adversaries; while ostracism is itself a magnetic power that must eventually win over to its camp the most vociferous and inveterate amongst its foes."

Bahá'ís had to understand in that Shoghi Effendi's visions of the future they had a "holy task" that possessed "limitless possibilities" of raising to "an exalted level not only the life and activities of their own community, but the motives and standards," Shoghi Effendi pointed out, "that govern the relationships existing among the people" to which they would be an heir to labor. "So fraught with peril, so full of corruption," yet in his vision of those times, "pregnant with the promise of a future so bright that no previous age in the annals of mankind can rival its glory."

These, friends, are just a few of the visions of Shoghi Effendi as reflected in The Advent of Divine Justice. Thank you very much.