

Keys to the Proper Understanding of Islám  
in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

**T**he *Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi's concise statement of the fundamental verities of Bahá'í belief, contains a number of important keys which lead Bahá'ís to a more complete understanding of Islám.

*The Dispensation* makes direct reference to other Bahá'í writings that shed light on Islám, including the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (which quotes extensively from the Qur'án) and *Nabíl's Narrative. God Passes By*, a later work by Shoghi Effendi, foreshadowed in *The Dispensation*, traces the death-knell of the law of Islám back to the trumpet-blast sounded by Táhirih at the conference of Badasht and predicts the universal recognition and acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh by the Muslim world. In *The Promised Day is Come*, the Guardian analyzes the impact on Islám of its refusal to accept the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, including the collapse of the Caliphate, the abolition of the Sultanate, and the annulment of Sharí'ah canonical law.

*The Dispensation* upholds Islám as an independent religion and confirms the Imáms as the legitimate Successors of Muḥammad. 'Alí's appointment by Muḥammad as His Successor was made verbally, and is not to be found in the Qur'án. The split of Islám into Sunní and Shí'ah branches, a schism which the Guardian has characterized as "permanent and catastrophic," can be traced to the lack of a written document from Muḥammad establishing 'Alí as His Successor.

Misunderstandings that have crept into Islám are due to two sources: misinterpretation of the Qur'án (which is authentic) and the use of Ḥadīth, which are the reported sayings of Muḥammad and the Imáms. Several misunderstandings addressed in *The Dispensation* include the finality of Revelation (since Muḥammad is the "Seal of the Prophets" His Revelation is final), and the non-belief in the crucifixion of Christ. *The Dispensation* confirms that the process of Revelation is ongoing and eternal, and that Christ was crucified, as attested to by Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

The Bahá'í Faith, being the latest Revelation from God, provides for religious and administrative features not found in earlier religions, including Islám. These include the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, which establishes in written documents the Succession, the unique station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The Bahá'í Administrative Order includes the Guardianship, the Universal House of Justice, a system of elected administrative bodies, a series of appointed positions, and a comprehensive and authoritative body of administrative principles and guidelines laid down by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. The Qur'án, while laying down the basic laws and ordinances of Islám, is silent on the questions of succession and administration. There exists no provision in Islám, such as the Universal House of Justice, to provide for ongoing authoritative legislation.

Finally, *The Dispensation* clarifies that the Bahá'í Faith seeks not to undermine Islám, but to restore and reinvigorate it and to assist in the realization of its highest aspirations. To be true to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, we must view Islám and the Bahá'í Faith as essentially different stages of one and the same religion. "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

### Introduction

*The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh* is Shoghi Effendi’s masterful and concise statement of Bahá’í theological principles, or fundamental verities as he calls them:

My chief concern at this challenging period of Bahá’í history is rather to call the attention of those who are destined to be the champion-builders of the Administrative Order of Bahá’u’lláh to certain fundamental verities the elucidation of which must tremendously assist them in the effective prosecution of their mighty enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

One generally overlooked aspect of this wonderful letter is the way it helps us to develop a correct understanding and perspective on Islám, the religion which gave birth to both the Bábí and Bahá’í Faiths. This is especially important to Bahá’ís from a Western background because information on Islám is often highly distorted, difficult to obtain, or not stated in terms that are readily comprehensible to the Western mind. Charles Le Gai Eaton has described this problem in his thoughtful book, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*:

Most Muslim scholars seem to agree, at least in private, that there has been a singular failure to communicate across the cultural frontier. The actual means of communication—the way in which religion needs to be presented nowadays—have been forged, not out of Islamic materials, but in the West. The Muslim writer finds himself obliged to work with instruments which do not fit comfortably in his hand. Moreover, traditional Muslims, who have escaped the influence of ‘modern,’ that is to say, occidental education have no understanding of the occidental mind, which is as strange to them as it would be to a Christian of the Middle Ages...

The traditional Muslim writes with authority and conviction, but he does not know how to answer the questions which dominate Western thought in the religious context.<sup>3</sup>

While *The Dispensation* does not devote a very large percentage of its pages to Islám, and certainly cannot be called a treatise on the subject, it does provide a number of significant keys that help Bahá’ís, especially Western Bahá’ís, understand Islám and put it into a proper perspective. Shoghi Effendi is uniquely qualified to this task, combining as he does the qualities of authorized interpreter and spiritual successor of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Western-trained scholar, and a singular genius for historical analysis. However, Shoghi Effendi’s highly condensed exposition is a mix of the explicit and implicit. Some important elements are contained in fleeting allusions. Vast theological vistas are often only briefly hinted at, and the reader is left wanting more than the Guardian can possibly convey in a 60-page letter. This being the case, the “keys” to Islám contained in *The Dispensation* can and should be amplified by a careful study of other Bahá’í texts, including Shoghi Effendi’s other letters and messages.

In brief, *The Dispensation* provides the following “keys” to help us understand Islám from a Bahá’í perspective. Each one of these will be explored in detail in a later section of this paper:

1. *The Dispensation* makes reference to Bahá’í Scriptures and other writings, including the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *God Passes By*, *The Promised Day is Come*, and *Nabíl’s Narrative*, which together with the brief but definitive passages in *The Dispensation* shed light on Islám and give us a fuller understanding of the Bahá’í perspective on several fundamental questions.

2. *The Dispensation* upholds Islám as an independent religion and confirms the Imáms as the legitimate successors of Muḥammad.

3. *The Dispensation* both explicitly and implicitly corrects misunderstandings that have crept into Islám.

4. *The Dispensation* identifies new features of the Bahá’í Dispensation for which there are no parallels within Islám.

5. *The Dispensation* establishes the goals of the Bahá’í Revelation in relation to Islám.

### *Kitáb-i-Íqán*

The Dispensation quotes extensively from the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. A number of quotations are from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh's masterful treatise on the nature of religion. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* itself makes numerous references to the Qur'án, as well as to sayings of 'Alí, Husayn, and Sádiq (first, third, and sixth Imáms, respectively). Not only is the Western reader of the *Íqán* exposed to the rhythm and tone of the Qur'anic verses (in Shoghi Effendi's beautiful English translation), but a later Manifestation of God Himself (Bahá'u'lláh) uses these verses to support His religious arguments in support of the Báb's Revelation. While not offering a comprehensive study of the Qur'án, Bahá'u'lláh's references to the Qur'án in the *Íqán* and in His other works such as *Í* provide Bahá'ís a compelling and dramatic exposure to the sacred book of Islám.

And a dramatic exposure to the Qur'án for non-Arabic speaking Westerners is no small feat, as evidenced by the following quotations from *Muhammad*, a biography by Karen Armstrong:

In the case of the Qur'án there is also the problem of translation. ...There is something about Arabic which is incommunicable in another idiom: even the speeches of Arab politicians sound stilted, artificial and alien in an English translation. If this is true of ordinary Arabic, of mundane utterance or conventional literature, it is doubly true of the Qur'án which is written in highly complex, dense and allusive language....

This does not mean that we should dismiss the Qur'án arrogantly. It is not meant to be read like other books. If approached in the right way, believers claim, it yields a sense of divine presence. This is difficult for somebody who has been brought up in the Christian tradition to understand because Christians do not have a sacred language, as Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Arabic are sacred to Hindus, Jews, and Muslims.

...Western people tend to find the Qur'án tediously repetitive, because it seems to go over the same ground again and again, but the book was not designed for private perusal but for liturgical recitation. When Muslims listen to a sura in the mosque, they are reminded of the central tenets of the faith in a single recitation.<sup>4</sup>

Shoghi Effendi describes the problem facing Western Bahá'ís in this way:

It is certainly most difficult to thoroughly grasp all the Súrihs of the Qur'án, as it requires a detailed knowledge of the social, religious and historical background of Arabia at the time of the appearance of the Prophet. ...For the present, the Guardian agrees, that it would be easier and more helpful to study the Book according to subjects, and not verse by verse and also in the light of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation which throw such floods of light on the whole of the Qur'án.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to referencing the Qur'án itself, the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and those of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá introduce us to and familiarize us with Islamic terminology and concepts. In fact, any Bahá'í who makes a serious study of Islám will be amazed to find very many phrases and terms, which he thought previously to be Bahá'í-specific, that actually originate in Islám. The beauty of this situation is that Bahá'ís who read the Writings of the Central Figures are automatically taken to the spiritual heart of Islám.

### *God Passes By*

*The Dispensation* actually foreshadows later works by the Guardian in the following passage:

It is not my purpose, as I look back upon these crowded years of heroic deeds, to attempt even a cursory review of the mighty events that have transpired since 1844 until the present day. Nor have I any intention to undertake an analysis of the forces that have precipitated them, or to evaluate their influence upon peoples and institutions in almost every continent of the globe.<sup>6</sup>

These works are none other than *God Passes By* (written in 1944), and *The Promised Day is Come* (written in 1941). Speaking of a future time of conversion to the Faith by Muslims, *God Passes By* describes in several places a truly remarkable prophecy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's that the "banner of Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá...must float from the pinnacles of the foremost seat of learning in the Islamic world."<sup>7</sup> The reference here is to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the most famous Islamic university and seminary.

In another amazing passage in this same book, the Guardian traces the extinction of Islamic law, the decline and secularization of Islám, and the ultimate conversion of all Muslim peoples to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, to the trumpet-blast of the New Dispensation sounded by Táhiriḥ at the Conference of Badash̄t:

A little over four years had elapsed since the birth of the Báb's Revelation when the trumpet-blast announcing the formal extinction of the old, and the inauguration of the new Dispensation was sounded.... The arena was a tiny hamlet in the plain of Badash̄t on the border of Mázindarán. The trumpeter was a lone woman, the noblest of her sex in that Dispensation, whom even some of her co-religionists pronounced a heretic. The call she sounded was the death-knell of the twelve hundred year old law of Islám.

Accelerated, twenty years later, by another trumpet-blast, announcing the formulation of the laws of yet another Dispensation, this process of disintegration, associated with the declining fortunes of a superannuated, though divinely revealed Law, gathered further momentum, precipitated, in a later age, the annulment of the Shari'ah canonical Law in Turkey, led to the virtual abandonment of that Law in Shi'ah Persia, has, more recently, been responsible for the dissociation of the System envisaged in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* from the Sunní ecclesiastical Law in Egypt, has paved the way for the recognition of that System in the Holy Land itself, and is destined to culminate in the secularization of the Muslim states, and in the universal recognition of the Law of Bahá'u'lláh by all the nations, and its enthronement in the hearts of all the peoples, of the Muslim world.<sup>8</sup>

This passage leaves us absolutely breathless, combining as it does prophecy, historical analysis undreamt of by secular historians, and a dramatic recounting of the facts.

### *The Promised Day is Come*

In *The Promised Day is Come*, Shoghi Effendi analyzes the impact of the world's refusal to accept the Message of Bahá'u'lláh and devotes more pages to these themes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately describe the Guardian's analysis, but some of the topics related to Islám include the following:

1. The general decline of Religious Orthodoxy (pp. 76-80).
2. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh's castigation of the Muslim religious divines, who have been responsible for the people's rejection of the New Dispensation (pp. 87-93).
3. A description of the decline of the *Shi'ah* ecclesiastical order (pp. 93-98).
4. The collapse of the Caliphate (pp. 98-99).
5. The abolition of the Sultanate (pp. 99-100).
6. The annulment of the Shari'ah canonical Law and the promulgation of a civil code in its place (p. 101).
7. The de-arabization and de-Islamification of Turkey (p. 101).

Writing of the fortunes of Sunní Islám in the twentieth century, Shoghi Effendi describes the Caliphate as an institution that "vanished like a smoke," leaving more than 200 million Muslims without a leader:

Strange, incredibly strange, must appear the position of this most powerful branch of the Islamic Faith, with no outward and visible head to voice its sentiments and convictions, its unity

irretrievably shattered, its radiance obscured, its law undermined, its institutions thrown into hopeless confusion. This institution that had challenged the inalienable, divinely appointed rights of the Imáms of the Faith of Muḥammad, had, after the revolution of thirteen centuries, vanished like a smoke, an institution which had dealt such merciless blows to a Faith Whose Herald was Himself a descendant of the Imáms, the lawful successors of the Apostle of God.<sup>9</sup>

Lest we misinterpret these harsh descriptions, dire prophesies, stern rebukes and warnings to be a general rejection or disparagement of Muḥammad, the Qur’án, or Islám, the Guardian reminds us again of the fundamental verities of our Faith:

As to Muḥammad, the Apostle of God, let none among His followers who read these pages, think for a moment that either Islám, or its Prophet, or His Book, or His appointed Successors, or any of His authentic teachings, have been, or are to be in any way, or to however slight a degree, disparaged. The lineage of the Báb, the descendant of the Imám Ḥusayn; the divers and striking evidences, in Nabíl’s Narrative, of the attitude of the Herald of our Faith towards the Founder, the Imáms, and the Book of Islám; the glowing tributes paid by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán to Muḥammad and His lawful Successors, and particularly to the “peerless and incomparable” Imám Ḥusayn; the arguments adduced, forcibly, fearlessly, and publicly by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in churches and synagogues, to demonstrate the validity of the Message of the Arabian Prophet; and last but not least the written testimonial of the Queen of Rumania, who, born in the Anglican faith and notwithstanding the close alliance of her government with the Greek Orthodox Church, the state religion of her adopted country, has, largely as a result of the perusal of these public discourses of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, been prompted to proclaim her recognition of the prophetic function of Muḥammad—all proclaim, in no uncertain terms, the true attitude of the Bahá’í Faith towards its parent religion.<sup>10</sup>

### Nabíl’s Narrative

Finally, *Nabíl’s Narrative*, which Shoghi Effendi translated and edited two years before he wrote *The Dispensation*, offers “striking evidences” “of the attitude of the Herald of our Faith (the Báb) towards the Founder, the Imáms, and the Book of Islám.”<sup>11</sup> This book also serves to introduce us to the culture of Shí’ah Islám, as it existed in nineteenth-century Persia, and helps us to understand the ferocity of the attacks launched against the Bábi and Bahá’í Faiths in the land of their birth. Shoghi Effendi makes several references to *Nabíl’s Narrative* in *The Dispensation*.

### Islám as an Independent Religion and the Imáms as the Legitimate Successors of Muḥammad

In discussing the Master’s explanation of an ancient Zoroastrian prophecy, Shoghi Effendi makes the following statement in *The Dispensation*:

From the text of this explicit and authoritative interpretation of so ancient a prophecy it is evident how necessary it is for every faithful follower of the Faith to accept the divine origin and uphold the independent status of the Muḥammadan Dispensation. The validity of the Imamate is, moreover, implicitly recognized in these same passages—that divinely-appointed institution of whose most distinguished member the Báb Himself was a lineal descendant, and which continued for a period of no less than two hundred and sixty years to be the chosen recipient of the guidance of the Almighty and the repository of one of the two most precious legacies of Islám.<sup>12</sup>

This passage confirms the divine origin and independent status of Islám and upholds the validity of the Imamate. The legitimacy of the Imáms is also upheld in the previously quoted passage from *The Promised Day is Come*.

Amazingly, some writers dispute these statements proclaiming the Imáms to be the legitimate successors of Muḥammad. Instead, they claim the Faith’s stance on the Imáms is part of a general “Shí’ah bias” that exists because the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh came out of a Shí’ah Islamic background. In *The Dispensation* Shoghi Effendi clearly refutes such a view.

A central problem for Islám is that ‘Alí’s appointment as Muḥammad’s successor was not put into writing and is not contained in the Qur’án:

Can any passage of the Qur’án, which in respect to its legal code, its administrative and devotional ordinances marks already a notable advance over previous and more corrupted Revelations, be construed as placing upon an unassailable basis the undoubted authority with which Muḥammad had, verbally and on several occasions, invested His successor?<sup>13</sup>

This statement by the Guardian confirms that ‘Alí was verbally appointed by Muḥammad on several occasions, but as history reports, after Muḥammad’s passing he was passed over in favor of Abú-Bakr.<sup>14</sup> ‘Alí finally became the fourth Caliph after the death of ‘Uthmán, but Islám’s unity had by that time been irreparably shattered and the seeds sown for the division into Sunní and Shí‘ah sects. After ‘Alí’s assassination by His enemies, the leadership of Islám was seized by Mu‘áwiyah, the son of Muḥammad’s principle Meccan enemy, Abú-Sufyán. Thus began the period of the Umayyad Caliphs. A minority of Muslims who followed ‘Alí and his descendents, the Imáms, became known as the Shí‘ahs.

The Shí‘ah accounts of Muḥammad’s last pilgrimage to Mecca describe His appointment of ‘Alí as His successor:

Shí‘ah tradition has it that on the way back to Medina, at urgent bidding received from God, Muḥammad made, all of a sudden, a forced halt by the pool of Khum, a most inconvenient place; had a pulpit raised with saddles, and from this announced ‘Alí as His successor, requiring the large body of Muslims who were with Him to pledge their loyalty to ‘Alí.<sup>15</sup>

Another episode concerns Muḥammad’s death-bed request for writing materials in order to leave a will—a request which was refused by ‘Umar who reportedly said: “The Book of God is sufficient unto us.” We know this actually happened because ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the awful consequences of these words in the *Lawḥ-i-Hizár Baytí* (Tablet of One Thousand Verses). Here is Taherzadeh’s summary and commentary on this Tablet:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that it was this very statement which caused the foundation of the religion of God in the Islamic Dispensation to be shattered and the ignoble worshippers of self and passion to rule over the righteous souls. It became a deadly weapon with which the Imám ‘Alí himself was martyred, which caused great divisions within the nation of Islám, and which changed the loving spirit of that nation to that of warriors armed with sword and weapon. As a result of this statement, the head of Imám Ḥusayn, the most illustrious of the Imáms, was decapitated on the plain of Karbilá, the other holy Imáms were inflicted with great sufferings, imprisonment and death, and the blood of countless innocent souls was shed for well nigh twelve hundred years.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá further affirms that this statement uttered by ‘Umar was transformed into the hundreds of bullets centuries later which pierced the breast of the Báb in Tabríz, that this statement became the chains which were placed around the blessed neck of Bahá’u’lláh, and brought about the untold sufferings inflicted upon Him in the course of His successive exiles.<sup>16</sup>

Much, much more can be said on this topic. However, as confirmed by the above quotations and many others as well:

It is a fundamental belief of the Bahá’ís that Imám ‘Alí was the lawful successor of the Prophet of Islám. After him his lineal male descendents known as the ‘holy Imáms’ led the Shí‘ah community until the year 260 AH. Bahá’u’lláh regarded the Imáms as the legitimate successors of the Prophet, acknowledged the value of their work in the elucidation of the Qur’án, confirmed many of their sayings as recorded in the books of ‘*Aḥádíth*’ (traditions), quoted several of these in His Writings, interpreted their words, extolled their station (especially that of Ḥusayn, the third Imám) in glowing terms, and referred to them as ‘those unquenchable lights of divine guidance’ and ‘those lamps of certitude’.<sup>17</sup>

### Misunderstandings that Have Crept into Islám

#### Sources of Misunderstandings in Islám

As with each religion, Islám has over time departed from the pristine purity of its original teachings. Religious misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations have crept into the religion and are now accepted as orthodox teaching. This process is well described in the Bahá'í Scriptures, especially in the talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and constitutes the main reason why a new Revelation is needed every thousand years or so. The new Manifestation restates the eternal truths, brings new teachings for the people of His Day, and clears away misunderstandings from previous religions.

In the case of Islám, we know the text of the Qur'án is authentic, which is an advancement over the older Faiths:

We cannot be sure of the authenticity, word for word, of any of the past Holy Scriptures except the Qur'án, as they were either not written down during the Prophet's lifetime or have been changed in the course of time and the originals lost;<sup>18</sup>

...the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábi and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the two main sources of religious error in Islám are misinterpretation of the Qur'án (the words are authentic but their meaning is lost or misconstrued), and *Ḥadīth* (reported sayings of Muḥammad and the Imáms). It is interesting to note how both of these sources of error are dealt with in the Bahá'í Faith: Bahá'u'lláh has forbidden oral tradition as a basis for His religion and misinterpretation of the scriptures is prevented by the institution of the Covenant (see next section of this paper for a fuller discussion).

Several Islamic misunderstandings are explicitly or implicitly addressed in *The Dispensation*:

1. The claim of finality of Revelation (Muḥammad is the 'seal of the Prophets')
2. The Crucifixion of Christ

#### Finality of Revelation

The first issue is addressed in the following passage from *The Dispensation*:

Indeed, the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified. *"To believe that all revelation is ended, that the portals of Divine mercy are closed, that from the daysprings of eternal holiness no sun shall rise again, that the ocean of everlasting bounty is forever stilled, and that out of the tabernacle of ancient glory the Messengers of God have ceased to be made manifest"* must constitute in the eyes of every follower of the Faith a grave, an inexcusable departure from one of its most cherished and fundamental principles.<sup>20</sup>

The quotation in italics is from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. In that same book, Bahá'u'lláh forcefully challenges the Muslim view that since Muḥammad is the "Seal of the Prophets," a later Revelation from God is not possible.<sup>21</sup> Not only does Bahá'u'lláh affirm the Bábi's Revelation as the next valid religious Dispensation after Islám, but He also emphatically states that the process of Divine Revelation will continue indefinitely.

#### Crucifixion of Christ

The crucifixion of Christ is an important topic, since it demonstrates a clear example of a misinterpretation of the Qur'anic verses. To virtually every Christian denomination and sect, Christ's crucifixion represents the pivotal event of His ministry in which He died on the cross to atone for the sins of all humanity. And yet, the majority of Muslims rejects the historical fact of the Crucifixion of Christ:

The Quranic teaching is that Christ was not crucified nor killed by the Jews, notwithstanding certain apparent circumstances which produced that illusion in the minds of some of his enemies; that disputations, doubts, and conjectures on such matters are vain; and that he was taken up to God.<sup>22</sup>

The following quotations are two different translations of the Qur'anic verses which have led Muslims to this conclusion (4:157-158):

That they said (in boast),  
“We killed Christ Jesus  
The son of Mary,  
The Apostle of God”;—But they killed him not,  
Nor crucified him,  
But so it was made  
To appear to them,  
And those who differ  
Therein are full of doubts,  
With no (certain) knowledge,  
But only conjecture to follow,  
For of a surety  
They killed him not;—  
Nay, God raised him up  
Unto Himself; and God  
Is Exalted in Power, Wise;—<sup>23</sup>

...and for their saying, ‘We slew the Messiah,  
Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God’—  
yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him,  
only a likeness of that was shown to them.  
Those who are at variance concerning him surely  
are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge  
of him, except the following of surmise;  
and they slew him not of a certainty—  
no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is  
All-mighty, All-wise.<sup>24</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh refutes this interpretation in several places in His Writings. In *The Dispensation*, a prayer of Bahá'u'lláh is quoted in which He says: “*Again I was crucified for having unveiled to men's eyes the hidden gems of Thy glorious unity, for having revealed to them the wondrous signs of Thy sovereign and everlasting power.*”<sup>25</sup> In this prayer He identifies Himself with the sufferings experienced by past Prophets and Holy Ones, including Noah, Moses, Jesus, and the Imám Ḥusayn.

An even more pointed confirmation of Christ's crucifixion is made in the following quotation from *Gleanings*:

*O Jews! If ye be intent on crucifying once again Jesus, the Spirit of God, put Me to death, for He hath once more, in My person, been made manifest unto you.*<sup>26</sup>

### Other Misunderstandings Not Addressed in *The Dispensation*

There are numerous other misunderstandings or errors that have entered Islám, such as attitudes towards women,<sup>27</sup> certain Ḥadīth that encourage the execution of apostates,<sup>28</sup> etc. These and others are dealt with in other places in the Bahá'í Revelation, but are not covered in the *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*.

### New Features of the Bahá'í Dispensation Not Found in Islám

#### The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

We have already discussed in Section III the lack of a written will appointing 'Alí as Muḥammad's successor, and the resulting schism into Sunní and Shí'ah branches—a schism which the Guardian has characterized as “permanent and catastrophic.”<sup>29</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, as documented in the *Kitáb-i-Ahd* and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament*, has resolutely resolved the question of succession, and has conferred the mantle of authority, interpretation, and infallibility on both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. This is unprecedented in the history of religion:

Nowhere in the sacred scriptures of any of the world's religious systems, nor even in the writings of the Inaugurator of the Bábí Dispensation, do we find any provisions establishing a covenant or providing for an administrative order that can compare in scope and authority with those that lie at the very basis of the Bahá'í Dispensation. Has either Christianity or Islám, to take as an instance two of the most widely diffused and outstanding among the world's recognized religions, anything to offer that can measure with, or be regarded as equivalent to, either the Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant or to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá? Does the text of either the Gospel or the Qur'án confer sufficient authority upon those leaders and councils that have claimed the right and assumed the function of interpreting the provisions of their sacred scriptures and of administering the affairs of their respective communities? Could Peter, the admitted chief of the Apostles, or the Imám 'Alí, the cousin and legitimate successor of the Prophet, produce in support of the primacy with which both had been invested written and explicit affirmations from Christ and Muḥammad that could have silenced those who either among their contemporaries or in a later age have repudiated their authority and, by their action, precipitated the schisms that persist until the present day?<sup>30</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh Himself testifies to the power of His Covenant in the following words: “*So firm and mighty is this Covenant that from the beginning of time until the present day no religious Dispensation hath produced its like.*”<sup>31</sup> One may wonder why this is true—why have past religions, including Islám, suffered catastrophic schisms for lack of a firm and documented Covenant? One possible explanation has been offered in Taherzadeh's monumental work, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*:

In past Dispensations the Prophets did not establish a firm and unequivocal Covenant with their followers concerning their successors, nor did they leave behind clear guidance as to how to conduct the affairs of the community after their departure from this world. Consequently, religions became divided into many sects resulting in conflicts and disunity among the followers. But the non-existence of a clear Covenant and lack of guidance should not be construed as a failure on the part of the Founders of religions. To attribute to the Manifestations of God a lack of understanding, of vision and knowledge, is tantamount to attributing shortcomings and imperfections to God Himself...

A careful study of the history of religions will enable us to realize that the Manifestations of old, those embodiments of God's attributes, did not make an unequivocal written Covenant with their followers because of the immaturity of the people of the age, who could not have sustained the rigours, the tests and the strict discipline which the observance of such a Covenant would inevitably have required.<sup>32</sup>

### The Uniqueness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

As stated in *The Dispensation*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá fulfills a unique function for which there is no equivalent in past religions, including Islám:

One Who, not only in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh but in the entire field of religious history, fulfills a unique function. Though moving in a sphere of His own and holding a rank radically different from that of the Author and the Forerunner of the Bahá'í Revelation, He, by virtue of the station ordained for Him through the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, forms together with them what may be termed the Three Central Figures of a Faith that stands unapproached in the world's spiritual history.<sup>33</sup>

A glimpse of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's uniqueness is offered by the Guardian's summary description of His many qualities and titles:

He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being "round Whom all names revolve," the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation - styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the "Mystery of God"—an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to Him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.<sup>34</sup>

It is interesting to note that Shoghi Effendi does not claim a similar uniqueness of station for the Guardianship. In fact, in his discussion of the Guardianship in *The Dispensation* he mentions "the hereditary principle and the law of primogeniture as having been upheld by the Prophets of the past."<sup>35</sup> From this, one could infer a correspondence in function between the Imáms of Islám, and the Guardian. The Imáms, like the succession of Guardians envisioned in *The Will and Testament*, passed the mantle of authority and succession from father to son. Both the Guardian and the Imáms provided interpretation of the scriptures and spiritual leadership and guidance.<sup>36</sup>

### Administrative Order

The Bahá'í Administrative Order, the provisions of which have been laid down in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, is absolutely unique in religious history:

The Bahá'í Commonwealth of the future, of which this vast Administrative Order is the sole framework, is, both in theory and practice, not only unique in the entire history of political institutions, but can find no parallel in the annals of any of the world's recognized religious systems.<sup>37</sup>

In rough outline, the Bahá'í Administrative Order contains the following elements:

1. A written Covenant, which specifies succession. Bahá'u'lláh was succeeded by His eldest Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the *Mystery of God*, Whom He appointed in His Book of the Covenant (*Kitáb-i-'Ahd*). 'Abdu'l-Bahá fulfills a unique role in religious history as appointed successor, infallible interpreter, Center of the Covenant, and perfect exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was succeeded by His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, whom He appointed in His *Will and Testament* to be the Guardian, vested with the roles of head of the Faith and infallible interpreter.

2. A series of elected bodies to administer the Faith (Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, and the Universal House of Justice). The local believers elect the Local Assembly annually through plurality vote;

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the National Assembly is elected annually through a National Convention; the Universal House of Justice is elected every five years by a plurality vote of the members of all National Assemblies. In 1998 the Universal House of Justice introduced Regional Bahá'í Councils that operate between the local and national levels in those countries where the complexity of issues facing National Spiritual Assemblies requires a new measure of decentralization.

3. A series of appointed positions including Hands of the Cause, Continental Counselors, Auxiliary Board Members and their assistants. These individuals inspire and educate the believers, and focus on activities to propagate and protect the Faith. They work hand in hand with the elected institutions, but have no real power of their own.

4. A series of Administrative principles and guidelines which are enshrined in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. These principles cover such topics as consultation, elections, community life, the spirit of Bahá'í administration, guidance on the application of Bahá'í Law, and the qualifications for service.

5. Explicit infallibility conveyed upon the Center of the Covenant ('Abdu'l-Bahá), the Guardian, and the Universal House of Justice.

6. Explicit and exclusive right of interpretation conveyed to both the Center of the Covenant and the Guardian.

7. Ability for the House of Justice to legislate in areas not covered by Bahá'u'lláh's Writings.

8. Sphere of legislation of the Universal House of Justice defined by the Guardianship.

9. A specified provision for the excommunication of those who attack the head of the Faith and attempt to undermine the firmly established Covenant. These individuals are called "Covenant Breakers."

We have seen in the previous sections of this paper that Islám lacked a written Covenant resulting in a split into Sunní and Shí'ah sects. The Qur'án, while providing laws and ordinances and the basis for a legal code, is silent on the question of how the religion is to be maintained and administered after the Prophet's passing. The Shí'ah and Sunní sects took different paths as explained by this passage from Moojan Momen's excellent book, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*:

The Sunni concept of leadership of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet, the Caliphate, is essentially a temporal leadership. The Caliph is the first among equals, elected ideally by consensus, although later the hereditary principle became the norm. To others, the theologians and experts in jurisprudence, is given the task of expounding upon religious questions.

To the Shi'is, however, the succession to the Prophet is a matter of the designation by the Prophet of an individual ('Alí) as Imam. Each Imam designates his successor during his lifetime. The authority of the Imam derives from his designation by his predecessor to a spiritual station and is independent of his temporal standing, i.e. it makes no difference to the Imam's station whether he is acknowledged by the generality of Muslims or not, whereas this quite clearly does not apply to a Sunni Caliph whose station is totally dependent on such acknowledgement.

The Sunnis and Shi'is are basically in agreement with each other over the nature and function of prophethood. The two main functions of the Prophet are to reveal God's law to men and to guide men towards God. Of these two functions, the Sunnis believe that both ended with the death of Muhammad, while the Shi'is believe that whereas legislation ended, the function of guiding men and preserving and explaining the Divine Law continued through the line of Imams.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the Caliphs and the Imáms, both Islamic branches developed an additional body of literature called *Hadíth*, which represent the reported sayings of Muḥammad (Sunnís), and which for the Shí'ahs also include the reported sayings of the Imáms. Each branch also developed its own form of Islamic jurisprudence as well their own system of clergy and theological training.

It is important to realize that no matter how much these elements have contributed to the richness of Islamic history, culture, and religious thought, absolutely none of it can be traced back to the explicit text of the Qur'án, a book that is universally accepted as the Word of God by all Muslims. Thus, 'Alí's appointment as Muḥammad's successor is not to be found in the Qur'án, neither is any text that might form the justification for the Caliphate. There is disagreement among Muslims as to which *Ḥadīth* are authentic and which are not (plus the Shí'ahs have *Ḥadīth* for the Imáms which of course are not accepted by the Sunnís). The various schools of Islamic jurisprudence and the various religious clergy have all been developed in response to the needs of the religion to deal with questions and situations not found in the Qur'án, to ensure training and education of the people, and to provide for the ongoing administration of the religion. An almost identical situation exists in Christianity: the Bible contains almost no information about how to administer the religion after the departure of Christ.

Neither Christianity nor Islám contains a mechanism for ongoing authoritative legislation, which can be traced back to the Holy Book, such as exists with the Universal House of Justice.

### Goals of the Bahá'í Dispensation in Relation to Islám

Bahá'u'lláh says: "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future. Let him that seeketh, attain it."<sup>39</sup> As a befitting close to this paper, the following quotation from *The Dispensation* seeks to establish the proper relationship between Islám and the Bahá'í Revelation:

Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfillment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instill. Its teachings do not deviate a hairbreadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer has graphically expressed it, "are doomed not to die, but to be reborn...."<sup>40</sup>

The Bahá'í Revelation seeks not to undermine Islám (or any other religion), but to restore and reinvigorate it. To be true to the truths revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, we must view Islám and the Bahá'í Faith as essentially different stages of one and the same religion.

*The Dispensation* thus protects the Bahá'í community from slipping into the "Islám-bashing" so common in the West today. *The Dispensation* requires that Bahá'ís, despite having suffered enormously at the hands of Muslims, give due and just regard to Islám as a Divinely-revealed religion, revere the Prophet Muḥammad and His Successors the Imáms, accept the Qur'án as the Word of God, and acknowledge the many valuable contributions which Islám has made to the advancement of civilization. Finally, this all-important letter of the Guardian holds out the promise of the ultimate regeneration of Islám - a regeneration that will be realized during the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

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### Notes

- 1) This paper was originally written to fulfill the course requirements for the Wilmette Institute distance-learning course on *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*. It was presented at the 'Irfán Colloquium in October 2000. The author is indebted to Dr. Geoff Marks, whose comments and suggestions for improvement have been incorporated into this version of the paper.

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- 2) Shoghi Effendi, 1969. *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*. paragraph 5. This letter is in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, (WOB) (Wilmette: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), pp. 95-157.
- 3) Charles Le Gai Eaton, 1985. *Islam and the Destiny of Man*. New York: State University of New York Press, The Islamic Texts Society. p.11. Le Gai Eaton is a Western Muslim.
- 4) Karen Armstrong, 1992. *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, (San Francisco: Harper), pp. 49-50.
- 5) Shoghi Effendi. *Directives From the Guardian*, (New Delhi: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), p. 59.
- 6) *Dispensation*, paragraph 5, (WOB, p. 98).
- 7) Shoghi Effendi, 1974. *God Passes By*, (Wilmette: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), p. 411. Also, see other references to this prophecy on pages 302 and 315.
- 8) *Ibid*, pp. 33-34.
- 9) Shoghi Effendi, 1967. *The Promised Day is Come*, (Wilmette: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), p. 100.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 112-113.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 12) *Dispensation*, paragraph 14, (WOB, p. 102).
- 13) *Ibid*, paragraph 96, (WOB, p. 145).
- 14) A discussion of Muḥammad's passing and the succession can be found in *Muḥammad and the Course of Islám*, by H.M. Balyuzi, chapter 19, and in *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, by Moojan Momen, chapter 2.
- 15) H.M. Balyuzi, 1976. *Muḥammad and the Course of Islám*, (Oxford: George Ronald Press), pp. 149-150. Some Sunni sources also describe this event. See, for example, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, p. 15, which quotes an account from Ibn Ḥanbal, a Sunni collection of *Ḥadīth*.
- 16) Adib Taherzadeh, 1992. *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Oxford: George Ronald Press), pp. 157-158.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 18) Shoghi Effendi. *Buddha, Krisna, Zoroaster*, compilation from the letters and writings of Shoghi Effendi, p.21. The authenticity of the Qur'án is not explicitly described in *The Dispensation*, but is somewhat implied in paragraph 96: "Can any passage of the Qur'án, which...marks already a notable advance over previous and more corrupted Revelations..."
- 19) Shoghi Effendi, 1969. *The Advent of Divine Justice*, (Wilmette: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), p. 41.
- 20) *Dispensation*, paragraph 44, (WOB, pp. 115-116).
- 21) See for example, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pages 40, 162-163, 166, 169, 170, 174, 179, 213, 233, and 244.
- 22) A. Yusuf Ali (translator), 1983. *The Holy Qur'án, Text, Translation and Commentary*, (Brentwood: Amana Corp), note 663, p. 230.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- 24) A.J. Arberry (translator), 1955. *The Koran Interpreted*, (New York: Macmillan), p. 123.
- 25) *Dispensation*, paragraph 52, (WOB, p. 118).
- 26) Bahá'u'lláh, 1976. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'i Publishing Trust), p. 101.
- 27) For example, the relegation of women to the back of the mosque occurred over time. Women worshipped in the mosque side by side with men in Muḥammad's day. The use of a chador or "head to toe" shroud for women is not mandated by Muḥammad or the Qur'án, other than general exhortations for modesty in dress.
- 28) Bukhari 88:1 states: "Whoever changes his religion, kill him." Bukhari 87:6 also states that the life of a Muslim may be taken in three cases, one of which is that "he forsakes his religion and separates himself from his community." Bukhari is one of the well-known compilations of Islamic *Ḥadīth*. These traditions are not accepted by all Muslims, especially the more liberal. See, for example, *The Religion of Islam*, Maulana Muhammad Ali, S. Chand & Company, New Delhi, pp. 591-599, for a discussion of Apostasy. The Qur'án states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256).
- 29) *Dispensation*, paragraph 96, (WOB, p. 146).
- 30) *Ibid.*, (WOB, p. 145).
- 31) *Ibid.*, paragraph 98, (WOB, p. 146).
- 32) *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 158-159.
- 33) *Dispensation*, paragraph 69, (WOB, pp. 131-132).
- 34) *Ibid.*, paragraph 75, (WOB, p. 134).
- 35) *Ibid.*, paragraph 101, (WOB, p. 147).
- 36) The line of Guardians ended with Shoghi Effendi, since he had no heirs and none of his male relatives met the qualifications in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament*. This situation created a theological test for the Bahá'i community, since a line of Guardians is clearly envisioned in the *Will and Testament*, which also describes the Guardian as the permanent head of the Universal House of Justice, which had not yet come into existence at the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing in 1957. Much has been written on this topic elsewhere, and so a more detailed treatment is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, the Universal House of Justice was first elected in 1963, at the successful conclusion of Shoghi Effendi's ten-year global campaign to expand the Bahá'i Faith to all parts of the world. The House of Justice, when elected, resolved the theological dilemma by legislating that future Guardians were not possible. The Supreme Institution did explain that the institution of the Guardianship continues to operate through the vast and authoritative body of writings left by Shoghi Effendi. Although there was only one Guardian in the person of Shoghi Effendi, the "hereditary principle" mentioned in *The Dispensation* is fulfilled in the sense that Bahá'u'lláh appointed His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who in turn appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi.

37) *Ibid.*, paragraph 118, (WOB, p. 152).

38) Moojan Momen, 1985. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islám*, (Oxford: George Ronald Press), p. 147.

39) *Gleanings*, p. 136.

40) *Dispensation*, paragraph 42, (WOB, p. 114).