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Shoghi Effendi's view of providential history in light of the Judaeo-Christian tradition

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Abstract

As head and Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani wrote on both the internal history of the Baha'i Faith since its inception in 1844 and its interactions with world events. What may be said of his view of history? A faith-based, or theologically driven, overview or meta-history emerges that highlights what he regarded as the actions of God in history and the effect of the Baha'i Faith on world events. In its broad outlines, this overview of history closely resembles the linear features of Judaeo-Christian providential history. While providential theories of history are clearly at odds with the postmodern mindset and are viewed with suspicion as extra-historical theories by academic historians, they have a long and respectable intellectual history that endures until today. This providential history deserves re-examination in light of the writings of Shoghi Effendi who, qua Guardian, wrote history from the perspective of the official head and interpreter of the Baha'i Faith. This paper will examine six defining features of his providential view. They include: 1) palingenesis and transitional history, 2) synchronization in providential history, 3) teleological history, 4) organically whole history, 5) periodization: cycles, ages and epochs, and 6) history as community identity-creation.

Introduction

Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957 CE) was the head of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 until his death in 1957. He was also appointed to be the authorized interpreter of the Baha'i scripture. His explicitly theological view of history is antithetical to, for example, Voltaire's anti-religious Enlightenment 'philosophy of history',¹ and later twentieth-century, postmodern, secular views of history. These secular approaches have generally substituted human will, self-determination, the faculty of reason, and random and/or material causes for the will of God, prophetic teaching and divine Providence as determining factors in the making of history. Shoghi Effendi's providential standpoint is made apparent, not only by its own internal

¹ Voltaire was the first to use the term 'philosophy of history' to distinguish it from theological interpretations of history in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756). Although scholarly opinion is divided over Voltaire's belief in God (deism, agnosticism, atheism), 'Abdu'l-Baha called Voltaire an atheist. Speaking of French nationalism, 'Abdu'l-Baha said: 'Today France glorifies Napoleon Bonaparte, saying, "He was a French military genius", whereas, in reality, he was a tyrant. They say, "Voltaire was ours", although Voltaire was an atheist. "Rousseau was a great man of this nation", and yet Rousseau was irreligious.' ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982, 414). Voltaire scholar, biographer and editor, Theodore Besterman (1904–1976) (*Voltaire*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), also believed that Voltaire was atheistic. Voltaire originated the saying: 'Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer.' ('If God did not exist, we would have to invent Him.') While he was atheistic, he did recognize a salutary effect of religion on society in that the fear of God's retribution had a tendency to curtail crime.

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evidence, but also by his copious citation of Baha'i scripture, through which he interprets both contemporary events and Baha'i history itself. He also envisions future scenarios of a peaceful and united world, an approach that is rejected in traditional historiography.² His providential view is a type of *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).³ In a Baha'i context, this means a fully prophetic history that anticipates the fulfilment of the destiny of the human race, what he calls 'the coming of age of the entire human race',⁴ a form of world unity as conceived and adumbrated by Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i religion. This world unity will lead ineluctably to a world 'civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive.'⁵ Shoghi Effendi views history as both an eschaton (the kingdom of God at the end-time) and an apocalypse in which a New World Order is 'destined to rise upon the ruins of a tottering civilization',⁶ a history that is driving toward a predetermined finis and telos – a final end and goal. While God's overlordship of history clearly predominates in this view, the necessity of a viable human response to the divine will is clearly acknowledged. While providential history is admittedly deterministic, and becomes a type of historicism,⁷ the elements of free-will and human responsiveness remain key factors in mapping out the divine plan. In a comparative perspective, Shoghi Effendi's view of providential history shares affinities with the Judaeo-Christian belief that a positive human response to the divine will is a form of partnership with God.

It is worth noting, however, that Shoghi Effendi's letters reveal that he did not consider himself to be expert in all matters historical, whether of Baha'i or non-Baha'i history, and that he expected Baha'i historians to follow a disciplined, or scientific, approach and to settle outstanding issues in the light of their own independent research and understanding.⁸

² By definition, for historians the study of history ends in the present.

³ A usually Christian expression that has deep Judaic roots and usually refers to the redemptive acts of God to save a fallen humanity through the aegis of the Hebrew prophets and the salvific work of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, rev. ed., (Wilmette: IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980) 117.

⁵ Ibid 123.

⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947–1957* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1965) 39.

⁷ Historicism has changed meaning since the 19th century when, based on the work of philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), it referred to a historically and philosophically based knowledge that would apply to all human activities. Dilthey reacted against scientific, positivist ideals of knowledge. In the 20th century, through the work of Popper and Hayek, it referred to 'historical laws' that held that history had a pattern and an end that could be discovered by social science. These laws should determine political action and social policy. Popper and Hayek criticised this view as pseudo-science. Here, it refers especially to the predictive and deterministic nature of providential theories. See further 'Historicism' in Robert Audi, general editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ For example, regarding statements in the Book of Mormon referring to the early history of America, Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary, in an undated letter: 'As there is nothing specific about Joseph Smith in the teachings, the Guardian has no statement to make on his position or about the accuracy of any statement in the Book of Mormon regarding American history or its peoples. This is a matter for historians to pass upon.' (Shoghi Effendi, *High Endeavors: Messages to Alaska*, Anchorage: Baha'i Publishing Trust, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Alaska, 1976) 71. These letters were written to individuals between 1939 and 1943. But in a letter of February 21, 1942, Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary: 'Joseph Smith we do not consider a Prophet, minor or otherwise. Certainly no reference he made would have foretold the coming of the Revelation in his capacity as a Prophet.' (Helen Bassett Hornby, comp., *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 3rd rev. ed., no. 1611, New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1994). However, what the Book of Mormon says about Jewish or aboriginal peoples living in North America – 'regarding American history or its peoples' – would have to be determined by historical investigation.

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The parameters of providential history

As used here, the term providential history is defined by six conceptual elements: 1) God may never be excluded from history. 2) A divine plan may be discerned within the baffling number of events that has occurred within recorded history. 3) The prophets are the founders of civilizations, the principal educators of humanity and the main instruments of the divine plan.⁹ 4) This divine plan drives history toward a telos or final 'end'¹⁰ (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, reverses, setbacks), ultimately prove to contain some hidden wisdom and are seen as 'a "providence" of God'.¹¹ 6) The principle of indeterminacy remains in the unfolding of the divine plan. Chaos and unpredictability are inherent in 'this moving drama'.¹²

Historical nihilism, scepticism or the search for meaning

Karl Löwith remarks in the *Introduction to Meaning in History* (1949) that the quest for meaning in history exists precisely because it is not readily apparent: 'It is the very absence of meaning in the events themselves that motivates the quest.'¹³ Coherent patterns in some larger picture and a moral orientation are sought within the narrative. Philosopher-historian William H. Dray, in his cogent study *Philosophy of History* (1964), identifies three types of historical theories or non-theories. These theories both affirm and deny that meaning can be found in history: 1) Historical nihilists: those who deny any meaning to history whatsoever. Meaning is *ultra vires* to the study of history (value-judgements are also excluded). 2) Historical sceptics: those who assert that we cannot know whether or not there be either pattern or meaning in history, the viewpoint of many postmodern historians. 3) Philosophers/theologians of history: they assert that both meaning and morality are intrinsic to the study of history. This last approach, dead since the Enlightenment, was revived in the 20th century and can be found, *inter alia*, in the works of the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), the cultural anthropologist Christopher Dawson (1898–1970), the American Protestant post-liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), and earlier in the metaphysical system of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and his dialectic of freedom and necessity.¹⁴ It would also correspond to Shoghi Effendi's concept of history.

⁹ Point 3 is simply assumed and is not elucidated in this paper.

¹⁰ The word 'end' is being used here in its functional rather than its temporal sense. In its temporal sense, the meaning of the word 'end' is not absolute. It does not mean 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.

¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 145. The context was the 1955 persecution of the Iranian Baha'is. Further to this point, see section 2b below.

¹² Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day Is Come* 12.

¹³ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949) 4.

¹⁴ The point is William H. Dray's in *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1964) 60–62.

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Shoghi Effendi considered that Baha'is have certain insights into the meaning of the global crises that currently afflict humanity, what he called 'this titanic upheaval'.¹⁵ In his extended letter, *The Promised Day Is Come*, which was written partly in England in 1940 and completed in Haifa in 1941, he wrote:

Dear friends! The powerful operations of this titanic upheaval are comprehensible to none except such as have recognized the claims of both Baha'u'llah and the Bab. Their followers know full well whence it comes, and what it will ultimately lead to. Though ignorant of how far it will reach, they clearly recognize its genesis, are aware of its direction, acknowledge its necessity, observe confidently its mysterious processes, ardently pray for the mitigation of its severity, intelligently labour to assuage its fury, and anticipate, with undimmed vision, the consummation of the fears and the hopes it must necessarily engender.¹⁶

The academic rejection of providential histories

While history has become a widely differentiated field since the 1970s, especially under the influence of postmodern 'linguistic turn' theories of language and narrative,¹⁷ many traditional and postmodern historians would find any theory of providential history both outdated and unacceptable. English historian of Soviet Russia, E. H. Carr (1892–1982), a proponent of modified objectivity,¹⁸ in a series of lectures given at Cambridge (January–March 1961),¹⁹ 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 '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.'²⁰ 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

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day is Come* 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 4.

¹⁷ Ignacio Olabarri, "'New" New History: A *Longue Durée* Structure' in *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, (Wesleyan University, 34:1, 1995) 13. By 'linguistic turn' Olabarri was referring to the radically different sorts of histories being written under the influence of postmodern theories of language in the 1970s. Olabarri examines various schools of history (New History, *Annales* school, Marxist historiography, *Historismus* etc.) and, despite the fragmentation and disparities that have arisen in historiography in modern and postmodern times, shows that certain continuities and commonalities persist, what he calls *longue durée* structures (long duration structures).

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ The George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures published as *What is History?* (1961).

²⁰ Carr, *What is History?* 83.

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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.²¹

Carr's solution to this problem 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.'²² For Carr no absolute values exist apart from historical context. Carr's absolute – since God and/or revelation are excluded – would have to be history itself, which is, ironically, just as impervious to a facile definition as are the words God, religion and revelation. C. S. Lewis made this point by giving six different meanings to the word 'history' in his anti-historicism essay 'Historicism'.²³ Moreover, Carr's statement that all values are themselves rooted in history begs certain questions (*petitio principii*). We have to ask ourselves, what exactly is the nature of this history that he claims is lying at the root of all values? Do the events of history create 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. We will now examine six defining features of Shoghi Effendi's providential view of history.

1) The dual phenomenon of palingenesis and transitional history

Shoghi Effendi 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 central to his thought and run as a leitmotif throughout his epistolary works:

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

²¹ Ibid 63.

²² Ibid 84.

²³ These meanings are: 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) 'that version of the matter so discovered which has been worked up by great historical writers', i.e. Gibbon or Mommsen; 6) 'that vague, composite picture of the past which floats, rather hazily, in the mind of the ordinary educated man.' (C.S. Lewis, 'Historicism' in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967) 105.

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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.²⁴

Shoghi Effendi was not alone in his conviction that western civilization was dying. Decades earlier, Burkhardt in Switzerland, Nietzsche in Germany, Dostoevski and Count Tolstoy in Russia and, of course, Oswald Spengler in *Der Untergang des Abenlandes* (*The Decline of the West*, trans. 1926–1928), all predicted the fall of the West.²⁵ His unique contribution was that he linked, in graphic terms, and in a magisterial language of apocalyptic certitude, such a decline to the proclamation and rejection of Baha'u'llah's revelation. Unlike Shoghi Effendi, these historians abstained from making pronouncements about the future development of a world civilization.

The motif of death and rebirth alluded to in the above passage is very ancient. While the Baha'i Faith rejects reincarnation, death and rebirth have both a scientific and conceptual usage in biology,²⁶ philosophy and theology. It was used by the Romantics as palingenesia²⁷ – the more usual biological term is palingenesis – and was employed by the Pythagoreans, among others, to indicate metempsychosis, and by Schopenhauer to designate the continued existence of the eternal will in each newborn individual.²⁸ The duality highlighted above by Shoghi Effendi is found especially in his dyadic expressions 'death pangs/birth pangs'²⁹ that characterize the twin processes that define the modern age. These sets of binary relationships are found in other passages of his writings such as the 'processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other'.³⁰

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. Physicist-theologian Dr Robert J. Russell throws light on Shoghi Effendi's statement:

From a theological perspective, we can add to the view that God creates the universe through chance and law, the claim that the order God is creating is in some sense the order of quantum chaos. Rather than saying that God creates order in place of (i.e., out of) chaos, from a quantum perspective we could say that one way God creates order is through creating properties of chaos.³¹

²⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day Is Come* 17.

²⁵ Löwith, *Meaning in History* 98.

²⁶ In biology it refers to the exact reproduction of ancestral features in the individual (ontogenesis).

²⁷ Geoffrey Nash, *The Phoenix and the Ashes: The Baha'i Faith and the Modern Apocalypse* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984) 132.

²⁸ 'Palingenesis' in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1959.

²⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day Is Come* 17.

³⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, first rev. ed. 1963) 61.

³¹ Robert J. Russell is the founder and director of the Berkeley-based Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. From 'God's Providence and Quantum Mechanics' on his website 'Physics and Cosmology'. See <http://www.counterbalance.net/physics/qmprovid-topics.html> (accessed 7 September 2004).

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The scientific, religious and mythic views converge, then, 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 thanatopsis³² 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. The same may be said of Arnold Toynbee's cyclical view of the rise and fall of civilizations and cultures. Karl Löwith reminds us that for Toynbee 'disintegration may look like growth and vice-versa'.³³ In the 19th century Hegel made the same observation in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1830): 'But the next consideration which allies itself with that of change, is that change, while it imports dissolution, involves at the same time the rise of a new life, that while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death.'³⁴

As mentioned, erudite histories usually abstain from making predictions. The academic historian does not make it her or his business to prophesy. Apocalyptic scenarios are necessarily excluded. Shoghi Effendi's view of history includes both apocalyptic judgements and future predictions, both sombre and bright. Among others, he predicts a transition from 'brutal nationalism'³⁵ to fraternal internationalism. Of this coming 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.'³⁶ As mentioned above, this view points to the coming maturity of the human race as it passes through its stage of adolescence, which he called 'the most turbulent stage of its evolution...when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax.'³⁷ This passage also gives credence to his linear view of the succession of historical events in '*the Day which shall not be followed by night*'.³⁸

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 tranquillity of an undisturbed, a universal, and lasting peace, in which the discord

³² From the Greek *thanatos* (death) and *opsis* (sight), meaning a reflection or musing upon death.

³³ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* 13, quoting Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1934-9) 5:16, 188 ff; 6:174, n. 4.

³⁴ Cited by Löwith in *ibid* 52. The original is found in Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London, 1900) 75 ff.

³⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette: IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1965) 35. The context is Shoghi Effendi's analysis of the consequences of the provisions of the Versailles Peace Treaties (1919) which contributed to the outbreak of World War II.

³⁶ *Ibid* 204.

³⁷ *Ibid* 202.

³⁸ The context of this scriptural saying, quoted by Shoghi Effendi without attribution, is 'Abdu'l-Baha's appointment as Head of the Faith following the ascension of Baha'u'llah: 'The continuity of that unerring guidance vouchsafed to it since its birth was now assured. The significance of the solemn affirmation that this is "*the Day which shall not be followed by night*" was now clearly apprehended.' (Italics in original) (*God Passes By*, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1944 and 1965) 245.

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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.³⁹

2) 'Synchronization' in providential history

Once widespread in the English-speaking world but now largely obsolete, 'providence' is a word that has been resurrected in Shoghi Effendi's theological vocabulary (cf. Lat. *providere*, to foresee, Gk. *pronia*, forethought). While firmly rooted in biblical theology, it lingers on mainly in the disquisitions of theologians and philosophers of religion. The existence of Providence, which is a large topic, is usually subdivided into general and special Providence. God's providence traditionally includes three functional components: 1) preservation and 2) provision, which may be subsumed by 3) government.⁴⁰ Shoghi Effendi's references to 'Providence' refer mainly to God's intervention, protection and foresight *vis-à-vis* seemingly adverse events in the world as they affect the Baha'i community. Two examples follow:

a) The outbreak of World War II

Just prior to the outbreak of World War II, in order to fortify his readers for the ordeals that were about to engulf humanity, Shoghi Effendi shared his thoughts on what he called 'synchronization' between forthcoming catastrophic world events and the gradual but steady spread of the Faith he directed. His words heartened those who were soon to face the forthcoming global conflict; they also indicated a basic component of his view of Providence. Writing to the American and Canadian Baha'i communities in 1938, Shoghi Effendi alluded to the coming war on the European continent⁴¹ which was soon to break out, on 3 September 1939:⁴² '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.'⁴³ And yet, he foresaw a divine wisdom in any future hostilities and encouraged the Baha'is to remain steadfast while finding a 'synchronization' between world events and their own appointed tasks:

³⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day is Come* 117.

⁴⁰ For a good general introduction to the topic see Michael J. Langford's *Providence* (London: SCM Press, 1981). General providence usually refers to the government of humanity and the universe through natural law. Special providence refers to particular *ad hoc* acts of care and guidance either of individuals, groups or communities. See Lanford, *Providence* 3.

⁴¹ The ominous events of 1938 and 1939 that foreshadowed the outbreak of war 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. According to some historians, these events were violations of the Treaty of Versailles of 28 June 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) 41.

⁴² England and France declared war on Germany on this date following the invasion of the western Polish corridor by German armies on August 31.

⁴³ Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 60.

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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.⁴⁴

At the end of World War II, he wrote in a cablegram of 12 May 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 Centre of our Faith to escape what posterity will recognize as one of the gravest dangers which ever confronted the nerve centre of its institutions.⁴⁵

With these words, no sharp demarcation can be made between discernible secular history and the internal and less visible sacred events associated with the development of the Baha'i Faith.

b) The 1955 persecution of the Iranian Baha'is

During the summer of 1955, the Iranian government and clergy launched what Shoghi Effendi called a 'premeditated campaign' of persecution against the Baha'i community, which he called one of the 'mysterious dispensations of Providence'.⁴⁶ Fuller details of this incident may be found in his letters of 15 August and 20 August 1955.⁴⁷ The persecution included the formal outlawing of the Baha'i Faith in the Majlis (parliament), the banning of Baha'i activities, the destruction of the dome of the Baha'i National Centre, and various abuses and atrocities committed in the provinces which included 'the hacking to pieces' of seven Baha'is living near Yazd, the desecration of the Bab's house in Shiraz, the occupation of Baha'u'llah's ancestral home in Takur, 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. Always ready to evaluate the gravity of historical events, Shoghi Effendi described this persecution as '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 Baha'i Dispensation'.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid 60–61.

⁴⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* 80–81.

⁴⁶ *Citadel of Faith* 139.

⁴⁷ See *Citadel of Faith* 132–142. Subsequent references to this incident are taken from these pages.

⁴⁸ *Citadel of Faith* 133.

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The response to the persecution was both decisive and instructive. Shoghi Effendi directed the American Baha'i Community to send appeals for protection to President Eisenhower. Local and national spiritual assemblies (the elected administrative councils of the Baha'i Faith) 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'.⁴⁹ Shoghi Effendi wrote further that the 1955 persecution led to 'widespread publicity' that had attracted 'the notice of those in high places', which he saw as a prelude to 'the emancipation of these valiant sufferers from the galling fetters of an antiquated religious orthodoxy' and which would, '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'.⁵⁰

In a more poetic tone, his thought on this seemingly calamitous event was expressed in the following passage:

Indeed this fresh ordeal that has, in pursuance of the mysterious dispensations of Providence, afflicted the Faith, at this unexpected hour, far from dealing a fatal blow to its institutions or existence, should be regarded as a blessing in disguise, not a 'calamity' but a 'providence' of God, not a devastating flood but a 'gentle rain' on a 'green pasture', a 'wick' and 'oil' unto the 'lamp' of His Faith, a 'nurture' for His Cause, 'water for that which has been planted in the hearts of men', a 'crown set on the head' of His Messenger for this Day.⁵¹

3) The Judaeo-Christian heritage: teleological history

Whatever current theories of the philosophy of history may be, or the practice of historiography itself, it is clear that Shoghi Effendi's view of history is decidedly teleological (Gr. *telos*, end, completion). Teleology lends itself to the construction of the predictive grand scheme or the meta-narrative. Both teleology and the meta-narrative have been criticized as failures by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) in *The Postmodern Condition*.⁵² It did not escape the notice of the respected Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye (1912–1991) that the teleological sense has virtually disappeared in modernity: '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

⁴⁹ *Citadel of Faith* 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 139.

⁵² Lyotard's postmodern scepticism of meta-narratives includes what are taken to be universal or ultimate truths that are embodied in various historical projects such as Marxism, the American or French revolutions, and may include such time-honoured truths as the inalienable rights of the human being, the belief in progress and 'freedom and prosperity for all'. For example, the smashing of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signified the collapse of the socialist meta-narrative. This established the 'end of story' for Marxism. See his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

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by Poe,⁵³ a discontinuous sequence of immediate experiences'.⁵⁴ However, the philosopher of critical realism⁵⁵ and poet, George Santayana, in explaining Herbert Spencer's views on evolution and substance, has argued that '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'.⁵⁶

In this paper, teleology means that the divine will has predetermined the end-goal of history and ultimately directs the process toward its final achievement. The origins of teleology are found in rudimentary Greek science and philosophy (Aristotelian, Platonic, Neo-Platonic),⁵⁷ although curiously, not in their history, which was basically oriental (i.e. mythic and cyclical). Teleological movement in history is primarily Judaeo-Christian in origin since it is seen to be moving toward the coming of the messianic kingdom, the ultimate end-point, goal and purpose of all creation. Yairah Amit, a contemporary Jewish scholar, has pointed out how the belief in a coming kingdom contrasted markedly from the mythical sense of cyclical time in the religions that preceded Judaism, whether those of Greece or India. Only Persian Zoroastrian eschatology resembled the Hebrew view of history as a drama that moved toward a final resolution, after an eschatological clash of the forces of darkness and light (good and evil) at the end of the age, with the coming of a saviour-figure (*Saoshiyant*). Amit observes:

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.⁵⁸

And what of Islam? Briefly, Islam inherited from later Judaism and Christianity, as one of its five articles of faith,⁵⁹ a belief in the Last Day/Day of Judgement/End of the World and bodily resurrection (*qiyāma*), although the vivid details of end-time apocalyptic scenarios

⁵³ 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) 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid 33.

⁵⁵ The theory that the structure of reality, in addition to the physical and mental realms, also contains a third dimension of essences of substances.

⁵⁶ Quoted from 'The Unknowable'. From 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*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945, 211; above quotation from 215)

⁵⁷ In Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes (*aitia*), the final cause (*telos*) was the most important since it fulfilled the purpose or end for which the thing was made. The material, the efficient and the formal were the other three causes.

⁵⁸ Yairah Amit, *History and Ideology: Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible* (trans. Yael Lotan, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 16.

⁵⁹ The others are: 1) belief in God, 2) belief in the angels, 3) belief in the four inspired books – the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel – of which the Qur'an is the final and most complete, 4) belief in the twenty-eight prophets of whom Muhammad is the last.

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differ. The Islamic view of the Last Day would appear to bring closure to the time-line of history. According to one Hadith (oral tradition), the Prophet held up his thumb and forefinger, making only a tiny space between them, and said: 'I and the Last Hour are like this.'⁶⁰ The Muslim belief in Muhammad as the 'seal' (*khātam*) and last of the prophets reinforces this idea. Islamic eschatology centres in both the judgement of the individual soul (the lesser resurrection) and the judgement of all humanity (the greater resurrection) and the cosmic rearrangement or end of the world.⁶¹ The Last Day glories of heaven and the terrors of hell are graphically spelled out in the Qur'an. The Surah of Abraham, in language reminiscent of Revelation 21:1, refers to the time of the end as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth: 'On the day when the Earth shall be changed into another Earth, and the Heavens also, men shall come forth unto God, the Only, the Victorious.' (14:49) Just as for the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the nature of the new order after the return of the Mahdi and/or Jesus Christ (Īsā) points to the defeat of evil. Thus Islamic eschatology points in a sense to the 'end of history'.

The eclectic Christian existentialist philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948) in *The Meaning of History* (trans. 1936) has explicated the unique contribution of the Judaeo-Christian view of history. Berdyaev underscored the dramatic, dynamic and teleological nature of this theology of history that was Western civilization's biblical inheritance, one that became possible only in light of the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of free will and the freedom of humanity:

For the Jews the idea of history turns upon the expectation of some future event which will bring with it a solution of history. They are the first to demonstrate the structural character of the historical process and to become conscious of the "historical"... Christianity introduced historical dynamism and the extraordinary force of historical movement, and thus made possible a philosophy of history... History is a progression; it possesses an inner significance and mystery, a point of departure and a goal, a centre and a purpose... There would be no drama of history, no tragic development, expressing the profound clash, interaction and strife between the Divinity and mankind on the ground of freedom, if only one principle, that of natural or divine necessity were involved... But history also demands a dynamic-creative element, a creative sequence and purpose, an urge towards self-fulfilment.⁶²

Reinhold Niebuhr in his compelling work *Faith and History* (1949) has argued cogently how the idea of the 'one story' for humanity has developed from the belief in 'a single divine sovereignty',⁶³ the 'single universal deity' mentioned above by Amit. Niebuhr argues:

History is conceived as unity because all historical destinies are under the dominion of a single divine sovereignty... It would seem, therefore, that the story of mankind

⁶⁰ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1994) 202.

⁶¹ Ibid 203.

⁶² Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (London : Geoffrey Bles: the Centenary Press, 1936) 28, 33, 34, 37, 39.

⁶³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949) 107.

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is progressively becoming one story, both through an actual growth in cultural penetration and through the development of historical sciences, able to trace and analyse such interpenetrations.⁶⁴

While Niebuhr's comment reflects on the Judaeo-Christian view of a Kingdom of God that governs the entire world, it is also coherent with the Baha'i view of providential history which is precisely a meta-history that shifts the focus away from the nationalistic, military or technical prowess of particular nations to concentrate instead on the story of the development of one human family.

Seminal texts in Shoghi Effendi's writings may be found that bear on the theme of the fulfilment of the end-goal of history, which he called 'the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet'. The following one announces the promise and fulfilment of this final end:

The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, 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.⁶⁵

4) Organically whole history

One of the central concepts of the seventh *World Order* letter, 'The Unfoldment of World Civilization', is that of 'this organic and spiritual unity',⁶⁶ also described simply as 'organic unity'.⁶⁷ This key phrase applies both to the structure and operation of the Baha'i Administrative Order and the future unified body of nations. It is coherent with that of the 'living organism' mentioned in the second *World Order* letter, 'The Goal of a New World Order' (1930). To speak of organic unity is to invoke holism, a word that was coined by the South African statesman and general, Field Marshal J. C. Smuts (1870–1950) in his philosophical treatise *Holism and Evolution* (1926). However, in a religion whose scriptures also promote 'unity in diversity', it is important to note that the philosophy of holism is not

⁶⁴ Ibid 107–108.

⁶⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163.

⁶⁶ Ibid 163.

⁶⁷ Ibid 195.

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synonymous with an undifferentiated wholeness. Holism conceals, moreover, an unsuspected moral character as indicated by Shoghi Effendi's maxim, based on 'Abdu'l-Baha's teachings, that 'the welfare of the part means the welfare of the whole, and the distress of the part brings distress to the whole'.⁶⁸

Organic unity is intrinsic to Shoghi Effendi's view of Baha'i history as an organic whole: it unfolds in a developmental process that is orderly, holistic and evolutionary. He wrote in *God Passes By* (1944) that the four periods he first identified in the first Baha'i century were all interdependent and interconnected:

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.⁶⁹

5) Periodization: cycles, ages and epochs⁷⁰

While periodization is an accepted commonplace of the historical method, philosopher, historian and archaeologist of Roman Britain R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) observed in *The Idea of History* (1946), in his remarks on medieval historiography: 'Now, the attempt to distinguish periods in history is a mark of advanced and mature historical thought, not afraid to interpret facts instead of merely asserting them.'⁷¹ As was pointed out in point 4 above,

⁶⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day Is Come* 122.

⁶⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* xiv-xvi.

⁷⁰ '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 Baha'u'llah and of 'Abdu'l-Baha. This Primitive Age of the Baha'i 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 Bahā'u'llāh – 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* 4–5).

⁷¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) 53. While Collingwood recognized the advances in periodization made by Christian historians, a clear advance over Graeco-Roman

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Shoghi Effendi has provided for the Baha'i community its own periodization, a basic technique of historiography.

His demarcation of periods was expanded to include the Baha'i Era itself and its ages. Following the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, he wrote that the Declaration of the Bab marked the beginning of the Baha'i Era and the inauguration of a new cycle in human history which is to last, according to 'Abdu'l-Baha in a tablet to a Zoroastrian believer, some 500,000 years: 'May 23, 1844, signalizes the commencement of the most turbulent period of the Heroic Age of the Baha'i 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.'⁷²

Then we have the assignment of ages. The first age is called 'the Heroic, the Primitive or the Apostolic Age'. The second age is called variously 'the Formative, the Transitional', or 'Iron Age'.⁷³ The third age is the Golden Age. As mentioned in point 4 above, he 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 Baha'i Era (1844-1944). He thus supplies a useful gauge by which Baha'is may situate themselves within the temporal flux of their dispensation. Periodization serves two other useful purposes: it allows for the assessment of past events in order to better understand their import and it sensitizes to the necessity of seizing present opportunities since they in turn will become the 'stuff of history'.

A 'vital link' has connected these three ages. The *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Baha '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'.⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi's assurance in the ultimate success of the Baha'i Faith is based on his belief that it is rooted in the fertile soil of what the Greek fathers of the apostolic church called the *logos spermatikos*,⁷⁵ which alluded to the fecundating power of the Holy Word. Seed imagery is not, of course, exclusive to the Christian tradition. Just as the Bab referred to the Bayan as being in the stage of seed,⁷⁶ Shoghi Effendi used this seed imagery to indicate evolution or gradation, as he depicted the gradual unfoldment of the three ages of the Babi-Baha'i 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].'⁷⁷ Needless to say, this is an image of organic wholeness.

In addition to assigning periods and ages, Shoghi Effendi has also subdivided these ages into epochs. The Universal House of Justice determined, in its message of 16 January 2001 to the Baha'is of the world, that they were entering the fifth epoch of the Formative

histories, he rejects any appeal to God or revelation as determining any future outcome to history as being methodologically unhistorical.

⁷² Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By* 3.

⁷³ Ibid xiii.

⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi, 'The Dispensation of Bahā'u'llāh' in *World Order* 98.

⁷⁵ Reinhold Bernhardt, 'Interreligious Images and Parables', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 5/1 (1995) 63.

⁷⁶ 'Today the Bayan 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 Baha'u'llah' 100.

⁷⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 144.

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Age.⁷⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of the determination of these epochs,⁷⁹ 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 Baha'i Faith is subdivided into epochs, 'Abdu'l-Baha's Divine Plan, as contained in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* to the North American Baha'is (1916–1917), inaugurated another series of epochs.⁸⁰ 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). The Baha'is are currently in the second epoch of 'Abdu'l-Baha'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, of course, 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 later 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 periodization 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.⁸¹

6) History as identity creation: the North American Baha'i Community

Shoghi Effendi's writings contributed to the Baha'i community a strong sense of its own historical consciousness. This is particularly true of the North American Baha'i community. In both *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939) and 'America and the Most Great Peace' (1933), the fifth *World Order* letter, he sets out the 'mission' and signal accomplishments of the North American Baha'is, whom he calls 'the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age'⁸² and the 'champion-builders of the World Order of Baha'u'llah'.⁸³ He describes them as holding a position of 'undisputed leadership'⁸⁴ in the Baha'i world. Pre-eminent among these accomplishments is the establishment of the administrative order on

⁷⁸ 'With a spirit of exultation we are moved to announce to you: the Faith of Baha'u'llah now enters the fifth epoch of its Formative Age.'

⁷⁹ For a detailed account, see the memorandum of 5 February 1986, prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice and forwarded to all National Spiritual Assemblies, in *Bahā'ī Canada*, vol. 13 (Jamal BE158/April 2001), no. 12, pp. 13–16.

⁸⁰ *Baha'i News*, March 1953, 265:4. Letter dated 18 January 1953 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, cited in a memorandum of the Research Department of 5 February 1986.

⁸¹ This paragraph has been summarized from Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979) 59.

⁸² Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 6.

⁸³ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 74.

⁸⁴ *Ibid* 72.

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the North American continent and around the world, and America's mission as the leading nation in the establishment of world peace.

It is the identity-creating function of such passages that I emphasize here, rather than the pre-eminence of the North American Baha'i community. Sociologists of religion usually understand identity as a function of the individual's belonging to a religious community. Yet it is no less true that identity is also a function of the community's collective self-consciousness, particularly of its historical and doctrinal self-consciousness. Just as an individual's sense of identity undergoes change and development, the same is true of community identity. In his praises of the North American Baha'i community's recent achievements, Shoghi Effendi produced a transformation of its historical consciousness. In his eulogies, which find their origin in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi largely created a sense of Baha'i community identity.

In the subsection entitled 'Chief Remaining Citadel', in the opening pages of *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939), Shoghi Effendi made a major statement on the historical achievements of the North American Baha'is. The following passage is only the preamble to a much longer eulogy, one that is framed by no less than thirteen rhetorical questions. Along the lines of Arnold Toynbee's 'challenge and response' causal factor in the rise and persistence of civilizations,⁸⁵ this preamble establishes the record of the North American Baha'is, despite the considerable obstacles and handicaps that confronted them in their early days. 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-centre 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.⁸⁶

In this and similar passages, Shoghi Effendi held up a mirror in which this community doubtless saw itself reflected for the first time. This passage, and others like it, also provided

⁸⁵ The challenge and response factor in making history belongs to Toynbee's theory of the 'genesis of civilizations' in his monumental 10-volume work, *A Study of History*. See II:V, 'Challenge and Response', in D. C. Somervell's abridgement (2 vols., New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1947) 1:60–79.

⁸⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* 6–7.

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a summary or outline of American Baha'i history which future historians can use as the basis for their research.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Shoghi Effendi's writings reflect a dynamic and coherent concept of history which is consistent in its main features with the Judaeo-Christian understanding of providential history. While Shoghi Effendi's view of modern history remains at odds with current postmodern theories and academic approaches, which reject grand narratives and predictive teleological schemes, these elements are clearly present in his concept. While it retains its own originality, his view adapts, prolongs and offers itself as the fulfilment of the ancient Judaeo-Christian view of the coming kingdom. As one theory among others, providential history ensures that history continues to be viewed as the result of prophetic teaching and divine intervention rather than the product of purely secular causes and effects. In Shoghi Effendi's view, God is no *deus absconditus*.