

Paper

The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Covenant

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Abstract

This paper compares the contents of the Wills of Bahá'u'lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which Shoghi Effendi terms Their “twin Covenants.” It also examines the Bahá'í Writings which explain “the broad nature of the authority conferred on the Universal House of Justice” and the infallibility which is an inherent part of that authority. Further, it compares the lofty imagery in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh speaking of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness,” with similar beautiful imagery in the Master’s description of Shoghi Effendi, as “the blest and sacred bough.” It examines the Guardian’s writings which demonstrate that although the Guardianship is not expressly mentioned in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, it was always part of His plan of World Order; that this Institution must not be seen as an “innovation” that came into being solely through the instrumentality of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but rather that Bahá'u'lláh, no less than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is the Author of this institution. Shoghi Effendi explains that the Guardianship must not be divorced from the plan of world order adumbrated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself in the Most Holy Book, that to do so would be a mutilation of the truth; and that this is also the intention of Shoghi Effendi when writing that “divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be mutilated.”

The Beloved’s Will and Testament, so amazing in all its aspects.

Shoghi Effendi¹

Introduction

In November 1921, Shoghi Effendi, great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh and eldest grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, was in his second year of graduate studies at Oxford when he was thunderstruck by news of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.² When he arrived back in the Holy Land, there was an envelope addressed to him, the ‘Chosen Branch’, from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; it contained His Last Will and Testament.³ In it Shoghi Effendi read for the first time of an institution – Vali Amru’llah, Guardian

¹ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 50. <http://www.bahai.org/r/788381161> [accessed 1 May 2025].

² See, generally, Riaz Khadem, *Prelude to the Guardianship* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2014), particularly chs 17-18.

³ The text of this 26-page document is available on the official Bahá'í World Centre website <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/will-testament-abdul-baha/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

of the Cause of God – and that he was the Guardian.⁴ This institution was not expressly found elsewhere in the Writings of either Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá. At the age of 24, Shoghi Effendi found himself the Head of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi's wife described the occasion some fifty years later:

It now became the painful duty of Shoghi Effendi to hear what was in it; a few days after his arrival they read it to him. In order to understand even a little of the effect this had on him we must remember that he himself stated on more than one occasion, not only to me, but to others who were present at the table of the Western Pilgrim House, that he had had no foreknowledge of the existence of the Institution of Guardianship, least of all that he was appointed as Guardian.⁵

As we will see below, Shoghi Effendi would describe that remarkable Document as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 'Covenant', as His 'greatest legacy to posterity', and as 'the Charter of the New World Order'.⁶ It is not the intention of this paper to attempt even a summary description of the full contents of this Document; rather, it will focus on aspects of the Successorship it carried forward.⁷

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh

To understand the significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament we must first understand something of the Will and Testament of Bahá'u'lláh, which He entitled the Kitáb-i-'Ahd, 'The Book of My Covenant'.⁸ The verse at the very heart of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, which begins with the words 'The Will of the divine Testator',⁹ is His instruction to 'turn, one and all, unto the Most Great Branch ('Abdu'l-Bahá).'¹⁰ Together with additional Documents, Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant explicitly appoints 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His immediate Successor, and The Most Holy Book of

⁴ The Arabic word walīy (valí in the Bahá'í transliteration system) has connotations of helper, friend, protector, legal guardian, ruler, and one who exercises sovereignty over. The governor of the Ottoman province in which Shoghi Effendi was born held the title 'valí'. See, generally, Wehr's *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976) at p. 1100-1101; and Udo Schaefer, Nicola Towfigh, and Ulrich Gollmer, *Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000), footnote 284.

⁵ Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) p. 42.

⁶ The Covenant is summarised on the Bahá'í World Centre website: 'This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.' <https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahauallah-covenant> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷ Adib Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant: A Study Guide to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Oxford: George Ronald Publishers, 2000) is an extensive treatment of the provisions of the Will and Testament.

⁸ The full text of this document is found on p. 218 of *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* <http://www.bahai.org/r/301774724> [accessed 1 May 2025] and as Tablet no. 32 in *Days of Remembrance*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/124370249> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 221. <http://www.bahai.org/r/078110759> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰ Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 239. <http://www.bahai.org/r/548855206> [accessed 1 May 2025]. Its contents are summarized by Shoghi Effendi on that same page.

Bahá'u'lláh, briefly described below, appoints 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the infallible Interpreter of the Word of God.¹¹

Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh was the Tree of Life mentioned in the Bible.¹² He referred to some of His male children as 'branches' and to the women in His family as 'leaves'. His oldest son's given name was Abbás, and Bahá'u'lláh gave Him the title Ghusn-i-A'zam, 'The Most Great Branch' or 'The Most Mighty Branch'. Several years after the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, the Most Great Branch assumed the title 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and directed the Bahá'ís to use it; it signifies not only 'Servant of the Glory', but more to the point, 'Servant of Bahá'u'lláh'.¹³

At a talk He gave at a Bahá'í home in New York City on December 2, 1912,¹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented on the effect of this Covenant:

As to the most great characteristic of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, a specific teaching not given by any of the Prophets of the past: It is the ordination and appointment of the Centre of the Covenant. By this appointment and provision He has safeguarded and protected the religion of God against differences and schisms, making it impossible for anyone to create a new sect or faction of belief. To ensure unity and agreement He has entered into a Covenant with all the people of the world, including the interpreter and explainer of His teachings, so that no one may interpret or explain the religion of God according to his own view or opinion and thus create a sect founded upon his individual understanding of the divine Words. The Book of the Covenant or Testament of Bahá'u'lláh is the means of preventing such a possibility.¹⁵

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has maintained the integrity of the community since His passing. Shoghi Effendi referred to it as 'a Covenant of world importance, pre-existent, peerless and unique in the history of all religions'¹⁶ and as 'the supreme gift conferred by Him Who is the Lord of Revelation upon the present and future generations'.¹⁷ It is the first document in religious history

¹¹ For further reading please see Bahá'u'lláh's *The Tablet of the Branch* and *The Book of the Covenant*. These are Tablets 29 and 32 respectively in the compilation *Days of Remembrance*. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauddin/days-remembrance/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹² 'And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.' Revelation of St. John, 22:1-2. 'The Tree of Life, of which mention is made in the Bible, is Bahá'u'lláh, and the daughters of the Kingdom are the leaves upon that blessed Tree.' *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 57. <http://www.bahai.org/r/395238909> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³ For a commentary on the full text of the *Will and Testament* see Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*. This subject is addressed on pp. 147-148.

¹⁴ Bahá'ís worldwide study this Document in their homes today, in 'Study Circles' coordinated by 'Training Institutes.' The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is the focus of what Bahá'ís call Unit One of Book Eight of the Ruhi sequence. Participation in these study circles held for all age groups is open to anyone, and the materials are available in the USA (see <https://palabrapublications.com/pages/materials-in-development> [accessed 1 May 2025]) and in the United Kingdom (see <https://books.bahai.org.uk/collections/main-sequence-of-ruhi-institute-courses-published> [accessed 1 May 2025]).

¹⁵ Talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá compiled by Howard MacNutt, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2007) <http://www.bahai.org/r/510080411> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 248. <http://www.bahai.org/r/785406023> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour*, p. 66. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/decisive-hour/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

establishing the Successorship of a faith in writing.¹⁸ As we will see, the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá further carries forward the Successorship into the future, until the appearance of the next Manifestation of God. In letters to two national spiritual assemblies Shoghi Effendi designated these two Wills 'the Covenants established successively by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá'¹⁹ and 'the twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'.²⁰

These Documents, the Wills of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, address many subjects – personal ethics, loyalty to government, the lofty station of man and the establishment of various institutions in the Bahá'í community and in the world at large, as well as admonitions to unity, the acquisition of divine qualities, the spread of the Faith and the establishment of world peace – but primarily they are Documents of Succession revealed to ensure that the Bahá'í Faith maintains the course set by its Founders.²¹ The Successorship embodied in the two institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice is the primary focus of this paper, along with passages from the Bahá'í Writings about the scope of their authority and infallibility.

The Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament

Of the more than one hundred volumes comprising the sacred Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Universal House of Justice writes, 'the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is of unique importance.'²² In a passage replete with superlatives, Shoghi Effendi wrote that 'the most signal act' of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry was the promulgation of His Most Holy Book, (Kitáb-i-Aqdas). Likewise, he described the promulgation of the Will as 'the supreme act associated with the mission' of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'.²³

Shoghi Effendi writes that Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book was 'the brightest emanation of the mind of Bahá'u'lláh'.²⁴ He used identical words to describe 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament as 'the brightest emanation of His mind',²⁵ and as 'supplementary to no less weighty a Book than the Kitáb-i-Aqdas'.²⁶

¹⁸ This matter is more fully discussed in one of Shoghi Effendi's World Order letters dated March 21, 1930, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh Further Considerations*. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/3#523190331> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁹ Postscript by Shoghi Effendi in his own hand, letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria, 30 June 1949, *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria*, (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982) Volume I, p. 154. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LDG1/ldg1-99.html> [accessed 1 May 2025]. On p. 156 of that same volume please see the letter written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf dated 3 July 1949 in which he identifies the Master's Will as His Covenant. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LDG1/ldg1-100.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁰ 'This Hour, Crowded with Destiny,' Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States dated August 18, 1949, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 76. <http://www.bahai.org/r/147153942> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19. <http://www.bahai.org/r/874009616> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²² Universal House of Justice, *The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) Introduction, p. 1.

²³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 213. <http://www.bahai.org/r/020161556> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁴ Ibid., p. 212. <http://www.bahai.org/r/020161556> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁵ Ibid., p. 325. <http://www.bahai.org/r/020161556> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁶ Ibid., p. 328. <http://www.bahai.org/r/229666135> [accessed 1 May 2025].

Shoghi Effendi described Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas as 'The Charter of His New World Order,'²⁷ and the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as 'the Charter of the New World Order which is at once the glory and the promise of this most great Dispensation.'²⁸ These passages from the Universal House of Justice and Shoghi Effendi help us to better grasp the lofty station of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The Twin Successors

The Universal House of Justice, the Head of the Bahá'í faith today, has written that a religious covenant has two parts – God's part and humanity's – 'a binding agreement between God and man, whereby God requires of man certain behaviour in return for which He guarantees certain blessings.'²⁹

The Covenant of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has two parts – God's and humanity's. God's part of the Covenant of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the clear identification of His Successors, the Guardian of the Cause and the Universal House of Justice, and the promise that they both will be guided by God through Bahá'u'lláh ('The Abhá Beauty') and the Báb ('His Holiness, the Exalted One'):

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may My life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God.³⁰

This is what an eminent Bahá'í author and former member of the Universal House of Justice described as 'the most momentous' passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will.³¹ It is equivalent in the Master's Will to the verse in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-'Ahd that begins: 'The Will of the divine Testator is this.' The appointment by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of His Successors, and the promise that they will receive divine guidance, is God's part of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Covenant,³² and it is followed immediately by the believers' part – to obey these successors – as well as a dramatic warning to those who might seek to overturn His Covenant:³³

²⁷ Ibid., p. 213. <http://www.bahai.org/r/973724879> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 144. <http://www.bahai.org/r/481093231> [accessed 1 May 2025].

²⁹ From a letter dated 23 March 1975 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692131020> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁰ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11. <http://www.bahai.org/r/181898597> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³¹ Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, p. 276.

³² The implication of this passage is elaborated in this letter Shoghi Effendi's secretary wrote on his behalf, 'He is assured the guidance of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly reveals.' From a letter written to an individual believer dated August 20, 1956; Helen Hornby, *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), p. 313. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692132059> [accessed 1 May 2025]. This guidance is promised no less emphatically to the Universal House of Justice in the same passage of the Will.

³³ Several paragraphs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, not discussed in this paper, are devoted to recounting the deeds of those who broke the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, who sought to supplant 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership, to instigate His banishment and even bring about His death. In an extraordinarily magnanimous passage of His Will 'Abdu'l-Bahá forgives them. (*The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 19, <http://www.bahai.org/r/907927208> [accessed 1 May 2025]). He then, as the cited passage from the Will

Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God. May the wrath, the fierce indignation, the vengeance of God rest upon him!³⁴

The believers' part of the Covenant of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is stated again as the closing words of His Will and Testament: 'All must seek guidance and turn unto the Centre of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error.'³⁵ The very last words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the human race³⁶ are to turn to the Guardian of the Cause and the Universal House of Justice. Through both Wills, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have 'appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors'.³⁷ Though the word 'covenant' has additional meanings, in the following chapter the focus is on the Covenant of Successorship.

The Divine Protection Afforded by the Covenant

The 'twin Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá' are the very heart of the successful protection of the integrity of the Bahá'í community³⁸. Though Christianity has three main branches and Islam two, the clear and vigorous language of these two Wills has prevented divisions from developing in the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi points out that although some of the 'leading figures' in this Faith's history have attempted to draw a party to themselves – as in every religious age – 'the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh had, far from breaking or bending, gone from strength to strength, from victory to victory.'³⁹

The Bahá'í Writings do not promise that the Covenant will prevent such individuals from arising and attempting to start seditious groups; they promise they will not succeed. From time to time critics have challenged the assertion that the Covenant keeps the Bahá'í community one and undivided, and to prove their assertion, such critics present lists of so-called Bahá'í 'splinter

shows, summons the judgment of God upon those who would oppose His appointed Successors from that day forward.

³⁴ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11. <http://www.bahai.org/r/181898597> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26. <http://www.bahai.org/r/691205948> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁶ Just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated above that the Kitáb-i-'Ahd is 'a Covenant with all the people of the world,' likewise 'Abdu'l-Bahá' states that His Covenant shelters not only the Bahá'í community, but 'all mankind.' *Ibid.*, p. 3. <http://www.bahai.org/r/367671165> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19. <http://www.bahai.org/r/874009616> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 76. <http://www.bahai.org/r/147153942> [accessed 1 May 2025].

³⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 408-09. <http://www.bahai.org/r/794698685> [accessed 1 May 2025] See also *Challenges to the Covenant* <https://covenantstudy.org/> [accessed 1 May 2025] which is an excellent and authoritative resource on the Bahá'í Covenant. A number of these individuals are discussed in Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, throughout the course of the book.

groups'. Such lists unwittingly prove the efficacy of the Covenant, as these groups have one thing in common: in the main, they no longer exist.⁴⁰

The Envelope

To return to Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's oldest male descendant, in Haifa in 1921. When he opened the envelope addressed to him, he found Bahá'u'lláh's Will and Testament wrapped within 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, indicating the identity of purpose of these Documents.⁴¹ The Will was 'signed and sealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá' and was 'entirely written with His own hand'. Referring to the Will's appointment of both of the successors, Shoghi Effendi wrote that the Will 'establishes the institution of the Guardianship as a hereditary office and outlines its essential functions', and 'provides the measures for the election of the International House of Justice, defines its scope and sets forth its relationship' to the institution of Guardianship.⁴² The Will provided that the Guardian was made 'the permanent head of so august a body'⁴³ through these words: 'the guardian of the Cause of God is its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body.'⁴⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will directed the Bahá'ís to 'turn unto Shoghi Effendi... as he is the sign of God, the chosen branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God... He is the Interpreter of the Word of God.'⁴⁵ Those words endowed the Guardian with what he himself described as 'such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'.⁴⁶

Bahá'u'lláh Himself had written that the Universal House of Justice was to consult 'regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He, verily, is the Provider, the Omniscient.'⁴⁷ Following upon this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in His Will: 'The House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book.'⁴⁸

⁴⁰ The Bahá'í writings predict that those few remaining will inevitably pass into oblivion: 'We should feel truly thankful for such futile attempts to undermine our beloved Faith -- attempts that protrude their ugly face from time to time, seem for a while able to create a breach in the ranks of the faithful, recede finally into the obscurity of oblivion, and are thought of no more. Such incidents we should regard as the interpositions of Providence, designed to fortify our faith, to clarify our vision, and to deepen our understanding of the essentials of His Divine Revelation.' Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 3. <http://www.bahai.org/r/061266705> [accessed 1 May 2025]. See also, Ibid. pp. 195-196. <http://www.bahai.org/r/003827870> [accessed 1 May 2025]. See also a blog on the Bahá'í Covenant, particularly an essay available <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2010/12/covenant-protects-from-schism.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴¹ Extract from a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 25 September 1934, *The Light of Divine Guidance, Vol. I*, p. 61. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LDG1/ldg1-40.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴² Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 328. <http://www.bahai.org/r/229666135> [accessed 1 May 2025]. The reader is referred to that paragraph to read a summary of the contents of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, as the broad ambit of that Document is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴³ *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 150. <http://www.bahai.org/r/788047530> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴⁴ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 11. <http://www.bahai.org/r/189137811> [accessed 1 May 2025]. Sometimes translated as 'Expounder' of the Word of God.

⁴⁶ *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 151. <http://www.bahai.org/r/768620532> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴⁷ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 68. <http://www.bahai.org/r/723031566> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁴⁸ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 19. <http://www.bahai.org/r/407994625> [accessed 1 May 2025].

In sum, as Shoghi Effendi wrote, 'the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings.'⁴⁹ This does not exhaust the responsibilities of either of these institutions, but rather sets forth the primary area of jurisdiction in which the other twin institution does not share. The Guardian of the Faith could not supplement the revealed laws, while the House of Justice was designed to do so; and the House of Justice could not provide authoritative interpretations of the Bahá'í Writings, which was exclusive to the Guardian. The scope set forth in the Bahá'í Writings for each of these institutions is much broader, as discussed below. Just as interpretation of the Word of God did not constitute the bulk of Shoghi Effendi's divinely-guided activities, neither does enacting supplementary legislation primarily comprise the divinely-guided activities of the Universal House of Justice.

Building the Foundation for Election of the Universal House of Justice

Shoghi Effendi then faced the monumental task the Will gave him, together with the Universal House of Justice, of leading the Bahá'í faith. One of the most loyal and capable Bahá'ís, who worked very closely with Shoghi Effendi, wrote:

When he became Guardian, Shoghi Effendi has said, he did not know what he was supposed to do as Guardian, and he searched the Writings for direction as to the course of his work... In his study of the Writings he was able to discern his three primary missions. They would be to establish the administrative order of the Cause, to disseminate the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world and to build the Bahá'í world centre. The Guardian found mandates in the Writings for each of these undertakings. The Will and Testament of the Master was the charter for building the administrative order.⁵⁰

From the very beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi contemplated calling for the election of the Universal House of Justice, but various considerations prevented it, including the need to develop local and national Bahá'í institutions. During 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lifetime, 'a small number of embryonic consultative groups existed,' but 'there were no uniform procedures governing such features as how they were to be elected, the number of members, or even the title by which they were to be known.'⁵¹ Shoghi Effendi set about establishing the local and national spiritual assemblies, so that when they were 'fully representative of the rank and file of the believers in their respective countries' they would 'provide the spiritual basis for the constitution of so august a body in the Bahá'í world'.⁵²

The Will and Testament was the Charter that guided Shoghi Effendi in the development of these local and national institutions. 'This document builds on the seminal ideas outlined in Bahá'u'lláh's writings and calls into being the institutions comprising the Bahá'í Administrative Order, which is destined to serve as the vehicle for the diffusion of the Faith's values throughout the world and as the nucleus of world order.'⁵³ Shoghi Effendi established a series of worldwide

⁴⁹ *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 149. <http://www.bahai.org/r/694282671> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵⁰ Leroy Ioas, quoted in Anita Ioas Chapman, *Leroy Ioas, Hand of the Cause of God* (Oxford: George Ronald Publishers, 1998) pp. 166-167.

⁵¹ Janet A. Khan, *Call to Apostleship* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 2016) p. 75.

⁵² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 7. <http://www.bahai.org/r/162241101> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵³ Khan, *Call to Apostleship*, pp. 6-7.

plans to implement the guidance in the Will.⁵⁴ Calling to mind that Bahá'u'lláh had ordained that in every city a 'House of Justice' should be established, he directed that in every locale where at least nine adult believers resided, a 'local spiritual assembly' should be elected. He referred to these assemblies as 'the chief sinews of Bahá'í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure', and recounted that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had written of the spirit animating these bodies:

These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.⁵⁵

Then, Shoghi Effendi wrote, in countries 'where the local Bahá'í communities had sufficiently advanced in number and in influence measures were taken for the initiation of National Assemblies, the pivots round which all national undertakings must revolve. Designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will as the 'Secondary Houses of Justice', they constitute the electoral bodies in the formation of the International House of Justice.⁵⁶

The provisions of the Bahá'í Covenant 'have significance beyond the establishment of the administrative institutions of the Faith. They have, for example, a critical ongoing impact on such things as the preservation of the integrity of the Faith's teachings, the emergence of a creative, organically evolving community, and the establishment of the Most Great Peace in the distant future.'⁵⁷

Love: The Motivating Spirit for the Conduct of Bahá'í Institutions

The Guardian then developed in the hearts of the Bahá'ís a deep sense of love and loyalty to these local and national spiritual assemblies. He built upon what might be termed the earlier charismatic stage of the Bahá'í community's devotion to the Persons of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and suffused that love into the institutional and permanent stage of its life. The following letter on his behalf to the Bahá'ís of India is characteristic guidance from the Guardian:

There are two main principles which the Guardian wishes the friends to always bear in mind and to conscientiously and faithfully follow. First is the principle of unqualified and whole-hearted loyalty to the revealed Word... Next is the principle of complete and immediate obedience to the Assemblies, both local and national. It is the responsibility of these Bahá'í administrative bodies to enable the community to acquire, and increasingly deepen in the

⁵⁴ See 'The Epochs of the Formative Age,' enclosed with a message from the Universal House of Justice dated 5 February 1986, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996) p. 710, Message 451. <http://www.bahai.org/r/318981979> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 331-332. <http://www.bahai.org/r/327595563> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332. <http://www.bahai.org/r/106101923> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵⁷ Khan, *Call to Apostleship*, p. 97.

knowledge and understanding of the Cause. Doctrinal unity and administrative unity, these are the two chief pillars that sustain the edifice of the Cause.⁵⁸

This same love characterises the attitude of the Bahá'ís towards these assemblies today, under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, which wrote to the Bahá'ís of the world at Naw-Rúz in 1974:

The friends are called upon to give their wholehearted support and cooperation to the Local Spiritual Assembly, first by voting for the membership and then by energetically pursuing its plans and programs, by turning to it in time of trouble or difficulty, by praying for its success and taking delight in its rise to influence and honour. This great prize, this gift of God within each community must be cherished, nurtured, loved, assisted, obeyed and prayed for.⁵⁹

The Guardian patiently led the Bahá'ís away from a sterile approach to administration and towards what Bahá'u'lláh had written was the spirit that should animate them,⁶⁰ 'that the world's affairs be administered through the potency of love'.⁶¹ The Universal House of Justice also characterises the Bahá'í Administrative Order as 'the structure of freedom for our Age'.⁶²

Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had written in His Will that the Bahá'ís must establish love and devotion to God as the basis of order in the world:

Bestirred, without rest, and steadfast to the end, they must raise in every land the triumphal cry 'Ya Bahá'u'l-Abhá' (O Thou the Glory of Glories), must achieve renown in the world wherever they go, must burn brightly even as a candle in every meeting and must kindle the flame of Divine love in every assembly; that the light of truth may rise resplendent in the midmost heart of the world, that throughout the East and throughout the West a vast concourse may gather under the shadow of the Word of God, that the sweet savours of

⁵⁸ From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated September 5, 1936, *Messages to the Indian Subcontinent 1923-1957* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995) p. 145. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/DND/dnd-69.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁵⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 264. <http://www.bahai.org/r/314749898> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶⁰ 'Administrative efficiency and order should always be accompanied by an equal degree of love, of devotion and of spiritual development. Both of them are essential and to attempt to dissociate one from the other is to deaden the body of the Cause. In these days, when the Faith is still in its infancy, great care must be taken lest mere administrative routine stifles the spirit which must feed the body of the Administration itself. That spirit is its propelling force and the motivating power of its very life.' From a letter dated 10 December 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The National Spiritual Assembly*, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1990. https://bahai-library.com/pdf/compilations/national_spiritual_assembly.pdf [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *Trustworthiness, A Cardinal Bahá'í Virtue* compiled by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre, 1990 Revised Edition. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/compilations/> [accessed 1 May 2025]. For further thoughts on this subject, the reader may wish to consult this blog post, *Shoghi Effendi Created an Extraordinary Love in the Hearts of Those Who Knew Him*. <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2016/11/shoghi-effendi-love.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶² Letter dated 29 December 1988, *To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/377981470> [accessed 1 May 2025].

holiness may be diffused, that faces may shine radiantly, hearts be filled with the Divine spirit and souls be made heavenly.⁶³

Numerical Growth of the Bahá'í Faith Under Shoghi Effendi's Leadership

When Shoghi Effendi began to carry out the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will there were Bahá'ís in 35 countries; by the end of his life, in 1957, this number had increased to 254. During the same 36-year ministry the number of national spiritual assemblies increased from zero to 26, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided worldwide increased to 4200.⁶⁴ The number of local spiritual assemblies increased from a literal handful at the beginning of his ministry to 1000 at its conclusion.⁶⁵ After his passing his wife wrote: "That the Cause of God has reached the point where it stands today is due to the self-sacrificing, constant, unsparing, truly herculean labours of its Guardian."⁶⁶ In a 2019 article on religious demographics, Todd Johnson and Peter Crossing note that 'the Bahá'í Faith is the only religion to have grown faster than the general population in every United Nations region over the past 100 years.'⁶⁷

Imagery Describing the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice

Shoghi Effendi used visual and architectural images to describe these two institutions, for instance representing them as 'the twin pillars that support this mighty Administrative Structure'.⁶⁸ He described the institution of the Guardianship as the 'pivot' of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament'⁶⁹ and as the 'head cornerstone' of the Administrative Order of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.⁷⁰ He described the Universal House of Justice as 'the apex of the Bahá'í Administrative Order',⁷¹ as 'that central pivot of the people of Bahá',⁷² and as 'the dome, the final unit crowning the entire edifice.'⁷³

⁶³ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 10. <http://www.bahai.org/r/834554251> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶⁴ Cf. *The Ministry of the Custodians 1957-1963* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) p. 12.

⁶⁵ Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 393.

⁶⁶ Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, *The Passing of Shoghi Effendi* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958), p. 1.

⁶⁷ Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, 'The World by Religion,' *Journal of Religion and Demography*, online publication 6 May 2019. https://brill.com/view/journals/jrd/6/1/article-p1_1.xml [accessed 1 May 2025]. Some current statistics can be found on the official Bahá'í Media web page <https://news.bahai.org/media-information/statistics/> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 147. <http://www.bahai.org/r/568030410> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁶⁹ Shoghi Effendi, Message dated May 4, 1953, *Messages to the Bahá'í World, 1950-1957*, p. 148. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/MBW/mbw-71.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷⁰ Cablegram dated March 30, 1937, *Messages to America 1932-1946*, p. 8; and Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís, 1932 – 1946* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002), p. 15, para. 27.1. <http://www.bahai.org/r/330613928> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷¹ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 332. <http://www.bahai.org/r/106101923> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷² From a letter dated 30 October 1924 to the Spiritual Assembly of Tíhrán, translated from Persian; *The Bahá'í World Vol. XIV*, p. 436; Compilation on Establishment of the Universal House of Justice. <http://www.bahai.org/r/318979454> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 330. <http://www.bahai.org/r/327595563> [accessed 1 May 2025].

The Election of the Universal House of Justice

The Will and Testament ‘consists of three sections written at three different times between 1901 and the year of His passing’.⁷⁴ The first section anticipates the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice functioning together: ‘[T]he Guardian of the Cause of God is its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body.’⁷⁵ As I have explained, throughout his ministry Shoghi Effendi functioned alone as Head of the Faith. He passed away childless and without a will in 1957, but his dedication to building up the worldwide Administrative Order enabled the Bahá'ís of the world to elect the Universal House of Justice after his passing.⁷⁶ The historian of the Faith Adib Taherzadeh writes:

The Universal House of Justice was instituted in 1963, when members of the national spiritual assemblies, in a prayerful attitude and in an atmosphere of intense spirituality and profound devotion, elected as members of this supreme institution nine souls from among the Bahá'ís of the world. The occasion is considered by the Bahá'ís to be, next to the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Faith, the most momentous event in the history of the Formative Age of the Faith.⁷⁷

Elsewhere, Taherzadeh writes, ‘Never before has a Manifestation of God given authority to a council elected by universal suffrage to enact laws and administer the affairs of His religion with the assurance that it will be guided by God in its decisions.’⁷⁸

Soon after the Universal House of Justice was elected it determined that there was no way to appoint another Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi.⁷⁹ As a former member of the Universal House of Justice wrote, ‘Bahá'u'lláh, in His Most Holy Book, had specifically created the Universal House of Justice and confirmed its divine guidance. This and the text of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's Will make it clear that the guidance conferred on each of the “twin pillars” is independent of the guidance conferred on the other, and it had been proven by the Guardian's ministry that one pillar could exist and function by itself.’⁸⁰ Just as Shoghi Effendi functioned as the Head of the Faith without the House of Justice, since its inception the Universal House of Justice has functioned as the Head of the Faith without a Guardian⁸¹. The guarantee of divine guidance in the Will encompasses both situations – whether these institutions function together or severally.

⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour*, Glossary, p. 173.

⁷⁵ *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷⁶ For observations on Shoghi Effendi not having written a will see Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, pp. 354-357. Also see *Observations on Shoghi Effendi Not Having Written a Last Will and Testament*, blog post <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2009/04/shoghi-effendi-didnt-write-will-and.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁷⁷ Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, p. 376.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Message from the Universal House of Justice dated 6 October 1963, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 14, Message 5. <http://www.bahai.org/r/849488755> [accessed 1 May 2025]. See also Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, ch. 38.

⁸⁰ David Hofman, *A Commentary on the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, 4th Edition, Revised, with Epilogue (Oxford: George Ronald, 1982), p. 43.

⁸¹ For a further discussion of the divine guidance the Universal House of Justice receives since it must function without the presence of the Guardian of the Cause please see this blog post <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2009/03/is-universal-house-of-justice.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

The second part of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will was written at a time when He wrote: ‘I am now in very great danger and the hope of even an hour’s life is lost to me.’⁸² This part of the Will, apparently written during the childhood of Shoghi Effendi, does not mention the institution of Guardianship. In the event of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s death the Universal House of Justice was to be ‘elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England’. He continues, ‘It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate.’⁸³ That is, in the second part of His Will ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promised that the decisions of this body, which would have been composed of only its elected members during Shoghi Effendi’s childhood, would be ‘the truth and the purpose of God Himself’, and have ‘the same effect as the Text itself.’⁸⁴ This promise likewise applies today, when the Universal House of Justice must function without the Guardian among its membership. The Universal House of Justice has written, ‘Nowhere is it stated that the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is by virtue of the Guardian’s membership or presence on that body. Indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Shoghi Effendi in his Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh have both explicitly stated that the elected members of the Universal House of Justice in consultation are recipients of unfailing Divine Guidance.’⁸⁵

The Shared Authorship of the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

For the purposes of this paper, it is very important to understand that, as the Guardian explains, both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are equally the Authors of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will – specifically with respect to the institutions brought into being in the Will. Shoghi Effendi implies this joint authorship when he writes of these two Wills as one: ‘the explicit directions of their Book, and the surprisingly emphatic language with which they have clothed the provisions of their Will’⁸⁶.

In the following passage the Guardian uses marvellous imagery to convey that the Will and Testament written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is inseparable from and was also authored by Bahá’u’lláh, ‘the One Who provided the motivating impulse for its creation’:

The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh had been instituted solely through the direct operation of His Will and purpose. The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, on the other hand, may be regarded as the offspring resulting from that mystic intercourse between Him Who had generated the forces of a God-given Faith and the One Who had been made its sole Interpreter and was recognized as its perfect Exemplar. The creative energies unleashed by the Originator of the Law of God in this age gave birth, through their impact upon the mind

⁸² *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 19. <http://www.bahai.org/r/985165857> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, For fuller discussion of this subject see The Universal House of Justice, *Election and infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, p. 50; letter dated 9 March 1965 <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655394> [accessed 1 May 2025] in which it states that ‘The second part of the Master’s Will ... should be studied by the friends.’ Also see *Is there provision in the Bahá’í Writings for the Universal House of Justice to function infallibly with only its elected members?* (blogpost <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2009/03/is-there-provision-in-bahai-writings.html> [accessed 1 May 2025]).

⁸⁵ *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing, 2021), para. 59.6. <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655488> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁸⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 21-22. <http://www.bahai.org/r/178590959> [accessed 1 May 2025].

of Him Who had been chosen as its unerring Expounder, to that Instrument, the vast implications of which the present generation, even after the lapse of twenty-three years, is still incapable of fully apprehending.

The Guardian concludes with a sentence stating that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will – ‘this Instrument’ – cannot be ‘divorced’ from Bahá’u’lláh: ‘This Instrument can, if we would correctly appraise it, no more be divorced from the One Who provided the motivating impulse for its creation than from Him Who directly conceived it.’⁸⁷ Understanding his use of the term ‘divorced’ in this context is extremely important. Shoghi Effendi bids us to ‘correctly appraise’ the relationship between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament and Bahá’u’lláh, ‘the One Who provided the motivating impulse for its creation’, and not to ‘divorce’ that Instrument from Bahá’u’lláh. This striking passage is an important key to another passage the Guardian wrote on the same topic – the passage which begins, ‘Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh would be mutilated...’⁸⁸ In both passages the Guardian is stating the same thing.

As the Universal House of Justice has explained, there was no one Shoghi Effendi could have appointed as successor Guardian in accordance with the provisions of the Will.⁸⁹ Some have understood this circumstance to mean that since there is no living Guardian, a ‘divorce’ has taken place, and the Cause of God has been ‘mutilated’. If we examine the context in which Shoghi Effendi wrote this and compare other passages in which he uses the words ‘divorced’ and ‘mutilated’, we can seek to ‘correctly appraise’ his intent in this one. Simply put, as the next section seeks to demonstrate, in both passages Shoghi Effendi meant that although Bahá’u’lláh did not mention this institution anywhere in His Writings, and it was not formally established until the promulgation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will, the Guardianship must not be viewed as solely a creation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. To see the Will in that way would be to divorce it from Bahá’u’lláh, which would be a mutilation of the true picture of the World Order He conceived. As we read the following passages, we will examine what Shoghi Effendi means by ‘inseparable’ and its opposite ‘divorced’, and also what he communicates with the word ‘mutilated’.

Bahá’u’lláh is the Original Author of the Institution of the Guardianship

As I mentioned at the start of this paper, Shoghi Effendi had no inkling of the institution of the Guardianship before he read the Will, as it had not been explicitly mentioned in any of Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings or in any of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prior to His Will. This institution can, however, be seen in the implications of the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. Shoghi Effendi writes that in the Most Holy Book Bahá’u’lláh ‘anticipates by implication the institution of Guardianship’.⁹⁰ He also writes that a careful reading of the Most Holy Book will show that Bahá’u’lláh ‘adumbrated’ the institutions which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá later would ‘formally establish’ in His Will and Testament.⁹¹

The subject of the following paragraph is the institutions ‘Abdu’l-Bahá brought about in His Will and Testament. Shoghi Effendi explains in a letter from February 1929 that the Will of

⁸⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 325. <http://www.bahai.org/r/020161556> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 58.2. <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655439> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 214. <http://www.bahai.org/r/795879813> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 157, 146. <http://www.bahai.org/r/337384896> [accessed 1 May 2025].

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Most Holy Book of Bahá’u’lláh are ‘inseparable parts of one complete unit’ and that ‘the institutions which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ordains in His Will,’ though not outwardly specified in Bahá’u’lláh’s ‘general scheme of Bahá’í Dispensation’ in His Most Holy Book, cannot be ‘divorced’ from that Book:

It would, however, be helpful and instructive to bear in mind certain basic principles with reference to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, constitutes the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá’í Faith. A study of the provisions of these sacred documents will reveal the close relationship that exists between them, as well as the identity of purpose and method which they inculcate. Far from regarding their specific provisions as incompatible and contradictory in spirit, every fair-minded inquirer will readily admit that they are not only complementary, but that they mutually confirm one another, and are inseparable parts of one complete unit. A comparison of their contents with the rest of Bahá’í sacred Writings will similarly establish the conformity of whatever they contain with the spirit as well as the letter of the authenticated writings and sayings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In fact, he who reads the Aqdas with care and diligence will not find it hard to discover that the Most Holy Book itself anticipates in a number of passages the institutions which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ordains in His Will. By leaving certain matters unspecified and unregulated in His Book of Laws, Bahá’u’lláh seems to have deliberately left a gap in the general scheme of Bahá’í Dispensation, which the unequivocal provisions of the Master’s Will have filled. To attempt to divorce the one from the other, to insinuate that the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh have not been upheld, in their entirety and with absolute integrity, by what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has revealed in His Will, is an unpardonable affront to the unswerving fidelity that has characterized the life and labours of our beloved Master.⁹²

I suggest that when Shoghi Effendi states that one must not ‘divorce’ the ‘institutions which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ordains in His Will’ from ‘the general scheme of Bahá’í Dispensation’ set forth in Bahá’u’lláh’s Most Holy Book, he is in particular referring to the institution of the Guardianship, which is not mentioned in the Most Holy Book. It is another way of saying that to divorce the Guardianship from Bahá’u’lláh’s plan of world order would be to mutilate the truth of the Bahá’í teachings.

There were people who thought that the Bahá’í Faith solely concerned itself with the inner life and had no bearing on institutions such as local and national spiritual assemblies. Shoghi Effendi shows what he means by ‘mutilation of the body of the Cause’ in the same February 1929 letter when he explains that ‘the system of Bahá’í administration’ being established under his leadership during the seven years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing is not an innovation or a departure from the overall purpose of the Faith. Rather, the administration must be seen as part and parcel of the spiritual teachings of the Faith. Observe that he is saying that to ‘dissociate’ (divorce) the spiritual and administrative teachings of the Faith from one another would be to mutilate its truth.

It should be remembered by every follower of the Cause that the system of Bahá’í administration is not an innovation imposed arbitrarily upon the Bahá’ís of the world since the Master’s passing, but derives its authority from the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is specifically prescribed in unnumbered Tablets, and rests in some of its essential features

⁹² Shoghi Effendi, Letter dated February 27, 1929, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 3-4. <http://www.bahai.org/r/476179381> [accessed 1 May 2025].

upon the explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It thus unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith. To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.⁹³

In these two passages, Shoghi Effendi emphasizes the essential harmony of the elements of the Bahá'í Faith as 'inseparable parts of one complete unit' and characterizes their 'divorce' or 'dissociation' from each other as a grievous misunderstanding – as a distortion of the truth, as a 'mutilation of the body of the Cause'.

It may be helpful to see how, in one more passage from his writings, he uses the word 'mutilation' to intend a misapprehension of the Teachings. It shows yet again that by 'mutilation' he means divorcing the inseparable aspects of the Faith from one another – that is, a misunderstanding.

In the foreword to *God Passes By*, his history of the first Bahá'í century, Shoghi Effendi provides an overview of the four component periods of that century:

The century under our review may therefore be considered as falling into four distinct periods... The first period (1844-1853) centres around the gentle, the youthful and irresistible person of the Báb... The second period (1853-1892) derives its inspiration from the august figure of Bahá'u'lláh... The third period (1892-1921) revolves around the vibrant personality of 'Abdu'l-Bahá... The fourth period (1921-1944) is motivated by the forces radiating from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that Charter of Bahá'u'lláh's New World Order, the offspring resulting from the mystic intercourse between Him Who is the Source of the Law of God and the mind of the One Who is the vehicle and interpreter of that Law... These four periods are to be regarded... as the component, the inseparable parts of one stupendous whole.⁹⁴

In a previous paragraph we saw how the Guardian described the Master's Will and Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book as 'inseparable parts of one complete unit', and that we must not 'divorce the one from the other'. Now, writing of the four periods of Bahá'í history, he explains that each of these four periods 'revolves around its own theme, boasts of its own heroes, registers its own tragedies, records its own triumphs, and contributes its own share to the execution of one common, immutable Purpose. 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.'⁹⁵

To 'dissociate' the component elements of the history of the Faith from one another would constitute a divorce which is 'tantamount to a mutilation', a perversion of the truth. By 'mutilation' he means misunderstanding the true relationship between the inseparable aspects of the Faith by isolating them from one another.

⁹³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 5. <http://www.bahai.org/r/112459415> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, *Foreword*, p. xv. <http://www.bahai.org/r/085224896> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹⁵ Ibid.

I will now quote the last sentence of that passage again, to show that what the Guardian means by the word 'mutilation' is to misperceive the relationship between the inseparable elements of the Faith: '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.'

Above, we saw that the Guardian wrote that the 'Instrument' of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá must not be 'divorced' from Bahá'u'lláh. We have also read that to 'dissociate' the 'system of Bahá'í administration' from the 'essential verities of the Faith' would be 'tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause'. And we have read that we must not 'divorce' the 'institutions which 'Abdu'l-Bahá ordains in His Will' from 'the general scheme of Bahá'í Dispensation' Bahá'u'lláh has established in His Most Holy Book. Now we will see that he uses the same linguistic structure when he explicitly states that the institution of the Guardianship must not be divorced from Bahá'u'lláh.

The Guardian writes of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice that 'these twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh should be regarded as divine in origin, essential in their functions and complementary in their aim and purpose,' that they are 'inseparable institutions' and that 'they supplement each other's authority and functions, and are permanently and fundamentally united in their aims.'⁹⁶ Then, in an often-misunderstood passage, Shoghi Effendi restates what he has previously said, using the same terminology – that the institution of the Guardianship cannot be divorced from Bahá'u'lláh's plan of World Order: 'Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be mutilated.'⁹⁷

The remainder of that paragraph addresses two points: It quotes a tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá which explains the importance of the principle of primogeniture, and it states features of the connection between the institutions of the Universal House of Justice and the Guardianship:

Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be mutilated and permanently deprived of that hereditary principle which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, has been invariably upheld by the Law of God. 'In all the Divine Dispensations,' He states, in a Tablet addressed to a follower of the Faith in Persia, 'the eldest son hath been given extraordinary distinctions. Even the station of prophethood hath been his birthright.' Without such an institution the integrity of the Faith would be imperilled, and the stability of the entire fabric would be gravely endangered. Its prestige would suffer, the means required to enable it to take a long, uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking, and the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its elected representatives would be totally withdrawn.'⁹⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablet about the hereditary principle is addressing a financial matter – certain assets in the estate of a person who dies without a will are inherited by the eldest son – and from this tablet Shoghi Effendi has elucidated implications which apply to the hereditary Guardianship.'⁹⁹ It

⁹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 148. <http://www.bahai.org/r/898812393> [accessed 1 May 2025].

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The tablet is quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 1 July 1996. <http://www.bahai.org/r/802585328> [accessed 1 May 2025].

is interesting to note that in like manner, paragraph 42 of the Most Holy Book, which deals with a financial matter – the disposition of endowments dedicated to charity – likewise has ‘implications for the succession of authority following the passing of Bahá’u’lláh ... and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’.¹⁰⁰

As to the last part of that paragraph, explaining the relationship between the inseparable institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, it is similar if not identical in content to this explanation of the same principle by Shoghi Effendi:

It must be also clearly understood by every believer that the institution of Guardianship does not under any circumstances abrogate, or even in the slightest degree detract from, the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and repeatedly and solemnly confirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will. It does not constitute in any manner a contradiction to the Will and Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, nor does it nullify any of His revealed instructions. It enhances the prestige of that exalted assembly, stabilizes its supreme position, safeguards its unity, assures the continuity of its labours, without presuming in the slightest to infringe upon the inviolability of its clearly-defined sphere of jurisdiction.¹⁰¹

The Universal House of Justice has elucidated the contents of these two paragraphs in several important letters.¹⁰²

We will now examine the context in which Shoghi Effendi writes ‘Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship...’. To view this as the Guardian’s prediction that if ever the Cause of God had to function without a living Guardian it would be ‘mutilated’ is, in this writer’s view, not the Guardian’s intent and takes the phrase out of its context. In the very next paragraph of this letter, written in 1934, Shoghi Effendi wrote that the World Order would be ‘paralysed in its action’ if it were to be ‘severed’ from the ‘no less essential institution of the Universal House of Justice’.¹⁰³ At that time, the Guardian was functioning as Head of the Faith without the benefit of a single word from the Universal House of Justice – it would not be brought into being for another thirty years. If ‘divorced’ from the Guardianship is taken to mean functioning without a living Guardian, then ‘severed’ would have to mean functioning without the Universal House of Justice. However, he was, as he wrote those words, functioning without ‘the no less essential institution of the Universal House of Justice’ – and to conclude that he meant that he was at that moment ‘severed’ from the House of Justice is illogical. Further, he would have to be saying that the Cause of God was, in his own words, ‘paralysed in its action’. More important than seeing the illogic of such a deduction, more important than our own observation that during every day of Shoghi Effendi’s ministry the Cause of God was advancing and was not ‘paralysed in its action’, is Shoghi Effendi’s own clear statement later in the same letter that it was not paralysed. Some paragraphs later Shoghi Effendi writes of the ‘vitality’ of the institutions of the ‘vibrant body of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh’ (functioning without the Universal House of Justice) in ‘contrast’ to the ‘fear’ that

¹⁰⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 196, Note 66. <http://www.bahai.org/r/117765224> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 8. <http://www.bahai.org/r/246797968> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰² These are found in *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, particularly letter no. 57 dated 9 March 1965 <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655370> [accessed 1 May 2025], letter no. 58 dated 27 May 1966 <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655437> [accessed 1 May 2025] and letter no. 59 dated 7 December 1969. <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655478> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 148. <http://www.bahai.org/r/638026963> [accessed 1 May 2025].

‘paralyses the action’ of the world’s ‘blind and bewildered statesmen’, who were leading ‘the outworn institutions, both religious and secular, of present-day society’.¹⁰⁴

That is, since he contrasts the ‘vitality’ which characterises the institutions inside the Bahá’í Faith with the ‘fear’ that ‘paralyses the action’ of institutions in wider society, he cannot be saying that functioning without the Universal House of Justice would paralyse the action of the Cause of God. Rather, he is asserting that the Faith was neither ‘severed’ from the House of Justice nor ‘paralysed’. He described these twin institutions as ‘inseparable’ some thirty years before the Universal House of Justice came into being. In like manner today, when the Universal House of Justice is Head of the Faith without the active participation of a living Guardian, the Faith is neither ‘divorced’ from the Guardianship nor ‘mutilated’. Shoghi Effendi attaches a different meaning to these terms. He is saying not to divorce the institution of Guardianship from Bahá’u’lláh as its creator; he is also stating that these two institutions cannot be divorced from one another. He told the reader two paragraphs earlier that that is his context – to ‘elaborate certain salient features’ of ‘the nature of the relationships which, on the one hand, bind together these two fundamental organs of the Will of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and connect, on the other, each of them to the Author of the Faith and the Center of His Covenant’.¹⁰⁵

As we now see, Shoghi Effendi means something entirely different by ‘divorced’ when he writes about the Guardianship – he means that the Guardianship is among those institutions of the Administrative Order which were not mentioned in Bahá’u’lláh’s Writings, were brought into being by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will, but which were no less Authored by Bahá’u’lláh.

Mirror Imagery of the Most Mighty Branch and the Chosen Branch

There is a remarkable identity of imagery in the Covenants of Bahá’u’lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The Will and Testament of each of them directs the faith’s followers to ‘turn’ to the hereditary successor. In ‘The Tablet of the Branch, a tablet which is a ‘harbinger’ of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant,¹⁰⁶ Bahá’u’lláh warns against turning against ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, characterizes Him as a sacred Branch, and directs the followers to abide under the shade of that Branch. This imagery is repeated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament with respect to Shoghi Effendi.

The heart of the Will of Bahá’u’lláh is a single term, to ‘turn’ to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: ‘It is incumbent upon the Aghṣán,¹⁰⁷ the Afnan¹⁰⁸ and My Kindred to turn, one and all, their faces towards the Most Mighty Branch.’¹⁰⁹ Likewise, in His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directs the Bahá’ís to ‘turn’ to his hereditary successor Shoghi Effendi: ‘After the passing away of this wronged one, it

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 155. <http://www.bahai.org/r/548799335> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 147. <http://www.bahai.org/r/568030410> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 177, <http://www.bahai.org/r/704761967> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰⁷ ‘Aghṣán’ (plural of Ghuṣn) is the Arabic word for ‘Branches.’ This term is used by Bahá’u’lláh to designate His male descendants in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Note 66. <http://www.bahai.org/r/117765224> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰⁸ ‘The term ‘afnán’ means literally small branch, and refers to the relatives of the Báb, both men and women. As the Báb’s only son died while in infancy, the former had no direct descendants. The ‘afnán’ are, therefore, all indirectly related to the Báb.’ (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 25 September 1934, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, Vol. 1, p. 62. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LDG1/lbg1-40.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁰⁹ Bahá’u’lláh’s Book of the Covenant, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 221. <http://www.bahai.org/r/078110759> [accessed 1 May 2025].

is incumbent upon the Aghṣán (Branches), the Afnan (Twigs) of the Sacred Lote-Tree, the Hands (pillars of the Cause of God and the loved ones of the Abhá Beauty to turn unto Shoghi Effendi.¹¹⁰

Speaking of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh warns, 'Whoso turneth towards Him hath turned towards God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me.'¹¹¹ Likewise, in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá He writes of Shoghi Effendi, 'He that obeyeth him not, hath not obeyed God; he that turneth away from him, hath turned away from God and he that denieth him, hath denied the True One.'¹¹² This is Covenant language. This promise and this threat are essential features of God's Covenant and have proven to be an impregnable bulwark protecting the integrity of the Bahá'í community and keeping it true to the course set for it by Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote of the exalted station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 'There hath branched from the Sadratu'l-Muntaha this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness.'¹¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá used the same imagery in His Will to refer to the exalted position of Shoghi Effendi, 'the sacred and youthful branch' and 'the blest and sacred bough that hath branched out from the Twin Holy Trees'.¹¹⁴

In the Tablet of the Branch, Bahá'u'lláh says of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Well is it with him that hath sought his shelter and abideth beneath His shadow.'¹¹⁵ Likewise in the Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says of Shoghi Effendi, 'Well is it with him that seeketh the shelter of his shade that shadoweth all mankind.'¹¹⁶ The resonance in the spirit and imagery of the Documents of Successorship authored by Bahá'u'lláh and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá setting forth the exalted station of both of these sacred branches is striking.

Shoghi Effendi described 'Abdu'l-Bahá as 'the Centre 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.'¹¹⁷ However, when writing of his own position as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi distinguished his own powers and capacities from those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

No Guardian of the Faith, I feel it my solemn duty to place on record, can ever claim to be the perfect exemplar of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh or the stainless mirror that reflects His light. Though overshadowed by the unfailing, the unerring protection of Bahá'u'lláh and of

¹¹⁰ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11. <http://www.bahai.org/r/189137811> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Branch in *Days of Remembrance*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/137097754> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹² *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 24. <http://www.bahai.org/r/691205948> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹³ Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Branch in *Days of Remembrance*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/446103766> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹⁴ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11 <http://www.bahai.org/r/181898597> [accessed 1 May 2025] and p. 3. <http://www.bahai.org/r/367671165> [accessed 1 May 2025]. For a treatment of the Will and Testament generally see Hofman, *Commentary on the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. The imagery under discussion is addressed on pp. 12-14. The 'Twin Holy Trees' refers to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

¹¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Branch in *Days of Remembrance*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/446103766> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹⁶ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 3. <http://www.bahai.org/r/367671165> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 133. <http://www.bahai.org/r/305127046> [accessed 1 May 2025].

the Báb, and however much he may share with 'Abdu'l-Bahá the right and obligation to interpret the Bahá'í teachings, he remains essentially human ... The fact that the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not necessarily confer upon him a station co-equal with those Whose words he is called upon to interpret.¹¹⁸

Shoghi Effendi states that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is a 'stainless mirror' reflecting the light of Bahá'u'lláh, but that the Guardian of the Faith is not. In this connection it is interesting to consider a provision of the Will, which may carry an implication about what might be termed the Guardian's 'sinlessness'. In His Will, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the Guardian a specific function:

The Guardian of the Cause of God is its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body... Should any of the members [of the Universal House of Justice] commit a sin, injurious to the common weal, the Guardian of the Cause of God hath at his own discretion the right to expel him, whereupon the people must elect another one in his stead.¹¹⁹

Shoghi Effendi indicated that the meaning of the word in the Will he translated as 'member for life of that body' is 'irremovable'.¹²⁰ Perhaps since the elected members were theoretically subject to being removed but the Guardian was not, this carries an implication about the Guardian's infallibility – that it rendered him incapable of committing 'a sin injurious to the common weal'. As we will see in the next section, the Guardian's infallibility ensured that his every deed fostered the 'highest interests' of the Bahá'í Faith, which may be another way of saying that the Guardian was protected from committing a sin injurious to the common weal.

The Authority and Infallibility of the Guardian of the Cause

Shoghi Effendi's guidance to a devoted Bahá'í family was that 'your dear family should do all you can to teach the believers the Will and Testament to strengthen their understanding of its important provisions; for all the authority of the administrative bodies, as well as of the Guardian himself, is mainly derived from this tremendous document.'¹²¹ This authority was derived directly from the Manifestations of God for this Day. As we have seen from the earlier section 'The Twin Successors', the Guardian was 'guided directly by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, as the Master states in His Will'.¹²² It is interesting that in the Will the divine guidance is specified to flow through the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 151. <http://www.bahai.org/r/768620532> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹¹⁹ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025]. There being no Guardian to perform this function, the Constitution and By-Laws of that Body provide that in such an event the House of Justice may declare a vacancy (see <https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/constitution/constitution-universal-house-justice> [accessed 1 May 2025]).

¹²⁰ Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 204.

¹²¹ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 15 April 1949, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, Volume 2, p. 82. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LDG2/ldg2-97.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹²² From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 34, no. 89. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/DG/dg-89.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

two Manifestations of God, rather than in a general sense from God. As Shoghi Effendi wrote, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are 'presiding... over the destinies of this supreme Dispensation'.¹²³

Among the areas in which the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá guarantees that the Guardian of the Cause will receive divine guidance in addition to interpretation of the Word of God, is the protection and well-being of the Faith, as Shoghi Effendi's secretary wrote on his behalf:¹²⁴

The Guardian's infallibility covers interpretation of the Revealed Word and its application. Likewise any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith or its wellbeing must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly reveals.¹²⁵

Further, as the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf, this promised guidance ensures that all of the Guardian's actions foster 'the growth and highest interests of the Faith':

Just as the National Assembly has full jurisdiction over all its local Assemblies, the Guardian has full jurisdiction over all National Assemblies; he is not required to consult them, if he believes a certain decision is advisable in the interests of the Cause. He is the judge of the wisdom and advisability of the decisions made by these bodies, and not they of the wisdom and advisability of his decisions. A perusal of the Will and Testament makes this principle quite clear.

He is the Guardian of the Cause in the very fullness of that term, and the appointed interpreter of its teachings, and is guided in his decisions to do that which protects it and fosters its growth and highest interests.

He always has the right to step in and countermand the decisions of a national assembly; if he did not possess this right he would be absolutely impotent to protect the Faith, just as the NSA, if it were divested of the right to countermand the decisions of a local assembly, would be incapable of watching over and guiding the national welfare of the Bahá'í Community.

[Postscript in the Guardian's writing:] 'Read and approved, Shoghi.'¹²⁶

The House of Justice has pointed out that the extent of the infallibility bestowed in the Will on the Guardian was coterminous with the scope of his designated responsibilities: 'Thus, while there were indeed limits to his conferred infallibility, it was not confined merely to authoritative

¹²³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97. <http://www.bahai.org/r/324035127> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹²⁴ For a statement by the Universal House of Justice on the scope of the divine guidance received by the Guardian please see *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 86.5. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692132059> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹²⁵ From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, August 20, 1956, cited in Helen Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 313.

¹²⁶ From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian dated May 13, 1945, *Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 55-56. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/LANZ/lanz-40.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

interpretation of the Bahá'í Writings but extended to the range of his responsibilities as Guardian and Head of the Faith¹²⁷.

As we will see, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise of the guidance of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh applies equally to the Universal House of Justice; and likewise the Guardian states that the decisions of the House of Justice foster the highest interests of the Faith.

Shared Functions of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice

Though the Guardian was designated in the Will as the Interpreter of the Word and the House of Justice as the body to supplement the divine laws, there is not a sharp line of demarcation between the responsibilities of these two institutions – most of the work of leadership of the Faith is common to both institutions, with a smaller area of exclusive responsibility in which the other institution does not share. Shoghi Effendi described this common sphere in broad terms when he wrote that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá had, 'in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors, destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world.'¹²⁸ Similarly, he wrote, 'Acting in conjunction with each other, these two inseparable institutions administer its affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions.'¹²⁹

In the light of such passages, to view the generality of the authority of these two institutions as mutually exclusive is not a tenable position. The Universal House of Justice elaborated further on the functions which it shares in common with the Guardian:

In the Order of Bahá'u'lláh there are certain functions which are reserved to certain institutions, and others which are shared in common, even though they may be more in the special province of one or the other... although after the Master authoritative interpretation was exclusively vested in the Guardian, and although legislation is exclusively the function of the Universal House of Justice, these two Institutions are, in Shoghi Effendi's words, 'complementary in their aim and purpose'. 'Their common, their fundamental object is to ensure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings.' Whereas the Universal House of Justice cannot undertake any function which exclusively appertained to the Guardian, it must continue to pursue the object which it shares in common with the Guardianship.¹³⁰

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the body of the House of Justice has the same protection from error, but its individual elected members do not: 'The members of the House of Justice are not essentially

¹²⁷ From a letter dated 18 May 2018 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 2021; <http://www.bahai.org/r/207001271> [accessed 1 May 2025]).

¹²⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19. <http://www.bahai.org/r/874009616> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 147. <http://www.bahai.org/r/898812393> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³⁰ *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 58.8. <http://www.bahai.org/r/519655456> [accessed 1 May 2025].

infallible as individuals, but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and unerring guidance of God.¹³¹

The guarantee that all of the acts of the Guardian foster ‘the highest interests’ of the Bahá'í Faith is not limited to the Guardian; as Shoghi Effendi wrote, ‘Acting in conjunction with each other these two inseparable institutions... promote its interests.’¹³² In His Will, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá described the Universal House of Justice as ‘the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error’.¹³³ His promise that the Universal House of Justice is the ‘source of all good’ ensures that only good flows from its guidance. This statement that ‘all good’ comes from the Universal House of Justice permeates everything else ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about that Body. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s Will guarantees that they both will be guided by God through Bahá'u'lláh (‘The Abhá Beauty’) and the Báb (‘His Holiness, the Exalted One’):

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God.¹³⁴

In my view, Bahá'ís believe that these institutions receive unfailing divine guidance not as a leap of faith, but because we believe ‘Abdu'l-Bahá.

The Authority and Infallibility of the Universal House of Justice

The broad scope of the authority¹³⁵ the Will and Testament gives to the Universal House of Justice is expressed in this verse: ‘Unto this body all things must be referred.’¹³⁶ Shoghi Effendi amplified the meaning of that verse when he wrote of ‘the Universal House of Justice, to which, according to the Master’s explicit instructions, all important and fundamental questions must be referred’.¹³⁷ With this verse ‘Abdu'l-Bahá sets the context for the additional passages in His Will in which He sets forth the scope of the duties of the House of Justice, and the proper attitude of the believers towards that body. He also states that it will enact ‘all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text’, as well as ‘laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions’, that ‘all that is not expressly recorded’ in Bahá'u'lláh’s Most Holy Book ‘must be referred to the Universal House of Justice,’ and ‘that which this body,

¹³¹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, ch. 45. <http://www.bahai.org/r/033451012> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 147. <http://www.bahai.org/r/898812393> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³³ *The Will And Testament of ‘Abdu'l Bahá*, p. 14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³⁴ *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11. <http://www.bahai.org/r/181898597> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³⁵ For a discussion of the scope of the authority and infallibility of the House of Justice set forth in the Will, see Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, ch. 38.

¹³⁶ *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³⁷ The full passage reads, ‘Touching the point raised in the Secretary’s letter regarding the nature and scope of the Universal Court of Arbitration, this and other similar matters will have to be explained and elucidated by the Universal House of Justice, to which, according to the Master’s explicit instructions, all important and fundamental questions must be referred. At present the exact implication and full significance of the provisions of the Master’s Will are as yet imperfectly understood, and time will serve to reveal the wisdom and the far-reaching effects of His words.’ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 47. <http://www.bahai.org/r/969736024> [accessed 1 May 2025].

whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself, and further that it will resolve 'all the difficult problems' and 'all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself.'¹³⁸ The broad scope implicit in referring to it 'all things', 'all important and fundamental questions', is in keeping with the spirit of the last verse of the Will, which sums up the posture which 'Abdu'l-Bahá directs the believers to have towards that body: to wholeheartedly turn to it and seek its guidance.'¹³⁹

Some have taken a limited view of the scope of authority of the Universal House of Justice by focusing solely on passages such as that the body will enact 'laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions', concluding that the designated sphere of that body encompasses only legislative enactments, and only on matters of secondary importance. This view does not take into account the many other passages from the Writings on that subject. The scope of the authority of the Guardian and of the House of Justice are not a proper matter for individual 'opinions', as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in His Will.¹⁴⁰ One should see this matter through the eyes of the appointed Interpreters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated, 'The Blessed Perfection, Bahá'u'lláh, appointed a central authoritative Personage, declaring Him to be the expounder of the Book. This implies that the people in general do not understand the meanings of the Book, but this appointed One does understand.'¹⁴¹

As Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary, 'We must never take one sentence in the Teachings and isolate it from the rest.'¹⁴² Likewise, the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice has written on its behalf, 'While there are explicit passages in the authoritative texts that make reference to the infallibility of the House of Justice in the enactment of legislation, the argument that it is free from error only in this respect is untenable.'¹⁴³ The presumption that the divinely guided role of the Universal House of Justice is limited to matters where the Text is silent is the same as assuming that the Guardian of the Faith was only divinely guided when he was interpreting the Writings.

Although the responsibilities of the Guardian and the promise of divine guidance to him are mostly found in the Will, and also implicitly in the verse of the Most Holy Book about the Interpreter of the Book,¹⁴⁴ there are many passages in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

¹³⁸ *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14 (<http://www.bahai.org/r/071420525> [accessed 1 May 2025]), 19 (<http://www.bahai.org/r/985165857> [accessed 1 May 2025]), and p. 20 (<http://www.bahai.org/r/407994625> [accessed 1 May 2025]). Further thoughts are found in the blog post, *The Broad Scope of the Authority of the Universal House of Justice*, <https://bahai-covenant.blogspot.com/2016/07/authority-universal-house-justice.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹³⁹ All must seek guidance and turn unto the Center of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error. *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 26. <http://www.bahai.org/r/691205948> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá compiled by Howard MacNutt, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/495331350> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴² From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 4 October 1950, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community*, p. 457. <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/UD/ud-627.html> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴³ From a letter dated 7 April 2008 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Friends in Iran. *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 77.2. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692132004> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 174, p. 82. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692132004> [accessed 1 May 2025].

and the Guardian regarding the scope of the authority and infallibility of the Universal House of Justice. Among these, Bahá'u'lláh states that 'God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth,'¹⁴⁵ which, as the Guardian elaborates, constitutes 'Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance' that that body receives infallible guidance not only 'in the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas' but also 'in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith', and in its judicial role, in 'any case presented for their consideration'. This passage is one of several in the Bahá'í Writings which specifies that this guidance is directly to the elected membership of the Universal House of Justice and not by virtue of the Guardian's membership on that body; that the elected members, 'and not the body of those who either directly or indirectly elect them, have thus been made the recipients of the divine guidance which is at once the life-blood and ultimate safeguard of this Revelation.'¹⁴⁶ Shoghi Effendi wrote that the House of Justice would not only 'supplement' the revealed laws of Bahá'u'lláh, but that it is 'the body designed to ... apply His legislative ordinances'.¹⁴⁷ That is, the Guardian states that the House of Justice supplements the revealed law where the Text is silent, and it applies the revealed law where the Text has spoken. Furthermore, there is additional guidance from the Guardian clarifying that the divinely guided role of the House of Justice includes application of the teachings in general, not only Bahá'u'lláh's legislative ordinances.¹⁴⁸

This is not even a partial summary of the scope of the Universal House of Justice. The authoritative source on this subject is a compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice comprised of passages from Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice.¹⁴⁹ Among the contents of that document is the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice,¹⁵⁰ which codifies and distils the Bahá'í writings specifying the powers and duties of the Universal House of Justice:

The provenance, the authority, the duties, the sphere of action of the Universal House of Justice all derive from the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh which, together with the interpretations and expositions of the Centre of the Covenant and of the Guardian of the Cause – who, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is the sole authority in the interpretation of Bahá'í Scripture – constitute the binding terms of reference of the Universal House of Justice and are its bedrock foundation. The authority of these Texts is absolute and immutable until such time as Almighty God shall reveal His new Manifestation to Whom will belong all authority and power.

¹⁴⁵ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 68. <http://www.bahai.org/r/723031566> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 153. <http://www.bahai.org/r/384742643> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144. <http://www.bahai.org/r/642632703> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁴⁸ The Guardian's guidance was that 'these general statements we have in the teachings have to be explained and applied by the House of Justice before we can really appreciate their significance.' From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 21, 1932, Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on the Subject of Agriculture and Related Subjects, a compilation of the Universal House of Justice; *The Compilation of Compilations, Volume III*.

¹⁴⁹ *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/207001271> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁵⁰ A detailed examination of that document is found in Guy Sinclair, *A Study Guide to The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2005).

The House of Justice has provided its guidance on the scope of the Guardian's responsibility and infallibility and shown how it illumines the same scope with respect to the House of Justice:

Thus, while there were indeed limits to his conferred infallibility, it was not confined merely to authoritative interpretation of the Bahá'í Writings but extended to the range of his responsibilities as Guardian and Head of the Faith. 'It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism,' yet another letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states. 'These passages about the Guardian's conferred infallibility and authority can also serve to assist believers in understanding the scope of the conferred infallibility and authority of the Universal House of Justice.'¹⁵¹

Taking into account all of the Writings on the subject, we see that 'an understanding of the principles by which we explore the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh depends, too, on an appreciation of the broad nature of the authority conferred on the Universal House of Justice.'¹⁵²

I close with a passage from Shoghi Effendi which states that when the Universal House of Justice comes into being, the truths contained in the Will and Testament will be brought to light:

As to the order and the management of the spiritual affairs of the friends, that which is very important now is the consolidation of the Spiritual Assemblies in every centre, because on these fortified and unshakable foundations, God's Supreme House of Justice shall be erected and firmly established in the days to come. When this most great Edifice shall be reared on such an immovable foundation, God's purpose, wisdom, universal truths, mysteries and realities of the Kingdom, which the mystic revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has deposited within the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, shall gradually be revealed and made manifest.¹⁵³

Author biography

Brent Poirier is an independent researcher. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and Biology from Loyola-Marymount University and a Juris Doctor from the University of the Pacific with postgraduate studies in International Law at Salzburg University. He was admitted to the California and New Mexico Bar Associations and practised law for more than 40 years. He is the author of several Bahá'í blogs, including on the Bahá'í Faith and the Bahá'í Covenant.

¹⁵¹ From a letter dated 18 May 2018 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692132059> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁵² Letter of March 14, 1996, from the Universal House of Justice, *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 71.8. <http://www.bahai.org/r/692131127> [accessed 1 May 2025].

¹⁵³ From a letter of Shoghi Effendi dated 19 December 1923, translated from the Persian, quoted in a letter from the Universal House of Justice dated 9 March 1965, *The Universal House of Justice: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice*, para. 57.14. <http://www.bahai.org/r/736247311> [accessed 1 May 2025].

He served at two of the national Bahá'í schools in the United States, including several years as Coordinator for Archives and Library at the Green Acre Bahá'í School in Maine. He resides in Maine with his wife, Vickie, who is a noted Bahá'í textile artist.

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