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Research Note

The Afnan Library: 'for the benefit of all who seek knowledge'

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Abstract

Housed in a former church in Sandy, Bedfordshire, the Afnan Library grew from the books, papers and documents of the late Hand of the Cause Mr Hasan Balyuzi, who wished his collection to form the basis of a research library 'for the benefit of all who seek knowledge'. This research note describes the growth of the Library since the establishment of the Afnan Library Trust in 1985, its present holdings of some 14,000 books, 90 metres of archives and 800 gigabytes of digital material, and the online collection through which an increasing proportion of these resources is being made available. It further considers the Library's contribution to intellectual thought, both as the major resource for the history and culture of the British Bahá'í community and as the only accessible repository of copies of archives of the national Bahá'í community of Iran.

Housed in a beautiful former church owned by the Afnan Library Trust in Sandy, Bedfordshire, the core of the Afnan Library comprises the books, papers and documents of the late Hand of the Cause Mr Hasan Balyuzi, a precious and unparalleled archive resource for historians and students of religion, as well as the global Bahá'í community.

Hasan Balyuzi was an Afnán, a member of the family of the Báb. His great-grandfather, and that of Shoghi Effendi, was Ḥájí Mírzá Abu'l-Qásim, one of the two brothers of Khadíjih Bagum, the wife of the Báb. Mr Balyuzi was called by the Universal House of Justice one of the Bahá'í world's 'most powerful defenders' and 'most resourceful historians' who produced 'outstanding literary works'. It was the House of Justice's prayer that Mr Balyuzi's 'exemplary achievements' his qualities of steadfastness, patience and humility and his 'outstanding scholarly pursuits' would 'inspire many devoted workers' among the 'rising generations' to follow in his 'glorious footsteps'[1].

In a codicil to his will, Mr Balyuzi indicated that he wished his vast and unique collection of precious papers letters, notebooks, many in his own hand, manuscripts, rare books, photographs and newspaper cuttings to form the basis of a research library 'for the benefit of all who seek knowledge'. To fulfil this wish, the Afnan Library Trust was established as an independent charity in 1985. The Trustees nominated by Mr Balyuzi are the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, Robert Balyuzi and Dr Moojan Momen. The Universal House of Justice has indicated that it 'views the final accomplishment of the wishes of the late Hand of the Cause as of the very greatest importance'[2].

1 The Universal House of Justice, cablegram announcing the passing of Ḥasan M. Balyúzí (12 February 1980), in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record, Volume XVIII, 1979–1983* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1986), p. 635. Available: https://bahai.works/Bah%C3%A1%E2%80%99%C3%AD_World/Volume_18/Hasan_Balyuzi [accessed 7 August 2026].

2 From a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to the trustees of the Afnan Library Trust, 6 June 1985.

Since being established, the Afnan Library Trust has grown to in scope to be an archive and research library that specializes in religion, the Middle East and the Bahá'í Faith. Financed by voluntary contributions, it has local, national and international importance and serves a variety of purposes:

- to provide a repository for and preserve a collection of materials, some of which is unique and irreplaceable and much of which is inaccessible elsewhere
- to serve the increasing number of scholars researching the Bahá'í Faith
- to make its materials available to the wider public

The archive and library have expanded greatly since its official opening in 2014 and now comprises some 90 metres of shelf storage of archives, 15 metres of periodicals and some 14,000 books. It has about 800 gigabytes of digital archives and library, which is increasingly being made available online.

In accordance with Mr Balyuzi's wishes, the trustees have continuously expanded the holdings of the Library in the decades since his passing. As well as the 14,000 catalogued books, the Library houses books of a number of prominent Bahá'ís such as Hand of the Cause Dr 'Alí Muḥammad Varqá, Hand of the Cause Mr Abu'l-Qásim Faizi, and former member of the Universal House of Justice Mr 'Alí Nakhjavani. Important collections of books and papers include;

- Hand of the Cause Mr Balyuzi's own collection
- Claudia Coles collection
- Dorothy Ferraby collection
- Philip Hainsworth collection
- Marion and David Hofman collection
- Hormuzdiar Sabet collection
- Charles Dunning's diaries
- Adam Thorne papers
- Over 100 copies of manuscripts from the Iran National Bahá'í archives
- Bahá'í periodicals from around the world

An ongoing process is the cataloguing of the papers and documents held by the Library. To make the books and papers that the Afnan Library holds accessible to a wider range of individuals, an online library has been created[3]. This includes 90 volumes of manuscripts of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. At the request of the Universal House of Justice, all of the 104 volumes of Bahá'í scriptures (and other texts) that were published in a photocopied collection by the Iranian National Spiritual Assembly just before the 1979 Iranian Revolution have also been placed online[4].

The Library works closely with the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice to put online manuscript histories of local Bahá'í communities in Iran. To date, 20 such histories have been posted. The Afnan Library has also placed a number of rare Bahá'í books, journals and unpublished materials in various languages online, including English, Farsi, Arabic and Burmese.

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3 Available: https://afnanlibrary.org/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

4 Available: https://afnanlibrary.org/inba/ [accessed 7 August 2026].

It is the intention, when the resources become available, to develop the website further and to translate it into other languages, including Arabic and Persian.

Contribution to intellectual thought

Whilst the Afnan Library is the major resource for the history and culture of the British Bahá'í community, it is also currently the only major accessible repository of copies of some the archives of the national Bahá'í community of Iran, which have otherwise been destroyed or rendered inaccessible owing to the accelerated persecution of the Bahá'ís and their institutions there since the Islamic revolution of 1979. Large numbers of the Iranian Bahá'í community have been forced to leave Iran and have now settled in all parts of the world, including in the United Kingdom where there are a few thousand. The culture of this diaspora has been destroyed in their own country and the resources of this archive and library will help to maintain and rebuild this culture. There are also millions of non-Iranian Bahá'ís in more than 200 countries. There is no other comparable archive and library in the world for this population.

The Universal House of Justice expressed in its letter of 30 December 2021 a desire to enhance the intellectual life of the community and enable 'the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds'.[5] The Afnan Library contributes to this by providing both to in-person researchers and to those online easy access to a wealth of books, journals, manuscripts, maps, documents and papers that are not found elsewhere, as well as numerous archival objects relating to the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths. In-person researchers may attend the Library by appointment while online researchers may access materials in the online collection at any time.

Selected examples of recent research undertaken in the Afnan Library, and the base of the researcher(s) involved, can be seen below:

- Research in journals relating to Africa and in notes of Mr Balyuzi regarding Africa (Bahá'í World Centre staff)
- Research for a book on 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Ireland)
- Research on various topics (Haifa University, Israel)
- Research for a book on 20th century Bahá'í activities (USA)
- Research for a film on 'Abdu'l-Bahá (USA)
- Researching materials on early Bahá'ís of Isfahan (USA)
- Research on the writings of the Báb (USA)
- Research for an article on Frank Lloyd Wright re. *World Order* magazine cover designs (UK)
- Research on Tahirih's poems (UK)
- Research for a book on Iran (UK)
- Research for UK Baha'i Histories project (UK)
- Research for restoration of Holy Places in 'Akká (Bahá'í World Centre staff)

[5] The Universal House of Justice, 'To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors', 30 December 2021 https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/1 [accessed 7 August 2026].

The Afnan Library also carries out a number of activities to support the intellectual life of the community. This includes hosting several book launches, as well as a recent special exhibition on Dr Esslemont to support the launch of a Bahá'í history book. It also supports numerous academic seminars, summer schools, conferences, conventions, reflection meetings and the Bahá'í Training Centre by providing books and other materials.

To support the wider Bahá'í community, the Afnan Library has donated books to Bahá'í libraries in Malta, Cyprus, Germany, Kenya, Cameroon and other countries. It has also donated books to Wadham College, University of Oxford, and the Library for Iranian Studies in London[6].

It is the hope and intention of the Trustees that the work of the Library will continue to expand and support the needs of the worldwide Bahá'í community as it continues to develop and enhance in its intellectual life.



Figure 1. The Afnan Library (Source: Ashley Southall)

[6] For more information see: http://www.iranianlibrary.org.uk [accessed 7 August 2026].

Author biographies

Carmel Momen is a Trustee of the Afnan Library and the library's general manager. She is also co-director of George Ronald Publisher.

Wendi Momen holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics, where she is Governor Emeritus, and is the author of 13 books. A social activist and advocate for social justice, she served as a magistrate and lay judge in the family court for 38 years. She is a trustee of Widows Rights International and of the Bahá'í Agency for Social and Economic Development UK, co-founder of Ethical Business Building the Future, and member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the UK. She was appointed MBE in 2014.