

The Journey Motif in the Bahá'í Faith: From Doubt to Certitude

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of “journey” in the Bahá'í Faith from spiritual, social, and historical perspectives. Because the process of individual spiritual growth lies at the heart of human purpose according to the Bahá'í teachings, the individual spiritual journey is a central theme in scripture and authoritative texts. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh speaks about the collective spiritualization of humanity—a process which carries with it the necessary creation of new patterns of community and social relations—as the “journey” of the human body politic. In this paper, the relationship between the individual and the collective journey is examined through the lens of the history of the spread of the Bahá'í Faith and compared with the literal journeys undertaken by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi.

Résumé

L’auteur explore le concept de cheminement dans la foi bahá'íe d’un point de vue spirituel, social et historique. Selon les écrits bahá'ís, le but de l’existence humaine étant essentiellement de croître spirituellement, le cheminement spirituel de l’individu est un thème central des écrits et des textes fondamentaux bahá'ís. En outre, Bahá'u'lláh désigne la spiritualisation de l’humanité – un processus qui comporte nécessairement la création de nouveaux modes de relations communautaires et sociales – comme un cheminement sociétal. L’auteur examine la relation entre le cheminement individuel et collectif vu sous l’angle de la chronologie de la propagation de la foi bahá'íe, et établit une comparaison avec les déplacements géographiques faits par le Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá et Shoghi Effendi.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el concepto de “viaje” en la Fe Bahá'í desde perspectivas

espirituales, sociales e históricas. Ya que el proceso de desarrollo espiritual del individuo yace en el corazón del propósito humano de acuerdo a las enseñanzas Bahá'ís, el viaje espiritual del individuo es un tema central en textos de escrituras y autorizados. Además, Bahá'u'lláh habla sobre la espiritualización colectiva de la humanidad—un proceso que lleva con él la creación necesaria de nuevos patrones de comunidad y relaciones sociales—como el “viaje” del cuerpo político humano. En este ensayo, la relación entre el individuo y el viaje colectivo es examinado a través del lente de la historia de la propagación de la Fe Bahá'í y comparado con los viajes literales llevados a cabo por El Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá y Shoghi Effendi.

The goal of our individual spiritual journeys is to move from a position of doubt to a position of certitude. On that spiritual journey there should be an ever-increasing recognition of our purpose and of how that recognition allows us to transcend the limitations encompassing the mundane realities of our physical existence. In religious frames of reference, this awareness is intertwined with the recognition of our Creator and is the impulse and guidance that defines and gives structure to our life. Certitude in regard to our Creator and the purpose of our creation provides the dynamic movement beyond lingering and limiting doubts about the meaning of existence.

In the Bahá'í Faith our individual spiritual journey is a central theme of scripture. Beyond this, however, the idea of a spiritual journey is also expressed in collective terms as humanity as a whole moves toward its spiritual destiny. The history of the Bahá'í Faith—the narratives that propel the story of the Faith forward—become metaphors for this collective spiritual journey, as each of the physical journeys of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi symbolically embody a shift in humanity's dynamic movement forward.

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

In Bahá'í scripture, this journey from doubt to certitude is explicitly discussed and forms an organizing construct for many of Bahá'u'lláh's key writings—including *The Seven Valleys* and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude). The former of these works outlines the steps on the spiritual

journey itself, from “search,” “love,” “knowledge,” “unity,” “contentment,” “wonderment,” and “true poverty” through to “absolute nothingness.”¹ The latter of these works—the greatest and most significant of Bahá'u'lláh's doctrinal writings—was written to answer questions of doubt that had been raised by a prominent individual and does so by articulating the doctrinal foundations and arguments for certitude.² In *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh continually calls the reader to the orientation and intention required for the journey, as He does in these opening words of the book: “[T]hey that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse themselves of all that is earthly—their ears from idle talk, their minds from vain imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth. They should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way” (3).

The individual's spiritual journey—and the motivation and the call to that journey—is located in the Bahá'í Writings at the very heart of how we live our daily life. The obligatory prayers Bahá'u'lláh revealed are pleas from the individual to the Creator to develop our capacity to know and love God, and to understand the purpose of our creation. Daily routine and activity—everything we do—become an arena and opportunity for striving to move along on that dynamic journey:

Therefore I say that man must travel in the way of God. Day by day he must endeavour to become better, his belief must increase and become firmer, his good qualities and his turning to God must be greater, the fire of his love must flame more brightly; then day by day he will make progress, for to stop advancing is the means of going

1. *The Seven Valleys* (Haft-Vadi) was written by Bahá'u'lláh around 1860. It has been referred to by Shoghi Effendi as Bahá'u'lláh's “greatest mystical composition” (*God Passes By* 140).

2. *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*The Book of Certitude*) was written by Bahá'u'lláh around 1861. Shoghi Effendi states that The Book of Certitude “occupies a position unequalled by any work in the entire range of Bahá'í literature, except the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book” (*God Passes By* 139).

back. The bird when he flies soars ever higher and higher, for as soon as he stops flying he will come down. Every day, in the morning when arising you should compare today with yesterday and see in what condition you are. If you see your belief is stronger and your heart more occupied with God and your love increased and your freedom from the world greater then thank God and ask for the increase of these qualities. You must begin to pray and repent for all that you have done that is wrong and you must implore and ask for help and assistance that you may become better than yesterday so that you may continue to make progress. (*Star of the West*, Vol. 8, 68)

Implicit in both spiritual and physical journeys lies the suggestion that movement and change are necessary. We human beings are created to be dynamic, not static in our lives. Even our physical reality exemplifies this purpose—our bodies are ever-changing, never still, never the same from one moment to the next. Our spiritual reality is the same. The pace of movement and change may be slow or fast; it may be dramatic or imperceptible, but movement and change are nonetheless occurring. Consciousness of the reality of change and of our own dynamic movement are central vehicles for purposeful progress in our spiritual journey. When asked to explain the seeming paradox of why it was necessary for a soul that emanates from God to make a journey back to God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responds that human life is a journey. It is only on this journey, which is characterized by change, that we come to recognize our full capacities as spiritual beings:

If he could not realize the condition of old age, he would not know that he was young. He would not know the difference between young and old without experiencing the old. Unless you have passed through the state of infancy, how would you know this was an infant beside you? If there were no wrong, how would you recognize the right? If it were not for sin, how would you appreciate virtue? If evil deeds were unknown, how could you commend good actions? If sickness did not exist, how would you understand health? Evil is nonex-

istent; it is the absence of good. Sickness is the loss of health; poverty, the lack of riches. When wealth disappears, you are poor; you look within the treasure box but find nothing there. Without knowledge there is ignorance; therefore, ignorance is simply the lack of knowledge (*Promulgation* 295–96).

In this idea of journey, we see a dynamic vision for the fulfilment of human potential. We have not been created to maintain a state of balance or stasis, but to be constantly on the move, consciously engaged in the processes of change. Spiritual fulfilment is not a staid state of peace and tranquillity, but an enlightenment born out of action and praxis in which we become ever more conscious of our spiritual capacities and their myriad depths of expression. In this journey, we are constantly challenging ourselves to perceive in new ways, act in new ways, and relate and love in new ways.

This vision of the spiritual journey is also one that rejects a polarity between inward spiritual journey and active engagement in the external world. In rejecting asceticism and monasticism, Bahá'u'lláh firmly defines the journey of spiritual fulfilment as one in which we strive to close the gap between living a life characterized by knowledge of God and holiness and the mundane routines of everyday existence. Even the most ordinary thoughts and commonplace events of our lives can reflect the highest ideals and attributes of the true spiritual journey. Similarly, this necessary closing of the gap between our spiritual journey and our worldly lives requires the rejection of theologies and doctrines proposing that the spiritual journey and salvation can take place through a single act of contrition, conversion, or profession of faith. In Bahá'u'lláh's vision there is no way to bypass the fact that on each and every day there will be constant challenges and struggles for spiritual growth in order to continue on a healthy and life-affirming course. While an affirmation of faith, the adoption of a label or title, a mystical experience, or a moment of enlightenment can all play roles in the process of spiritual growth, these do not exempt one from the reality that each of us is subject to an enduring journey and the challenges and opportunities it holds for us on a daily basis.

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN BAHÁ'Í HISTORY

This interconnection between the spiritual journey and our daily life takes on another form of intense expression in the Bahá'í Faith, whose history is centered around physical journeys that mirror humanity's collective spiritual ascent. Put simply, the journey motif underlies the gradual passage of humankind toward its spiritual destiny.

Each head of the Faith undertook substantial physical journeys during Their lives. For the Báb it was the hajj to Mecca and Medina; for Bahá'u'lláh it was the exile from Baghdad to Akká; for 'Abdu'l-Bahá it was a journey west to Europe and North America; and for Shoghi Effendi it was a journey across Africa from Cape Town to Cairo. Each of these journeys alone might be seen as symbolically representing a distinct moment in the evolution, movement, and growth of the Bahá'í Faith. They are, if you will, the moments of passage—the walking through a door to a new reality in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. At the same time, however, these moments—individually and collectively—are moments of passage in humanity's collective spiritual journey. Just as the individual moves from doubt to certitude, so the journeys of the central figures represent key moments in time of humanity's collective movement towards being in position to fulfil its spiritual purpose, including reflecting its fundamental oneness.

It is important to note that this gradual movement and expansion of the Bahá'í Faith is a theme that is directly discussed in various ways in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh Himself commented on the relationship between the “East” and “West” in humanity's relationship to Divine revelation: “In the East the light of His Revelation hath broken; in the West have appeared the signs of His dominion. Ponder this in your hearts, O people, and be not of those who have turned a deaf ear to the admonitions of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Praised” (*Tablets* 13). Shoghi Effendi observes how 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms and expands this theme and, in particular, He portrays how the potential of the revelation manifests itself:

'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, confirming this statement, has written: “From

the beginning of time until the present day the light of Divine Revelation hath risen in the East and shed its radiance upon the West. The illumination thus shed hath, however, acquired in the West an extraordinary brilliancy. Consider the Faith proclaimed by Jesus. Though it first appeared in the East, yet not until its light had been shed upon the West did the full measure of its potentialities become manifest." "The day is approaching when ye shall witness how, through the splendor of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh the West will have replaced the East, radiating the light of divine guidance." "The West hath acquired illumination from the East, but, in some respects the reflection of the light hath been greater in the Occident." "The East hath, verily, been illumined with the light of the Kingdom. Erelong will this same light shed a still greater illumination through the potency of the teachings of God, and their souls be set aglow by the undying fire of His love" (*Citadel* 30).

Shoghi Effendi goes on to describe how this movement is intertwined with the placing of a mantle of responsibility on the shoulders of the Bahá'ís in the West to spread the Faith around the globe, and to raise up the foundations of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. As is suggested later, the journeys of Shoghi Effendi might be seen as symbolic of the beginning of the movement of the Faith around the globe, and the pattern of sacrifice that Bahá'u'lláh's followers should strive to emulate.

The details of each of the journeys of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have been written about to varying degrees elsewhere, so it is not necessary to repeat the specifics of what They did and what They encountered. However, a brief discussion of each journey is necessary to see how it relates to humanity's collective spiritual destiny. In particular, from the time of the Declaration of the Báb in 1844 in Shiraz to the passing of Shoghi Effendi in London in 1957, the Bahá'í Faith moved from being a minuscule group with a handful of followers of what was then considered to be an obscure radical religious movement in Persia, to a world religion reaching all continents and corners of the earth. The physical journeys of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi can be seen as symbolizing a shift in the global movement and expansion of the Faith.

THE HAJJ OF THE BÁB

In 1844 not long after His Declaration, the Báb undertook a nine-and-a-half-month pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, accompanied by Quddús and a personal attendant. Their passage by sea from Bushir to Jeddah is described as a time when the Báb and Quddús were “absorbed in their work” (Nabíl 130), which involved the revelation and recording of verses.

The journey was arduous and trying. In the Persian Bayán the Báb recounts, “For days we suffered from the scarcity of water. I had to content myself with the juice of the sweet lemon” (131). As Nabíl describes the journey, the hardship of the voyage was such that the Báb “supplicated the Almighty to grant that the means of ocean travel might soon be speedily improved, that its hardships might be reduced, and its perils be entirely eliminated” (131). Upon arrival at Jeddah, the Báb mounted a camel for the rest of the journey to Mecca while Quddús walked alongside Him.

In the signal act of His pilgrimage the Báb stood against the Ka’bih—the point to which Muslims turn in prayer—and proclaimed thrice, “I am the Qá’im whose advent you have been awaiting.” In these words, the Báb’s pilgrimage became the symbolic physical or outer expression of the end of the Islamic dispensation and the birth of a new Revelation. Through this act the Báb transformed the traditional meaning of the pilgrim’s journey.

In conventional terms, undertaking a pilgrimage is a spiritual obligation and responsibility for the individual’s own relationship with the Creator. It is a milestone in one’s spiritual journey. For the Báb, however, rather than being a journey of personal fulfilment, His pilgrimage was a milestone in humanity’s collective spiritual journey, a moment of fulfilment in our collective and progressive relationship with God. It was a symbolic and overt expression of the instant in which, through the Báb’s statement, the age of prophecy most recently embodied by the Islamic dispensation gave way to a time of that same prophecy being fulfilled.

From this perspective, the Báb’s pilgrimage stands as a moment of collective death and birth, a closing and an opening, both an end and a begin-

ning. A threshold was crossed and humanity—all humanity—was now responsible for responding to the appearance of a new Manifestation of God. The Báb's Declaration in May 1844 did not entail any public declaration. Rather, He waited for eighteen individuals to find Him through their own intuition, effort, and volition. The tables had now turned. By going to the epicenter of worship of the previous revelation of God and publicly declaring His station and the principle of fulfilment, the Báb had effectively come to the world as a whole. The peoples of the world were now being challenged to act in response to this declaration.

These themes of the Báb's pilgrimage—physical hardship, sacrifice, humanity's collective spiritual journey, and the public pronouncement of a new revelation—are complemented by the substantive expression and embodiment of the principle of oneness that is at the heart of the Báb's—and later Bahá'u'lláh's—teachings. Up to this point in time, the Báb's station and revelation had been limited to the knowledge of only a few, and while the movement had begun causing convulsions in Persia, the station of the Báb was not comprehended in the way that it would be understood later in His life. By declaring His advent in the holiest spot in the Muslim world, the Báb was making it explicit that the path to God was now through Him. This is the point He made explicit in His face-to-face dialogue with Mírzá Muhít-i-Kirmání, the ambitious cleric seeking to be leader of the Shaykhí sect. Taking his hand, the Báb said:

Verily I declare, no one besides Me in this day, whether in the East or in the West, can claim to be the Gate that leads men to the knowledge of God. My proof is none other than the proof whereby the truth of the Prophet Muhammad was established. Ask Me whatsoever you please; now, at this very moment, I pledge Myself to reveal such verses as can demonstrate the truth of My mission (Nabíl 134).

This statement evokes the principle of the oneness of God and religion by expressing the continuity of the Báb's revelation with all previous revelations. It also speaks to the oneness of humanity by calling all the peoples of the world to now turn toward the living Bearer of the new

Revelation from God. By going to the holiest spot of the Islamic Dispensation and declaring His mission, and through the affirmation of that previous dispensation, the Báb was metaphorically embodying the oneness that bound His religion to all previous dispensations. This emphasis on a new revelation—which is both a break from the past and also a continuity expressed through the ultimate oneness of God and religion—is echoed in the epistle the Báb revealed for, and which Quddús delivered to, the Sherif of Mecca during the Báb's pilgrimage:

O Sherif!... All thy life thou hast accorded worship unto Us, but when We manifested Ourselves unto thee, thou didst desist from bearing witness unto Our Remembrance, and from affirming that He is indeed the Most Exalted, the Sovereign Truth, the All-Glorious... Verily We are cognizant of all things. Yet notwithstanding that We had called thee into being for the purpose of attaining Our presence in the Day of Resurrection, thou didst shut thyself out from Us without any reason or explicit Writ; whereas hadst thou been among such as are endowed with the knowledge of the Bayán, thou wouldst have, at the sight of the Book, testified forthwith that there is no God but Him, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, and wouldst have affirmed that He Who hath revealed the Qur'án, hath likewise revealed this Book, that every word of it is from God, and unto it we all bear allegiance. However, that which was preordained hath come to pass. Shouldst thou return unto Us while revelation still continueth through Us, We shall transform thy fire into light. Truly We are powerful over all things. But if thou failest in this task, thou shalt find no way open to thee other than to embrace the Cause of God and to implore that the matter of thine allegiance be brought to the attention of Him Whom God shall make manifest, that He may graciously enable thee to prosper and cause thy fire to be transformed into light. (*Selections 29–30*)

While not specific to the Báb's pilgrimage, it is instructive to note how the Universal House of Justice characterizes the Báb's ministry as a whole,

highlighting as it does the themes of physical sacrifice, of humanity's collective journey and the principle of oneness:

The sufferings sustained by the Báb so as to arouse humanity to the responsibilities of its coming age of maturity were themselves indications of the intensity of the struggle necessary for the world's people to pass through the age of humanity's collective adolescence. Paradoxical as it may seem, this is a source of hope. The turmoil and crises of our time underlie a momentous transition in human affairs. Simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration have clearly been accelerating throughout the planet since the Báb appeared in Persia. That our earth has contracted into a neighbourhood, no one can seriously deny. The world is being made new. Death pangs are yielding to birth pangs. The pain shall pass when members of the human race act upon the common recognition of their essential oneness. There is a light at the end of this tunnel of change beckoning humanity to the goal destined for it according to the testimonies recorded in all the Holy Books (Statement).

THE EXILE OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH FROM BAGHDAD TO AKKÁ

The Báb's journey to Mecca and Medina was filled with the intensity and upheaval that was indicative of His ministry as a whole. Similarly, the central physical journey of Bahá'u'lláh's life—the five years during which He was forced to move from Baghdad to Adrianople and finally to Akká—is characterized by the perseverance, endurance in the face of trials, and unmatched productivity that were the hallmarks of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry.

In 1863, after Bahá'u'lláh had already been a prisoner and was now an exile in Baghdad, a struggle ensued between Ottoman and Persian officials concerning what should happen to Him. Baghdad was a city at a crossroads of Sunni and Shi'ih populations and interests within the Ottoman Empire. In this context, Bahá'u'lláh gained increasing prominence, including clear recognition as a Bábí leader and a certain level of tolerance and sympathy among some officials and Sunni religious leaders. Persian officials wanted Him dealt with harshly. The Ottomans ultimately decided to move Him to Constantinople. The context of this decision

has been described in the following terms:

By 1863, Bahá'u'lláh concluded that the time had come to begin acquainting some of those around Him with the mission which had been entrusted to Him in the darkness of the *Síyáh-Chál*. This decision coincided with a new stage in the campaign of opposition to His work, which had been relentlessly pursued by the Shi'ih Muslim clergy and representatives of the Persian government. Fearing that the acclaim which Bahá'u'lláh was beginning to enjoy among influential Persian visitors to Iraq would re-ignite popular enthusiasm in Persia, the Shah's government pressed the Ottoman authorities to remove Him far from the borders and into the interior of the empire. Eventually, the Turkish government acceded to these pressures and invited the exile, as its guest, to make His residence in the capital, Constantinople. Despite the courteous terms in which the message was couched, the intention was clearly to require compliance (*Bahá'u'lláh* 13).

So began a journey during which Bahá'u'lláh would spend over four years in Adrianople and a journey that would end in 1868 with His arrival in Akká. Until His death in 1892, Bahá'u'lláh would remain in the vicinity of Akká and nearby Bahjí, His final resting place.

Bahá'u'lláh's journey from Baghdad to Akká was a period of extreme personal peril. In addition to being an exile, Bahá'u'lláh was the subject of plots against His life, notably by His half-brother Mirzá Yahya. These plots included the poisoning of Bahá'u'lláh, which almost claimed His life and left Him with a hand-tremor that endured the rest of His life.

Against this backdrop of physical trial and hardship, Bahá'u'lláh's journey marks the next symbolic step after the Báb's pilgrimage in the global movement of the Bahá'í Faith. If the Báb's pilgrimage symbolized the break from Islam, Bahá'u'lláh's exile was the journey when the new revelation was symbolically expressed universally. In other words, it marked the point when the principle of oneness was announced to the world at large. It was, if you will, the time during which God's new revelation could

be fully proclaimed, and God could make Himself known again to humanity through a new universal revelation. It was the journey of fulfilment.

During the Adrianople years Bahá'u'lláh made His station known to high and low alike. Bahá'u'lláh confirmed publicly to the small number of Bábís around Him that He was "Him Whom God shall make manifest,"³ the Promised One the Báb had foretold. In relation to His Station, He began to give form to the notion of the "people of Bahá"⁴ as a distinct religious community. The small, despondent, persecuted, fallen Bábí community was now being called to recognize the birth of yet a newer stage in humanity's collective spiritual journey through acceptance of a new Manifestation of God in their midst and the birth of a new religious system.

Mirroring His call to the Bábí community, Bahá'u'lláh called the loftiest among humanity to recognize His station. In tablets revealed during this time to kings and rulers, both to specific individuals as well as to the generality of humankind, Bahá'u'lláh summoned everyone to recognize Him, to accept His Word, and to work toward justice and peace. For example, in His Tablet to the Kings, Bahá'u'lláh rebukes the leaders for not recognizing the Báb or Himself:

My face hath come forth from the veils, and shed its radiance upon all that is in heaven and on earth; and yet, ye turned not towards Him, notwithstanding that ye were created for Him, O concourse of kings! Follow, therefore, that which I speak unto you, and hearken unto it with your hearts, and be not of such as have turned aside (*Summons* 187).

3. The Báb used this phrase in numerous passages throughout His Writings. See *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 134 and p. 155.

4. While Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly uses this appellation to designate His followers, the first instance is found in the Suriy-i-Haykal. See, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 79.

This failure to recognize Him is seen, in effect, as an abandonment of and an affront to humanity's collective spiritual destiny inasmuch as all religions and all humankind had waited millennia for this Day. Using a Christian example, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

O kings of Christendom! Heard ye not heard the saying of Jesus, the Spirit of God, "I go away, and come again unto you"? Wherefore, then, did ye fail, when He did come again unto you in the clouds of heaven, to draw nigh unto Him, that ye might behold His face, and be of them that attained His Presence? In another passage He saith: "When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." And yet, behold how, when He did bring the truth, ye refused to turn your faces towards Him, and persisted in disporting yourselves with your pastimes and fancies. Ye welcomed Him not, neither did ye seek His Presence, that ye might hear the verses of God from His own mouth, and partake of the manifold wisdom of the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the All-Wise. (*Gleanings* 246)

In the context of this inauguration of a new religious system for humanity, and Bahá'u'lláh's harkening all the peoples of the world to accept this heralded "Day of Days," Bahá'u'lláh's exile becomes the point of passage when God's revelation emerges as a new religious order. While Bahá'u'lláh suffered the indignities of being an exile and being the subject of denial and negation, the power of His revelation was affirmed symbolically to all humanity. While only the thinnest possible sliver of humanity was aware of or called to the new religious system, we can discern in Bahá'u'lláh's journey of exile His new religious system encompassing all humanity around the globe. The principle of oneness was thus expressed again.

The continuity of the themes of journey, suffering, and oneness seen in Bahá'u'lláh's exile is one that Shoghi Effendi compares to the exile of

Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to the Promised Land—a banishment which, in the multitudinous benefits it conferred upon so many

divers peoples, faiths and nations, constitutes the nearest historical approach to the incalculable blessings destined to be vouchsafed, in this day, and in future ages, to the whole human race, in direct consequence of the exile suffered by Him Whose Cause is the flower and fruit of all previous Revelations. (*God Passes By* 107)

In light of this analogy, Bahá'u'lláh's journey becomes the pivotal moment in which all humanity is invited to turn toward, and is exposed to, the knowledge, energy, and bounty of the new revelation.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ GOES WEST

At the age of sixty-seven, not long after being released from His status as a prisoner, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá began His journey to Europe and North America that would stretch from 1911 through 1913. In Shoghi Effendi's judgment, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's journey to the West was “the greatest exploit ever to be associated with His ministry” (*God Passes By* 295). A centerpiece of the journey was the 239 days that He spent in North America.

In His first talk upon arrival by ship in New York City, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commented on the hardship associated with the journey, and how He had been cautioned against embarking on it:

I was in Egypt and was not feeling well, but I wished to come to you in America. My friends said, “This is a long journey; the sea is wide; you should remain here.” But the more they advised and insisted, the greater became my longing to take this trip, and now I have come to America to meet the friends of God. This long voyage will prove how great is my love for you. There were many troubles and vicissitudes, but, in the thought of meeting you, all these things vanished and were forgotten....

In the East people were asking me, “Why do you undertake this long voyage? Your body cannot endure such hardships of travel.” When it is necessary, my body can endure everything. It has withstood forty

years of imprisonment and can still undergo the utmost trials.
(*Promulgation* 3–4)

Accounts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey illustrate how this undertaking was a constant stream of giving talks and meeting with peoples from all walks of life, from the most prominent leaders and thinkers to the impoverished and disempowered. His talks covered a range of topics of public interest concerning spiritual matters, issues of the day, and the challenges of the future. In His focus and demeanor, He sought to elevate public discourse, reshape social meanings and shared understandings, and connect with intimacy to people's yearnings, experiences, and lives. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach is described in the following terms:

An appreciation of the circumstances in which the expansion of the Cause in the West occurred is vital for present-day Bahá'ís, and for many reasons. It helps us abstract ourselves from the culture of coarse and intrusive communication that has become so commonplace in present-day society as to pass almost unnoticed. It draws to our attention the gentleness with which the Master chose to introduce to His Western audiences the concepts of human nature and human society revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, concepts revolutionary in their implications and entirely outside His hearers' experience. It explains the delicacy with which He used metaphors or relied on historical examples, the frequent indirectness of His approach, the intimacy He could summon up at will, and the apparently limitless patience with which He responded to questions, many of whose assumptions about reality had long since lost whatever validity they might once have possessed.
(*Century of Light* 17–18)

In this history of evolution of the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey stands as a fundamental transition point of emergence from its Middle Eastern context to its establishment as a global religion. When Bahá'u'lláh wrote to the leaders and kings while He was in exile, no one from Europe or North America had met Him, and indeed prior to His

passing in 1892 the only recorded meeting with a westerner was that of His meeting with the famous orientalist Edward Granville Browne. But this isolation from contact with people from the West had begun to change early in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry as the first small groups of western Bahá'í pilgrims traveled to the Holy Land.

In this context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to Europe and America stands as an exponential acceleration in awareness and knowledge of the new religion and the attraction of individuals to it. Even as Bahá'u'lláh had proclaimed to high and low alike in the Middle East, so 'Abdu'l-Bahá met with all strata of society in His journey to the West. By this symbolic means, the universal nature of the Bahá'í revelation was demonstrated as it began encompassing the entire globe and building a religious system that would involve people from all parts of the planet. In humanity's collective evolution, the actual building of a new global religious order was now actively taking place.

Importantly, the focus flowing from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to the active building of a religious system also enacted a shift in the nature of responsibility that was incumbent upon individuals. The journeys of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh represented God's bestowal of a message to humanity and God's calling for humanity to respond. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey might be thought of as a similar call for response except that it identifies more concretely specific individual responsibilities, and the actions necessary to construct a community of people capable of meeting those responsibilities. This expectation can be seen most clearly in how 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to the West is effectively an explicit precursor to His unleashing of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, which called on Bahá'ís, particularly in the West, to take specific action and span the globe to spread the Bahá'í Faith. These Tablets became the "Charter for teaching of the Faith" and remain to this day the "master plan" for the "diffusion of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh" (*Lights of Guidance* no. 1628). The *Tablets of the Divine Plan* would lead in subsequent years to Bahá'ís leaving their homes in order to pioneer around the globe.

SHOGHI EFFENDI CROSSES AFRICA

Shoghi Effendi traveled through Africa twice—first in 1929 and then in 1940. On both trips he traveled from Cape Town to Cairo. On the first journey, Shoghi Effendi may well have been the first Bahá'í to ever set foot in some of the countries he visited. On the second trip Shoghi Effendi was accompanied by Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum.

It is interesting to note that Shoghi Effendi's journeys, though more recent, are far less chronicled than those of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. There is a good reason for this disparity: it was Shoghi Effendi's expressed wish that his travels be regarded by the Bahá'ís as entirely personal, informal, and private.⁵ Indeed, there is no record of Shoghi Effendi ever endeavoring in these travels to contact local Bahá'í communities. Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum provides little detail about Shoghi Effendi's travels across Africa in *The Priceless Pearl*, her biography of him. To the degree the fact of these travels has been shared, it would seem to have been as a form of encouragement and inspiration to local Bahá'í communities.⁶

The personal, informal, and private nature of Shoghi Effendi's journey across Africa clearly sets it completely apart from those of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Unlike, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's much anticipated and very public journey—with its constant and steady media coverage—Shoghi Effendi's trips to Africa did not involve the public proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith in any way. Any impact of Shoghi Effendi's journey on the future of the Faith in Africa has to be understood strictly in spiritual terms.

Given the private and informal nature of Shoghi Effendi's journeys to

5. Personal communication with Mr. Ali Nakhjavani, May 2013. The author is most grateful to Mr. Nakhjavani for sharing some notes and crucial perspective on Shoghi Effendi's travels.

6. Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum often did acknowledge and share some details of Shoghi Effendi's travels when speaking with Bahá'ís.

Africa, and the general lack of information that is available about them, one should be very cautious in speculating about their significance or putting emphasis on them. In the context of this article about the journey motif in the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi's two journeys are cited primarily to note the stark contrast between his travels and those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Indeed, one might say the contrast parallels an important shift in the course of the history of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá planted seeds for the growth of the Faith through His travels in the West, and He laid out the blueprint for this growth in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. His public travels reflect an era in the history of the Faith in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá's distinct station and the love and motivation it generated in those who met Him constituted a central force driving forward the growth and spread of the Bahá'í Faith.

While Shoghi Effendi also had a profound and powerful effect on those who were privileged to meet him, a central element of his ministry was the systematic construction of the Administrative Order of the Faith, along with exhorting Bahá'ís to arise and sacrificially and selflessly undertake the tireless work required for the seeds 'Abdu'l-Bahá had planted to bear their full fruit. The Guardian's informal, private, and personal journeys are in some ways symbolic of how the future growth of the Faith may not be in the arena of high drama or the subject of grand narratives—such as those that often accompany the birth of any new religion. Rather, Shoghi Effendi's interaction with the community made plain that the time has now arrived for selfless, often unacknowledged, painstaking and systematic efforts to labor step by step and day by day in creating a vibrant global religious community.

The Divine Plan would not be implemented through waiting for people to come to God's revelation (like those early heroes who found the Báb while He remained silent), but rather through individuals heading out to places where not even the breath of the new Revelation had been heard, and then painstakingly sharing and spreading the word.

Shoghi Effendi embodied the new type of sacrifice to which the Bahá'í Faith was calling individuals. A new form of utterly selfless action was needed, action that required the same courage and devotion as the martyrs

in Bahá'u'lláh's homeland, but this new sacrifice was to be a living sacrifice. Whereas martyrdom involved a willingness to accept the annihilation of one's physical self, the living sacrifice required complete detachment from physical and material needs and desires.

Shoghi Effendi's journeys might also be seen as symbolically signaling the movement toward the Bahá'í Faith becoming a global religion. While the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá had steered the Bahá'í community out of the Islamic orbit and shifted the focus to the West, Shoghi Effendi had now undertaken the symbolic act of ushering the Faith into its present status as a universally recognized a global religion. Both figuratively and literally, the Faith had now traveled the globe, growing from seeds planted in the land that long had been (and continues to be) the subject of the most enduring prejudices, exploitation, and misunderstanding by the rest of the world's inhabitants. The peoples whom some might consider to be the least likely part of the human family to be exalted, had been, in spiritual terms, fully embraced as a most essential part of that family.

THE JOURNEY MOTIF AND THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

Against this vast backdrop of a world religious community taking root around the globe through the sacrificial journeys of the central figures of the Faith, a particular ethic was born within the Bahá'í community. The fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, which emphasize oneness, unity, and peace, were destined to span the globe. But the fact of intense persecution in its homeland made an early cultivation of an ethic of itinerancy inevitable. Just as the Báb endured martyrdom, and Bahá'u'lláh exile and imprisonment, there was always a justification, indeed a need, for movement in order to survive. Sacrifice was the only choice for this community—whether believers stayed in their homeland to suffer deprivation and perhaps death, or forsook everything and set out into the unknown world.

This ethic of itinerancy was further harnessed and transformed in the age of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. While the Iranian friends had begun, in small numbers, to bravely travel the globe and spread the word, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's chal-

lenge was to marshal individuals from the West to spread across the globe and spread the new Revelation. These souls did not have the consciousness, knowledge, and experience of being part of a community of people grounded in sacrifice. Indeed, in many instances, the early Bahá'ís in the West came from the realms of standing and privilege where sacrifice of this sort was not a common occurrence. These early Western believers were being called to abandon material comfort, wealth, and prestige in the name of taking a foreign word and message to the farthest reaches of humanity.

To “pioneer”—as it came to be called—became the norm and practice of the community during the leadership of Shoghi Effendi. The call was to establish the Faith where it had not existed before, or where it had placed only the loosest of roots, and then to plant firm foundations for its growth. In scattering across the globe as pioneers, these early Bahá'ís were, in their sacrificial efforts, descendants of the patterns set by the journeys of the Sacred Heads of the Faith. While the revelation spanned the globe through successive journeys of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, the global community itself would have to be built laboriously, even anonymously, through the tireless efforts of individuals from every walk of life. In this sense, one might consider Shoghi Effendi's journey across Africa as symbolic of the mission he exhorted the believers to undertake. He set foot where the Faith had never gone, and while a great leader, his journeys remain shrouded in the relative anonymity that would be required of spiritual heroes acting in a spirit of selflessness, without the goal of personal attention, gain, or recognition.

One hundred years have passed since 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled to the West, and it has been over fifty years since the Guardian passed away. The world has radically changed. Physical journeys rarely entail the same great sacrifice. Disseminating ideas and knowledge is hampered by far fewer barriers, and the Bahá'í community has moved beyond the limitations of time and space. As the pace of change continues to accelerate, one can see the ethic of journey within the Faith continue to evolve. The focus must now turn more intensely to the spiritual dimensions of journey. The goal is not only to create a physical community but also to create a com-

munity that is increasingly spiritualized by the essential conditions of love, justice, and unity. These communities must be nurturing homes for an individual's spiritual journey, providing support and foundations that allow one to reach the heights of spiritual creativity and potential, and be marked by the highest ideals to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh calls us. The ethic and motif of "journey" has always been about this spiritual vista. The future will increasingly call upon all Bahá'ís to focus on this same vision.

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