

# Preface

This book is about an extraordinary but little-known woman, Bahíyyih Khánum, who transcended the limitations of a cultural background notorious for its blind fanaticism, its narrow outlook, and its uncompromising refusal to accommodate the forces of modernity. Her story is a testimony to the power of the human spirit to triumph over adversity. The record of her life and achievements provides reassurance and hope to all who are apprehensive about humanity's ability to overcome the powers of ignorance and repression that trouble the world today.

Born in Persia (now known as Iran\*) in the middle of the nineteenth century, she was the daughter of Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí (1817–92), known as Bahá’u’lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh’s courageous and forthright presentation of teachings on emancipation, unity, and harmony attracted hatred and relentless persecution in the countries of the Middle East. As a result, Bahíyyih Khánum endured imprisonment or house arrest for six decades.

Events of her life described in this book, and passages within it that are quoted from the Bahá’í writings, are best understood with a basic knowledge of the Bahá’í Faith. It is appropriate, therefore, to briefly discuss the circumstances surrounding the origin of the Bahá’í Faith and the developments in the functioning of the Bahá’í community after Bahá’u’lláh’s passing.† Some features of the religion’s history need to be considered in the light of the Persian culture in which it arose.

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\* Persia officially adopted the name Iran in 1935. References in the Bahá’í writings use both terms; hence the two terms are used interchangeably in this work.

† For references concerning details of the history and teachings of the Bahá’í Faith, please refer to the basic reading list that appears at the end of this volume.

A distinctive feature of that culture in the nineteenth century was a certain refinement of speech and courtesy of expression that called for the use of elaborate titles and forms of address. This style of expression may be unfamiliar or strange to Westerners brought up with a tradition of precise, unadorned speech and a preference for informality in addressing others. In nineteenth-century Persian culture, to refer to individuals of stature in society by their given names, or even to address them directly, was regarded as an unacceptable form of familiarity. Consequently, we find use of the title Bahá'u'lláh, meaning “the Glory of God,” and other designations such as “the Blessed Beauty” or “the Abhá Beauty” in referring to Him. The title ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, meaning “the Servant of the Glory,” is used for His eldest son and designated successor in authority, as is the term “the Master.”

Followers of Bahá'u'lláh are honored through their designation as “servants” if male, and as “handmaidens” or “maidservants” if female. These titles signify the recognition of their commitment to conform their conduct to the religion’s precepts. For some readers, the use of such terms could well initially elicit a negative impression—the image of gullible devotees offering passive obedience and subservience to self-deluded, charismatic religious figures who have propounded extravagant claims to divine authority. However, further investigation and careful scrutiny reveal that such an image is far removed from the Bahá’í way of life, with its emphasis on the dignity and freedom of the individual, the fostering of aspiration, the development of the intellectual powers of all people, and the preservation of personal initiative within the broad limits of social cohesion.

Another element that might puzzle Western readers is the use of certain images of nature in the Bahá’í writings. For example, the tree appears in the Bahá’í writings as a powerful symbol, with terms such as “the Divine Lote-Tree” being used to refer to Bahá'u'lláh. Its connotations of strength, endurance, flexibility, and benefit to all

are particularly appealing to those sensitized to the wonder and beauty of the natural world. The male members of Bahá'u'lláh's family are designated as "branches," with 'Abdu'l-Bahá being identified as "the Most Great Branch." The females of the family are honored with the appellation of "leaves," and the term "Greatest Holy Leaf" appears in many places in this book in reference to Bahíyyih Khánum.

The Bahá'í world view is that the development of humanity is evolutionary and purposeful, proceeding from the dawn of recorded history, through the present day, to a future of world unity and the flourishing of a world civilization for many thousands of years to come. The constructive interaction of the forces of religion and science provides both the motivation and the means for this process. Religion provides enlightened values and a code of behavior that promotes a creative and unified society. Science provides an ever-deepening understanding of the operation of the universe and gives rise to new technology, including energy sources, communications facilities, and means of transportation. These new technologies, in turn, advance the evolution of society.

The entire evolutionary process arises from the continuing interaction between God and humanity. The divine will, Bahá'ís believe, is conveyed to humanity through a series of Messengers of God, Who have appeared in the past, some hundreds of years apart, and will continue to come at intervals of a thousand or more years in the future. This process is described in the Bahá'í writings as one of progressive revelation, and the Messengers are known as Manifestations of God. Their messages, when examined in their pure form as given by the Manifestation, are very similar in their fundamental spiritual values but significantly different in the social laws applicable to the period in which the Manifestation appears.

The period of thousands of years of recorded history during which Manifestations of God have come to humanity is known in the

Bahá'í Faith as the Cycle of Prophecy. Its distinguishing feature is that each Manifestation of God, during His particular Dispensation, foreshadowed the coming of another Manifestation—either as the return of the Messenger setting out the prophecy or as a distinct religious entity Who would bring teachings to unify humanity and provide the foundation for world civilization over a vast period designated as the Cycle of Fulfillment. Thus all of the great religions extant in the world today contain, in their pristine form, the expectation of the coming of a Promised One.

The most arresting feature of the Bahá'í Faith is the belief that Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God Who fulfills the prophesied coming of this Promised One, and that the turmoil of the present time is associated with the transition to the long anticipated unification of the peoples of the world. Those who are able to resist the natural tendency to dismiss summarily such an extraordinary claim will seek evidence to support or disprove it. They will carefully scrutinize not only His fulfillment of specific elements of prophetic expectation, but also beyond that, the record of His life, the caliber of His teachings, and the extent to which the application of His teachings is eradicating the many deeply entrenched barriers to unity. Those who carefully investigate His claim ultimately reach a conclusion that transcends rational analysis to attain the level of spiritual conviction.

The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh is anticipated to endure no less than one thousand years. It is divided into three ages: the Heroic Age, the Formative Age, and the Golden Age.

The Heroic Age began in 1844. It was inaugurated in Persia by the declaration of Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad, known as the Báb ("Gate"), that He was the bearer of a message from God which concluded the Prophetic Cycle and foreshadowed the imminent advent of the Promised One. Such statements resonated within the souls of thousands of people in Persia, rapidly attracting large-scale

support but causing consternation to a firmly rooted religious establishment that held both government and people within its clutches. The early history of the Bahá'í Faith is drenched with the blood of some twenty thousand martyrs, with the thirst for vengeance unquenched by the martyrdom of the Báb in 1850.

Bahá'u'lláh, to Whom the followers of the Báb turned for leadership after the Báb's martyrdom, was imprisoned in an underground dungeon in Tehran in 1852 and exiled to Baghdad very soon thereafter. These traumatic events marked the beginning of the suffering of Bahíyyih Khánum, then a small child, described in some detail in this book. Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His mission in 1863 brought the full force of ecclesiastical opposition upon Him and His followers. He remained a prisoner and an exile for the rest of His life and was transferred successively to the Ottoman cities of Constantinople (Istanbul) and Adrianople (Edirne). Finally, He and His family were incarcerated in the notorious prison city of Acre on the Mediterranean coast. He passed away in 1892, and His remains were interred at Bahjí, on the outskirts of this city. The Bahá'í World Center is located in the twin cities of Haifa and Acre in what is now the State of Israel. The repression and persecution of the Bahá'ís by Muslim clerics continues to the present day and is fueled by the false accusation that the location of the Bahá'í World Center in Israel is an expression of partisan involvement in the political tensions of the region. Appeals to reason, pointing out that Bahá'u'lláh came to Acre involuntarily, as a prisoner in the time of the Ottoman Turkish domain here, are fruitless in the face of blind religious fanaticism.

Unique to the Bahá'í Faith are its provisions to prevent the enduring schisms that have grievously diminished the strength and cohesion of the Prophetic Cycle religions as a consequence of disagreements over authority and organization after the passing of the Manifestation. These provisions are contained in the Covenant of

Bahá'u'lláh, which sets out explicitly in writing the arrangements for authority and organization after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. They focus primarily on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, who was appointed Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í writings. Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears in this book in a role supplementary to that of his sister, Bahíyyih Khánum, his wisdom and strength of character are apparent. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing in 1921 marked the end of the Heroic Age.

The second of the three ages in the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh is the Formative Age, with its distinguishing feature being the establishment throughout the world by Bahá'ís of an Administrative Order for their Faith. This system of organization and administration of the Bahá'í community is based on principles laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and further elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in his will and testament, within his capacity as authorized interpreter of his father's writings.

The Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood and is free from the privileges, prerogatives, and rituals that are generally associated with ecclesiastical structures. The Bahá'í Administrative Order has two arms, one elected and the other appointed. The elected arm consists of individuals who are elected to serve as members of Spiritual Assemblies. These local and national bodies are endowed with the authority to administer the affairs of their Bahá'í community through the exercise of legislative, judicial, and executive powers in matters pertaining to religious practice. An internationally elected body, the Universal House of Justice, was formed in 1963 and acts as the head of the Bahá'í Faith. All Bahá'ís turn to it for guidance.

The appointive arm of the Administrative Order is composed of individuals of high standing in the community who are appointed to act in an advisory capacity to Assemblies and individuals. They offer counsel, foster adherence to the spiritual values of the religion, and

call attention to those measures required to protect the Bahá'í Faith from the inadvertent corruption of its teachings with the passage of time. These individuals are designated as Counselors and Auxiliary Board members, and, along with their assistants, are organized into five boards of Counselors, one for each continental area of the world. Their work is coordinated and supervised by the International Teaching Center, which is located at the Bahá'í World Center and functions under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

To bring the Bahá'í administrative structure into being, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as Guardian of the Faith. The poignancy of the relationship between Shoghi Effendi, then a young man in his early twenties, and the elderly Bahíyyih Khánum is described in this book, as is the crucial role she played in the period of transition immediately following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. By discharging his functions, which included acting as the authorized interpreter of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi successfully completed his mission to expand and protect the fledgling Faith by the time of his own passing in 1957.

As the membership of the Bahá'í community grows, the influence of its Administrative Order will extend to a greater proportion of society. Bahá'ís believe that its methods of operation—with an emphasis on maintaining a careful balance between centralized and decentralized functioning, the use of democratic procedures in the election of its administrative bodies, measures to preserve individual freedom and initiative, and safeguards for fostering cultural diversity—provide both a pattern and a nucleus for a future world society. Bahá'ís anticipate that the Formative Age will culminate, perhaps centuries into the future, with the evolution of its Administrative Order into an inclusive entity known as the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, which will be animated by Bahá'í spiritual and administrative principles.

Inevitably, attempts have been made periodically to subvert the provisions of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh by those whose sense of personal superiority over others leads them to seek the individual power and authority denied them by that Covenant. The Bahá'í Faith makes no secret of the fact that, at various times in its history, a few ambitious and egotistic individuals have strenuously endeavored to violate the Bahá'í Covenant for their own ends. When efforts to persuade such individuals to cease their attempts to disrupt the Bahá'í community prove unsuccessful, the head of the Faith has no option but to designate them as Covenant-breakers and exclude them from membership in the Faith. Covenant-breakers are left free to pursue their own interests. Throughout the history of the Faith, the fruitless labors of Covenant-breakers have ultimately proven beneficial to the Bahá'í community by serving as a reminder of its commitment to building a society suffused with the spirit of equality and loving support for all of its members. Bahíyyih Khánum's personal example as an individual of high standing in the community is particularly instructive in this regard.

The third and final age of the Bahá'í Dispensation is its Golden Age, which lies hundreds of years in the future, when the transformation of human society through the influence of the Bahá'í teachings will give rise to the foundation of a world civilization having a dazzling splendor far beyond our capacity to visualize.

The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh will be terminated by the advent of the next Manifestation of God, Who will bring teachings that rest on the same spiritual foundation but that have social principles designed to meet the needs of that time. This process will continue in the millennia to come in the Cycle of Fulfillment and will give energy and direction to an ever-advancing civilization of incomparable magnificence.

The vital role of Bahíyyih Khánum in the early days of the Bahá'í Dispensation, when the Bahá'í Faith was beset by threats and dangers from cruel and relentless enemies, can only properly be assessed in the distant future. At that time, the significance of her actions and her example will become more clearly apparent, and the gratitude and admiration of those who contemplate the nobility of her life will be boundless.