

MASON REMEY AND THOSE WHO FOLLOWED HIM

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INTRODUCTION

In addition to explaining the nature and dangers of violation of the Covenant, Shoghi Effendi several times reviewed briefly the fates of individuals and groups who had surrendered to this worst of human failings. To reflect on the consequences experienced by those who seek to undermine the unity of the Cause, he said, helps believers to appreciate more deeply the protecting power of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. In the perspective of more than four decades that have passed since Charles Mason Remey's violation of the Covenant, it is instructive to review the consequences to those who followed him down this barren path.

I

COVENANT-BREAKING

The Nature of Covenant-breaking

What is Covenant-breaking? In a letter to an individual dated 23 March 1975, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

When a person declares his acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God he becomes a party to the Covenant and accepts the totality of His Revelation. If he then turns round and attacks Bahá'u'lláh or the Central Institution of the Faith he violates the Covenant. If this happens every effort is made to help that person to see the illogicality and error of his actions, but if he persists he must, in accordance with the instructions of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, be shunned as a Covenant-breaker.¹

The personal failings that lead people to violate the Covenant to which they know they have committed themselves have been described by the Guardian as “the blind hatred, the unbounded presumption, the incredible folly, the abject perfidy, the vaulting ambition”² which, in varying degrees, afflict the persons concerned. While some of these may have been duped by others, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has said of them:

These do not doubt the validity of the Covenant, but selfish motives have dragged them to this condition. It is not that they do not know what they do—they are perfectly aware and still they exhibit opposition.³

The Danger It Poses

The Master has warned that, if unchecked, Covenant-breaking would “utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past”. He sets this warning in the context of the fact that the central purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is to create unity:

Were it not for the protecting power of the Covenant to guard the impregnable fort of the Cause of God, there would arise among the Bahá'ís, in one day, a thousand different sects as was the case in former ages.⁴

Apart from the danger that Covenant-breaking poses to the development of the Cause, it represents a spiritual contagion threatening the well-being of the individual believer because of its subtle appeal to the human ego. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called for the complete exclusion from the Bahá’í community of anyone found to be infected with the virus of Covenant-breaking and urged all believers to shun any contact whatever with the persons involved.

The Effect on Those Involved

In reviewing the development of the Faith, the Guardian several times cited examples of how these “movements, sponsored by deluded, self-seeking adventurers, find themselves, sooner or later, enmeshed in the machinations of their authors, are buried in shame, and sink eventually into complete oblivion”. He adds:

The extinction of the influence precariously exerted by some of these enemies, the decline that has set in in the fortunes of others, the sincere repentance expressed by still others and their subsequent reinstatement and effectual participation in the teaching and administrative activities of the Faith, constitute in themselves sufficient evidence of the unconquerable power and invincible spirit which animate those who stand identified with, and loyally carry out the provisions and injunctions of, the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.⁵

A Cleansing Process

Regarding a group of Covenant-breakers in the United States which was later to break up and disappear following the deaths of the two individuals who had created it, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

The schism which their foolish leaders had contrived so sedulously to produce within the Faith, will soon, to their utter amazement, come to be regarded as a process of purification, a cleansing agency, which, far from decimating the ranks of its followers, reinforces its indestructible unity, and proclaims anew to a world, sceptical or indifferent, the cohesive strength of the institutions of that Faith, the incorruptibility of its purposes and principles, and the recuperative powers inherent in its community life.⁶

II

MASON REMEY'S DEFECTION

The Hands' Proclamation on the Guardianship

When news of the Guardian's passing was received at the Bahá'í World Centre on the evening of 4 November 1957, Shoghi Effendi's apartment was immediately locked and guarded so that no one could have access until the Hands of the Cause of God would have time to gather in the Holy Land, which they did shortly after the Guardian's funeral.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament is explicit in stating how the Guardian was to appoint his successor:

He [Shoghi Effendi] is the expounder of the words of God and after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants....

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the words: —“The child is a secret essence of its sire,” that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the guardian of the Cause of God) choose another branch to succeed him.

The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons.... The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor.⁷

As soon as 26 of the 27 Hands of the Cause had gathered in the Holy Land (Mrs. Corinne True, whose advanced age and health had prevented her coming, subsequently signed affidavits declaring her support for the various actions her fellow Hands took), they designated nine of their number to enter the Guardian's apartment and search for any document he might have left behind. Following their report, all the Hands, including Charles Mason Remey, signed a document stating that Shoghi Effendi had passed away “without having appointed his successor....”⁸

From the first conclave of the Hands, gathered in Bahjí at that time, a proclamation was issued “To the Bahá'ís of East and West” announcing that, as “The Aghşán (branches) one and all are either dead or have been declared violators of the Covenant by the Guardian”, it was apparent “that no successor to Shoghi Effendi could have been appointed by him”.⁹ Calling on the believers to unite in completing the Guardian's Ten Year Crusade, the Hands pointed out that, in due course, the Bahá'í world would elect “the Universal House of Justice, that Supreme Body upon which infallibility, as the Master's Testament assures us, is divinely conferred”:

...The entire body of the Hands, assembled by the nine Hands of the World Centre, will decide when and how the International Bahá'í Council is to evolve

through the successive stages outlined by the Guardian, culminating in the call to election of the Universal House of Justice by the membership of all National Spiritual Assemblies.

When that divinely ordained Body comes into existence, all the conditions of the Faith can be examined anew and the measures necessary for its future operation determined in consultation with the Hands of the Cause.¹⁰

Mason Remey again joined his fellow Hands in signing this second formal statement that there was no successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God. For two years after the passing of the Guardian, Remey was personally involved and concurred with all actions taken by the Hands of the Cause to assume responsibility for the direction of the Faith until such time as they could arrange for the election of the House of Justice.

Mason Remey Is Expelled

Despite his written affirmations in 1957 that Shoghi Effendi had appointed no successor and could not have appointed one, Remey himself laid claim to this station in a "Proclamation" of April 1960 declaring that he was the "Second Guardian". He based this spurious claim on the fact that he had been named president of the appointed International Bahá'í Council. When he refused to renounce his attempt to thus seize control of the Cause, the Hands of the Cause expelled him from the Faith as a violator of the Covenant.

Shortly thereafter a number of believers in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere who had accepted his claim were likewise expelled from the Faith, among them John Carré, Donald Harvey, Joel Marangella, Reginald King, and Leland Jensen. All of these would later play major roles in provoking the series of conflicts that were to hopelessly divide the remnant of Remey's followers.

Mason Remey Dies

In April 1974 the Universal House of Justice advised the Bahá'í world:

CHARLES MASON REMEY WHOSE ARROGANT ATTEMPT USURP GUARDIANSHIP AFTER PASSING SHOGHI EFFENDI LED TO HIS EXPULSION FROM RANKS FAITHFUL HAS DIED IN FLORENCE ITALY IN HUNDREDTH YEAR OF HIS LIFE BURIED WITHOUT RELIGIOUS RITES ABANDONED BY ERSTWHILE FOLLOWERS. HISTORY THIS PITIABLE DEFECTION BY ONE WHO HAD RECEIVED GREAT HONOURS FROM BOTH MASTER AND GUARDIAN CONSTITUTES YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE FUTILITY ALL ATTEMPTS UNDERMINE IMPREGNABLE COVENANT CAUSE BAHÁ'U'LLÁH.¹¹

III

DIVISIONS AMONG REMEY'S FOLLOWERS

“National Spiritual Assembly ... under the Guardianship”

Basing themselves on Remey's defection, a group in the United States calling themselves “Bahá'ís under the Guardianship” came together in New Mexico in 1961–62 and, in April 1963, formed what they called the “National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States under the Hereditary Guardianship”. A similar body was created that same month by a group in Pakistan, but it soon broke up.

The New Mexico group incorporated itself in March 1964, and brought legal suit against the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, claiming to be the rightful owners of the Wilmette Temple property as well as to represent the authorized voice of the Bahá'í Faith in the United States. The legitimate National Spiritual Assembly filed a counter-claim against this group for trademark infringement and later secured an injunction prohibiting them from the use of established Bahá'í terminology or otherwise infringing the National Assembly's rights under civil law.

As the New Mexico group was preparing for a second trial, Remey suddenly directed them to withdraw from the proceedings “regardless of the consequences”. Shortly thereafter, Remey ordered the Santa Fe group's “National Assembly to be dissolved”.

Remey's “Second International Bahá'í Council”

In 1964 Remey created what he called a “Second International Bahá'í Council”. He appointed to the presidency of this body one Joel Marangella, an American believer living in France, who had been an early supporter of Remey and had been expelled from the Faith by the Hands of the Cause on 3 August 1960. Since Remey had sought to base his own claim to the Guardianship on his position as president of the International Bahá'í Council created by Shoghi Effendi, this action on his part appeared to give Marangella the leading position among Remey's followers.

That serious conflicts were developing among the band of Covenant-breakers is apparent, however, from the fact that, on 18 October 1966, Remey abruptly dissolved this “Council” and ordered Marangella, as its former president, to “turn over to me such records as you have of the second Council that no longer exists”. The apparent effect of this action, which deprived Marangella of his leading role, was to increase rather than subdue the differences of opinion that had appeared in the group. On 29 January 1967 Remey complained that “Some friends have started the report that the Guardian is loosing [*sic*] his mind and that someone is controlling him...”

The Appointment of Donald Harvey

On 15 May 1967, Remey formally appointed one of his followers, Donald Harvey, to succeed him at his death as “third Guardian of the Faith”. Harvey, an American Bahá'í also resident in France at the time of Remey's defection, had been among the first group of Covenant-breakers. During the following year Remey appointed five of an intended “twenty-four elders” who would “administer the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” in cooperation with Harvey. Subsequently,

however, Remy dissolved the body of elders, as he had the earlier organizations, without having completed the promised appointments.

Harvey, who remained Remy's appointed successor, took no action either before or following Remy's death to exercise the powers thus conferred on him. He died in 1991, his various letters disclaiming any interest in organization, saying that religious faith was a matter purely for the individual.

One of Harvey's associates, Jacques Soghomonian, produced a document, ostensibly signed by Harvey on 17 November 1984, which includes the statement: "[I] do appoint and designate Mr. Jacques Soghomonian ... as his [sic] successor as Fourth Guardian of the Universal Faith and Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh." A member of the original group supporting Remy in 1960 who had been expelled at that time with the others, Soghomonian has had little success in attracting followers.

The Claim of Joel Marangella

Suddenly, on 12 November 1969, Marangella announced that he rather than Harvey should be regarded as Remy's legitimate successor. According to Marangella, Remy had several years earlier, in December 1961, sent him a sealed letter with a covering note indicating that Marangella would "know when to break the seal". Marangella said that shortly after his appointment as president of the "Second International Bahá'í Council" he had opened this envelope, to discover a brief note, signed by Remy, instructing him to "tell the Bahá'í World that I appoint you to be the third Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith". Marangella, however, had hitherto taken no action on this instruction.

Marangella's excuse for ignoring Remy's formal appointment of Harvey as his successor was that Remy was allegedly exhibiting irrational behaviour. Remy had by this time begun attacking Shoghi Effendi, declaring that the Administrative Order represented only the organizing of "the Bábí Faith" and must be "dismantled", and that Remy now considered himself to be the "first" Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith.

Having made his announcement, Marangella went on to create what he called a "National Bureau of the Orthodox Bahá'í Faith". Thereafter, Harvey and Marangella, each claiming to be Remy's legitimate successor, largely ignored one another's existence.

The Role of John Carré

By this time other contenders for leadership were pressing supposed rights of their own. John Carré, a prolific writer, had been one of Remy's earliest supporters and had been expelled as a Covenant-breaker in 1961. He had originally promoted Remy's claims to the Guardianship by sending a stream of letters to Bahá'ís whose addresses he had. As the dispute over the leadership of Remy's following broke into the open, however, Carré suddenly emerged as a spokesman for the bizarre and entirely unrelated claims of one Jamshíd Ma'ání. The latter, an Iranian pioneer in Indonesia, had announced himself to be "the One Who creates the Messengers at every instant".

When Ma'ání began to show signs of mental illness, requiring his hospitalization in Tihrán, Carré abandoned this interest, too, appearing later under the pseudonym "John Christofil" and writing as the alleged spokesman of various organizations, including "House of Light" and "House of Mankind". In this new capacity, Carré focused his attention increasingly on the

subject of “catastrophic events” that would appear before the end of the century and would prepare the way for a “Third” Manifestation of God.

The Intervention of Reginald King

Meanwhile, in the United States, two more Covenant-breaking factions had emerged and were bitterly denouncing one another. The first of these was led by Reginald (“Rex”) King, who had been elected secretary of the short-lived New Mexico “National Assembly”, dissolved by Remy in 1964. Unhappy about Remy’s resistance to his leadership role in the United States, King eventually went to Italy where Remy was living, and had an apparently acrimonious meeting with him. Following this encounter, on 13 September 1969 Remy issued a letter denouncing King: “his station to be ever and eternally that of Satan for evermore”. King switched his allegiance to Marangella when the latter advanced his own claims two months later.

This relationship, however, also soon broke down. King decided that Marangella had made “a number of faulty ‘interpretations’ of the Writings” and declared that Marangella “had ceased to fulfill the requirements of the office of guardian”. He argued, indeed, that “neither Mason Remy nor Joel Marangella had in truth ever been guardians ... because of the lack of lineal descendancy” (i.e., from Bahá’u’lláh). Harvey’s position in the enterprise was ignored. What Remy had actually been, King said, was “a regent”, and King came to the “realization” that he himself “was in actuality the *Second* Regent....”

Harvey and Marangella paid no more attention to this claim than they had to those of one another or of Carré, and King died on 1 April 1977, leaving whatever rights he believed he had to a “Council” consisting of members of his own family.

The Case of Leland Jensen

King’s long struggle for leadership of Remy’s followers in the United States had, however, paralleled that of yet another claimant, Leland Jensen. A dispute between the two men had broken out in 1963 when both of them had been members of the New Mexico “National Assembly ... under the Hereditary Guardianship”. Jensen had accused King of having “gained control” of the United States group, and King had thereupon proposed to set up a “Bahá’í court” to have Jensen “thrown out of the Bahá’í Faith”. It had been Remy’s resistance to this latter manoeuvre that had begun King’s disaffection from him.

The emergence of Jensen marks a further deterioration in the moral character of the group following Remy. After taking up residence in Missoula, Montana, in 1964 to avoid a disastrous flood predicted by Remy, Jensen was convicted in 1969 of “lewd and lascivious” behavior and was sentenced to Montana State Prison. There, Jensen had converted several fellow inmates to his claim that an angelic visitor had told him he was “Joshua”. After serving his sentence, he began travelling throughout the United States in an effort to bring Remy’s remaining American followers to his own peculiar interpretations of religious truth. (Jensen claimed, for example, to be not only “Joshua” and “the return of Jesus” but also the “embryonic” Universal House of Justice.)

After the death of Remy, Jensen created a group called “Baha’is Under the Provisions of the Covenant” (BUPC). In 1991, he set up his “Second International Bahá’í Council”.

Jensen’s activities suffered a severe setback in May 1980 when his widely predicted “end of the world” failed to materialize despite his changing the date of this event three different times

(29 April, 7 May, 22–23 May 1980). Although some of his closer associates and family members continued their support of him, the majority of Jensen's followers abandoned him. He died in August 1996.

Attempts to Involve Giuseppe Pepe

Perhaps the strangest development in this long and confused history was one centering on a person who was neither a member of the Faith nor had taken any role in the activities of the various Covenant-breakers. On a visit to Florence, Italy, Remy had become acquainted with a young man named Giuseppe Pepe, who later served as his secretary/companion when Remy settled in Florence following his expulsion. Eventually, Pepe was legally adopted by Remy. It was he who, through the kind assistance of the American consulate in Florence, arranged for Remy's burial in 1974. To Pepe's surprise and distress, Jensen seized upon this adoptive relationship to announce, in an open letter, that he (Pepe) was "the Crown Prince", the legitimate successor of Remy as "Fourth Guardian". What Pepe must do to secure this station was to permit himself to "be coronated [sic] King of the Kingdom by the High Priest...." The strong suggestion was that the said "High Priest" was Jensen.

When his protests were ignored, and Jensen's faction continued to use his name in their broadsheets and correspondence, Pepe wrote to a Bahá'í institution whose address he had to set the record straight. The actions of the Covenant-breakers had been undertaken, he said, without his permission, and repeated requests on his part that they desist had been ignored. Giuseppe Pepe apparently died in 1994.

In 2001, five years after Jensen's death and seven years after Pepe's death, Neal Chase, a member of Jensen's "Second International Bahá'í Council", claimed to have been adopted by Pepe and appointed his successor as Guardian. The majority of the "Council" members rejected this claim, leading to additional disputes and a lawsuit.

The Current Situation

With none of the leaders of the defection able to substantiate the conflicting claims they made, divisions continued to proliferate over the years. Most represented idiosyncratic agendas conceived by various individuals and largely unrelated to one another. Embroiled in charges and countercharges, abandoned by most of those who had originally taken them seriously, and entirely ignored by the Bahá'í community, the various Remy factions today provide a graphic illustration of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of Covenant-breaking given over eighty years ago:

These agitations of the violators are no more than the foam of the ocean, which is one of its inseparable features; but the ocean of the Covenant shall surge and shall cast ashore the bodies of the dead, for it cannot retain them.¹²

By 1996 Remy's following had largely disintegrated. Death had removed five of the principal figures: Mason Remy in 1974, Reginald King in 1977, Remy's appointed successor, Donald Harvey, in 1991, Giuseppe Pepe in 1994, and Leland Jensen in 1996. Public disgrace and ridicule had reduced Jensen's influence to that of a cult figure for two or three isolated groups in the American Midwest; those left in the BUPC were divided by infighting. John Carré had drifted off into esoteric religious pursuits only tangentially related to Bahá'í subjects. Jacques Soghomonian has remained a largely isolated figure. Joel Marangella's group, the so-called "Orthodox Bahá'ís", had testified in a court proceeding in July 2007 to having only about forty members in the United States. Some others are scattered in locations in Australia and India.

For the past decade, those who uphold the absurd claim of Charles Mason Remy to be the successor to Shoghi Effendi have sought to revive their fading hopes by establishing a presence on the Internet. Veiling the small size of their membership, these insignificant groups attempt to create the illusion of being rightful followers of Bahá'u'lláh and legitimate alternatives to the worldwide Bahá'í community. Though lacking the capacity to arouse interest among the general public, the remnants of the Remy defection still compete among themselves to draw in loyal Bahá'ís under their corrupting influence.

Because of advancing age, Joel Marangella and Jacques Soghomonian have recently announced their own successors. No doubt responding to Internet postings heaping ridicule upon their claims to be infallible interpreters of Sacred Texts that they cannot read in the original languages, both have selected Iranians to succeed them. While the believers in the Cradle of the Faith turned their back on Remy's machinations, two Persians outside Iran, victims of their egos and desire for leadership, now have the arrogance to claim a station equal to that of the chosen branch, Shoghi Effendi.

Despite efforts by the institutions of the Faith to clarify his thinking, Nosrat'u'llah Bahremand of Perth, Australia, openly accepted the pretensions of Remy and Marangella and was designated a Covenant-breaker in 2003. Within a few years, Marangella appointed him a "Hand of the Cause" and "Vice-President" of the "Third International Bahá'í Council" which Marangella had established in 2006. In May 2007 Marangella appointed him as his successor.

Enayatullah (Zabih) Yazdani, who resides near Sydney, Australia, began surreptitiously expressing his allegiance to Mason Remy many years ago. A prolonged effort was made to dissuade him from his course of action; yet in 2004 he openly propagated his long-held view that Remy was the legitimate successor to Shoghi Effendi and, moreover, accepted Donald Harvey as the "Third Guardian" and Jacques Soghomonian as the "Fourth Guardian". In June 2005 he was designated a Covenant-breaker. Soghomonian recently appointed Yazdani to succeed him as "Fifth Guardian" upon his death.

That reasonably intelligent men and women should be unable—after the passage of almost half a century—to free themselves from the relentless undertow of folly and ambition that has drowned every hope and scheme they ever cherished is a cautionary tale indeed. The fate of those who followed Charles Mason Remey is a case study in the nature and paralyzing effect of the virus of Covenant-breaking.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Power of the Covenant, Part Two* (Thornhill, Ontario: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1987), pp. 7–8
- ² *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís, 1932–1946* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002), p. 66
- ³ *Star of the West*, Vol. X, p. 246; as quoted in *The Power of the Covenant, Part Two*, p. 11
- ⁴ *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 357–58
- ⁵ *This Decisive Hour*, p. 65
- ⁶ *This Decisive Hour*, p. 65–66
- ⁷ *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), pp. 11–12
- ⁸ *The Ministry of the Custodians* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 29
- ⁹ *The Ministry of the Custodians*, pp. 35–36
- ¹⁰ *The Ministry of the Custodians*, pp. 37–38
- ¹¹ *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), par. 144.1
- ¹² *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1997, 2004 printing), par. 185.1