

# Competing for the Oneness Of Mankind: The Influence of the Bahá'í Faith on the Olympic Games\*

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From 15 September to 1 October 2000, the world will celebrate the Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. The Bahá'ís of Sydney have placed the Cause in a winning position by ensuring that the 350,000 visitors hear about the Faith. Four billion people worldwide will tune in to at least part of the largest peacetime event in history. It is the first time the Olympic Games will be held in a city with a Bahá'í House of Worship. A beautiful full-colour pamphlet about the Faith has been distributed to hotels, tourist centres, domestic and international airports, and at the Olympic Village. The Temple was painted inside and out. A website about the Faith is prepared. As to how the Olympics have aroused the believers to action was presented in the Australian Bahá'í Bulletin, September 2000 under the article, "Sydney Bahá'ís go for Olympic gold".

At the start of the Games, the spirit of competition, the ardour for winning, the tension and excitement that builds in every Olympic year stir in the heart a combination of feelings and questions about spiritual victories versus material achievements. This presentation attempts to demonstrate that the Bahá'í Teachings and the experiences of the Faith provide a new way of looking at the Olympics. Are the Games caught up with the spirit of the age - the oneness of humankind? What do the Bahá'í Teachings say about competition? How has the Revelation enhanced certain values which are cultivated by the 10,300 athletes from 200 countries who will compete in the Games? Are the Olympics connected with something far greater for humanity than the glory of sport and the love of country, namely, the oneness of peoples and nations - as the title of this presentation suggests?

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The fierce contest afoot in the world between religion and the forces of ungodliness also comes to mind. At stake is the triumph in human history of the fundamental spiritual principle of our age - the oneness of mankind - described by Shoghi Effendi as, “*the pivot around which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve.*”<sup>1</sup> On this theme the Guardian wrote, “*A titanic, a spiritual struggle, unparalleled in its magnitude yet unspeakably glorious in its ultimate consequence, is being waged*” for the unification of humankind.<sup>2</sup> It is this planetary contest between the spiritual and the material that provides an excellent perspective for considering whether the Olympics’ spectacular tapestry of races, peoples, colours, and nations advances the principle of the oneness of mankind.

The spirit of competition the Olympics excites invites a comparison between some of the hard fought victories won by the Faith to Olympic successes. For this purpose, some features of the heroic struggle out in the Mázindarán province of Persia at Tabarsí in 1848 have been selected. The run away triumph of Mullá Husayn, Quddús and their companions demonstrates that the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith is a compelling factor in the Olympics’ universal attraction. The heroic contests reveal as well that spiritual values foster victories, even Olympic achievements, and establish excellent criteria for evaluating triumphs. For, in the days to come, the world will rejoice that a small band of untrained, frail body believers, at the cry, “*Mount your steeds, O heroes of God*”<sup>3</sup>, competed with their lives against desperate forces of spiritual oppression, so that their Faith could win a place in the world.

## The Influence of the Revelation

The impact of the Faith on the fortunes of the Olympics is directly connected to the penetrative influence of the Word of God. The Revelation’s creative power operates upon society through Bahá'í institutions and believers and through progressive movements, like the Olympics. Although, it is clear that only the Word of God as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh can achieve the revolutionary regeneration of society, the Olympic movement, promoting international cooperation, is a remarkable development towards world unification.

The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896<sup>4</sup> is an aspect of that “*unity of thought in world undertakings*” which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said the nations would

1. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, (2nd rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p.42. The Guardian also describes the principle as “the chief and distinguishing feature of the Faith He (Bahá'u'lláh) proclaimed”, “the cornerstone of Bahá'u'lláh's world-embracing dominion”, and “the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law” p.36.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
3. Nabil-i-A'zam (Muhammad-i-Zarandí), *The Dawn-Breakers*, Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932), p. 341.
4. David C. Young, *The Modern Olympics, A Struggle for Revival* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 81-95.

achieve as one of the “*Seven Candles of Unity*”<sup>5</sup>. The great variety of international gatherings of world leaders called by the United Nations, the growing number of transnational projects, congresses, conferences, summits, and global events of every sort, including such great sports events as the African Cup of Nations, the Commonwealth Games, and the Olympics, champion the spirit of internationalism, global identity and the oneness of mankind. The Games illustrate that “universal fermentation” which Shoghi Effendi said, “...in every continent of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, through the compelling power of the Revelation the Olympics are connected with the social and spiritual evolution of mankind.

### Religion and the Ancient Olympic Games

The influence of the Faith on the Olympics is also consistent with the impact of religion on the evolution of sports contests. Scholars in the history of sports have discovered that many athletic activities began as religious events. Primitive people competed through games against invisible and visible forces that threatened their survival. Games were played to promote fertility among crops and animals. Tribes played a cup-and-ball game to symbolically “catch the sun” for the growing season.<sup>7</sup>

The ancient Olympic Games began as a religious festival held every four years successively for a thousand years. They were held in 776 BC through 393 AD. Everything connected to the competitions was linked to religion. Only Greeks could participate and the events symbolised the unity of the Hellenic population. The contests took place in a sacred valley called Olympia, named in antiquity after Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Mainland Greece and in mythology the home of the greatest Greek gods and goddesses. The Games were held in honour of Zeus, the king of the Greek deities.<sup>8</sup> The Games struggled on until 393 AD, when the Roman emperor Theodosius abolished them<sup>9</sup>. It took 1503 years for the Olympics to return in its full international flavour in 1896, when the modern Olympics began in Athens. It was the Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertine who revived the Olympic idea.<sup>10</sup> He envisioned that the modern Olympics would eventually become both symbol and centrepiece of a new global era of togetherness

5. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 32.

6. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, *op. cit.* p. 170.

7. Charles S. Prebish, ed. *Religion and Sport*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 83.

8. M.I. Finley and H.W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1976), pp. 6-10, 14-24.

9. William Oscar Johnson, *The Olympics, A History of the Games*, (Times, Inc., New York, 1996), p.9; Finley and Pleket, *ibid.* P.13.

10. Young, *op. cit.* p. 81.

among nations.<sup>11</sup> The Games are indeed a symbol of a new era of global unification, but the concept of the oneness of mankind, as revealed by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, is the true centrepiece of the new age of global unification.

### Principle of the Oneness of Mankind

For example, Shoghi Effendi explained that the unity of nations implies that “*national rivalries, hatreds and intrigues will cease and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation.*”<sup>12</sup> The Games, however, have served as a surrogate battlefield for the cold war, a stage for terrorists and protests of every sort. In some ways, the Olympics are still about the need for the symbolic satisfaction of nations who have used them in a political way to prove the superiority of their cultures, traditions, or political social systems. As we look back some of the incidents have been quite amusing. Some host nations have refused to fly the flags of nations they had disagreements with along with the other flags in the Olympic stadium. Olympic officials have carried runners they favoured across the finish line to keep others from winning.<sup>13</sup>

Hitler saw the Summer Games in Berlin in 1936 as an opportunity to spread the blatant Nazi anti-Semitism, the false religion of Aryan superiority and racial hatred. The Soviet Union made its Olympic debut in 1952, which heightened the cold war confrontations. China competed for the first time in 1984. In ancient times all wars were suspended during the period of the Olympics. In modern times, however, three Olympic games were cancelled due to war. The summer games have been plagued by boycotts. There are still nations that can send only a few athletes. The industrial nations, with better coaching, better training facilities, larger, healthier, better-educated population, and a sports culture, win most of the medals.

These setbacks, the current exposure of corruption in the International Olympic Committee, the use of banned drugs by athletes to enhance performances, indicate that a hard race is on for the spirit of the Games and for what the Olympics could symbolise for mankind. As Shoghi Effendi said:

*“There are so many movements in the world . . . akin to various Bahá'í principles; indeed we can almost say that the principles of Bahá'u'lláh have been adapted by thinking people all over this planet. But what they do not realize and what the Bahá'ís must therefore teach them, is that these principles, however perfect, will never be able to create a new society unless and until they are animated by the spirit which alone changes the hearts and characters of men and that spirit is recognition of their*

11. Young, *op. cit.* p. 81.

12. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, *op. cit.* p. 204.

13. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

*divine origin in a teacher sent from God, in other words, Bahá'u'lláh. When they recognize this, their hearts will change and a change of heart is what people need, not merely a change of intellectual outlook.*"<sup>14</sup>

The process of achieving the oneness of mankind includes the growing realization that our basic loyalty is to mankind as a whole rather than to any nation or smaller group. This is the spirit in which those involved in the Olympics must move towards. The Olympics beyond Sydney will be entirely different when the financial, coaching and other resources of the world are equitably shared under Bahá'u'lláh's system of world order. The impact of the Revelation will lead eventually to Games which fully reflect the spiritual principles of unity. Bahá'ís know, from the ringing clarifications of Shoghi Effendi, that the road leading to the oneness of the whole body of nations, which will be the ruling principle of international life, is long and arduous.<sup>15</sup> Still, the Olympic Movement is an important step in the right direction. This does not mean that Bahá'ís are blind to its weaknesses and failures. Thank goodness that most people who are caught up in cheering for their country or for certain groups no longer feel that winners from this group are superior to those who lose.<sup>16</sup>

There has emerged the most incredible claim that the Olympics is a religion; that sports is a religion.<sup>17</sup> I was astonished to read in a well researched scholarly book on religion and sport the declaration that there is a god of running! A god of swimming! And other athletic gods!<sup>18</sup> That sports is a more accurate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism, or any of the traditional religions.<sup>19</sup> This complex issue seems to be connected to Bahá'u'lláh's words: "*The weakening of the pillars of religion hath strengthened the foolish and emboldened them and made them more arrogant ... the greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. This cannot but lead in the end to chaos and confusion.*"<sup>20</sup>

The Writings explain that "*the purpose of religion ... is to establish unity*

14. Helen Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1983), p. 425. (from letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Bahá'í Youth of Lima, Peru, 17 November 1945.

15. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, *op. cit.* p. 193.

16. Torbjorn Tannsjö, "Is Our Admiration for Sports Heroes Fascistoid?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, XXV, 1998, pp. 23-34. The author argues that nationalism within sports is declining because of commercialisation and internationalism. He points out, however, that nationalistic values are reinforced by publicly broadcast sports events such as the Olympic Games, and nationalism's orientation towards abstract symbols: the flag, the team, as a representative of the nation (see especially p.24). Mr. Tannsjö's basic premise is that the Olympic winners are admired based on a value judgement that those who win, if the competition is fair, are excellent, and their excellence makes them valuable. This excellence is based on the strength they exhibited in the competition. He argues that the losers are considered less valuable, because in losing they demonstrate weakness, which leads to contempt for the loser.

17. Presbish, *op. cit.* pp. 54-62, 74, 153, 180.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

20. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1953) p. 28.

*and concord amongst the peoples of the world.*"<sup>21</sup> Can anyone seriously believe that basketball or soccer can eliminate the fierce hatred and prejudices in the hearts of people? The Writings reveal that "*Religion is verily the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world...*"<sup>22</sup>. Can there be a world order founded on the rules of football? Religion, unlike sports, forms a unique foundation for a general system of meaning related to ultimate issues and questions. It affects the way people think about the world, about social relations and processes and even about sports. It defines the meaning and purpose of life.

## Values

Another element in which the influence of the Faith may be seen is that the Writings and the experience of believers reveal for mankind important features about the character of victories, and how to evaluate achievements. The Revelation has renewed and strengthened the very qualities that render Olympians victorious. These values, which foster victories of every kind, as well as the order of their importance to human endeavours, are set out in the Writings.

The animating influences of these qualities were demonstrated in the startling victories for the unification of humankind won at Fort Tabarsí. And by this I mean the powerful spiritual values — vision, courage, heart, discipline, focus, passion, trying, perseverance, and many more — manifested by the champions of Tabarsí are the strengths that make Olympic winners. The value orientation underlying competitive sports, excellence, fairness, etc., may seem unconnected with religion. But, those values that are central to sports, whether in relation to successful individual or team achievements, are more or less secularized versions of the core values of religion.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, only Bahá'ís fully appreciate, at this time, that the great qualities that the champions out in Tabarsí showed - clarity of vision, commitment to excellence, striving with heart, and many more - are spiritual values. The Bahá'í view on these values, whether seen in sports or other systems of endeavours, is that: "*it is religion ... which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization.*"<sup>24</sup> And that: "*these virtues do not appear from the reality of man except through the power of God and the divine teachings, for they need supernatural power for their manifestation...*"<sup>25</sup>

It is from this perspective that humankind will come to realize that sports, including the Olympic Games, is merely a carrier of religious qualities. Thus,

21. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*: Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 129.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

23. Presbish, *op. cit.* p. 97.

24. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p.98.

25. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 80.

the Olympic contenders merely exhibit some of the eternal values which, in the champions of the world, heroes even for today, out in Mázindarán, and elsewhere in the Land of the Martyrs, marked the depth of their belief. We can only comment on a few here.

**VISION AND FOCUS:** Mullá Husayn and that little band of companions at Tabarsí caught the vision and purpose of the contests in this way: “*You have been chosen of God,*” Bahá’u’lláh addressed those champions, who went on to bequeath the world matchless examples of transformation, courage and other spiritual strength, “*to be the vanguard of His hosts and the establishers of His Faith. His hosts verily will conquer. Whatever may befall, victory is yours, a victory which is complete and certain.*”<sup>26</sup> “*This is the Day,*” Bahá’u’lláh has stated, “*when the loved ones of God should keep their eyes directed towards His Manifestation, and fasten them upon whatsoever that Manifestation may be pleased to reveal.*”<sup>27</sup> “*Regard not the children of the world and all their doings but fix thy gaze upon God and His never-ending dominion.*”<sup>28</sup> Great athletes also come to learn that they must keep their eyes fixed on the ball, or on the target, or on the main goal; that they must concentrate fully at critical moments.

**COURAGE:** No sickness of the soul is worse than discouragement. Perhaps, this is why the Manifestations of God renew and strengthen the principles of courage and encouragement. The courage of the dawn-breakers was superhuman. Leaping on horseback, time and time again, Mullá Husayn and his companions decimated in every fair encounter the treacherous forces arrayed against them. These examples show that the words of God inspire courage. Bahá’u’lláh in a Word of Wisdom reveals the secret of their might: “*The source of courage and power,*” He tells us, “*is the promotion of the Word of God and steadfastness in His love.*”<sup>29</sup>

**HEART:** In the Olympic competitions, you won’t find the matchless manifestations of spiritual strength, or physical strength, that Mullá Husayn and his companions exhibited out in Mázindarán. The manner in which they sallied out to defend the Cause arouses new insight into what it means to compete with, or to show, heart when facing challenges. Among athletes heart is regarded as one of the most essential values. It is a mysterious quality. The dawn-breakers possessed it on a grand scale.

All the world loves the heart of a competitor who refuses to give in. The person who seizes opportunities. The contender who exerts herself far beyond

26. *The Dawn-Breakers, op. cit.* p. 349.

27. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh,* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 171.

28. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, op. cit.* p. 139.

29. *Ibid.,* p. 156.

capacity. People love to witness souls involved in wholesome contests who will not accept defeat when it would be reasonable to do so. This is what heart does. This is what the martyrs showed the world. Heart is grounded in exuberance, a kind of irrational commitment to an endeavour. Heart involves an enthusiastic, spontaneous, uncalculating, innocent and sometimes even a naïve response. It involves becoming involved with the world. It is the behaviour of those who are young and young at heart. It enables one to answer the call, for better or for worse, in situations where others fear to tread, or are indifferent.<sup>30</sup>

Heartful service to God is like this, where believers come to understand that the true victory must first occur in the heart. Bahá'u'lláh has revealed: “Say, the power of God is in the hearts of those who believe in the unity of God and bear witness that no God is there but Him, while the hearts of them that associate partners with God are impotent, devoid of life on this earth, for assuredly they are dead.”<sup>31</sup> Those who serve or play with heart often become hardened to reason. Often there is a lack of self concern. We see something of heart in the Olympics, as a result, I think, of the impact of the Revelation. Youth competing for gold for themselves and for their nation, with extravagant flings of energy, with grace and poise, with courage and heart, will also be competing symbolically for the oneness of mankind.

Speaking of gold, when the believers out at Tabarsí struck out for the headquarters of the imperial army, undaunted by the overwhelming forces arrayed against them, they penetrated the apartments of several princes. They discovered coffers filled with gold and silver, all of which they disdained to touch.<sup>32</sup> The gold of God's good pleasure was sufficient for His hosts.

Perhaps, those believers turning away from those treasures reminds you of Atalanta's race. You know the tale — how the princess, Atalanta, tall and wild and beautiful, one of the swiftest runners in Greek mythology promised the king she would marry him who outraced her. Those who failed must die. With her eyes fixed on the ideals of chastity, freedom and service, she raced across the mountains. Many challengers were slain. The cunning Hippomenes laid three golden apples over the course. The beautiful Atalanta fled like a shadow. The first apple startled her. She paused. But even as Hippomenes stretched his hand, she sprinted away. The innocent maiden hovered over the second golden apple. But slipping again from Hippomenes' hot grasp, she flew over river, vale and hill. Then, she lingered over the third apple. The weight of the three apples slowed her down, and Hippomenes easily passed her by. The greed of gold defeated the youth in the race of her life. In the

30. See John Corlett, “Virtue Lost: Courage in Sport”, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, XXIII, 1996, pp. 45-57.

31. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in the compilation, *The Power of Divine Assistance*, (National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 1982), p. 15.

32. *The Dawn-Breakers*, op. cit. p. 367.



flush of victory, Hippomenes forgot to thank the goddess, Aphrodite, for her help. In her wrath, the snubbed goddess transformed Hippomenes and Atalanta into giant cats. And so, according to Greek legend, they stay to this day, the beautiful but lazy lion and the swift lioness.

**TRYING:** I have the impression that the world senses that deep inside the Olympics there is something dear to be found. All the competitors will be trying their best to win. How well does the value of trying speaks of the influence of the Faith. In the martyrs it was shown in their humility, vision, nobility, and confidence. It is the spirit of trying which quickens and sustains true champions. The notion of trying also involves an irrepressible intention and willingness to serve with heart. It is not the full accomplishment of the service but simply the willing of it. Trying is a kind of learning. It is a focus on the transformation of the self and not on others.

Much could be said about the values of striving for excellence, learning the fundamentals of the endeavour, the importance of training, initiative, seizing opportunities, the sense of urgency, each person playing his part, the execution of plans, anticipating responses, absorbing setbacks, obedience to those with higher responsibilities, the passion for winning, the importance of teaching oneself, etc. All of these will be exhibited in the Sydney Games. From our perspective, all of these, and more, have been demonstrated in the experiences of the Faith and are promoted in the Bahá'í Scriptures.

The experience at Fort Tabarsí shows that humanity lives and moves through faith. The source of the martyrs' heroism was the ardour of their faith; unquestioning belief in the Manifestation; the vision of God's mercy, generosity, and the triumph of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; a passionate love for Him, Who is "*the Victorious*,"<sup>33</sup> "*the Giver of victory*"<sup>34</sup>, "*He Who knows the reality of victory*"<sup>35</sup>. The believers at Tabarsí were champions of vision and commitment. Their story is that of hard work, commitment, guts, confidence, loyalty, and noble behaviour, benchmarks for building the world.

## Competition

There are some who feel that athletic games, even the Olympics, are trivial pursuits. How does the Faith regard competition? Do the Prophets manifest physical valour? The Olympics is fundamentally competitive. In contrast, it is often thought that religion is fundamentally noncompetitive. The Bahá'í Writings permit competitiveness, in which a spirit of service to God and mankind, and love of others, is encouraged. However, the spirit of self-promotion and defeating others in order to exalt oneself is discouraged.

Bahá'u'lláh's words on the subject are clear: "*Vie ye with each other in*

33. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 120.

34. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, op cit.* p. 125.

35. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, op cit.* p. 196.

the service of God and of His Cause. This is indeed what profiteth you in this world, and in that which is to come.”<sup>36</sup> Shoghi Effendi announced with a great deal of satisfaction that “(the) Knights (of Bahá'u'lláh) ...are vying with each other for the spiritual conquest of the unsundered territories and islands on the surface of the globe.”<sup>37</sup> He urgently appealed to all Bahá'í communities in 1951 to “vie with one another in emulating the example of their African sister communities ranking among the youngest in the Bahá'í world . . .”<sup>38</sup> A little later, he alerted believers, “. . . the Pacific area, . . . (was) now competing for the palm of victory with the African continent itself.”<sup>39</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised that students should practice gymnastics as part of their education.<sup>40</sup> Shoghi Effendi allowed that, “Playing games is not in the least forbidden. It should be encouraged if they are of an athletic nature.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, participation in athletics is a matter of individual discretion.

In their human station, the Prophets exhibited physical valour and fitness, excellence of bodily form and grace. Indeed, a sign for which the first disciples of the Báb had been told would mark His identity was that he would be free from “bodily deficiency.”<sup>42</sup> On the glorious day, following the declaration of His station in Baghdád, as he departed the city for the banishment to Constantinople, Bahá'u'lláh displayed “masterly horsemanship”, as a symbol of His divine authority. During the ten year exile in Baghdád, He had always chosen to ride a mule. Thus, mounted on a stallion of the finest breed, for the first time the startled population marvelled at His “splendid horsemanship”.<sup>43</sup>

As to His response to those who dared to compete with Him, the words of Bahá'u'lláh are quite explicit: “O concourse of divines! Can any one of you race with the Divine Youth in the arena of wisdom and utterance, or soar with Him into the heaven of inner meaning and explanation? Nay, by My Lord, the God of mercy . . . Can the one possessed of wooden legs resist him whose feet God hath made of steel? Nay, by Him Who illumineth the whole of creation”<sup>44</sup>. And: “O ye leaders of religion! Who is the man amongst you that can rival Me in vision or insight? Where is he to be found that dareth to claim to be My equal in utterance or wisdom?”<sup>45</sup>

36. Quoted in, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, (3rd ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 83.

37. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965), p. 117.

38. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958), p.73.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

40. *Star of the West*, The Bahá'í Magazine. Published from 1910 to 1933 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1978) vol. 9, p. 91.

41. From a letter dated 27 December 1932 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly.

42. *The Dawn-Breakers*, op. cit. p. 57.

43. H. M. Balyuzi, *The King of Glory*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980), p.165.

44. *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and leaders of the world* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1967), p. 76.

45. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 23.

The exclamation of Quddús, upon seeing the Báb for the first time, rings with wonder: “*Why seek you to hide Him from Me? I can recognize Him by His gait.*”<sup>46</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was said to have been “*a strong and excellent swimmer*” and “*a fearless horseman*”<sup>47</sup>. Shoghi Effendi loved sports. During his days at Oxford, he played tennis, “*a game he loved and in which he excelled.*” Laughing most of the time while he played, he was marvellously active in the sport, ambidextrous and possessed lightning speed.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps, the physical valour of the Central figures and of the beloved Guardian may contribute to the promotion of wholesome athletic competitions. But will anyone dare to race in the days to come without recalling Bahá’u’lláh’s forced, barefoot run through a hostile, jeering mob from Shimírán to the Siyáh Chál of Tihrán? Will weight lifters lift their burdens without recalling that Bahá’u’lláh was fastened down with chains in the dungeon prison?

### The Symbolic Character Of The Games

An element of the influence of the Faith on the Olympics may lie in the manner in which the Faith seems to have strengthened the symbolic character of the Games. The world’s acceptance of its symbols may be the Olympics’ most outstanding breakthrough. The Olympic flame stands for the concept of the sacred fire of ancient times. It expresses the struggles necessary to maintain unity. It recalls the myth of Prometheus, the Greek demi-god, who stole the fire so that mortals could prepare food, vanquish cold and darkness and become almost equal of the gods.<sup>49</sup> It was at the Games in Berlin in 1936 that the Olympic flame was lit for the first time.<sup>50</sup>

The flame is said to represent youth, their thoughts and actions. It is borne to the Games by a system of relay torches. This symbolizes that he who held the torch was the weary runner passing the fire to a fresh runner, who is stronger. Like the old generation passing on the torch of service to the young. The Olympic flame stands up straight. Sometimes the winds bend it briefly, but it bravely stands up again. It represents an upright life. Lit during the spectacular opening ceremony, it burns day and night in the Olympic stadium through the duration of the Games.<sup>51</sup> How much more nobly could this flame glow if it would remind the world of words of Bahá’u’lláh that: “*The Word of God hath set the heart of the world afire.*”<sup>52</sup>

In the days to come the Olympic flame may cause mankind to wonder

46. *The Dawn-Breakers, op. cit.* pp. 69-70.

47. Blomfield, Lady (Sítárh Khánúm), *The Chosen Highway*, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1967), p.87, p. 191.

48. Riaz Khadem, *Shoghi Effendi in Oxford*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1999), pp. 102, 103.

49. Much of this section is taken from the excellent article by Luc Silance, “Symbolism in Olympism-Symbolism in Art” International Olympic Academy, 26 Session 1986, pp. 116 to 129.

50. *Ibid.*, p.120.

51. *Ibid.*, p.120.

52. *Gleanings, op. cit.* p. 316.

how the people far away up in the mountains of Mákú denied the Báb even a candle to light his prison cell. Or perhaps, it may recall the candles Mullá Husayn placed in the hands of each of his companions at Fort Tabarsí, as they rushed out to meet Quddús.<sup>53</sup> I want to share with you the words of the Master, which I feel summarize beautifully the symbolism of light. *“The time has come when all mankind shall be united, when all races shall be loyal to one fatherland, . . . and racial and religious bias pass away. It is a day in which the oneness of humankind shall uplift its standard and international peace, like the true morning, flood the world with its light.”*<sup>54</sup>

The marvellous Olympic symbol, the five intertwined rings of blue, yellow, black, green and red represents five parts of the world: Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and America respectively. It stands for the unification of the nations, which, as stated earlier, Coubertin wanted to unite through sport.<sup>55</sup> It was in 1920 that the Olympic flag bearing for the first time the symbol was presented.<sup>56</sup>

Speaking of flags, it may be recalled that Mullá Husayn at the instruction of the Báb unfolded the “Black Standard” that symbolised a new religion was on the march. Under this banner, Mullá Husayn, and his fellow-disciples, fearlessly proclaimed the message of the New Day.<sup>57</sup> Like all flags generally, it was a symbol of identification, evoking feelings of devotion and pride. It was *“that earthly emblem of an unearthly sovereignty (which) waved continually over the heads of that small and valiant band, summoning the multitude who gazed upon it to renounce the world and to espouse the Cause of God.”*<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

During the Olympics millions will be aroused by the flags and the national anthems. Nationalism, individualism, and secularism are parts of the evolution of the Games and will have to run their course. But many will cherish the appeal of honest, wholesome, noble endeavour, athlete against athlete. Competitors honouring themselves, their country, and their opponents with their very best performances. Perhaps, there are Olympic enthusiasts who can imagine with us that the athletes will compete for the oneness of mankind. That all those who support the Games are advancing the principle of world unity. Perhaps, the Games will help the world see that mankind can have no true life until it is one. And should the Games last until the end of the Bahá'í Dispensation, there will always be athletic heroes to cheer, and, perhaps, a

53. *The Dawn-Breakers, op. cit.* p.352.

54. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 153.

55. Silance, *op. cit.* p. 119.

56. *Ibid.* p. 122.

57. *Dawn-Breakers, op. cit.* p. 325.

58. *Dawn-Breakers, op. cit.* p. 351.

little girl who will tumble the length of a balance beam, and in one perfect instant achieve the kind of transcendent greatness that will live forever in the hearts.

But the Olympic medals are trifling in comparison with winning the gold of striving for God's good pleasure, won by the heroes of the Faith. The world will come to learn that the great competitive zeal, focus and dedication, which have ever animated Olympic winners, are no match for the ardour of faith which transformed and quickened the dawn-breakers. This is easily the most striking feature of the comparisons we have drawn: that the spectacular Olympic victories are far less important than the victories won for God. The Faith enables us to treasure the true character of spiritual victories in relation to other successes, even in relation to the winning of Olympic gold. All the world will eventually rejoice, I think, in this component of the greatness of the Revelation.

So we have gathered up in the days before the Olympics considering the influence of the Cause. We are resolved upon our present course of vying with the world for its unification. For we know that "*He Who leadeth to true victory is come.*"<sup>59</sup> Take care to have the influence of the Faith keep us alert to the cunning of Hippomenes. Take care to recall the influence of the Faith that lies in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words that our joy can be perfected by arising for the triumph of the Cause.<sup>60</sup> Take care to remember that mankind eventually comes to love its religious heroes. Take care, then, to be influenced by the lamentation in the Fire Tablet: "*Dost Thou wail, or shall I wail? Rather shall I weep at the fewness of Thy champions.*"<sup>61</sup>

From the youth who were out in the Mázindarán province, we learn that competition in the path of God and victory is one. Bahá'ís everywhere are still racing with the world to achieve that ultimate victory which Bahá'u'lláh promised. From the influence of the Faith on the Olympic Games and on all progressive movements, and in the spirit of the symbolic character of the Games, we take the torch of fire from the dawn-breakers. We, too, are stirred by the passion of the Games. But whether the ardour runs to basketball, football, swimming, gymnastics, or track or field events, it does not match our zeal for the principle of the oneness of mankind. It doesn't matter that at this time only a few million cherish the victories for the unification of mankind gained by the "*lion-hearted*" believers out in the Mázindarán province, who, at the cry, "*Mount your steeds, O heroes of God*", made the Word of the Lord of Hosts triumphant.

Let us take heart and consider that the Olympics are among those forces which, as Shoghi Effendi says, "*whether or not cognizant of the regenerating Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in this age are operating, each in its respective sphere*

59. *Gleanings, op. cit.* p. 259.

60. *Bahá'í Prayers*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 203.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

*and under His all-encompassing guidance, for the uplift and salvation of humanity.*"<sup>62</sup> Let the fire of the Olympic contests symbolise that the struggle begun at Tabarsí is still unwon. May the Olympic Games remind us that we are competing in the service of God. May they inspire us to say to Mullá Husayn, Quddús, Táhirih, and all the martyred champions, heroes for the unification of peoples and nations: 'Rejoice! For your spirit of victory is alive in us. And we are worthy of you. For we, too, have mounted our steeds, O Heroes of God, for the glory of the oneness of mankind.'

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62. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) pp. 145-147.