

Apocalypse and Millennium: Catastrophe, Progress, and the Lesser Peace

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Abstract

Millennialism—the expectation of a more perfect order through divine intervention—is an important research topic and Bahá'í motif. The Bahá'í vision of a divine plan leading to the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace has “progressive” and “catastrophic” aspects. Some twentieth-century speculations on the Lesser Peace anticipated momentous events for three periods with both apocalyptic and peaceful aspects, for example, peace preceded by a catastrophe near the century's end. This paper reviews some approaches to the Lesser Peace in light of millennialism studies and draws conclusions about Bahá'í “catastrophic” and “progressive” thinking.

Résumé

Le millénarisme—l'attente d'un ordre plus parfait qui résulterait d'une intervention divine—a fait l'objet de nombreuses recherches et constitue également un thème bahá'í. La perspective bahá'íe d'un plan divin menant à la moindre paix, puis à la plus grande paix, comporte un double aspect de « progression » et de « catastrophe ». Certaines théories du vingtième siècle ont anticipé des événements précis marquant trois périodes, qui revêtent à la fois un caractère apocalyptique et un caractère pacifique, par exemple, une ère de paix précédée d'événements catastrophiques vers la fin du siècle. L'auteur examine certaines conceptions de la moindre paix à la lumière des études sur le millénarisme et tire des conclusions sur la pensée bahá'íe en ce qui concerne le caractère à la fois « catastrophique » et « progressif » des événements.

Resumen

El milenarismo—o sea, la expectativa de un orden más perfecto mediante la intervención divina—es un asunto importante de investigar a la vez de ser tema bahá'í. La visión bahá'í de un plan divino que culmine con la Paz Menor y la Paz Mayor tiene aspectos “progresivos” y “catastróficos.” Algunas suposiciones del siglo veinte en cuanto a la Paz Menor anticipaban hechos de gran momento durante tres períodos con aspectos tanto apocalípticos como pacíficos citando, por ejemplo, la paz precedida por una catástrofe al aproximarse el cierre del siglo. Este ensayo investiga algunos planteamientos referentes a la Paz Menor a la luz de estudios sobre el milenarismo y traza conclusiones surgidas del pensar bahá'í acerca de lo “catastrófico” y lo “progresivo.”

Introduction

Most of the religions of the world look forward to a future “peaceable kingdom” where prosperity and unfettered spiritual and social development are established here on earth under divine guidance. The vision of a coming Kingdom of God creates a tension between present reality and the prophesied future, a tension which may spur believers to develop or discover the steps required to attain this promised Kingdom. Among Bahá'ís in the West, whose conversion milieu includes biblical prophecy, discussions of the timing of these steps have produced a distinctive discourse. This discourse typically focuses on how the chaotic world of national sovereignty and social disruption can be transformed into a political peace where nation-states covenant to eliminate warfare (the “Lesser Peace”), followed by the emergence of a spiritualized world civilization infused with Bahá'u'lláh's principles (the “Most Great Peace”). In more general discussions of religion, this kind of expectation is part of a wider phenomenon termed *millennialism*.

The concept of millennialism (from *millennium*, meaning one thousand years) originates in the thousand-year period mentioned in the biblical Book of Revelation (Rev. 20:4) during which the returned Jesus Christ is expected to reign. Millennialism also has a generic sociological meaning that transcends its Christian origins. In that context it has been defined as the anticipation of a future time of justice and peace when the current flawed order will be replaced by a new and more perfect one, either through God's direct intervention or through human implementation of the divine plan (Barkun, *Crucible* 13; Wessinger, “Millennialism”).¹ The context for millennialism includes a future time when human society will undergo a period of crisis followed by a golden age. Millennialism is a dynamic topic in modern social science and religious studies, connected as it is to the origin of religions, to revolution and violence, and to social change.² Most major religions have a strong millennial

component, though it does not normally affect believers' daily lives. Nevertheless, important millennial movements signal a time of universal change as the movements infuse a creative impulse into the society around them.

Two varieties of Christian millennialism have traditionally been recognized. *Pre-millennialism* upholds Jesus Christ's return, accompanied by various apocalyptic signs, before the general resurrection and judgment. This return brings redemption and the remaking of the world, triggering the thousand-year reign of the returned Christ. *Post-millennialism* holds that the "kingdom of God," built by Christians, will result in a peaceful order for a thousand years, after which Jesus Christ will return.³ This Christian-based terminology is being supplemented, and even supplanted, by a new terminology that is more generically descriptive. Catherine Wessinger has coined two new terms which are increasingly being used by scholars of New Religious Movements. *Catastrophic millennialism* signifies a pessimistic view of humanity, society, and history: evil is rampant; to eliminate evil and achieve collective salvation on earth, God must destroy and renew the world; the catastrophic destruction is imminent. Another term that has become synonymous with catastrophic millennialism is *apocalypse* or *apocalyptic millennialism*. *Progressive millennialism* takes an optimistic view of humanity, society and history: progress is possible; collective salvation will be achieved by humans working in harmony with a divine plan.⁴ Although some commentators have been tempted to place specific religious movements in one or the other of these types, it is becoming increasingly clear from recent studies (Wessinger; Landes) that millennialism can be seen as a catastrophic-progressive continuum, with the history of each religion moving along that continuum emphasizing a variable mix of catastrophic and progressive elements over time or at any given time.⁵

Bahá'í millennialist tendencies have been expressed in three ways: (1) in the Bábís' expectation that the existing order would be rapidly overturned, (2) in the claim that the Bahá'í Central Figures and the establishment of the Bahá'í community fulfill the prophecies of previous religious traditions, and (3) in the paradoxical processes of disintegration and integration that are said to characterize the period during which Bahá'ís construct the Kingdom of God on earth under a divine plan.⁶ The forces that Bahá'ís expect will usher in the millennium include the forces of chaos and disruption unleashed by a defective order, the efforts made by Bahá'ís to build the kingdom and spread their Faith, and the mysterious workings of Providence behind the scenes (Stockman).

The Bahá'í Visionary Imagination

Essential to Bahá'í millennialist thinking are its visionary elements, which can be expressed within Wessinger's catastrophic-progressive continuum. Shoghi Effendi saw the framework for a future world civilization contained in the Bahá'í scriptures. He articulated this framework as a number of discrete elements of human sociopolitical maturation and Bahá'í community development, within each of which would occur a series of evolutionary stages:

- *Sociopolitical Evolution.* Shoghi Effendi extended into the future a sociological model of humanity's organized existence. Humans have created ever wider levels of social and political organization, and are destined to complete that process on the planetary level, through a process of integration moving from the already accomplished stages of the family, tribe, city-state, and nation toward future world unification—"the final object and the crowning glory of human evolution on this planet" (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* ¶290).
- *Stages of the Bahá'í Faith's Development.* He outlined a series of evolutionary stages in the Bahá'í Faith itself, some of which have already been completed: unmitigated obscurity, active repression, complete emancipation, acknowledgment as an independent Faith enjoying full equality with other religions, recognition as a State religion, the assumption of the rights and prerogatives associated with the Bahá'í state, and the emergence of the worldwide Bahá'í Commonwealth, animated by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's laws and principles (*World Order* 19).
- *Time Periods of the Bahá'í Dispensation.* The Bahá'í writings indicate that the Bahá'í dispensation will last for at least one thousand solar years from the date of Bahá'u'lláh's receipt of His divine mission while incarcerated in October 1852 (in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* n.62). The period of this dispensation is divided into three "ages," and each age is divided into "epochs." These ages are: (1) the Heroic, Primitive, or Apostolic Age (1844–1921) with three epochs associated respectively with the ministries of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá; (2) the Formative, Transitional, or Iron Age (1921–?) is to be the longest age, within which the Faith has entered its fifth epoch as of January 2001; and (3) the Golden Age (a few centuries from now, until 2852 or later).⁷
- *Development of a Peaceful World Civilization.* The world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed accelerated processes of nation building and fragmentation. Shoghi Effendi distilled from the Bahá'í writings a vision of the emergence of two successive stages of peace. The first is the Lesser Peace, a political peace created by the world's states, in which warfare as a solution to conflicts will be severely limited and the rudiments of a

world federation will be constructed.⁸ The second stage is the Most Great Peace, a condition of permanent peace and world unity based on the spiritual principles and institutions of Bahá'u'lláh. The Most Great Peace, as a result of the spiritualization of all aspects of human existence, will witness the fusion of races, creeds, classes, and nations into one people, and represents humanity's coming of age in the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.⁹

There is a synchronic aspect to these scenarios explained by Shoghi Effendi. The highest sociopolitical level of planetary unity, the efflorescence of a Bahá'í Commonwealth, the Golden Age of the Bahá'í dispensation, and the Most Great Peace all represent the same future civilization "the like of which mankind has, at no stage in its evolution, witnessed" (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World* 162). The final stages of each of the scenarios described above converge in the millennial kingdom (see Figure 1).

Evolutionary Stages

(stages are not to scale chronologically)

Family Tribe City-State	Pre-Bahá'í	Pre-Bahá'í	Pre-Nation
Nation	Obscurity	Heroic Age	National Sovereignty
	Repression	Formative Age	
	Emancipation		Lesser Peace
Planet	Independence		
	Establishment		
	Bahá'í State	Golden Age	Most Great Peace
	Bahá'í Commonwealth		

Figure 1

Shoghi Effendi systematically forecast from contemporary social trends, placing them within the framework of his sequence of developmental stages. He delineated a series of short-range, middle-range, and long-range conditions. He characterized the near term as dark and catastrophic, as the prevailing order inadequate to the needs of a changed world fails to meet new challenges, and thus disintegrates. At the same time, integrative forces slowly emerge and culminate in the cessation of hostilities and the beginnings of peace. He characterized the intermediate range as a time of consolidation for the forces of integration and stability, including the creation of a world federated state, a code of international law, world citizenship, elimination of trade barriers, and moral revival. His long-range forecast outlined the steps approaching and entering the Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, the Most Great Peace, when the coming of age of the human race will be realized, the world federal system will be fully established, and a Bahá'í Commonwealth will encompass humanity (Wendi Momen, "Future Tense").

A vision has tremendous motivating power. It represents the goal that beckons the intended recipients onward into the future. A vision also creates impatience with the world as it exists. Shoghi Effendi, while visionary, was also realistic about humanity and the nature of progress. He frequently reminded Bahá'ís of exactly where they were in that process of the Faith's evolution, cautioning individuals and institutions when they wanted to reach a later stage before the essential groundwork necessary to sustain that next stage had been laid. Shoghi Effendi's vision was therefore breathtaking in concept but practical in operation. It was evolutionary and restrained.

With this realistic vision, Shoghi Effendi knew that Bahá'ís, no less than humanity as a whole, required both the beckoning vision and an occasional goad. Comfort may hinder people from moving into a new stage. In order for the Bahá'ís to propel humankind forward, Shoghi Effendi sought to move the Bahá'ís to teach and diffuse their Faith as widely as possible in a short time. Shoghi Effendi found a motivator in Bahá'u'lláh's apocalyptic writings, which he tied to contemporary events. The threat of warfare, moral degradation, social unrest, and political corruption could be motivators for those who might feel comfortable and complacent. To this was added Shoghi Effendi's frequent reminder that if Bahá'ís fail to "deliver the Message to their fellows at once . . . they are really partly responsible for prolonging the agony of humanity" (*Lights of Guidance* no. 425). Shoghi Effendi used apocalyptic rhetoric as a strategy of persuasion, as in his emphasis on the dangers faced by American cities (*Citadel* 126) coupled with the need for Bahá'ís to leave these "centers of materialism" (*Lights of Guidance* no. 448). He

directed the catastrophic imagery in his writings at those on whom catastrophe would be expected to have the severest negative impact—comfortable Westerners and Iranian believers reluctant to leave their homeland—and called them to take responsibility for spreading their Faith to mitigate the suffering of humanity. This rhetorical motif has a long history in Western religious expression and political discourse as the *jeremiad*, a complaint and lamentation about the decline and corruption of a people, viewing the present pessimistically and the immediate future as filled with calamity. Its purpose is to provoke personal and social reformation and deeper commitment to one's community and to its underlying divine purpose and plan. The jeremiad's apocalyptic persuasiveness is a basic element of discourse for all peoples that have a covenant.¹⁰

The Bahá'í Catastrophic/Apocalyptic Imagination

Scholars of millennialism use the notion of the *millennial moment* to describe events that initiate a major change in a group, religion, or society (Christensen and Savage). Millennialist movements tell their story from within millennial time, where momentous events—prophesied and guided by God—occur. Millennial time is *apocalyptic* when seen as a time of destruction and cleansing; it is *progressive* when seen as a long-term process under a divine plan. An alternate narrative is told from within what the outside observer considers “normal” time, in which people accept the existing order, make incremental changes, and take care of life's daily and often mundane requirements.

The Bábí religion was founded within apocalyptic millennial time. Though it did not isolate itself from the world, it was catastrophic in its expectation of the collapse of the old order and the installation of a new one. To move people out of one settled social system and worldview, and into a new one, involves the destruction of old structures. Shoghi Effendi emphasized the catastrophic nature of the Bábí period:

The severe laws and injunctions revealed by the Báb can be properly appreciated and understood only when interpreted in the light of His own statements regarding the nature, purpose and character of His own Dispensation. . . . [T]he Bábí Dispensation was essentially in the nature of a religious and indeed social revolution, and its duration had therefore to be short, but full of tragic events, of sweeping and drastic reforms. Those drastic measures enforced by the Báb and His followers were taken with the view of undermining the very foundations of Shí'ih orthodoxy, and thus paving the way for the coming of Bahá'u'lláh. (In Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* n109)

However, a careful study of the writings of the Founders of the Bahá'í Faith indicates that the apocalyptic rhetoric was, as Shoghi Effendi agreed, a necessary step in loosening the hold of the old order,¹¹ and not a prediction of imminent, immediate, total renewal. Consequently, in the first phase of the Bahá'í dispensation, in the Bábí Revelation, the Báb's followers were initially focused on the immediate vision of the divine theophany and the expected destruction of a corrupt order, and were only secondarily concerned with the long-term reconstruction of society. Bahá'u'lláh, in contrast, focused on the long-term transformation of human society, reminding the world of the dangers that accompany such transformations and looking toward the Most Great Peace as the ultimate goal. He gave to the imagination of His followers two related but psychologically different visions of time, progressive and catastrophic. Bahá'u'lláh's writings contain passages of extraordinary power in this regard, which serve as a basis for the subsequent authoritative interpretations by His successors and for speculative scenarios developed by some believers.

On one hand, Bahá'u'lláh is reported to have said: “Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the ‘Most Great Peace’ shall come. . . .” (qtd. in Browne, Introduction xl); that “the Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come” (*Gleanings* 60); and that the Lord “hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world. . . the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith” (*Gleanings* 257). These are progressive millennial statements.

On the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh warned of “an unforeseen calamity” and “grievous retribution”; wrote that “We have fixed a time for you, O peoples. If ye fail, at the appointed hour, to turn towards God, He, verily, will lay violent hold on you, and will cause grievous afflictions to assail you from every direction”; and predicted that “when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake” (*Gleanings* 209, 214, 119). These passages, though naming no specific date, are catastrophic millennial statements.

As Christians and Muslims entered the Bahá'í Faith, they linked these statements to existing millennial concerns and prophetic expectations within Christianity and Islam. In the Bahá'í community in the twentieth century, individual expressions of the millennial motif tended to mix authoritative texts (that is, scripture and authorized interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian) on the one hand, with unauthenticated utterances, pilgrims' notes,¹² and personal deductions or speculations, on the other.¹³

We owe in part to early Bahá'í writers in the West, but most particularly to Shoghi Effendi, the Bahá'í apocalyptic imagination of the mid-twentieth century. As I have mentioned, Shoghi Effendi quoted from Bahá'u'lláh's more apocalyptic writings as a spur to believers to take action, to move, to achieve widespread geographical diffusion of their Faith.¹⁴ From the 1930s through the 1950s, he warned of the dire consequences of humanity's continued waywardness and refusal to accept Bahá'u'lláh.¹⁵ These authoritative statements were reinforced by Shoghi Effendi's private conversations with pilgrims, during which he reportedly emphasized, in even more dire and specific language, the terrible results of human stubbornness.¹⁶

Of all Shoghi Effendi's works, *The Promised Day Is Come* stands out first and foremost as a distillation of the apocalyptic elements present in the Bahá'í teachings and worldview. Written in early 1941 to the Bahá'ís of North America, it set World War II specifically, and the entire sweep of Old World decline generally, in the context of a judgment from God for humankind's refusal to accept His latest Manifestation. Shoghi Effendi thus gave authority and sanction to apocalyptic sentiment in the Bahá'í community, adding a dimension to Bahá'í thinking beyond the primarily social emphasis of the second and third decades of the century.

Bahá'í Visionary and Catastrophic Sentiment in the Twentieth Century

The tension between a progressive millennial vision and the apocalyptic imagination is clearly demonstrated by three time periods during the twentieth century that were the focus for some Bahá'ís' predictions of dramatic events they hoped would establish a new peaceful civilization.

Predictions about 1917 (Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá)

Ibrahim Kheiralla, an early convert of Lebanese Christian heritage, became a Bahá'í in Egypt and entered the United States in 1892. By 1894, Kheiralla was teaching the Bahá'í Faith in a series of private lessons. Among the predictions he espoused was one that associated Daniel's prophecy of 1,335 days (Dan. 12:12) with the initiation of the millennial kingdom in A.H. 1335 or A.D. 1917. Kheiralla also taught in his lessons that grave calamities would occur before 1917, including wars in which a fourth Napoleon would defeat Germany and persecute the believers. He predicted that a third of the world's people would become Bahá'ís in 1917 (Browne, "Materials" 83). This prediction was reiterated by Paul Kingston Dealy in his book *The Dawn of Knowledge and the Most Great Peace* published in 1903, 1905, and 1908. He explained that in 1917 "the opposers of this Great Truth shall find themselves in the minority; then the laws and ordinances of God shall prevail to guide, rule and govern the nations of the world" (44). World War I and its aftermath of course disconfirmed Kheiralla's and Dealy's promised universal peace of 1917.

There is some evidence that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Head of the Bahá'í Faith at the time, did not endorse their views. In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told reporters for a Montreal newspaper that "all Europe is an armed camp," and that there would be a "great war" caused by the race to arms. He said that there was "nothing of the nature of prophecy about such a view. . . ; it is based on reasoning only." In the same interview he also is reported to have said that permanent peace "will be established in this century. It will be universal in the twentieth century. All nations will be forced into it" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada* 35).

'Abdu'l-Bahá apocalyptically characterized the Great War of 1914–1918 as "Armageddon," alluding to the location in northern Israel mentioned in the Book of Revelation (16:16) where many Christians expect a great battle to occur at the end of the age between the forces of heaven and the forces of hell. Corinne True reported in 1914 that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, at a talk in California in October 1912, predicted the beginning of the Battle of Armageddon in two years and said that "By 1917 kingdoms will fall and cataclysms will rock the earth" (qtd. in Esslemont [1980 ed.] (43–44).¹⁷ But in another conversation 'Abdu'l-Bahá also stated that specific conditions, as yet unrealized, were necessary for international peace (Latimer, *Light*; see also Maude). Another question asked of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was: "Is the banner of Universal Peace going to be raised after this war?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reported reply was: "Not now. This period is like the false dawn. We will see what the future brings. This has not taken place yet" (Latimer, *Light* 114).

'Abdu'l-Bahá predicted that a large-scale war must precede any lasting peace, and had stated that World War I was the battle of Armageddon foretold in the Bible. But He seems not to have encouraged the view that peace would appear suddenly in 1917 or immediately after the war. The main Bahá'í periodical, *Star of the West*, made no mention of this date as a time of millennial fulfillment. The millennial possibilities of 1917 nevertheless remained part of the popular speculation among Bahá'ís when that year arrived.¹⁸

It is clear then that predictions of fulfillment in 1917, based on association of the prophecy of 1,335 days in Daniel 12:12 with A.H. 1335, were prominent in American Bahá'í thinking. With 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West in 1911–1913, the prediction faded from prominence, although some people still expected peace in 1917. Before his passing, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote letters in which He confirmed an interpretation of Daniel's reference to 1,335 days that

was very different from Kheiralla's, saying the prophecy was to be completed, not in 1917, but in the 1957–1963 period. Some in the Bahá'í community now focused on a new date in their hope for a peaceful world.

Predictions about 1957–1963 (Ministry of Shoghi Effendi)

In 1923, J. E. Esslemont published *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, which became a standard introductory text. He included in the book a number of reported utterances by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that are not authentic, including an unauthenticated oral statement that linked 1957 with the establishment of "Universal Peace" when "misunderstandings will pass away. The Bahá'í Cause will be promulgated in all parts and the oneness of mankind established!" (Esslemont [1923 ed.] 288–89). However, authenticated manuscripts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings on this topic gave two different dates for fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. One of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's published authoritative Tablets made a calculation of 1957 but made no reference to the establishment of universal peace: "O servant of God! The aforementioned thousand three hundred and thirty-five years must be reckoned from the day of the flight of His Holiness Muhammad, the Apostle of God, (Hegira)¹⁹ salutations and blessings rest upon Him, at the close of which time the signs of the rise, the glory, the exaltation, the spread of the Word of God throughout the East and the West shall appear" (Shoghi Effendi and Blomfield 31). Another authoritative statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá calculated this fulfillment for the year 1963:

Now concerning the verse in Daniel, the interpretation whereof thou didst ask, namely, "Blessed is he who cometh unto the thousand three hundred and thirty five days." These days must be reckoned as solar and not lunar years. For according to this calculation a century will have elapsed from the dawn of the Sun of Truth,²⁰ then will the teachings of God be firmly established upon the earth, and the Divine Light shall flood the world from the East even unto the West. Then, on this day, will the faithful rejoice! (Shoghi Effendi and Blomfield 31; Esslemont [1970 ed.] 250)²¹

In 1946, the publishers of Esslemont's book inserted Shoghi Effendi's authoritative corrections as a set of notes to the text. Shoghi Effendi wrote that "in the Bahá'í teachings themselves there is nothing to indicate that any definite degree of world peace will be established by 1957, nor by 1963, the one hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'ís understand that the process of spiritual regeneration and social order is evolutionary, and that no human powers can prevent the final consummation of the divine promise" (qtd. in Esslemont [1946 ed.] ix). It is clear that 'Abdu'l-Bahá predicted that 1957 or 1963 would be momentous for Bahá'ís. The text that appeared in Esslemont's work clarified that 1963 was to be the year when the Bahá'í teachings would be firmly established. Bahá'ís accepted the validity of the 1957 and 1963 dates which 'Abdu'l-Bahá said were the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. The question was what those dates actually signified.

Despite clarifications from Shoghi Effendi, there were still some who believed that 1957 or 1963 would usher in the Lesser Peace or the Most Great Peace, rather than the completion of the edifice of Bahá'í Administration,²² and who continued to ask the Guardian questions about the meaning of those year dates. The pilgrim reports are contradictory and usually in direct conflict with the Guardian's authentic letters. Shoghi Effendi's written statements, which are the sole authoritative source, avoided all specific timetables for the Lesser and Most Great Peace. He made his authoritative interpretation very clear in 1946 when he wrote: "All we know is that the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace will come—their exact dates we do not know" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, Research Department, "Attainment" 4). Bahá'ís believe that the Ten Year Crusade (1953–1963), which ended with completion of the Bahá'í administrative structure at the election of the Universal House of Justice, was the fulfillment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of Daniel's prophecy of 1,335 days. This understanding of Daniel's prophecy was only possible after the completion of the prophesied time period, the availability of a larger body of indexed original texts, and the attainment of a longer-term perspective (Universal House of Justice, Research Department, "Daniel's Prophecies").

In his letters during the 1930s, Shoghi Effendi foreshadowed another world war. Soon after that war began in 1939, he was describing it in terms that evoked a cosmic apocalyptic significance through direct identification of the war with the "convulsion" predicted by Bahá'u'lláh (*Messages to America* 42, 45, 53). Shoghi Effendi indicated that the Second World War was simply the second stage of a titanic upheaval that began with the First World War (*Citadel* 32, 125). Yet in these statements Shoghi Effendi named World War II as the apocalyptic event destined to chasten humanity and weld it together. Why then did Bahá'ís continue to expect still further calamitous events?

Some Bahá'ís continued to wonder when or how the Lesser Peace would come into being because Shoghi Effendi provided no assurance of the imminence of that peace, but rather an analysis of the world's ripeness for additional trials of its own making. In the postwar period Shoghi Effendi saw that humanity had still not awakened to maturity. It had instead entered a bipolar world of superpowers representing rival ideologies engaged in a Cold

War that would last over four decades. Just as the responsibility for the initial phases of this convulsion was laid at the feet of those who worshiped the idols of nationalism, communism, and racism (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* ¶276), so too after the war, the essential problem continued to be that states effectively undermined international cooperation in order to defend what Shoghi Effendi saw as essentially materialist ideologies (*Citadel* 1 2 4 – 2 5).²³ The existence of such a superbloc structure, with its inherent push toward conflict, particularly while in possession of nuclear arsenals, appears to have led Shoghi Effendi to the conclusion that breaking free from this particular international order would require considerable suffering, including the possible use of the very arsenals that assured mutual destruction.²⁴ As early as 1949 Shoghi Effendi was writing that it was “too late to avert catastrophic trials” (*Lights of Guidance* no. 431). One of Shoghi Effendi’s apocalyptic reviews of the postwar international political situation was a letter titled “American Bahá’ís in the Time of World Peril,” in which he cautioned the American nation about “aggravating . . . the havoc which the fearful weapons of destruction, raining from the air, and amassed by a ruthless, a vigilant, a powerful and inveterate enemy, will wreak upon [its] cities” (*Citadel* 126).

Predictions about the Period up to 2000 (Ministry of the Universal House of Justice)

The third focus of predictions was the end of the twentieth century, when some individuals thought that the world would witness in rapid succession both the “catastrophe” and the Lesser Peace. This particular date focus was in fact the one with the longest life. In a sense, both 1917 and 1957/1963 fell under its umbrella. In 1906, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a letter in which He outlined seven “candles” of unity or principles of social life and governance for a world community. These were unity in the political realm, unity of thought in world undertakings, unity in freedom, unity in religion, unity of nations, unity of races, and unity of language. One portion of this letter is of special importance: “The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland” (*Selections* 32). Only “unity of nations” is linked to a specific time period—the twentieth century.

Possibly from the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá there were believers who were convinced that “the unity of nations” was a reference to the establishment of the Lesser Peace by the end of 2000. Many Bahá’ís and academics who have studied the religion have noted that a significant number of Bahá’ís in the West after 1945 subscribed to the Lesser Peace’s definite establishment toward the end of the century.²⁵ As late as 1989, a Bahá’í author wrote that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to unity of nations being established in the twentieth century “would lead us to assume that the Lesser Peace, the political unification of nations, will be established before or at the end of the twentieth century” (Lee 92). There was thus in existence some secondary literature and a few informal beliefs regarding the establishment of the Lesser Peace by a specific date, based in large part on a single statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about the unity of nations being established in the twentieth century.

In all three time periods mentioned above, some members of the Bahá’í community seized upon interpretations of biblical or Bahá’í prophecy that highlighted particular dates as the inception of the Lesser or Most Great Peace. These individuals thought that peace would come as an event in a specific year following another event—the calamity or catastrophe. The initial prediction for 1917 expected the quick establishment of peace after a war. As the century progressed, the predictions tended to greater pessimism, as humanity demonstrated its destructive capacities. Each prediction of the peaceful kingdom’s arrival at a particular date was accompanied by clear foreshadowings of calamity and catastrophe, each calamity more destructive than the ones previously predicted. Believers who tended to emphasize these were the more pessimistic and apocalyptic minded who thought that specific disastrous events would purge the unrepentant world of its corruption. These datings are tied to worldwide conflicts of the twentieth century—World Wars I and II and the Cold War/Nuclear Era. In every instance there existed an expectation that the catastrophic event(s) would be followed by international cooperation and permanent peace (see Figure 2).

Millennial Dates

Date	Preceding Event	Symbol	Expectation	Later Interpretation	Result
1917	World War I	Armageddon	Most Great Peace?	1st Stage of Titanic Struggle	League of Nations
1956/1963	World War II/ Cold War	Convulsion	Most Great Peace?/ Lesser Peace?	2d Stage of Titanic Struggle/ Foretaste	United Nations
Before end of 2000	Cold War/ Communist Collapse	Convulsion?/ Prelude to Catastrophe or Calamity?	Lesser Peace	Disintegration and Integration	World Federation?

Figure 2

Bahá'í Millennialisms: From Events to Process

The twentieth century witnessed a discussion among some Bahá'ís about the pathway from the troubling twentieth century through the soon-to-be established Lesser Peace to the far-off millennial Golden Age of the Most Great Peace. It was apparently not sufficient for some that Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi had given a broad vision of the future, had warned of present dangers, and had urged the believers to spread their Faith with conviction to large numbers of people in a geographically dispersed fashion. People want some level of certainty about the future. Those who think they possess the correct chart of the future can feel more confident about what is coming because the sequence of events is laid out for them. However, the more detailed and specific the chart's predictions, the greater the threat of disconfirmation, as when someone predicts that the world will end at 1:32 A.M. Eastern Daylight Time on 5 August 2000, and then must explain the failure of the event to materialize at exactly the predicted moment. The greater danger is that such an approach puts a timetable or an individual's interpretation above submission to the spirit of the Sacred Texts.

The parties to this discussion do not fall into starkly dichotomized groups. They represent a range of perspectives. The Bahá'í focus on unity overrides the particular approach that anyone may take toward catastrophe and peace. For the community of Bahá'ís, catastrophe actually plays only a small role, which is viewed in a larger context of historical development. Nevertheless, in the course of the century three general frameworks of understanding emerged: *catastrophic*, *spiritualizing*, and *progressive*.

(1) *Catastrophic*. One portion of the community subscribed to a radical Bahá'í apocalyptic, with rather detailed expectations of sequences of events. In the three time periods mentioned, and especially at the end of the twentieth century, these individuals expected a single catastrophic event of great magnitude preceding a dramatic break from the past and the rapid entry into an era of peace. They relied heavily on Shoghi Effendi's direct predictions, on apocalyptic pilgrim notes of the 1950s, and oral transmission of apocalyptic speculation through informal channels. This approach could be termed Bahá'í "catastrophic millennialist." This example has been characterized as the "Big Bang" theory of the Lesser Peace (Wendi Momen, "How Close" 110–12).

(2) *Spiritualizing*. A second perspective adopted "apocalyptic reconceptualization," in which calamity or catastrophe became something internal to the Bahá'í Faith. In this view, the foretold catastrophes referred to events within the Bahá'í community such as the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957; or Bahá'u'lláh's, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's, and Shoghi Effendi's dire warnings were given a purely spiritual (that is, metaphorical) interpretation, thus removing the possibility of their physical fulfillment; or the warnings were seen solely as a rhetorical device to encourage action. These individuals embraced the vision of the Lesser Peace and Golden Age, but tended to diminish warnings of physical calamity in the authoritative Bahá'í writings in favor of something more internal to the individual or the community. This approach might be called "spiritualizing apocalyptic millennialist" (Piff 128).

(3) *Progressive*. This framework included two different views of catastrophe: (a) that catastrophe was still possible and (b) that the catastrophe was over. The first approach employed historical contextualization, in which the notion of catastrophe was seen in light of the historical periods in which catastrophe was at the forefront, especially as mediated by the historical processes of social and political development represented by the series of wars and efforts towards wider forms of governance in the twentieth century. It was more historically realist, accepting some possibility of further catastrophe. This view might be termed "Bahá'í medium-progressive millennialist." A similar approach was expressed in a totally progressive view of the religion's millennial aspiration, postulating that (a) apocalyptic events predicted in the Sacred Texts are capable of many interpretations; (b) these events have already occurred; (c) humanity has progressed by means of these experiences; and (d) the future would be catastrophe-free from the present through the establishment of the Lesser and Most Great Peace. This view might be termed "Bahá'í

total-progressive millennialist.” These latter views have been characterized as the “Process Theory” of the Lesser Peace (Wendi Momen, “How Close” 112–14).

According to studies on this topic, some Bahá’ís do engage in “date-setting” and creating “typological frameworks,” but most regard the problems of the world as indicating the desperate need for the solutions provided by the Bahá’í Faith (Smith, *Babi and Baha’i Religions* 144). In effect, the present-day order is rejected at the ideological or theoretical level, without taking on a world-rejecting attitude. Millennialism is simply one of several *motifs* by which the religion’s concerns can be described. This motif focuses generally on the hope for the Lesser Peace and the future Most Great Peace, and the grounding of that hope in a focus on the exigencies of the present (Smith, “Millenarianism” 270–71). The studies reflect the range of views already described. Some scholars claim that “we are past the worst of the catastrophes that humanity has to endure” (Moojan Momen, “Millennial Dreams”), arguing that Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice have moved Bahá’ís further away from pocalypitic.²⁶ Another scholar sees the unofficial discourse about catastrophe as a “medium for managing the community’s anxieties” about past and potential disasters, and for assuaging a communal guilt about living too comfortably in the materially prosperous societies of the West (Piff 129–30).

There also exists an approach to Bahá’í texts which compares personal spiritual growth to social development, one aspect of which is the transition from the Lesser Peace to the Golden Age and the Most Great Peace. It emphasizes that only through clear demonstration of the defective nature of human management of the earth can humanity awaken to the need for a more comprehensive spiritual solution to the world’s problems. The expected catastrophic “ordeal,” which will occur as one or more events, becomes viewed as the stage of “transitional labor” in childbirth, which signals the imminent appearance of the child but is also the most severe stage of childbirth. This approach focuses on the necessity of enduring the process involved in giving birth to the Lesser Peace, and on the meaning and ultimate result of the experience.²⁷

The majority of Bahá’ís, unlike the very catastrophic or very progressive, are likely to have subscribed to a “theory” of the Lesser Peace that simply awaited clarification from the Universal House of Justice and the unfolding of events. The approach taken by the Universal House of Justice considers as true and relevant all of the statements in the Bahá’í Sacred Texts, whether referring to catastrophe, the Lesser Peace, or the promised Most Great Peace, but treats them as part of a harmonious whole. Shoghi Effendi wrote that “one might liken Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them” (*Compilation*, vol. 1 no. 506). The Universal House of Justice therefore does not spiritualize all references to catastrophe, relegate them to the past, or dismiss them. It treats the more apocalyptic statements as part of a coherent description of spiritual processes that inevitably involve pain and joy, suffering and triumph, effort and reward. The Universal House of Justice does not ignore the potential physical fulfillment of specific warnings, but it avoids an undue emphasis on catastrophe and carefully eschews specific date predictions.²⁸

The approach taken by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice—to embrace the potential visible fulfillment of all apocalyptic and progressive statements in the Bahá’í writings while maintaining a moderate focus—has served as a corrective to the tendency of some individual Bahá’ís to take unbalanced positions. The discourse on millennialism in the Bahá’í community is shifting, but not in the sense of moving *away from* apocalyptic and *toward* progressive millennialism, since both elements are represented within the authentic grounding of the Bahá’í Faith. The shift proceeds in two areas: (1) the illumination of misguided directions of thought, energy, and emotion that result from dwelling on speculations and personal interpretations; and (2) a focus on the processes that lead to the Kingdom of God—processes within which both catastrophe and progress operate.

Minimizing Speculation: The Guidance of Authoritative Institutions

Anticipation that the Lesser Peace would come into being before the end of the twentieth century, preceded by a catastrophe, was a preoccupation that interfered with some individuals’ functioning and choices. In 1949, Shoghi Effendi responded to a believer who asked him about the catastrophe, advising the believer to “go ahead and plan your college education” (*Lights of Guidance* no. 439). Clearly this individual had contemplated the possibility that the imminence of the apocalyptic upheaval might make it impractical to go to college. In 1954, during the time when nuclear fears were at their height, Shoghi Effendi told the Bahá’ís that they should not “waste time dwelling on the dark side of things” and that he “saw no cause for alarm,” although he wrote that any thinking person could well understand from the experiences of the previous war and the nuclear arms race that big cities were in danger. He advised Bahá’ís to serve their Faith by leaving these centers of materialism and dispersing to towns and villages to diffuse the Bahá’í teachings (qtd. in International Teaching Centre).

By 1974, the Universal House of Justice was writing to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States about “the preoccupation of some American believers with the date of the Lesser Peace, and with their feeling that ‘the calamity,’ as a prelude to that peace, is imminent.” In that letter, the House of Justice verified

that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had linked the establishment of the unity of nations to the twentieth century, but that the Guardian had himself specifically written that the exact dates of the Lesser and Most Great Peace were unknown. The House of Justice advised that Bahá’ís “should not permit this inevitable process to deter them from giving their undivided attention to the tasks lying immediately before them” (*Messages* no. 149). In succeeding years, it continued to communicate that “we do not know what form these upheavals will take, when exactly they will come, how severe they will be, nor how long they will last” (qtd. in International Teaching Centre). The House of Justice advised Bahá’ís not to “be diverted from the work of the Cause by the fear of catastrophes,” but to “understand why they occur,” and not to “waste their time and energies in fruitless speculations on this question” (qtd. in International Teaching Centre).

A decade later, in 1984, member of the Continental Board of Counsellors Dr. Peter Khan, on a visit to North America, noted that some believers were preoccupied with fears of impending calamity, and that these fears were diverting them from teaching the Bahá’í Faith and supporting the immediate plans and goals of the Bahá’í community. The International Teaching Centre advised the Counsellors in the Americas to educate Bahá’ís about the inauthenticity of pilgrim notes, the nature of catastrophic events associated with disintegration of the old order, and the believers’ response to the prospect of “an unforeseen calamity.” The Bahá’í Faith, it noted, clearly expects humanity to traverse this period of turmoil to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, with believers finding their “true salvation” through pursuit of the plans immediately before them. Disintegration is a feature of the current world system—a system that is in itself an impediment to the forward movement of the Bahá’í Faith (International Teaching Centre).

These official communications are primary evidence that the expectation of the Lesser Peace by the close of 2000 and its being ushered in by a catastrophe were of sufficient spread in the United States to warrant attention from the community’s international institutions. While the institutions were cautioning Bahá’ís not to become too fixed on calamitous events, the institutions would not disavow or diminish the possibility of further ordeals precisely because calamity and catastrophe are an authoritative part of the Bahá’í writings and are an observed part of human existence. The institutions would only place the references to such upheavals in a context that might lessen fears and preoccupations, and focus Bahá’ís on immediate exigencies rather than hypothetical situations.²⁹

What, When, and Where Is the Lesser Peace?

Among American Bahá’ís throughout the century, and particularly from the mid-1930s, when Shoghi Effendi wrote his seminal “World Order” letters,³⁰ through the fall of communism in 1990, there was considerable expectation that by the end of the twentieth century the Lesser Peace would be established. Bahá’ís developed different positions with regard to its establishment. Believers who leaned toward the notion of a single calamity were quick to link that calamity’s timing to the end of the twentieth century and the establishment of a definitive and clearly visible Lesser Peace. Those who leaned toward progressivism were inclined to consider the twentieth century to have exhibited movement toward the foundations of the Lesser Peace over the course of a long calamitous period that was now largely completed.

In issuing a recent clarification of Bahá’í texts on the catastrophe, the Lesser Peace, and the twentieth century, the Universal House of Justice has explained how the adherents of both of these views misapprehended the Bahá’í approach to calamity and the Lesser Peace: (1) the Lesser Peace, a political pact of states, is not yet created;³¹ (2) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to establishment of the unity of nations in the twentieth century³² was not a promise or prophecy of the Lesser Peace; (3) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s actual promise regarding the Lesser Peace was “unity in the political realm,” but no date was associated with it; (4) the Bahá’í writings do not appear to indicate that “the calamity” *must* occur before the Lesser Peace; (5) nowhere in the Bahá’í texts is there an indication that the period of the Lesser Peace will be free of upheaval (Universal House of Justice, Research Department, “Attainment”).

Process

A focus on dates tends to lead to a focus on events—discrete happenings that can be pinpointed in time, bracketed by a clearly defined before and after. If one thinks of the catastrophe and the Lesser Peace as occurring on a given date, one isolates them from the flow of time. In contrast, the Bahá’í Faith’s focus is on a long-term series of processes that work together organically and give perspective to events that attain appropriate levels of value in the overall movement toward a goal.

Since 1963, the Universal House of Justice’s method of planning has changed from a series of primarily numerical goals to a series of process goals intended to stimulate conditions that will foster continued learning and growth. Its annual messages at Ridván, particularly beginning in 1996, emphasized progress, process, and development. It reiterated the goal of “a significant advance in the process of entry by troops” which must involve “marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local

community” (Universal House of Justice, Message . . . Ridván 153 ¶17–19).” Initiatives to raise institutional capacity, improve presentation of Bahá’í principles to public policy-makers, strengthen external affairs, create educational and training programs, develop families, and improve devotional life have been highlighted. The Universal House of Justice also gives salience to

a realistic approach, systematic action. There are no shortcuts. Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá’í service. . . . While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act. (Universal House of Justice, Message . . . Ridván 155 ¶10).

However, events do not comprise the process. Specific events are snapshots of points in a process at a given time. If World War II is viewed only in its destructive aspect isolated in time, the observer loses sight of the learning that made possible the creation of the United Nations and the first real steps toward use of international peacekeeping forces. To make the future event-centered by focusing on “the catastrophe” is potentially to encourage carelessness of personal responsibility in favor of a one-time occurrence that will miraculously remedy what Bahá’ís see as humanity’s rejection of Bahá’u’lláh. If the Lesser Peace is regarded as an event rather than a process, disappointment is likely when the Lesser Peace emerges only gradually from a long and complex chain of decisions and changing perspectives, and discouragement when the hard work of sustaining the Lesser Peace over the long term actually begins.

A focus on *events* may encourage an addiction to easy fixes for complex problems. A focus on *process* leading to specific goals encourages individual and collective responsibility for the development of humankind. Process is a sustained phenomenon marked by gradual forward movement toward an intended outcome. It mirrors the organic way in which life develops:

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and foetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, until at last he reaches the plane where he can befittingly fulfill the words: “the most excellent of Makers.” Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 107)

What Kind of Millennialists Are the Bahá’ís?

To ask whether the “correct” description of Bahá’í millennialism is “catastrophic” or “progressive” misses the dynamic of the millennial moment and the millennial enterprise. It is possible, as this paper has demonstrated, for reasonable people to come to either conclusion. Certainly it is difficult to escape the more catastrophic possibilities suggested by Bahá’u’lláh’s definiteness, even while He leaves the nature and time of the event unspecified: “*the appointed hour*,” “*that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake*,” and “*an unforeseen calamity*” (not simply “unforeseen calamities”). Yet the goals, program, and general long-term optimism of the Bahá’í vision lead to the conclusion that progressivism is the millennialism that Bahá’ís have chosen and that Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings support. This is particularly evident in the increasing emphasis on process.³³

Evolutionary science has a theory of “punctuated equilibrium” (Eldredge and Gould). This theory postulates long periods of stability interrupted by sudden catastrophic events from which great bursts of natural creativity and evolution ensue. Punctuated equilibrium stands in contrast to the concept of gradual evolution, where a species makes incremental changes to the point that it differentiates into new species. The fossil record indicates that microscopic organisms are more likely to undergo gradual evolution, whereas large complex organisms maintain species stability for millions of years, undergoing infrequent but very rapid periods of speciation following calamitous events. I propose that the millennialist impulse in the Bahá’í Faith is “punctuated progressive millennialism.” The Bahá’í Faith has a generally positive progressive outlook, in which Bahá’ís are building the Kingdom of God according to a divine plan in a gradual evolutionary mode. It retains, however, elements of concern and expectation of one or more world-shaking events. When these events occur, they are expected to lead to the ultimate defeat of reactionary, disintegrative forces and give impetus to progressive, integrative ones, resulting in a “mass extinction” of old ways and rapid dissemination of Bahá’í responses. Progress and catastrophe are alternating faces of the same evolutionary coin.

Bahá'ís anticipate that there will be a centuries-long period when the simultaneous processes of disintegration and integration operate. Will there be a single earth-shaking calamity that will revolutionize the fortunes of the Bahá'í community? Only future events will tell. In any case, the Bahá'í Faith will almost certainly remain a religion with strongly manifested progressive millennialism and a periodic infusion of the catastrophic type. Progressive millennialism is at the fore, but the catastrophic element remains, because it is part of the Bahá'í writings.

Bahá'ís envision the future millennial kingdom as a stable, peaceful, and prosperous civilization operating under spiritual principles, built through centuries of difficult work under the disintegrative and integrative forces of which Shoghi Effendi wrote. Among those forces may yet be an “appointed hour,” an “unforeseen calamity,” of sufficient magnitude for Bahá'ís to be able to point to it definitively as what Bahá'u'lláh indicated in His writings. It is clear, in light of terrorist attacks on large American cities, the proliferation of nuclear weapons among small unstable nations, and continuing threats and violence in the Middle East and elsewhere, that the worst is not over. The view that humanity had suffered its greatest calamities by the end of the twentieth century seems naive at best. The world continues to be faced with seemingly intractable problems. The Bahá'í writings also refer to future large-scale opposition to the Bahá'í Faith—a prospect that should give members of the Bahá'í community some food for thought about the difficulties yet to be faced (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 17–18, 25–26). As stated in *Century of Light*, published in 2001,

Merely to state the goal is to acknowledge the great distance that the human race has yet to traverse. It was against the most intense resistance at every level of society, among governed and governors alike, that the political, social and conceptual changes of the past hundred years were achieved. Ultimately they were accomplished only at the cost of terrible suffering. It would be unrealistic to imagine that the challenges lying ahead may not exact an even greater toll of a human race that still seeks, by every means in its power, to avoid the spiritual implications of the experience it is undergoing. Shoghi Effendi's words on the consequences of this obduracy of heart make sober reading. (138)

Thus when we consider the future from a Bahá'í perspective, what can be known for certain is that the Bahá'í community, no less than any other community in history, is forced to deal with reality on reality's own terms, and then influence and shape it as far as the Bahá'í collective purpose and social conditions will allow. The history of Bahá'í millennialist thinking has run along a continuum from catastrophic to progressive. The mix of catastrophic and progressive modes has an authoritative base in Bahá'í scriptures. The human expressions and expectations of these modes, however, have originated in the partial understanding of believers, moderated by the authoritative guidance provided by the successive heads of the Bahá'í Faith. The typologies of millennialism that have been considered here cannot be isolated from history. They are subject to what will actually happen rather than to what individuals hope, expect, or predict will occur. Nevertheless, the expressions of millennialism in the Bahá'í collective understanding do have a particular effect on how this community faces its future. The long-term progressive view engenders hope, makes possible the desire to invest in the envisioned future, and renders individuals and communities responsible for social development. The concept of a calamity may remind Bahá'ís that the hand of Providence is the ultimate director of change. It is possible that a group of people which is surprised by neither progress nor catastrophe may have the greater capacity to shape and choose the future.

Notes

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1. For other treatments of the millennialist impulse in the Bahá'í Faith, see the sources by Collins, Lambden, Momen, Smith (“Millenarianism”), and Stockman.
2. See Cohn; Barkun, *Disaster and Millennialism and Violence*.
3. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh claim to fulfill the expectation of Jesus Christ's return. That return has occurred before the world's spiritual renewal. In the conventional terminology, the Bahá'í Faith could thus be called pre-millennialist. Nevertheless, the Kingdom of God on earth must be built by humanity, which would make the Bahá'í Faith post-millennialist. The conventional terminology is thus inadequate to describe the Bahá'í Faith.
4. See Wessinger, “Millennialism” 47–59; *How the Millennium; Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence*; Landes; Wojcik.

5. The Bábí phase (1844–1853) of the Bahá'í religion was a millennial movement that arose within Shí'ih Islam and directed its message of fulfillment primarily toward that audience, frequently in a catastrophic mode— i.e., early Bábís expected the imminent rapid collapse of the existing order and its replacement by a Bábí society, and were willing to engage in armed self-defense (See Nabíl-i-A'zam 324–99, 527–81; Amanat 372–404; Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions* 21–29). The Bahá'í period (1853–) tends to be a progressive millennialist religion with a fundamental belief in the human destiny to build the Kingdom of God on earth by means of the divine plan articulated by Bahá'u'lláh and his successors.
6. See Piff 118–19; Universal House of Justice, “To the Believers.”
7. Although additional Manifestations of God are expected to appear approximately every thousand years, Bahá'ís also believe that certain universal Manifestations overshadow those that follow. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá stated that the Bahá'í cycle, during which Bahá'u'lláh will overshadow future Manifestations, is to last 500,000 years (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 102).
8. See Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* ¶301; *World Order* 39–40, 162; Hatcher 235–76; Lee.
9. See Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day*, ¶301; *World Order*, 162–63; Hatcher, 277–42.
10. See Bercovitch; O'Leary; Heller.
11. The gathering of leading Bábís at the small Persian town of Badasht in 1848 was a prime example. Táhirih, the sole female disciple of the Báb, appeared unveiled and proclaimed the abandonment of Islamic orthodoxy for a new divine law and a new religion.
12. Pilgrim notes are historically important for their background influence on the community. In this study, the most important such notes are those recording Shoghi Effendi's words about the future as he spoke at dinner with pilgrims. Shoghi Effendi indicated that such notes “need not be suppressed, but they should not also be given prominent or official recognition” (*Lights of Guidance* no. 1436). A 26 February 1933 letter written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to an individual states: “Shoghi Effendi has often said that the notes of pilgrims should be for their own personal use and bear absolutely no authority. What he desires to convey to the friends at large he always says in his general letters” (International Teaching Centre). The Universal House of Justice reiterated similar sentiments in a 23 January 1980 letter: “The instructions of the Master and the Guardian make it very clear that pilgrims' notes are hearsay and cannot claim the authority and binding power of the Sacred Text. . . . Moreover, the fact that the pilgrim writing of his experience is a reliable or well-known believer, or that the reported statement seems to be repeated in the notes of several pilgrims, does not in itself confer authority upon the pilgrim's note in question” (International Teaching Centre). For a sociological discussion of this topic, see Piff 35–44.
13. The Universal House of Justice writes that “a clear distinction is, however, drawn in the Bahá'í writings between authoritative interpretation and the understanding that each individual arrives at from a study of its Teachings. Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the Teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a greater comprehension of the Faith. Such views, nevertheless, lack authority. In presenting their personal ideas, individuals are cautioned not to discard the authority of the revealed words, not to deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, and not to engage in controversy; rather they should offer their thoughts as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that their views are merely their own” (in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* n130).
14. “Catastrophic millennialism” in the Bahá'í Faith is characterized by preoccupation with the possibility that divine intervention may bring about catastrophes that will reinforce the fortunes of the Bahá'í Faith. This catastrophism is not one in which Bahá'ís would consider hastening the catastrophe through their own actions, as such activity is strongly abhorred in the Bahá'í teachings. Acts of violence are forbidden to Bahá'ís. External academic observers (e.g., Balch; Balch et al.) have sought examples of exaggerated catastrophic emphasis among a handful of excommunicants who claim to represent “Bahá'í” beliefs. The Bahá'í community gives neither recognition nor legitimacy to these individuals, who have placed themselves outside the boundaries of the Bahá'í Faith.
15. See for example, *Citadel of Faith*, *World Order*, *Promised Day*.
16. See Piff 40–41 and pilgrim's notes by Dudley, Sabri, and Moffett, which warn of destruction of cities in the United States and of Americans becoming refugees. They reported in these notes that the calamity cannot be averted.
17. Esslemont's book, which quoted this passage, was initially published in 1923. Mrs. True's 1914 report had limited Bahá'í dissemination except for a longer variant that appeared in 1919 (Masson). In April 1916, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá referred back to His predictions: “During my stay in America I cried out in every meeting and summoned the people to the propagation of the ideals of universal peace. I said plainly that the continent of Europe had become like unto an arsenal and its conflagration was dependent upon one spark,

and that in the coming years, or within two years, all that which is recorded in the Revelation of John and the Book of Daniel would become fulfilled and come to pass. This matter, in all probability, was published in the San Francisco Bulletin,

12 Oct. 1912” (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 22; *Star of the West* 7.9 [20 Aug. 1916]: 85).

18. Eric Adolphus Dime wrote an article for a prominent literary magazine entitled “Is the Millennium Upon Us? (The Bahais Claim that this Is that ‘Great and Terrible Day of the Lord’).” He described the Great War as the “leading topic of discussion” at the 1917 Bahá’í Convention, with Bahá’ís expressing confidence peace would come before the end of the year. Dime nevertheless records that the Bahá’ís were careful to note that no one can predict the future. Dime reports that the Bahá’ís’ expectation of peace was moderated by their view that the period of adjustment after the war would require some time before perfect peace was reached. (167, 180).

19. Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina, which took place in 622 C.E. ($622 + 1355 = 1957$).

20. Calculated from Bahá’u’lláh’s Declaration in the Garden of Ridván in 1863 ($1863 + 100 = 1963$).

21. The 1,335 days have been interpreted by some Bahá’ís as 1,335 solar years from the full establishment of Islamic institutions in Arabia in 628 to the full establishment of Bahá’í institutions. In 1963 the Universal House of Justice was elected, completing the administrative structure called for by Bahá’u’lláh. See also Universal House of Justice, Research Department, “Daniel’s Prophecies,” for an explanation of this prophecy’s fulfillment during a time period spanning 1953–1963.

22. Maxwell 40; Kenny 1; Orbison; Holley 44. Horace Holley, the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, was so sure of Shoghi Effendi’s intention in “The Goal of a New World Order” (*World Order* 48) that he stated that Shoghi Effendi had made a “definite prediction” that the Most Great Peace would be established in 1963.

23. The letter was written 28 July 1954.

24. Shoghi Effendi’s widow wrote: “Far from having rounded the corner and turned our backs forever on our unhappy past, there was ‘a steadily deepening crisis.’ In March 1948 he went still further in a conversation I recorded in my diary: ‘Tonight Shoghi Effendi told me some very interesting things: roughly, he said that to say there was not going to be another war, in the light of present conditions, was foolish, and to say that if there was another war the Atom Bomb would not be used was also foolish’” (Rabbani 190).

25. Piff 118–19; Smith, *Babi and Baha’i Religions* 140–44; McMullen 114–15. I took a convenient nonscientific sample at the annual conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies in Seattle, Washington, on 2 September 2001. Of approximately one hundred Bahá’ís present, about 95 percent indicated that at some point in their Bahá’í lives, they had believed that the Lesser Peace would be established by the end of the twentieth century. Those who expected “the Catastrophe” during the twentieth century before the establishment of the Lesser Peace constituted less than 10 percent.

26. Lambden; Moojan Momen, “Millennial Dreams” and *Phenomenon of Religion* 242–67. Recent events such as the spread of terrorism, the devastating effect of long periods of warfare in regions such as the Congo, the growing disparities in wealth and poverty, and periodic famines, seem to counter the argument that calamities are over. It is difficult to see how Shoghi Effendi moved Bahá’ís away from catastrophic thinking, given his broad analysis of disintegration and integration going hand in hand, and his many strong statements about possible warfare, human-initiated destruction, and the inevitability of calamitous events. The assertion that the Universal House of Justice believes that difficulties are largely over does not match some recent statements issued by the Universal House of Justice, including its recent communication about the Lesser Peace (Universal House of Justice Research Department, “Attainment”), as well as the officially commissioned *Century of Light*. A response to Lambden states an early version of this paper’s thesis: that the Bahá’í writings expect occasional calamitous events and catastrophic periods, and that it is unrealistic to bracket or dismiss the more apocalyptic statements as no longer relevant simply because they have been historically contextualized (Collins, “Apocalyptic”).

27. See Hatcher 235–76.

28. See for example, Universal House of Justice, *Messages*.

29. The notion of what constitutes fulfillment of prophecy is not universally agreed upon within the world’s religions. One Bahá’í author has written that “there is no evidence to support the commonly held assumption that the meaning of prophecies can be understood before they have been fulfilled” (Yamartino 1). Believers will take the truth of a prophecy on faith. The difficulty is that no particular interpretation of a prophecy can be known for certain, in advance of fulfillment, to be the correct one. For a sensitive introduction to modern uses of prophecy interpretation, see Boyer.

30. The individual letters, written and sent during the period 1929 to 1936, were initially published as pamphlets within months of the date of writing. They were first collected in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, published in 1938. The letters provide an exposition of the purpose, philosophy, spiritual basis, and future prospects of Bahá'u'lláh's system of governance. It was in these letters that Shoghi Effendi clearly set out the several sequences of events: stages of peace from chaos/calamity through the Lesser Peace to the Most Great Peace; stages of governance from national sovereignty to world federation and world superstate to world commonwealth. The stages of Bahá'í development from obscurity to Bahá'í world commonwealth appeared in Shoghi Effendi's *Advent of Divine Justice*.
31. With reference to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, "The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned" (*Selections* 32).
32. "The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland" (*Selections* 32).
33. See, for instance, Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind* and subsequent statements.

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