

Library and Archival Resources at the Bahá'í World Centre

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As I am the Librarian of the Bahá'í World Centre Library, it would be very easy to make the assumption that what I am about to say is a set of official pronouncements on behalf of the Bahá'í institutions. That, however, is not the case. While every statement is as near as possible to what I believe to be true about the Bahá'í World Centre, the opinions expressed are my own, as will be the answers that I give to any questions.

Before undertaking any discussion of the published and unpublished historical resources at the Bahá'í World Centre, it is essential that we understand what the Bahá'í World Centre is. Haifa and 'Akká are the twin cities in which the spiritual and administrative hub of the Bahá'í community has been established. The Universal House of Justice is the Head of the Faith, charged with legislating on all matters not expressly revealed in the Bahá'í sacred writings, or dealt with in the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The Universal House of Justice, since its inception in 1963, has been primarily carrying out the work of general administration and executive functions, encouragement, elucidation of questions that come from Bahá'í administrative bodies and individuals, judicial functions, and general education of the Bahá'í community. The International Teaching Centre, an international institution subordinate to the Universal House of Justice, is concerned with the propagation and protection of the Bahá'í Faith. The departments of these institutions provide expertise in various areas for the support of the functions outlined above. It follows, therefore, that the primary purpose of the information resources at the international headquarters of the Bahá'í community is to provide a sound and knowledgeable basis for the continuation of these functions of legislation, propagation, protection, administration, encouragement, elucidation and education.

Secondarily, these library and archival resources will ultimately also serve the needs of scholarly researchers. The Bahá'í commitment to such

scholarship is very clear, for it is enshrined in the essential activities of three of the institutions of the faith of Bahá'u'lláh: The Centre for the Study of the Holy Texts, The International Bahá'í Library, and The International Bahá'í Archives.

The Centre for the Study of the Holy Texts.

This institution, of which the present Research Department is the embryo, will occupy a building on the arc [1] on Mount Carmel around which the international administrative institutions will have their seats. The Universal House of Justice has the duty "to analyse, classify and co-ordinate the Writings," "to elucidate questions that are obscure" and "to promulgate and apply the laws and principles of the Faith." [2] The successful carrying out of these duties, in all their far-flung ramifications, will require the existence of a Centre for the Study of the Holy Texts manned by a body of knowledgeable scholars who will study the corpus of Bahá'í scripture and interpretation in depth--codifying its teachings, principles and provisions; translating selections and entire works for publication; and preparing detailed commentaries.

An instance of what this institution may do is afforded by the process which the Universal House of Justice went through in elucidating on the question of ablutions for the Long and Short Obligatory Prayers. The process took some two years during which the relevant Bahá'í texts were compiled and sent, with questions, to the Hands of the Cause of God and to various renowned Bahá'í scholars; upon receipt of their opinions, the Universal House of Justice then studied the question itself, forming a 'view' of what it considered to be the correct decision; this was then resubmitted to the same Hands of the Cause of God and scholars for further comment; in light of their comments the Universal House of Justice then reconsidered the matter and came to its decision. So although the exact functions and staffing of this

institution will be made clear when the Universal House of Justice creates it, the above-mentioned tasks will, no doubt, be part of its mandate.

The International Bahá'í Library.

As with the Centre for the Study of the Holy Texts, the specific details of the functioning of this institution will only be clear when the Universal House of Justice calls it into being. Nevertheless, it is evident that it will perform the typical duties of a library: acquisition of published materials; arrangement and cataloguing of the items acquired; provision of reference and access to these materials.

A library, in the full formal sense of the word, has been in existence at the Bahá'í World Centre only since 1977. Before that time, a very basic collection of books was maintained with minimal bibliographic control. What is now known as the Bahá'í World Centre Library is a part of the Department of Library and Archival Services. It occupies small temporary quarters in the Seat of the Universal House of Justice--quarters which, in the future, will only house a small branch Reference Library for the Universal House of Justice. The vast majority of what is housed in these present quarters is part of the collection of the International Bahá'í Library, though not yet under the administrative framework or in the physical quarters of that institution.

The Bahá'í World Centre Library seeks to collect all published Bahá'í materials and other publications which have significant reference to the Bahá'í Faith; typescripts of articles, papers and talks delivered at conferences; background material on Iran and Shi'ah Islam; publications on social and development issues affecting the Bahá'í world; and any other literature deemed necessary to support the work of institutions and departments of the Bahá'í World Centre, and the possible needs of future scholars.

The collections of the Bahá'í World Centre Library consist of: nearly

55,000 books, pamphlets, typewritten manuscripts, and journal articles (or photocopies and microfilm of these) in approximately 400 languages [3]; 1200 Bahá'í periodical titles, 400 of which are active and currently being received; between 40,000 and 50,000 newspaper clippings on Bahá'í topics; and a small number of broadsides, posters and maps of historical interest.

Of special interest in the Bahá'í World Centre's holdings are: (1) the aforementioned Bahá'í periodicals, most of which contain historical information unavailable elsewhere. In many cases, the only complete sets, or even the only existing issues, are in the library in Haifa; (2) newspaper clippings brought together in one collection, providing not only a mine of little-known information, but also affording a day by day current history of the Bahá'í Faith around the world; (3) special collections associated with prominent individuals. There exist a number of collections associated with Shoghi Effendi, and the personal libraries of 'Abdu'l-Hamid Ishráq-Khávarí and Mírzá Abū'l-Faḍl Gulpáygānī, none of which is at present either fully inventoried, catalogued, or arranged. In the 1960s, a large portion of the library of A.-L.-M. Nicolas, the French student of Bahism, was purchased for the Bahá'í World Centre, and is now being processed.

It should be made clear that there are very few Bahá'í publications which could be said to be truly rare, although a number of items are becoming scarce. Most of the published books and pamphlets in major languages that are held in the Bahá'í World Centre Library are also available in other large research libraries in the West: the Library of Congress, Harvard University Library, the New York Public Library, Cambridge University Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, Lenin Library, the Deutsche Bibliothek, and so forth. The value of what is in the Bahá'í World Centre is that we are attempting to collect everything on the Bahá'í movement in one place, thereby significantly lessening any future problems of Bahá'í scholars and

institutions in locating this material.

While the Bahá'í World Centre Library undoubtedly has the best single collection of published materials on the Bahá'í Faith extant, it does not have everything published. As a special library, it has the task of acquiring not only each work, or each edition of every work, but every printing of every edition. So in addition to many missing works, there are also gaps in the historical record of the printings of each individual work. The Bahá'í World Centre Library maintains a lengthy want list, and is looking for contacts who are willing to assist in finding materials.

Another valuable contribution with which scholars can assist is the development of some properly done, thorough bibliographic listings of Bahá'í literature in Arabic and Persian. The compilation of something approaching comprehensive seems hopeless, even at the World Centre, where large chunks of material are missing all the way from the works printed in Bombay to materials published in Iran between 1930 and 1979. Yet without well-researched bibliographies of the publications that were produced, there is no way to know what is missing.

A further service which scholars can render is the ferreting out of Bahá'í-related material in publications and various public and private archives, and sending this information to the Bahá'í World Centre Library. Examples of such assistance include the information that Cosima Wagner's diaries contained documentation of Richard Wagner's interest in the Bahá'í Faith, and the work being done by Dr. Kent Reveridge in the papers of Count Anton Ritter von Prokesch-Osten. There is an enormous field for preliminary research work which will be of extraordinary value in writing future histories of the Bahá'í community.

Besides collecting published materials, the professional librarians and other library staff at the Bahá'í World Centre have been working on systems for the intellectual organization and easy accessibility of these

publications. There is thorough cataloguing, with access by authors, editors, translators, compilers, titles, series, alternate titles, subjects, languages, and classification or 'call' numbers. We have developed our own classification system which is a modification of the 'Baháism' section of the Library of Congress classification. This is still in the process of development, a radical refinement of it being currently under review at the Library of Congress for addition to its own classification schedules (See appendix 1). We have also created our own list of subject headings, based loosely upon the Library of Congress Subject Headings, 9th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980), Sears List of Subject Headings, 11th ed. (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1977) and the Utah Library Association's Classification Schedule and Subject Headings for Mormon Literature (Salt Lake City: Utah Library Association, 1962) (See appendix 2). A project is also under way to develop a computer-searchable index for newspaper clippings, thus reducing the time which is now required for manual searching of the files. The information to be recorded for each clipping will include author, article titles, newspaper title, place, number of column inches, whether the article was from a wire service, subjects and names. The clippings computer index system will be associated with the correspondence and archives systems which will be described later.

In the future, when the International Bahá'í Library will have been created as an institution, and will have occupied its own building, provision will, no doubt, be made for full library service to researchers and scholars. In the meantime, we are attempting to build a complete collection of works on Bahá'í topics, background material on other important related subjects, and to compile a bibliographic record of publishing on the Bahá'í Faith. A bibliography of English language works is currently being compiled and should be published, with annotations, in 1988. It is hoped that this foundation now being laid will provide a firm support for International Bahá'í Library

service to scholars at a time not too distant.

The International Bahá'í Archives.

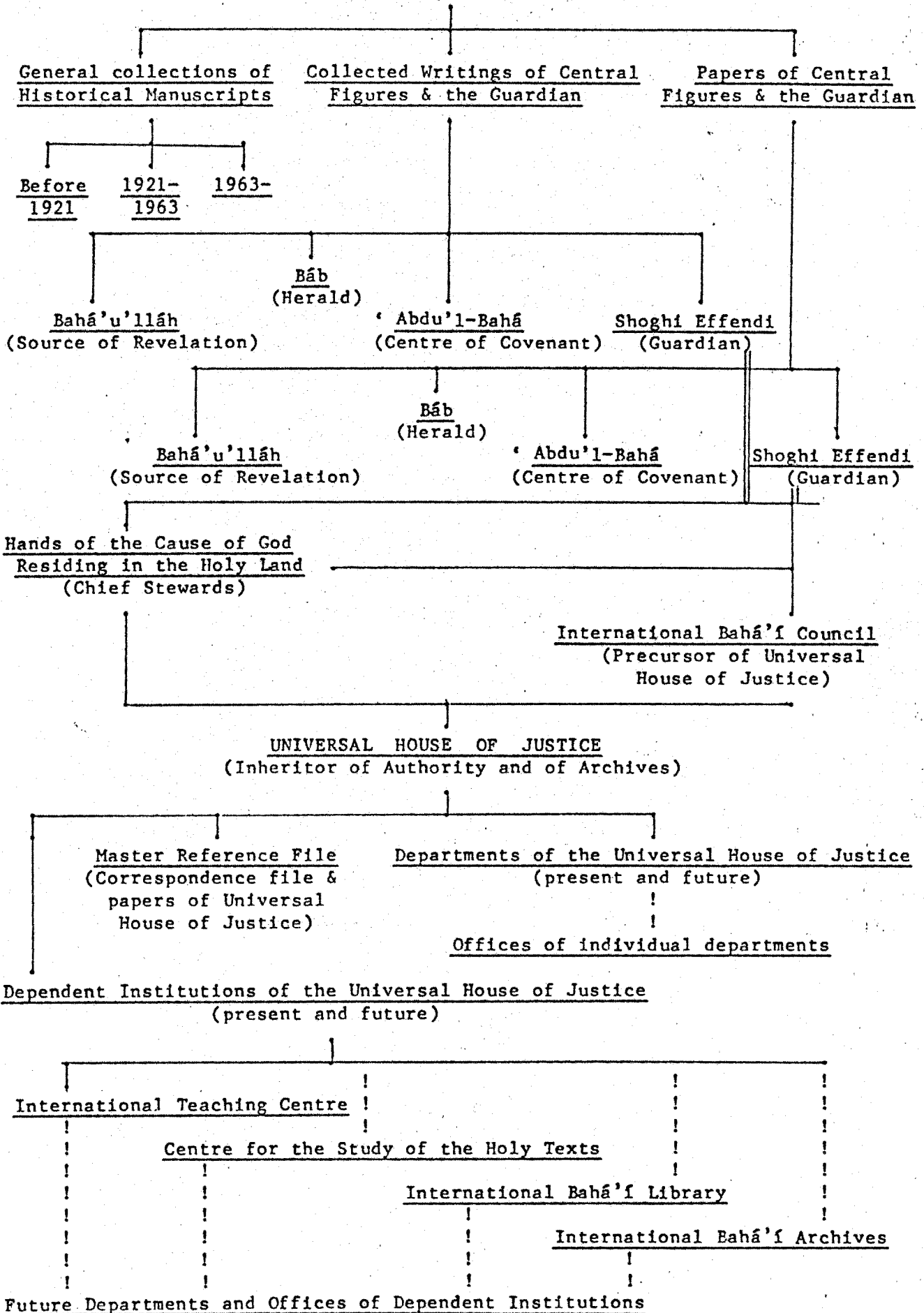
The International Bahá'í Archives are formally represented by the edifice known as the International Archives Building. This structure is not an archives in the sense of the word as generally understood by the professional archivist or researcher, but rather a museum dedicated to relics of the three Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith and of members of the Bahá'í Holy Family, and to historical objects associated with some of the outstanding promoters of the Faith. The present Archives Office of the Department of Library and Archival Services will eventually become the institution of the International Bahá'í Archives, and this museum will then come under its aegis.

As in the cases of the Centre for the Study of the Holy Texts and the International Bahá'í Library, the exact nature and functioning of this institution will be known only when it is established by the Universal House of Justice. It can, however, be presumed that its functions will include the usual ones of any archives: collecting, preserving, arranging, listing and indexing material which is not only of interest to scholars and researchers, but also of daily administrative importance to the Universal House of Justice and its auxiliaries at the Bahá'í World Centre.

The present Archives Office at the World Centre was established in 1981, and it has been only since that time that the archival material held at the World Centre has been managed on a professional basis. Like the Library, the Archives Office occupies temporary quarters in the Seat of the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá'í World Centre has, however, had an archives (although not formally organized) ever since the early years of the Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi, who took the first steps in the early 1920s towards the collection at the World Centre of the writings of the three Central Figures of

Diagram showing structure of Bahá'í World Centre Archives

"Historical Collections" inherited from preceding
Central Figures and Institutions



the Faith and Their relics. The collection of these writings was essential to his own work as Guardian in carrying forward the work of the Faith and in discharging his function of interpreter. With the relics, he established the precursor of the present International Archives Building in the three back chambers of the Shrine of the Báb (the Major Archives), and in a building near the monument to the Greatest Holy Leaf (the Minor Archives).

The Archives at the Bahá'í World Centre is unique among archives in a number of respects, the greatest and most important being that for the first time in history the authentic scriptures of a world religion, as revealed by that religion's Founders, have been systematically collected and preserved for Their successors--the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, and for the benefit of future scholars of the Bahá'í religion. Close to this in importance is the fact that the inception and growth of a universal religion has been documented by eye-witnesses and participants in the events themselves, and that a corpus of primary historical source material is being built up for the benefit of future generations of historians and other scholars of the Bahá'í Faith. As George Townshend wrote of Nabíl's Narrative in his essay entitled "Nabíl's History of the Báb," "anyone who investigates the Bábí religion is enabled to learn the true facts concerning the Founder and His immediate followers with a degree of fullness and accuracy never before possible in human history. No earlier Revelation is so well documented as this." [4]

Another unique feature of the Archives at the World Centre is the manner in which the entire body of papers, from the writings of the Central Figures right down to the files of the present offices of the Universal House of Justice, with the exception of three small collections of historical manuscripts, is interrelated (as shown in the accompanying chart). The very foundation of the work which the Universal House of Justice and its offices are doing today, and will do throughout the Bahá'í dispensation, rests on

the contents of the collections of writings of the Central Figures and the Guardian. It would indeed be a mistake to think of the information resources in the Archives at the Bahá'í World Centre as consisting only of those items which are popularly thought of as being of immediate interest to scholars of the Bahá'í Faith, namely the sacred texts, their interpretations, and the historical manuscripts which have found their way to Haifa. Archives are first and foremost the memory of an organization, and the files and papers of the Universal House of Justice and its ancillary institutions therefore also have a vital place.

The classes of papers in the Archives which are at present of most interest to researchers on the Bahá'í Faith are those consisting of the collected writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, and the complementary classes of Their papers; some small general manuscript collections containing, among other things, historical and theological works; and the papers of some distinguished early believers who were companions of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The collections of sacred writings and of general manuscripts are continually growing. The Archives attempts to obtain originals or good copies of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and letters by Shoghi Effendi or written on his behalf; relics associated with the Central figures, Shoghi Effendi or the Holy Family; other papers and manuscripts of historical value deemed of sufficient importance on an international level to merit preservation in the international archives.

Until the establishment of the Archives Office in 1981, these classes of papers were administered by the Research Department, which arranged them in an elementary fashion and produced rudimentary finding aids, including first line and subject indexes. One of the first tasks of the Archives Office upon its establishment was to analyze these 'collections' and distinguish the different classes of papers they represented, as an essential prerequisite to

their proper arrangement and listing.

One of the chief aims of the Archives Office in documenting the archival and other manuscript material at the World Centre is to make materials available for scholarly research, while at the same time minimizing the need for scholars to have recourse to the original documents. The Bahá'í scriptures and interpretations, on which the existence and activities of the Bahá'í Faith are founded, should be preserved in the original for a period of at least one thousand years, and indeed for as long as possible. Because the content of these archival materials is of inestimable value to the Universal House of Justice and to scholarly research, every effort must be made to increase the life of the physical materials on which these documents are written.

To the end that these materials may be both used and preserved, the Archives Office has embarked on a program which will result in the production of exhaustive computerized finding aids, and of high quality microfilm. Used together, these two aids to research will reduce the necessity for consulting originals to those cases where very minute examination of handwriting or of physical features which cannot be reproduced photographically is necessary.

The computerized finding aids are to be made on a DEC VAX 11/750 computer, using ORACLE software, a relational database package. The same equipment and software are being used to index the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice, which will itself eventually become part of the Archives. The tables of data for the archives system and for the correspondence indexing system will together make up one large information database for the Universal House of Justice and its offices. The common use of computer and software for the two systems is a practical demonstration of the inseparable relationship between the two bodies of documentation to which reference has already been made, and will make it possible to exploit the interrelationship to the full.

In making the computerized lists, many fields of data are to be recorded

for each individual document, ranging from authorship, place and person names, subject index terms and dates, to the identity of scribes, descriptions of seals and paper, and including data related to the previous history of the documents and references to translations, publications, and research and commentary. In addition to research data, the same lists will contain conservation data relating to the repair and preservation of documents. It is intended that these computerized lists be used not only as finding aids, but as research tools in themselves. And it is foreseen that their use will assist in the dating of many undated documents, researches into methods of authentication, the work of early scribes, and other areas of research.

From these remarks, it will be readily understood that the work of organizing and documenting the manuscripts collections and archival material at the Bahá'í World Centre is still in its very early stages. A considerable amount of time has to be spent in these stages, particularly where computers are involved, in planning and formulating standards, to the end that the programs will be as bug-free as possible when they are first put into use. The production of archival finding aids is a slow and painstaking process. An eminent British archivist, Dr. Felix Hull, has defined the task of the archivist as being "to carry out the basic work on which sound scholarship can build," [5] and this is certainly the chief aim of the Archives Office of the Bahá'í World Centre.

Access to resources at the Bahá'í World Centre

The scholar, whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, will raise the question of current access to the library and archival resources at the Bahá'í World Centre. It is clear that the Universal House of Justice wishes to encourage the development of a sound and professional scholarship on the subjects of the Bahá'í teachings, and the historical and social development of the Bahá'í Faith. It has encouraged the founding of Bahá'í studies organizations and

the development of journals on Bahá'í studies, and has lauded Bahá'í scholars and students in many letters to individuals. But there are difficulties in opening the World Centre's resources to more regular scholarly research:

First, as already noted, the primary purpose of these resources is support of legislation, propagation and protection, administration, encouragement, elucidation and education. This is not to fault the importance of scholarly research, but under current circumstances outlined below, the Bahá'í World Centre is not able at this time to accept the strain placed upon its resources by an influx of researchers.

Second, the Universal House of Justice has been charged with the preservation of the sacred text. The archival materials must last for many centuries, but this will not be possible with heavy handling. The Bahá'í World Centre has not yet found a way to make perfect facsimiles of the originals for scholars to work with, although current technology is exploring some avenues which should soon prove fruitful. Microfilming was done for the purpose of preservation, but without benefit of proper archival organization and professional microfilmmers, resulting in microfilm which is not suitable for scholarly research. The archivist is proposing a new microfilming program which will result in microfilm capable of serving for scholars as an acceptable substitute for handling of the originals.

Third, we must remember that the Bahá'í religion is quite small, numbering some three million people, the vast majority of whom are devoid of worldly wealth. The Bahá'í World Centre operates on extremely limited resources with a small staff that carries heavy burdens, and on a relatively modest annual budget. One thing which will hasten the day when more scholars will be able to use the facilities in Haifa is an increase in Bahá'í income, which will then support increased staff and increased use of technology to handle public services.

Fourth, there is an urgent need for more people with thorough scholarly expertise and grounding in the Bahá'í Faith to come to the Bahá'í World Centre to deal with identification of manuscripts and the proper annotation of archival lists. It is with the work of qualified scholars and professionals laboring for the Bahá'í World Centre that the various manuscripts and archival collections will be readied for use by academics and researchers.

Fifth, although the Bahá'í archives are not 'secret,' there are considerations which are taken into account in granting access to resources at the Bahá'í World Centre: confidentiality; timeliness and wisdom; and the indicated abilities of the potential researcher.

In the case of confidentiality, it must be remembered that the Central Figures, the Guardian, and now the Universal House of Justice, have all served as confidants to individuals and institutions who revealed the most intimate and secret details of their personal and collective lives. Many of those who wrote to Shoghi Effendi, and most of those who have corresponded with the Universal House of Justice, are still living. It would be inappropriate for the privacy of these individuals to be traduced by the very spiritual leaders in whom they have placed their trust. The Bahá'í World Centre has not yet established a records management program to provide for organized retirement of institutional records from active use, or any statutes of limitation on closure of records.

The consideration of wisdom in releasing certain materials is a less easily quantifiable judgment. Perhaps an illustration will raise some of the issues involved. There are two degrees of release of materials:

1. Release for study. As already explained, it is not feasible, for practical reasons, to have scholars come to the Bahá'í World Centre at the present time to study documents. Therefore, since it is out of the question to send original documents around the world, release for study means, in fact, the sending of a photocopy of the document or portion of document concerned.

Again, for reasons of time, staff, and other priorities, it is necessary to keep this service to a minimum. Therefore it is rendered only for those who are bona fide scholars in whose use of the document the Universal House of Justice has confidence. If the document which exists at the World Centre is in any way suspect as to its authenticity, or is in a form which cannot be photocopied, the request for a copy would normally be refused.

2. Release for publication. The question of releasing a document for publication is a different matter. No doubt there will ultimately be facsimile publications of many documents of historical or other interest, but at this time when the nature of the Bahá'í Faith is so little understood it can be highly misleading to publish individual documents out of a large collection. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas is a well-known example. When published, it will have to be accompanied by copious annotations referring to other Tablets and interpretations. This does not mean that Bahá'ís are forbidden to read the existing translations of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, or that its contents are secret. Rather, it is simply a consideration of the importance of making the presentation of Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book as accurate, clear and dignified as possible.

In the case of the abilities of the scholar, it should be noted that most archives and many libraries have a perfectly well-established practice of opening their collections only to researchers with legitimate projects or with a set of credentials accepted by those particular archives and libraries. The British Library Reference Division for instance, has a number of requirements: that the services of the library are generally for those "wishing to carry out research or reference work, normally of a long term nature, which cannot reasonably be carried out in another library"; and "if a long period pass is required" a "form...must be accompanied by a detailed description in writing of the reference or research which the applicant wishes to carry out...."; "applications must be supported by proof of identity and a written

recommendation from a person of recognised position..., based on personal knowledge of the applicant, and certifying that he or she is a fit and proper person to use the Students' Room" in the Manuscript Division. [6] That the Bahá'í World Centre has adopted criteria along these lines should not be a surprise. What is remarkable is that the Universal House of Justice has not only not generally made greater restrictions on the archival materials at the World Centre, but has continued to supply a great deal of information to those who request it, and has steadily worked toward rendering more professional the library and archival staffs in anticipation of ultimately serving scholars.

These temporary restrictions--almost total focus on legislation, elucidation, administration, encouragement, education, propagation and protection; lack of resources and qualified staff; considerations of confidentiality, wisdom, and demonstrated ability of the potential researcher--will, wherever appropriate and as development of the Bahá'í World Centre permits, loosen, culminating in a day not far distant when numbers of qualified researchers will be able to pursue their academic and scholarly studies in the library and archives in Haifa. There are, however, some services that the library and archives can perform now. Those who write the Universal House of Justice with specific questions or in search of some specific piece of information, will receive a reply based upon research done in the information resources available at the World Centre. Where possible, correspondents can be referred to other libraries and archives that hold some of the same material. Those who wish to have copies of original manuscripts and other documents will have their requests considered by a committee which will make recommendations to the Universal House of Justice. It must be recognized that the library and archives staff is unable to undertake detailed research on behalf of scholars, and that any such research could never be a substitute for research conducted by the scholar in person. There is, nevertheless, a commitment which the Bahá'í religion's supreme institution

has made to the development of scholarship as part of the totality of Bahá'í community life. It is clearly shown in the increasing library and archives staffs at the Bahá'í World Centre, in the movement toward better organization of the materials already collected, and in the anticipated future use of these materials by scholars.

Notes

1. On the Bahá'í properties on Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel, Shoghi Effendi laid out a semicircular path and gardens, centered on the graves of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sister, brother, mother and wife. Around this 'arc' will be constructed the five buildings for the international institutions of the Bahá'í Faith. Already standing are the Seat of the Universal House of Justice and the International Archives Building.
2. Universal House of Justice, "The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice," The Bahá'í World, volume XVII, 1976-1979 (Haifa: Bahá'í world Centre, 1981), p. 286.
3. Bahá'í literature has been translated into over 700 languages, but individual publications stand at almost 400 languages. This is because some of the translated material has yet to be published.
4. George Townshend, "Nabíl's History of the Báb," The Mission of Bahá'u'lláh and Other Literary Pieces, Rev. impression (London: George Ronald, 1965), p. 40.
5. Felix Hull, "Foundations," Journal of the Society of Archivists v.7 no.3 (Apr. 1983), p. 154.
6. A Librarian's Handbook (London: The Library Association, 1980), II: 191-2, 216.