

Pilgrimage and Religious Identity in the Bahá'í Faith

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The Importance of Pilgrimage in the Bahá'í Faith

There are a number of ways to build religious identity, but in revealed religions it could hardly be done without creating a strong bond to the founder of that religion, the prophet himself. There is not just a single way of accomplishing this, and in this paper one of these means, the pilgrimage, will be studied. I will start with a general discussion on pilgrimage as such and on different kinds of places of pilgrimage. I will then continue with a discussion of the "World Order of Bahá'u'lláh" as the world view in the Bahá'í Faith and how this takes its expression in the international center of the Bahá'í Faith in Haifa and the 'Akká area in Israel.

Building on the relationship between willingness to accept martyrdom and the creation of the strong bond between the believer and the prophet, I will come to the nature of the concept of martyrdom. In the Bahá'í Faith the willingness to accept martyrdom is strongly related to the relationship of the believer as a servant and Bahá'u'lláh as the manifestation of God, a spiritual king paralleling Christ as the Messiah.¹ The ideal relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and the believer is given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the position he points toward in his talks, his writings and his life was the role of a servant. The martyr in the Bahá'í Faith is thus a believer who accepts the role of a servant to such a degree that he or she gives up life itself. The difference between the individual that works with the Bahá'í administration and the martyr is a matter of degree, not of principle. Both are servants of Bahá'u'lláh and both have 'Abdu'l-Bahá as their ideal.

The general discussion of the relationship between East and West, that is so important in order to understand the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís, must be supplemented with another discussion. To understand the context of the persecutions, the East and West relationship must be discussed. To understand the reaction of the Bahá'ís, however, the discussion of the relationship between the center and the periphery is more important, as the foundation of Bahá'í identity is an individual acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet of God. This makes the dimension of center-periphery being crucial, as the believers have not been encouraged to physically gather around the leader of the community, but have been encouraged to spread to as many places as possible in order to spread the message of Bahá'u'lláh to as many places as possible.

The East-West dimension within the Bahá'í Faith has given a special role to the Bahá'í communities in Iran and the United States. The Bahá'í communities in other countries have had their own role, but these two countries have had a special importance and have formed separate platforms for spreading the Bahá'í Faith to other countries. The East-West dimension has no doubt existed as a problem within the Bahá'í community. This problem has, however, never resulted in a split in two or more separate communities as it has been balanced by an active effort to bridge over this difference and to create a united global Bahá'í community, based on a common religious identity: the ideal of the servant. The Bahá'í pilgrimage has, as an institution, been central to this solution.

Pilgrimage and Religious Identity

To go on pilgrimage is a common way to express religious belief and to create and strengthen religious identity. In the prophetic religions, it is common to go on pilgrimage to places related to the prophet, most notably the prophet grave. This is, however, far from the only kind of place for pilgrimage. Every place for pilgrimage has its own theophany and is a point of attraction of its own to the believers. The strongest position that pilgrimage has as a religious institution is probably within Islam, where pilgrimage is a religious law. In this way pilgrimage becomes closely connected to religious identity among Muslims.

Islam is a good example of the revitalizing power of pilgrimage. This came about with the increased possibility of Muslims to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, due to renewed possibilities with modern transportation. What had happened before was that the distance to Mecca was a major factor to decide whether a person could go on pilgrimage. Today there are increasing numbers of Muslims coming from all over the world on pilgrimage and return home as committed upholders of the cause of Islam. This modern trend is an important part of the background to the awakening of the Muslim world in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The Concept of Pilgrimage

The word pilgrimage comes from peregrinus (lat.) which means stranger. The pilgrim is travelling to a place that is holy to his or her religion. Travelling for religious reasons has been connected with a number of different religious movements all through history, although not with all. In Indian context pilgrimage is very well established and has been practiced by many of the existing religious traditions. In Christian context pilgrimage was mainly done to the Holy Sepulchre of Jesus Christ during the first millennium. At the end of the first millennium this possibility was denied to Christian pilgrims, a situation that resulted in the Crusade movement. This resulted in Europeans instead making pilgrimages to places in Europe that were holy to them, especially to the tombs of the saints.

In many religions it has been considered meritorious to make pilgrimages, but it has not been compulsory. In Islam pilgrimage—hajj—was emphasized by making it a law and thereby also defining it. By giving the hajj such a special station, other kinds of pilgrimage have been discouraged. Another kind of pilgrimage did, however, come into being and this kind of pilgrimage, the *zíarat*, became especially important to twelver Shí'a. The word itself is an Arabic word and means "visit." In the Shí'a context it was used especially for visits to the holy graves of the twelve Imáms. After visiting such a grave the Shí'a believer is given a title, parallel to *hajjí*, depending upon which Imám shrine was visited, such as *Karbilá'í*, *Najaf'í* and *Mashhad'í*.

Both of these concepts are found in the Bahá'í Faith. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* mentions two places of pilgrimage, the house of the Báb in Shiráz and the house of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad, and in the Arabic original, the word being used is *hajj*. When the believers go on pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Center to visit the tombs of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the word *zíarat* is used and at these shrines a tablet of visitation is read—*zíarat-námeh*² (the tomb of the Báb) and *munáját-i-laqá*³ (the tomb of 'Abdu'l-Bahá). *Zíarat-námeh* is also read in the tomb of Bahá'u'lláh. *Zíarat-námeh* is written by Bahá'u'lláh and *munáját-i-laqá* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.⁴

Is it possible to go on a pilgrimage to a living person? The definition of pilgrimage is to visit a place that is holy to one's religion, and not to visit a person. Often the goal of the pilgrimage is a shrine of a holy person or a place that is connected with divine revelation. Traditionally the *zíarat* is made to a shrine and it is connected to such a ritual. When the Bahá'ís visited Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá they did it as a way of showing a great respect and reverence. Even when it was not possible for the Bahá'ís to see Bahá'u'lláh in person during those periods when he was held in very strict imprisonment in 'Akká, they would still travel the long way from Iran in order to stand outside the prison, only to see a quick glimpse of the face of Bahá'u'lláh.⁵ These visits should, however, also be seen as a way to show a willingness to serve and it was not uncommon for them to actually be asked to do a certain kind of service.

One such example is Bádí’ who was asked to deliver a letter to the Shah, which he did. After delivering that letter, he was killed and became one of the well-known martyrs in the Bahá’í Faith.⁶

Places of Pilgrimage

In Israel there are a number of places of pilgrimage that are visited by Jews, Christians and Muslims. If the area of discussion is extended to the other countries in that region, the most central places of pilgrimage of all these religions will be included. These places have been the focus of these religions for centuries and the source of renewal of the personal faith of generations of believers. In the following discussion regarding the role of pilgrimage in the process of the creation and development of a religious identity, these places of pilgrimage will be grouped under three headings: prophet-grave, axis mundi and symbol of theocracy. My suggestion is, however, not that all places of pilgrimage can be put under these headings. It is simply a help to make a comparative discussion regarding these three different kinds of pilgrimage places. Its main purpose is, however, to form a background to the discussion about the importance of pilgrimage in the Bahá’í Faith for the development of a Bahá’í identity.

Table 1

	Prophet grave	Axis mundi ⁷	Symbol of theocracy
Judaism	Shrine of Abraham	Temple	Temple
Christianity	Shrine of Jesus	Place of crucifixion	Different places, depending on the theology of each church
Islam	Shrine of Muhammad in Medina	Mecca	Different places, depending upon which school and time intended
Bahá’í	Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh	Shrine of the Báb	Universal House of Justice

Are these places comparable? Yes, but certain comments have to be added. Abraham is a legendary person and it is most uncertain if he ever lived. There is, however, a holy place called the shrine of Abraham and it is recognized as such. It is, however, not underlined. There is no grave of Moses at hand and even if the grave of Abraham in Hebron is important to Judaism, it can in no way be compared in importance to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish Temple is a part of a ideal past and was replaced by the Scrolls of the Law in the synagogue during the time of the Diaspora. The formation of the state of Israel and its control of the city of Jerusalem has, however, again put the focus more on the Temple. I have chosen the Temple as Axis mundi and the symbol of theocracy in the table as it is a natural goal of pilgrimage to the believers.

To Christian pilgrims, there are two places of pilgrimage that are of major importance: the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the church of the Holy Sepulchre⁸ in Jerusalem. The Christian pilgrim to Jerusalem who walks through Golgata and passes all its stations would probably include the system of stations and not only the Sepulchre itself. Although there are traditions that point towards the place of the crucifixion being the axis mundi, there is no such place that is accepted by all Christians or even the majority. Regarding symbol of theocracy the situation is similar. To Catholics the Pope or the Vatican would be a common answer. To many Protestant churches it would instead be the Bible itself, and in other Protestant churches it would be the king that symbolized theocracy.

To Christianity, the pattern given in the table might not be seen as very well fitted. In Christianity there is a long tradition of pilgrimage to the shrines of martyrs and saints and, in the history of Christian churches, there are periods when these kind of pilgrimages have been very common. This situation, however, has not been prevalent during the entire history of Christianity; rather it has been the effect of pilgrim roads to Jerusalem being closed by Muslim rulers.

With this as a background, it seems that this typology is not a tool that can be used in all religions. Pilgrimage has been of great importance in Christian history, which can be exemplified by the Crusades. Today however, the importance of pilgrimage to Palestine is not so important, although there are great differences between different churches.

In Islam, both Mecca and Medina have been underlined, as they are a part of the same pilgrimage. There is a difference between Sunni and Shi‘a in the relationship to the tomb itself. Believers from both schools, however, visit the mosque that includes the tomb. It is not possible, though, to find an outer symbol of theocracy that can be visited during pilgrimage and that is universally accepted today.

Pilgrimage in the Bahá’í Faith

The Bahá’í Faith has in common with Islam that pilgrimage is a religious law. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas it is stated: “The Lord hath ordained that those of you who are able shall make pilgrimage to the sacred House, and from this He hath exempted women as a mercy on His part. He, of a truth, is the All-Bountiful, the Most Generous.”⁹ Regarding the “sacred House,” there are two places that are referred to: the house of the Báb in Shiraz and the house of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad.¹⁰ After the passing of Bahá’u’lláh, his shrine, called Bahjí, outside of ‘Akká was designated as a place of pilgrimage by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.¹¹ Regarding the exemption of women from pilgrimage, it was a part of the Bayán, written by the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh kept this principle. The comment from the Universal House of Justice is that it “has clarified that this exemption is not a prohibition, and that women are free to perform the pilgrimage.”¹² When referring to pilgrimage as a way of creating a Bahá’í identity today, it is zíarat that is intended. Belief in Bahá’u’lláh as a manifestation of God is the most central part of the Bahá’í Faith and by making a zíarat, the believer is strengthening his or her personal tie with the prophet. It is not possible for Bahá’ís to undertake the hajj today for reasons of security. Also, the house of the Báb in Shíráz has been destroyed, which makes this pilgrimage impossible for now. Yet detailed information about the planning of this house exists, which means that it could be rebuilt in the future.

Regarding the spirit in which pilgrimage should be made, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá talked about this to the pilgrims on the 27th of October 1914, as reported by Mu‘ayyad in his book *Khátirát-i-Habib*: “Pilgrimage should be carried out in a state of utter humbleness and devotion. Otherwise it is not true pilgrimage; it is a form of sightseeing... Many people used to come and attain the presence of Bahá’u’lláh. They saw His virtuous character, His blessed smile, His magnetic attraction and His infinite bounties, yet they remained unaffected by Him. Some others were instantly transformed by attaining His presence. Jamál-i-Burújirdí attained the presence of Bahá’u’lláh in Adrianople. With him were two men from Burújird. One of them was called Mírzá Abdu’r-Rahím. He was so influenced by the magnetic person of Bahá’u’lláh that he was completely transformed. The Blessed Beauty¹³ stated that this man within ten minutes took one step from this mortal world and placed it in the realms of eternity. It is therefore necessary to acquire spiritual receptiveness. A deaf ear will not enjoy the melody of a beautiful song, and a diseased nostril will be insensible to the perfume of the rose. The sun shines, the breeze is wafted, and the rain falls, but where the land is a salt marsh nothing grows but weeds.”¹⁴

Bahá’í Pilgrimage in the Time of Bahá’u’lláh

Bahá’u’lláh was one of the leading Bábís in Iran when he was imprisoned and banished to Baghdad. It was in Baghdad where he proclaimed himself as “Him whom God will make manifest,” which was done just before he was sent to Istanbul, and later banished to Adrianople and ‘Akká. Although it is not correct to technically call it a pilgrimage, still to Bahá’ís there was only one proper pilgrimage (zíarat) to make—to visit Bahá’u’lláh, wherever he happened to live. As he was a prisoner, it was not easy to see him and at periods it was very difficult. The majority of the Bahá’ís lived in Iran and they had to travel the long way to ‘Akká without indicating in their hometown what they were doing. One way of hiding this was to give the impression that they were going on a business trip to Bombay. Another way was to first travel to Mecca and from there to continue to ‘Akká.

There is very little written by these pilgrims to show their impressions of Bahá’u’lláh from these meetings. It was not seen proper, or possible, to formulate these experiences in words. Therefore the

best description from a meeting with Bahá'u'lláh is the one made by Professor E.G. Browne. This description was included in the most commonly used introductory book to the Bahá'í Faith, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, and this description has been much used in Bahá'í literature. The meeting with Bahá'u'lláh during pilgrimage was very important in order to create the Bahá'í identity among the Iranian Bahá'ís. The lack of descriptions from the Iranian Bahá'ís has probably more to say about their extreme reverence for him than the description that the British scholar has left to posterity, important as it is. To a certain degree it can, perhaps, be understood if one studies the reaction of the early Western Bahá'ís to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Bahá'í Pilgrimage at the Time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Pilgrimage was, in the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, properly defined in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and the additional statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh should be included in this list. The pilgrimages from Iran continued and going on pilgrimage to Bahjí outside ‘Akká became just as much a part of Bahá'í identity as it had been in the time of Bahá'u'lláh. The major change came as the Bahá'í Faith was spread to the Western world and the western pilgrims started to come. To this pilgrimage was now added the visit to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his function as the pronounced leader of the Bahá'í Faith.

Early Bahá'ís in the West

The first Bahá'ís in the West became initiated by Dr. Khayru'lláh¹⁵, who was sent by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to North America to spread the Bahá'í teaching. He did this in a very effective way, but the teachings were not entirely those teachings that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was teaching. He was a part of the first pilgrim group from the West. At this pilgrimage the difference became obvious to other Bahá'ís in this group. Some years after this pilgrimage, the early Western Bahá'ís found out that they had to choose between him and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as he did not accept ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a religious authority any more. In contact with the western Bahá'ís, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not very strict in dogmatic matters and the fact that Dr. Khayru'lláh had been teaching reincarnation seems not to have been a major problem to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, although this teaching is not a part of the Bahá'í Faith¹⁶. The problem was rather that of authority. All the Bahá'ís had to accept the authority of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant, and this also included Dr. Khayru'lláh. This personal acceptance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was central to their identity as Bahá'ís and it took its outer form by the writing of a personal letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which was sent to him.

First Pilgrims from the West

The first pilgrim group from the West left the United States on September 22, 1898¹⁷ and arrived in Haifa, Israel, about three months later. One of the members of this group, Lua Getsinger, had an overwhelming experience during that pilgrimage in such a way that her acceptance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant became not only a mere acceptance but a central part of her religious identity. She describes a meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, her last in this pilgrimage, in one of her letters:

“It was nearly dark, so we went to the apartment of the Holy Leaf,¹⁸ where we had tea and then sat talking, waiting for the ‘King’ to come. At last a servant announced that He was coming, so the two youngest daughters and myself ran out in the court to meet Him. I reached Him first and knelt down before Him, kissing the hem of His robe. He thereupon took my hand, and, saying in Persian ‘Daughter, welcome’ helped me to my feet, and keeping my hand, walked with me into the house, where I sat down beside Him while He drank some tea,—and asked me if I was ‘well, happy and content’—to which I could only reply that to be in His presence was health, happiness and contentment itself.”¹⁹

This extremely devotional behavior of Lua Getsinger towards ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not shared by all the western Bahá'ís. It would however, be common to show him great respect and devotion, although there is no indication that he demanded this behavior among the Bahá'ís. Her behavior was, however, not only devotional. For a westerner to behave like this for devotional reasons could hardly have been natural, considering the socially accepted behavior of devoted Christians in North America. The role she had accepted was rather the role of a servant, not in Western countries but in the East, and it shows her complete readiness to serve in whatever way he wished.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to North America

In 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the growing numbers of Bahá'ís in North America. Before this period it had not been possible as he was still a prisoner. On this journey he also visited Bahá'ís in Europe, and he spent some time especially in Paris where he held the speeches that were later published as *Paris Talks*.²⁰ There were other collections of talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that came out from this travel, but no other collection of talks has been used by the Bahá'í community as much as *Paris Talks*.

The Bahá'ís in North America and Europe were converts from different Christian churches and brought this identity with them into the Bahá'í Faith. They depended upon this Christian identity, which, for example, can be seen in the correspondence of Lua Getsinger. Their development of a Bahá'í identity came gradually and is much related to their personal contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In North America 'Abdu'l-Bahá had a wider field of contact with these Bahá'ís and had the possibility to continue this development. He also had contact with news media and other non-Bahá'ís. The themes around which he was concentrating could well be summarized in some headlines: *New York City Evening Mail*: "BANISHED FIFTY YEARS, LEADER OF BAHAI HERE: PERSIAN PHILOSOPHER FAVORS WOMAN SUFFRAGE AND WILL TALK PEACE..."; *New York Evening World*: "PERSIAN TEACHER OF WORLD-PEACE IS HERE"; *New York Herald*: 'ABDUL BAHA HERE TO CONVERT AMERICA TO HIS PEACE DOCTRINE.'²¹ These contacts had more than one function and, among other things, they were related to how the American Bahá'ís looked upon their own religion. In this respect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did what was expected by an international leader of a religious community. The American Bahá'ís, who no doubt were the ones informing news media, could see their leader in a position where he was welcomed with open arms by different institutions in North America. This was perhaps not so important for the Bahá'í identity of Bahá'ís such as Lua Getsinger and other deepened Bahá'ís, but it was probably crucial to the Bahá'í identity of the North American Bahá'í community at large. Even more important, obviously, was to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá in person and to hear his explanation of the Bahá'í Faith.

The Pilgrim Program

The aim of a pilgrimage is to make a visit to a holy place—to travel from the profane to the holy. This travel is a spiritual travel as well as a physical travel and this aspect of holiness takes different forms in different religions. In the Bahá'í Faith the dimension of time is important also in the pilgrimage and a part of this travel. The Bahá'í World Center is, to the pilgrim, also a symbol of the future vision of the Bahá'í Faith – the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner in the 'Akká area between 1868, when he arrived from Edirne in Turkey until he passed away in Bahjí, outside 'Akká city in 1892. Because of this there are a number of places for the pilgrims to visit. The most important place is the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in Bahjí and the residential area beside the shrine. Around this has been developed a large area of gardens. The shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is the Qiblih of the Bahá'í world, its spiritual center, as well as a very important historical place in the Bahá'í history.

When the Báb had been executed in 1850 his body was hidden by the Bábís for many years and then transported to 'Akká for burial. 'Abdu'l-Bahá started to build a shrine on the slopes of Mount Carmel, which was completed with a superstructure by Shoghi Effendí. It was Bahá'u'lláh who in 1891 pointed out the place for that shrine to be built.²² The remains of the Báb were buried in the shrine in 1909 and the superstructure was completed in 1953.²³ In the same shrine 'Abdu'l-Bahá also is entombed.

When going on pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Center, the believer is made a member of a pilgrim group upon arrival in Haifa. This group takes part in a special program with guided visits to a number of holy places in the 'Akká-Haifa area. The pilgrim program has shifted over the years as holy places have been acquired and restored by the Bahá'í community and made ready for pilgrimage. The pilgrim program presented below is thus only one example of possible pilgrim programs, but it is possible to get an idea of the main parts of a Bahá'í pilgrimage.

The program that the pilgrims normally take part in today is organized in such a way that pilgrims are able to see most of the interesting sites. There are groups from different parts of the world; in the following example from 1982,²⁴ when the present writer took part, there were four groups. Before the

Iranian revolution there could be two groups, one Persian-speaking group, coming from Iran, and an English-speaking one with Bahá’ís from the rest of the world. The system with a Eastern pilgrim group that was Persian-speaking and a Western pilgrim group that was English-speaking had been the normal situation since the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. At the Bahá’í World Center there is a house close to the Shrine of the Báb called the Pilgrim House. This used to be an Eastern pilgrim house, used as residence for the Bahá’ís from Iran; elsewhere there was a Western pilgrim house for the European and North American Bahá’ís. The Western pilgrim house is not used by the pilgrims today. Today the pilgrims stay in hotels in Haifa and the Eastern pilgrim house is used by the World Center as a general Bahá’í pilgrim center.

The pilgrim program was a nine-day program in 1982. The first day all four groups visited the Shrine of the Báb and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for prayer and meditation. The second day the pilgrims visited the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh at Bahjí outside of ‘Akká; the program included a guided tour of the mansion building as well as prayer and meditation in the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh. In the afternoon the pilgrims could meet the Universal House of Justice in the Western pilgrim house, which was then the site of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice. On the third day, the pilgrims could meet the members of the International Teaching Center. On the fourth day, two groups would visit the International Archives building, where the original writings of the Bahá’í Faith are kept, together with Bahá’u’lláh’s clothes, personal utensils, and so on. Here are also three portraits of Bahá’u’lláh (two paintings and a photo) and a painting of the Báb. These portraits should be the only ones existing in the Bahá’í community,²⁵ which means that the only possibility for a Bahá’í to see these portraits is to go on pilgrimage. The other two groups visited the prison cell of Bahá’u’lláh in ‘Akká and the house of Abbúd where Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned for some time, also in ‘Akká. The tour continued to Mazra’ih, a place outside ‘Akká where Bahá’u’lláh lived for some time, after leaving the house of Abbúd. The fifth day was a copy of the fourth day, but the four pilgrim groups took part in the program that they had not taken part in on the fourth day. Back in Haifa the pilgrims saw a slide show. The seventh day the pilgrims visited the Monument Gardens and the Temple Land, the site of a future Bahá’í Temple. The eighth day they visited Bahjí once more and the ninth day they visited the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Haifa. Today the pilgrims visit the Seat of the Universal House of Justice close to the Monument Gardens, which was finished at the end of 1982 but was not ready when my pilgrimage was performed. Pilgrims also visit other houses in ‘Akká that were not open in 1982.

The pilgrim program is centered upon the life of Bahá’u’lláh as a prisoner in the ‘Akká area and on visits to the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh and the shrine of the Báb. At each place there would be time for prayer and meditation.

The Holy Land

In the Bahá’í writings, Israel is referred to as the Holy Land,²⁶ but without any aspect of exclusiveness. According to Shoghi Effendi, the holiness of Israel is related to its long and diversified religious history—the birthplace of Judaism and Christianity, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the place where Bahá’u’lláh stayed for thirty-four years and where his remains rest today, and also where the remains of the Báb rest. Thus it is not the Holy Land, promised by God. It is rather holy in another sense, as it is considered the center of the world. I will expand on this theme in the chapter called “Axis mundi.”

Iran also has a special place in the Bahá’í writings. It is the place where three manifestations of God²⁷ were born and it is also the birthplace of three religions. There are a number of writings related to Iran written by Bahá’u’lláh. The following passage, addressed to Teheran,²⁸ can be seen as a typical example: “O Land of Tá! Thou art still, through the grace of God, a center around which His beloved ones have gathered. Happy are they; happy every refugee that seeketh thy shelter, in his sufferings in the path of God, the Lord of this wondrous day!”²⁹

The history of the Bahá’í Faith in Iran has also left behind many places of interest. The persecution of the Iranian Bahá’ís has always put Iran in focus for the Bahá’ís around the world. This focus has been given dimension through *The Dawn-Breakers* and other martyrologies. It is not, however, the Promised Land that could serve as a refuge from persecution. It has rather been the place where persecutions have been most intense.

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh

The public perception of the Bahá'í Faith tends to emphasize either of two perspectives: a broadly humanistic movement or an international religious organization that has a high moral expectation on its members with a well-defined membership. Neither of these perspectives is completely wrong. There are some broad humanistic traits in the Bahá'í Faith and these traits were emphasized especially by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and especially in contact with westerners. The same version of the Bahá'í Faith is presented in E.G. Browne's interview. Another perspective is equally true. It was emphasized in Iran and was more and more emphasized also in the West as the Bahá'í administration took its form and demanded that those who would work within that administration accepted the discipline that was necessary to keep the organization together. The first step for the individual to accept this second perspective is to accept Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of God with all that it means in following the laws and principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

These two perspectives are not usually parallel, at least not today. The perspective of the Bahá'í Faith as a general humanistic movement is usually what a person first meets before he or she gets a deeper understanding of the Bahá'í Faith and perhaps becomes a member. When a person investigates the Bahá'í Faith more closely, he/she will meet an organized religion, which includes active participation in the Bahá'í administration. As there are no personal leaders in the Bahá'í Faith, but rather a form of collective leadership on local, national and international levels, most active members take part in the administration. They will often be involved in this work to such an extent that it will be a part, perhaps a large part, of their identity as Bahá'ís.

The Nature of Bahá'í Administration

When the Bahá'í community had to cooperate in a practical way when trying to stop the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís, it obviously had to be done through the Bahá'í administrative system, which is the means of practical cooperation in the Bahá'í Faith.

To the Western student it is natural to ask the question whether or not the Bahá'í administrative system should be considered a democratic system. Regarding this question, Shoghi Effendi has written: "The Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character inasmuch as the basic assumption which requires all democracies to depend fundamentally upon getting their mandate from the people is altogether lacking in this Dispensation."³⁰

The Bahá'í administration should, according to Shoghi Effendi, rather be described as a theocratic system. "What the Guardian was referring to was the Theocratic systems, such as the Catholic Church and the Caliphate, which are not divinely given as systems, but man-made and yet, having partly derived from the teachings of Christ and Muhammad are, in a sense, theocracies. The Bahá'í theocracy, on the contrary, is both divinely ordained as a system and, of course, based on the teachings of the Prophet Himself."³¹

Bahá'í Theocracy

When Shoghi Effendi describes Bahá'í administration as a theocracy, he obviously already has some kind of theocracy in mind, but how should this kind of theocracy be described? In order to get a perspective to this question, I will start by searching for different kinds of theocracies.

In his article on theocracy,³² Dewey D. Wallace Jr., has made an overview of different kinds of theocracies and he describes four main types: Hierocracies, Royal theocracies, General theocracies and Eschatological theocracies. Of these four types, it is possible to omit the eschatological theocracy immediately, as this kind of theocracy is "centering on visions of an ideal future, in which God will rule." It is true that this kind of vision exists in the Bahá'í Faith in the concept of the "Most Great Peace," but in Bahá'í theocracy God is ruling already and has done so from the moment the Báb appeared on May 23, 1844. Seen from the Bahá'í perspective, it is rather mankind that has failed to accept this divine rule.

Hierocracy has been described as "pure" theocracy and Wallace finds a distinction between two kinds of hierocracies: one kind that is priestly and another that is prophetic-charismatic. During the time in

Bahá’í history that is called the “Heroic age” by Shoghi Effendi, 1844–1921, there is no doubt that the Bahá’í faith is best described as a prophetic-charismatic theocracy. During the time of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh the Bahá’í Faith was led by two prophets who functioned in a charismatic way. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not accept to be described as a prophet, but he was promised direct divine guidance in the Kitáb-i-Ahd (Will and Testament of Bahá’u’lláh)³³ and his way of exercising his task must be seen as charismatic in character. Therefore, he must also be described as a prophetic-charismatic leader.

Still, this period is probably not what Shoghi Effendi was referring to. He was concerned with describing the nature of the administrative system in the Bahá’í community, the system that he, himself, was building up and which was based on the teachings of the prophet himself. This administrative system is not a prophetic-charismatic theocracy, as there is no person who can be described as a prophetic-charismatic leader. Whether the period of the leadership of Shoghi Effendi (1921–1957) should be considered prophetic-charismatic is a matter of how this term is defined, but this period is a period of transition, as is the period 1957–1963. It is rather the period from 1963 onwards that should be studied, from the year of the first election of the Universal House of Justice.

The second version of hierocracy is the one ruled by priestly functionaries. This could hardly have been the kind of theocracy that Shoghi Effendi was referring to, as no priesthood exists in the Bahá’í Faith. Naturally this is dependent upon how the term “priesthood” is defined, but it is very difficult to apply it to Bahá’í administration as the members in its institutions have no priestly functions. Bahá’í administration is characterized by the existence of elected assemblies composed of nine members. These members have no special education that could characterize them as priestly functionaries and they have no special initiation that separates them from other Bahá’ís. They are elected individually with secret ballots and there is no effective system to influence the voters. There also are no guarantees that the members of the assemblies will be re-elected.

The next type of theocracy is what Wallace calls Royal theocracy.³⁴ Dewey Wallace mentions a number of examples of this kind of theocracy, but the most important of these examples are from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The most important feature of this kind of theocracy is that the king has a sacral role in the society. It is also taken for granted that the nation is the base. No king exists in the Bahá’í administration and the administration is of a global extension. In Egypt the king was a god himself and in Mesopotamia the king was a representative of the god. In this there is a parallel to the Universal House of Justice. As the Bahá’í administration is in some respects a theocratic system, the leading institution is divinely guided and the election of its members is considered being guided by God in a process of election where the voting delegates turn to God in prayers and supplicate to be guided by God when casting their votes. The Universal House of Justice is also promised infallibility in its decisions as an institution, which gives it a high degree of authority. The individual members of the Universal House of Justice, however, have no formal authority.

Considering this discussion, it might still be the royal theocracy that Shoghi Effendi was referring to, but it would be a royal theocracy cast in a new mould. If this background is what Shoghi Effendi was referring to, it would probably be the royal theocracy in the version of ancient Iran, as it is rather the Iranian culture that forms a background to the Bahá’í Faith than the culture of Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt.

The description of general theocracy is also applicable to the Bahá’í Faith. The Báb and Bahá’u’lláh are manifestations of God who left a vast number of revealed writings. Also the life and writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are, to a certain degree, considered to be revelations, as they are believed to be inspired by God. Other examples of general theocracy are connected to divine law, like the Sharia law in Islam. The center of Bahá’í law, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, is called the “Most Holy Book” and to follow Bahá’í law is an important aspect of being a Bahá’í. It is a duty of Bahá’í institutions to make sure that the members of the Bahá’í community respect and obey these laws. If a certain individual has broken one of these laws in a way that it is affecting the Bahá’í community and has been warned a number of times, the Bahá’í institution can give some kind of punishment to that individual. One such punishment is loss of voting rights.³⁵

The judicial duties of the Bahá’í administration are not, however, its most central function. When Shoghi Effendi called the Bahá’í administration a theocracy, he probably was not thinking primarily of its potential to uphold a divine law, but more of its potential to lead the Bahá’í community in accordance to the will of God. The Universal House of Justice is bound by Bahá’í law and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, yet it is still the Universal House of Justice that must apply the law and, if necessary, make additional laws. The judicial aspect of general theocracy is, no doubt, a part of the Bahá’í theocracy, but it does not cover the total meaning of theocracy in the Bahá’í Faith. It only explains in what ways the divine law affects the life of the Bahá’í community. It does not explain the development that has taken place. The question that has to be answered is how the Bahá’í Faith could develop into an international organization that could become part of the international community and affect different parts of the international community with the effect that the issue of the Iranian Bahá’ís was taken up by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

God is King

A central concept in the Bahá’í Faith is “bahá”—glory—and Bahá’u’lláh is the glory of God. The word bahá carries the name of the religion itself—Bahá’í—meaning the religion of Bahá’u’lláh and a follower of Bahá’u’lláh. It is connected to Bahá’í administration as well: “The Lord hath ordained that in every city³⁶ a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather the counselors to the number of bahá³⁷ and should it exceed this number it doth not matter.”³⁸

Related to this is the older concept of *khvarenah*, which was later described as *farr*.³⁹ Ulla Olsson discussed this concept in her doctoral dissertation on princely mirrors in Iranian tradition: “Vem är hjálte?” A part of her discussion is *khvarenah*—the divine radiance emanating from the king in the pre-Islamic kingship ideology in Iran. She points out that Ghazali uses the concept *farr-i-Izadí*. He asks the question whether any man could be called king or if this is worthy only of God “...because great men (*buzurgán*) owe their greatness to the divine effulgence, (*farr-i-Izadí*) and to their radiance of soul, pureness of body, and breadth of intellect and knowledge, as well as the dominion which has long been in their family.”⁴⁰

This pattern has its parallel in the administrative system of the Bahá’í Faith. There are a number of passages where God is described as king or king of kings. The promise to the Universal House of Justice that it will have divine support in its decisions also implies that God rules through the Universal House of Justice: “And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error, it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers. Its members must be manifestations of the fear of God and daysprings of knowledge and understanding, must be steadfast in God’s faith and the well-wishers of all mankind.”⁴¹

In the tablet of Ahmad, Bahá’u’lláh refers to the idea of God as the king, as it starts with the words: “He is the King, the All-knowing, the Wise!” It continues further on: “...informing the severed ones of the message which hath been revealed by God, the King, the Glorious...” “O Ahmad! Bear thou witness that verily He is God and there is no God but Him, the King, the Protector, the Incomparable, the Omnipotent.”⁴² In the tablet of ‘Ishráqát he refers to God as “the King of Eternity”;⁴³ in the tablet Tajalliyát as “King of everlasting days,”⁴⁴ in Lawḥ-i-Burhán as “King of all Names,”⁴⁵ these being only a few examples.

A Global Perspective

The geographical perspective of kingship is the nation and therefore there is a connection between kingship and nationalism. The relationship between nationalism and the Bahá’í Faith is expressed in the much-used quotation from Bahá’u’lláh: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”⁴⁶ When the concept of nation is used in the Bahá’í Faith, like in the National Spiritual Assembly, it is primarily a level between the local town or village and the global perspective. It does, however, also relate to the concept of nation, as normally understood. In the words of Shoghi Effendi regarding the “world-wide law of Bahá’u’lláh”: “It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men’s hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided.”⁴⁷

This global aspect is one reason why it is not possible to call the Bahá’í Faith a “sacral kingship” or,

in the words of Wallace, a “royal theocracy.” The other one is that there is no king in the Bahá’í Faith. The theocracy in the Bahá’í Faith cannot, however, be separated from the concept of the covenant, a concept that in the Bible exists parallel to sacral kingship. In the Bible these two concepts are combined in the covenant of David, which in the New Testament is developed into the belief of a messiah. The covenant of David⁴⁸ is in this way developed from a concept with a national focus to a concept with a universal focus.

The global perspective is, in this way, already existing in Abrahamitic tradition as both Christianity and Islam go beyond the perspective of nation and turn to the whole of mankind. The basis of this is that God had created all mankind and offered a covenant to all peoples, hence the striving to missionize.

The Bahá’í Covenant

The covenant in the Bahá’í Faith is a relationship between God and humanity, running through the history of mankind up to the present age. This concept is inherited from the Bible and the Qur’án and in this way the Bahá’í Faith stands in the tradition of the Abrahamitic religions.⁴⁹ In the covenant of the Bahá’í Faith is mentioned names from the Bible and the Qur’án, such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Yet Buddha and Zoroaster are also mentioned, and Shoghi Effendi refers to “the Bhagavad Gita of the Hindus.”⁵⁰ The covenant is based on seven religions: Sabeism [sic], Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. To these are added Bábism [sic] and the Bahá’í Faith, making the list of nine complete.⁵¹

There is no central idea of reconciliation that has to be done by sacrifice. The history of mankind is seen instead as a long period of development through a number of manifestations of God and not as a primordial state of order that was brought into chaos and that has to be brought back to order through reconciliation. The order is brought to men through the manifestations of God, and chaos comes into being when men deviate from this order. Order is restored when God sends a new manifestation with a new message. The covenant between man and God describes this balance, but it is not only a balance. It is also a development where humankind is growing and maturing like a child becoming a youth then finally an adult.⁵²

This covenant is extended to a minor covenant, as Bahá’u’lláh in his Will appointed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant. To be a Bahá’í is also to accept this part of the covenant. In the will of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi is named as the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, thus making it a part of the minor covenant. Finally, the authority of the Universal House of Justice is established as part of this covenant.

Kingship and Servanthood

A special aspect of sacral kingship is the idea of the faithful slave or helper. Ulla Ohlsson has touched upon this theme in her study on princely mirrors. The example that she dwells upon from the Iranian tradition is the example of relationship between the king and the servant in Sultan Mahmoud and Ayaz. This is pictured as the ideal example of servanthood, which is of great value to the king.

In the Bible, this is not a central theme. The king, especially king David, is called the servant of God, but others are also given this name.⁵³ These are, however, not examples of kingship and servanthood as a relationship between two persons, as in the case of Sultan Mahmoud and Ayaz. When studying the special relationship between Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the personal relationship is very important and so the best parallel to study is probably this Iranian example, in order to get more light and understanding to the theme.

In Mathnáví, Rumi dwells on this theme. Rumi describes Ayaz as being the most appreciated person of all, close to the king. He was richly rewarded and the other envied him.

There are a number of stories showing Ayaz’s faithfulness to Sultan Mahmoud. One example is when Sultan Mahmoud has a priceless pearl that he asks his vazír to evaluate. When he had done this, Sultan Mahmoud asked him to smash the pearl. The vazír could not make himself do that, as the pearl was much too valuable. The same question was put to different other ministers with the same result. When finally Ayaz was asked that question, he also estimated the pearl as priceless. When asked to destroy it, he took

two stones and crushed it. When receiving the reaction of the others, he said: "O renowned princes, is the King's command more precious or the pearl? In your eyes is the command of the sovereign or this goodly pearl superior..."⁵⁴ There is more to this story, but the message that is most interesting to this study is the exemplary obedience of Ayaz.

Relationship Between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The relationship between the lord and the true servant, as described in the story about Sultan Mahmoud and Ayaz is mirrored in the relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá acted as the representative of Bahá'u'lláh in his contact with the authorities of 'Akká. Shoghi Effendi describes him as "the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant,"⁵⁵ but in his relation to Bahá'u'lláh he describes himself as a servant.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was born on May 23, 1844 into the family of Bahá'u'lláh, which was economically very well off. The situation changed for the close family of Bahá'u'lláh when he was put into prison and later exiled to the Ottoman Empire. It is from this time that one is able to see this kind of relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. During his lifetime, Bahá'u'lláh often used the services of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Taherzadeh mentions 'Abdu'l-Bahá as one of the transcribers of the revelation writings of Bahá'u'lláh⁵⁶ and Balyuzi⁵⁷ dwells on the role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká, where he took care of the affairs of the Bahá'í community, related to officials, and had other external contacts. At the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'u'lláh's Will made 'Abdu'l-Bahá the leader of the Bahá'í community. It was after this that he took the title 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He emphasized this in the following letter: "You have written that there is a difference among the believers concerning the 'Second Coming of Christ.' Gracious God! Time and again this question hath arisen, and its answer hath emanated in a clear and irrefutable statement from the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that what is meant in the prophecies by the 'Lord of Hosts' and the 'Promised Christ' is the Blessed Perfection⁵⁸ (Bahá'u'lláh) and His holiness the Exalted One (the Báb). My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion.... No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will I ever have, except 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory."⁵⁹

Authority and Servanthood

The example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has emphasized the principle of servanthood for the individual and the guiding authority of the elected institution. "...the local assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the local assembly."⁶⁰

In the *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, the basis of Bahá'í administration, the relationship between the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice is explained. In the years to follow, the holder of the institution of guardianship, Shoghi Effendi, developed both institutions. Today the institution of guardianship is represented by the International Teaching Center, but not as an independent institution. That institution is subordinated the Universal House of Justice.

Bahá'í Martyrs: Servants and Witnesses

The Persian and Arabic word for martyr, used in Islam and in the Bahá'í Faith is shahíd, meaning "witness." This is a link to the New Testament word for witnesses, as "witness" is the meaning of the Greek word "martyreín."⁶¹ The concept of martyrdom in Christianity has its roots in the Gospel, where the apostles are promised help from the Holy Spirit, when interrogated at court.

The meaning of the word shahíd does not, however, mean that martyrs primarily are considered witnesses in the Bahá'í Faith, as martyrdom also includes the aspect of servanthood. The martyr should rather be considered a servant of Bahá'u'lláh who gives up the most valuable thing that one can give: his or her life. Whether a person should be considered a martyr is decided by the Universal House of Justice. If the death of a Bahá'í is accepted as martyrdom, it will be written in a letter that is sent to the Bahá'í world. Martyrdom is therefore always tied to obedience to the Universal House of Justice.

The Fundamentals of Bahá'í Administration

When Shoghi Effendi described the Bahá'í Faith as a theocracy, he was describing a kind of theocracy that does not fit perfectly into the pattern, given in the article on theocracy. It was a system, based upon a divine government with some similarities of sacral kingship but without a king and without a nation. It is moreover a system, based on a prophet, but without a charismatic leader after the formation of the first Universal House of Justice in 1963, and without a system of priestly functionaries.

This theocracy is led by an assembly of nine people, elected through a process that has many similarities with democracy. According to Shoghi Effendi it is, however, not a democracy because it is not responsible to its voters, but to God. At the time of election the members of the institutions in Bahá'í administration still have to give the initiative to the members of the Bahá'í community, who give their ballots in secret elections. In this way the elections are carried out according to the same basic principles as elections in democratic systems.

The way of working in the Bahá'í administrative system can be described in terms of both the basic pattern of both the theocratic and the democratic systems. Its fundamentals are equally complex. The Bahá'í administrative system is built on three fundamentals and two have been described in this chapter: theocracy and the Biblical concept of the covenant. These two systems were not all the time compatible even in the Bible. In order to get a more complete picture of the Bahá'í administrative system, it is necessary to continue with the third fundamental, which is also an instrument to integrate the other two fundamentals—the World Center of the Bahá'í Faith.

Mount Carmel as Axis Mundi

The holy mountain as a symbol in the history of religions is a well-known motif, as for example Mount Ararat to the Armenians and Mount Zion in Jewish and Christian traditions. In the latter case it even serves as the name of a political ideology. To the Bahá'ís, Mount Carmel in Israel has the same function.

In the Tablet of Carmel, Bahá'u'lláh has related Carmel and Zion with the following words: "Call out to Zion, O Carmel, and announce the joyful tidings: He that was hidden from mortal eyes is come! His all-conquering sovereignty is manifest; His all-encompassing splendor is revealed."⁶² In this way he proclaims that the prophecies of the Bible have been fulfilled. He does not say exactly which prophecies, but his aim is obviously to connect it to biblical tradition. In the same letter he refers to a number of religious traditions. The tradition of sacral kingship is referred to with the following words. "Rejoice, for God hath in this Day established upon thee His throne, hath made thee the dawning-place of His signs and the day spring of the evidences of His Revelation."⁶³ Islamic tradition is reflected in "...the celestial Kaaba..."⁶⁴ and from Jewish tradition mention is made of "...the Burning Bush..."⁶⁵

The status of the Tablet of Carmel is to be the foundation of the Bahá'í World Center on Mount Carmel, its charter. The other two texts that are called charters are 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan and the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.⁶⁶

Mount Carmel—The Vineyard of God⁶⁷

To a visitor to the city of Haifa, Israel, it is obvious that Mount Carmel is of central importance to the Bahá'í Faith. On this mountain the Bahá'ís have erected an international administrative center, a shrine for the remains of the Báb and a center of pilgrimage. Surrounding these edifices there are gardens to such an extent that a citizen of that city once expressed to this author that when she was a child, growing up in Haifa, she thought the Bahá'ís worshipped gardening. To the numerically small Bahá'í community,⁶⁸ the building of this area has been a major undertaking and a proportionally large part of its economic resources have been invested in this project.

'Abdu'l-Bahá started the development of the area owned by the Bahá'ís by transporting soil to the barren land of Carmel and building the first part of the shrine of the Báb.⁶⁹ This work was continued by Shoghi Effendi and by the Universal House of Justice. The projects now going on emphasize this on a grand scale with the plan to make the group of administrative buildings complete and to build a series

of nine terraces from the top of Mount Carmel down to the shrine of the Báb and a further nine down to the foot of Mount Carmel. This project is described by Shoghi Effendi in the following vision: “The opening of a series of terraces which, as designed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, are to provide a direct approach to the Báb’s Tomb from the city lying under its shadow; the beautification of its precincts through the laying out of parks and gardens, open daily to the public, and attracting tourists and residents alike to its gates—these may be regarded as the initial evidences of the marvelous expansion of the international institutions and endowments of the Faith at its world center.”⁷⁰

Axis Mundi

In his book, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade has discussed holy mountains as axis mundi—the center of the world—standing in the middle of the world, binding it together with heaven. This theme can be found in many religions, Zion being one example from Judaism. Also in Iranian religion, there are references to holy mountains.⁷¹

Shoghi Effendi has described the importance of Mount Carmel and the shrine of the Báb in the following text: “The outermost circle in this vast system, the visible counterpart of the pivotal position conferred on the Herald of our Faith, is none other than the entire planet. Within the heart of this planet lies the ‘Most Holy Land,’ acclaimed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as ‘the Nest of the Prophets’ and which must be regarded as the center of the world and the Qiblih of the nations. Within this Most Holy Land rises the Mountain of God of immemorial sanctity, the Vineyard of the Lord, the Retreat of Elijah, Whose Return the Báb Himself symbolizes. Reposing on the breast of this Holy Mountain are the extensive properties permanently dedicated to, and constituting the sacred precincts of, the Báb’s holy Sepulcher. In the midst of these properties, recognized as the international endowments of the Faith, is situated the Most Holy Court, an enclosure comprising gardens and terraces which at once embellish, and lend peculiar charm to, these Sacred Precincts. Embossed in these lovely and verdant surroundings stands in all its exquisite beauty the Mausoleum of the Báb, the Shell designed to preserve and adorn the original structure raised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Tomb of the Martyr-Herald of our Faith. Within this Shell is enshrined that Pearl of Great Price, the Holy of Holies, those chambers which constitute the Tomb itself, and which were constructed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Within the heart of these Holy of Holies is the Tabernacle, the Vault wherein reposes the Most Holy Casket. Within this Vault rests the alabaster Sarcophagus in which is deposited that inestimable Jewel, the Báb’s Holy Dust. So precious is this Dust that the very earth surrounding the Edifice enshrining this Dust has been extolled by the Center of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant,⁷² in one of His Tablets in which He named the five doors belonging to the six chambers which He originally erected after five of the believers associated with the construction of the shrine, as being endowed with such potency as to have inspired Him in bestowing these names, whilst the Tomb itself housing the Dust He acclaimed as the Spot round which the Concourse on high circles in adoration.”⁷³

Does this necessarily mean that it is the shrine of the Báb that should be considered the Axis Mundi of the Bahá’í Faith? In Islam it is the Kaaba that is considered the Axis Mundi and the Kaaba is also the Qiblih in Islam. This function is bound to the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh in the Bahá’í Faith. The cited text by Shoghi Effendi is, however, central to this question and this means that in the Bahá’í Faith the Axis Mundi and the Qiblih are separated from each other.

Dedicated by Bahá’u’lláh

When revealing the Tablet of Carmel, Bahá’u’lláh was standing on the top of Mount Carmel, reading out the tablet in a loud voice as a proclamation. The place he chose for this proclamation was just above the Carmelite monastery, which in that moment came to symbolize the religions of old⁷⁴ and the prophecy of the Bible that is interpreted as Mount Carmel being the place where Jesus would return. Mircea Eliade⁷⁵ has written about this kind of consecration of holy places. He points out that those holy places were often known earlier as holy places.

Mount Carmel is best known from the Old Testament as the mountain of Elia,⁷⁶ who in the New Testament is recognized as John the Baptist. This could be seen as a background to the spiritual center on Mount Carmel, the shrine of the Báb, parallel to John the Baptist in the Bahá’í Faith. His remains have

been placed at that spot by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá under the instruction of Bahá’u’lláh. The shrine of Bahá’u’lláh is situated across the Bay of ‘Akká. During pilgrimage it is a part of the program to visit both shrines.

A Microcosm

In Bahá’í teaching the number nine symbolizes totality: “The number nine, which in itself is the number of perfection, is considered by the Bahá’ís as sacred, because it is symbolic of the perfection of the Bahá’í Revelation which constitutes the ninth in the line of existing religions...”⁷⁷ In Persian/Arabic thinking, a number could be expressed by adding the numeric value of the letters in a word. The word for nine is “bahá” in this abjad system. When Bahá’u’lláh instructs in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that “in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counselors to the number of Bahá,”⁷⁸ it is obvious to the reader how many persons that should be elected to that assembly. He is, however, not only giving a number. He is also relating that assembly to the complete number of the Bahá’í Faith. In this way He gives this assembly a role as a microcosm, representing the whole world. An expression to this is that every assembly should, in its decisions, try to serve not only the group that has elected its members, but the totality of mankind.⁷⁹

Another number that has a symbolic meaning in the Bahá’í Faith is nineteen. The Bahá’í calendar has nineteen months with nineteen days in each month. The most important religious service is the Nineteen Day Feast. The number of delegates in a national convention is nineteen, two times nineteen, three times nineteen, etc., depending upon the size of the community. This relation to number nineteen began in the Bábí religion, which started by eighteen persons who accepted the Báb independently. These eighteen, together with the Báb himself, made up the first unit or váhid. The word váhid comes from the Arabic, meaning “one” in the feminine tense. In the abjad system the sum of váhid is nineteen. Váhid can also mean unity and is used in the Bahá’í Faith to mean the unity of God. Number nineteen of the Bahá’í Faith has a parallel in Manicheism where number nineteen has a relationship to Daéná, the maiden that waited to accompany the soul into paradise.⁸⁰ The Daéná motif is also referred to in the writings of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh as the “Maid from Heaven” speaks to the Báb in “Muntakhabát-i Ayát”⁸¹ and to Bahá’u’lláh in the Tablet of ‘Ishráqát.⁸²

Mount Carmel as a Universal Symbol

In his description of the holy mountain, Mircea Eliade, also emphasizes the need to rebuild the holy mountain in the local village and even in the homes of people. There is no example of this that is described in the Bahá’í writings. There are, however, some traits that relate to this idea in the Bahá’í House of Worship. Mircea Eliade has described the holy mountain as the place where earth and heaven meet and that this is repeated in the local temple. The Bahá’í Houses of Worship are reflecting this by their dome structure, resembling the canopy of heaven.⁸³ The House of Worship itself has nine entrances, nine pathways leading up to each entrance and nine gardens surrounding it. The idea is that each village, town and city should be built around a House of Worship, which would emphasize the idea of each temple being a symbol of the holy mountain, the center of the world. Around the House of Worship will be built dependencies like schools, libraries etc. making the institution of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár complete.

“The first part to be built is the central edifice which is the spiritual heart of the community. Then, gradually, as the outward expression of this spiritual heart, the various dependencies, those ‘institutions of social service as shall afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant’ are erected and function. This process begins in an embryonic way long before a Bahá’í community reaches the stage of building its own Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, for even the first local center that a Bahá’í community erects can begin to serve not only as the spiritual and administrative center and gathering place of the community, but also as the site of a tutorial school and the heart of other aspects of community life.”⁸⁴

The Spiritual Center

The most holy place, however, is not Mount Carmel. It is the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh, outside the city of ‘Akká, and especially where his remains are resting.⁸⁵ This is also the Qiblih of the Bahá’í world, the point towards which the Bahá’ís turn when praying. During pilgrimage the Bahá’ís always will visit this place at least on one occasion and to most pilgrims it is the highlight of their pilgrimage each time they

can visit this spot. At the time of larger gatherings, like at international conventions,⁸⁶ there will be too many to enter into the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. Instead the delegates will circumambulate this building, following a pathway that goes in a circle with the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in its center.

In this way there might seem to be a tension between Mount Carmel as the center of the world and the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. This is, however, not the case. The two places have separate roles to the Bahá'ís, which are better thought of as complementary than competing. The shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is the most holy spot and Mount Carmel could be seen more as an outer symbol of the world order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Conclusion

Pilgrimage is a way for the individual believer to strengthen his/her religious belief and to form a religious identity. This is true in many religions and also in the Bahá'í Faith. Strengthening the ties with the founder of a religion—for Bahá'ís to strengthen the ties with Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of God—makes a person ready to take on different kinds of religious services and for the Bahá'ís this would be to work in the Bahá'í administration. In extreme situations, like religious persecutions, this religious identity will be tested to its utmost and this has happened to the Bahá'ís in Iran.

The Bahá'í administration is founded on two concepts, well known in the history of religion: sacral kingship and the covenant. The Bahá'í World Center makes the means whereby the weaving together of the idea of sacral kingship and the idea of the covenant has been made.

The kingship of God is represented by the Bahá'í administration, headed by the Universal House of Justice. The outer symbol of this institution is the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, surrounded by complementary buildings. The symbol of the covenant is the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, as this institution is first and foremost connected to Bahá'u'lláh himself. The binding together of the idea of these two concepts is done through the idea of Mount Carmel as axis mundi, which is represented by the shrine of the Báb.

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Notes

- 1) In the meaning that Messiah (the anointed one) is referring to the king.
- 2) This can be translated to “letter of visitation.”
- 3) This can be translated as “prayer of visitation.”
- 4) The words *ziárat* and the less common word *laqá* both mean “visit” and are also used in a more general sense, meaning to visit a person that one has a great respect for. Both words are Arabic, but *ziárat* has been more integrated in the Persian language.
- 5) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, sixth printing 1970., (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1944), p. 188
- 6) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 199
- 7) The center of the world.
- 8) This is the place referred to in the table as the Shrine of Jesus. As it is central to Christian Faith that the Tomb of Jesus was empty, it can be seen as disrespectful to call it the shrine of Jesus. It is, however, not my intention to discuss this dogma. I simply use this term in order to be able to discuss pilgrimage as a phenomenon.
- 9) Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Wilmette, Illinois 1992, reprinted 1993, Bahá’í Publishing Trust), p. 30.
- 10) These two places are the only places where the term *hajj* is used in the Bahá’í writings. In English speaking Bahá’í literature there is no difference made between *hajj* and *ziárat*.
- 11) The Most Holy Shrine is the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh in Bahji, outside ‘Akká in Israel. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 191.
- 12) Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 191-192.
- 13) Bahá’u’lláh.
- 14) Taherzadeh, Adib, *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983) vol. 3.,p. 64.
- 15) A Christian Arab who came from Lebanon. The idea of initiation is not common in the Bahá’í Faith. It seems that he did not get this idea from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but included it himself.
- 16) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, No year of publication), Chapter LXXXI
- 17) V. Piff Mettelman, *Lua Getsinger—Herald of the Covenant*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), p.7.
- 18) Bahá’u’lláh’s eldest daughter.
- 19) Velda Mettelman, *Lua Getsinger—Herald of the Covenant*, p. 24-25.
- 20) This collection was first published under the title *The Wisdom of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*.
- 21) Ward, Allan L., *239 Days, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Journey in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 17-18
- 22) Ruhe, David S., *Door of Hope*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983), p. 136.
- 23) David S. Ruhe, *Door of Hope*, p. 143
- 24) *Program of Pilgrimage*, (Haifa: Bahá’í World Center, no year of publication). This booklet is undated and no author is given. Each pilgrim receives a copy at the time of confirmation of the pilgrimage.
- 25) It is possible that portraits exist in private homes as well, but if so, they are not available to the Bahá’í community.
- 26) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 183
- 27) Zarathustra, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.
- 28) According to the Bahá’í transcription system, the spelling is Tihrán.
- 29) Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, Second revised edition 1976, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1939), p. 109, 110.
- 30) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, Second revised edition, third printing 1969, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1938), p. 153.
- 31) Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian*, (New Dehli, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, no year of publication) p. 71.
- 32) D. D. Wallace, Jr., “Theocracy,” *Encyclopaedia of Religions*, Ed. M. Eliade, (New York: MacMillan Publ. 1987), vol. 14, pp. 427-430.
- 33) Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Haifa: Bahá’í World Center, 1978), p. 221. In this tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is referred to under the title, given by Bahá’u’lláh: the Most Mighty Branch.
- 34) I use “Royal theocracy” and “sacral kingship” as synonyms.
- 35) *Lights of Guidance*, Compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby, third revised edition 1994, (New Dehli: Bahá’í Publishing Trust,

- 1983), pp. 50–51. Quotation from Shoghi Effendi. This punishment means that this person cannot take part in the Bahá’í administration.
- 36) The Arabic word being used by Bahá’u’lláh for city is *Medíneh*, which does not imply that the meaning of the word should be connected to a certain size of the city or any special definition of a city as opposed to a village. There are today a number of villages around the world with such an assembly.
 - 37) The numerical value of Bahá in the abjad system is 9. This is the traditional system whereby each letter gets a number and the sum of the letters in a word gets a symbolic value.
 - 38) Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 30.
 - 39) The meaning of *khvarenah* is light, glory in the meaning of farr-i-Izadí, which is the glory of God, the same as the meaning of the title Bahá’u’lláh.
 - 40) Ohlsson, Ulla, *Vem är hjälte?* (Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, Institutionen för Religionsvetenskap, nr. 17, 1995), p. 95f.
 - 41) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, (Manchester: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1950), p. 7.
 - 42) *Bahá’í Prayers*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 129-130.
 - 43) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 123.
 - 44) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 50.
 - 45) *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 206.
 - 46) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. xvi.
 - 47) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 41.
 - 48) Ringgren, Helmer, *Israel’s Religion*, (Lund: Doxa, 1970), p. 161f.
 - 49) Shoghi Effendi writes that Bahá’u’lláh derived His descent, on the one hand, from Abraham through his wife Katurah, and on the other hand from Zoroaster, as well as from Yazdigird, the last king of the Sásániyán dynasty. *God Passes By*, p. 94.
 - 50) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 95.
 - 51) Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 52.
 - 52) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 114.
 - 53) Helmer Ringgren, *Israel’s Religion*, p. 155.
 - 54) Ulla Ohlsson, *Vem är hjälte?*, p. 188.
 - 55) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 134.
 - 56) The revelation writings of Bahá’u’lláh are notes taken at the time of the revelation of the tablets. As Bahá’u’lláh could not be disturbed at those times, the secretary taking notes had to write very quickly. This had the consequence that this text was only possible to read directly after the revelation and had to be transcribed directly. Taherzadeh, Adib, *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh*, vol. 1, revised edition (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976), p. 24.
 - 57) Balyuzi, Hasan, *Bahá’u’lláh: The King of Glory*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980), index on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 501–502.
 - 58) Bahá’u’lláh.
 - 59) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 139.
 - 60) Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 1969 edition, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1939), p. 28.
 - 61) *Encyclopedie des Islam*, p. 281.
 - 62) Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 16.
 - 63) *ibid*, p. 15.
 - 64) *ibid*, p. 16.
 - 65) *ibid*, p. 16.
 - 66) *Tablets of the Divine Plan: ‘propagation of the Faith; Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: administration*. Adib Taherzadeh, *Trustees of the Merciful*, (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1972), p. 57.
 - 67) Engnell, Ingvar (ed), *Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk*, second edition, (Stockholm: Esselte, 1962), p. 1302.
 - 68) About 5 million members today. When the first buildings on Mount Carmel were built in the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of Bahá’ís was much smaller. Homepage of the Bahá’í World Center, Internet, 97-03-2.
 - 69) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 275–277.
 - 70) Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 346.
 - 71) Eliade, Mircea, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Reprinted 1971, (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd, 1958), p. 100.
 - 72) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.
 - 73) *The Bahá’í World*, xii, reprinted 1981, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956), pp. 349–350, contribution by Shoghi Effendi.
 - 74) See chapter with the title “Bahá’í covenant.”
 - 75) Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 369.
 - 76) *Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk*, p. 1302.
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- 81) Báb, The, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, Chatham, Great Britain, 1978, p. 54.
- 82) Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 122.
- 83) The dome structure is a symbol of heaven. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Chicago: 1975). “Religious Symbolism and Iconography.”
- 84) Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, Compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby, third revised edition 1994., (New Dehli: Bahá’i Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 556.
- 86) David S. Ruhe, *Door of Hope*, p. 118.
- 87) International conventions are held once every fifth year. The number of delegates present might be more than 1,000 persons. The delegates are the members of each national spiritual assembly and during the 1990s there have been up to 175 national spiritual assemblies. (Homepage of the Bahá’í World Center on the Internet)

