Some Historical Context

Written in the dying days of 1938 and distributed widely the next year as the specter of war (eventually to be a global conflagration) grew larger on the horizon, *The Advent of Divine Justice* must, with its stirring voice and call to service, have been viewed then by the North American Bahá’ís as a lifeline to sanity and salvation, and felt as a ringing call to service in a world that was fast growing dark with fear and uncertainty.

It is a testament to its brilliance and vision that over eighty years later, to a world that is sadly commercialistic and self-indulgent, and which remains alarmingly belligerent and terrified about its environmental future, that it remains still a clarion call to service at a time in which service is desperately needed. Indeed, perhaps that is even more so now, because with the march of time there has come with it an inevitable sense of the loss of a timely opportunity in which to act. For if in 1939, time seemed short in which positive action could have positive effect, surely it seems even shorter today, nearly midway through the second decade of the 21st century.

Moreover, the period since the passing of the Guardian in 1957 has only given the world time to start to truly glimpse the nature, depth, clarity, magnitude, profundity, power and vision of his understanding of the role which we, as individual Bahá’ís, can and must have in saving the soul of all humanity and lifting this sorry world from the decayed state to which it has sadly sunk.

Originally published as a long letter (as all of Shoghi Effendi’s works were, excepting only *God Passes By*) the Guardian signed the end of *The Advent of Divine Justice* simply as “Shoghi,” an act of profound humility that indicated, I believe, that when it came to the theme of service to mankind and to exhorting other souls to action, he thought of himself as just one Bahá’í among many. He was not, of course, not then, to the body of believers who awaited his every word, and far less to us now. But that honest and fundamental sense of humility, both in terms of the daunting tasks that needed to be done and in terms of the power released by Bahá’u’lláh in which to help accomplish the tasks, was, in the end, perhaps, the wellspring of power and vision that guided him.

**Best-loved brothers and sisters…**

The opening paragraph of *The Advent of Divine Justice* refers to the execution of the then current Seven Year Plan. From the comfort of the 21st century, when world-wide
Plans for the development of the Bahá’í Faith are a constant theme in our lives, it is hard to imagine a time when they were not. But 1938 is the time when this is the case. Like much that we take for granted in the Bahá’í world today, Plans were the brainchild of the Guardian and their mode of design and communication, the goals they attempted to achieve, the daring and challenging nature of these goals, and their promulgation was developed over a number of years through trial, reflection and re-development. The Seven Year Plan referred to in *The Advent of Divine Justice* was a national one, developed specifically for North America. It was only later, as Plans and their successes were appreciated by the worldwide Bahá’í community—in truth some European National Assemblies lobbied hard to have their own—that plans became international, culminating in the greatest effort and design of the Guardian’s day, The Ten Year Crusade, a plan which, alas, Shoghi Effendi himself did not live long enough to see completed.

The Guardian goes on to discuss why the promulgation of the Seven Year Plan is going so well: the resourcefulness of the National Spiritual Assembly, the unity of communication and the institutions involved and the systematic processes used, being precise, efficient and regular.

He moreover asserts, that the success of the Plan is despite the trials placed upon it and which only demonstrate even more compellingly the unity of the Bahá’í community and ends the opening of his letter with a call to continue persecution of the plan despite the social upheavals that were surely in the future.

Let me now state a theme that this passage clearly demonstrates for the entire body of *The Advent of Divine Justice*: that his words ring true, perhaps even truer, today, than they did even in 1938. This is surely a point to which we will return over and over again, for clearly, the Guardian was not writing for one small group of Bahá’ís at one point of history, he was writing for the entire Bahá’í community within the formative centuries of its age.

**Recurrent Crises**

*These recurrent crises which, with ominous frequency and resistless force, are afflicting an ever-increasing portion of the human race must of necessity continue, however impermanently, to exercise, in a certain measure, their baleful influence upon a world community which has spread its ramifications to the uttermost ends of the earth.*

– Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*
These words of Shoghi Effendi could be talking about today. With one armed conflict after another springing up all over the world, with countries polarizing and creating dangerous stalemates, with the larger powers taking sides and smaller groups adding their voices to the chaos of the world, it is looking as though history is about to repeat itself, again.

And like Shoghi Effendi suggested in 1939, how can we think such agitations will fail to produce “any repercussions on the institutions” of our Faith today? The institutions of our Faith have grown, the House of Justice has confirmed that we have emerged from obscurity, our organization and communication networks have increased beyond what the believers of 75-years-ago, when The Advent of Divine Justice was first penned, could have imagined. If there were a world conflagration at this time, the safest place to be would be working at the World Center in Haifa.

In The Advent of Divine Justice, Shoghi Effendi tells us, in this segment, what is happening in most of the world. How we are being affected as a community and how the world itself seems to be disintegrating from the inside out. He starts out talking about Europe where the Faith took root in the early years of the 20th century, where May Maxwell in her younger days was the center of the teaching activities in France. But those radiant deeds were being eclipsed by Germany as it threatened the continent’s Jews in January, took Czechoslovakia in March and then Poland in September of 1939. Immediately after the invasion of Poland, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand and Canada declare war on Germany. World War II had begun. The voice of the Faith was “silenced, the institutions dissolved, its literature banned, its archives confiscated and its meetings suspended.” Some Bahá’ís were taken to concentration camps with the Jews and suffered a similar fate.

Russia had also invaded Poland and that government shared the spoils of war in Poland with Germany. Closer to home Russia took over the world’s first Bahá’í House of Worship in Ishkabad and disbanded the once potent and vital community, deporting some of the “chief promoters” and imprisoning “the most enthusiastic supporters”. Although they allowed Bahá’í worship to continue for a while in the House of Worship, all of the surrounding institutions (and they were all built and functioning) were closed. In later years, the Russian government turned the House of Worship into a museum. This confiscation was followed by an earthquake that made the building itself unsafe to be inhabited. It was finally pulled down in 1963.

Shoghi Effendi talks in the next paragraph about our beleaguered brethren in Iran. From the oppression that he talked about, the Persian Bahá’ís were able to emerge. Things got better, the Bahá’í community rose to a new level or robustness and the House of Justice asked the friends of Persia to go pioneering. When the Revolution
started up in the 70s, the community was plunged into a worse place than it had been before. It became apparent that this was why the House of Justice had been so urgent about the Persian Bahá’ís leaving the country. Two entire National Spiritual Assemblies were executed, its administration was disbanded, students were expelled from the university, financial institutions were closed, the funds frozen, schools were closed, and retirees denied their pensions. The Persian Bahá’í community bounced back, slowly and cautiously. University students were schooled in home schools, and a skeleton administration was set up. The community tried to comply with every oppressive obstacle placed before it, but still, Iran continues to tighten the oppression and uses, with impunity, our dear friends as scapegoats for every ill they can conjure in their society.

Then The Guardian talks about the conflict in the Holy Land itself. Although the Bahá’í presence there has grown and solidified, the conflict between the Muslims and the Jews continues to boil . . . except in Haifa. Haifa is a peaceful and thriving city with the Bahá’í gardens and holy places taking a prominent place in twin cities of Haifa and Akka. Haifa is a model for the rest of Israel. The population is about half Arab and half Israeli and they get along fine.

Chief Remaining Citadel

To me, the importance of this section of The Advent of Divine Justice is that it lifts my vision from my own, small, personal vision of the issues and challenges that face me and my little corner of the Bahá’í world, up to the lofty vision of the responsibilities, potentialities, historical successes and challenges that Shoghi Effendi gives to the Bahá’ís of North America. This lofty vision, so clearly penned by the Guardian, is both majestic and encouraging. First he quotes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and then explains that: 1) the light that shall be revealed by this community is the light of the future Golden Age of the Bahá’í Faith, 2) that the mysteries to be solved are those associated with the establishment of the Bahá’í Administrative Order, 3) that the righteousness that will abide is the order that will be established in the world in this future, and 4) that the freedom to be generated is the world-wide freedom and unity that will be granted by a world that recognizes and follows Bahá’u’lláh.

No better metaphor could be used, as the Guardian notes, than that the North American Bahá’ís are the spiritual descendants of the Dawn-breakers, destined to give birth to the Administrative Order of the Bahá’í Faith, even as those martyrs gave birth to the Faith Itself.
The Guardian clearly denotes the limitations on the community at that time, but then, more importantly lists for the Bahá’ís, the successes they have had: 1) fixing the pattern of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, and 2) the erection and continued extension of this framework. 3) The raising of the Temple at Wilmette, 4) the teaching of Queen Maria of Romania, 5) the establishment of Bahá’í schools, 6) the generation of resourceful, hardy and numerous pioneers, 7) the translation and publication of the Writings, 8) the safeguarding and extension of the Bahá’í properties in the Holy Land, 9) the establishment of legal frameworks around Bahá’í institutions and, 10) the succoring of international Bahá’í communities as they are persecuted and besieged by their governments and religious authorities.

And finally, the Guardian speaks directly to us, today, right now:

...the tasks associated with...this privileged community is, far from approaching its climax, only beginning to unfold. What the American believers have, within the space of almost fifty years, achieved is infinitesimal when compared with to the magnitude of the tasks ahead of them.

A Crusade of Still Greater Magnitude

In this section, Shoghi Effendi clearly links the establishment of the North American Bahá’í community to the Will of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and then the Seven Year Plan that the North American Bahá’í community was pursuing in 1938 to The Tablets of the Divine Plan.

In clearly seeing this linkage made, I, for one, am now tempted to link the title of The Advent of Divine Justice directly to the title of The Tablets of the Divine Plan, being that the Guardian’s work is the specific architectural structure required to implement the spiritual impetus released by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is His work. For what else but Justice—that which creates unity—could possibly be the result of implementing the Master’s vision and challenge to the North American Bahá’ís?

After reviewing the successes of the Seven Year Plan and directly linking it to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s The Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian goes on to say that greater challenges and victories await under that Plan. And while, in 1938, the tasks outlined under that Plan were mainly focused on Latin America, the Guardian quotes The Tablets of the Divine Plan to clearly prove that the same effort will next be pursued for the entire world. Is it not amazing, that even then, in 1938, the Guardian has already linked the word “Crusade,” at least in his own mind and planning, with a world wide effort, when, in fact, the Ten Year Crusade will not even be started until 1953?
And finally, if this escalation of responsibility was not enough, Shoghi Effendi then goes on to allude to even more colossal mission awaiting the Bahá’í community in the future that will come out of the turmoil and tribulations of the “latter years.”

A last thought: while we have no way of knowing when these “latter years”.

**The Possibilities of the Future**

It is a uniquely profound thing to read Shoghi Effendi’s list of major future tasks that he feels the world Bahá’í community faced in 1938, and indeed, for today:

2) The establishment of the UHJ in the Holy Land.
3) The formation of the UHJ’s auxiliary branches subsidiary institutions.
4) The gradual development of the various dependencies of the Wilmette Temple (the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár of the West)
5) The development of the Bahá’í community life.
6) The codification and promulgation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdás.
7) The building of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in Teheran.
8) The building of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in the Holy Land.
9) The deliverance of all Bahá’í communities from the attacks of orthodox religious authorities.
10) The recognition by civil authorities of the independent status and religious character of Bahá’í institutions.
11) The protection of the Bahá’í Faith from the forthcoming attacks on the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh.
12) The creation of Bahá’í States as the legal authority throughout the world, and the eventual creation of a Bahá’í Commonwealth.

Perhaps no statement of *The Advent of Divine Justice* is more surprising, especially to American Bahá’ís, than this: boldly stating the concept of merging state and church into a singular Bahá’í Administration. To a country which was conceived of and settled as a result of religious conflicts, this is a hard concept to accept. Indeed, so fearful of this idea were the Founding Fathers that it is specifically forbidden in the American Constitution. However, let us be clear about the idea of the creation of an American Bahá’í State: this is clearly something that will happen in a far off future and in a world so very different from ours now that we cannot possibly conceive of its reality or existence. Moreover, we are certain that it will only come about after a
series of trials and tribulations that will, by their nature, demand and require a Bahá’í State to relieve them.

**His Unfailing Light**

This short section could easily have also been named* The Power of the Covenant, for this is essentially the main subject of the text. While giving a clear statement of the difficulties faced both from within the Faith and from without, the Guardian discusses the “Force” which energizes all effort in advancement towards the far-off goal of the Golden Age of the Bahá’í Commonwealth. It furthermore ends with a warning: that not for a moment must the power or successes of the Faith in general, or individuals in particular be considered as coming from within them, or as a natural consequence of who they are. For it is the power of the Covenant that is being radiated through the believers, it is not the light of the believers themselves.

This theme of the real basic nature of mankind and especially those first affected by a Manifestation is explored and developed further in the coming section.

*Names for each section were not designated by Shoghi Effendi, although approved by him. They were determined by Horace Holly, later a Hand of the Cause.

**The Supreme Function of His Revelation**

It seems clear that the supreme function of a Manifestation’s Revelation is the transformation of the society in which They appear. It is for this reason that every Manifestation chooses to reveal Himself in the worst place on earth at the worst possible time. For surely it is an indication of the power of the Word of God if that Manifestation is able to transform this wretched lot of people from the worst to the best. This theme is developed at great length with specific reference to The Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and the people of Iran, where the nobility of the Dawn-Breakers is, in particular, compared to the perfidy of the general populace.

But then the Guardian goes on to expand this theme and by parallel to state that it also applies to North America, and it was chosen to be the birthplace of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh not due to any inherent capability or asset that it may possess, but because of the incipient flaws in American society, and that be the renunciation of
these traits and the unparalleled deeds of triumphing over them, will the Bahá’í Community prove worthy of its task and complete it.

Specifically, the Guardian points out the flaws that are endemic to the North American society:

1) Materialism

2) Racial prejudice

3) Political corruption

4) Lawlessness

5) Laxity in moral standards

But he also identifies the characteristics, that when marshaled by the Message of Bahá’u’lláh, will allow this society to persevere and create justice and order in the world:

1) High intelligence

2) Youthfulness

3) Unbounded initiative

In summary, it is amazing to note how this section can, on the one hand, be so honest and revealing about the negatives of the American society, and on the other, be so uplifting in urging courage and action. The tasks are great, but the power inherent in the Faith to achieve its high purpose are available.
How Staggering the Responsibility

After pointing out the flaws of the American society in the previous section and indicating that it is only through overcoming them that the Bahá’í Community will prove itself worthy of its mandate and accomplish its tasks, in this section the Guardian discusses the process by which this process is accomplished.

Typical of his ability to clearly see and focus on an architectural response to solving any problem and building any solution, if it is the task of the North American Bahá’í Community to transform society, then this can only be accomplished if each and every individual Bahá’í works first on transforming themselves; in bringing out and polishing from their own selves the “gems of inestimable value” that lay hidden therein. It is only after focusing on the effects of the ills that are commonplace in the American society (listed in the previous section) in each of us, can we as a community then have the strength and wisdom to try and affect society as a whole.

In guidance to what needs to be done, the Guardian then details what he feels are the essential requirements for the success of the most pressing needs:

1) Building the agencies and instruments of the Administrative Order that allows prosecution of the Seven Year Plan. (An idea specific to 1938 but which can be equally generalized to today, in the prosecution of our current Plan.)

2) Initiating and completing teaching campaigns

3) Raising the Funds necessary to pursue the efforts at hand

But he then points out that as important as these specific tasks are, they are, in total, equaled by the importance of the last task which can never be forgot or dropped:

4) The development of the spiritual factors which govern our public and inner lives and which determine our human and social interactions, factors which, in turn, require constant self-scrutiny and continual self-examination.

Spiritual Prerequisites
In the previous section, the Guardian had discussed the staggering responsibility to transform oneself before taking on the role planned for it by Bahá’u’lláh. He ends the section with noting that the spiritual factors demand no less an equal scrutiny in every Bahá’í’s life. This section, *Spiritual Prerequisites*, details at great length, what is required.

This section could alternatively be entitled the *Spiritual Prerequisites of Success* as the Guardian clearly states that the degree of Bahá’u’lláh’s response and support of the American Bahá’í community is based on the extent to which it meets the basic requirements of these spiritual prerequisites and the depth to which it inculcates them in each individual believer’s life.

The spiritual perquisites are three:

1. a high sense of moral rectitude in both social and administrative activities,
2. absolute chastity in each individual’s life, and,
3. the complete removal of all forms of prejudice with respect to race, class, creed or color.

The remaining portion of this section is a detailed analysis of the first two prerequisites, while the third prerequisite, racism, is dealt with in the following section, *The Most Challenging Issue*, which is, in itself, nearly as long as this section, and with both being the longest and most detailed themes thus far dealt with in *The Advent of Divine Justice*.

It is beyond the ability of this blog to do an adequate and yet detailed summary of either of the first two prerequisites. Both are dealt with in the same way: a few critical statements by the Guardian, but then the theme is supported and developed by an exhaustive and detailed series of quotations from Bahá’u’lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings, which should, and indeed must, be read *in situ* and in total.

Let these brief statements introduce the topics only:

1) A rectitude of moral conduct implies:

- justice
- equity
- truthfulness
- honesty
- fair-mindedness
- reliability
- trustworthiness

and, in action, must distinguish every phase of Bahá’í life and society.
2) A chaste and holy life implies:

- modesty
- purity
- temperance
- decency
- clean-mindedness
- moderation
- abstinence

and must be the controlling principle in every Bahá’í’s behavior and conduct. In a separate note, the Guardian indicates that chastity is a particularly challenging because its erosion is the main activity of the current and dominant forces of irreligion in today’s society, and for this reason must claim an increasing share of the American believer’s attention.