

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

5 February 1986

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In the letter dated 2 January 1986 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, reference was made to the inception of the fourth epoch of the Formative Age. In response to questions subsequently put to the House of Justice about the periods related to the earlier epochs of that Age, the Research Department was requested to prepare a statement on the subject. This has now been presented, and a copy is enclosed.

Kindly share this material of topical interest with the friends, as you deem fit, so that it may be studied in their deepening classes, summer schools, conferences and similar gatherings.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

The Epochs of the Formative Age
Prepared by the Research Department of
the Universal House of Justice

Introduction:

In disclosing the panoramic vision of the unfoldment of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi refers to three major evolutionary stages through which the Faith must pass—the Apostolic or Heroic Age (1844–1921) associated with the Central Figures of the Faith; the Formative or Transitional Age (1921–), the “hallmark” of which is the rise and establishment of the Administrative Order, based on the execution of the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament; and, the Golden Age which will represent the “consummation of this glorious Dispensation.” Close examination of the details of Bahá'í history reveals that the individual Ages are comprised of a number of periods—inseparable parts of one integrated whole.

In relation to the Heroic Age of our Faith, the Guardian, in a letter dated 5 June 1947 to the American Bahá'ís, specified that this Age consisted of three epochs and described the distinguishing features of each:

... the Apostolic and Heroic Age of our Faith, fell into three distinct epochs, of nine, of thirty-nine and of twenty-nine years' duration, associated respectively with the Bábí Dispensation and the ministries of Bahá'u'lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This primitive Age of the Bahá'í Era, unapproached in spiritual fecundity by any period associated with the mission of the Founder of any previous Dispensation, was impregnated, from its inception to its termination, with the creative energies generated through the advent of two independent Manifestations and the establishment of a Covenant unique in the spiritual annals of mankind.

The Formative Age, in which we now live and serve, was ushered in with the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Its major thrust is the shaping, development and consolidation of the local, national and international institutions of the Faith. It is clear from the enumeration of the tasks associated

with the Formative Age that their achievement will require increasingly mature levels of functioning of the Bahá'í community:

During this Formative Age of the Faith, and in the course of present and succeeding epochs, the last and crowning stage in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh—the election of the Universal House of Justice—will have been completed, the “Kitáb-i-Aqdas,” the Mother Book of His Revelation, will have been codified and its laws promulgated, the Lesser Peace will have been established, the unity of mankind will have been achieved and its maturity attained, the Plan conceived by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will have been executed, the emancipation of the Faith from the fetters of religious orthodoxy will have been effected, and its independent religious status will have been universally recognized, ...

The epochs of the Formative Age mark progressive stages in the evolution of the organic Bahá'í community and signal the maturation of its institutions, thus enabling the Faith to operate at new levels and to initiate new functions. The timing of each epoch is designated by the Head of the Faith, and given the organic nature of evolutionary development, the transition from one epoch to another may not be abrupt, but may well occur over a period of time. This is the case, for example, in relation to both the inception of the Formative Age and the end of its first epoch. In relation to the former, the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the transitional event most often identified with the close of the Heroic Age and the beginning of the Formative Age. However, the Guardian also asserts that the Apostolic Age of the Faith concluded “more particularly with the passing [in 1932] of His well-beloved and illustrious sister, the Most Exalted Leaf—the last survivor of a glorious and heroic age.” With regard to the termination of the first epoch of the Formative Age, Shoghi Effendi has placed this between the years 1944 and 1946.

Before describing the individual epochs of the Formative Age, it is important to comment on the use of the term “epoch” in the writings of the Guardian. In a letter dated 18 January 1953, written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, it is explained that the term is used to apply both to the stages in the Formative Age of the Faith, and to the phases in the unfoldment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan. We are currently in the fourth—epoch of the Formative Age and the second epoch of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan. (The first epoch of the Divine Plan began in 1937, with the inception of the First Seven Year Plan of the North American Bahá'í community, and concluded with the successful completion of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963. The second epoch of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan commenced in 1964 with the inauguration of the Nine Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice.)

The primary focus of this statement is on the epochs of the Formative Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The First Epoch of the Formative Age: 1921–1944/46

The first epoch of this Age witnessed the “birth and the primary stages in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith.” The epoch was characterized by concentration on the formation of local and national institutions in all five continents, thereby initiating the erection of the machinery necessary for future systematic teaching activities. This epoch was further marked by the launching, at the instigation of the Guardian, of the First Seven Year Plan (1937–1944) by the American Bahá'í community. This Plan, drawing its inspiration from the Tablets of the Divine Plan, represented the first systematic teaching campaign of the Bahá'í community and inaugurated the initial stage of the execution of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan in the Western Hemisphere.

The Second Epoch of the Formative Age: 1946–1963

This epoch extended the developments of the first epoch by calling for the “consummation of a laboriously constructed Administrative Order,” and was to witness the formulation of a succession of teaching plans designed to facilitate the development of the Faith beyond the

confines of the Western Hemisphere and the continent of Europe. This epoch was distinguished, in the first instance, by the simultaneous and often spontaneous prosecution of Bahá'í national plans in both the East and the West. For example, in a letter written at Naw-Rúz 105 [1949] to the Bahá'ís in the East, the beloved Guardian listed the specific plans undertaken by the United States, British, Indian, Persian, Australian and New Zealand, and Iraqi National Spiritual Assemblies, and indicated that this concerted action signaled the transition into the second epoch of the Formative Age. The internal consolidation and the administrative experience gained by the National Assemblies was utilized and mobilized by the Guardian with the launching of the Ten Year World Crusade—a crusade involving the simultaneous prosecution of twelve national plans. The plans derived their direction from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan, and the goals were assigned by Shoghi Effendi from the World Center of the Faith. A second distinguishing feature of this epoch was the "RISE" and "STEADY CONSOLIDATION" of the World Center of the Faith.

The second epoch thus clearly demonstrated the further maturation of the institutions of the Administrative Order. It witnessed the appointment of the Hands of the Cause, the introduction of Auxiliary Boards, and the establishment of the International Bahá'í Council. The culminating event of the epoch was the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. It further demonstrated the more effective and coordinated use of the administrative machinery to prosecute the goals of the first global spiritual crusade, and the emergence in ever sharper relief of the World Center of the Faith.

The Third Epoch of the Formative Age: 1963–1986

In addressing the British National Spiritual Assembly in 1951, the Guardian foreshadowed "worldwide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in future epochs of that same [Formative] Age, by the Universal House of Justice." In announcing the Nine Year Plan, "the second of those world-encircling enterprises destined in the course of time to carry the Word of God to every human soul," the Universal House of Justice embarked upon the process anticipated by the Guardian and proclaimed the commencement of the third epoch of the Formative Age, an epoch which called the Bahá'ís to a yet more mature level of administrative functioning, consistent with the expected vast increase in the size and diversity of the community, its emergence as a model to mankind, and the extension of the influence of the Faith in the world at large. The House of Justice, in a letter dated October 1963, stated:

Beloved friends, the Cause of God, guarded and nurtured since its inception by God's Messengers, by the Center of His Covenant and by His Sign on earth, now enters a new epoch, the third of the Formative Age. It must now grow rapidly in size, increase its spiritual cohesion and executive ability, develop its institutions and extend its influence into all strata of society. We, its members, must, by constant study of the life-giving Word, and by dedicated service, deepen in spiritual understanding and show to the world a mature, responsible, fundamentally assured and happy way of life, far removed from the passions, prejudices and distractions of present day society.

The period of the third epoch encompassed three world plans, involving all National Spiritual Assemblies, under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, namely, the Nine Year Plan (1964–1973), the Five Year Plan (1974–1979), and the Seven Year Plan (1979–1986). This third epoch witnessed the emergence of the Faith from obscurity and the initiation of activities designed to foster the social and economic development of communities. The institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors was brought into existence leading to the establishment of the International Teaching Centre. Assistants to the Auxiliary Boards were also introduced. At the World Center of the Faith, the historic construction and occupation of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice was a crowning event.

The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age: 1986–

In a letter dated 2 January 1986 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, the Supreme Body announced the inception of the fourth epoch of the Formative Age.

It highlighted the significant developments that had taken place in the “organic growth of the Cause of God” during the course of the recently completed third epoch, by assessing the readiness of the Bahá’í community to begin to address the objectives of the new Six Year Plan scheduled to begin on 21 April 1986, and, outlined the general aims and characteristics of this new Plan. Whereas national plans had previously derived largely from the World Center, in this new epoch the specific goals for each national community will be formulated, within the framework of the overall objectives of the Plan, by means of consultation between the particular National Spiritual Assembly and the Continental Board of Counselors. As the Universal House of Justice states:

This new process ... signalizes the inauguration of a new stage in the unfoldment of the Administrative Order. Our beloved Guardian anticipated a succession of epochs during the Formative Age of the Faith; we have no hesitation in recognizing that this new development in the maturation of Bahá’í institutions marks the inception of the fourth epoch of that Age.

Future Epochs

The tasks that remain to be accomplished during the course of the Formative Age are many and challenging. Additional epochs can be anticipated, each marking significant stages in the evolution of the Administrative Order and culminating in the Golden Age of the Faith. The Golden Age, itself, will involve “successive epochs” leading ultimately to the establishment of the Most Great Peace, to the World Bahá’í Commonwealth and to the “birth and efflorescence of a world civilization.”