

The Bahá'í Faith
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Pronunciations:

- Bahá'í: Ba-HIGH
- Bah'áu'lláh: Ba-ha-ul-LAH
- Báb: Bahb (Bob)
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Abdul ba-HAH

From the Sacred Writings of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith

“O CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance, it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth, and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.”

Independent Investigation: A Prerequisite for All Seekers of Truth

1. What is Bahá'í?

- Islamic in origin - Persia.
- Shia offshoot, considered a heresy by some. Legal persecution in Iran.
- Abrahamic origins, but Muhammad is not considered the last prophet, and Jesus was the prophet of His time, not divine.
- In the Bahá'í Faith, religious history is seen to have unfolded through a series of divine messengers, each of whom established a religion that was suited to the needs of the time and the capacity of the people. These messengers have included Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and others.
- For Bahá'ís, the most recent messengers are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.
- In Bahá'í belief, each consecutive messenger prophesied of messengers to follow, and Bahá'u'lláh's life and teachings fulfilled the end-time promises of previous scriptures.
- Humanity is understood to be in a process of collective evolution, and the need of the present time is for the gradual establishment of peace, justice, and unity on a global scale.

Major Tenets

- One God, many Names, many religions.
- God is too awesome, mysterious, and powerful to be completely understood by man.
- Each age has its own prophet and religion.
- One God, many manifestations through time. (*God refers to Himself as “We.”*)
- The basic tenet is the seeking of world peace.

My First Contact

My first contact was a fraternity brother in the early 1960s. At the end of his pledgeship, one of our conservative Christian members tried to blackball the Bahá'í on the basis that he was not a Christian.

I asked the pledge if he believed the teachings of Jesus. I carefully worded my question so that he could say yes and not go against his faith, while at the same time not misleading the CC. I have no regrets. He said he did, so I argued that he was Christian enough. He was voted into full membership.

2. History

The Báb

- Similar role to John the Baptist.
- A sect developed that was confrontational toward Shia Islam.
- Claimed to be the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam).

The origin of the Bahá'í Faith can be traced to the city of Shiraz in southwest Iran, where, in 1844, Sayyid `Ali Muhammad Shirazi confided to a select group of Shi'a Muslims that he was the Báb, the Gate to the Hidden Imam of the Shi'a. The Báb took eighteen as his disciples, whom he called the "Letters of the Living." The Bábí movement became a significant insurgency movement. In an effort to quash the insurrections erupting in parts of Iran, the government executed the Báb on July 9, 1850.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892)

Born in 1817, Mirza Husayn `Ali Nuri, who later became Bahá'u'lláh, was a member of one of the great patrician families of Persia. The family could trace its lineage to the ruling dynasties of Persia's imperial past and was endowed with wealth and vast estates. Turning his back on the position at court which these advantages offered him, Bahá'u'lláh became known for his generosity and kindness, which made him deeply loved among his countrymen.

In 1866, Mirza Husayn `Ali Nuri publicly proclaimed himself to be "he Whom God Shall Make Manifest," the successor of the Báb. Known as Bahá'u'lláh, the Glory of God, he emerged as the leader of the majority of Bábís, and his followers adopted the label Bahá'ís. This co-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, while a public supporter of the Báb, was much less confrontational. He worked on keeping a relatively low profile but did proselytize, and his privileged position did not long survive his announcement of support for the message of the Báb.

Engulfed in the waves of violence unleashed upon the Bábís after the Báb's execution, Bahá'u'lláh suffered not only the loss of all his worldly endowments but was subjected to imprisonment, torture, and a series of banishments. The first was to Baghdad, where, in 1863, he announced himself as the One promised by the Báb. From Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh was sent to Constantinople, to Adrianople, and finally to Acre, in the Holy Land, where he arrived as a prisoner in 1868. During his travels in exile, he visited Haifa and Mount Carmel. He loved Mount Carmel, and he, along with the remains of the Báb, are buried there. It is the major shrine of the Bahá'í Faith.

3. Succession

He was succeeded by his son, `Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921). From earliest childhood, Abbas Effendi, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, shared his father's sufferings and banishments. He took as his title Abdu'l-Bahá, the "Servant of Bahá." Bahá'u'lláh appointed him the one authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í teachings and as Head of the Faith after his own passing. In `Abdu'l-Bahá was seen a perfect example of the Bahá'í way of life.

While Abdu'l-Bahá was still a prisoner of the Ottomans, the first Bahá'í pilgrims from the Western world arrived in Acre in 1898. After his release in 1908, Abdu'l-Bahá set out on a series of journeys which, in 1911–1913, took him to Europe and America. There he proclaimed Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity and social justice to church congregations, peace societies, members of trade unions, university faculties, journalists, government officials, and many public audiences.

On November 29, 1921, ten thousand people, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from all persuasions and denominations, gathered on Mount Carmel to mourn the passing of One who was eulogized as the essence of "Virtue and Wisdom, of Knowledge and Generosity." On that occasion, Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's Son and chosen successor, was described by a Jewish leader as a "living example of self-sacrifice," by a Christian orator as One who led humanity to the "Way of Truth," and by a prominent Muslim leader as a "pillar of peace" and the embodiment of "glory and greatness."

His funeral, according to a Western observer, brought together a great throng "sorrowing for his death, but rejoicing also for his life." His eldest son assumed leadership: Shoghi Effendi. He spent his life interpreting the holy writings and setting up the administrative structures that would succeed him. He died in 1957. He had no heirs, so leadership of the Bahá'ís was assumed by the primary organizational body of the Bahá'ís.

Organization - Universal House of Justice

Founded on a set of unique electoral and consultative principles, the Bahá'í administrative order is organized around elected governing councils operating at the local, national, and international levels.

The Universal House of Justice, the supreme international legislative authority of this system, is a nine-member body elected at five-year intervals by the entire membership of the national governing institutions of the Bahá'í world. The members of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh wrote, are "the Trustees of God among His servants."

4. Bahá'í in the U.S. - What Attracts Converts?

Example of Attraction: The Light Goes On

A Convert Said:

"It was difficult to some extent to switch loyalties. Because Christianity is centered on Christ, and he is your only door to heaven, so if you turn your back on Christ, you're doomed, you know? So it is a very serious consideration. So the only way that I could make the switch was when I realized that I had the same feelings towards Bahá'u'lláh as I did towards Christ, and there was no conflict between them. That was it. When I realized that Bahá'u'lláh had the same loyalty, and I wasn't diminishing my feelings towards Christ and my loyalty towards him. Bahá'u'lláh kind of stepped into Christ's spot, yea, but without Christ moving." Perhaps more typical of Bahá'í converts are those who found the rational, logical aspect of the faith to be the most compelling.

For example, a convert said:

"I remember at one period I really started studying some of the other religions. I came back and said, you know, they all claim to be right. They can't all be right. How do you sort this stuff out? [The man who taught her the Bahá'í Faith] turned to me and said, 'Well, they were all right for their time.' It was like light bulbs went off. God! Of course! The concept of progressive revelation was what makes perfect sense. So that really attracted me."

5. Principles

Shoghi Effendi, the appointed head of the religion from 1921 to 1957, wrote the following summary of what he considered to be the distinguishing principles:

- The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition.
- The oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith.
- The basic unity of all religions.
- The condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class, or national.
- The harmony which must exist between religion and science.
- The equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of humankind is able to soar.
- The introduction of compulsory education.
- The adoption of a universal auxiliary language.
- The abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty.
- The institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations.
- The exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship.
- The glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations.
- The establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind.

6. The Parable of the Tree

“Man is like unto a tree. If he be adorned with fruit, he hath been and will ever be worthy of praise and commendation. Otherwise a fruitless tree is but fit for fire. The fruits of the human tree are exquisite, highly desired and dearly cherished. Among them are upright character, virtuous deeds and a goodly utterance.”

7. Discussion

- So, what are your thoughts?
- How similar or different is the Bahá'í Faith from Unitarian Universalism?