

The Bahá'í Faith

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: “A religious movement founded in the nineteenth century as an independent religious movement branching off from Islam. The Bahá'í Faith has always been an ecumenical movement in that it sees as its goal the eventual unity of all of the world's different faiths into the Bahá'í Faith.”¹

Founders: Mirza Ali Muhammad (Báb; 1819-1850); Mirza Husayn Ali

Statistics: Over 5 million worldwide; about 130,000 in the U.S.

History: The Bahá'í Faith began in 19th century Persia (modern-day Iran), with conceptual roots in Iranian Shi'ism. Its founder, Mirza Ali Muhammad (1819-1850), declared himself to be Bab (Persian for “gate”). He claimed fulfillment of prophecies of Islam and viewed himself as forerunner of a prophet to come, the messianic figure Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic, “The Glory of God”).² The Persian government executed Bab in 1850. Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh was Mírzá Husayn Alí (1817-1892), the successor of Bab. In 1863 Mírzá Husayn Alí announced that he was *Mahdí*, “him whom God should manifest,” “the expected prophet of all the world's religions, whose teachings will finally usher in the long-awaited kingdom of God.”³ After a period of imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh attracted followers and was eventually exiled in 'Akká, Palestine, near present-day Haifa, Israel, the location of the Bahá'í World Centre. His writings while in prison partially make up the Scriptures of Bahá'í. He was succeeded by his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), during whose leadership Bahá'í came to the United States. He built a temple⁴ in Wilmette, IL—the first Bahá'í community in the U.S. called “First Assembly of Baba'ists in America—1895” whose leader was Kheiralla. Following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in 1921 his grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) ruled, followed in turn by a series of other who led the movement. In 1963 the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member supreme governing body elected democratically, was founded. Bahá'ís believe that the Universal House of Justice receives infallible guidance from God and is the institutional foundation of the kingdom of God. In early years, Bahá'ís were persecuted by Islam, whose leaders regarded the teachings of Bahá'í as heretical.

According to recent sources, the presence of Bahá'í has increased in certain regions of the world. The movement has established a growing number of schools, literacy programs, and radio stations.⁵ The growth rate of Bahá'í is reported to be 5.5% a year worldwide.⁶

¹Larry Nichols, George Mather, and Alvin Schmidt, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006 revised and updated edition), 32.

²See <http://www.bahai.org/faq/facts/bahauallah>

³*New Religions: A Guide—New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 132. Bahá'u'lláh is regarded as the fifth incarnation of Buddha for Buddhists, the Messiah for Jews, the return of Christ for Christians, etc.

⁴Like all Bahá'í temples, the Wilmette temple is nine-sided and contains several structural elements numbering nine. The number nine is sacred to Bahá'ís and signifies culmination and unity. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), 883.

⁵*The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121.

⁶*Watchman Fellowship Profile*, 1997, 2.

Texts: Many writings of Bahá'u'lláh, of which there are over 100 (e.g., *The Most Holy Book* [*Kitab-i-aqbas*], *The Book Certitude*, *The Hidden Words*, *The Seven Valleys*)

Beliefs and Practices⁷

Three principles are central to the thought world of the Bahá'í Faith: The oneness of “God,” oneness of religion, and oneness of humanity. *Oneness of God*. Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, whom they regard as “creator” (He simply emanates all that exists) and sustainer of all life. All faiths are worshipping the same Divine Presence. All creation mirrors the glory of God. God transcends creation and is totally unknowable and inaccessible. He reveals himself in “Manifestations of God,” which are the founders of the world's religions and teachers of humanity.⁸ Bahá'ís believe in progressive revelation and hold that since the beginning of time God has sent at certain intervals “Divine Educators” to establish spiritual and social guidelines for the advancement of civilization⁹ and enabling people to develop nobler qualities. Among these “Educators” are such individuals as Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Zoroaster, Krishna, and of course Bahá'u'lláh. *Oneness of Religion*. Bahá'ís' goal is the global unity of all religion. The “spiritual truths” of all religions are the same, though their social laws differ to create unity at different stages of history in different segments of humanity. They believe that religion has a two-fold function: spiritual education of individual souls and social solidarity of humanity through laws and institutions.¹⁰ *Oneness of humanity*. Bahá'ís believe in the unity of all humanity. The religion seeks to unify all humanity into one human family by eliminating all forms of prejudice, so that there will be global unity and peace. As a Bahá'í puts it, “God's messenger [Bahá'u'lláh]...has released the spiritual power which will unite all mankind in one universal faith and establish peace and brotherhood.”¹¹

Bahá'í summarizes some of its teachings this way:

- The oneness of mankind.
- Independent investigation of truth.
- The common foundation of all religions.
- The essential harmony of science and religion
- Equality of men and women.
- Elimination of prejudice of all kinds.
- Universal compulsory education.
- A spiritual solution of the economic problem.
- A universal auxiliary language.
- Universal peace upheld by a world government.¹²

⁷For a brief summary of the Bahá'í Faith from its own web site, see http://www.bahai.org/faq/facts/bahai_faith. Also, <http://www.bahai.us/bahai-beliefs>. The information in the first paragraph above under “Beliefs and Practices” is a summary of material contained in the section on Bahá'í in *New Religions: A Guide* (see note 3).

⁸“One Universal Faith,” brochure published by Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1-2.

⁹Followers of Bahá'í are promised that in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings they will find “laws and ordinances of world order and the establishment of a higher world civilization.” *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰Examples of “spiritual” laws: rules on daily prayer, fasting, sexual morality, abstinence from drugs and alcohol, and burial. “Social” laws: laws on marriage and divorce; founding of single language; world government; collective security; reduction of armaments; elimination of racism; sexism and prejudice; reduction of extremes of wealth and poverty; and universal education.

¹¹“One Universal Faith,” 2.

¹²*Ibid.*, 3. See also: <http://web.archive.org/web/20060907005952/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/re/move/>

Bahá'í denies the reality of evil, the devil, and hell as the Christian Scriptures speak of them—viewing the soul of human beings as essentially good. Ignorance has separated humans from God's being. Education aiming toward perfection of humanity is the main goal. Death is merely new birth through which the soul enters the afterlife, “where it will continue to progress until it attains the presence of God.”¹³

The daily life of Bahá'ís is governed by a strict moral code and the laws formulated by Bahá'u'lláh, including laws on fasting, prayer, study of Bahá'í scripture and keeping the rituals of a 19-month calendar (based on dates in the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Alí Muhammad). A Nineteen-day Feast is held on the first day of each month. The Feast, often held in homes, consists of a devotional period, business, and social activities. Work done in a spirit of service is regarded as a form of worship. Bahá'í has no clergy.

A Lutheran Response

The Bahá'í Faith is a highly syncretistic (mixing together conflicting or divergent beliefs from many religions) movement. To advance its goal of unifying all faiths into a common brotherhood, it chooses what it regards as central truths in all religions. But at the same time Bahá'í rejects fundamental truths that give these religions their distinctive identity.¹⁴ Non-negotiable according to Bahá'í, however, are the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. As a Bahá'í teacher has put it, “The writings of Bahá'u'lláh, since they are the last manifestation [of “God”], are to be considered final authority in matters of religion as far as the Baha'i faith is concerned.”¹⁵ Lutherans teach that the final and definitive revelation of the one divine truth is contained in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which as the inspired Word of God are the sole norm for what is to be taught (John 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:15-16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). Lutherans in principle reject all claims of divine, specific revelation apart from the Scriptures and on the basis of these Scriptures further reject all attempts to mix truth and error (see 2 Cor. 6:14-18; 1 John 4:1-6). Lutherans regard endeavors to “unite all mankind in one universal faith” in some kind of composite belief system as illusory. According to the New Testament, true unity is based on agreement in the doctrine taught by Jesus and His apostles, and to the exclusion of contrary doctrine (1 Cor. 1:10; 1 Tim. 1:3-11; Rom. 16:17).

Bahá'í not only rejects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (one God in three distinct persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit). It also rejects the central truth of Christianity that Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate and “the way, the truth and the life,” apart from whom no one now or in the future can enter God's presence (John 14:6-7). A Bahá'í teacher has stated, “we believe that Jesus was only one of nine manifestations of the divine being and appeared in His era of time to illumine those who lived at that time. Today, Baha'u'llah is the revelation.”¹⁶ The very essence of Christianity, which in no way can be compromised, is the core truth that the eternal Son of God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14); in His one person the divine and human natures are inseparably united. In Him, says the Bible, all the fullness of the Godhead dwelled bodily (Col. 2:9). He suffered, died, and rose again to atone for the sins of the whole world (Mark 10:45; Rom. 3:25; 4:25; Eph. 1:7; 1 John 1:1-10; 2:2, etc.). Jesus is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), who alone has seen God (1:18) and who is the only way to God the Father (16:6). As the writer to the Hebrews declares, “in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature”; He is therefore absolutely pre-eminent (Heb. 1:2-14).

A Bahá'í teacher who was asked, “just how in Baha'ism do you deal with the problem of your own personal sin?” responded as follows: “We accept the fact that no one is perfect, but the practice of principles laid down by Baha'u'llah and by making every effort through prayer and personal sacrifice to

¹³ <http://www.bahai.us/bahai-beliefs>

¹⁴ The *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* points out that at least some of the world religions regard Bahá'í's goal of the unity of all faiths as unrealizable (34).

¹⁵ Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, revised and updated edition, 1997), 326.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

live in accord with the character of the divine being revealed in him, we can arrive at eventual salvation as you like to term it.”¹⁷ This statement reveals that the Bahá'í faith does not take seriously sin as the total depravity of human nature and man's accountability before a just God who punishes sin (Rom. 3:19-20; 5:12; Eph. 2:1-3). Rather, it assumes that humans possess an innate power to effect a moral transformation that will enable them to enter eternity. Such teaching by its very nature stands in radical opposition to what is distinctive about Christianity. Christianity teaches that human beings are put right with God and receive the gift of eternal life not through obedience to moral principles, but by faith in Jesus Christ “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24; Gal. 2:15-21; 3:10-14, 21-22). Lutherans respect the efforts of Bahá'ís to adhere to high moral principles (such as opposition to abortion, prejudice, gossip, etc.) that contribute to the betterment of society and peace in the world. However, from the Lutheran perspective the ultimate goal of establishing a “world order,” “a higher world civilization,” and “universal peace upheld by a world government” through the laws and ordinances of the Bahá'í prophet Bahá'u'llah cannot be reconciled with the biblical understanding of the kingdom of God. Jesus taught that His kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36) and does not come “with signs to be observed” (Luke 17:20-21), but is established in the hearts of people through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:15) and the forgiveness of sins in His name (Col. 1:13-14).

For Further Reading

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Links and Websites

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¹⁷*Ibid.*, 327.