

the Faith's teachings and institutions and disseminate it worldwide.

History and Major Figures

The Bahá'í Faith emerged from Twelver Shi'ism, the form of Islam dominating Iran, which believes that a succession of twelve imams followed Muhammad and expects the return of the Twelfth Imam at the end of time. On May 23, 1844, `Alí-Muhammad (1819-50), a young merchant from Shiraz, in southern Iran, announced that he was that promised return. Taking the title of the Báb ("the Gate" in Arabic), he began to pen texts that he claimed were divine revelation. His followers, Bábís, grew rapidly in number, prompting strong opposition from Iran's Shi'ite establishment and his imprisonment. Executions, army assaults against Bábí groups, and mob action resulted in the deaths of thousands to tens of thousands of Bábís. The Báb was executed by firing squad in 1850.

One of the few surviving Bábí leaders was Husayn-`Alí of Núr (1817-92), son of a prominent member of the court. He took the title of Bahá'u'lláh ("Glory of God" in Arabic). The Báb hinted in his writings that Bahá'u'lláh was "he whom God will make manifest," a messianic figure to appear nineteen years after the beginning of the Báb's own mission. The Báb appointed Yahyá, Bahá'u'lláh's teenaged half brother, the nominal head of the Bábí Faith, presumably to draw attention away from Bahá'u'lláh yet allow him to continue his role as informal leader of the Bábís.

In 1852 the Iranian government imprisoned Bahá'u'lláh, then exiled him. He went to Ottoman Iraq, where he withdrew into the wilderness for two years, then established himself in Baghdad and began to compose texts that, he hinted, were divine revelation. In April 1863 he formally announced his claim to be the messenger of God foretold by the Báb. The vast majority of Bábís accepted him over the next decade and became Bahá'ís.

In the next thirty years Bahá'u'lláh suffered additional exiles to Istanbul, Edirne in European Turkey, and the Turkish penal city of Acre (modern Akko in northern Israel). His half-brother

Yahyá broke from him and established the Azalí movement, which never attracted more than a few hundred followers. Bahá'u'lláh produced theological and philosophical treatises, Qur'an commentaries, prayers, responses to attacks on his religion, mystical poetry, ethical works, and epistles to his followers. His literary corpus, encompassing some 15,000 extant works in Arabic, Persian, and an erudite combination of the two, comprises the core of Bahá'í scripture.

In his will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed his eldest son, 'Abbás (1844-1921), his successor and the head of his Faith. 'Abbás took the title of 'Abdu'l-Bahá ("servant of Bahá" in Arabic). His literary corpus of 16,000 works in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish is regarded as inspired interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's works and form a part of Bahá'í scripture. One of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's major accomplishments was coordinating the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to the Occident, starting in 1893. After the Young Turks Revolution in 1908, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was freed from house arrest in Acre and was able to travel to Egypt (1910), Europe (1911, 1913) and North America (1912). He gave hundreds of talks, interpreting and explaining Bahá'í teachings to western audiences. He also began to establish local and national Bahá'í organizations and oversaw work on two Bahá'í Houses of Worship.

In his Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957) to be his successor and the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. Upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing in November 1921, Shoghi Effendi took provisions in the Will and Testament as a blueprint for establishing local and national Spiritual Assemblies, the nine-person governing councils of Bahá'í communities, and then gave the national Spiritual Assemblies goals for spreading the Bahá'í Faith. Oxford educated, Shoghi Effendi created authoritative English translations of many of Bahá'u'lláh's works. His 36,000 letters in English, Persian, Arabic, and French are considered authoritative interpretation, but not scripture.

When Shoghi Effendi died unexpectedly in November 1957, the twenty-seven individuals he had appointed Hands of the Cause of God as "chief stewards" of the Bahá'í Faith assumed temporary responsibility to coordinate the community until the Universal House of Justice, a nine-man supreme governing council, was elected in April

1963. The Universal House of Justice, whose authority and functions were outlined by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, is elected by all the members of the national Spiritual Assemblies every five years. It has continued the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide, answered hundreds of thousands of letters asking for clarification of the Bahá'í teachings, issued statements on Bahá'í principles, coordinated the Faith's external relations, and guided the development of local and national Bahá'í institutions.

Teachings and Practices

The Bahá'í teachings are often summarized as the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh spoke of God as an ultimately unknowable essence which manifests its qualities and attributes in the natural world and vouchsafes revelation to humanity through chosen mouthpieces termed manifestations. He identified Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zoroaster, the Báb, and himself as manifestations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá added the Buddha, and Shoghi Effendi, Krishna, to the list. Bahá'í scripture attributes the differences between religions to differing cultural and linguistic contexts, fallible interpretation of the teachings, and humanity's unfolding needs. The religions' messianic expectations are understood to refer to the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh's writings contain many interpretations of qur'anic and biblical texts.

The oneness of humanity refers to the idea that all human beings come from the same stock and therefore are fundamentally equal, regardless of race or gender. The manifestations have been their divine educators and an important source of human cultural and ethical progress. Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the manifestation for the modern age and to bring teachings that will serve as the founding principles of a world civilization. Among them are equal rights of women in all social spheres, including work and politics; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; the elevation of work, performed as a service to humanity, to the level of worship; the central role of consultation (a system of collective decision making that starts with prayer); and the need for an international system of governance that prevents war, protects the environment, coordinates the flow of commerce, and reduces the extremes of wealth and poverty.

The principle of unity is central to Bahá'í doctrine. At the practical level, it refers to groups of persons consulting and serving others together, but the ultimate goal is being "one soul in many bodies," a mystical level of trust, intimacy, and communion. Partisanship prevents spiritual unity and thus Bahá'ís do not join political parties (though they can vote). Bahá'í community governance is based on electing nine-member spiritual assemblies in an atmosphere of prayer and in the complete absence of nominations, campaigning, or any mentioning of names. The religion has no clergy. Complementing the elected councils are individual advisors, consultants, and encouragers: Counselors at the international and continental levels (appointed by the Universal House of Justice), Auxiliary Board members at the national and regional levels, and assistants at the local level.

Anyone who recognizes Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of God and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as his successors, accepts the Bahá'í institutions they created, and strives to follow their teachings, is considered a Bahá'í. Bahá'ís are to recite, daily and in private, one of the Faith's three obligatory prayers; fast (abstain from food, water, and tobacco) from sunrise to sunset every March 2-20; read the Word of God every morning and evening; serve others; follow Bahá'í moral laws (such as abstaining from sex outside of heterosexual marriage and from alcohol); go on pilgrimage (currently to the Bahá'í World Center in northern Israel); participate in Bahá'í community activities (such as voting and attending Feast, the monthly Bahá'í community meeting); and support their religion by teaching it to others and contributing to its funds. A strong personal connection with Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is an important part of the personal faith of Bahá'ís.

Current Extent and Status

The Bahá'í Faith moved beyond its Iranian Shi'ite milieu in the 1870s and 1880s when Iranian Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sunni Muslims joined. By the 1890s Sunnis as far west as Egypt and as far east as Indonesia had become Bahá'ís, as had Lebanese Christians and Burmese Buddhists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá oversaw the conversion of one or two hundred Europeans, a similar number of Indians (mostly Parsees), and of Burmese, a few thousand North Americans, and a scattering of

Japanese, Chinese, Hindus, Sikhs, Hawaiians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, and Latin Americans. Once Shoghi Effendi established a network of national

Spiritual Assemblies, he encouraged them to found Bahá'í communities across Latin America (1937-53), Europe (1946-53) Africa (1950-63), and Asia and the Pacific (1953-63). The Universal House of Justice has continued the spread of the Bahá'í Faith, especially in former Iron Curtain countries after 1989. The World Christian Encyclopedia regards it as the second most widespread religion in the world (Christianity is found in 238 countries, the Bahá'í Faith in 218,

and Islam in 204). Its membership, about 100,000 in 1900 and 250,000 in 1963, was about five million in 2000. Persecution of the Bahá'ís continues in some Islamic nations, notably Egypt and Iran, where 222 have been executed in the last twenty-eight years.

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