



to as babs (gates), since they are believed to function as the gates by which believers gain access to the true faith. Shi'ites have always believed that one day the twelfth imam, who disappeared in mysterious and unexplained circumstances during the ninth century, would reappear as the Messiah.

In 1844 a Persian Shi'ite Muslim named 'Ali Muhammad declared that he was the long-awaited twelfth imam and assumed the title of bab. Gathering around him a group of disciples, who called themselves Bab'is, The Bab launched a movement for religious and social reform. Within a short time this movement had gained so much momentum that both religious and political forces within Iran took drastic counteraction. The Bab was publicly executed on July 9, 1850, and many of his followers were eliminated through either imprisonment or execution. Before The Bab died, however, he foretold the appearance of a leader greater than he to carry on the work of establishing a universal religion, so that his remaining disciples were sustained by the hope that all was not lost.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)

Among this group of survivors was a man called Mirza Hussain Ali, the eldest son of the minister of state, who, by virtue of his family connections, was spared the fate of many of his companions. He had abandoned his family name and assumed the title Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God).

In 1852 an event occurred that affected the future course of the movement. One of The Bab's followers attempted to assassinate the Iranian shah, an act that provoked further persecution against the Bab'is. Bahá'u'lláh was first imprisoned and later exiled to Baghdad, then under the jurisdiction of the Turkish government. During this period, which lasted approximately ten years, a number of significant developments occurred.

First, Bahá'u'lláh made his place of residence in Baghdad a center of learning to which students from near and far were attracted, and many Bab'is gradually formed a community in exile. Second, Bahá'u'lláh wrote several books, including Hidden Words, Seven Valleys, and The Book of Certitude—all aimed at encouraging and guiding his followers. Third, it was revealed to Bahá'u'lláh that he was the long-awaited leader predicted by The Bab. Fourth, when the authorities in Baghdad

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sought to suppress The Bab's movement, Bahá'u'lláh was ordered into even more distant exile. His destination was to be Istanbul.

While the caravan was being prepared for the long journey, Bahá'u'lláh and his dedicated followers encamped for twelve days (April 21-May 2, 1863) in the garden of Ridvan, just outside Baghdad. When all had assembled, Bahá'u'lláh made an unexpected announcement: the one whose coming had been foretold by their master, The Bab, was none other than he, Bahá'u'lláh. All those who recognized him as the Chosen of God, the Promised One of all the prophets, were to follow him. Except for a few who remained unconvinced, the company of Bab'is recognized him as the fulfillment of the prophecy and from that day called

themselves Bahá'ís.

The caravan of displaced Bahá'ís paused in Istanbul for only a few months before being forced to move on to Adrianople, in European Turkey. During his four and a half years in Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh resumed his teaching and gathered a large following. He also wrote letters to numerous religious leaders, rulers, and kings, including the pope and the president of the United States. To all, he announced his mission and called upon them to promote the unity of humankind and the establishment of the true, universal religion.

His energetic proselytizing, however, stimulated further opposition, which resulted in the banishment of Bahá'u'lláh and his followers to Acre, in Palestine—then a Turkish enclave to which criminals were exiled. A few years later the restrictions that had at first been imposed

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on the small religious colony were relaxed, and shortly afterward Bahá'u'lláh and his group moved to Bahji, on the slopes of Mount Carmel. His mission, however, terminated with his death on May 29, 1892, at the age of seventy-five. Today, a shrine dedicated to his memory stands on Mount Carmel in Israel.

Abdul Baha (1844-1921)

Bahá'u'lláh left a will in which he appointed his eldest son, Abbas Effendi, as his successor. In assuming the leadership of the movement, Abbas Effendi changed his name to Abdul Baha (Servant of Baha, or Servant of Glory). He had shared the persecutions, exiles, and imprisonment of his father and now as leader he carried on his father's program of writing. In 1908, when he was freed by the Turkish authorities, he undertook extensive teaching tours in Europe, the United States, and Canada. He preached and taught the faith of the Bahá'í and established numerous Assemblies in various nations. On his return to Palestine he wrote *The Divine Plan*, a work that invoked all Bahá'ís to spread Bahá'u'lláh's message—the unification of humankind through the medium of Bahá'í, to the four corners of the world. He died on November 28, 1921, at the age of seventy-seven, leaving a will that directed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to assume leadership of the Bahá'í faith.

The Shrine of The Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel. The site was selected by

Bahá'u'lláh before his death in 1892, and his remains were placed there in 1909. Courtesy of Israel Government Tourist Office, Ministry of Tourism, Toronto, Canada.

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Shoghi Effendi (1896-1957)

Shoghi Effendi ("the Guardian") was the last in a direct line of succession from Bahá'u'lláh. He continued the work of establishing local and national Assemblies in various parts of the world until his death on November 2, 1957.

Two important innovations were made under his guidance: the structure that governs matters of administration and the Universal House of Justice, which is the supreme legislative body governing the affairs of the Bahá'í faith at the international level.

### Bahá'í Scriptures

The written works of The Bab, Bahá'u'lláh, Abdul Baha, and Shoghi Effendi, which make up the sacred literature of the Bahá'ís, are considered to be inspired but human, poetic but practical. The writings of The Bab consist mainly of commentaries, expositions, exhortations, and prayers. Those of Bahá'u'lláh are more comprehensive in range and deal with every phase of human life: individual and social, material and spiritual. His work also includes interpretations of ancient and modern scriptures of other religions, as well as prophetic pronouncements, all written either in Persian or in Arabic.

One of the unique features of the Bahá'í faith is the Book of the Covenant, in which Bahá'u'lláh provides, in clear and unambiguous terms, an authorized interpretation of what he is saying. In this book, Bahá'u'lláh vested full powers over the interpretation of his writings and over the direction of the Bahá'í faith in his eldest son, Abdul Baha. In the same way, when Abdul Baha appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as his successor, he stipulated in his will that Shoghi Effendi should be the sole interpreter of the writings and the guardian of the faith. Since his death, no individual can claim special authority for interpreting the sacred writings of the Bahá'í.

Among the hundreds of writings of Bahá'u'lláh, two books are regarded as especially important by Bahá'ís: the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Most Holy Book) and the *Kitab-i-Iqan* (Book of Certitude). The former deals with Bahá'í laws and institutions, and the latter consists of revelatory concepts. Bahá'ís consider both books to be no less divinely inspired than the sacred writings of other religions.

### Bahá'í Teachings

The basic teaching of the Bahá'í faith may be summed up in nine words: the oneness of God and the unity of humanity. God is one, even though people call him by different names. In essence, God is unknowable, but he has made known his truth according to the

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requirements of an advancing civilization through his chosen prophets or messengers in nearly every era. These prophets or messengers are considered by the Bahá'ís to be "manifestations of God." Included in this group are Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh. The religions that evolved out of these manifestations of God were the product of two factors: interpretations influenced by human limitations and varying degrees of revealed truth.

On the basis of these assumptions, Bahá'ís affirm that Bahá'u'lláh, for the first time in religious history, took the necessary step to assure the unity of his followers for all time: he appointed his eldest son, Abdul Baha, as his successor and decreed that Abdul Baha was divinely authorized to interpret his teachings. In a thousand or more years, another manifestation of God may appear; but until then, the words of Bahá'u'lláh, Abdul Baha, and "the Guardian" Shoghi Effendi, along with the decisions of the Universal House of Justice, constitute the authorities to which all believers must turn. No Bahá'í may found a sect based on any supposed divine revelation or particular interpretation.

Abdul Baha, as the authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í faith, summarized its teachings in a set of principles. Twelve of the most important of them are as follows:[2]

1. Humanity. All the people of the world are created by God and are therefore members of one human family. Since God is just, kind, and merciful to all members of the human race, each individual should follow God's example in dealing with others.
  2. Truth. Truth is one and does not admit of multiple divisions. Each individual must seek this truth independently, forsaking imitations and traditions.
  3. Religions. The universal message of all religions is the same: peace and good will. It is in the interest of humanity that all religious systems dispel animosity, bigotry, and hatred and promote love, accord, and spiritual brotherhood.
  4. Religion and science. Humanity is endowed with intelligence and reason in order to test the validity of ideas. If religious beliefs and opinions fly in the face of scientific evidence, they are little more than superstitions and unfounded assumptions.
  5. Sex. Differences that distinguish one sex from another are not peculiar to humans; these differences are common to all living things and do not favor one sex over another. Therefore, the equality of men and women must be universally acknowledged.
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6. Prejudice. Prejudice destroys human well-being and happiness; therefore, humanity must actively work to abolish all forms of prejudice—religious, racial, class, and national.
  7. Peace. The establishment of a permanent and universal peace through world government will be achieved in this century.
  8. Education. Since education is essential to humanity, there should be one universal standard of training and teaching. This universal curriculum should also establish a global code of ethics.

9. Economy. Happiness, prosperity, and the stability of humanity depend on economic equality. Society must, therefore, adjust the balance of the global economy in favor of the majority instead of the few.

10. Human rights. God's dominion is characterized by justice and equity without distinction or preference, so that a uniform standard of human rights must be universally recognized and adopted.

11. Language. One of the great factors in the unification of human beings is language. Therefore, a specially appointed committee should select an auxiliary language that will be universally adopted as a medium of international communication.

12. Work. Any work performed in a spirit of service is considered to be an act of worship.

Aside from these fundamental teachings, Bahá'ís believe that the Day of Judgment is determined as much by events in the present as in the future. In this sense, every day is a Day of Judgment. Every individual is being tested or judged now by the advent of the revelation of God. In addition, each individual is called to account for his or her actions after death. By rejecting the oneness or unity of humankind, civilization is destroying itself—in itself the Day of Judgment. However, Bahá'ís affirm, on the basis of Bahá'u'lláh's sayings, that humanity and the physical earth will survive as a new, universal civilization eventually emerges.

After death, the soul continues to evolve into different states and conditions. The so-called spiritual body that a soul inhabits when the physical body dies is thought of as comprising the moral qualities and spiritual perceptions developed during one's lifetime. Heaven and hell are not places but conditions of the soul, which is in a continual and eternal state of evolution. When the soul is near God and his purposes, that is heaven. When the soul is distant from God, that is hell.

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To put it differently: according to the Bahá'í faith, heaven represents a state of perfection, and hell of imperfection; heaven is the fulfillment of harmony with God's will and one's fellow beings, and hell is the absence of such harmony. The joys of heaven are spiritual, and the sorrows of hell consist of the absence of these joys. Bahá'ís reject any belief in the objective existence of the forces of evil. Just as darkness is simply the absence of light, so evil is explained as the absence of divine qualities at any particular level of existence.

### Bahá'í Worship

The Bahá'í faith has no rituals, no professional priesthood, and no monastic orders. A respected individual in the community who is well educated in the Bahá'í faith conducts the regular meetings for united worship. These meetings consist of prayers, selected readings from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and

Abdul Baha and from the scriptures of the other world religions, and, occasionally, questions and answers. Mutual service and spiritual fellowship are the factors that bring adherents together for worship.

The basic unit of worship is the local spiritual Assembly. In every city, town, or district where there are nine or more adult Bahá'ís, a nine-member administrative body is elected annually on April 21 to govern the affairs of the particular community. The second level of Bahá'í administration is the national spiritual Assembly. This, too, is a nine-member body elected annually by delegates attending a national convention. The third and highest level of Bahá'í administration is the Universal House of Justice, made up of nine members elected once every five years at a convention.

Bahá'ís meet in the homes of members or in some other buildings, as they do not have local houses of worship. They have constructed several magnificent temples around the world, however. Two of these temples have been designed and built by Canadian architects: the shrine of The Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa is the work of Sutherland Maxwell of Montreal, Quebec; and the temple at Wilmette, Illinois, is the work of Louis Bourgeois of Nicolet, Quebec. All the temples are constructed according to Bahá'u'lláh's instructions. They are located in a large garden adorned with fountains, trees, and flowers, and they are surrounded by a number of accessory buildings devoted to educational, charitable, and social purposes. All of these temples are nine-sided, and all are covered with domes. The number nine is very significant to Bahá'ís, because, as the largest single-digit numeral, it represents the universal unity that Bahá'ís seek.

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Bahá'í house of worship in Sydney, Australia. While each house of worship differs from the others in general design, they all have the unifying architectural feature of nine sides—nine being the largest single digit, symbolizing oneness and unity. Courtesy of Bahá'í Community of Canada.

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### Bahá'í Obligations

Very few obligations regulate the lives of the Bahá'ís. One duty is to pray. Although the recitation (or chanting) of prayer is enjoined upon every Bahá'í, prayer is not confined to the use of prescribed forms, important as those are. Bahá'ís believe that one's whole life can be a prayer—that work devoted to the glory of God and the good of one's neighbor is also prayer.

Another obligation is to fast. The month of 'Ala (the nineteenth month in the Bahá'í calendar\*) is appointed for fasting, and during the entire nineteen days of the month, both food and drink are forbidden from sunrise to sunset. All Bahá'ís, except children, invalids, travelers, pregnant women, and the sick, are enjoined to keep the fast.

A third obligation relates to marriage. Monogamy is the rule, and a couple may

marry only after the consent of their parents. In the matter of divorce, a couple is bound not only by Bahá'í teaching, but also by the laws of the country of residence. According to Bahá'í teaching, divorce is permitted after a year's separation and only if, during that period, the couple is not able to restore a harmonious relationship.

Finally, Bahá'í parents are under a religious obligation to educate their children. The use of narcotics and intoxicants of any kind, except for medicinal purposes, is strictly prohibited.

### Spread of Bahá'í Faith

There are neither paid missionaries nor professional clergy in the Bahá'í religion. All the work of teaching and spreading the faith is done by volunteer teachers known as pioneers. Normally, application for membership is made to the local spiritual Assembly and is open to all who accept the tenets of the Bahá'í faith, recognize the five "stations" of prophethood (The Bab, Bahá'u'lláh, Abdul Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice), and accept the Bahá'í scriptures (known as the Tablets of God) and the administrative order. In matters of financial support, contributions are accepted only from Bahá'ís and are wholly voluntary; personal solicitation is strictly forbidden.

The Bahá'í faith has followers on every continent in the world. Much of the work demands sacrifices from individual believers, who leave their homes, their careers, and their comforts in order to spread the Bahá'í faith.

\* The Bahá'ís use a calendar that was established by The Bab and confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh. The year begins on March 21 and is divided into nineteen months of nineteen days each, with four (five in leap years) additional intercalary days.[page 469]

### Bahá'í Festivals

Bahá'í followers observe a number of festivals based primarily on important historical events and religious anniversaries. The following are some of the more important ceremonies.

The birth of The Bab is celebrated annually on October 20, the day The Bab was born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1819. Bahá'ís honor him as the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh and the herald of a new era.

The Bab revealed his mission to his first disciple, Mulla Husayn, in 1844. The anniversary of this declaration is commemorated annually on May 23. It was The Bab who also inaugurated the Bahá'í calendar, which dates from the year of his declaration (1844).

The anniversary of The Bab's martyrdom is commemorated on July 9 at noon, with readings and prayers from Bahá'í scriptures, because The Bab was martyred by a firing squad in the barracks square of Tabriz, Iran, at noon on that date in 1850.

The birth of Bahá'u'lláh (Mirza Hussain Ali) is celebrated annually on November 12, to commemorate the day he was born in Teheran, Iran, in 1817.

The most important festival in the Bahá'í faith is the Feast of Ridvan (known as the Lord of Feasts), which extends over a period of twelve days, from April 21 to May 2. It commemorates the period in 1863 during which Bahá'u'lláh declared his mission in the garden of Rid-van, just outside Baghdad. The first of Ridvan (April 21) is also the day on which every town, district, or village elects nine representatives to the local Assemblies.

The ascension of Bahá'u'lláh is commemorated on May 29, the day that Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892, in Akko, Palestine, where he had lived in exile. His burial place in Bahji, just outside Akko, is considered the holiest shrine of the Bahá'í world.

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, in which he declared the appointment of his eldest son, Abdul Baha, as the authorized interpreter of his teachings, is celebrated annually on November 26.

The ascension of Abdul Baha (Abbas Effendi) is commemorated annually on November 28, the day he died in 1921 at the age of seventy-seven.

The Nineteen-Day Feast assumed a special importance after the death of Abdul Baha. It is observed on the first day of each of the nineteen Bahá'í months.

The Feast of Naw Ruz (New Year) is celebrated on March 21 and follows immediately after nineteen days of fasting. It is celebrated by picnics or festal gatherings at which music, the chanting of verses, and short addresses suitable to the occasion are contributed by those present.

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Notes

Bahá'í World Faith, Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 240.

See G. Faizi, *The Bahá'í Faith* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Books, 1975), pp. 45-85; and J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Books, 1976), pp. 83-180.

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