Baha'i

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Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith began in middle 19th-century Persia, a Shi'ite Islamic society. Founded by Bahá'u'lláh and his forerunner the Bab, developed and guided by his son, Abdu'l-Bahá, and great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi, it is now widely recognized as an independent world religion. The Bahai Faith emphasizes the unity of all religions and world peace, "To be a Bahá'í," according to Abdu'l-Bahá, "simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood." Bahá'í doctrine is sometimes expressed in the "three onenesses." (1) The oneness of God: There is a single and ultimately unknowable God who is given different names. The knowledge we do have of God derives from his various prophets who instruct us. (2) The oneness of humankind: There is a single human race, and we are all members of it. (3) The oneness of religion: All religions are unified insofar as they are each stages in God's revelatory plan.

HISTORY OF BAHAI FAITH

Bahá'í Founders

The Bahá'í Faith is historically founded on the Babi religion, which in turn rests on the Shi'ite Muslim doctrine of the Hidden Imam. According to this doctrine, the Mahdi, the final Imam-or spiritual successor to Ali-is alive, but was placed by God in a condition of occultation in which he can see others but others cannot see him (or at least they cannot recognize him). He will return at the end of time, take vengeance on the wicked, and initiate an era of peace. Shi'ite Islam has numerous denominations and sects that have differing views of the status of the Imams in general and of the Mahdi. The 19th-century Shaykhi sect, founded by Shaykh (Sheik) Ahmad al-Ahsai (1753-1826), maintained that

Imams have an almost divine status and that each generation needs a gate (Bab) as an intermediary between the Hidden Imam and believers. Although one of the Shaykhi leaders claimed to be guided by the Mahdi in his dreams, no one initially claimed to be the Bab himself.

The forerunner to the Bahai Faith was affiliated with the Shaykhi sect -- either formally or as a sympathizer. Sayyid Ali-Muhammad Shiraz (1819-1850) was born into a merchant family in south Persia; his father died soon after his

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birth, and he was raised by his uncle. He married at 22 and subsequently joined the Shaykhi, In 1844, while on a pilgrimage to Mecca, he claimed to be the Bab, which was a more extreme claim than his Shaykhi predecessors made. It is this event which Bahais designate as the beginning of their religion. Scholars believe that the Bab privately announced to his followers that he was the Mahdi himself; the public declaration of Babhood, though, was politically more safe to make. Even so, his declaration quickly attracted followers, but it also raised political concerns, and for the next six years -- the remainder of his life -- he was exiled or imprisoned. After his announcement, the Bab formed a religious group called the Babis. The first 18 of his followers were sent out as proselytizers, Later the Bab publicly claimed to be the Imam Mahdi himself, and in 1848, in an important work called the Bayan, he declared that he was a manifestation of God, superseding Muhammad. The Bayan also presents a constitution for the coming Babi state and a series of laws. In perhaps the most controversial section, it maintains that believers can take all possessions of nonbelievers. The severity of some of the Bab's laws dramatized his messianic role and rhetorically underscored his legislative authority. However, these laws were counterbalanced by others that prohibit harming or offending others, especially nonbelievers. In any event, only a few of the Bab's laws were ever implemented.

He summoned the Shah of Persia to acknowledge his authority, and in 1848 the Babis distanced themselves from Islam. The same year about 300 Babis set off on a march that prompted armed confrontation. They defended themselves, but were quickly crushed by the Persian government. Massive persecution of Babis followed, and the Bab was executed by a firing squad in 1850. Witnesses reported that he and a follower were suspended by rope. The first volley only severed their ropes and they dropped to the ground. Seeing this as a divine sign, the commander of the regiment withdrew the troops, but a new group of soldiers was brought in, and they finished the task. The Bab's body was secretly retrieved by his followers and, after a number of years, transported to its final resting place at the Mausoleum of the Bab in Haifa, Israel. His immediate successor as Babi leader was Mirza Yahya (Subh-i-Azal), who resided in Baghdad. Before the Bab died, he foretold of a leader, greater than himself, who would finish his work.

The Bahá'í Faith's second founder was Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), an honorific title that means "Glory of God." Bahá'u'lláh, originally named Mirza

Husayn-Ali Nur, was born in Tehran, the capital of Persia. He had no formal education and was eldest son of a distinguished minister of state, When 22, his father died and he was left to manage the estate and care for his family, At age 26 (18,44) he espoused Babism and became one of the Bab's earliest followers, although, as some Bahai historians maintain, he never personally met the Bab, In 1852 a Babi named Sadiq attempted to assassinate the Iranian Shah in retaliation for the execution of the Bab. Sadiq and 80 others were killed, and many more were imprisoned or exiled. Bahá'u'lláh's property was confiscated and he was imprisoned for four months, after which he was exiled to Baghdad. Mirza Yahya (the Bab's provisional successor) went into hiding and made his

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way to Baghdad when he heard that Bahá'u'lláh was there. This initial period of exile lasted until 1863 and was relatively peaceful. Bahá'u'lláh retreated to the desert for two years (1854-1856), and when he returned he ably met challenges by the Muslim Mullas in defense of Babism. He wrote several books while in Baghdad, the most important of these being The Book of Certitude (Kitab-i-Iqan), which explained how prophets from one dispensation anticipate the prophets of the next.

In 1863 Bahá'u'lláh was summoned to Constantinople (Istanbul). While preparing for the journey his house overflowed with well-wishers, and for 12 days he, and later his family, were compelled to camp in a garden, later named Ridvan (paradise). At this time he privately announced that he was the leader foretold by the Bab. As such, he declared himself to be the manifestation or appearance of God. This announcement is known to Bahá'ís as the Declaration at Ridvan, and is the basis of their most important festival celebrated each year from April 21 to May 2. Bahá'u'lláh, his family, and 26 followers went to Constantinople, where they were confined to squalid conditions for four months, and then they moved to Adrianople (Edirne), Turkey, where they remained until 1868. There he attracted more followers and openly announced his mission. He wrote letters to the Shah and other world leaders, including Napoleon 111, Pope Pius IX, Czar Nicholas 11, and Queen Victoria. In 1868, a long-standing tension between Bahá'u'lláh and Mirza Yahya culminated in division, principally owing to Bahá'u'lláh's claim of a new dispensation and universal religion. Contrary to Bahá'u'lláh's wishes, their quarreling led to violence among the two factions; Mirza Yahya was deported to Cyprus, where ultimately his followers abandoned him. Bahá'u'lláh was deported to Acre, Palestine (then part of Syria), which was a prison city for criminals of the Turkish Empire. For two years he and 80 followers were confined to army barracks.- the conditions were so harsh that several of the followers died. When the barracks were needed to house troops, Bahá'u'lláh was moved to a small house in the city in which he stayed for six years. During these years his followers grew substantially in number, At this time he wrote The Most Holy Book (Kitab-i-Aqdas), his most important work, which lays out the basic laws and principles for his followers and establishes the basis of Bahai administration.

In 1877 he was released from the prison city although the prison sentence was never removed. After a two-year stay in a house north of Acre, Bahá'u'lláh moved to a more regal estate, known as Bahji, secured through donations from his followers. He spent the remaining years of his life writing and teaching while administrative functions were taken over by his eldest son, Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921). Upon Bahá'u'lláh's death in 1892 Abdu'l-Bahá was appointed successor, as designated in Bahá'u'lláh's will. Bahá'u'lláh's burial site -- a garden building near the main mansion at Bahji-is the most holy site for the Bahai Faith.

Abdu'l-Bahá ("servant of Baha") was born in Tehran, and was only nine when his father was first imprisoned (1852). He was a dutiful companion to his father, attending him throughout his years of exile and closely guarding him. After Bahá'u'lláh's death, the transition of leadership was not smooth,

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particularly as Abdul-Baha was opposed by several family members, After Bahá'u'lláh's death, Abdu'l-Bahá built the shrine on Mount Carmel as a burial site for the Bab. Abdu'l-Bahá's dissenting relatives reported to the Turkish government that he was constructing a fortress, and in 1901 he was confined to Acre for seven years. There he lived an austere life, teaching and visiting the sick. In 1907 a tribunal met to determine his fate. Coincidentally, a revolution broke out in the Ottoman Empire, and the tribunal members were called to Istanbul. The new leaders of the Empire (the Young Turks) released all political and religious prisoners in the empire. Thus, after a total of 40 years of imprisonment in Palestine, Abdu'l-Bahá too was released (1908). In 1911-1913 he traveled to Great Britain, France, Germany, Hungary, the United States, Canada, and Egypt, where he met with religious and political leaders, scientists, and philosophers. He spoke at universities, charitable organizations, and institutions of various religions. Accordingly, Abdu'l-Bahá is responsible for spreading the Bahai Faith beyond the Middle East and into the Western world. He continued adapting the Bahá'í Faith to modem social ideas. In his role as a spiritual leader, he maintained exclusive authority in interpreting scripture, as appointed to him by Bahá'u'lláh, although he did not consider his own writings to be equally authoritative. During the years of World War I, Abdu'l-Bahá and the Bahá'ís in Palestine were under wartime restrictions and had only limited contact with outside pilgrims. Their efforts focused on securing food supplies for the Bahais and the surrounding poor. After the war, Palestine was occupied by the British and Abdu'l-Bahá was officially honored with Knighthood. He died in 1921, stating in his will that leadership should be passed to his 24-year-old grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), whom he appointed "Guardian of the Cause."

Studying abroad at the time, Shoghi Effendi was surprised at the news of his position. During his tenure as leader, he established the administrative structure of the Bahá'í Faith and became responsible for the subsequent formalized organization of Bahá'ís around the world. He established teaching plans to spread the Bahai Faith worldwide, including North America. His

definitive English translations and clarifications of Bahá'u'lláh's writings helped secure the Bahai Faith in non-Islamic Western countries. Perhaps most importantly, he arranged for the long-awaited election of members to the Universal House of Justice (Bayt al-Adl al-Azam), which would succeed him after his death by overseeing the Bahai community and elucidating doctrine. The plan for this task was Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament which, in turn, draws from the Aqdas. The first election of the members of the Universal House of justice took place in 1963, six years after his death. Members reside in Haifa, Israel, meet almost daily, and are reelected every five years. Today, the Bahá'í Faith has over five million followers in more than 230 countries worldwide, and is one of the world's fastest growing religions. It remains the largest religious minority in Iran, the cradle of the Bahai Faith , with more than a quarter million believers, However, since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been executed, and thousands more persecuted.

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Bahá'í Teaching

The Bahai Faith now reflects little of its original Imami theology, although Shi'ite elements are more present in Iranian Bahá'í traditions. Because of Bahá'u'lláh's appearance, the function of the Bab is no longer considered primary. A central tenet of Bahá'í teaching holds that God's nature is unknowable. Everything around us, though, exhibits different attributes of the divine as each is created by God and endowed with different sets of attributes. Most generally, God is a single infinite power, which implies the nonexistence of evil: Evil is only the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. Neither darkness nor evil have a reality, but are only names we give to the absence of the reality in question. The most striking aspect of Bahá'í theology is its notion of the unity of religions. Revelation is thought to be progressive, and prophets deliver messages appropriate to their own times. All true prophets from the various religions should be acknowledged as genuine -- including Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, and Buddha. The prophets are manifestations of God and have special insight into the spiritual realm. Bahai revelation is seen as the fulfillment of all previous revelations.

In its eschatological teachings, the Bahai Faith holds that there is life after death through the continuation of a disembodied soul, However, heaven, hell, and final judgment are symbolic. Bahá'u'lláh is the messianic figure spoken of by previous prophets, and the "final judgment" is the appearance of each new manifestation/prophet of God. Institutionally, the Bahá'í Faith has no official priests, no monastic component, and all Bahá'ís are expected to participate in teaching. Local spiritual assemblies assist with life cycle rites, such as weddings and funerals, plan community events, counsel members, and coordinate Bahá'í education programs. Nine Bahá'ís are elected annually by secret ballot (April 21) to help supervise the local assemblies, National spiritual assemblies oversee the local spiritual assemblies, and the Universal House of Justice oversees these. Bahá'ís follow a 19-month calendar, each

month having 19 days with four intercalary days between the last two months. One month is designated for fasting.

In their social and moral beliefs, Bahá'ís teach racial and gender equality, monogamy, abstinence from alcohol and narcotics, and the voluntary sharing of property. Strong emphasis is placed on world peace and the unity of all humankind, as indicated in the statement by Bahá'u'lláh that "You are all fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch, the flowers of one garden." The Bahá'í founders and the Universal House of Justice variously advocated a universal language, a universal league of nations, and an international court of arbitration. Although Bahá'ís believe in the doctrine of a just war, military aggression is rejected.

BAHA'I SCRIPTURES

The most sacred group of Bahá'í texts are the writings of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh, which are considered to be revelations. Second to those are the writings of

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Abdu'l-Bahá, which, while not revealed, are considered to be inspired. The writings of Shoghi Effendi are not on a par with either of these groups, but are still considered authoritative, The letters of the Universal House of Justice are also authoritative, but are not scriptural either. The complete corpus of Bahá'í scriptures is perhaps two hundred volumes, although some items are still in manuscript form. The Bab, Bahá'u'lláh, and Abdu'l-Bahá were imprisoned and exiled for much of their lives, and, since they were prohibited from public speaking under these conditions, they devoted their time to writing.

The Bab composed about 50 volumes of writings. His most important work is the Qayyum al-Asma' (1844), a commentary on the Surah of Joseph in the Qur'an, which Bahá'ís consider to be the Bab's first revealed work. The foremost doctrinal works of the Bab are the Persian and Arabic Bayan ("exposition"). Although they share the same title, they are two independent works with some overlapping themes. The Persian Bayan (1848) is larger, although intentionally left incomplete, and is his principal doctrinal work. The Arabic Bayan (1850) was composed during the last few months of the Bab's life.

Bahá'u'lláh penned over one hundred volumes of writings, including letters to world leaders, prayers, and laws, Many of these are published as compilations. His most important writings are The Book of Certitude (Kitab-i-Iqan), Most Holy Book (Kitab-i-Aqdas), The Hidden Words, The Seven Valleys, Tablet of the Holy Mariner, and Tablet of Glad-Tidings. Abdul-Baha's writings include Tablets of the Divine Plan, A Traveler's Narrative, Memorials of the Faithful, and Secret of Divine Civilization. Important talks were also published, including Promulgation of Universal Peace and Some Answered Questions. Abdu'l-Bahá composed about 50 volumes of text, some of which are in the form of letters to Bahais as well as to those outside the faith. Shoghi Effendi composed about 35

volumes of text. His key works are The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, The Advent of Divine Justice, The Promised Day Is Come, and The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. His book God Passes By is his interpretation of Bahai history. His writings also include letters and translations of the writings of the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh, and Abdu'l-Bahá. The Bahai World, an ongoing series of volumes founded by Shoghi Effendi (19 most recently), is a compilation of official Bahá'í writings since 1925. It includes religious calendars, festival descriptions, poetry, music, administrative information, articles on theological topics, maps, bibliographies, transliterations, and definitions.

Selections of Bahá'í Writings (not included)

Note: pages 431-456 consisted of selections from Bahá'í readings. These pages were not scanned. The following excerpt
from the book's table of contents lists the selections that were included. All of these items can be found at bahai-library.com/writings.

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Endnotes

Bahá'ís refer to their religion as the "Bahá'í Faith," as opposed to "Bahá'ísm" or "Bahá'í." The term "Bahá'í" alone is either an adjective or is a noun meaning a follower of the faith,

Selections from the Writings of the Bab (Bahá'í World Centre, 1982 ed.).

Kitab-i-Iqan (Bahai World Centre, 1989).

Kitab-i-Aqdas (Bahá'í World Centre, 1992).

Abdul-Baha interpreted this to mean that Bahais are limited to taking only one wife: "Know thou that polygamy is not permitted under the law of God, For contentment with one wife hath been clearly stipulated, Taking a second wife is made dependent upon equity and justice being upheld between the two wives, under all conditions. However, observance of justice and equity towards two wives is utterly impossible. The fact that bigamy has been made dependent upon an impossible condition is clear proof of its absolute prohibition, Therefore it is not permissible for a man to have more than one wife." Kitab-i-Aqdas p, 206 (note 89)

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitab-i-Aqdas (US, 1988 pocket-size ed,).

Ibid.

Abdu'l-Bahá in London (U.K., 1982 reprint),

Some Answered Questions (U.S,, 1990 reprint of pocket-size ed.)

Paris Talks, 11th ed. (U.K. 1972 reprint),

Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Bahá (U.S,, 1990 reprint)

The Advent of Divine Justice (U.S., first pocket-size edition 1990),

"Mashriqu'l-Adhkar" refers to national Bahai houses of worship. The first one in the west is the House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, "Dependencies" of the houses of worship are specific social institutions that are to be built nearby. There are five dependencies: a hospital, pharmacy, hospice, orphanage, and a university.

The Promised Day Is Come (U.S., Revised Edition 1980).

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