

would found a universal religion. The body of the Bab was rescued by some of his followers and preserved for several years. Ultimately it was transported to the city of Haifa, in Palestine, where it was finally buried.

One of the Bab's imprisoned disciples was a man named Mirza Husayn Ali, the son of one of the most distinguished families in Persia. Because of his family Mirza was not executed with the Bab but was

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imprisoned in Tehran. In 1852, another of the Bab's followers attempted to assassinate the Shah of Iran, and this brought further persecution upon the group. Mirza Ali was exiled to Baghdad, and there he spent the next ten years of his life. During his imprisonment and exile it was revealed to Mirza that he was the one whom the Bab had foretold. In 1863, Mirza and the remaining Babis were exiled from Baghdad to Constantinople, and on the eve of their departure he revealed to the Babis that he was the one promised by the Bab. This revelation was made in Ridvan, near Baghdad, and today is commemorated annually by Bahá'ís, with a feast. Mirza assumed the name Bahauallah ("the glory of God"), and those Babis who accepted him and followed his teachings became known as Bahá'ís.

In the following years Bahauallah and the Bahá'ís were forced from one capital city in the Middle East to another. From Constantinople they went to Adrianople. Finally, they were banished to the Turkish prison city of Acca, in Palestine. At first Bahauallah and about eighty of his followers were incarcerated for two years in an army barracks, where they suffered from hunger and disease. After this period the group was transferred to other quarters, which were somewhat more comfortable. Eventually, more freedom was given to Bahauallah, but he spent the remainder of his life as a prisoner of the Turkish government in Acca. Although he was imprisoned during his years in Acca, Bahauallah was able to send out missionaries and receive guests and thus spread his teachings of unity and world peace. During this period he wrote many letters and books. One series of letters was sent to the pope and to the world heads of state, announcing his mission and calling for their help in furthering world peace. He wrote books such as the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* ("The Most Holy Book"), the *Kitab-i-Iqan* ("The Book of Certitudes"), and *The Hidden Words*. He died in Acca in 1892, at the age of 75.

Leadership of the movement passed to the son of Bahauallah, Abbas Effendi, who became known as Abdul Baha (the servant of Baha). Abdul Baha carried on his father's program of writing, and in 1908 he was freed by the Turks. For the remaining years of his life he traveled widely in Europe and North America preaching the doctrines of Bahá'í and establishing Bahá'í assemblies in many nations. In 1920, the British conferred the knighthood of the British Empire upon Abdul Baha because of his work for world peace. Upon Abdul Baha's death in 1921, leadership of the movement was passed to his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who continued the work of establishing local and national assemblies in many

nations, until his death in 1957. At this point Bahá'í came to be governed, not by one of the descendants of Baháullah, but by a body elected from Bahá'ís all over the world.

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THE TEACHINGS OF BAHÁ'I

Although Bahá'í originated within the Shi'ite sect of Islam it soon came to differ radically from it. Bahá'í does not revere the Quran to the same degree that Islam does. Much of the Quran is modified, explained allegorically, or treated symbolically. Belief in angels and evil spirits has been discarded by Bahá'í, while heaven and hell are treated symbolically. The Quran takes its place, along with the Christian and Jewish bibles and the sacred writings of other religions, as a source for Bahá'í worship. This attitude toward the Quran has made Bahá'í most unpopular among Muslims, and it has even been outlawed in Iran, the land of its birth. Persecution against Bahá'ís in Iran became especially harsh after the so-called Islamic revolution of 1979.

The basic belief of Bahá'í is that all religions come from the same source.

In nearly every era God has revealed his truth through prophets. Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha, and Baháullah were the prophets of God, and all presented a portion of the truth of God in their times, but Baháullah, as the last and the greatest of these prophets, revealed the final truth from God. Baháullah's greatest message was the oneness of the human race. All of humankind, all races, both sexes, and all religious truths are the work of the one God. In the words of Baháullah:

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source and are the subjects of one God.¹

On the basis of these religious truths found in the writings of Baháullah, Abdul Baha went out from Acca to preach the following Bahá'í doctrines of the world.

The oneness of the entire human race is the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the faith. This principle is essential to Bahá'í. It is the basis for most of its teachings and practices.

There must be an independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition. Anyone who wishes to be a Bahá'í must be willing to

search out the truth of God without relying on the prophets and the traditions of the past. "The freedom of man from superstition and imitation, so that he may discern the Manifestations of God with the eye of Oneness, and consider all affairs with keen sight..."² is one of the basic teachings of Bahá'í.

1. Bahá'ullah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'ullah* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952), p. 217.

2. J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'ullah and the New Era* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Books, 1976), p. 85.

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There is a basic unity of all religions. Growing out of the belief that there is a oneness in the human race is the teaching that all religions essentially teach the same message. This is not to say that differences do not exist among the religions of the world, but Bahá'í doctrine states that the basic message of every religion is the same and that all minor differences should be forgotten. In a conversation with a visitor, Bahá'ullah said:

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affections and unity between the Sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled . . . these strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family. . .³

All forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class, or national, are condemned. In one of his speeches in Paris Abdul Baha said:

Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth; it should give birth to spirituality, and bring light and life to every soul. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it would be better to be without it. . . . Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion.⁴

Harmony must exist between religion and science. Bahá'í arose in the nineteenth century when great battles were fought between the established religions and the newly emerging sciences. These two forces must be harmonized.

Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, said: "That which is in conformity with science is also in conformity with religion." Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept. Religion and science walk hand in hand, and any religion contrary to science is not the truth.⁵

There is equality of men and women. Bahá'í may be the only religion of the world that has asserted from the beginning that women are equal to men.

Humanity is like a bird with its two wings—the one is male, the other female. Unless both wings are strong and impelled by some common force, the bird cannot fly heavenwards. According to the spirit of this age, women

3. *ibid.*, p. 126.

4. *ibid.*, p. 165.

5. *ibid.*, p. 202.

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must advance and fulfill their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men.⁶

Compulsory education must prevail. Although neither Baháullah nor Abdul Baha had the opportunity of formal education, both preached that universal education was a necessary condition for world peace and stability.

In addition to universal education, Bahá'í teaches that there should be a universal language. Baháullah said:

We commanded the

Trustees of the House of Justice, either to choose one of the existing tongues, or to originate a new one, and in like manner to adopt a common script, teaching these to the children in all the schools of the world, that the world may become even as one land and one home.⁷

Abdul Baha was an advocate of the adoption of Esperanto as the universal language.

Extremes of wealth and poverty should be abolished. Coming from a family of high rank and then spending much of his life in prisons, Baháullah was acutely aware of the extremes of wealth and poverty in the world. Believing that both extremes were unhealthy and abnormal, he urged their abolition. He did not offer an elaborate plan that would bring about this change. Rather, he suggested to the rich of the world that they should open their hearts and contribute to the poor. He also advocated that the governments of the world should pass laws to prevent the two extremes.

A world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations should be instituted. Forty years before the establishment of the League of Nations, Baháullah was urging such an organization from his prison cell in Acca. However, when the League of Nations was formed after World War I, Abdul Baha considered it too weak to be effective.

Work performed in the spirit of service should be exalted to the rank of worship. According to Bahá'í, a good society is one in which everyone

works at some task. There are to be no loafers or idlers.

It is enjoined on every one of you to engage in some occupation—some art, trade, or the like. We have made this—your occupation—identical with the worship of God, the true One.⁸

Thus Baháullah, like Calvin and the ancient Jewish Pharisees, believed in the religious efficacy of labor.

6. *ibid.*, p. 154.

7. *ibid.*, p. 170.

8. Baháullah, *Glad Tidings*.

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Justice should be glorified as the ruling principle in human society and religion, for the protection of all peoples and nations.

Finally, as a capstone to all of the teachings of Bahá'í, the establishment of a permanent and universal peace should be the supreme goal of humankind.⁹

Unlike Islam and other Western religions, Bahá'í believes that heaven and hell are not places but conditions of the soul. The soul, which is the reality of humankind, is eternal and in continuous progress. When the soul is near to God and God's purposes, that is heaven, when the soul is distant from God, that is hell. Thus the descriptions of heaven and hell that are found in other religions are regarded as symbolic rather than actual. When Bahá'ís speak of the unity of humankind, they mean not only the unity of humanity in this life but unity of the living and the dead as well. Thus it is possible that the living and the dead may commune with each other. Abdul Baha believed that this was the reason for the peculiar powers of the prophets and saints to see into the other world and commune with it.

According to the Bahá'í belief in the total unity of God, there can be no such thing as positive evil. If God is one and all, there can be no Satan figure in the universe. Just as darkness is only the absence of light, so that which appears to be evil is only the absence of good. According to Abdul Baha:

In creation there is no evil; all is good. Certain qualities and natures innate in some men and apparently blameworthy are not so in reality.¹⁰

BAHA'I PRACTICES

The daily life of Bahá'ís is governed by many regulations. The Bahá'í is required to pray daily. In fact, the entire life of a Bahá'í is supposed to be a prayer. One's work, one's thoughts, and one's deeds are all to be done in the spirit of a prayer. This is one of the most important aspects of Bahá'í life. Baháullah stressed this in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*.

Chant (or recite) the Words of God every morning and evening. The one who neglects this has not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His agreement, and he who turns away from it today is of those who have turned away from God.¹¹

9. These thirteen principles are taken from information supplied by the Public Information Department, National Bahá'í Headquarters, 112 Linden Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois.

10. Abdul Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1964), p. 250.

11. Baháullah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*.

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[photo of Wilmette House of Worship]

Although there are many formal prayers a Bahá'í may recite in daily devotions,

Baháullah established three obligatory prayers. Bahá'ís are free to choose any one of these three as a part of their meditations.

Bahá'ís are also encouraged to fast for one of the nineteen months in their calendar. During the month of Ala (loftiness), which begins near the first of March, Bahá'ís are expected to fast for nineteen days. A full fast, with a complete abstinence from food, is not required; Bahá'ís must not eat during the daylight hours only. Since the fast occurs during the early spring each year, no food or drink is taken between about 6 AM. and 6 P.M. According to Abdul Baha:

Fasting is a symbol. Fasting signifies abstinence from lust. Physical fasting is a symbol of that abstinence, and is a reminder; that is, just as a person abstains from physical appetites, he is to abstain from self-appetites and self-desires. But mere abstention from food has no effect on the spirit. It is only a symbol, a reminder. Otherwise it is of no importance.¹²

At other periods during the Bahá'í year, followers engage in certain feasts which celebrate various events in the history of Bahá'í. These

12. Abdul Baha, cited by J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p. 189.

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include the feast of the new year, celebrated on March 21, and the feast of Ridvan, celebrated between April 21 and May 2, which commemorates Baháullah's declaration that he was the promised one.

For Bahá'ís, monogamy is the rule in marriage. Bahá'ís may marry only after they have the consent of both sets of parents. Baháullah taught:

Verily in the Book of Bayan (the Bab's Revelation) the matter is restricted to the consent of both (bride and bridegroom). As We desired to bring about love and friendship and the unity of the people, therefore We made it conditional upon the consent of the parents also, that enmity and ill-feeling might be avoided.¹³

Divorce is permitted for Bahá'ís, but only in extreme cases of incompatibility. At such a point the couple must wait for one full year and seek to re-establish their relationship. If this does not happen, then a divorce may be granted. If a Bahá'í couple have children, they are obligated to provide their children with the best possible education. Alcohol and narcotics are forbidden to Bahá'ís.

Bahá'í differs from many other religions in its manner of worship. The basic unit of worship is the Local Spiritual Assembly. This group may meet in the homes of members or in other buildings, but there are no special houses of worship as in other religions. Neither is there a special clergy to conduct the worship. Worship for Bahá'ís tends to be very simple, with a minimum of form and no ritual. A respected member of the community reads from the writings of Baháullah and from the scriptures of other world religions. The remainder of the service consists of private prayers and readings. Bahá'í community worship is so simple in form that it rejects two elements that Christians and others often find essential, the sermon and the offering. While Bahá'ís are expected to contribute to the support of their religion, they refuse to take offerings from non-Bahá'ís.

Bahá'ís are organized on three levels. The most basic is that of the Local Spiritual Assembly already mentioned. In every community where there are nine or more adult Bahá'ís, a nine-member administrative body is elected each April 21 to govern the affairs of those Bahá'ís. As of 1968, there were 6,828 of these assemblies in the world. The second level of administration is the National Spiritual Assembly. This too is a nine-member body made up of people elected annually by delegates to the national conventions. In 1968 there were eighty-three National Assemblies. The top level of the Bahá'í organization is the Universal House of Justice. This is a nine-member body

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elected by the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the

world. These representatives serve a five-year term.

Although the Bahá'ís do not have local houses of worship they have constructed several magnificent temples around the world, and plan eventually to construct one on every continent. Those already in existence are located in Frankfurt, Germany; Sydney, Australia; Kampala, Uganda; and Wilmette, Illinois, U.S.A. Each of these temples reflects a somewhat different style of architecture, but all must be nine-sided and covered with a dome. The number nine is symbolic for Bahá'í because it is the largest unit number and thus represents the worldwide unity that Bahá'í seeks to develop. In addition to these temples, the world center of Bahá'í is located on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel, near Acca, where Baháullah spent his last days. In the midst of splendid gardens stand the gold-domed shrine of the Bab and the archive building.

Like other religions, Bahá'í has established its own calendar and its own holy days. The calendar is a solar one made up of nineteen months, each containing nineteen days. To achieve 365 days, four days are added after the last month of the year (five days are added in leap years). The new year begins on March 21, at the birth of spring. As is the case with the Jewish calendar, the day begins at sunset.

Although exact statistics are not available, it is estimated that there may be as many as five million Bahá'ís in the world today. Although still relatively small in terms of members, this religion appears to be growing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Relate the beginnings of Bahá'í to the messianic hopes of Shia Islam.

Why do some consider Bahá'í to be the religion most in tune with the modern world?

How do Bahá'ís regard the scriptures of other religions?

SUGGESTED READING

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