

Bahá'u'lláh's vision of world unity.

For the individual, the purpose of life is to know and worship God. This lifelong process occurs as the individual learns to serve humanity by responding to the message of God and, in the process, develops his or her own spiritual, moral and intellectual capacities. Prayer, meditation on the creative Word and the discipline of one's physical nature are necessary aids to this effort. The soul is immortal and continues to evolve after death.

The Bahá'í faith began in 1844 in Persia [Iran], with the announcement of the new age by Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner, known as the Bab ("The Door"). The Bab (1819-50) and some 20,000 early Persian followers, regarded by the Muslim clergy as heretics, were persecuted and killed. Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned and eventually exiled to the Turkish penal fortress of Akko, on the bay of Haifa in present-day Israel. The shrines where the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh lie buried are today the focal points of an imposing complex of gardens and institutions. By 1987 over 2000 ethnic groups were represented in the 120,000 Bahá'í centres established worldwide. Persecution of Iran's 300,000 Bahá'ís for refusal to recant their faith intensified under the regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the current Islamic Republic.

Bahá'ís have no clergy. The affairs of the community are governed by democratically elected councils locally, nationally and internationally. At the lower 2 levels the councils, known as Spiritual Assemblies, are elected each year. The supreme governing body, the Universal House of Justice, whose seat is at the faith's world headquarters on Mount Carmel, Haifa, is elected every 5 years. Because of its beliefs, the Bahá'í Faith has placed great importance on co-operation with all efforts toward world unity. The body which represents it in international affairs, the Bahá'í International Community, holds consultative status as one of the nongovernmental organizations at the UNITED NATIONS, and it takes an active part in many of the UN's humanitarian and educational activities.

Bahá'í Faith in Canada

Canada has played an unusually important role in Bahá'í history. After a visit to Montréal and several American cities in 1912, the founder's son, Abdu'l-Bahá, gave US and Canadian believers joint responsibility for expansion of the Bahá'í Faith around the world. Canadian Bahá'ís responded enthusiastically, and today their community shoulders the

second-largest burden of responsibilities for international activities. One of the community's members, Mary Sutherland Maxwell of Montréal, married in 1937 the great-grandson of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, who served in the central role of its Guardian until his death in 1957.

The Canadian community has had a particularly close connection with the design of the Faith's many imposing shrines and houses of worship around the world. Two Montréal Bahá'í architects, Jean-Baptiste Louis Bourgeois and William Sutherland Maxwell, designed, respectively, the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land and the first house of Worship in the western hemisphere at Chicago, Illinois. More recently the Vancouver Bahá'í architect Fariborz Sabha created the extraordinary "Lotus Temple " in New Delhi, India, which has won acclaim in the international architectural press. Still another Vancouver Bahá'í, H. Amanat, is responsible for the design of the complex of monumental marble edifices constituting the faith's international administrative centre in Haifa, Israel, now approaching completion on the slopes of Mount Carmel.

Canadian Bahá'ís work in countless community-development projects undertaken by their faith around the world, and their National Assembly collaborates with the CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY and the INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE on a range of such activities.

The Canadian community pioneered the concept of an international organization for Bahá'í studies to bring together scholars and students in an application of Bahá'í principles to various social concerns. The Association for Bahá'í Studies, founded 1977, has its headquarters in Ottawa and affiliates in 25 other countries.

The faith has attracted members from all Canadian provinces and territories and from every ethnic group and social class. Some 35 of the faith's 374 elected Local Spiritual Assemblies are on native reserves and others, with Inuit members, are in remote Arctic centres. The Canadian National Spiritual Assembly was the first Bahá'í institution in the world to be incorporated formally by a special Act of a sovereign parliament (1949), an example since followed in many other countries. The Bahá'í National Centre is located in Thornhill, Ontario, and the former Maxwell home in Montréal is maintained as a Bahá'í place of Pilgrimage.

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