

for teaching the Bahá'í Faith to others, for spiritual development, and for assistance with personal tests and difficulties. These have been published in prayer books and are among the first Bahá'í scriptures translated for a new Bahá'í community. While using communes is not required, most Bahá'ís make them an integral part of their private worship life, choosing those communes that fit their needs best.

Bahá'u'lláh calls on the Bahá'ís to recite the "verses of God every morn and eventide," adding that "whosoever faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, par. 149). Presumably repeating obligatory prayers and communes fulfil this requirement. Stressing that "one hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship" (Kitáb-i-Íqán, 238) Bahá'u'lláh stresses the importance of meditating on the Word, not simply reading it.

While developing and maintaining a connection to the Word of God is not the central purpose of private, individual Bahá'í worship—building the individual's connection to God is more important—experiencing the Word and internalizing it are major aspects of public or community Bahá'í worship. At prayer meetings, at the worship portion of Feast, and in worship programs at Bahá'í Houses of Worship, the primary ingredients of the program are the following: communes; passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá; and occasionally passages from the Bible, Qur'án, and other scriptures. Public Bahá'í worship thus focuses on the Word; hence the importance placed by `Abdu'l-Bahá on choosing readers with pleasing and experienced reading voices. Placing the Word at the center of Bahá'í community worship keeps the community focused on its common values and principles, educates it in the Bahá'í scriptures, minimizes the role of personality and personal interpretations, and fosters a mysticism of the word.

Other aspects of worship. Prayer and reading the Bahá'í scriptures are not the only aspects of Bahá'í worship. The Bahá'í fast is also centrally important to worship. Bahá'u'lláh describes fasting as a "grace that is appointed in the Book [the Kitáb-i-Aqdas]" (Bahá'í Prayers, 238) and as the "sun" of religion (Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 40). It constitutes a form of worship inasmuch as one fasts out of one's love of and desire to obey God. Bahá'í contributions to the Bahá'í funds and payment of the huqúqu'lláh, similarly, are forms of Bahá'í worship. Pilgrimage is an important part of worship for those who are able to perform it.

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts the Bahá'ís to bring themselves to account each day (Arabic Hidden Words, 31) in preparation for their judgment after death. Since bringing oneself to account involves considering one's deeds in relation to God's expectations, and presumably aligning the former with the latter, it constitutes a form of worship. It also involves worshiping God through use of one's own words rather than through revealed prayers; it is one of the few examples where the Bahá'í scriptures explicitly endorse use of one's own words in worship.

Bahá'u'lláh urges His believers to "observe My commandments, for the love of My Beauty" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 4). Thus observance of all of Bahá'u'lláh's laws constitute a form of worship if they are followed out of love and devotion to Him.

The Bahá'í Faith has minimal worship practices connected with events in the life cycle. Birth may be accompanied by a naming ceremony, where scriptural texts and communions are read, the name of the baby announced, and refreshments served. `Abdu'l-Bahá describes the result as "spiritual baptism" (Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, 149-50). Marriage ceremonies require only the recitation of the verse "verily, we will all abide by the will of God" by the bride and groom; most couples create their own program, however, which usually include reading passages from Bahá'í and other scriptures, reading other favorite texts, and music. No specified worship form exists for use when a person becomes a Bahá'í. After the death of a Bahá'í a funeral takes place; the only required part of the program is the reciting of the congregational prayer for the dead. This prayer is repeated by one person and constitutes the only occasion in the Bahá'í Faith where one person may say a prayer on behalf of everyone else.

Unlike worship in some other religions, Bahá'í worship follows no liturgical calendar. The Bahá'í writings encourage daily prayer at dawn, and in some parts of the world this is a significant part of Bahá'í community worship. While Friday is the Bahá'í sabbath, no forms of worship are required on that day. In most of the Bahá'í world no customary weekly worship, such as the Christian Sunday service, exists. Each Bahá'í month, usually on the first day, a meeting called feast is held, which has three portions: a worship portion, a business portion, and a social portion. The worship portion usually consists of the reading of passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá, including communions; sometimes singing occurs as well. During the eleven annual Bahá'í Holy Days it is customary to hold a worship program similar to that of a Feast.

Service to Others. The Bahá'í scriptures emphasize the importance of serving others to such an extent that it is described as a form of worship. As `Abdu'l-Bahá notes, "This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer" (Paris Talks, 177).

The Bahá'í scriptures also describe one's vocation as a form of worship. Thus Bahá'u'lláh states that "we have graciously exalted your engagement in such work [crafts, trades, and the like] to the rank of worship unto God, the True One" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 26). Abdu'l-Bahá adds that "in accordance with the divine teachings the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship" (Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, 144) and "attaining perfection in one's profession in this merciful period is considered to be worship of God" (Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, 145-46).

Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (q.v.). The Bahá'í conception of worship is epitomized

by the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár or "Dawning Place of the Mention of God." Central to this institution is a House of Worship, a building where prayer takes place. Notably absent in the worship service is a sermon, as would be common in Christianity; all music in the program must be a capella, performed without the aid of musical instruments.

Other forms of worship also occur at the House of Worship. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts fathers to take their children to the House of Worship to recite the verses of God (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 150). Surrounding the House of Worship and equally essential parts of the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár are charitable institutions such as an orphanage, an old person's home, a dispensary, a library, and a school. Thus the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár symbolizes most of the major aspects of the Bahá'í conception of worship: prayer, reciting and internalizing the Word of God, and service to others.

Note

[1] Shoghi Effendi's prayers were composed in Arabic and Persian and have not been translated into English and other languages, hence they are not used by Bahá'ís outside the Middle East).

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