

The Bahá'í Community

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Bahá'u'lláh

Origins

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion founded a century and a half ago. It is today among the fastest growing and most widespread of the world's religions with more than 6 million followers on earth. Embracing people from more than 2,100 so;. Ethnic and racial groups, it is quite likely the most diverse organised body of people on the planet.

The Bahá'í Faith originated in Persia on the 23rd of May 1844, when a Prophet named 'the Báb' (Arabic: The Gate) heralded the coming of the Promised One of all religions who would bring about **peace and unity on earth**. The Báb Himself suffered severe persecution and was publicly executed in 1850, for bringing this new message from God. Many of his followers were persecuted and martyred.

In 1852 a follower of the Báb, known today as 'Bahá'u'lláh' (Arabic: **The Glory of God**), received during his imprisonment, a vision of God's will for humanity, and the revelation that he was the Promised One foretold by the Báb. The event is comparable to those great moments of the ancient past when God revealed Himself to His earlier Messengers: when Moses stood before the Burning Bush; when the Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus; or when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammed.

Bahá'u'lláh, born in 1817, was a Persian nobleman who became known as the 'Father of the Poor' and was renowned for defending the rights of the oppressed and impoverished citizens of Persia. He turned down a ministerial position in the Court of the Shah, and chose instead to devote his energies to a life of philanthropy and charity. As one of the leading advocates of the Báb's message he was tortured and imprisoned and cast into the notorious "Black Pit" prison in Tehran. This dungeon became the birthplace of His Divine Revelation.

Upon his release Bahá'u'lláh was banished from His native land – the beginning of 40 years of exile, imprisonment and persecution. He passed away on the 29th May 1892 near Akka in the Holy Land. His resting place is considered by the Bahá'í's as the holiest place on earth, and the most important place of pilgrimage.

Teachings

Bahá'u'lláh taught that there is only one God who has progressively revealed His Will to mankind by sending Divine Messengers whose common purpose has been to bring the human race to spiritual and moral maturity.

God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide the means by which they can be established. (Bahá'u'lláh)

Among the principles emphasised by Bahá'u'lláh are:

- **The Oneness of God**
- **The Oneness of Religion**
- **The Oneness of Mankind**
- Independent Investigation of Truth
- Equality of Men and Women
- A World Commonwealth of Nations
- World Peace is Inevitable
- Abolition of all Forms of Prejudice
- Spiritual Solutions to Economic Problems
- A Universal Auxiliary Language
- Harmony of Science and Religion
- Elimination of Extremes of Wealth and Poverty
- Compulsory Universal Education
- Establishment of a World Government

Some of the other beliefs and teachings are:

We are created as noble and spiritual beings.

The Soul continues to live and progress after death.

Living a moral life has a direct influence on our spiritual happiness and development.

The family is the foundation of human society.

Marriage is a means for the spiritual development of both parties.

Consultation is a dynamic process for finding truth and for solving conflicts and problems.

Bahá'is believe all Divine Revelations come from the same source: thus, the religions identified with them are in essence one. They differ in the measure of their teachings and particularly in their social laws and principles, appropriate to the times in which they appeared. The successive Divine Revelations over the centuries have provided the spiritual force and laws for the advancement of civilisation. The Messengers of God have been:

Krishna	3000 BC
Abraham	2000 BC
Moses	1300 BC
Zoroaster	750 BC
Buddha	560 BC
Christ	1 AD
Muhammad	622 AD
The Báb	1844 AD
Bahá'u'lláh	1863 AD

'The Prophets and Messengers of God have been set down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth'

Bahá'u'lláh

The Bahá'í writings explain the station of Bahá'u'lláh:

To Israel He was neither more nor less than the incarnation of the 'Everlasting Father.' The 'Lord of Hosts'...to Christendom Christ returned 'in the gory of the Father'. To Shi'ah Islam the return of the Imam Husayn; to Sunni Islam the descent of the 'Spirit of God; to the Zoroastrians the promised Shah-Bahram; to the Hindus the reincarnation of Krishna; to the Buddhists the fifth Buddha (Maitreya, the Buddha of universal fellowship).

The name Bahá'u'lláh means 'the Glory of God' or 'Glory of the Lord.' This title is mentioned in many prophecies:

To Him Isaiah, the greatest of the Jewish prophets, had alluded as the 'Glory of the Lord, the 'Everlasting Father', the Prince of Peace', the 'Wonderful', the 'Counsellor.'

Worship

Bahá'is say daily obligatory prayers and read the Holy Scriptures every morning and evening. There are also prayers for special occasions such as marriage or fasting. Bahá'is believe that work performed in a spirit of service to mankind is regarded as worshipping God. The best time to pray is when one is free of daily cares, in the privacy of one's chamber, like at midnight or at dawn.

The short obligatory prayer is:

"I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."

Bahá'u'lláh

Pilgrimage

It is the duty of every Bahá'í to go to pilgrimage in one's lifetime if possible. Pilgrimage is made to the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith in Haifa, Israel – the Holy Land – to the shrines of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh.

Fasting

This takes place during the Bahá'í month of Alá (meaning 'Loftiness' and occurring between 2nd to 20th March) for 19 days between sunrise and sunset. Fasting is obligatory from the age of 15 until the age of 70. Certain groups are exempt from fasting such as the sick and pregnant women. Fasting is seen as a time of spiritual renewal and discipline and it is a particularly joyous and bountiful period.

"As regards fasting, it constitutes, together with... prayers, the twin pillars that sustain the revealed law of God. They act as stimulants to the soul, revive and purify it, and thus ensure its steady development."

Abdu'l- Bahá

Places of Worship

There are Houses of Worship on each continent open to everyone and symbolising unity. They are nine-sided, representing the world's nine Great Religions. Bahá'u'lláh envisioned that local Houses of Worship will, in the future, be the focal point of a community's spiritual life – and an expression of its humanitarian concern. However devotional prayer meetings can be held anywhere and often take place in the homes of the believers.

Religious Books and Artefacts

The Holy Book revealed by the Báb is called the **Bayán**. There are over 100 volumes of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings. The **Kitáb'l'Aqdas** being the Most Holy Book.

Practices

Birth

No ritual or ceremony, although prayers can be said for the unborn and there are many prayers for children's spiritual growth.

Marriage

Bahá'u'lláh attaches great importance to the institution of the family as the foundation of human society. There is no set marriage format but the vow, "We will all verily abide by the will of God," must be recited by the bride and groom in front of witnesses. The consent of both parties' living parents is required. The sanctity of marriage is recognised.

Divorce is discouraged and only possible after one year of patience has elapsed.

Funerals

Cremation is forbidden. Burial has to take place within one hour's travel from the place of death. The body of the deceased has to be washed and wrapped in several sheets of white cotton or silk. A special congregational prayer for the departed is recited at the site of the burial.

Diet

There is no set diet.

Dress

Decency and moderation should be considered. Men must not wear their hair past the earlobe, lengthwise.

Rites and Initiation

There are no rituals of initiation. If an individual believes in Bahá'u'lláh and in His Teachings he is accepted as a member of the Bahá'l Community.

Festivals and Celebrations

The Bahá'l Calendar is a solar one and has 19 months, each of 19 days. They are named after the names of God such as Glory, Might, Will and Perfection. These total 361 days and the remaining 4 days are termed the "intercalary days" and are a time for giving to charity and offering hospitality. There are 9 Holy Days during the year when work or school is to be suspended as a mark of respect. These are the following:

21 March	Naw Ruz (New Year)
21 April	First Day of Ridván (Anniversary of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh)
29 April	Ninth Day of Ridván
2 May	Twelfth Day of Ridván
23 May	Declaration of the Báb
29 May	Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh
9 July	The Martyrdom of the Báb
20 October	Birth of the Báb
12 November	Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

Community

Around the globe, individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities are raising up a new kind of community. Through a unique process of cooperation, study and worship, they are exploring the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on an effective and far-reaching basis. Activities are open to all and their focus is on personal development, the education of children and community devotional gatherings.

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. In any locality, where there are 9 or more Bahá'ís, a Local Spiritual Assembly is elected by secret ballot and becomes the body in charge of the affairs of the community. This constitutes the basic unit of Bahá'í administration. On a national level, the National Spiritual Assembly is elected annually by delegates from various localities. Every five years the members of National Spiritual Assemblies elect the Universal House of Justice – the supreme institution of the Bahá'í world today.

Denominational Differences

A unique feature of the Bahá'í Faith is that it has not broken down into several schools of thought or sects interpreting the scripture in various ways. This is due to a unique Covenant instated by the Founder of the Faith, Bahá'u'lláh. In His Will and Testament, Bahá'u'lláh appointed his eldest Son, Abdul-Bahá, as the Head of the Faith and the divinely inspired authoritative interpreter of His writings. Abdul-Bahá, in turn, appointed His eldest Grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian of the Faith and the infallible Interpreter of its teachings. Following his passing the Universal House of Justice was elected as the Supreme Governing Body of the Bahá'í Faith, invested with the infallible authority and guarantee of divine guidance from Bahá'u'lláh himself.

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“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”

Bahá'u'lláh

“Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!”

The Báb

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