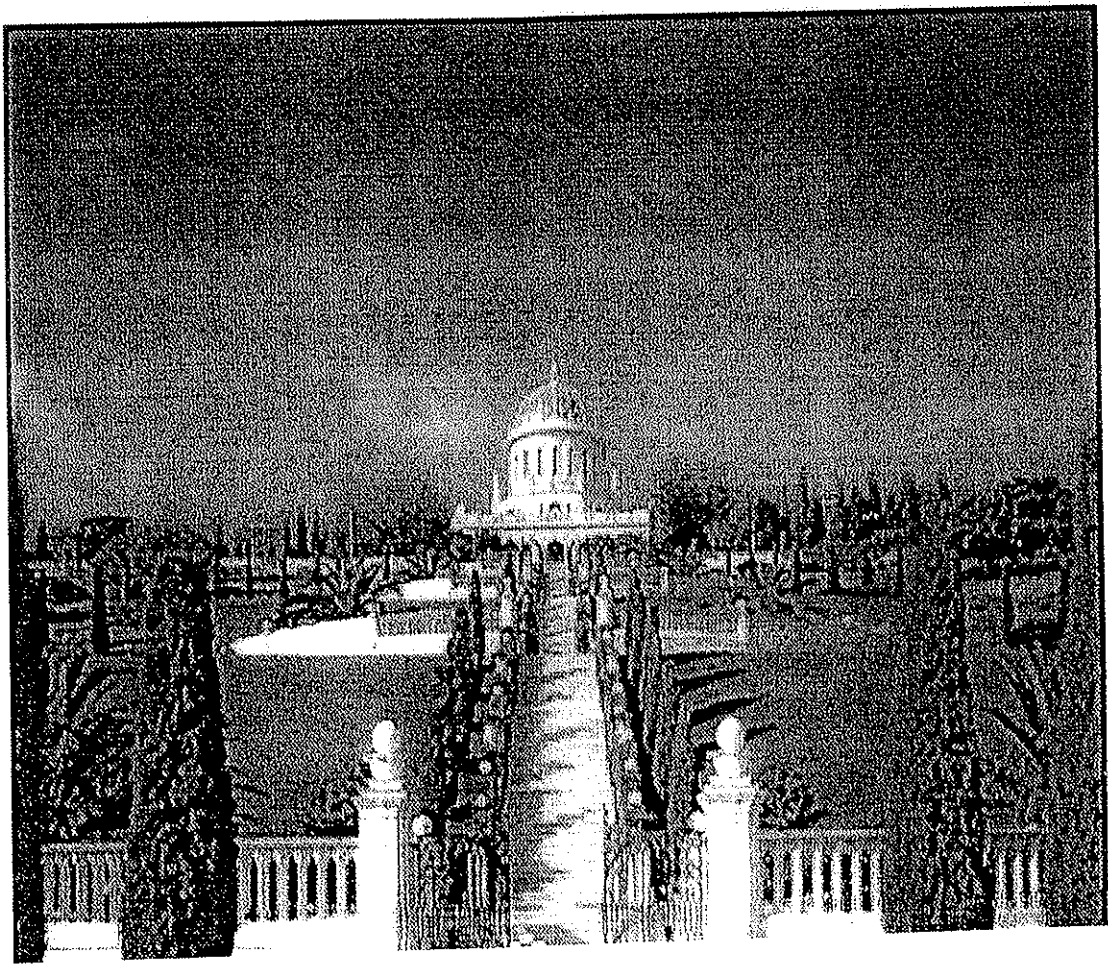
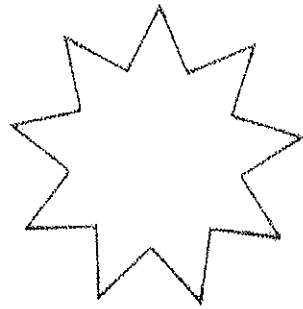


The Bahá'í Faith



The Shrine of the Báb in Haifa, Israel

Understanding the Baha'i Faith

Background and History

The **Baha'i Faith** is an independent world religion founded by **Baha'u'llah** in the mid-nineteenth century in Iran. Baha'u'llah was born in 1817 in Teheran, Iran and in 1863 made his claim to be a new Divine Messenger from God. The essential message of Baha'u'llah is one of unity: there is only one God, one human race, and one religion delivered over long periods of time by His chosen prophets.

Currently, there are more than six million Baha'is worldwide. The Baha'i community is possibly the most diverse and widespread of social and ethnic groups in the world today. They represent more than 2,000 ethnic, racial, and tribal groups who speak more than 100 different languages. There are Baha'i Houses of Worship on all seven continents with the North American site being Chicago, Illinois. All Houses of Worship are distinguished by nine sides, representing nine areas of the world, and have a central dome. These houses serve as beacons to call all humanity to a unifying theme of "oneness and unity."

The actual gathering of followers takes place in homes or community settings where followers assemble every 19 days to observe prayer, fellowship, and self-governance. These local assemblies have no clergy, no liturgy, and no rituals. They each hold a democratic election of council members who vote and decide on priorities. There are dozens of such groups in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

Each nation also elects a national council of representatives to hold dialogue and make decisions for Baha'is within their borders. Ultimately, there is a Universal House of Justice situated on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, also with 9 council members representing 9 areas of the world, which provides statements and worldwide guidance for achieving the specified goals and principles of the Baha'i Faith.

Baha'is place the life of Baha'u'llah in a time line of Divine Messengers extending back more than 4,000 years:

- 2000 B.C.E. – **Krishna** and Hinduism
- 1800 B.C.E. – **Abraham**: "Father" of Western Faiths
- 1300 B.C.E. – **Moses** and Judaism
- 1000 B.C.E. – **Zarathustra (Zoroaster)** and Zoroastrianism
- 600 B.C.E. – **Siddartha** and Buddhism
- 0- C.E. – **Jesus** and Christianity
- 622 C.E. – **Mohammad** and Islam
- 1863 C.E. – **Baha'u'llah** and the Baha'i Faith

Teachings of Baha'u'llah

"The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens."

The central premise of "unity" is explained in these three basic assumptions:

- **The Oneness of God**
 - *The universe and all creatures and forces within it have been created by a single **Absolute Being** whom we call "God."*
 - *Mankind may have different concepts of God's nature, may pray to Him in different languages, and call Him by different names --- but all are speaking about the same one and unique "God."*
 - *God is All-Powerful and All-Loving and has complete knowledge and control over all His creation. Mankind is limited in understanding the fullness of His Reality but is able to know God through his attributes: **"Everything in creation is God's handiwork and therefore reflects something of His attributes."***

- **The Oneness of Religion**
 - *In addition to His handiwork, God also reveals Himself through His Prophets, whom Baha'is call "Manifestations of God." Each of these Prophets (see above) was chosen to reveal a particular message to a particular culture, generation, and time.*
 - *All of these messages are part of one unfolding and timeless revelation meant to enable mankind to progress in a collective evolution. In this sense all of the religious systems established by these Prophets are part of a single divine plan directed by God.*
 - *In reality, however, there is only **One Religion** --- and that is **"the religion of the One God."***

- **The Oneness of Mankind**
 - *In this modern age, humanity has entered into a collective "coming-of-age." The time has come for mankind to become united into one global society: **"All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."***
 - *As we are all creations of One God, we are all one people and members of one race: **"The Human Race."** The idea of "one race" forms the foundation for the other principles of social justice in the Baha'i Faith.*

- Differences of color, ethnicity, culture, and language are peripheral to the real essence of mankind, which is essentially spiritual. These differences serve to give us variety and perspective and should be embraced as essential parts of the wholeness of humanity.
- This is a challenge for our modern age; however, we will forge ahead, either by peaceful means and efforts of spiritually minded people – or by catastrophic means that force us to look to one another out of necessity.

Fundamental Principles of the Baha'i Faith

1. Elimination of all forms of prejudice

“Know ye not that you were all created from the same dust? No one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how you were created. Since we have created you all from the same substance, it is incumbent upon you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land (created for you).”

Prejudice is an affront to human dignity, a cause of hatred and division, and a disease that devastates societies.

For too much of history, the human race has squandered its energy and resources in futile attempts to prove superiority of one race. Racism is the most challenging issue confronting the modern world. It foolishly assumes ethnicity, color, creed, or class of one people to be superior over others.

Furthermore, prejudice and discrimination have created a disparity in standards of living, providing some with excessive economic advantage while denying others the bare necessities for existence.

2. Full equality between the sexes

Inequality between men and women retards not only the advancement of women, but of progress and civilization itself. Several writings express this notion:

“The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. When these two wings become equivalent in strength, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary.”
“When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed.”

The education of girls is particularly important. Baha'i teachings state that girls should receive priority in education if by some circumstance a family (or a society) cannot afford to educate its children equally.

“As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.”

In Baha'i marriages, neither the husband nor the wife has a dominant voice; however, each has a distinctive role as mother and father in the home.

3. Essential oneness of the world's religions

“Know assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same.”

“The peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one Heavenly Source, and are the subjects of One God.”

Religion has two aspects: the spiritual and the social. The spiritual is to liberate humans from the darkness of ignorance and guide them to the light of true understanding. The social is to ensure the peace and tranquility of mankind and provide the means by which they can be established.

*Baha'u'llah taught that there is only one God who has revealed Himself to humankind through a series of Divine Messengers. Though diverse in specific teachings, all of these messages convey a single religious purpose: that is to **educate humanity** and to cultivate the spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacities of the human race; in so doing, humans carry forward an ever-advancing world civilization.*

4. Elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth

“Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feels indeed abashed, as he is fully aware that the very thing which is the source of his prosperity – that is his wealth, his advancement, and his power --- is the Earth, ordained by God, which is trodden beneath the feet of all men.”

“Do not busy yourselves with your own concerns. Let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of (all) men.”

Social and economic developments are expressions of faith in action. Baha'is worldwide are engaged in projects, often at the grassroots level, to reduce the inequities between poverty and wealth throughout the world.

Since the 1940's, the Baha'i International Community has held key roles in the United Nations and other international efforts which include:

- *Presence in 1945 in San Francisco at the founding of the United Nations*
- *Recognition in 1948 as an international non-governmental organization;*
- *Since 1970, consultative states with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) and since 1976 with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); and*
- *Close working relations with the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).*

5. Universal education

Baha'u'llah refers to the human being as "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value." He says that the purpose of life and society is to generate creative processes which serve to release those "gems" of human potential.

"Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone ... The knowledge of science should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth."

"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."

The Prophets of God are thought to be the first educators. They teach mankind how to rise from the lowest levels of savagery to the highest pinnacles of spiritual development. Philosophers, artists, and others are also important in intellectual development.

Universal compulsory education is essential for all children throughout the world. Each child must be taught in ways to develop his or her mind as well as to prepare for a profession or trade by which to earn a living and serve the community. If there are no parents, then the community or the state must assume this essential task.

6. Harmony of science and religion

There is no contradiction between science and religion. If religion is opposed to science, then the religion is superstitious. True principles of religion are in conformity with the understandings of science.

Much of the discord of the world is created by man-made oppositions and contradictions. When religion dismisses the test of careful reflection about scientific knowledge, or science is lacking in its spiritual and universal nature, then there can be no progress or growth.

“Science and religion are different yet harmonious approaches to the comprehension of reality. Science is humanity’s tool for understanding the physical side of the universe ...”

“If that religion to which we adhere be a reality, it must of necessity conform to the fundamental reality of all things.”

7. Free and independent search for truth by every individual

*Each individual must investigate spiritual truth for him- or herself. One’s relationship with God is dependent on nothing less. While one can learn from the knowledge and experiences of others, Baha’u’llah cautions: “**Look into everything with a searching eye!**”*

“God has created man so that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth.”

8. Establishment of an auxiliary world language

The Baha’i Faith teaches that the world should move toward creating or adopting an auxiliary international language by which all mankind could communicate together. This language should not replace one’s mother tongue but rather provide a way to communicate and foster unity among people.

“The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script. When this is achieved, whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home.”

9. The Vision of World Peace

Bahai’s believe that world peace is not only possible, but that it is inevitable. This will be the next stage in the evolution of this planet.

“The Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts, of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision, and for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise, is now at long last within the reach of the nations.”

This belief reflects an understanding that humanity is approaching its maturity and is able to create a global society founded on justice that incorporates trust, understanding, and collaboration.

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Baha'u'llah, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds, and classes are closely and permanently united; however, the autonomy of its state members and personal individual freedoms will be safeguarded.

Johnnie Hicks – 01/23/13

References and Bibliography

The Baha'is: A Profile of the Baha'i Faith and Its Worldwide Community. Baha'i Publishing Trust of the United Kingdom; Oakham, Leicestershire; U.K.; 1994.

Baha'u'llah's Teachings on Spiritual Reality. Palabra Publications; U.S.A.; 1994.

Faizi, Gloria (1996): *The Baha'i Faith – An Introduction.* Baha'i Publishing Trust; New Delhi, India.

Mackey, Sandra (1998): *The Iranians.* A Plume Book - Penguin Group; N.Y.

Sciolino, Elaine (2000): *Persian Mirrors – The Elusive Face of Iran.* Simon & Schuster; NY.

Two Wings of a Bird – The Equality of Men and Woman. Baha'i Publishing Trust; Wilmette, IL; 1997.

The Vision of Race Unity – America's Most Challenging Issue. Baha'i Publishing Trust; Wilmette, IL; 1991.

Johnnie Hicks – 04/03/13