

# HANDBOOK OF RELIGION

**A Christian Engagement  
with Traditions,  
Teachings, and Practices**



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## Baha'i: History, Beliefs, Practices

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### History

The Baha'i Faith was founded by two men: the Bab (the "Gate," 1819–1850) and Baha'u'llah (the "Glory of God," 1817–1892). Baha'i history begins on May 22, 1844, when a young merchant, Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad Shirazi, proclaimed himself to be a Messenger of God and Herald of a greater One to follow. The Bab's religious claims outraged the clerics of Shi'a Islam, the predominant religion in Persia, who pronounced the death sentence on the Bab. He was executed before a firing squad of 750 soldiers in Tabriz on July 9, 1850.

The Bab's primary purpose was to prepare the way for the advent of a messianic figure greater than himself. Baha'is believe that this was none other than Mirza Husayn-'Ali Nuri Mazandarani, known by his spiritual title, Baha'u'llah. In 1852, Baha'u'llah was arrested because he was a Babi leader, and was thrown in jail in the capital of Persia, Tehran. During four months of imprisonment Baha'u'llah experienced prophetic visions that bade him arise for the uplift of humanity and the unification of the world in a federation of nations.

After his release in 1853, Baha'u'llah was exiled, first to Baghdad, then to Constantinople and later Adrianople in 1863, and finally, in 1868, to a penal colony at Akka in Palestine (now Israel). After several years, he was released to live in the house of Udi Khammar, where Baha'u'llah revealed the Kitab-i-Aqdas ("The Most Holy Book") as his laws for the new Faith.

Throughout his nearly 40-year prophetic career, Baha'u'llah revealed a prodigious corpus of writings that comprise the heart of Baha'i scripture—the equivalent of a hundred books. Baha'u'llah passed away on May 29, 1892.

## Study Aid #228

### Baha'i Timeline

The Bab (d. 1850)	'Abdu'l-Baha (d. 1921)
Kitab-i-Aqdas revealed (1873)	Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957)
Baha'u'llah (d. 1892)	Universal House of Justice established in Haifa, Israel (1963)

In his Will and Testament, Baha'u'llah designated his son 'Abdu'l-Baha—who had long emerged as the natural and obvious leader—as his successor. 'Abdu'l-Baha had traveled throughout North Africa, Europe, the United States and Canada in 1910–1913, promoting Baha'u'llah's gospel of social salvation—justice, virtue, and unity.

'Abdu'l-Baha led the Baha'i world until his passing in 1921. His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who was studying at Oxford University at the time of 'Abdu'l-Baha's "ascension" (as Baha'is honorifically refer to his death), assumed the leadership of the Baha'i community, as explicitly provided for in 'Abdu'l-Baha's own Will and Testament. Shoghi Effendi orchestrated the worldwide development and expansion of the Baha'i religion through a series of global initiatives, or "Plans," that proved highly successful in the systematic growth of the new religious community. As a result, the Baha'i Faith now comes close to being the most widespread religious community in the world today—exceeded only by Christianity.

Five years after Shoghi Effendi's passing in 1957, Baha'i representatives from the various National Spiritual Assemblies (democratically elected Baha'i councils) worldwide, met in 1963 in Haifa, Israel, to elect the first Universal House of Justice, a nine-member international council (elected every five years) that now directs the affairs of the Baha'i world, with its seat on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel. This is considered a divine institution, as Baha'u'llah had explicitly ordained the Universal House of Justice

Not all places in the world are open to the Baha'i tradition. Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has systematically oppressed the Baha'i community. Through draconian measures that exclude the Baha'is from the protections of the Iran's Constitution, the regime bars Baha'is from the constitutional rights enjoyed, at least in theory, by other religious minorities.

## Beliefs

Baha'i belief acknowledges one true God as an "unknowable Essence," far beyond the reach and ken of men. In other words, God may not be *comprehended*

but only *apprehended*. God is a profound mystery, yet with clues everywhere, pervading creation. Since God cannot be known by essence, only the nature and will of God can be appreciated.

“Progressive Revelation” is the Baha'i belief that Messengers of God successively appear throughout history to establish world religions that renew and amplify spiritual teachings and declare new social laws suited for that day and age. These Messengers of God reveal, from age to age, God's will and purpose. Baha'is consider such religious figures as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ and Muhammad to be such Messengers of God.

Many world religions look forward to a time when the world would be saved by a world-messiah. Baha'is see these messianic expectations as convergent. In 1863 in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah proclaimed himself to be the “Promised One” of all religions, and as the one whom Christ foretold would come in the spirit and power of Christ himself—not as a reincarnation, nor as the Incarnation, but as the “Manifestation” of God.

Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah symbolically fulfills many religions prophecies, for example, Baha'is regard Baha'u'llah as the return of Christ. Baha'is also believe that Baha'u'llah has come, in fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, as the Lord of Hosts and “Everlasting Father” (even though these were not traditionally believed to be prophetic titles). Baha'u'llah, moreover, is seen by Baha'is as the return of Jesus in Sunni Islam; as the return of Husayn in Shi'a Islam; as Shah Bahram Varjavand for the Zoroastrians; as Maitreya, or the Fifth Buddha, in Buddhist millennial belief; as Kalki Viṣṇuśāś in Hindu (Vaisnavite) chiliasm. Many Native American Baha'is also believe in Baha'u'llah as the return of White Buffalo Calf Woman for the Lakota, the return of Deganawida among the Iroquois, and the return of Viracocha among the Quechua Indians. In a word, they believe that Baha'u'llah is the world-messiah.

A Baha'i accepts the teachings of Baha'u'llah and the interpretive authority of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, as well as the ongoing governing authority of the Universal House of Justice. Baha'is live according to the laws and precepts revealed by Baha'u'llah in the Most Holy Book, as further elucidated by 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, and as extended and adapted, by the Universal House of Justice, to new situations in which Baha'i principles may be wisely applied.

### **Study Aid #229**

#### **Baha'i Beliefs**

One God	Equality of Women and Men
Oneness of Humanity	Elimination of Prejudice
Common Foundations of All Religions	Universal Education
Harmony of Science and Religion	

### **Study Aid #230**

#### **Baha'i Demographics**

Number of Baha'is in the world: 7,447,000.

Percentage of world population: 0.1 percent.

Countries where Baha'is more than 50 percent: None

Baha'is have promoted their message of unity in more countries than any other smaller religion. The Baha'i religious tradition is the only religion to have grown faster in every United Nations region over the past 100 years than the population. Hence it is the fastest growing religion over that period. Baha'is have viable communities in every country of the world except North Korea and the Vatican.

Baha'is often talk about the “Three Onenesses”: that there is but one, almighty God; that world religions, in their pure form, impart divine truths; and that humanity—metaphorically, biologically and spiritually—is “one family.” The purpose of the Baha'i Faith is to unify the world by establishing a common foundation for harmonious and prosperous individual and social life. Some of the more prominent Baha'i beliefs include the equality of men and women, the harmony of science and religion, the need for a universal language, peace among nations, races and religions, disarmament, world self-governance through international law, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, where the purpose of justice is understood to be precondition for the appearance of true unity and prosperity.

On each continent, Baha'is have built magnificent temples which are open to everyone who wishes to experience their architectural beauty and soulful atmosphere. Perhaps the most celebrated Baha'i house of worship is the Lotus Temple in New Delhi, India, which attracts more visitors annually than the Taj Mahal. In 2008, UNESCO designated the Shrine of the Bab (and surrounding Baha'i terraces and gardens at the Baha'i World Centre on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel) and the Shrine of Baha'u'llah in Akka as “World Heritage sites”—the first modern religious edifices to be so designated.

#### **Baha'i Practices**

The purpose of life, in the Baha'i view, is to know and worship God, to acquire virtues, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Individually, Baha'is pray, fast, meditate, and work. Baha'u'llah teaches that when done in the spirit of service to humanity, work is a sacred undertaking and thus is a form of worship. Baha'is promote unity through non-political means.

Baha'is have a spiritual, solar calendar of nineteen months of nineteen days each, with four or five intercalary days to round out each solar year. Each day, month, year and cycle of years is given a name that reflects one of the attributes

**Study Aid #231****Baha'is by World Region**

Asia	3,551,000
Africa	2,176,000
Latin America	941,000
North America	527,000
Europe	144,000
Oceania	108,000

of God, as manifested in such human perfections as Honor, Justice, Mercy, Generosity, Grandeur, and the like. By keeping these sterling qualities of character in mind, Baha'is learn, over time, what it means to be honorable, just, merciful, generous, and noble.

The Baha'i year begins on the first day of Spring (March 21), following a nineteen-day period of fasting, from sunrise to sunset, lasting from March 2–20. At the beginning of every Baha'i month, each Baha'i community gathers for a Nineteen-Day Feast, consisting of spiritual, consultative, and social portions. Baha'is observe nine Holy Days, on which work is suspended.

Baha'is participate in a series of open “study circles,” a guided group self-study in a dynamic sequence of brief courses. Each course equips participants with not only fundamental knowledge about the Baha'i religion, but with basic skills necessary to effectively teach the Baha'i Faith to others, and to organize children's classes, lead activities among junior youth and youth, hold inspirational devotional gatherings open to all, and facilitate the learning process among believers and those interested in the Faith.

The world, Baha'is believe, evolves not only physically, but spiritually and socially. Baha'is understand that, in this day and age, the will of God for humanity is to bring about global unity through diversity as the next logical stage in the world's social evolution. Baha'i principles and social teachings are for the world at large. If carried out in socially and scientifically enlightened ways, Baha'is believe that these divinely revealed precepts and practices will have a leavening influence and will eventually transform the world.

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**Baha'i:**  
**Theological Exchanges, Current Issues**

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Issues that arise in the course of Baha'i-Christian interfaith encounters, beginning with issues arising from Baha'i-Christian religious dialogue, may be briefly summarized as follows.

**Individual Salvation and Social Salvation**

The Baha'i Faith has a simultaneous emphasis on both personal and social transformation. Shoghi Effendi, great-grandson of Baha'u'llah and "Guardian" of the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957, has written that the Baha'i Faith's mission is "the salvation, through unification, of the entire planet." (Effendi 1980, 116.)

Baha'u'llah came for the salvation of entire societies as well as souls. From the Baha'i perspective, salvation history is a process that has progressively unfolded throughout the course of prophetic history, and which has reached its most advanced stage in the advent of Baha'u'llah:

The declared purpose of history's series of prophetic revelations, therefore, has been not only to guide the individual seeker on the path of personal salvation, but to prepare the whole of the human family for the great eschatological Event lying ahead, through which the life of the world will itself be entirely transformed. (Baha'i World Centre, 2006, 54.)

**Study Aid #232****Typology of Baha'i-Christian Contacts**

Witness	Disinterest	Interest
	Polemics	Dialogue

The Baha'i statement issued by the Baha'i World Centre, "One Common Faith," begins with the observation that, in the early 20th century, the "dominant world faith" was not Christianity, but "a materialistic interpretation of reality" (ibid., 3). Yet, as the twentieth century approached its close, "a sudden resurgence of religion as a subject of consuming global importance" emerged as a worldwide phenomenon (ibid., 5). The concomitant "search for justice and the promotion of the cause of international peace" had the effect of "arousing new perceptions of the individual's role in society" (ibid., 6–7) insofar as the "rational soul does not merely occupy a private sphere, but is an active participant in a social order" (ibid., 15).

**The Baha'i Faith and Christianity**

The most important recent Baha'i outreach to Christian leaders is the letter addressed "To the World's Religious Leaders" in April 2002 by the Universal House of Justice. The nine members of the Universal House of Justice are elected—by plurality vote, with no nominations or campaigning allowed—by members of Baha'i national councils (each known as a "National Spiritual Assembly"), who convene once every five years in Haifa, Israel, site of the Baha'i World Centre. In "To the World's Religious Leaders," interfaith dialogue is highly regarded: "In the context of the transformation taking place in the human race's conception of itself, the most promising new religious development seemed to be the interfaith movement." In "To The World's Religious Leaders," the Universal House of Justice addresses the primary role of religion, Christianity included, as follows:

Religion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. Unquestionably, the seminal force in the civilizing of human nature has been the influence of the succession of these Manifestations of the Divine that extends back to the dawn of recorded history.

The Universal House of Justice, "as the governing council of one of the world religions," urges religious leaders, in a "spirit of goodwill," to act concertedly to address the greatest problems that face the world today: "Vast numbers of people

**Study Aid #233****Baha'i-Christian Theological Exchanges**

Baha'i is fulfillment of Christianity	All religions are one
Baha'u'llah is successor to Jesus	Reject original sin, the Trinity, Satan

continue to endure the effects of ingrained prejudices of ethnicity, gender, nation, caste and class.” “Tragically, organized religion,” the Universal House of Justice goes on to say, “has long lent its credibility to fanaticism.” The problem is that “the greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth’s inhabitants.”

Acknowledging that there are “certainly wide differences among the world’s major religious traditions with respect to social ordinances and forms of worship,” the Universal House of Justice maintains that religion, ideally, has “the unique power” to better the world.

The Universal House of Justice’s letter extends an open invitation to the world’s religious leaders—leaders of Christianity included—to work collaboratively through interfaith endeavors: “Inspired by this perspective, the Baha’i community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception.”

**Current Social Issues of Deep Concern to Baha’is**

Before “social justice” served as the secular philosophy of modern democracies in the twentieth century, the Baha’i Faith had already established ethical principles and social laws for the ennobling of individuals and the ordering of societies. Social justice can only be universal if predicated on the unity of the human race. Justice and unity are thus the hallmarks of Baha’i precept and praxis, as Baha’u’llah declared: “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established” (Baha’u’llah 1978, 167.) As a collective ethical orientation, the Baha’i concept of social justice is dynamically linked with the principle of unity. “The purpose of justice,” Baha’u’llah declared, “is the appearance of unity among men.” (ibid., 67.) A Baha’i theory of social justice can be articulated from the Baha’i sacred writings themselves, and amplified by policy statements made by the Baha’i International Community, a religious non-governmental organization (NGO) with consultative status at the United Nations (UN).

Formed in 1948 as an NGO at the United Nations, the Baha’i International Community (BIC) represents an association of democratically-elected national and regional (as in the case of Alaska and Hawaii) Baha’i governing bodies known as National Spiritual Assemblies. In 1970, the BIC was granted consultative status (now called “special” consultative status) with the UN Economic and Social

Council (ECOSOC), followed by consultative status with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 1976 and with the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 1989, when working relations with the World Health Organization (WHO) were also established. In close association with the UN Environment Program (UNEP), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the UN Development Program (UNDP), the BIC has served as the primary channel for promoting Baha'i universal values for the common good at the international level. Social issues of deep concern to Baha'is, as represented by statements of the Baha'i International Community (BIC), include, *inter alia*, the following:

1. Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.
2. Human Rights Reform.
3. Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.
4. Advancement of Women.
5. Freedom of Conscience.
6. Social Development.
7. Minority Issues.
8. Religious Persecution.
9. Climate Change.
10. Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls.
11. Eradicating Poverty.
12. Full Employment and Decent Work.
13. Mobilizing Institutional, Legal and Cultural Resources to Achieve Gender Equality.
14. Situation of the Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran.
15. Situation of the Baha'is in Egypt.
16. A New Framework for Global Prosperity.
17. Search for Values in an Age of Transition.
18. Sustainable Development.
19. Overcoming Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity in Public Institutions.
20. The Right to Education.
21. Protection of Minorities.
22. Women and Health.

### **Study Aid #234**

#### **Baha'i Social Issues**

Racism	Advancement of Women	Eradicating Poverty
Human Rights	Sustainable Development	Full Employment
Freedom of Religion	Climate Change	Right to Education

**Study Aid #235****Current Baha'i and Baha'i-Christian Issues**

Persecution in Iran and Egypt	Individual Salvation/Social Salvation
One common faith	Baha'i Outreach to Christians
Christ and Baha'u'llah	

Baha'is believe these current issues transcend religious and national boundaries. As problems without borders, their solutions must likewise cross religious boundaries.

**Baha'i Social Action and Public Discourse**

Baha'is are currently engaged in “three broad areas of action”: (1) “expansion and consolidation of the Baha'i community itself”; (2) participation in “social action” and in (3) “the discourses of society” on such issues as “governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few.” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated January 4, 2009 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Australia.)

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