

Baha’i Faith: Origin, Missionary work, and the Entrance into Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Earlier 2007, the legitimacy of Baha’i faith was officially recognized by the State of Vietnam and the religion was allowed to practice its rituals within the framework of Vietnam’s existing legal systems. Yet, Sirin Phoda, an Indian who was appointed by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly, had come to Saigon for missionary work in Vietnam at the end of 1954. The paper first explains what is Baha’i faith, how it develops in the world, and then discusses its situation in Vietnam since beginning of missionary works until present.

Baha’i faith, of which history was traced back nearly two hundred years ago, has almost six million followers in more than ten countries in the world. Hence, it is known as a religion in the world. This religion believes that it tells the whole of truth while other religions tell parts of the whole truth.

1. Iran, formerly named Persia, where has been known for the faith called “*ancient Babylon religion*”, is considered the cradle of Baha’i faith. Persia, one of the longest standing nations in Western Asia, had an area of some three million of square kilometers, covering the fertile Mesopotamia which means “lying between the two rivers” of Tigris and Euphrates. This land was once famous for great achievements of “Two rivers’ civilization” which is named “the cradle of the world’s ancient civilisations” by historians.

In the 1,000 B.C, Mesopotamia people revered the supernatural forces relating to cultivation and animal raising as saints and god. It is considered the example of totemism in primitive societies. Human beings believed that there was a kind of animal or natural objects having consanguineous relationship with their clan and they

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worshipped such objects as the symbol of their ancestors. Also in this land, there were myths which have been cited in dogmas of several religions for thousands of year. Such are the myths of creation (creating the world), the origin of human beings, the life (resurrection), and the Flood. At the dawn of Christian era, this Persia country saw the birth of Zoroastre religion (Zoroastrism, Zoroastrianism) which was much in vogue for 10 centuries in several Asian countries, including China in the dynasty of Tang. This religion believed in the key roles of the Good and the Evil. When the Zoroastre religion withered, the core of spiritual life of this country shifted into Manichaeism. In the 6th-7th centuries, Manichaeism spread into several lands in Africa, Europe, and Asia. The primary tenets of this religion are the struggle between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness.

Since 642, Persia was occupied by the Arabs until the year 662 it was a part of Islam Empire. Persia was conquered by Turkey in 999 and by Mongo in 1220. Since the 13th century, this country became a profitable prey for conquerers. Especially, the British Imperialism exploited to the utmost the immense oil resources of Persia country. Since it became Iran, the country was enlarged to 1,650,000 square kilometers, with the population of 70 million people. The majority of Iran people follow the Islamism with a full range of branches, in which most of Iran people follow the Islamic branches of Shiite and Sunnite. Whatever religions and religious branches people follow, Iran people of all social classes are responsible for maintaining and developing its four-thousand-year cultural and historical traditions.

2. In 1804, the legendary Persia country gave a birth to a person called Bah. When Bah grew up, he said to people that he was assigned to be the precursor who announced the coming of *Balla u llah* who was said to come to punish evil-doing rulers. Bah's omen was responded by a lot of people. Therefore, Islamic priests incited the rulers to arrest Bah and sentenced him to six-year imprisonment. In prison, Bah continued saying he knew everything and loved everybody. If he was imprisoned, it was his pleasure to throw himself flesh to the foot of the God. Eventually, the rulers did not release Bah and shot him to death at a deserted area.

Shortly afterwards, a boy was born to a high-rank family and took the title *Balla u llah*. He grew up very fast and became very intelligent. He won all savants at all eloquences and refused the King's offer to becoming a minister at 22 years old. He explained that "Balla u llah" means the Light of the God but he introduced himself as the God informed by Bah. People welcomed him as the God. He sent the messages

calling the kings of countries to stop fighting and together establishing a religion for all humankind. No kings responded his call but scores of people beseeched him reverently to establish a new religion. When he declared the birth of Bahai religion, the ruling authority arrested *Balla u llah* and sent him into exile. He became weaker and weaker after several years of imprisonment and the ruling authority eventually released him. He resumed carrying on missionary work. Before dying, he appointed his son, Abdul Baha, to continue explaining his teachings.

3. Why it is called Baha'i faith? No Bahai believers can answer this question clearly. They said it is the origin of this religion and it has been called so for years and because "our religion is united above all peoples and all languages." Who did name the religion? "It is the last will of Balla u llah," responded Bahai believers.

Since then, Baha'ism appeared as a complete religion in the name of Baha'i Temple. The religion has a Spiritual Assembly working as the leadership centre which sent messengers to several countries for missionary work. Baha'ism's teachings say it is Balla u llah who sent Buddha, Jesus Christ and Mohammad to the earth to examine how a religion works the best in preparation for establishing a Heavenly Kingdom on earth for the sake of all human beings. Given the experiences on the successes and failure of all such three Gods, it is now time for Him to implement a 12-principle program as follows:

1. Uniting human beings irrespective of language;
2. Printing 150 sets of books on teachings;
3. Gathering all existing heads of religion at the foot of God;
4. Building the foundation based on united wills and harmonious benefits;
5. Developing a scientific and conscious church;
6. Condemning all prejudice and superstitions;
7. Exercising gender equality;
8. Developing compulsory education;
9. Practicing all languages and eliminating language barriers;
10. Providing spiritual measures for economy, societies, and everybody has capital and labour; people are happy with what they have;
11. Establishing an international tribunal to deal with conflicts between lands;

12. Maintaining peace on earth eternally.

For a long time, many people wanted to establish a religion which could attract people of all continents. In Vietnam, a number of people wanted to make Caodaism cover Buddhism, Saints, and God and exist as the only religion globally. Also, such attempts coped with protest turn in turn.

4. In the 20th century, Baha'i faith's missionaries were welcomed in some places while some were opposed, sent away, or arrested. When there is someone not understanding the name "Baha'i", the faith explained that Baha'i in the language of the God is called by followers everywhere so that they can recognize each other. It is to reflect the solidarity and mutual love of followers everywhere. Like Islamism, Baha'i faith has an abstinence month annually or the month of Baha'i which takes place in 19 days on 2 to 21 March. During the month of Baha'i, followers do not eat from the sunrise to the sundown and spend time on praying, thinking, and cultivating wills. Sick persons, pregnant women, or those who are away from home are exempted from fasting. Baha'i's rules are relatively easygoing that is signified in the fact that anyone who wants to follow Baha'i faith are accepted without probation and accession neither renouncing their existing religion. Baha'i followers explained this like a student who is a very good learner needs respect and show deep gratitude towards his former teachers who have taught them to get good results at higher education. Even some Baha'i missionaries say that one person is unable to become a Baha'i follower unless he does accept his former religions.

Being born later, Baha'i faith should have easygoing dogmas in order to attract the followers from other standing religions which are often closely organized. Learning from the rigid experiences of Christian missionaries, Baha'i religion accepts all practices and customs of all peoples.

However, Baha'ist scholars argued that the religion respects customs of all peoples at the first time then adjusts to be in line with the 12 principles. In doing so, they are trying to abolish all religions and gather people in a single Baha'i religion.

5. Presently, the centre of Baha'i faith is situated at the Carmel Mount in Haifa province of Israel. The reason why this religion is located in Israel is that this is the place where Palestinians failed to control the religious activities decades ago while the ruling authorities in Iran did not permit Baha'i faith. In the world, Baha'i faith

has five temples in the Middle East. Temples have nine sides which reflect nine religions unified in the Baha'i temple.

The centre is led by the Reverend elected by the International Spiritual Assembly. The Reverend appoints 27 assistants to administrate activities in which the regular activity is the subscription to build "a unification building" which is an abstract construction rather than architecture. The more contribution followers make, the more solid mortal background is and the more they believe in the sacred teachings of Balla u llah.

It is said that Baha'i faith is organized democratically that is signified in the fact that all believers can raise queries regarding the teachings. All these queries are forwarded to the Reverend's assistants to be answered. If anyone is unsatisfied with the explanation or answers, the queries will be forwarded to the centre so that the Bab, Balla u llah and Bahai God will express their sympathy through a holy path to believers individually. The believers will talk with the Almighty in their dreams.

Baha'i faith does not have classes to train clergyman but it sends messengers to countries to develop branches. When a national branch attract dozens of believers, on 21 April every year it elects a local spiritual assembly composing of nine members of 21 years old and more in the positions of chairperson, vice chair, secretary and cashier. If any country has more than ten local spiritual assemblies, it will elect a national spiritual assembly. If any country has fewer believers or local spiritual assemblies, it elects a regional spiritual assembly. For a couple of years, national and regional assembly members gather at Haifa city of Israel to elect an international spiritual assembly. It should be noted that local spiritual assemblies are elected on 21 April annually regardless it is flood or stormy on that day.

6. The rituals of Baha'i faith are very simple. Except for five temples in the Middle East, Baha'ism has no temple in any other places. The subscription of believers is sent to the centre. Each locality has a hall built of bamboos, woods or clothes. Inside this hall hangs only a piece of cloth written saint names in Arabian or Persian languages. Any needy believers can come to the temples to wait for support. "Anyone who lives according to the Balla u llah's teachings, they are Bahai believers already," explained the Baha'ism's dogmas.

Baha'ists read prayers like other religions but if they forget or leave out some passages, their prayers are still granted. Importantly, in order to be answered, the followers must honestly consider themselves as the progressivists and love other people to make the societies progressive.

7. At the end of 1954, Sirin Phoda, an Indian who was appointed by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly to come to Saigon for missionary work in Vietnam. One year later, she attracted several hundreds of followers who were mainly the migrants from the Northern Vietnam. During this time, Baha'i faith was about to develop in Cambodia and Laos but it failed. In the following years, Baha'i faith attracted more and more followers. Until the end of 1962, Bahai religion had some 40 local spiritual councils with 5,000 followers. The religion's seat was located at Phú Lâm street, district No. 6, Saigon.

Sirin Phoda explained the three teachings several times to the new followers. First, any religion admits that life is limited. When a person dies, he or she enters another life in the Heaven or another healthy world. In this respect, the death does not mean the end but the transition to a real and immortal life. Second, any religion believes in a God Almighty. With Baha'i faith, he is called Balla u llah. Baha'i faith does not force its followers to cut off their existing religion. It only requires their followers to worship Balla u llah at their best way. Third, like any religion, Baha'i faith teaches its followers to improve their virtues to live a healthy life; keeping away from wrong things; maintaining love, reliability, peace; keeping away from lewdness, deception; praying, eating vegetarian food; heightening the sacrifice. Those are the most effective behaviors to become a Bahai follower quickly.

8. After a period of time developing at the outskirts of Saigon, Baha'i faith saw a decline due to the profuse supports of other Protestantism branches in Saigon, Đà Nẵng, Cần Thơ and several areas in the Southern Vietnam. The local spiritual councils were not elected as regulated for several years and the religion's activities were not in a rush like before.

After the Fall of Saigon, the decline of Baha'i faith became worse. When the Đổi Mới (Renovation) policy began in Vietnam, the former bases of Baha'i faith were selected to be restored and the faith got favourable conditions for development. Earlier 2007, the legitimacy of Baha'i faith has been officially recognized by the State of Vietnam and the religion is now allowed to perform its rituals within the framework of Vietnam's existing legal systems.