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Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i Faith is a religion that began in Persia (modern-day Iran) in 1853. Its founder was Mirza Husayn-Ali, known as Baha'u'llah. Worldwide membership in the Baha'i Faith has grown to more than 5 million, and the Faith has emerged as the most geographically widespread religion in the world after the Roman Catholic Church.

The Baha'i Faith arose from the Babi Faith, a religion that briefly flourished in Persia in the 1840s. It was established by Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz, who in 1844 took on the title of the Bab (the Gate) and declared himself to be the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. The Twelver Shia Islam that dominated Persia (and still dominates Iran) expected the return of the 12th imam (a messianic figure), and the expectation peaked among some Shiites in 1844. The Bab initially hinted that he was merely a gate to the 12th imam, but gradually made explicit a claim to be the 12th imam himself. He also penned mystic commentaries on the Koran, whose style and content signified a claim to divine revelation.

Beliefs and Practices

The Baha'i Faith possesses authoritative texts from the Bab, Baha'u'llah, Abdul-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. In all cases, a sharp distinction is made between written and oral statements by the head of the Faith: the former are binding if they can be authenticated; the latter are not binding unless they were committed to writing and subsequently approved by the head of the Faith.

The authoritative texts are also hierarchically ranked in importance. Those by the Bab and Baha'u'llah are the most important, because both individuals are considered Manifestations of God and who thus communicated divine revelation. Their writings are considered the word of God. Because Baha'u'llah often abrogated specific laws of the Bab, the latter are not binding on Baha'is. Abdul-Baha is not considered a Manifestation of God, but his writings come from an individual whose spiritual rank is considered unique in human history (above that of an ordinary human being but below that of a Manifestation); hence his writings possess a sacredness and are considered part of Baha'i scripture. Shoghi Effendi, on the other hand, occupies a rank even farther from that of a Manifestation, and his writings, though binding and authoritative, occupy a less sacred place in the hierarchy of Baha'i scripture. The writings of the Universal House of Justice are also binding and authoritative but, like papal encyclicals, would not be considered scripture.

Baha'u'llah describes God as an unknowable essence—in other words, ultimately God is beyond human ken and reckoning. Baha'u'llah's view, however, is not that humans can know nothing about God; on the contrary, even though the divine has an unknowable essence, it also has attributes such as mercy, justice, love, patience, self-subsistence, might, and knowledge that we can experience and know. By developing these qualities in their own souls, humans guide and foster their personal spiritual development and prepare themselves for the next life, in which spiritual growth occurs continuously and primarily through God's grace.

Experiencing God's attributes in creation is the basis of nature mysticism; Baha'u'llah says that all created things

reflect divine attributes (a concept that is also fundamental to Baha'i environmental ethics). Baha'u'llah notes, however, that the perfect reflector of divine attributes on this plane of existence is the Manifestation of God, a rare figure who receives divine revelation and guidance and manifests them perfectly in the language of his or her culture and through his or her own life and actions. In an epistemological sense, the Manifestation *is* God, because in the mortal plane she or he is the only perfect source of knowledge of the divine. Baha'u'llah identifies Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zoroaster, the Bab, and himself as Manifestations and suggests that Adam, Noah, the (unknown) founder of the Sabaeen religion, Salih, and Hud were also Manifestations (the last three figures are mentioned in the Koran as well). To this list Abdul-Baha adds Buddha and Shoghi Effendi adds Krishna, raising the total to 14. Baha'u'llah also states that many Manifestations lived so long ago that their names have been lost; Abdul-Baha stresses that humanity has always received divine guidance through Manifestations.

The Baha'i recognition that most of the world's major religions were established by Manifestations is the basis of the Baha'i concept of the unity of religion. Baha'u'llah and Abdul-Baha both state that all religions are based on a divine revelation (either directly or by borrowing divine ideas from previous religions) but add that, while all religions share certain basic ethical and metaphysical principles, they also differ because the revelation had to be tailored to the social and cultural context in which it was expressed.

Baha'u'llah and Abdul-Baha strongly emphasized that all persons are equal before God and therefore must have basic equality in human society, that men and women are equal, and that races are equal and must be reconciled and united. In addition to its implications of unity, the oneness of humanity is also understood to imply the need to establish a global governing system. Baha'u'llah called on all kings and rulers to end war, limit armaments, and meet in an international summit to establish common treaties and institutions. He said that an international language and script should be selected to supplement local languages and allow easy world communication. The Baha'i texts also call for an international system of weights and measures, a world currency, an elected world legislature, an international collective security arrangement, and global measures to ensure universal education and health care, to create equitable access to resources, and to diminish the extreme imbalances of wealth and poverty. Indeed, the Baha'i authoritative texts include an extensive critique of existing social norms and a vision for creating a just, unified world.

Baha'i Community

The Baha'i community consists of all persons who have accepted Baha'u'llah and have requested membership in the body of his followers. It is conceived of as an evolving entity destined to reflect Baha'u'llah's teachings ever more perfectly and to embrace an ever-larger segment of humanity. The chief goal of the Baha'i community is to achieve ever-greater unity.

Baha'is strive for spiritual unity through various means. Baha'i gatherings begin with prayer. Discussion about any matter is conducted according to the principles of consultation, whereby individuals are encouraged to be frank but tactful in expressing themselves; should listen carefully and avoid offending or feeling offended by others; where ideas, once expressed, belong to the group and thus can be modified or rejected by all present, including the person first proposing the idea; where decisions ideally should be unanimous, but can be carried by a majority; and where the results of consultation must be trusted and not undermined by subsequent dissent, noncooperation, or backbiting. Consultation is simultaneously a set of principles of behavior, a collection of attitudes toward people and ideas, and a culture of discourse to model and perfect.

In addition to the Baha'i governing institutions, the Baha'i texts describe the creation and development of Baha'i communities. Baha'i community life centers on the institution of the feast, a gathering once every Baha'i month (which lasts 19 days) wherein the Baha'is worship together, consult on local community activities, and socialize.

Particularly important are Baha'i holy days, nine of which are observed every year. In addition to the Baha'i New Year's Day (March 21), they commemorate events in the lives of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. Supplementing the nine holy days on which Baha'is should suspend work are two holy days connected with the life of Abdul-Baha (on which Baha'is can carry out their occupations) and Ayyam-i-Ha, a four- or five-day period of service, merrymaking, and gift-giving (February 26 through March 1. Ayyam-i-Ha is necessary to bring the total days in the Baha'i calendar from 361 to the number of days in a solar year). Every Baha'i holy day is accompanied by a gathering that is open to the public.

In the United States, most local Baha'i communities meet in members' homes, though rented and purchased Baha'i Centers are becoming much more common. The United States has only one Baha'i House of Worship, located in Wilmette, Illinois, outside Chicago.

Prayer and Devotional Life

No account of Baha'i teachings would be complete without an exploration of the devotional life of the individual. The Baha'i scriptures state that the purpose of life is "to know and worship" God and to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization," thus embracing both a vertical relationship with one's Creator and a horizontal relationship with one's fellow humans. Rather than stress an instant of personal salvation, like some Christian groups, or a moment of enlightenment, like some Buddhist groups, the Baha'i scriptures stress ongoing personal transformation based on internalization of the Baha'i revelation and its expression in service to others.

Baha'u'llah called on Baha'is to build their prayer life on the pillar of daily obligatory prayer; he gave three prayers among which Baha'is choose one to say daily. Baha'is can also choose among hundreds of prayers penned by Baha'u'llah, the Bab, and Abdul-Baha on a variety of subjects, such as forgiveness, assistance, healing, and grief; they rarely pray spontaneously in their own words. Baha'u'llah ordained the repeating of the phrase *Allahu-Abha* (God Is Most Glorious) 95 times each day as the basis for one's meditative and contemplative life. He also established a period of fasting—from sunrise to sunset, for 19 days from March 2 through March 20. During that period, Baha'is abstain from eating, drinking, and tobacco as a mild ascetic practice, granting exceptions to those under age 15 or over age 70; the ill; travelers; women who are pregnant, menstruating, or nursing; and anyone performing heavy labor. He enjoined the practice of reciting the word of God twice daily to connect the believer to the revelation.

Robert Stockman

Further Reading

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