

[print page](#)[close window](#)

roots of the Baha'i Faith

The roots of the Baha'i Faith can be traced to the Babi Movement of mid-19th-century Persia (today called Iran), which was violently persecuted. Among the early converts to the Babi movement was Mirza Husayn-Ali, a nobleman born in northern Iran whose father was a palace official. As the Babi leadership was executed, one after another, his role in the movement grew in importance.

In the summer of 1848, he assembled a gathering of the remaining Babi leaders at which he gave each a title; he took on the title of Baha'u'llah (the Glory of God)óone subsequently endorsed by Babi Movement leader Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz, who in 1844 had taken the title of the Bab (the Gate) and declared himself to be the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. Before his execution, the Bab recognized Baha'u'llah's teenage half-brother Yahya as a figurehead leader of the Babi community, though he gave Yahya no explicit authority. Considering that Yahya was completely unknown in the Babi community and was still a youth living in Baha'u'llah's household, the appointment was probably made to allow Baha'u'llah to run the Babi movement with a minimum of government interference.

In August 1852, a group of Babis attempted to assassinate the king, resulting in a severe government-sponsored pogrom against the remaining Babis. Baha'u'llah was arrested and imprisoned for four months. When the Iranian government released Baha'u'llah from prison, they banished him from Persia. Hence he departed for Baghdad (capital of modern-day Iraq), a city in the Ottoman Empire frequented by many Iranians intent on performing pilgrimage to the Shiite shrines nearby.

The next 10 years were highly productive ones, in which Baha'u'llah penned several of his most important works: *The Hidden Words*, a collection of ethical and mystical aphorisms); *The Seven Valleys* and *Four Valleys*, two works about the mystic journey of the soul in dialogue with Sufi concepts; and the *Book of Certitude*, a work delineating basic theological concepts and principles of personal spiritual development through commentary on passages from the Bible and the Koran. His efforts to revitalize the Babi community of Baghdad and to revive the Iranian Babi community were so successful that the Iranian government requested that the Ottomans move him farther from Iran. On the eve of his departure for Istanbul, Turkey, in April 1863, Baha'u'llah publicly declared to his companions and close associates that he was the prophetic teacher the Bab had prophesied.

The latter work specified that upon Baha'u'llah's passing, his eldest son, Abbas, was to become his successor; other tablets praised Abbas as the exemplar of Baha'u'llah's teachings and the official interpreter of Baha'u'llah's revelation. Consequently, when Baha'u'llah died in 189 at age 75, the 48-year-old Abbas was quickly acknowledged by all as the rightful head of the Baha'i Faith. He took the title of Abdul-Baha, meaning "servant of Baha," to underline his subservience to his father's legacy. An attempt by one of Abdul-Baha's half-brothers to form a rival Baha'i movement garnered virtually no support and died out, though it did cause Ottoman officials to look at all Baha'is with suspicion and to renew Abdul-Baha's confinement within the city of Acre. The decade of confinement ended in 1908, when the Young Turks Revolution toppled the Ottoman sultan and converted Turkey into a secular republic.

From 1892 to 1908, Abdul-Baha was free to receive visitors and communications, including cablegrams. The spread of the Baha'i Faith to the United States and subsequently to Europe, Hawaii, Australia, and Japan resulted in a diverse group of pilgrims entering Acre to meet Abdul-Baha and receive his wisdom. When Abdul-Baha's confinement ended in 1908, he considered travel. In 1910, he visited Egypt, and in 1911 he traveled to Europe to meet and encourage that continent's fledgling Baha'i communities. In 1912, he traveled to North America, arriving in early April (just two weeks before the sinking of the *Titanic*, a ship many Baha'is had urged him to take because of its reputation for safety).

His nine-month journey extended as far south as Washington, D.C., as far north as Montreal, Canada, and as far west as Los Angeles, California. He gave hundreds of speeches to thousands of people gathered in churches, synagogues, and theosophical lodges. He spoke to the annual Lake Mohonk Peace Conference and the fourth annual national conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The result was hundreds of newspaper articles, almost all favorable. He left North America in December 1912, spending the winter and spring visiting Baha'is from London to Budapest before returning to Palestine months before the beginning of World War I. A contemplated trip to India was rendered impossible by the war and his age. He passed away in November 1921 at age 77.

Like his father, Abdul-Baha wrote a will, in which he named his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, to be his successor and *vali amrullah* (Guardian of the Cause of Allah). As a result, aside from a few small efforts to split the Baha'i community (none of which garnered more than a few hundred followers or lasted more than a generation), the Baha'is united by accepting Shoghi Effendi as their new head. Abdul-Baha's will also specified the system whereby Baha'is would elect nine-member local spiritual assemblies (governing councils of local Baha'i communities) and delegates who would elect nine-member national spiritual assemblies. The will also specified that the members of all national spiritual assemblies would serve as the delegates to elect the Universal House of Justice, the supreme worldwide Baha'i governing body. Abdul-Baha's will asserted that while the Guardian had the power to interpret authoritative Baha'i texts, the Universal House of Justice had the authority to legislate on matters about which the texts were silent.

However, Shoghi Effendi's sudden death without a will in November 1957, plunged the Baha'i Faith into crisis, because it deprived the community of its international leadership and raised the specter of schism. But Shoghi Effendi had begun a 10-year plan for expansion of the Baha'i Faith in 1953 that provided the Baha'is with clear goals until April 1963. He had also appointed a series of individuals as Hands of the Cause of Allah (a position created by Baha'u'llah). In October 1957, he raised their total number to 27 and termed them "the Chief Stewards of Baha'u'llah's embryonic World Commonwealth, who have been invested by the unerring Pen of the Center of His Covenant with the dual function of guarding over the security, and of insuring the propagation, of His Father's Faith."

Abdul-Baha's will had also given the Hands clear authority. Consequently, the Baha'is of the world turned to the Hands, who coordinated the Baha'i Faith until the completion of Shoghi Effendi's 10-year teaching plan. One effort by a Hand of the Cause, Charles Mason Remey, to claim leadership of the Baha'i community garnered support from several hundred persons, but subsequently the Remeyite movement split into at least four factions.

In April 1963, the Hands oversaw the election of the Universal House of Justice (they voluntarily disqualified themselves as members). Subsequently the Universal House of Justice has been elected every five years by the

members of all the national spiritual assemblies, who either send their ballots by mail, or gather in Haifa, Israel, to cast their ballots in person. The Universal House of Justice has overseen continued expansion of the Baha'i community and coordinated translation of more Baha'i texts into English and other languages (including the *Kitabi-Aqdas*); it was also responsible for a great increase in the public visibility of the Baha'i Faith worldwide.

The global dissemination of the Baha'i Faith had begun in 1888, when two Lebanese Christians became Baha'is in Egypt and in 1892 immigrated to the United States. One of them, Ibrahim George Kheiralla, was responsible for converting the first Americans in 1894. Starting with a small group in Chicago, by 1900, the United States had four Baha'i communities of 50 or more believers, plus scattered Baha'is in 23 states. By 1899, the Faith was also introduced from Chicago to Ontario, Canada; Paris, France; and London, England. In turn, a European convert took the Baha'i Faith to Hawaii in 1901, and two Hawaiian Baha'is took the religion to Japan in 1914. In 1910, a pair of American Baha'is circled the globe westward, visiting major Baha'i communities in every country where the religion could be found. By 1921, other American Baha'is had settled in Mexico, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and Korea.

Abdul-Baha was so impressed by the American Baha'i community that he sent them a series of 14 tablets from 1914 to 1916 entitled *The Tablets of the Divine Plan*, in which he enjoined them to spread the Baha'i religion to every nation and island on the globe. He enumerated hundreds of places where there should be Baha'i communities, all of which subsequently became missionary goals. In the 1920s, Shoghi Effendi gave the American Baha'is the chief responsibility for establishing Baha'i elected institutions, and he patterned such bodies in Europe, Asia, and Australasia on the American model.

In 1937, the North American Baha'is having finally established firm local and national spiritual assemblies, Shoghi Effendi gave them a Seven Year Plan (1937ñ1944) calling for them to establish at least one local spiritual assembly in every state in the United States and one in every province of Canada, to establish the Baha'i Faith in every country in Latin America, and to complete the exterior of the Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. In spite of World War II, enormous progress was made, and by 1944, many Latin American nations were home to local spiritual assemblies as well as small groups of Baha'is.

In 1946, Shoghi Effendi launched a second Seven Year Plan (1946ñ1953) that called for creation of a separate national spiritual assembly for Canada (the Canadian Baha'is having shared a national assembly with the United States all that time), a single national spiritual assembly for all of South America, another for all of Central America, and reestablishment of the Baha'i Faith in war-ravaged Western Europe.

By 1953, there were 12 national spiritual assemblies worldwide: one in Italy and Switzerland, one in Germany and Austria, one in Egypt and Sudan, one in Australia and New Zealand, one in India and Burma, the four aforementioned in the Americas, the United Kingdom, Iran, and Iraq. Shoghi Effendi gave plans to all 12 for the period 1953ñ1963. Among the goals were to more than double the number of countries, islands, and significant territories in which the Baha'i Faith was established and to raise the number of national spiritual assemblies to 57. Except for a national spiritual assembly in one Islamic country, all the goals were achieved by 1963. The United States achieved perhaps a third of the goals, while expanding the number of American Baha'is from 7,000 to 10,000.

The decade spanning 1963ñ1973 saw the fruits of the effort to spread the Baha'i Faith widely but very thinly around the world. Latin American Baha'is settling in Bolivia reached out to the rural population, and tens of

thousands became Baha'is; the Bolivian Baha'i community is still the largest in Latin America, with a university and a radio station to serve its members and the citizenry. In the United States, door-to-door teaching brought 10,000 to 15,000 rural African Americans into the Baha'i Faith in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia in the years 1969ñ1972. At the same time, an unusual receptivity swept the college population, stimulated by support for the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. By 1974, the United States had 60,000 Baha'is. Subsequent conversion has been supplemented by immigration (some 12,000 Iranian Baha'is and perhaps 10,000 Southeast Asian Baha'is have settled in the United States since 1975), with the result that in 2001, the United States had 142,000 Baha'is and nearly 1,200 local spiritual assemblies. Today, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States owns retreat and conference centers in five states; publishes a children's magazine, a monthly newspaper, and a quarterly scholarly periodical; operates a radio station in South Carolina; runs a senior citizens' home and two institutions for economic development and public health; and employs some 200 staff members.

Expansion of the American Baha'i community in the last 25 years has also allowed resources to be channeled in several new directions. The Baha'i community has been able to sustain much greater commitment to the abolition of racism, the establishment of world peace, and the development of society. One result has been greater media attention. The larger community also produced an expanded book market that stimulated writers and scholars, so that Baha'i literature greatly expanded in scope and depth. Cultural expressions of the Baha'i Faith, such as operas and "Baha'i gospel" music, have also developed, and have become much more sophisticated. Now more than a century old, the American Baha'i community is an indigenous American religion, with fifth- and sixth-generation members.

Robert Stockman

Further Reading

Badiee, Julie. *An Earthly Paradise: Baha'i Houses of Worship around the World*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1992; Bahá'u'lláh. *Selected Writings of Baha'u'llah*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing, 2005; Cedarquist, Druzelle. *The Story of Baha'u'llah, Promised One of All Religions*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing, 2005; Esslemont, J. E. *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*. Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980; Hatcher, William S., and J. Douglas Martin. *The Baha'i Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984; Smith, Peter. *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Select Citation Style:

MLA

Stockman, Robert. "roots of the Baha'i Faith." *World Religions: Belief, Culture, and Controversy*. ABC-CLIO, 2011. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.

[back to top](#)

Entry ID: 1586898

Server: WEB2 | Client IP: 50.101.52.243 | Session ID:

r4xsruunrbrl0za0uroucnpm | Token: 9DB63A75B772765CD9AAFC8DC4E65D15

Referer: http://religion.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1586898