

religion and its believers after the passing of its Founder. There has to be a centre of authority in the Faith in order to hold it together and enable its followers to work together. It is only when there is unity that real progress can be made. Often, unfortunately, there has been disagreement over who should lead the believers.

"Inasmuch as great differences and divergences of denominational belief had arisen throughout the past, every man with a new idea attributing it to God, Bahá'u'lláh desired that there should not be any ground or reason for disagreement among the Bahá'ís. Therefore, with His own pen He wrote the Book of His Covenant."

In this book Bahá'u'lláh appointed His own Son, Abdu'l-Bahá, to be the Interpreter of His words after His passing. In turn, Abdu'l-Bahá made a will appointing his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to be the Guardian of the infant faith. After the death of Shoghi Effendi, the Faith was sufficiently strong and widely-established to be able to complete the system laid down by Bahá'u'lláh for administering the affairs of the Cause.

This system includes institutions at local, national and international level which are elected in a spiritual atmosphere by secret ballot, without nominations or canvassing. Since the completion of this system, authority belongs to the institutions rather than to any individual.

The world body, which is known as the Universal House of Justice, has been functioning since 1963, the national and local bodies since the early years of this century. There are now Bahá'ís in every country of the world. One hundred years after the passing of its Founder, the Bahá'í Faith remains united.

The Responsibility of the Individual

In previous ages, priests were needed in order to explain religion to the ordinary people who were not able to read and write. Now that people are generally more educated it is the responsibility of individuals to investigate religious teachings and beliefs and decide for themselves.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to meet together to discuss the deeper levels of meaning in the Bahá'í writings. Each person is entitled to his or her own opinion about the meaning of a particular passage of scripture but no-one is entitled to say that their interpretation is the correct one or that others are wrong. This removes the possibility of the formation of different groups with conflicting dogma. Only the Universal House of Justice, the centre of authority, can make definitive statements when this is necessary.

"Were it not for the protecting power of the Covenant to guard the impregnable fort of the Cause of God, there would arise among the Bahá'ís, in one day, a thousand different sects as was the case in former ages."

The Next Messenger

Each Messenger in the series is part of God's great plan: they each arise at

the place and time where they are most needed. There is always a link from one to the next, usually in the form of prophecies which are fulfilled by the following Messenger. These prophecies form another covenant which is between the Messenger and His followers:

"The Lord of the universe hath never raised up a Prophet nor hath He sent down a Book unless He hath established His covenant with all men, calling for their acceptance of the next Revelation and of the next Book."

Bahá'u'lláh has promised that the next Messenger will come after not less than a thousand years.

"This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

We must always watch out for the next Messenger and be ready to accept Him (or Her). Purity of heart is needed. Unfortunately it is often those who hold positions of authority in a religion who fail to recognise the new Messenger when He comes.

Each religion has a springtime when it grows and spreads rapidly, a summer when it flourishes and its influence produces a new degree of civilisation, an autumn when it begins to decline or become corrupt, and a winter when belief is lost and it has hardly any influence for good in the world. It is at this time that the religion is refreshed and renewed by a new Messenger.

The Age of Peace

Although the spiritual teachings of religion remain basically the same from age to age, the social teachings often differ. This is because each set of teachings is suited to the particular stage of development which humanity has reached at that time. Our task in this age is to build a peaceful and harmonious world society and God has given us the means to do this. If we follow God's guidance for this age we will not destroy ourselves or our planet.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are a blueprint for a truly united world civilisation based on justice for all. They include a world government, a world economic system, a common world language, and at a personal level the leaving behind of prejudice of race, class, gender, religion, intellect or material wealth.

The Power of the Covenant

If we keep our part of the promise we will be empowered to serve humanity:

"The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth."

If the whole of humanity keeps the promise, the will of God will be done on earth:

"The light of the Covenant...is the educator of the minds, the spirits, the hearts and the souls of men."

"If it is considered with insight, it will be seen that all the forces of the

universe, in the last analysis, serve the Covenant."

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METADATA

Views15977 views since posted 2000-06; last edit 2026-04-18 15:30 UTC;

previous at archive.org.../warwick_gods_promise;

URLs changed in 2010, see archive.org.../bahai-library.org

Language

English

Permission

editor and publisher

History

Formatted 2000 by Graham Sorenson.

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Citation: ris/622

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