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THE BAHAI FAITH

A summary Reprinted from the Encyclopaedia Britannica

WORLD RELIGIOUS STATISTICS

Reprinted from the 1988 Britannica Book of the Year

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THE BAHAI FAITH

Baha'i faith is a religion founded by Mirza Husayn 'Ali (1817-92; known as . . . Baha'u'llah, Glory of God). The word Baha'i derives from Baha ("glory, splendor") and signifies a follower of Baha'u'llah. The religion stemmed from the Babi faith -- founded in 1844 by Mirza (Siyyid) 'Ali Muhammad of Shiraz, known as the Bab -- which emphasized the forthcoming appearance of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest," a new prophet or messenger of God. The Babi faith in turn had sprung from Shi'ah Islam, which believed in the forthcoming return of the 12th imam (successor of Muhammad), who would renew religion and guide the faithful. This messianic view was the basis of the teachings of the Shaykhi sect, so named after Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsa'i. Shaykh Ahmad and his successor, Siyyid Kazim-i-Rashti abandoned traditional liberalism and gave allegorical interpretations to doctrines such as resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the return of the 12th imam. They and their followers expected the appearance of the Qa'im (He Who Arises, the 12th imam) in the immediate future.

On May 22, 1844, in Shiraz, Persia, a young descendant <p2> of Muhammad, Mirza 'Ali Muhammad, proclaimed to a learned Shaykhi divine, Mulla Husayn-i-Bushru'i, that he was the expected Qa'im, whereupon Mulla Husayn became the first disciple of Mirza 'Ali Muhammad, who assumed the title of the Bab ("gate," or channel of grace from someone still veiled from the sight of men).

Soon the teachings of the Bab, the principal of which was the tidings of the coming of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest," spread throughout Persia, provoking strong opposition on the part of the clergy and the government. The Bab was arrested and, after several years of incarceration, condemned to death. In 1850 he was brought to Tabriz, where he was suspended by ropes against a wall in a public

square. A regiment of several hundred soldiers fired a volley. When the smoke cleared, the large crowd that had gathered at the place of execution saw ropes cut by bullets, but the Bab had disappeared. He was found unhurt in an adjacent building, calmly conversing with a disciple. The execution was repeated, this time effectively. There followed large-scale persecutions of the Babis in which ultimately more than 20,000 people lost their lives.

History and Extent

Baha'u'llah, who had been an early disciple of the Bab, was arrested in connection with an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the shah of Persia, Nasiri'd-Din, made in August 1852 by two Babis intent upon avenging their master. Though Baha'u'llah had not known of the plot, he was thrown into the Black Pit, a notorious jail in Tehran, where he became aware of his mission as a messenger of God. He was released in January 1853 and exiled to Bag had. There Baha'u'llah's leadership revived the Babi community, and an alarmed Persian government urged the Ottoman government to move both Baha'u'llah and the growing number of his <p3> followers farther away from Persia's borders. Before being transferred to Constantinople, Baha'u'llah spent 12 days in a garden on the outskirts of Baghdad, where in April 1863 he declared to a small number of Babis that he was the messenger of God whose advent had been prophesied by the Bab. From Constantinople, where Baha'u'llah spent some four months, he was transferred to Adrianople. There he made a public proclamation of his mission in letters ("tablets") addressed to the rulers of Persia, Turkey, Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Britain, to the pope, and to the Christian and Muslim clergy collectively.

An overwhelming majority of the Babis acknowledged Baha'u'llah's claim and thenceforth became known as Baha'is. A small minority followed Baha'u'llah's half brother, Mirza Yahya Subh-i-Azal, creating a temporary breach within the ranks of the Basis. Embittered by his failure to win more than a handful of adherents, Mirza Yahya, assisted by his supporters, provoked the Turkish government into exiling Baha'u'llah to Akka ('Akko, Acre), Palestine. He became, however, a victim of his own intrigues and was himself exiled to Cyprus.

For almost two years Baha'u'llah, his family, and a number of disciples were confined in army barracks converted into a jail. One of his sons and several companions died. When the severity of the incarceration abated, Baha'u'llah was permitted to reside within the walls of Akka and later in

a mansion near the town. Before his life ended in 1892, Baha'u'llah saw his religion spread beyond Persia and the Ottoman Empire to the Caucasus, Turkistan, India, Burma, Egypt, and the Sudan.

Baha'u'llah appointed his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Baha ("Servant of the Glory," 1844-1921), as the leader of the Baha'i community and the authorized interpreter of his teachings. 'Abdu'l-Baha not only administered the affairs of the movement from Palestine but also actively engaged in spreading the faith, traveling in Africa, Europe, and America from 1910 <p4> to 1913. 'Abdu'l-Baha appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957), as his successor, Guardian of the Cause, and authorized interpreter of the teachings of Baha'u'llah, thus assuring the continued unity of the believers.

During 'Abdu'l-Baha's ministry, Baha'i groups were established in North Africa, the Far East, Australia, and the United States. Since then the movement has spread to virtually every country in the world, with particularly large and vigorous communities in Africa, Iran, India, the United States, and certain areas of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.... Since the 1960s ... the Baha'i faith has undergone a period of rapid expansion.[1] By January 1989 Baha'is resided in more than 118,000 localities throughout the world, with 148 national spiritual assemblies (national governing bodies -- two more are to be elected in April 1989) and 20,000 local spiritual assemblies. Baha'i literature has been translated into more than 800 languages.

[1. The remainder of this paragraph has been revised to reflect current membership statistics. -- ED.]

Sacred Literature

Baha'i sacred literature consists of the total corpus of the writings of Baha'u'llah and their interpretation and amplification in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. Baha'u'llah's literary legacy of more than 100 works includes the Kitab-i-Aqdas ("The Most Holy Book"), the repository of his laws; the Kitab-i-Iqan (The Book of Certitude), an exposition of essential teachings on the nature of God and religion; The Hidden Words, a collection of brief utterances aimed at the edification of men's "souls and the rectification of their conduct"; The Seven Valleys, a mystic treatise that "describes the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence"; <p5> Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, his last major work; as well as innumerable prayers, meditations, exhortations, and epistles. The Baha'is believe that the writings of Baha'u'llah are

inspired and constitute God's revelation for this age.

Religious and Social Tenets

Baha'u'llah teaches that God is unknowable and "beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress." "No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures.... No sign can indicate His presence or His absence...." Human inability to grasp the divine essence does not lead to agnosticism, since God has chosen to reveal himself through his messengers, among them Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab, who "are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe...." The messengers, or, in Baha'i terminology, "manifestations," are viewed as occupying two "stations," or occurring in two aspects. The first "is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity," in which one may speak of the oneness of the messengers of God because all are manifestations of his will and exponents of his word. This does not constitute syncretism since "the other station is the station of distinction.... In this respect, each manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission...." Thus, while the essence of all religions is one, each has specific features that correspond to the needs of a given time and place and to the level of civilization in which a manifestation appears. Since religious truth is considered relative and revelation progresses and continues, the Baha'is maintain that other manifestations will appear in the future, though not, according to Baha'u'llah, before the expiration of a full thousand years from his own revelation.

In Baha'i teachings God is, and always has been, the Creator. There was, therefore, never a time when the cosmos <p6> did not exist. Man was created through God's love: "Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee." The purpose of man's existence as taught by Baha'u'llah is to know and to worship God and "to carry forward an ever advancing civilization..." Man, whom Baha'u'llah calls "the noblest and most perfect of all created things," is endowed with an immortal soul which, after separation from the body, enters a new form of existence. Heaven and hell are symbolic of the soul's relationship to God. Nearness to God results in good deeds and gives infinite joy, while remoteness from him leads to evil and suffering. To fulfill his high purpose, man must recognize the messenger of God within whose dispensation he lives and "observe every ordinance of

him who is the desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other."

Civilization, Baha'u'llah teaches, has evolved to the point where unity of mankind has become the paramount necessity. The Baha'i faith, in the words of Shoghi Effendi,

proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind asserts that it is gradually approaching, and claims that nothing short of the transmuting spirit of God, working through His chosen Mouthpiece in this day, can ultimately succeed in bringing it about. It, moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society. It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorces, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, <p7> extols any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind.

Practices

Membership in the Baha'i community is open to all who profess faith in Baha'u'llah and accept his teachings. There are no initiation ceremonies, no sacraments, and no clergy. Every Baha'i however, is under the spiritual obligation to pray daily; to fast 19 days a year, going without food or drink from sunrise to sunset; to abstain totally from narcotics, alcohol, or any substances that affect the mind; to practice monogamy; to obtain the consent of parents to marriage; and to attend the Nineteen Day Feast on the first day of each month of the Baha'i calendar. The Nineteen Day Feast, originally instituted by the Bab, brings together the Baha'is of a given locality for prayer, the reading of scriptures, the discussion of community activities, and the enjoyment of one another's company. The feasts are designed to ensure universal participation in the affairs of the community and the cultivation of the spirit of brotherhood and fellowship. Eventually, Baha'is in every locality plan to erect a house of worship around which will be grouped such institutions as a home for the aged, an orphanage, a school and a hospital.

By the early 1980s there were houses of worship in Wilmette, Illinois; Frankfurt am Main, West Germany; Kampala, Uganda; Sydney, Australia; and Panama City, Panama. Houses of worship were under construction in New Delhi, India, and in Apia, Western Samoa.[1] In the temples there is no preaching; services consist of recitation of the scriptures of all religions. [1. The House of Worship in Western Samoa was dedicated in 1984; the House of Worship in India was dedicated in December 1986. -- ED.]

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The Baha'is use a calendar established by the Bab and confirmed by Baha'u'llah, in which the year is divided into 19 months of 19 days each, with the addition of four intercalary days (five in leap years). The year begins on the first day of spring, March 21, which is a holy day. Other holy days on which work is suspended are the days commemorating the declaration of Baha'u'llah's mission (April 21, April 29, and May 2), the declaration of the mission of the Bab (May 23), the birth of Baha'u'llah (November 12), the birth of the Bab (October 20), the passing of Baha'u'llah (May 29), and the martyrdom of the Bab (July 9).

Organization and Administration

The Baha'i community is governed according to general principles proclaimed by Baha'u'llah and through institutions created by him that were elaborated and expanded by 'Abdu'l-Baha. These principles and institutions constitute the Baha'i administrative order, which the followers of the faith believe to be a blueprint of a future world order. The governance of the Baha'i community begins on the local level with the election of a local spiritual assembly. The electoral process excludes parties or factions, nominations, and campaigning for office. The local spiritual assembly has jurisdiction over all local affairs of the Baha'i community. Each year Baha'is elect delegates to a national convention that elects a national spiritual assembly with jurisdiction over the entire country. All national spiritual assemblies of the world periodically constitute themselves an international convention and elect the supreme governing body known as the Universe' House of Justice. In accordance with Baha'u'llah's writings, the Universal House of Justice functions as the supreme administrative, legislative, and judicial body of the Baha'i commonwealth. It applies the laws promulgated by Baha'u'llah and legislates on matters not covered in the sacred texts. The seat of the Universal House of Justice is in Haifa, Israel in the <p9> immediate vicinity of the shrines of the Bab and 'Abdu'l-Baha, and near the shrine of Baha'u'llah at Bahji near Akka.

There also exist in the Baha'i faith appointive institutions, such as the Hands of the Cause of God and the continental counselors. The former were created by Baha'u'llah and later assigned by 'Abdu'l-Baha the functions of propagating the faith and protecting the community. The Hands of the Cause appointed by Shoghi Effendi in his lifetime now serve under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. The continental counselors perform the same functions as the Hands of the Cause but are appointed by the Universal House of Justice. Assisting the counselors in advising, inspiring, and encouraging Baha'i institutions and individuals are auxiliary boards appointed by the counselors and serving under their direction.

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end rev. ed. (1974), an exposition of principles for the establishment of universal peace and world civilization; and *The Promised Day Is Come*, end ed. (1980), an examination of the effects of manifestation upon the modern world.

(F. Ka.)

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1988 Britannica Book of the Year

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The 1987 table below gives details of the global spread of the world's 16 largest faiths or ideologies. It illustrates the articles on the various religions by showing each religion's continental statistics in the overall global context. It also demonstrates an extraordinary religious development of the 20th century religious pluralism.

As the right-hand column demonstrates, over 14 major religious systems are each now found in over 80 countries. Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i World Faith are the most global; agnosticism and atheism are also widespread. Hinduism has recently spread to 88 countries, Buddhism to 86.

This 20th-century spread has brought the religions into contact with each other as never before. Thus we find Filipino Catholics and Korean Protestants in Saudi Arabia, Gujarati Hindus in rural England, Tibetan Tantrists in Wales, Muslim mosques in every capital of Western Europe including Rome. The long-term effects of this mass proximity are sure to be profound. They are certainly resulting in unprecedented interest in other people's religions, expressed in seminars, courses, discussion, dialogue, tolerance, and even acceptance. (David B. Barrett)

[DUE TO THE SMALLNESS OF THE TYPE, UNABLE TO REPRODUCE THE TABLE THAT APPEARED ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE OF THE ORIGINAL PUBLICATION.]