The Baha'i Faith

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The Bahá'í Faith

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Draft A

Summary. The Bahá’í Faith is a religion that began in Iran in 1853. Its founder was Mírzá Husayn-`Alí (1817-92) known as Bahá’u'lláh. He wrote some 15,000 documents, the majority of them letters, which define the religion’s main teachings. In his lifetime the religion spread across the Middle East to Russian Central Asia, India, and Burma. He appointed his eldest son, `Abbás (1844-1921), known as `Abdu’l-Bahá, as his successor. `Abdu’l-Bahá wrote about 27,000 letters and essays that interpreted Bahá’u'lláh’s teachings and he oversaw the religion’s spread to North America, Europe, Hawaii, East Asia, and Australia. He appointed a successor, his grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), who became the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith upon `Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in 1921. Shoghi Effendi wrote about 17,500 letters interpreting the writings of Bahá’u'lláh and `Abdu’l-Bahá; translated Bahá’u'lláh’s major works into English; oversaw the establishment of the Bahá’í administrative system; and managed the expansion of the Bahá’í Faith to nearly every country in the non-communist world. In 1963 the Bahá’í world, following guidelines in the writings of Bahá’u'lláh, `Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, elected the nine-member Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the religion. In the nearly forty years since, worldwide membership in the Bahá’í Faith has grown to over five million and the Faith has emerged as the most geographically widespread religion in the world after Christianity.

The Bahá’í teachings stress the unity of God, the unity of all major world religions (which are understood to have been founded by divine teachers and to be based on revelation), and the unity of humanity (which implies equality of all races and sexes, the need for access to universal education, and the necessity for world peace founded on international law). The religion emphasizes daily prayer, an annual fasting period, daily study of scripture, sharing one’s beliefs with others, material sacrifice for the religion, and

service to humanity. Bahá'í communities have no clergy, but elect nine-member governing councils annually.

Founding Figures. The Bahá'í Faith arose from the Bábí Faith, a religion that had a short-lived flourishing in Iran in the 1840s. It was established by `Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819-50), who in 1844 took on the title of the Báb or "the gate" and who declared himself to be the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. The Twelver Shi'ite branch of Islam that dominates Iran expected the return of the twelfth imam (a messianic figure) and the expectation peaked among some Shi'ites in 1844. The Báb initially hinted that he was a gate to the twelfth imam, but gradually made explicit a claim to be the twelfth imam himself. He also penned mystic commentaries on the Qur'án, whose style and content signified a claim to divine revelation.

In a country spiritually dominated by a network of Muslim clerics, the claim to be the successor of Muhammad created immediate controversy. Followers of the Báb were initially arrested and expelled from cities, later beaten, and eventually executed. In three locations the Iranian army attacked Bábís and killed them (two were quarters of cities where the majority of the inhabitants had converted to the new religion). The Báb was placed under house arrest, then moved to remote prisons in the mountains of northwestern Iran. Finally he was put on trial, found guilty of blasphemy, and in 1850 he was executed in Tabriz. Estimates of the numbers of Bábís who were eventually killed for their beliefs range as high as twenty thousand. Many of the Báb's extensive writings were lost, though hundreds of works have survived, sometimes with several textual variants. The Báb's teachings included a new series of laws to replace the Islamic shari'ah law and an emphasis on the coming of a successor, "He Whom God would make manifest," who would appear soon and be a far greater messiah.

Among the early converts to the Bábí movement was Mírzá Husayn-`Alí, a nobleman born in northern Iran whose father was a palace official. As the Bábí leadership was executed, one after another, his role in the movement grew in importance. In the summer of 1848 he brought together a gathering of the remaining Bábí leaders, where he gave each a title; he took on the title of Bahá'u'lláh ("the glory of God"), one subsequently endorsed by the Báb. Before his execution, the Báb recognized Bahá'u'lláh's teenaged half brother Yahyá (1831-1912) as a figurehead leader of the Bábí community, though he gave Yahyá no explicit authority. Considering that Yahyá was completely unknown in the Bábí community and was still a youth living in Bahá'u'lláh's household, the appointment was probably made to allow Bahá'u'lláh to run the Bábí movement with a minimum of government interference.

In August 1852 a group of Bábís attempted to assassinate the king, resulting in a severe government-sponsored pogrom against the remaining Bábís. Bahá'u'lláh was arrested and thrown in prison for four months. While there he received a revelation:

During the days I lay in the prison of Tihran, though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear. (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, page 22)

The event marked the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, though he did not announce His status as "He whom God would make manifest," the successor to the Báb, for another decade.

When the Iranian government released Bahá'u'lláh from prison they banished him from Iran, hence he departed for Baghdad, a city in the Ottoman Empire frequented by many Iranians intent on performing pilgrimage to the Shi'ite shrines nearby. The next ten years were highly productive ones in which Bahá'u'lláh penned several of his most important works, The Hidden Words (a collection of ethical and mystical aphorisms), The Seven Valleys and The 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 Qur'án). His efforts to revitalize the Bábí community of Baghdad and to revive the Iranian Bábí 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, in April 1863, Bahá'u'lláh publicly declared to his companions and close associates that he was the prophetic teacher the Báb had prophesied.

Bahá'u'lláh spent the next five years under house arrest in Istanbul and Edirne, both in European Turkey. Building on diplomatic contacts made in the Ottoman capital, he sent epistles to the heads of state of Iran, Turkey, and the major European powers and to Pope Pius IX proclaiming his claim to be God's messenger and Christ returned. He sent numerous tablets (a Bahá'í technical term for a writing of Bahá'u'lláh, usually a letter to an individual) to Iran's Bábís and sent teachers to announce his messianic claim. The result was the rapid conversion of over ninety percent of the Bábís to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh's half brother Yahyá, the figurehead leader of a now almost non-existent community, broke with him and attempted to have Bahá'u'lláh murdered. The Ottoman authorities, unable or unwilling to determine the root cause of the strife between the two half brothers, exiled Bahá'u'lláh and most of his followers to the prison city of Acre, in what is today northern Israel, in the summer of 1868. Yahyá and most of his handful of followers were sent to Cyprus.

In Acre, Bahá'u'lláh and his followers were confined in a prison under severe conditions for over two years, resulting in several deaths, including one of Bahá'u'lláh's sons. Subsequently Bahá'u'lláh was released but was considered to be under house arrest, first in houses within the city walls, later in more comfortable accommodation outside Acre. Once he was released from

prison the flow of Iranian Bahá'í pilgrims resumed, and they carried tablets to friends and fellow Bahá'ís back home. Among the surge in literary output can be numbered the Kitáb-i-Aqdas or book of laws (a work that defines Bahá'í worship practices such as obligatory prayer and fasting, its obligatory tithe of nineteen percent of the believer's surplus income, its laws of marriage and inheritance, and miscellaneous prohibitions, such as drinking alcohol); a series of tablets produced after the Aqdas that outline basic social reform teachings; the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf (a major work of apologetics and a summary of many basic teachings); and The Book of the Covenant (Bahá'u'lláh's will).

The latter work specified that upon Bahá'u'lláh's passing, his eldest son `Abbás became his successor, and other tablets praised `Abbas as the exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the official interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Consequently, when Bahá'u'lláh passed in 1892, at age 75, `Abbás, age 48, was quickly acknowledged by all as the rightful head of the Bahá'í Faith. He took the title of `Abdu'l-Bahá, meaning "servant of Bahá" to underline his subservience to his father's legacy. An attempt by one of `Abdu'l-Bahá's half brothers to form a rival Bahá'í movement garnered virtually no support and died out, though it did cause Ottoman officials to look at all Bahá'ís with suspicion and to renew `Abdu'l-Bahá'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 the Ottoman realms into a republic.

Throughout the period 1892 to 1908 `Abdu'l-Bahá was free to receive visitors and communicate; the latter effort now included cablegrams. The spread of the Bahá'í Faith to the United States and subsequently to Europe, Hawaii, Australia, and Japan resulted in a diverse group of pilgrims entering Acre—still a prison city—to meet `Abdu'l-Bahá and receive his wisdom. When `Abdu'l-Bahá's confinement permanently 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 Bahá'í communities. In 1912 he traveled to North America, arriving in early April (just two weeks before the sinking of the Titanic, a ship many Bahá'ís had urged him to take because of its reputed safety). His nine-month sojourn extended as far south as Washington, as far north as Montreal, and as far west as San Francisco and Los Angeles. 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 N.A.A.C.P. The result was hundreds of newspaper articles, almost all favorable to him. He left North America in December 1912, spending the winter and spring visiting Bahá'ís from London to Budapest before returning to Palestine months before the beginning of World War One. A contemplated trip to India was rendered impossible by the war and `Abdu'l-Bahá's subsequent old age. He passed away in November 1921 at age 77.

Like his father, `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a will, in which he named his eldest

grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, to be his successor and valí amru'lláh (Guardian of the Cause of God). As a result, aside from a few small efforts to split the Bahá'í community (none of which garnered more than a hundred or two followers or lasted more than a generation), the Bahá'ís unitedly accepted Shoghi Effendi as their new head. `Abdu'l-Bahá's will also specified the system whereby Bahá'ís would elect nine-member local spiritual assemblies (governing councils of local Bahá'í 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 world-wide Bahá'í governing body. `Abdu'l-Bahá's will asserted that while the Guardian had the power to interpret authoritative Bahá'í texts, the Universal House of Justice had the authority to legislate on matters about which the texts were silent.

Shoghi Effendi devoted much of his energy to building local and national spiritual assemblies around the world. He utilized his Oxford education to translate the major works of Bahá'u'lláh into masterfully clear English of an elevated King Jamesian style that has become the model for subsequent translation of Bahá'í sacred texts. Among the 17,500 letters he wrote were a dozen book-length epistles wherein he defined basic Bahá'í teachings and laid the theoretical foundation for the establishment of Bahá'í governing institutions.

Shoghi Effendi's sudden death in November 1957, before he had written a will, plunged the Bahá'í world community into a crisis because it deprived the community of its international leadership and raised the specter of possible schism. But Shoghi Effendi had begun a ten-year plan for the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in 1953, which provided the Bahá'ís with clear goals until April 1963. He had also appointed a series of individuals as Hands of the Cause of God (a position created by Bahá'u'lláh). 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" (Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá'í World, page 127). `Abdu'l-Bahá's will had also given the Hands clear authority. Consequently the Bahá'ís of the world turned to the Hands, who coordinated the Bahá'í Faith until the completion of Shoghi Effendi's ten-year teaching plan. One effort by a Hand of the Cause, Charles Mason Remey, to claim leadership of the Bahá'í community garnered support from a few hundred persons and subsequently the Remeyite movement split into at least four factions.

In April 1963 the Hands oversaw the election of the Universal House of Justice, membership on which they voluntarily disqualified themselves. 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 Bahá'í community, coordinated translation of more Bahá'í texts (including the Kitáb-i-Aqdas) into English and other languages, and has been responsible for a great increase in the public visibility of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide.

Authoritative Texts. The Bahá'í Faith possesses authoritative texts from the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, 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 also are hierarchically ranked in importance. Those by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are the most important because both individuals are considered to be Manifestations of God and thus as mouthpieces of divine revelation. Their writings are considered the word of God. Because Bahá'u'lláh often abrogated specific laws of the Báb, the latter are not binding on Bahá'ís. `Abdu'l-Bahá is not considered a Manifestation of God, but his writings come from an individual whose spiritual rank is considered unique in human history (above an ordinary human being but below a Manifestation), hence his writings possess a sacredness and are considered part of Bahá'í scripture. Shoghi Effendi, on the other hand, occupies a rank even farther from a Manifestation, and his writings, though binding and authoritative, occupy a less sacred place in the hierarchy of Bahá'í scripture. The writings of the Universal House of Justice are also binding and authoritative but, like papal encyclicals, would not be considered scripture.

An important distinction can be made among authoritative texts between their spiritual import and their morally and ethically binding nature. Bahá'ís can include in a program of Bahá'í worship writings by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and `Abdu'l-Bahá, plus the Qur'án and the Bible; all these texts are considered spiritually uplifting and potentially transformative of the soul. Writings by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice would not normally be included in a worship program. On the other hand, when Bahá'ís look for guidance how to live their lives they turn to the writings of the Universal House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Bahá'u'lláh; normally the writings of the Báb, the Qur'án, and the Bible would not be included because those revelations have had many of their specific ethical aspects superseded by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, by the interpretations of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and by the legislation of the Universal House of Justice.

A significant feature of Bahá'í authoritative texts is their sheer volume; 15,000 documents by Bahá'u'lláh, 27,000 by `Abdu'l-Bahá, and over 17,500 by Shoghi Effendi. No official estimate of the quantity of writings of the Universal House of Justice is known, but when one considers that the nine-member body employs a large secretariat to research and draft responses, the rumored estimate of 250,000 letters composed since 1963 may be a representative estimate. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh wrote in Arabic, Persian,

and a unique combination of the two; `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in the same plus a small number of texts in Ottoman Turkish; Shoghi Effendi wrote in Arabic, Persian, a combination of the two, English, and French. The Universal House of Justice produces most of its communications in English, but has used various other languages as well. To date, perhaps five percent of Bahá'u'lláh's corpus has been translated into English; much more of `Abdu'l-Bahá's writings have been translated into English, but the old translations have not been checked for accuracy, updated, or even completely collected together. The Bahá'í World Centre has been computerizing the Bahá'í authoritative texts in their original languages and their translations for some twenty years.

Basic Beliefs. The Bahá'í teachings are often summarized as the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humankind. To these three topics one can add teachings about the creation of a Bahá'í community and teachings about the personal spiritual life.

Unity of God. Bahá'u'lláh describes God as an unknowable essence, in other words, that ultimately God is beyond human ken and reckoning. Bahá'u'lláh'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, where spiritual growth occurs primarily through God's grace. Experiencing God's attributes in creation is the basis of nature mysticism; Bahá'u'lláh says that all created things reflect divine attributes, a concept that is also fundamental to Bahá'í environmental ethics. Bahá'u'lláh 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/her culture and through his/her own life and actions. In an epistemological sense the Manifestation is God, because in the mortal plane she/he is the only perfect source of knowledge of the divine. Bahá'u'lláh identifies Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zoroaster, the Báb, and Himself as Manifestations and suggests that Adam, Noah, the founder of the Sabaean religion, Salih, and Hud were also Manifestations (the last three are figures mentioned in the Qur'án as well). To this list `Abdu'l-Bahá adds Buddha and Shoghi Effendi adds Krishna, raising the total to fourteen. Bahá'u'lláh also states that many Manifestations lived so long ago that their names have been lost; `Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that humanity has always received divine guidance through Manifestations.

Unity of Religion. The Bahá'í recognition that the majority of the world's major religions were established by Manifestations is the basis of the Bahá'í concept of the unity of religion. Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá 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 contexts in which it was expressed. Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá also criticize the learned and clergy of all religions for misunderstanding and distorting the original teachings. The bewildering diversity of the world's religions—especially in ritual and practice—is attributed to differing cultural contexts and interpretations. Bahá'í scholars have just begun to research issues that arise from the Bahá'í approach to religion, such as the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Buddhism (which fits the Bahá'í model of a religion the least), and to Sikhism, Jainism, and Chinese religions (which have no Manifestations recognized by the Bahá'í Faith). Interfaith dialogue is also affected by the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation, for it implies that the latest Manifestation—Bahá'u'lláh—is the most authoritative and therefore currently the most important. Bahá'u'lláh states that God will continue to send Manifestations to humanity in the future, but the next one will come only after the lapse of a thousand years (which is the time the Bahá'í Faith has to develop itself and mature).

Unity of Humankind. Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that human beings are the "waves of one sea," "the leaves of one branch" and "the flowers of one garden," images that emphasize the overriding unity of all human beings. Shoghi Effendi notes that the oneness of humankind is the watchword and pivot of the Bahá'í teachings. While this teaching can be seen as similar to Paul's words that among the Christians "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (RSV, Gal. 3:28), Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá strongly emphasized the wider implications of this principle: 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. Specifically, Bahá'u'lláh noted in his writings the right of all people, including women, to education so that they can pursue a trade or profession. In his visit to the United States in 1912, `Abdu'l-Bahá insisted on all Bahá'í meetings being open to blacks as well as whites and encouraged an African American man, Louis Gregory, to marry a white English woman, Louisa Matthew. American Bahá'í communities began the struggle to integrate themselves ethnically and racially as early as 1908, and women were first elected to Bahá'í local and national governing bodies as early as 1907 (in 2001 they constitute the majority of the membership of American local spiritual assemblies and four ninths of the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States).

In addition to its implications of unity, the oneness of humanity also is understood to imply the need to establish a global governing system. Bahá'u'lláh 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 Bahá'í 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. The Bahá'í authoritative texts include an extensive critique of existing social norms and a vision for creating a just, unified world.

Building a Community. The Bahá'í community consists of all persons who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh and have requested membership in the body of his followers. It is conceived of as an evolving entity destined to reflect Bahá'u'lláh's teachings ever more perfectly and to embrace an ever-larger segment of humanity. The chief goal of the Bahá'í community is to achieve ever-greater unity. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts Bahá'ís to be "as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 58), a utilitarian metaphor of working together that is reinforced by `Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation "verily, God loveth those who are working in His path in groups, for they are a solid foundation." (Bahá'í World Faith, p. 401). But more important is an ideal, spiritual unity expressed in the metaphor that the Bahá'ís should be "one soul in many bodies" (`Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The Lights of Divine Guidance, vol. 2, p. 50). This form of spiritual unity is rarely experienced. `Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in these words:

Another unity is the spiritual unity which emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit. . . . Human unity or solidarity may be likened to the body, whereas unity from the breaths of the Holy Spirit is the spirit animating the body. This is a perfect unity. It creates such a condition in mankind that each one will make sacrifices for the other, and the utmost desire will be to forfeit life and all that pertains to it in behalf of another's good. This is the unity which existed among the disciples of Jesus Christ and bound together the Prophets and holy Souls of the past. It is the unity which through the influence of the divine spirit is permeating the Bahá'ís so that each offers his life for the other and strives with all sincerity to attain his good pleasure (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, 191-92).

Bahá'ís strive for spiritual unity through various means. Bahá'í 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, non-cooperation, 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.

Reinforcing the goal of spiritual unity and the means of consultation are

practical principles in such matters as elections. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy; authority rests in, and is delegated by, elected bodies at the local, national, and international level. Bahá'í elections are based on the right of the individual to free and unfettered choice in voting. For elections to local spiritual assemblies, national spiritual assemblies, and the Universal House of Justice, electors can vote for any Bahá'í age 21 and older who resides within the body's area of jurisdiction (the locality, the nation, and the world respectively). They are urged to consider "without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience" (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 88). When Bahá'ís come together to vote they begin by praying. Forbidden is all discussion of names of possible persons to vote for, nominations, campaigning, straw votes, and other forms of influence on voting. If evidence of efforts to influence voters comes to light, the election is invalidated. Such a system of elections, where voting is a spiritual act and campaigning is banned, fosters the conditions for consultation, greatly reduces opportunities for strife in the Bahá'í community, and reinforces unity.

In any locality (usually defined as the smallest unit of civil jurisdiction, a city, township, or county) where nine or more Bahá'ís reside, the Bahá'ís gather annually to elect the nine-member local spiritual assembly between sunset April 20 and sunset April 21. Nations are divided into electoral units and each unit annually elects one or more delegates (depending on the unit's population) who gather annually in a national convention to elect the nine-member national spiritual assembly. Every five years, the members of all the national spiritual assemblies (182 of which existed in 2001) gather in Haifa, Israel, to elect the nine-member Universal House of Justice. The Universal House of Justice has the authority to determine the number of delegates chosen to elect each national spiritual assembly, must approve any changes to the bylaws of national spiritual assemblies, can overturn the decisions of such assemblies and ultimately can disband them for reasons of improper functioning. National spiritual assemblies have similar jurisdiction over local spiritual assemblies.

In the 1980s and 1990s a fourth level of Bahá'í institution was established by the Universal House of Justice: the regional Bahá'í council. It exists to coordinate and encourage Bahá'í activities in an area smaller than a nation and is elected annually by all the members of the local spiritual assemblies in that region. The United States is divided into four regions (northeast, south, central, and west) and first elected regional councils in November 1997.

Complementing the elected bodies is an appointed arm of the Bahá'í administrative system consisting of individuals who have no personal authority, but who advise and encourage. Bahá'u'lláh appointed the first members of this arm, the Hands of the Cause of God, in the late nineteenth century.

`Abdu'l-Bahá asked the Hands—who at that time all resided in Tehran, Iran—to oversee the establishment of the Bahá'í governing body for that city in 1896 (the first such body in the world). Shoghi Effendi appointed additional Hands and created a subsidiary institution under them, Auxiliary Board members, who were appointed by the Hands. He also said that Auxiliary Board members would in turn appoint assistants. After the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice determined that the Bahá'í scriptures did not authorize it to appoint Hands, hence that institution would end when the last Hands died. Consequently, the Universal House of Justice chose to create a parallel institution, the Counselors, who would carry on the functioning of the Hands of the Cause of God into the future. In 2001, two Hands were still living; worldwide, there were 81 Counselors; operating under them were 990 Auxiliary Board members, and under them thousands of assistants. The Counselors and Auxiliary Board members confer with the Universal House of Justice annually, individual Counselors meet with national spiritual assemblies several times per year, and Auxiliary Board members and their assistants meet with local spiritual assemblies and entire local Bahá'í communities every year or two, thus tying the Bahá'í world together in a series of face-to-face relationships and consultative gatherings.

As of 2001, the Bahá'í Administrative Order consisted of four levels of elected bodies plus their numerous committees and three levels of appointed individual advisors. The Universal House of Justice is authorized to create additional institutions as it sees fit, so the picture will gradually change. Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the embodiment of the Bahá'í teachings and the primary vehicle for their expression in the world.

In addition to the Bahá'í governing institutions, the Bahá'í texts describe the creation and development of Bahá'í communities. Bahá'í community life centers on the institution of the feast, a gathering once every Bahá'í month (which consists of nineteen days) where the Bahá'ís worship together, consult on local community activities, and socialize. The feast also provides the principal opportunity for local spiritual assemblies to share their ideas and plans and receive feedback from the local members. In addition to feasts, Bahá'ís attend firesides (gatherings, usually in people's homes, to introduce the Bahá'í Faith to others), deepenings (meetings to study Bahá'í texts and principles), children's classes (the equivalent of Sunday school), adult classes, and devotional meetings (sometimes held weekly on Sundays). Particularly important are Bahá'í holy days. Except for Bahá'í new years (March 21), the nine holy days on which Bahá'ís suspend work commemorate events in the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Supplementing the nine holy days are two more holy days connected with the life of `Abdu'l-Bahá, during which Bahá'ís can carry out their occupations, and the Ayyám-i-Há festival, a four or five-day period of service, merrymaking, and gift giving (February 26 through March 1; Ayyám-i-Há is necessary to bring the total days in the Bahá'í calendar from 361 [the number in nineteen months of nineteen days each] to the number of

days in a solar year). Every Bahá'í holy day is accompanied by a gathering that is open to the public.

In the United States, most local Bahá'í communities meet in the homes of the members, but rented and purchased Bahá'í Centers are becoming much more common. The United States has only one Bahá'í House of Worship, located in Wilmette, Illinois, outside Chicago. It is a continental House of Worship and does not serve a particular local Bahá'í community. It hosts daily worship programs, holy day observances, and a variety of classes, special gatherings, and interfaith activities.

The Devotional Life. The Bahá'í scriptures state that the purpose of life is "to know. . . and to worship" God (Bahá'í Prayers, 4) and to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 215), thus embracing both a vertical relationship with one's Creator and a horizontal relationship with one's fellow humans. Rather that stress an instant of personal salvation, like some Christian groups, or a moment of enlightenment like some Buddhist groups, the Bahá'í scriptures stress ongoing personal transformation based on internalization of the Bahá'í revelation and its expression in service to others. Bahá'u'lláh called on Bahá'ís to build their prayer life on the pillar of daily obligatory prayer; he gave three prayers among which Bahá'ís choose one to say daily. (Bahá'ís also can choose among hundreds of prayers penned by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá on a variety subjects, such as forgiveness, assistance, healing, and grief; they rarely pray spontaneously in their own words.) Bahá'u'lláh ordained the repeating of the phrase Alláh-u-Abhá (God is Most Glorious) ninety-five times each day as the basis for one's meditative and contemplative life. He established a period of fasting—nineteen days from March 2 through March 20—when Bahá'ís abstain from eating, drinking, and tobacco from sunrise to sunset. Exemptions are granted to those under age 15, 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 in order to connect the believer to the revelation.

The horizontal dimension of the devotional life has various aspects. Bahá'u'lláh says Bahá'ís should "be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements" (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, selection CVI). Bahá'ís are thus encouraged, individually and collectively, to improve the world around them. Bahá'u'lláh requires all to "engage in some occupation" and exalts such work "to the rank of worship of the one true God" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 33) thus potentially spiritualizing the life of the rank and file, while simultaneously forbidding ordained priesthood and monasticism. He describes marriage as "a fortress for well-being and salvation" (Bahá'í Prayers, p. 105), thus sacralizing that institution and making it a vehicle for spiritual progress. Finally, the Bahá'í scriptures describe `Abdu'l-Bahá as the personal exemplar Bahá'ís should

emulate. His life of service to others serves as a model of behavior.

International Diffusion. The Bahá'í religion's century and a half of growth has already been touched on, but there are a few highlights to add. The Bábí community was largely confined to Iran and Iraq and their Shi'ite populations, and virtually all Bábís had become Bahá'ís by 1880. By the mid 1880s the Bahá'ís began to reach out to Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians, whose younger and more educated members soon became attracted to the religion's modernistic ideas and its claim to fulfill scriptural prophecies. The result was the eventual conversion of perhaps ten percent of Iran's Jews to the Bahá'í Faith and a similar percentage of the Zoroastrians. The conversion continued for about fifty years and ended as the Jewish and Zoroastrian Bahá'ís assumed a greater Bahá'í identity, intermarrying more with Bahá'ís of Muslim background than with Jews or Zoroastrians.

Commerce and flight from persecution took the religion to India and Central Asia. Jamál Effendi, an Iranian Bahá'í, arrived in Bombay in 1872 and traveled around India to proclaim the new religion. In May 1878, accompanied by a young man named Siyyid Mustafá Rúmí, he traveled to Burma, creating Bahá'í communities in Rangoon and Mandalay. Rúmí remained and built a strong Burmese Bahá'í community; he also traveled to Malaysia and the Indonesian archipelago in the early 1880s to establish Bahá'í communities there. Meanwhile, so many Iranian Bahá'ís moved northward into Russian Central Asia to escape persecution that they became one of the largest religious communities in Ashgabat (modern capital of Turkmenistan). `Abdu'l-Bahá authorized them to construct the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the world in that city. (In the 1920s, under Stalin, the House of Worship was confiscated and the vast majority of the city's two thousand Bahá'ís were expelled to Iran, executed, or exiled to Siberia.)

Bahá'u'lláh's exiles to European Turkey and Palestine resulted in establishment of Bahá'í communities there and in nearby cities such as Alexandria, Cairo, Port Said, and Beirut. Iranian Bahá'ís settling in all those cities introduced the Bahá'í Faith to Shi'ites of non-Iranian origin, Sunni Muslims, and Arab Christians. In the 1870s a group of Bahá'ís was exiled from Egypt to Khartoum for teaching their religion, resulting in the brief establishment of a Bahá'í community there. In 1888 two Lebanese Christians became Bahá'ís in Egypt and in 1892 emigrated to the United States.

One of the two, Ibrahim George Kheiralla, was responsible for converting the first Americans in 1894. From a small group in Chicago, by 1900 the United States had four Bahá'í communities of fifty or more believers, plus scattered Bahá'ís in twenty-five states. By 1899 the Faith was also introduced to Ontario, Canada; Paris, France; and London, England from Chicago. A convert in Europe in turn took the Bahá'í Faith to Hawaii in 1901 and two Hawaiian Bahá'ís took it to Japan in 1914. In Shanghai, Occidental Bahá'ís met a few Persian Bahá'í merchants who had settled; at that point the Bahá'í religion had circled the globe from both directions.

American Bahá'ís visited India and Burma 1904-06, helping those communities to establish relations with governing authorities and increasing the Faith's publicity and prestige. In 1906 an American Bahá'í of German background returned to his native country, establishing a strong Bahá'í community in Stuttgart. In 1910 a pair of American Bahá'ís circled the globe westward, visiting major Bahá'í communities in every country where the religion could be found. By 1921, other American Bahá'ís had settled in Mexico, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and Korea.

American Bahá'ís played an important role even in Iran. In 1908 an American Bahá'í man settled in Tehran, Iran's capital, followed by four American Bahá'í women, 1909-1911. All were able to help the fledgling Bahá'í school system modernize, westernize, and attain high standards of quality. The women were physicians and nurses, able to treat women in a society where male doctors still could not examine female patients; they helped the Bahá'í community of Tehran establish a public clinic that eventually became a major hospital. The women played a role in raising the consciousness of Iranian Bahá'ís about equality of the sexes. Their presence also signaled to those wishing to persecute the Iranian Bahá'ís that the community now had active coreligionists in other countries.

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

In 1937, the North American Bahá'ís having finally established firm local and national spiritual assemblies, Shoghi Effendi gave them a Seven Year Plan (1937-44) calling for the establishment of at least one local spiritual assembly in every state in the United States, one in every province of Canada, the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in every country in Latin America, and for the completion of the exterior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. In spite of World War Two, every goal was achieved, and many Latin American nations had local spiritual assemblies as well as small groups of Bahá'ís in 1944.

In 1946 Shoghi Effendi launched a second Seven Year Plan (1946-53) that called for creation of a separate national spiritual assembly for Canada (the Canadian Bahá'ís having shared a national assembly with the United States all this time), a single national spiritual assembly for all of South America, another one for all of Central America, and reestablishment of the Bahá'í Faith in war-ravaged western Europe.

By 1953 there were twelve 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 twelve of them for the period 1953-63. Among the goals were to more than double the number of countries, islands, and significant territories where the Bahá'í Faith was established and to raise the number of national spiritual assemblies to 57. Except for electing 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 Bahá'ís at home from 6,400 to 10,000.

The next decade—1963-73—saw the fruits of the effort to spread the Bahá'í Faith widely but very thinly around the world. Latin American Bahá'ís settling in Bolivia reached out to the rural population and tens of thousands became Bahá'ís; the Bolivian Bahá'í community is still the largest in Latin America, with a university and a radio station to serve its members and the citizenry. Similar efforts brought thousands into the Bahá'í Faith in Kenya, Uganda, Swaziland, several Pacific archipelagoes, and hundreds of thousands of new Bahá'ís in India. In the United States, door-to-door teaching brought ten to fifteen thousand rural African Americans into the Bahá'í Faith in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia in the years 1970-72. At the same time an unusual receptivity swept the college population, no doubt stimulated by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. By 1974 the United States had 63,000 Bahá'ís. Subsequent conversion has been supplemented by immigration (some 12,000 Iranian Bahá'ís and perhaps 10,000 Southeast Asian Bahá'ís have settled in the United States since 1975) with the result that in 2001 the United States has 144,000 Bahá'ís and nearly 1,200 local spiritual assemblies. Notable is the presence of perhaps twenty thousand African American Bahá'ís, the involvement of several thousand Hispanic Bahá'ís (served by a quarterly Spanish-language Bahá'í magazine), inclusion of hundreds of native Bahá'ís on the Navajo and Lakota reservations, and the existence of several thousand multiracial or multiethnic marriages within the American Bahá'í community. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís 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 citizen's home and two institutions for economic development and public health; and employs some 200 staff.

Expansion of the American Bahá'í community in the last twenty-five years has also allowed resources to be channeled in several new directions. The Bahá'í 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 Bahá'í literature greatly expanded in scope and depth. Cultural expressions of the Bahá'í Faith such as operas and "Bahá'í gospel" music developed and have become much more sophisticated. Now more than a century old, the

American Bahá’í community is an indigenous American religion, with fifth and sixth-generation members.

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Draft B

Abstract. The Bahá'í
Faith arose in Iran in the mid nineteenth century. Its founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), declared himself a divine messenger and composed thousands of works defining the teachings, organization, and practices of the religion, which have as their purpose the creation of unity among all humankind. His successors, `Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921) and Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) continued to produce authoritative texts that clarified and amplified the Bahá'í teachings and developed institutions to express and channel them. The successive leaders and the nine-member governing council, the Universal House

of Justice (1963-present), which succeeded them, guided a systematic growth plan that brought over five million people into the Bahá'í community, which is found
in nearly country of the world.

The Bahá'í Faith began in Iran in 1853 and is now one of the most widespread religions in the world, located in some 218 countries, island groups, and significant territories (World
Christian Encyclopedia (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001) 2d ed, vol. 1, p. 4). Its approximately five million adherents
are members of 2,000 ethnic groups; its literature has been translated into more than 800 languages. Because of its widespread dissemination and its century and a half of history, it is being included in more world religions textbooks and is attracting more attention from religious studies scholars.

The Bahá'í Faith was founded by Mírzá Husayn-'Alí
(1817–1892), known as Bahá'u'lláh, in the mid nineteenth century. He wrote some 15,000 documents, the majority of them letters, that define the religion's main teachings. In his lifetime the religion spread across the Middle East and to Russian Central Asia, India, and Burma. He appointed his eldest son, ‘Abbás (1844–1921), known as
‘Abdu'l-Bahá, as his successor. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote some 27,000 letters and
essays that interpreted Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and oversaw the religion's spread to North America, Europe, Hawaii, East Asia, and Australia. He appointed a successor, his grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), who became the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith upon ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's passing in 1921. Shoghi Effendi wrote some 17,500 letters interpreting the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and
‘Abdu'l-Bahá; translated Bahá'u'lláh's major works into English; oversaw the
establishment of the Bahá'í administrative system; and managed the expansion of
the Bahá'í Faith to nearly every country in the noncommunist world. In 1963 the
Bahá'í world, following guidelines in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh,
‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, elected the nine-member Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the religion. In the five decades since, worldwide membership in the Bahá'í Faith has grown to more than five million, it has expanded to the remaining countries of the world, and it has sunk its roots deeply into the diverse cultures of the globe.

The Bahá'í teachings stress the unity of God, the unity of all
major world religions (which are understood to have been founded by divine teachers and to be based on revelation), and the unity of humanity (which implies equality of all races and sexes, the need for access to universal education, and the necessity for world peace founded on international law). The religion emphasizes daily prayer, an annual fasting period, daily study of

Scripture, sharing one's beliefs with others, material sacrifice for the religion, and service to humanity. Bahá'í communities have no clergy but elect nine-member governing councils.

Origins:

The Bahá'í Faith arose from the Bábí Faith, a religion that briefly flourished in Iran in the 1840s. It was established by ‘Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), who in 1844 took on the title of the Báb (the gate) and who declared himself to be the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. The Twelver Shi'a Islam that dominates Iran expected the return of the twelfth imam (a messianic figure), and the expectation peaked among some Shi'ites in 1844. The Báb initially implied that he was merely a gate to the twelfth imam, but gradually made explicit a claim to be the twelfth imam himself. He also penned mystic commentaries on the Qur'án whose style and content signified a claim to divine revelation.

In a country spiritually dominated by a network of Muslim clerics, the claim to be the successor of Muhammad created immediate controversy. Followers of the Báb were initially arrested and expelled from cities, later beaten, and eventually executed. In three locations the Iranian army attacked Bábís and killed them (two were quarters of cities in which the majority of the inhabitants had converted to the new religion). The Báb was placed under house arrest, then moved to remote prisons in the mountains of northwestern Iran. He was put on trial, found guilty of blasphemy, and in 1850 executed in Tabriz. Estimates of the numbers of Bábís who were eventually killed for their beliefs range as high as twenty thousand. Many of the Báb's extensive writings were lost, though hundreds of works have survived, sometimes with several textual variants. The Báb's teachings included a new series of laws to replace the Islamic shariah law and an emphasis on the coming of a successor, “He whom God would make manifest,” who would appear soon and be a far greater messiah.

Among the early converts to the Bábí movement was Mírzá Husayn-`Alí, a nobleman born in northern Iran whose father was a palace official. As the Bábí leadership was killed, his role in the movement grew in importance. In the summer of 1848 he assembled a gathering of the remaining Bábí leaders at which he gave each a title; he took on the title of Bahá'u'lláh (the glory of God), one subsequently endorsed by the Báb. Before his execution, the Báb recognized Bahá'u'lláh's teenage half-brother Yahyá (1831–1912) as a figurehead leader of the Bábí community, but he gave

Yahyá no explicit authority. Considering that Yahyá was completely unknown in the Bábí community and was still a youth living in Bahá'u'lláh's household, the appointment was probably made to allow Bahá'u'lláh to run the Bábí movement with a minimum of government interference.

In August 1852 a group of Bábís attempted to assassinate Iran's king, resulting in a severe government-sponsored pogrom against the remaining Bábís. Bahá'u'lláh was arrested and imprisoned for four months. While there he received a revelation:

During the days I lay in the prison of Tihrán [Tehran], though the galling weight of the chains and the stench-filled air allowed Me but little sleep, still in those infrequent moments of slumber I felt as if something flowed from the crown of My head over My breast, even as a mighty torrent that precipitateth itself upon the earth from the summit of a lofty mountain. Every limb of My body would, as a result, be set afire. At such moments My tongue recited what no man could bear to hear. (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 22)

The event marked the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, though he did not announce His status as “He whom God would make manifest,” the successor to the Báb, for another decade.

When the Iranian government released Bahá'u'lláh from prison, they banished him from the country. He departed for Baghdad, a city in the Ottoman Empire frequented by many Iranians intent on performing pilgrimage to the Shi'ite shrines nearby. Over the next ten years Bahá'u'lláh 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 Qur'án). His efforts to revitalize the Bábí community of Baghdad and to revive the Iranian Bábí community were so successful that the Iranian government complained to the Ottoman government, which order him to move to Istanbul. On the eve of his departure, in April 1863, Bahá'u'lláh publicly declared to his companions and close associates that he was the divine messenger the Báb had prophesied.

Bahá'u'lláh spent the next five years in exile in Istanbul and Edirne, both in European Turkey. Utilizing diplomatic contacts made in the Ottoman capital, he sent epistles to the heads of state of Iran, Turkey, and major European powers, as well as to Pope Pius IX, announcing his claim to be

God's messenger and Christ returned. He sent numerous tablets (a Bahá'í term for a writing of Bahá'u'lláh, usually a letter to an individual) to Iran's Bábís and sent teachers to explain his messianic claim. The result was the conversion of more than 90 percent of the Bábís to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother Yahyá, the figurehead leader of a now almost nonexistent community, broke with him and attempted to have Bahá'u'lláh murdered. The Ottoman authorities, unable or unwilling to determine the root cause of the strife between the two half-brothers, exiled Bahá'u'lláh and most of his followers to the prison city of Acre, in what is today northern Israel, in the summer of 1868. Yahyá and most of his handful of followers were sent to Cyprus.

In Acre, Bahá'u'lláh and his followers were confined in a prison under severe conditions for more than two years, resulting in several deaths, including one of Bahá'u'lláh's sons. Subsequently Bahá'u'lláh was released but was still technically under house arrest, first in houses within the city walls, later in more comfortable accommodations outside Acre. Once he was released from prison, the flow of Iranian Bahá'í pilgrims resumed, and they carried tablets to fellow Bahá'ís back home. Among the surge in literary output can be numbered the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, or book of laws (a work that defines Bahá'í worship practices such as obligatory prayer and fasting, its laws of marriage and inheritance, and miscellaneous prohibitions, such as drinking alcohol); a series of tablets produced after the Aqdas that outlines basic social reform teachings; the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, a major work of apologetics and a summary of many basic teachings; and The Book of the Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh's will.

The latter work specified that upon Bahá'u'lláh's passing, his eldest son, ‘Abbás, was to become his successor. Other tablets praised ‘Abbás as the exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the official interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Consequently, when Bahá'u'lláh passed in 1892, at age seventy-five, ‘Abbás, age forty-eight, was quickly acknowledged by all as the rightful head of the Bahá'í Faith. He took the title of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, meaning servant of Bahá, to underline his subservience to his father's legacy.

An attempt by one of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's half-brothers to form a rival Bahá'í movement garnered virtually no support and died out, though it did cause Ottoman officials to look at all Bahá'ís with suspicion and to renew ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's confinement within the city of Acre. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was able

to
receive visitors and communications, including cablegrams. The spread of the Bahá'í Faith to the United States and subsequently to Europe, Hawaii, Australia, and Japan resulted in a diverse group of pilgrims entering Acre—still a prison city—to meet ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and receive his wisdom. The decade of confinement ended in 1908, when the Young Turks Revolution toppled the Ottoman sultan and converted Turkey into a secular republic.

Once ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was free, he began to travel. In 1910 he visited Egypt. He traveled to Europe in 1911 to meet and encourage that continent's fledgling Bahá'í communities. In 1912 he voyaged to North America, arriving in
New York in early April. His nine-month journey extended as far south as Washington, as far north as Montreal, and as far west as Los Angeles. He gave hundreds of speeches to thousands of people gathered in churches, synagogues, theosophical lodges, and university auditoriums. He spoke to the annual Lake Mohonk Peace Conference and the fourth annual conference of
the NAACP. Hundreds of newspaper articles appeared, almost all favorable. He left
North America in December 1912, spending the winter and spring visiting Bahá'ís
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 subsequent old age. He passed away in November 1921 at age seventy-seven.

Like his father, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a will, in which he named his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, to be his successor and valí amru'lláh (Guardian
of the Cause of God). As a result, aside from a few small efforts to split the Bahá'í community (none of which garnered more than a few hundred followers or lasted more than a generation), the Bahá'ís unitedly
accepted Shoghi Effendi as their new head. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's will also specified
the system whereby Bahá'ís would elect nine-member local spiritual assemblies (governing councils of local Bahá'í communities) and delegates who would elect
nine-member national spiritual assemblies. The will stated that the members of all national spiritual assemblies would serve as the delegates to elect the Universal House of Justice, the supreme worldwide Bahá'í governing body. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's will asserted that while the Guardian had the power to interpret
authoritative Bahá'í texts, the Universal House of Justice had the authority to
legislate on matters about which the texts were silent.

Shoghi Effendi devoted much of his ministry to building local and

national spiritual assemblies around the world. He utilized his Oxford education to translate the major works of Bahá'u'lláh into masterful English of an elevated King Jamesian style that has become the model for subsequent translation of Bahá'í sacred texts. Among the 17,500 letters he wrote were a dozen epistles of book length in which he defined basic Bahá'í teachings and delineated the theoretical principles for the establishment of Bahá'í institutions.

Shoghi Effendi's sudden death, without a will, in November 1957 plunged the Bahá'í world community into a crisis, because it deprived the community of its head and raised the specter of schism. But Shoghi Effendi had begun a ten-year plan for expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in 1953 that provided the Bahá'ís with clear goals until April of 1963. He had also appointed a series of individuals as Hands of the Cause of God (a position created by Bahá'u'lláh). In October 1957 he raised their total number to twenty-seven and termed them “the Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh'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” (Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá'í World, p. 127). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's will had also given the Hands clear authority. Consequently the Bahá'ís of the world turned to the Hands, who coordinated the Bahá'í Faith until the completion of Shoghi Effendi's ten-year teaching plan. One effort by a Hand of the Cause, Charles Mason Remey, to claim leadership of the Bahá'í 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 so they could continue their existing responsibilities. 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 Bahá'í community and coordinated translation of more Bahá'í texts into English and other languages (including Bahá'u'lláh's most important work, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas). It has overseen a great increase in the public visibility of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide.

Authoritative Texts:

The Bahá'í Faith possesses authoritative texts from the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice.
A sharp distinction is always made between written and oral statements by the head of the Faith: the former are binding if the text 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 also are hierarchically ranked in importance. Those by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are the most important, because both individuals are considered Manifestations of God and thus were mouthpieces of divine revelation. Their writings are considered the word of God. Because Bahá'u'lláh often abrogated specific laws of the Báb, the latter are not binding on Bahá'ís. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá 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 Bahá'í scripture. Shoghi Effendi, on the other hand, occupies a rank even further from that of a Manifestation, and his writings, though binding and authoritative, are not considered sacred. The writings of the Universal House of Justice are also binding and authoritative but are not considered scripture.

An important distinction can be made among authoritative texts between their spiritual import and their morally and ethically binding nature. Bahá'ís will include, in a program of Bahá'í worship, writings by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, plus scriptures from other religions; all these texts are considered spiritually uplifting and potentially transformative of the soul. Writings by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice would not normally be included in a worship program. On the other hand, when Bahá'ís look for guidance how to live their lives, they turn to the writings of the Universal House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and Bahá'u'lláh; normally, the writings of the Báb, and the scriptures of other religions would not be included, because those revelations have had many of their specific ethical aspects superseded by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, by the interpretations of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and by the legislation of the Universal House of Justice.

A significant feature of Bahá'í authoritative texts is their sheer volume; 15,000 documents by Bahá'u'lláh, 27,000 by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and more than 17,500 by Shoghi Effendi. The Bahá'í Faith is not a religion of the book, but of many books. No official estimate of the quantity of writings of the Universal House of Justice is known, but when one considers that the nine-member body employs a large secretariat to research and draft responses, the rumored estimate of 250,000 letters composed since 1963 may be approximately correct. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in Arabic, Persian, and a unique combination of the two; ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in the same plus occasionally in Ottoman Turkish; Shoghi Effendi wrote in Arabic, Persian, a combination of the two, English, and French. The Universal House of Justice produces most of its

communications in English, but uses various other languages as well. To date, perhaps 5 percent of Bahá'u'lláh's corpus has been translated into English; much more of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's writings have been translated into English, but the old translations have not been checked for accuracy, updated, or even collected. The Bahá'í World Centre has been computerizing the Bahá'í authoritative texts in their original languages and their translations for over twenty years.

Basic Beliefs:

Bahá'í teachings are often summarized as the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humankind. If one adds teachings about the creation of a Bahá'í community and about the personal spiritual life, one has a useful division of Bahá'í teachings.

God. Bahá'u'lláh describes God as an unknowable essence—in other words, that ultimately God is beyond human ken and reckoning. Bahá'u'lláh'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. Bahá'u'lláh says that all created things reflect divine attributes (a concept that is fundamental to Bahá'í environmental ethics), but he adds 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/her culture and through his/her own life and actions. In an epistemological sense the manifestation is God, because in the mortal plane she/he is the only perfect source of knowledge of the divine. Bahá'u'lláh identifies Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Zoroaster, the Báb, and Himself as Manifestations and suggests that Adam, Noah, the founder of the Sabaean religion, Salih, and Hud were also Manifestations (the last three are figures mentioned in the Qur'án as well). To this list ‘Abdu'l-Bahá adds Buddha and Shoghi Effendi adds Krishna. Bahá'u'lláh also states that many Manifestations lived so long ago that their names have been lost; ‘Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that humanity has always received

divine guidance through Manifestations.

Religion. The Bahá'í recognition that the majority of the world's major religions were established by Manifestations is the basis of the Bahá'í concept of the unity of religion. Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá both state that all religions are based on a divine revelation but add that, while all religions share certain basic ethical and metaphysical principles, they differ because revelation progressively unfolds from faith to faith and that it must be tailored to the social and cultural context in which it was expressed. Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá occasionally criticize the learned and clergy of all religions for misunderstanding and distorting the original teachings. The bewildering diversity of the world's religions—especially in ritual and practice—is attributed to differing cultural contexts and interpretations. Bahá'í scholars have just begun to research issues that arise from the Bahá'í approach to religion, such as the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Buddhism (which fits the Bahá'í model of a religion the least), and to Sikhism, Jainism, and Chinese religions (which have no Manifestations expressly recognized by the Bahá'í Faith). Bahá'u'lláh states that God will continue to send Manifestations to humanity in the future, but the next one will come only after the lapse of at least a thousand years (which is the time given the Bahá'í Faith to develop itself and mature).

Humanity. Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that human beings are the “waves of one sea,” “the leaves of one branch,” and “the flowers of one garden,” images that emphasize the overriding unity of all human beings. Shoghi Effendi notes that the oneness of humankind is the watchword and pivot of the Bahá'í teachings. Although this teaching can be seen as similar to Paul's words that Christians are “baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond of free” (KJV, I Cor. 12:13), Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá strongly emphasized the implications of this principle: that all persons are equal before God and therefore must have basic equality in human society; that men and women are equal; that races are equal and must be reconciled and united. Specifically, Bahá'u'lláh noted in his writings the right of all people, including women, to training so that they can pursue a trade or profession. In his visit to the United States in 1912, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá

insisted on all Bahá'í meetings being open to blacks as well as whites and encouraged an African American man, Louis Gregory, to marry an English woman, Louise Matthew. American Bahá'í communities began the struggle to integrate themselves ethnically and racially as early as 1908, and women were first elected to Bahá'í local and national governing bodies as early as 1907 (in 2009 they constitute the majority of the membership of American local spiritual assemblies and four-ninths of the membership of the national spiritual assembly).

In addition to its implications of unity, the oneness of humanity implies the need to establish a global governing system. Bahá'u'lláh 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 Bahá'í 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 Bahá'í authoritative texts include an extensive critique of existing social norms and a vision for creating a just, unified world.

Bahá'í community. The Bahá'í community consists of all persons who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh and have requested membership in the body of his followers. It is conceived of as an evolving entity destined to reflect Bahá'u'lláh's teachings ever more perfectly and to embrace an ever-larger segment of humanity. The chief goal of the Bahá'í community is to achieve ever-greater unity. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts Bahá'ís to “be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body” (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 58), a utilitarian metaphor of working together that is reinforced by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that “verily, God loveth those who are working in His path in groups, for they are a solid foundation” (Bahá'í World Faith, p. 401). More important is an ideal, spiritual unity expressed in the metaphor that the Bahá'ís should be “one soul in many bodies” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The Lights of Divine Guidance, vol. 2, p. 50). This form of spiritual unity is rarely achieved in practice. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in these words:

Another unity is the spiritual unity that emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit.… Human unity or solidarity may be likened to the

body, whereas unity from the breaths of the Holy Spirit is the spirit animating the body. This is a perfect unity. It creates such a condition in mankind that each one will make sacrifices for the other, and the utmost desire will be to forfeit life and all that pertains to it in behalf of another's good. This is the unity that existed among the disciples of Jesus Christ and bound together the Prophets and holy Souls of the past. It is the unity which through the influence of the divine spirit is permeating the Bahá'ís so that each offers his life for the other and strives with all sincerity to attain his good pleasure. (Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 191–192)

Bahá'ís strive for spiritual unity through various means. Bahá'í 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.

Reinforcing the goal of spiritual unity and the means of consultation are the principles of Bahá'í elections. The religion has no clergy; authority rests in, and is delegated by, elected bodies at the local, national, regional, and international level. Bahá'í elections are based on the right of the individual to free and unfettered choice in voting. Voters are urged to consider "without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience" (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 88). When Bahá'ís come together to vote, they begin by praying. Forbidden is all discussion of names of possible candidates, nominations, campaigning, straw votes, and other forms of influence. If evidence of efforts to influence voters comes to light, the election is invalidated. Such a system of elections, where voting is a sacred, spiritual act and campaigning is banned, fosters the conditions for consultation, greatly reduces opportunities for strife in the Bahá'í community, and reinforces unity.

In any locality (usually defined as the smallest unit of civil jurisdiction, a city, township, or county) where nine or more Bahá'ís reside, the Bahá'ís gather annually to elect the nine-member local spiritual assembly between sunset April 20 and sunset April 21. Many nations are divided into

regions (the continental United States is currently divided into six) and in each region, the members of the local spiritual assemblies vote by mail for the nine-member regional council every November. Nations are also divided into electoral units (the United States has 168), and each unit annually elects one or more delegates (depending on the unit's population) who gather annually in a national convention to elect the nine-member national spiritual assembly. Every five years, the members of all the national spiritual assemblies gather in Haifa, Israel, to elect the nine-member Universal House of Justice. The Universal House of Justice has the authority to determine the number of delegates chosen to elect each national spiritual assembly; must approve any changes to the bylaws of national spiritual assemblies; can overturn the decisions of such assemblies, and ultimately can disband them for reasons of improper functioning. National spiritual assemblies have similar jurisdiction over regional councils and local spiritual assemblies.

Complementing the elected bodies is a second arm of the Bahá'í administrative system consisting of individuals who have no personal authority but who advise and encourage. Bahá'u'lláh appointed the first members of this arm, the Hands of the Cause of God, in the late nineteenth century. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá asked the Hands—who at that time all resided in Tehran—to oversee the establishment of the Bahá'í governing body for that city in 1897, the first such body in the world. Shoghi Effendi appointed additional Hands and created a subsidiary institution under them, Auxiliary Board members, who were appointed by the Hands. He also said that Auxiliary Board members would appoint assistants.

After the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice determined that the Bahá'í scriptures did not authorize them to appoint Hands; hence that institution would die out when the last of the Hands died (the last one passed away in 2007). Consequently, in 1968 the Universal House of Justice chose to create a parallel institution, the Counselors, who would carry on the functioning of the Hands of the Cause of God. In 2009 there were 81 Counselors worldwide; operating under them were 990 Auxiliary Board members; and under them thousands of assistants. The Counselors meet with the Universal House of Justice annually; individual Counselors meet with national spiritual assemblies and regional councils several times per year; Auxiliary Board members and their assistants meet with local spiritual assemblies and entire local Bahá'í communities frequently. Thus the Bahá'í world is tied together in a series of face-to-face relationships and consultative gatherings.

The Universal House of Justice is authorized to create additional institutions as it sees fit, so the picture may change. Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the embodiment of the Bahá'í teachings and the primary vehicle for their expression in the world.

Bahá'í community life centers on the institution of the Feast, a

gathering once every Bahá'í month (which lasts nineteen days) wherein the Bahá'ís worship together, consult on local community activities, and socialize.
The feast also provides the principal opportunity for local spiritual assemblies to share their ideas and plans and receive feedback from the local members.

Nine Bahá'í holy days are observed throughout year. Other than Bahá'í New Year's Day (March 21), they commemorate events in the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Holy days are marked by gatherings that are open to the public. Supplementing the nine holy days on which Bahá'ís should suspend work are two holy days connected with the life of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, on which Bahá'ís can carry out their occupations, and Ayyám-i-Há, a four- or five-day period of service, merrymaking, and gift giving. Ayyám-i-Há falls annually between February 26 through March 1 and is necessary to bring the total days in the Bahá'í calendar from 361 (the number in nineteen months of nineteen days each) to the number of days in a solar year.

Bahá'ís also participate in a series of core activities: children's classes (the equivalent of Sunday school, at the neighborhood level or more centralized), junior youth groups (which engage in service and other activities focused on moral empowerment), study circles (classes for youth and adults following the Ruhi curriculum, currently a series of seven books that teach community building skills), and devotionals (prayer meetings held in homes and public places). Bahá'ís are encouraged to conduct one or more core activities in their home for friends and neighbors. They also participate in firesides (gatherings, usually in people's homes, to introduce the Bahá'í Faith to others) and deepenings (meetings to study Bahá'í texts and principles together).

In the United States, most local Bahá'í communities meet in the homes of the members, but rented and purchased Bahá'í Centers are becoming increasingly common. The United States has one Bahá'í House of Worship, located in Wilmette, Illinois, outside Chicago. It is a continental House of Worship (one of seven in the world) and does not serve a particular local Bahá'í community. It hosts daily worship programs, holy day observances, and a variety of classes, special gatherings, and interfaith activities.

Spiritual Life. The Bahá'í 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 that stress instant achievement of personal salvation, like some Christian groups, or a moment of enlightenment, like some Buddhist groups, the Bahá'í scriptures stress ongoing personal transformation based on internalization of the Bahá'í revelation and its expression in service to others.

Bahá'u'lláh called on Bahá'ís to build their prayer life on the pillar of daily obligatory prayer; he gave three prayers among which Bahá'ís choose one to say daily. Bahá'ís also can choose among hundreds of prayers penned by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá on a variety of subjects, such as forgiveness, assistance, healing, and grief; they may also pray spontaneously in their own words, but this is more typically done in private. Bahá'u'lláh ordained the repeating of the phrase Alláh-u-Abhá (God Is Most Glorious) ninety-five times each day as the basis for one's meditative and contemplative life. He established a period of fasting, which lasts from sunrise to sunset for nineteen days from March 2 through March 20. In that period Bahá'ís abstain from eating, drinking, and tobacco. He granted exceptions to those under age fifteen, over age seventy, 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 in order to connect the believer to the revelation.

The horizontal dimension of the devotional life has various aspects. Bahá'u'lláh says Bahá'ís should be “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, selection CVI). Bahá'ís are thus encouraged, individually and collectively, to improve the world around them. Bahá'u'lláh requires all to “engage in some occupation” and exalts work performed in the spirit of service “to the rank of worship of the one true God” (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, para. 33), thus potentially spiritualizing the life of the individual, while simultaneously forbidding ordained priesthood and monasticism. He describes marriage as “a fortress for well-being and salvation” (Bahá'í Prayers, p. 105), thus sacralizing that institution and making it a vehicle for spiritual progress. Finally, the Bahá'í scriptures describe ‘Abdu'l-Bahá as the personal exemplar Bahá'ís should emulate. His life of service to others serves as a model of behavior.

International Diffusion:

The dissemination of the Bahá'í Faith has been a systematic and active long-term goal of the Faith from the very beginning, which explains how it has achieved vast international spread (greater than Hinduism and Buddhism) even though it has far smaller numbers.

The Bábí community, starting in 1844, was largely confined to Iran and Iraq and their Shi'ite populations. Virtually all Bábís had become Bahá'ís by 1880. By the mid-1880s the Bahá'ís began to reach out to Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians, whose younger and more educated members soon became attracted to the religion's modernistic ideas and its claim to fulfill scriptural prophecies.

Jamál Effendi, an Iranian Bahá'í, arrived in Bombay in 1872 and traveled around India to proclaim the new religion. In May 1878, accompanied by a young man named Siyyid Mustafá Rúmí, he traveled to Burma, creating Bahá'í communities in Rangoon and Mandalay. They visited Malaysia and the Indonesian archipelago in the early 1880s to establish Bahá'í communities there. Rúmí remained in Burma and built a strong Bahá'í community.

Many Iranian Bahá'ís moved northward into Russian Central Asia to escape persecution. They became one of the largest religious communities in Ashgabat (the modern capital of Turkmenistan). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá authorized them to construct the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the world (1902-08). In the 1920s, under Stalin, the House of Worship was confiscated and the vast majority of the city's two thousand Bahá'ís were expelled to Iran, executed, or exiled to Siberia.

Bahá'u'lláh's exiles to European Turkey and Palestine resulted in the establishment of Bahá'í communities there and in nearby cities such as Alexandria, Cairo, Port Said, and Beirut. Iranian Bahá'ís settling in all those cities introduced the Bahá'í Faith to Shi'ites of non-Iranian origin, Sunni Muslims, and Arab Christians. In the 1870s a group of Bahá'ís was exiled from Egypt to Khartoum for teaching their religion, resulting in the establishment of a Bahá'í community there. In 1888 two Lebanese Christians became Bahá'ís in Egypt and in 1892 immigrated to the United States.

One of them, Ibrahim George Kheiralla (1849–1929), was responsible for converting the first Americans in 1894. From a small group in Chicago, by 1900 the United States had four Bahá'í communities of fifty or more believers, plus scattered Bahá'ís in twenty-three states. By 1899 the Faith was also introduced from Chicago to Ontario, Canada; Paris, France; and London, England. A convert in Europe took the Bahá'í Faith to Hawaii in 1901, and two Hawaiian Bahá'ís took it to Japan in 1914. In Shanghai, China, Occidental Bahá'ís met a few Persian Bahá'í merchants who had settled; at that point the Bahá'í religion had circled the globe from both

directions. American Bahá'ís visited India and Burma in 1904–1906, helping those communities to establish relations with governing authorities and increasing the Faith's publicity and prestige. In 1906 a German-born American Bahá'í returned to his native country, establishing a strong Bahá'í community in Stuttgart. In 1910 a pair of American Bahá'ís circled the globe westward, visiting major Bahá'í communities in every country where the religion could be found. By 1921 other American Bahá'ís had settled in Mexico, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and Korea.

American Bahá'ís played an important role even in Iran. In 1908 an American Bahá'í man settled in Tehran, Iran's capital, followed by four American Bahá'í women in 1909–1911. All were able to help the fledgling Bahá'í school system modernize, westernize, and attain high standards of quality. The women were physicians and nurses, able to treat women in a society where male doctors could not examine female patients; they helped the Bahá'í community of Tehran establish a public clinic that eventually evolved into a major hospital. The women played a role in raising the consciousness of Iranian Bahá'ís about equality of the sexes. Their presence also signaled to those wishing to persecute the Iranian Bahá'ís that the community now had active coreligionists in the west.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá penned a series of fourteen tablets to the North American Bahá'ís in 1916 and 1917 entitled The Tablets of the Divine Plan, in which he enjoined them to spread the Bahá'í religion to every nation and island on the globe. He enumerated hundreds of places where there should be Bahá'í communities, all of which subsequently became goals. In the 1920s Shoghi Effendi gave the American Bahá'ís the chief responsibility for establishing Bahá'í elected institutions, and he patterned such bodies in Europe, Asia, and Australasia on the American model. He used the elected institutions as instruments for implementing the missionary vision in The Tablets of the Divine Plan.

In 1937, the North American Bahá'ís having finally established firm local and national spiritual assemblies, Shoghi Effendi gave them a Seven Year Plan (1937–1944) calling for them to establish at least one local spiritual assembly in every state in the United States, one in every province of Canada, to establish the Bahá'í Faith in every republic in Latin America, and to complete the exterior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. In spite of World War II, every goal was achieved, and many Latin American nations had local spiritual assemblies in 1944.

In 1946, Shoghi Effendi launched a second Seven Year Plan (1946–1953) that called for creation of a separate national spiritual assembly for Canada (the Canadian Bahá'ís having shared a national assembly with the United States), a single national spiritual assembly for all of South America, another for all of Central America, and re-establishment of the

Faith in war-ravaged western Europe.

By 1953 there were twelve 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 twelve of them for the period 1953–1963. Among the goals were to more than double the number of countries, islands, and significant territories in which the Bahá'í Faith was established and to raise the number of national spiritual assemblies to fifty-seven. Except for a national spiritual assembly in Afghanistan, all the goals were achieved by 1963. The United States achieved perhaps a third of the goals, while expanding the number of American Bahá'ís from 7,000 to 10,000.

The next decade—1963–1973—saw the fruits of the effort to spread the Bahá'í Faith widely but very thinly around the world. Latin American Bahá'ís settling in Bolivia reached out to the rural population, and tens of thousands became Bahá'ís; the Bolivian Bahá'í community is still the largest in Latin America, with a university and a radio station to serve its members and the citizenry. Similar efforts to reach entire villages have brought thousands into the Bahá'í Faith in Kenya, Uganda, Swaziland, and several Pacific archipelagoes. Hundreds of thousands became Bahá'ís in India. In the United States, door-to-door teaching brought 10,000 to 15,000 rural African Americans into the Bahá'í Faith in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia in the years 1969–1972. At the same time an unusual receptivity swept the college population, stimulated by the social unrest caused by Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. By 1974 the United States had 60,000 Bahá'ís. Subsequent conversion has been supplemented by immigration (some 12,000 Iranian Bahá'ís and perhaps 10,000 Southeast Asian Bahá'ís have settled in the United States since 1975), with the result that in 2009 the United States had 164,000 Bahá'ís and nearly twelve hundred local spiritual assemblies. Notable is the presence of hundreds of native Bahá'ís on the Navajo and Lakota reservations, the involvement of several thousand Hispanic Bahá'ís (served by a quarterly Spanish-language Bahá'í magazine), and countless multiracial or multiethnic marriages within the American Bahá'í community. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States owns retreat and conference centers in five states; publishes a children's magazine, a bimonthly newspaper, and a quarterly scholarly periodical; operates a radio station in

South Carolina; runs two institutions for economic development and public health; and employs some two hundred staff.

Expansion of the American Bahá'í community in the last thirty years has allowed resources to be channeled in new directions. The Bahá'í 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 produced an expanded book market that stimulated writers and scholars, so that Bahá'í literature greatly expanded in scope and depth. Serious study of Bahá'í history, texts, teachings, and communities greatly expanded. Cultural expressions of the Bahá'í Faith, such as operas and Bahá'í-inspired gospel style music, developed and have become much more sophisticated. Now more than a century old, the American Bahá'í community has fifth- and sixth-generation members and has sunk its roots deep into American culture and society.

Internationally, membership growth slowed throughout the 1980s and 1990s as it became clear there was no easy way to consolidate large numbers of converts. The advent of the core activities and the Ruhi curriculum, starting about 2000, provided a new basis for training new adherents. The grouping of small local Bahá'í communities into units called clusters, and the provisioning of clusters with committees and officers dedicated to spreading the religion systematically, has brought about a resumption in membership growth.

Persecution has remained an important factor worldwide. The Iranian Bahá'í community has faced severe restrictions ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, with many members facing harassment, denial of business licenses and pensions, vandalism, arson, physical violence, imprisonment, and execution. Bahá'í children are harassed in and occasionally expelled from the public schools. Bahá'ís are denied access to higher education, resulting in creation of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, a web-based private university operating on computers in the West for educating Iran's Bahá'í youth. Defense of the Iranian Bahá'í community has become a stimulus for the development of external affairs and public information departments in many national Bahá'í communities.

In some other countries, however, the situation has improved. The Bahá'í Faith has become legalized in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Iraq. In Egypt, the Bahá'ís won a court case in 2009 that allowed them to obtain government identification cards, which are essential for obtaining drivers licenses, opening bank accounts, attending universities, and holding a job. The spread of the internet and satellite radio have made it much easier to disseminate accurate information in the Arabic and Persian languages and refute false accusations and stereotypes. Websites, listservs, and blogs have knit the worldwide Bahá'í community together in ways

previously
unimaginable.

The Bahá'í Faith's international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, is based in Haifa, Israel, close to the burial places of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and `Abdu'l-Bahá. Several official Internet sites are maintained at http://www.bahai.org/, http://www.bahai.us, and http:/news.bahai.org/

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