Introduction to the Baha'i Tradition

Source: Bahá'í Library Online (bahai-library.com), curated by Jonah Winters.
Used by permission of the curator. Original citation: unknown, Introduction to
the Baha'i Tradition, Cambridge University Press, 1997/2009,
bahai-library.com.
â”€

On Common Ground: World Religions in America
Introduction to the Bahá'í Tradition

Index:

The Bab and Baha'u'llah

The Bahá'í Faith is today a vibrant worldwide community of people from many races and cultures. Its beginnings were in mid-nineteenth century Iran, where most of the people were "Twelver" Shi'ite Muslims. Shi'ites recognize a line of leaders called Imams: successors within the family lineage of Muhammad who became the spiritual guides and authoritative leaders of the Muslim community. They expect the twelfth Imam--Muhammad al-Mahdi, who disappeared in the ninth century--to return to establish a rule of truth and justice in the last days.

One sect of Twelver Shi'ites believed that the twelfth Imam would return to earth in the year 1844 to establish his reign of righteousness, justice, and peace. When the head of this sect died in 1844, many of his followers scattered in search of the promised one. On May 23, 1844, a young man named Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad of Shiraz (1819-1850) declared to a leading Shaykhi that he was the promised one they were seeking.

He later
took the title of the Bab, Arabic for the "Gate," implying that he was the gate to the
twelfth Imam, although in some of his early writings he claimed to be the Imam himself.

Within a few months the Bab had gathered a small group of followers whom he sent
across Iran to spread his teachings, which were often written commentaries on chapters of
the Qur'an. The Babi movement grew rapidly among seminarians, merchants, and other
urban groups. It aroused the hostility of the Shi'ite clergy and the Persian authorities, who
had the Bab arrested and imprisoned in northwestern Iran. In prison, the Bab continued to
receive visitors and write. Among his writings was the Bayan, the "Explanation," which
gave new laws for his religion and prophesied the arrival of another divine messenger

even greater than himself. Because his teachings were considered blasphemy by the
Shi'ite clerics, the Bab was executed by firing squad on July 9, 1850. Pogroms against his
followers, already severe, intensified, and thousands of Babis died.

An early convert to the faith of the Bab, Mirza Husayn-'Ali (1819-1892), had organized a
conference of leading Babis to discuss the state of the Babi movement in 1848. At the
conference he acquired the title Baha'u'llah, Arabic for "the Glory of God." In 1852,
Baha'u'llah was thrown in prison after a group of Babis attempted to assassinate the Shah
of Iran. There Baha'u'llah received his first experience of divine revelation. As he
described the experience in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, "The breezes of the All-
Glorious were wafted over Me and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been."

In 1853 Baha'u'llah was released from prison and banished from Iran. He and his family

emigrated to Baghdad in Ottoman Iraq. There he began to write theological, ethical and mystical works, and was instrumental in reorganizing Iran's scattered Babis. Increasingly Babis regarded Baha'u'llah as the divine messenger the Bab had promised, and in April of 1863 he announced to a small group of followers his claim to be the promised one.

Because of his claims and his growing stature, Baha'u'llah was repeatedly banished. He went from Baghdad, to Istanbul, to a small city in Turkey, and ultimately, in 1868, to Akka, a prison city in Palestine. There he lived out the rest of his days either in prison, or under house arrest. Except for the years 1868-1870, however, Baha'u'llah was able to receive visitors and had the freedom to write.

Over the course of his life, Baha'u'llah wrote more than 15,000 letters, essays, and books which stated his religion's theological doctrines, its principles of social reform, and its understanding of personal spiritual development. In 1874 he completed the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the central Bahá'í book, which delineates Bahá'í laws of prayer, fasting, and personal conduct and defines basic Bahá'í institutions. A series of his later essays outlines social reform teachings and provides a vision of a Bahá'í civilization.
Baha'u'llah taught that divine revelation is a continuous and progressive process and that the missions of the messengers of God represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society. Baha'u'llah's mission, Bahá'í s believe, is the culmination of the work of the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad and the other great religious teachers and messengers.

Baha'u'llah died in 1892. One hundred years later, the anniversary of his passing was marked in New York City with a World Congress that drew 30,000 Bahá'í s from all over the world. The attendees were only a small fraction of the more than five million adherents of the Bahá'í Faith, a faith that represents almost all

nationalities, ethnic
groups, classes, professions, and religious backgrounds.

Worldwide Expansion

Virtually all of the Bab's followers accepted Baha'u'llah and became Bahá’í s by the
1870s. Under Baha'u'llah's leadership the Bahá’í community began to grow in size.
Starting in the 1870s and 1880s, Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians interested in the
"modernization of thought" joined Shi'ite Muslims in converting to the Faith. Bahá’í
teachers traveled to Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Turkey, and India, converting Sunni
Muslims and a smaller number of Christians. Bahá’í refugees from Iran fled northward
into Russia and Central Asia and established large Bahá’í communities there. One
teacher journeyed to Burma and converted both Muslims and Buddhists. The resulting
Bahá’í communities were only loosely organized at first, but they gradually acquired
copies of Baha'u'llah's writings and deepened their knowledge of his teachings.

Several of Baha'u'llah's works made it clear that his eldest son, Abbas Effendi (1844-
1921) was to succeed him as head of the Bahá’í community. Upon his father's death,
Abbas, who took the name of Abdu'l-Baha, was widely, though not unanimously,
accepted as the leader of the Bahá’í s. A major focus of Abdu'l-Baha's leadership became
the establishment of the Bahá’í Faith in Europe and North America. He also made the
consolidation of the Bahá’í community and the strengthening of community life a
priority. In Iran, Bahá’í schools were opened and women's activities were encouraged.
Abdu'l-Baha further developed Bahá’í Holy Days by encouraging all Bahá’í s to observe
the Holy Days and answering questions about their purposes. He also inaugurated the
practice of the Bahá’í Feast.

The Bahá’í Faith was brought to the United States by immigrants from the

Middle East.
One of them, Ibrahim George Kheiralla, an Arab Christian from what is today Lebanon, became a Bahá’í in 1889 while living in Egypt. Three years later he traveled west to seek his fortune. Kheiralla arrived in New York in December of 1892 and by the spring of 1894 he had settled in Chicago and was giving classes on spiritual subjects. By the end of the year, five or six Americans had become Bahá’í s. The most prominent was Thornton Chase, a 47-year-old life insurance executive of New England Baptist background. While some Catholics and at least one Jew joined, the majority of converts were middle- and working-class white Protestants.

In 1898 Kheiralla took a group of American Bahá’í s to Palestine to meet Abdu'l-Baha. They discovered many contradictions between Kheiralla's teachings and the Bahá’í scriptures. In response, Abdu'l-Baha sent four Persian Bahá’í teachers to the United States to explain Baha'u'llah's teachings to Americans. By 1905, six or seven books of Bahá’í scripture had been translated into English, and Bahá’í communities in several cities had elected governing bodies. The Chicago Bahá’í s organized a Bahá’í publishing society in 1900 and started planning to build a Bahá’í temple in 1903. They purchased a site for the temple in 1908 and held the first national Bahá’í convention in 1909. The convention established the Bahá’í Temple Unity, the first national Bahá’í organization. Construction of the temple was the focus of much of the American Bahá’í community's efforts for the next fifty years.

Abdu'l-Baha visited North America for nine months in 1912, traveling from coast to coast to explain the Bahá’í Faith to the growing number of converts. From 1912 to 1921, the Bahá’í Faith spread to more American towns and cities, although growth

was slowed by the First World War and by continuing uncertainty about basic Bahá’í teachings. The Tablets of the Divine Plan, a collection of fourteen letters (called tablets in Bahá’í terminology) by Abdu'l-Baha, called upon North American Bahá’í s to spread the Faith to the entire world. His Will and Testament elaborated his plan for a Bahá’í world organization, as well as recognizing his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as his successor.

Shoghi Effendi was a student at Oxford and not quite twenty-five years old when Abdu'l-Baha died in 1921. Shoghi Effendi hurried back to Palestine and was shocked to learn he had been appointed "Guardian of the Cause of God," the head of the Bahá’í Faith. Taking the Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha, which describes a Bahá’í administrative organization, as his mandate, Shoghi Effendi devoted his next fifteen years to establishing local spiritual assemblies, locally elected Bahá’í governing bodies, everywhere nine or more Bahá’í s lived, and national spiritual assemblies in every country or region with at least three local spiritual assemblies. He also translated a number of Baha'u'llah's works into English and wrote essays defining and clarifying many basic Bahá’í teachings. Shoghi Effendi answered many questions asked by the Americans, producing a clearer understanding of theological and social issues.

Better organization, clarity of understanding, and greater access to the scriptures produced genuine growth within the American Bahá’í community. By 1925 the organization to build the Bahá’í temple had evolved into the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’í s of the United States and Canada. By the following year, forty local spiritual assemblies had been elected in the United States. The number of North American Bahá’í s grew from 1,500 in 1926, to 2,800 in 1936, 5,000 in 1944, and 10,000 in 1963.

While Shoghi Effendi worked to give the Bahá’í Faith organization and focus, the rise of Fascism and Stalinism threatened many Bahá’í communities. Shoghi Effendi

began a series of plans for the systematic worldwide dissemination of the Faith. The first Seven Year Plan (1937-44) was given to the Americans and Canadians, since British Bahá’í s were few and weakened by the onset of war, and the Iranian Bahá’í s were victims of unrelenting persecution. This plan called for at least one local spiritual assembly to be created in every state of the United States and every province of Canada; the opening of every country in Latin America to the Bahá’í Faith (through settlement of at least one Bahá’í or conversion of at least one resident); and completion of the exterior of the Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. The plan was completed successfully in 1944. The second Seven Year Plan (1946-53) involved electing a single National Spiritual Assembly for Canada, another one for all of South America, a third for all of Central America, establishing the Bahá’í Faith in ten western European nations, and completion of the Bahá’í House of Worship's interior. The third plan, the Ten Year Crusade (1953-1963), involved all Bahá’í s worldwide in the establishment of Bahá’í

communities in Africa, parts of Asia, rural areas of Latin America, and throughout the Pacific.

Shoghi Effendi died suddenly in 1957, halfway through the Ten Year Crusade. Before his death, he had appointed twenty-seven Bahá’í s as "Hands of the Cause of God," a position of respect and trust but not authority. The various National Spiritual Assemblies agreed that the Hands should serve as custodians of the Faith until the Universal House of Justice, a body described in the writings of Baha'u'llah, Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi, could be elected. The House of Justice, which was elected after the conclusion of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963, has continued Shoghi Effendi's practice of drawing up

international plans. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a dramatic increase in membership in the United States, Canada, Australia, and western Europe. Together these nations now have perhaps 200,000 Bahá'í s, ten times their numbers in 1963.

In the United States this growth was largely the result of the attraction of thousands of college students and other youth. Many of these youths went to rural areas to teach the Bahá'í Faith door-to-door, resulting in thousands of minorities joining the Bahá'í Faith. The African-American portion of the American Bahá'í community expanded greatly, from about ten percent to perhaps thirty percent of the membership, and the Bahá'í Faith was firmly established on over fifty American Indian reservations. By 1974 the number of Bahá'í s in the United States had grown to sixty thousand, six times the number ten years earlier.

Although the growth rate subsequently fell, the American Bahá'í community has continued to increase. By 1996 the membership was approximately 125,000. Immigration augmented conversion. From 1975 to 1980 as many as 10,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Bahá'í s left Southeast Asia to settle in the United States. In the late 1970s and the 1980s they were joined by 10,000-12,000 Iranian Bahá'í s, who fled persecution after Islamic government took power in Iran.

Expansion of the American Bahá'í community in the last twenty years has allowed increased resources to be channeled in several new directions. The Bahá'í community has been able to sustain a much greater commitment to the abolition of racism, the development of society, and the establishment of world peace. One result has been greater media attention. The larger membership also produced an expanded book market which stimulated writers and scholars, so that Bahá'í literature developed greatly in scope and depth. Cultural expressions of the Bahá'í Faith such as operas and "Bahá'í gospel" music 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.

Affirming Oneness

During his 1912 visit to the United States, Abdu'l-Baha met an old man early one
morning on a deserted New Hampshire street. The man was ragged and dirty. His filthy

trousers barely covered his legs. After speaking with the man, apparently trying to cheer
him up, Abdu'l-Baha stepped behind a porch, fumbled under his robe, stooped and his
trousers fell to the ground. "May God go with you," Abdu'l-Baha said, giving the trousers
to the old man. Then Abdu'l-Baha proceeded as though nothing unusual had happened.

The story captures Abdu'l-Baha's emphasis on deeds and moral action rather than esoteric
doctrines. It also captures the belief in human equality which underlies the Bahá’í
principle of the oneness of mankind. This was a theme Abdu'l-Baha sounded repeatedly
as he traveled across America explaining Baha'u'llah's teachings.

Bahá’í s believe that humanity is one family created by God. The central principles of the
Bahá’í faith are the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of mankind.
The purposes of life, Bahá’í s believe, are to know and worship God and to contribute to
the advancement of civilization. The teachings of the Bahá’í Faith offer solutions to
problems which have been barriers to the achievement of this unity and to the
establishment of peace in the world. Because of their respect for all faiths, Bahá’í s have
been leaders in interfaith dialogue and understanding.

As Abdu'l-Baha explained Baha'u'llah's principles to Americans, in 1912, he touched
upon many themes. He stressed the importance of independent investigation of the truth;

the essential harmony of science and religion; the common foundation of all religions; the
equality of men and women; and the need to eliminate prejudice of all kinds and to
recognize the oneness of mankind. In order to further these goals he emphasized the
value of universal compulsory education; the need for spiritual solutions to economic
problems; the benefits of a universal auxiliary language; and the imperative to build a
world government which could uphold universal peace.

Today, the more than 176 National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá’í Faith and the
20,000 local assemblies continue to uphold these principles in their devotional services,
study classes, discussions, social events and in their observance of Bahá’í holy days.
These religious and community activities are planned and conducted without clergy,
according to the Bahá’í calendar.

The Bahá’í calendar, originating with the Bab's ministry in 1844 CE, is a solar calendar
divided into nineteen months of nineteen days each. The year begins on the vernal
equinox, March 21. The Bahá’í year includes nine holy days, most of which
commemorate events in the lives of the Bab and Baha'u'llah, on which Bahá’í s should
suspend work. Holy days, like all Bahá’í days, start at sunset and end the following
sunset. They are generally celebrated by a worship program followed by refreshments.
All holy day observances are open to non-Bahá’í s.

Near the end of each year, during the Bahá’í month of 'Ala or "Loftiness," which begins
at sunset March 1 and ends at sunset, March 20, Bahá’í s observe a period of fasting. The
Bahá’í fast involves abstaining from food, drink, and tobacco from sunrise to sunset each
day. Exempted from fasting are those under the age of fifteen or over age seventy;

women who are pregnant, nursing or menstruating; travelers; the ill; and those

performing heavy physical labor. Bahá’í s often gather at restaurants or in each others'
homes to pray and eat before dawn, or to pray and break their fast in the evening. The
purpose of the fast is to remember one's dependency on God and to learn detachment
from material things.

Bahá’í s also affirm the oneness of God, religion and humankind in prayer. Baha'u'llah
revealed three obligatory prayers. Bahá’í s are under a spiritual obligation to choose one
of these prayers and perform it each day. The Long Obligatory Prayer can be said any
time within a twenty-four hour period and is repeated only once. The Middle Obligatory
Prayer must be repeated three times in a day, once between dawn and noon, once
between noon and sunset, and once between sunset and midnight. The Short Obligatory
Prayer is said once a day, between noon and sunset. These Obligatory Prayers are always
performed in private.

Individuals often asked the Bab, Baha'u'llah, and Abdu'l-Baha for prayers for special
circumstances, such as grieving for a lost one; restoration of health; the spiritual growth
of their children; or preparation for marriage. Hundreds of these prayers have been
published in Bahá’í prayer books. They are among the first Bahá’í scriptures translated.
Repeating them is an important part of a Bahá’í 's daily worship; and the recitation of
these prayers is central in most Bahá’í worship services. Bahá’í s also pray to God in
their own words, but not in community or public worship services.

Feast and Fireside

The Bahá’í Faith has no weekly worship services, but it does have a regular community
gathering known as a Nineteen Day Feast. Generally held on the first evening of each
Bahá’í month, or once every nineteen days, the feast has three portions: worship,
business and socializing.

Bahá’í worship, at a feast and at other times, is distinguished by two characteristics.

First, since the Bahá’í Faith has no clergy, worship can be planned and led by anyone, female or male, young or old. Usually a local Bahá’í community rotates responsibility for planning its worship among its members, or delegates the responsibility to a committee. Second, rituals, rites and ceremonies are forbidden, and so the worship portion of a feast tends to be very simple.

Central to worship is the use of scripture, either carefully and clearly read, sung, or in the case of scriptures in Persian and Arabic, chanted. Chanting of Bahá’í prayers in English, while not widespread, is developing. While the Bible, the Qur'an, and scriptures of other religions are occasionally used in Bahá’í worship--especially when the non-Bahá’í public is invited--generally the writings, and especially the prayers, of Baha'u'llah, the Bab, and Abdu'l-Baha are used. The entire congregation does not recite a scriptural passage in unison. Generally one person reads, chants or sings while the others listen. Such worship is best described as a meditation on and celebration of the Word of God.

The other important element of Bahá’í worship is music. This may include instrumental music (except in Bahá’í Houses of Worship, where instruments are forbidden), listening to recorded music, or singing together. Bahá’í music in the sense of a particular musical genre does not exist; rather, music expressing Bahá’í themes has been written in many genres and styles. Music that is written to be performed in a worship context usually incorporates passages from the Bahá’í scriptures. The first American Bahá’í hymnbook was published in 1903 and contained mostly modifications of standard Protestant hymns, but by 1904 hymns on Bahá’í themes were being written.

With the rise of radio, records, talking pictures, and other forms of popular culture,

Bahá’í songs came to be written in a wider variety of genres. Guitars became a particularly important instrument for Bahá’í music, because most Bahá’í music was performed in homes or rented facilities where portable instruments were most convenient.
In the 1960s and 1970s several classical pieces were written on Bahá’í themes to be performed by orchestras. More recently country music and jazz have emerged as genres for Bahá’í music. Starting in the 1980s Bahá’í youth workshops created music and skits illustrating Bahá’í themes using rap and hip-hop. Traditional African-American music has been an important genre for Bahá’í music since the 1960s; in 1992 the debut of a gospel choir at the Bahá’í World Congress made Bahá’í gospel music very popular in the United States. Always, the role of music is to uplift and inspire those gathered to worship.

The business portion of the feast is open only to Bahá’í s. At this time the business of the Bahá’í community is discussed and necessary action taken. The feast concludes with a social portion, where all attending eat, drink, and socialize.

Probably the most common type of Bahá’í meeting is the fireside. The "classic" fireside described by Shoghi Effendi involves a Bahá’í inviting someone to his or her home to discuss the faith in an atmosphere of service and friendship. The fireside generally has two elements: hospitality and discussion of the Bahá’í Faith with those seeking to learn about it. All Bahá’í s are encouraged to host such gatherings regularly. Sometimes Bahá’í communities sponsor large formal "firesides" in a home or a Bahá’í Center. These events begin with a speaker (who need not be a Bahá’í) describing an aspect of the Bahá’í Faith. This presentation is followed by questions, discussion, and refreshments. Because the Bahá’í Faith stresses personal investigation of the truth, questions and discussion are important parts of a fireside gathering. Formal firesides are nearly always open to the

public.

Human Equality

Racism is the American Bahá’í community's most vital and challenging issue, one to which it has devoted considerable energy nearly since its founding. The Bahá’í scriptures stress the oneness of humanity, the principle that all humans are spiritually equal and must be treated equally. They clearly and specifically reject racism. When Abdu'l-Baha

visited the United States in 1912 he made this rejection clear in several ways. He refused to use hotels that excluded blacks, and he spoke about equality to the fourth national conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Abdu'l-Baha invited Louis Gregory, a prominent African-American Bahá’í , to a reception for the cream of Washington society, where he seated Mr. Gregory on his right. Later he encouraged Mr. Gregory to marry a white Bahá’í , stating that their union would symbolize love between the white and black races. The marriage of Louis and Louisa Gregory was the first of many interracial marriages within the Bahá’í Faith, which encourages interracial marriage. Louis Gregory was also the first African American to serve on a local Bahá’í governing body (the Washington, D.C., spiritual assembly, to which he was elected in 1911) and the national Bahá’í governing body (to which he was elected in 1912). Abdu'l-Baha also made it clear that separate local communities for white and black Bahá’í s could not be established. He required local American Bahá’í communities to be racially integrated. Thus began a long commitment to racial integration and equality in the American Bahá’í community.

One result of this commitment is the high level of ethnic diversity within the community: perhaps twenty-five to thirty percent of American Bahá’í s are African-American.

Another ten percent are Persians. Southeast Asian immigrants, Native Americans, and
Hispanics together make up almost another ten percent of the community. Bahá'í s have
become very active in efforts around the country to foster racial understanding and amity.
Currently one of the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly is Native American, and two, one of whom is the Secretary-General, are African-American.

Promoting equality of the sexes is also a principle stressed in Bahá'í scriptures. While
today the American Bahá'í community is fifty percent female and fifty percent male,
when it was founded, two thirds to three quarters of Bahá'í s were female, as was true of
many new religions in the late nineteenth century. Many of the most active speakers and
traveling Bahá'í teachers of the early twentieth century were women. The founders of
the Bahá'í communities of Germany, France, South Africa, South America, Hawaii,
Japan, and Korea were all American Bahá'í women. Another American Bahá'í woman,
Martha Root, traveled the world for twenty-four years teaching the Bahá'í Faith to
others. Root was instrumental in getting Bahá'í scriptures translated into dozens of
languages. The first national Bahá'í governing body for North America had three women
among its nine members. Today, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í s of the
United States has four women on it. The National Spiritual Assembly of Canada has five
women among its nine members.

Despite the prominence of women in Bahá'í organizations, sexism remains a concern
within the American Bahá'í community. This concern is highlighted by the fact that
three-quarters of all local spiritual assembly secretaries are female, while two-thirds of
the chairs and sixty percent of the treasurers are male. The National Spiritual Assembly is
currently writing a statement on sexual equality in order to give the issue a higher profile
and priority.

Becoming a Bahá’í

There is no ritual analogous to Christian baptism for becoming a Bahá’í . The first step is to declare one's faith by announcing to a Bahá’í that one believes in Baha'u'llah and wishes to be a Bahá’í . The second step, enrollment, involves meeting with one or more persons appointed by a local or national spiritual assembly, who ascertain whether the declarant understands the basic teachings of the Bahá’í Faith and really wants to be a member. In the United States (though not in all other countries), the declarant signs a card that states, "In signing this card, I declare my belief in Baha'u'llah, the Promised One of God. I also recognize the Bab, His Forerunner, and Abdu'l-Baha, the Center of His Covenant. I request enrollment in the Bahá’í Community with the understanding that Baha'u'llah has established sacred principles, laws, and institutions which I must obey."
Once the card is signed and the person's desire to be a Bahá’í is verified, the spiritual assembly adds the person to its membership rolls. It is not unusual for the new member to receive a Bahá’í prayer book or other work of Bahá’í scripture as a gift, and for his or her enrollment to be informally celebrated.

All religious communities seek to raise up the next generation to become active members of the tradition. The Bahá’í Faith is no exception. Bahá’í s teach their children from infancy to memorize Bahá’í prayers. Once a child is about three years old, he or she can attend children's classes. Children's classes seek to teach children virtues, such as freedom from prejudice, open-mindedness, love, honesty, compassion, and patience.
They may stress working in groups. They usually include learning Bahá’í prayers, principles, and history. There are also special programs for older youth. In many cities Bahá’í Youth Workshops have been established where youth perform dances and

skits
that highlight Bahá’í principles, especially chastity and freedom from racial and gender
prejudice. These workshops often perform skits and dances publicly.

When a Bahá’í child reaches the age of fifteen, it is expected that he or she will begin to
perform the obligatory prayers and fast, although such observances, especially partial
observance of the fast, can voluntarily begin at an earlier age. Bahá’í children are
automatically considered Bahá’í s unless, at some point, they express a desire not to be.
Often parents will give their children a party at age fifteen to mark their transition to full
membership in the Bahá’í community.

It is considered a spiritual obligation of every Bahá’í to share the Bahá’í teachings with
others. But this sharing must be done lovingly and according to the Bahá’í principle of
independent investigation of truth. Each person must be encouraged to study the Faith
without coercion and make a free, personal choice. The most common way to study the
Bahá’í Faith is the fireside, where one hears a presentation on some aspect of the Bahá’í
Faith and then discusses it. Bahá’í s are encouraged to hold a fireside once in every
Bahá’í month, or every nineteen days.

In many parts of the world Bahá’í s inaugurate mass teaching projects, which may bring
thousands of people into the Bahá’í community in a short time. In places where knocking

on doors to talk about religion is culturally acceptable--generally not in American
middle-class suburbs--Bahá’í s may go door-to-door. Increasingly, Bahá’í s have begun
to use radio, television, newspaper advertising, mass mailings, and billboards to proclaim
their teachings to the public.

— Introduction to the Baha'i Tradition (Used by permission of the curator)