

THE MAGAZINE "THE BAHAI'S"

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Founded a century and a half ago, the Baha'i Faith is today among the fastest growing of world religions. With more than five million followers in at least 232 countries and dependent territories, it has already become the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion but Christianity in its geographic reach. Baha'is reside in more than 116,000 localities around the world, an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship.

The Baha'i Faith's global scope is mirrored in the composition of its membership.

Representing a cross section of humanity, Baha'is come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession and social or economic class. More than 2,100 different ethnic and tribal groups are represented.

Since it also forms a single community, free of schism or factions, the Baha'i Faith comprises what is very likely the most diverse and widespread organized body of people on earth.

The Faith's Founder was Baha'u'llah, a Persian nobleman from Teheran who, in the mid-nineteenth century, gave up a princely existence of comfort and security for a life of persecution and deprivation.

Baha'u'llah claimed to be nothing less than a new and independent Messenger from God. His life work and influence parallel that of Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad. Baha'is view Baha'u'llah as the most recent in this succession of Divine Messengers.

"This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things." -Baha'u'llah

The essential message of Baha'u'llah is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's religions have been stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity. In this day, Baha'u'llah said, humanity has collectively come of age. As foretold in all the world's scriptures, the time has arrived for the united of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society. "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens," He wrote.

The youngest of the world's independent religions, the Faith founded by Baha'u'llah stands out from other religions in a number of ways. It has a unique system of global administration, with freely elected governing councils in more than 18,000 localities.

It takes a distinctive (and sometimes radical) approach to contemporary social problems. The Faith's scriptures and the multifarious activities of its membership address virtually every important trend in the world today, from the new thinking about cultural diversity and environmental conservation to the decentralization of decision-making; from a renewed commitment to a family life and morality to the call for a "New World Order."

The Faith's most distinctive accomplishment by far, however, is its unity. Unlike every other religion -- not to mention most social and political movements -- the Baha'i Faith has successfully resisted the perennial impulse to break into sects and sub-groups. It has maintained its unity despite a history as turbulent as that of any religion of antiquity.

In the hundred years since Baha'u'llah lived, the process of global unification for which He called has become well-advanced. Through historical processes, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed and nation have steadily broken down. The forces at work, Baha'u'llah predicted, will eventually give birth to a universal civilization. The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to accept the fact of their oneness and assist in the creation of this new

world.

"The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it."

-Baha'u'llah

For a global society to flourish Baha'u'llah said, it must be based on certain fundamental principles. They include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; full equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between nature and technology; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Baha'is around the world express their commitment to these principles chiefly through individual and community transformation. Among other ways, commitment is reflected in the large number of small-scale, grassroots-based social and economic development projects that Baha'i communities have launched in recent years.

In building a unified network of local, national and international governing councils, Baha'u'llah's followers have created a far-flung and diverse worldwide community -- marked by a distinctive pattern of life and activity -- which offers an encouraging model for cooperation, harmony and social action. In a world so divided in its loyalties, this is in itself a singular achievement.

This computer program is an attempt to tell this story.

How many Baha'is are there?

In 1963 it is estimated that there were about 400,00 Baha'is in the world. By 1985, it was estimated that there were about 3,500,000 Baha'is in the world. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica 1992 Book of the Year there were

5,400,000 Baha'is worldwide in 1991.

Statistics from the World Christian Encyclopedia, which is perhaps the best-respected work on this subject, indicate that the Baha'i Faith is among the fastest growing of the independent world religions. The World Christian Encyclopedia estimated that the worldwide Baha'i community grew at an average rate of 3.63 percent per year during the 15 years from 1970 to 1985.

Figures reported in the 1992 Britannica Book of the Year show the Baha'i Faith as having significant communities in 205 countries, second only to Christianity in its geographic spread.

Statisticians at the Baha'i World Centre (Haifa, Israel) calculated in 1992 that the Faith is established in 232 countries and dependent territories.

Not a sect, an independent religion

In the past, scholars sometimes referred to the Baha'i Faith as a "sect" of Islam -- owing to the fact that Its Prophet and early followers emerged from an Islamic society.

Today, religious specialists recognize that such a reference would be equivalent to calling Christianity a "sect" of Judaism, or referring to Buddhism as a "denomination" of Hinduism.

Although Christ was indeed Jewish and Buddha was born a Hindu. Their religious messages were not merely re-interpretations of the parent religions -- but went far beyond them.

In the same way, Baha'u'llah laid entirely new spiritual foundations. His writings are independent scripture, and His work transcends that of a religious reformer. As historian Arnold Toynbee noted in 1959:

"Bahaism [sic] is an independent religion on a par with Islam, Christianity, and the other recognized world religions. Bahaism is not a sect of some

other religion; it is a separate religion, and it has the same status as the other recognized religions."

Kimiko Schwerin lives in a suburb of Tokyo with her American husband John, where together they operate a successful language school. Born in Nagasaki, Ms. Schwerin has in many ways broken the mold for a Japanese woman of her generation. Not only did she marry a foreigner -- an act for which she was once slapped in the face by a disapproving stranger -- she is also active in a variety of activities aimed at promoting the equality of women.

Stanlake Kukama, who as a young man was a regional official for the African National Congress in South Africa, gave up politics in the 1950s to pursue a different path towards ending apartheid in his native land. Although he is now retired, his goal for the last 30 years has been to assist in the building of an integrated community of people that could serve to demonstrate the possibility of harmonious relations between blacks and whites in Southern Africa.

"All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."

-Baha'u'llah

Primo Pasci lives high in the Andes mountains of Bolivia, where he grows potatoes on steep hillside land that has been in his family for generations. A member of the Aymara people, Mr. Pasci has only a fourth grade education. Nevertheless, he has helped to start a pre-school for the children in his village, which provides an important educational boost during their most important developmental years. He has also led the way in bringing a new kind of inexpensive solar-heated greenhouse to his village, a project which has permitted him and his neighbors to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables -- items which do not otherwise grow at such altitudes.

Although different in their cultural heritages, educational backgrounds, and national origins, Ms. Schwerin, Mr. Kukama, and Mr. Pacsi are united by a common belief in the Baha'i Faith -- and a commitment to its ideals.

The worldwide Baha'i community may well be the most diverse and widespread body of people on earth. It is also among the world's most unified organizations, a feature that is perhaps its most distinguishing characteristic.

Baha'is the world over come from all religions backgrounds: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Zoroastrian, animist, and non-religious. Yet they study a common set of sacred writings, observe a unifying code of religious laws, and look to a single international administrative system for continuing guidance.

"Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self."

-Baha'u'llah

Their sense of unity goes beyond a shared theology. It is expressed in an abiding commitment to a global program for moral, spiritual and social progress that represents many of the finest ideals of civilization.

Promoting equality of women and men is a primary goal, as is ending racial and ethnic strife. Encouraging the concept of economic justice for all peoples is another major objective. So is ensuring access to good education for all. The community eschews all forms of superstition and sets for its followers the goal of meeting the highest moral standard. World peace and the establishment of a united global commonwealth has been and remains a distinguishing concern.

Indeed, no other world organization of similar diversity, whether affiliated along religious, political, or social lines, can claim a membership as committed to a vision that is at once so singular, coherent and universal.

The source of this vision is Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), the Founder of the Baha'i Faith. A Persian nobleman who spent the last 40 years of His life as a prisoner and an exile, He authored the equivalent of more than 100 volumes -- writings which today form the foundation on which the worldwide Baha'i community stands.

A Way of Life

From the earliest times, religion has been a powerful force for personal and social transformation. In both the lives of individual believers, and in the distinctive communities it has spawned, the Baha'i Faith is a dramatic illustration of this rule.

The primary purpose of life is to know and to worship God, and to contribute to an ever-advancing global civilization. Baha'is seek to fulfill this purpose in a variety of personal, family, and community activities.

The family unit, according to Baha'u'llah, is the foundation of human society. Kimiko Schwerin believers, for example, that her marriage can stand as an illustration of the oneness of all peoples. In traditional Japanese society, marriage to a foreigner is an unwritten taboo. Once, for example, when she was riding on a train with her husband in the early 1970s, a middle-aged Japanese man walked up and abruptly slapped her in the face.

"...The peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God."

-Baha'u'llah

"It was because I was with a 'foreigner'," said Ms. Schwerin, who grew up in Nagasaki and now runs an English language school with her husband in a Tokyo suburb. "In those days, there was a strong prejudice against international marriage. Marriage to a foreigner was not considered decent."

"But I didn't feel embarrassed, not at all,"

Ms. Schwerin added. "I just felt sorry for the man because of his prejudice. Because I'm a Baha'i, I feel international marriage is an entirely right thing to do."

The Schwerins see their experience as an example of how international marriage can promote a greater awareness of other cultures. "Because the Baha'i Faith is inclusive of all races and backgrounds, we avoid many of the conflicts that might come traditionally when a Japanese person marries a foreigner," said Ms. Schwerin.

"For example, John is from a Christian background and I am from a Buddhist background," Ms. Schwerin said. "The question of what faith to raise your children in is often a problem for people in international marriages. Because we believe in the oneness of religions, we have educated our children to appreciate all religions."

A successful businesswoman in her own right, Ms. Schwerin is also active in promoting the concept of women's equality. She travels frequently throughout Japan and surrounding countries to promote this principle -- and the other ideals of the Baha'i Faith.

The work that Primo Pacsi and the other Baha'is of Laku Lakuni, a remote village on the Bolivian altiplano, have done in helping to establish a small pre-school and to promote solar-heated greenhouses offers an example of how Baha'is strive to serve the community at large.

The pre-school, which serves all of the children in Laku Lakuni, gives students an important boost in their development. Although a government-run primary school exists in the village, the children in this remote and impoverished high altitude region are often the victims of inadequate attention during their pre-school years, considered the most important by many child development specialists. As a result, they sometimes do poorly in primary school, initiating a pattern of failure that casts a shadow over their entire lives.

In the Baha'i pre-school, group activities are emphasized -- activities as simple as singing

together -- and the result is significant. "There is a difference between the students who have been to pre-school can immediately understand the teacher. And the teacher has noticed that the ones who have been to pre-school learn much faster."

The pre-school is a bare-bones operation. Mr. Pacsi is the main teacher, and, for the most part, he volunteers his time, assisted only by occasional donations from parents. Held in a simple adobe building in the center of the village, its sessions last only a few hours a day.

"At first, the children were afraid to come," said Mr. Pacsi, who embraced the Baha'i Faith in the mid-1980s. "They didn't want to be in a group. But now they love to come and sing together."

Now they say, 'Me, Me, Me!' when I teach a number and ask a question. These things are connected in that Baha'u'llah teaches that we must educate our children and that we must cooperate and work together."

Mr. Pacsi and his fellow Baha'is have also been instrumental in promoting the use of solar-heated greenhouses in their community.

Developed by the Dorothy Baker Environmental Studies Center in Cochabamba, a Baha'i-run environmental research and study center about 200 kilometers away, the greenhouses enable families in Laku Lakuni and other communities on the Andean high plateau to grow a variety of fruits and vegetables which would not ordinarily survive at such altitudes.

"We really like the greenhouse," said Mr. Pacsi, who was the first one in Laku Lakuni to build one. "Without it, we could not have vegetables -- we don't have the money to buy them. But with the greenhouse we can have vegetables. Now we can have omelets with tomatoes and onions. My little boy didn't even know vegetables existed. Now he picks the tomatoes off the plant and eats them right there in the greenhouse. Now he knows that if you plant seed and nurture it, the fruit comes up."

The All-Knowing Physician
hath His finger on the pulse
of mankind. He perceiveth the
disease, and prescribeth, in
His unerring wisdom, the
remedy. Every age hath its
own problem... The remedy
the world needeth in its
present-day afflictions can
never be the same as that
which a subsequent age may
require. Be anxiously
concerned with the needs of
the age ye live in, and center
your deliberations on its
exigencies and requirements."

-- Baha'u'llah

In composition, Baha'i communities are quite diffuse. Baha'is do not seek to shut out the world. Baha'u'llah's writings encourage involvement with the rest of humanity. Most Baha'is lead lives that would not seem out of place in their native society -- save for a strong commitment to certain spiritual and social principles.

Despite this diffusion, however, Baha'is are able to maintain their essential unity through a system of freely elected governing councils, which operate at the local, national, and international levels. At the local level, for example, Baha'is each year elect a nine-member administrative council, which is known as the local Spiritual Assembly.

In all activities, Baha'is are expected to obey civil law and remain loyal to their respective governments. While they may accept non-partisan government posts or appointments, Baha'is are required to refrain from partisan political activity. At the time he began to look into Baha'u'llah's teachings in the 1950s, for example, Stanlake Kukama was the local secretary of the African National Congress. "I hated the white man," said Mr. Kukama, who now lives in Bophuthatswana. "To me, all whites were oppressors."

With that attitude, it was at first difficult for Mr. Kukama to accept the teachings of Baha'u'llah, because of His emphasis on the oneness of humanity and the necessity of working to eliminate all racial prejudice -- a principle which means that not only must whites accept blacks as equals and friends, but that blacks must learn to live with and, even, to love whites.

Mr. Kukama came to believe that, in the end, this path -- and not the confrontational world of politics -- will lead to a better world. And so, he has since worked to build a harmonious and diverse community which could, at the proper time, demonstrate to all South Africans that association between people of all races is not only possible -- but is in fact joyous and reflective of the reality of human oneness.

The diversity of the South African Baha'i community today embraces virtually all of the races, ethnic groups, and tribes that reside there. More than 90 percent of the approximately 7,500 Baha'is in South Africa are non-white a ratio that roughly matches the proportions of the population at large. Baha'is are spread throughout South Africa, too, with local communities in more than 150 cities and towns.

"The cause of the strife in South Africa is the 40 years of apartheid, which emphasized ethnic separation," said Mr. Kukama, who became a school teacher after he became a Baha'i. "But in the Baha'i community, even though we come from different tribes or races, we are all one. And one day there will be one world -- that is my vision of man. Togetherness, not separateness."

How Baha'is spread their Faith

Although forbidden by Baha'u'llah from aggressive proselytizing, Baha'is believe that His message offers specific and important answers to the diverse and grave problems facing humanity. Accordingly, they are eager to share this message with anyone who expresses an interest.

Sharing Baha'u'llah's vision is known as "teaching" in Baha'i terminology. Teaching can

take many forms. someone who wants to know more about the Faith might be invited to a "fireside." Firesides are informal gathers in homes of Baha'is. short talks on Baha'i principles are presented and discussion follows. Light refreshments are often served, and the gatherings are notable for their warm and hospitable atmosphere.

Baha'is also endeavor to spread the Faith by moving into areas where there are few Baha'is. This is known as "pioneering." This differs sharply from traditional missionary work in that pioneers are generally expected to be self-supporting. They become part of their new community in all aspects: by working there, participating in community activities, and supporting the local government and its institutions.

Baha'i communities sometimes also hold large public meetings, buy advertising, or seek media coverage in order to share more widely the principles of Baha'u'llah's message.

The Nineteen Day Feast: blend of worship, fellowship and grassroots democracy

The centerpiece of Baha'i community life is the Nineteen Day Feast. Held once every 19 days. It is the local community's regular worship gathering -- and more.

Open to both adults and children, the Nineteen Day Feast is the regular gather that promotes and sustains the unity of the local Baha'i community. Although its program is adaptable to a wide variety of cultural and social needs, the Feast always contains three elements: spiritual devotion, administrative consultation, and fellowship. As such, the Feast combines religious worship with grassroots governance and social development.

The use of the word "feast" might seem to imply that a large meal will be served. That is not necessarily the case. While food and beverages are usually served, the term itself is meant to suggest that the community should enjoy a "spiritual feast" of worship, companionship and unity. Baha'u'llah stressed the important of gathering every nineteen days, "to bind your hearts together," even if

nothing more than water is served.

During the devotional program, selections from the Baha'i writings, and often the scriptures from other religions, are read aloud. A general discussion follows, allowing every member a voice in community affairs and making the Feast an "arena of democracy at the very root of society." The Feast ends with a period for socializing.

How many Baha'is are there?

Accurately estimating the number of followers of any world religion is a difficult and complex task. In some regions of the world, religious persecution or government oppression may make individual believers reluctant to identify themselves. In other areas, poor communication or travel networks make it difficult to collect data.

With these difficulties in mind, demographers at the Baha'i World Centre have attempted to be as conservative as possible in estimating the number of Baha'is worldwide. Their most recent survey yielded an estimate of 5,000,000 Baha'is in 1991.

The inherent conservatism of their methodology is evident when Baha'i statistics are compared with estimates made by other religious scholars. Each year, for example, the Encyclopedia Britannica publishes a table of religious demographic statistics. According to the 1992 Britannica Book of the Year, there were 5,400,000 Baha'is worldwide in 1991.

Over the last three decades, the number of Baha'is in the world has grown dramatically. It is estimated that there were about 400,000 Baha'is in the world in 1963, the year of the First Baha'i World Congress. By 1985, it was estimated that there were about 3,500,000 Baha'is in the world.

In other words, the Baha'i Faith has grown by an estimated 1,500,000 believers over the last six years, an increase of roughly 43 percent.

Making any comparison between the rate of growth of the Baha'i Faith and other religions must be carefully qualified. Since Baha'i demographers are not involved in gathering

statistics on other religions, it would be inappropriate to make any official characterization about the rate of growth of the Baha'i Faith in relation to other religious groups.

However, statistics from the World Christian Encyclopedia, which is perhaps the best-respected work on this subject, indicate that the Baha'i Faith is among the fastest growing of the independent world religions. The World Christian Encyclopedia estimated that the worldwide Baha'i community grew at an average rate of 3.63 per cent per year during the 15 years from 1970 to 1985.

Published in 1982, it reports on the work of Christian demographers who undertook a decade long survey of religious believers worldwide in 1970s. The survey attempted to accurately determine the number Christians -- and followers of other religions -- in every country, and to make projections about their growth.

A comparison of rates of growth among the independent world religions, as reported in the World Christian Encyclopedia, is shown in the graph. [Click on "Graph" button on left below.]

While these figures are more than seven years old, they remain virtually the only widely published side-by-side comparison of the rate of growth for various religions.

It is important to qualify these figures by noting that, according to the World Christian Encyclopedia, some sects or sub-groups of Christianity and Islam grew faster than the Baha'i Faith during this period. None of these sects or sub-groups, however, were listed as having followers in more than 100 countries. The Baha'i Faith, was listed as having established "significant" communities in more than 192 countries in 1982, at the time of the Encyclopedia's publication.

More recent figures, reported in the 1992 Britannica Book of the Year, show the Baha'i Faith as having significant communities in 205 countries, second only to Christianity in its geographic spread.

Statisticians at the Baha'i World

Centre calculated in 1992 that the Faith is established in 232 countries and dependent territories.

The Babi movement, precursor to the Baha'i Faith

Accounts agree that the Bab was an extraordinary child. Born on 20 October 1819, He possessed a surprising wisdom and nobility, reminiscent of the young Jesus. Upon reaching manhood, the Bab joined his uncle in the family business, a trading house. His integrity and piety won the esteem of the other merchants with whom He came in contact. He was also known for His generosity to the poor.

After His announcement, the Bab attracted followers rapidly, and the new religious movement spread through Iran like wildfire. This growth stirred opposition and persecution -- especially among the religious establishment, who saw a threat to their power and prestige. In the course of this persecution, the Bab was imprisoned several times.

His major work, the Bayan, abrogated certain Muslim laws and replaced them with new ones. The Bayan stressed a high moral standard, with an emphasis on purity of heart and motive. It also upheld the station of women and the poor, and it promoted education and useful sciences.

The central theme of the Bayan was the imminence of a second Messenger from God, one Who would be far greater than the Bab, and Whose mission would be to usher in the age of peace and plenty that had for so long been promised in Islam, as well as in Judaism, Christianity, and all the other world religions.

Persecution and execution

The hearts and minds of those who heard the message of the Bab were locked in a mental world that had changed little from medieval times. Thus, by proclaiming an entirely new religion, the Bab was able to help His followers break free entirely from the Islamic frame of reference and to mobilize them in preparation for the coming of Baha'u'llah.

The boldness of this proclamation -- which put forth the vision of an entirely new society -- stirred intense fear within the religious and secular establishments. Accordingly, persecution of the Babis quickly developed.

Those opposed to the Bab ultimately argued that He was not only a heretic, but a dangerous rebel. The authorities decided to have Him executed.

On 9 July 1850, this sentence was carried out, in the courtyard of the Tabriz army barracks. Some 10,000 people crowded the rooftops of the barracks and houses that overlooked the square. The Bab and a young follower were suspended by two ropes against a wall. A regiment of 750 Armenian soldiers, arranged in three files of 250 each, opened fire in three successive volleys. So dense was the smoke raised by the gunpowder and dust that the sky was darkened and the entire yard obscured.

As recorded in an account filed with the British Foreign Office, the Bab was not to be seen when the smoke cleared. His companion stood uninjured and untouched by the bullets. The ropes by which he and the Bab had been suspended were rent into pieces.

The Bab was found back in His cell, giving final instructions to one of His followers. Earlier in the day, when the guards had come to take Him to the execution ground, the Bab had warned that no "earthly power" could silence Him until He had finished all that He had to say. Now, when the guards arrived a second time, the Bab calmly announced: "Now you may proceed to fulfil your intention."

For the second time, the Bab and His young companion were brought out for execution. The Armenian troops refused to fire again, and a Muslim firing squad was assembled and ordered to shoot. This time the bodies of the pair were shattered, their bones and flesh mingled into one mass. Surprisingly, their faces were untouched.

OR, WHY BAHAI'S SAY THAT THEIR FAITH

WAS FOUNDED IN 1844

The early nineteenth century was a period of messianic expectations in many lands. Deeply disturbed by the implications of scientific inquiry and industrialization, earnest believers from many religious backgrounds turned to the scriptures of their faiths for an understanding of the accelerating processes of change.

In Europe and America groups like the Templers and the Millerites believed they had found in the Christian scriptures evidence supporting their conviction that history had ended and the return of Jesus Christ was at hand. A markedly similar ferment developed in the Middle East around the belief that the fulfillment of various prophecies in the Qur'an and Islamic Traditions was imminent.

By far the most dramatic of these millennialist movements emerged in Iran. It focused on the person and teachings of a young merchant from the city of Shiraz, known to history as the Bab. From 1844 to 1863, Persians of all classes were caught up in a storm of hope and excitement, aroused by the Bab's announcement that the Day of God was at hand and that He was Himself the One promised in Islamic scripture. Humanity stood, He said, on the threshold of an era that would witness the restructuring of all aspects of life.

In some respects, the Bab's role can be compared to John the Baptist in the founding of Christianity. The Bab was Baha'u'llah's herald: His primary mission was to prepare the way for Baha'u'llah's coming. Accordingly, the founding of the Babi Faith is viewed by Baha'is as synonymous with the founding of the Baha'i Faith -- and its purpose was fulfilled when Baha'u'llah announced in 1863 that He was the Promised One foretold by the Bab.

An independent religion

At the same time, however, the Bab founded a distinctive, independent religion of His own. Known as the Babi Faith, that religious dispensation spawned its own vigorous community, had its own scriptures, and left its own indelible mark on history.

The Babi Faith was founded on 23 May 1844 when a 25-year-old merchant in the Iranian city of Shiraz announced that He was Islam's promised Qa'im, "He Who Will Arise." Although the young merchant's given name was Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad, He took the name "Bab," a title that means "Gate" or "Door" in Arabic. His coming, the Bab explained, represented the portal through which the universal Messenger of God expected by all humanity would soon appear.

An English scholar's encounter with Baha'u'llah

In 1890, the famed Cambridge orientalist Edward G. Browne met Baha'u'llah, the only Westerner to meet Him and leave an account of his experience. Browne, who visited Baha'u'llah in His home at Bahji, recorded the meeting this way:

The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet-black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie. No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!

A mild dignified voice bade me be seated, and then continued: -- "Praise be to God that thou hast attained! ... Thou hast come to see a prisoner and an exile ... We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment ...

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity

of religion should cease and differences of race be annulled - what harm is there in this? ... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come ... Do not you in Europe need this also? Is not this that which Christ foretold? ... Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind."

The process of revelation

HOW THE WORDS OF BAHA'U'LLAH WERE RECORDED

A unique feature of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah is the authenticity of its revealed Word. Unlike the teachings of Christ, for example, which were written down decades after they were uttered, the words of Baha'u'llah were recorded and authenticated at the time they were revealed. The process of revelation -- as Baha'is term the act of bringing forth the Word of God -- is described in several historical documents. One observer recorded the following:

"Mirza Aqa Jan (Baha'u'llah's personal secretary) had a large ink-pot the size of a small bowl. He also had available about ten to twelve pens and large sheets of paper in stacks. In those days all letters which arrived for Baha'u'llah were received by Mirza Aqa Jan. He would bring these into the presence of Baha'u'llah and, having obtained permission, would read them. Afterwards [Baha'u'llah] would direct him to take up his pen and record the Tablet which was revealed in reply...

"Such was the speed with which he used to write the revealed Word that the ink of the first word was scarcely yet dry when the whole page was finished. It seemed as if someone had dipped a lock of hair in the ink and applied it over the whole page." After each period of Revelation, the original manuscript would be re-transcribed, with

Baha'u'llah Himself overseeing and approving the final version.

"The Word of God is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked. "

-- Baha'u'llah

The Writings of Baha'u'llah

In addition to several longer works, Baha'u'llah wrote a vast number of documents known as "Tablets," most of them addressed to individuals among His followers. He has Himself estimated that the collected Tablets constitute over a hundred volumes. Moving easily between Persian and Arabic, both of which languages Baha'u'llah employed with superb mastery, the Writings are also characterized by a wide range of styles.

The heart of Baha'u'llah's ethical teachings is to be found in a small book entitled *The Hidden Words*, a compilation of aphorisms dating from the earliest days of His mission. The work He describes as a distillation of the spiritual guidance contained in the successive revelations of God.

Baha'u'llah's principal exposition of His doctrinal message is a book entitled the "*Kitab-i-Iqan*" (*The Book of Certitude*). In laying out the entire panorama of the Divine purpose, the "*Iqan*" deals with the great questions which have always lain at the heart of religious life: God, the nature of humanity, the purpose of life, and the function of Revelation.

Among the best known of Baha'u'llah's mystical writings is a small work entitled *The Seven Valleys*. In poetic language, it traces the stages of the soul's journey to union with its Creator.

Foremost among Baha'u'llah's writings is the "*Kitab-i-Aqdas*" ("*The Most Holy Book*").

Revealed during the darkest days of His imprisonment in Acre, the "Aqdas", "Mother Book" of the Baha'i dispensation, is the chief repository of the laws and institutions which Baha'u'llah designed for the World Order He conceived.

The process of translating the sacred writings into other languages is on-going. The standard for the work, of translation into English was established by Shoghi Effendi, who headed the Baha'i Faith from 1921 to 1957. [See page 55.] Educated at Oxford, he was able to provide translations that reflect not only a brilliant command of the English language, but also an authoritative exposition of the Texts' meaning.

In undertaking the challenge of finding an English style which would faithfully convey the exalted and emotive character of Baha'u'llah's use of Persian and Arabic, Shoghi Effendi chose a slightly archaic form of English which echoes the King James version of the Bible. He also chose, in accordance with this style, to use the masculine pronoun for references to God -- although Baha'u'llah's teachings make clear that no gender can be attached to the Creator. Shoghi Effendi also chose to make extensive use of diacritical marks as a guide to the pronunciation of Arabic and Persian names, a practice that is followed throughout the Baha'i community today.

The result is a style that acts as bridge between modern English and the Persian and Arabic style in which Baha'u'llah wrote. Accordingly, Shoghi Effendi's English translations, and not the Arabic or Persian originals, are used for the work of translation into other Western languages.

Selections from Baha'u'llah's Writings have been translated into more than 800 languages.

Baha'u'llah
Messenger of God

Baha'u'llah's writings offer answers to the timeless theological and philosophical questions that have plagued humanity since antiquity -- such as Who is God? What is goodness? and Why are we here? He also addresses the modern questions that have preoccupied 20th century thinkers, discussing

the basic motivations of human nature, answering whether peace is indeed possible, and explaining how God provides for humanity's security and welfare.

In the middle of the last century, one of the most notorious dungeons in the Near East was Teheran's "Black Pit." Once the underground reservoir for a public bath, its only outlet was a single passage down three steep flights of stone steps. Prisoners huddled in their own bodily wastes, languishing in the pit's inky gloom, subterranean cold and stench-ridden atmosphere.

In this grim setting, the rarest and most cherished of religious events was once again played out: mortal man, outwardly human in other respects, was summoned by God to bring to humanity a new religious revelation.

The year was 1852, and the man was a Persian nobleman, known today as Baha'u'llah. During His imprisonment, as He sat with his feet in stocks and a 100-pound iron chain around his neck, Baha'u'llah received a vision of God's will for humanity.

The event is comparable to those other great moments of the ancient past when God revealed Himself to His earlier Messengers: when Moses stood before the Burning Bush; when the Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus; or when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus; or when the archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad.

"And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven."

-- Baha'u'llah

Baha'u'llah's experience in the Black Pit set in motion a process of religious revelation which, over the next 40 years, led to the production of thousands of books, tablets and letters -- which today form the core of the sacred scripture of the Baha'i Faith. In those writings, He outlined a framework for the reconstruction of human society at all levels: spiritual, moral, economic, political, and philosophical.

In the past, God's Messengers have for the most part presented their messages to humanity by speaking or preaching; these outpourings have been recorded by others, sometimes during the Prophet's life, sometimes later, from the memory of His followers. The Founder of the Baha'i Faith, however, Himself took up pen and paper and wrote down for humanity the revelation He received or dictated His message to believers who served as secretaries.

Baha'u'llah addressed not only those timeless theological and philosophical questions that have plagued humanity since antiquity -- such as Who is God? What is goodness? and Why are we here? -- but also the questions that have preoccupied 20th century thinkers: What motivates human nature? Is real peace indeed possible? Does God still care for humanity?

From His words, the worldwide community of Baha'u'llah draws its inspiration, discovers its moral bearing and derives creative energy.

Baha'u'llah, whose name means "The Glory of God" in Arabic, was born on 12 November 1817 in Teheran. The son of a wealthy government minister, Mirza Buzurg-i-Nuri, His given name was Husayn-'Ali and His family could trace its ancestry back to the great dynasties of Iran's imperial past. Baha'u'llah led a princely life as a young man, receiving an education that focused largely on horsemanship, swordsmanship, calligraphy and classic poetry.

In October 1835, Baha'u'llah married Asiyih Khanum, the daughter of another nobleman. They had three children: a son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, born in 1844; a

daughter, Bahiyih, born in 1846; and a son, Mihdi, born in 1848.

Baha'u'llah declined the ministerial career open to Him in government, and chose instead to devote His energies to a range of philanthropies which had, by the early 1840s, earned Him widespread renown as "Father of the Poor." This privileged existence swiftly eroded after 1844, when Baha'u'llah became one of the leading advocates of the Babi movement.

Precursor to the Baha'i Faith, the Babi movement swept Iran like a whirlwind and stirred intense persecution from the religious establishment. After the execution of its Founder, the Bab, Baha'u'llah was arrested and brought, in chains and on foot, to Teheran. Influential members of the court and the clergy demanded a death sentence. Baha'u'llah, however, was protected by His personal reputation and the social position of His family, as well as by protests from Western embassies.

Therefore, He was cast into the notorious "Black Pit," the Siyah-Chal in Persian. Authorities hoped this would result in His death. Instead, the dungeon became the birthplace for a new religious revelation.

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

-- Baha'u'llah

Baha'u'llah spent four months in the Black Pit, during which time he contemplated the full extent of His mission. "I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been," He later wrote. "This thing is not from Me, but from the One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. And he bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven..."

Exile

Upon His release, Baha'u'llah was banished from His native land, the beginning of forty years of exile, imprisonment, and persecution. He was sent first to neighboring Baghdad. After about a year,

He left for the mountainous wilderness of Kurdistan, where He lived entirely alone for two years. The time was spent reflecting on the implications of the task to which He had been called. The period is reminiscent of the periods of seclusion undertaken by the Founders of the world's other great Faiths, calling to mind the wanderings of Buddha, the forty days and nights spent by Christ in the desert, and Muhammad's retreat in the cave on Mt. Hira.

In 1856, at the urging of the exiled Babis, Baha'u'llah returned to Baghdad. Under His renewed leadership, the stature of the Babi community grew and Baha'u'llah's reputation as a spiritual leader spread throughout the city. Fearing that Baha'u'llah's acclaim would reignite popular enthusiasm for the movement in Persia, the Shah's government successfully pressed the Ottoman authorities to send him farther into exile.

In April 1863, before leaving Baghdad, Baha'u'llah and His companions camped in a garden on the banks of the Tigris River. From 21 April to 2 May, Baha'u'llah shared with those Babis in His company that He was the Promised One foretold by the Bab -- foretold, indeed, in all the world's scriptures.

The garden became known as the Garden of Ridvan, which indicates "paradise" in Arabic. The anniversary of the twelve days spent there are celebrated in the Baha'i world as the most joyous of holidays, known as the Ridvan Festival.

On 3 May 1863, Baha'u'llah rode out of Baghdad, on His way to Constantinople, the imperial capital, accompanied by His family and selected companions. He had become an immensely popular and cherished figure. Eyewitnesses described the departure in moving terms, noting the tears of many onlookers and the honor paid to Him by the authorities.

"I have never aspired after worldly leadership. My sole purpose hath been to hand down unto men that which I was bidden to deliver by God..."

-- Baha'u'llah

After four months in Constantinople, Baha'u'llah was sent as a virtual state prisoner to Adrianople (modern Edirne), arriving there on 2 December 1863. During the five years He spent there, Baha'u'llah's reputation continued to grow, attracting the intense interest of scholars, government officials and diplomats.

Beginning in September 1867, Baha'u'llah wrote a series of letters to the world leaders of His time, addressing, among others, Emperor Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander II of Russia, Emperor Franz Joseph, Pope Pius IX, Sultan Abdul-Aziz, and the Persian ruler, Nasirid-Din Shah.

In these letters, Baha'u'llah openly proclaimed His station. He spoke of the dawn of a new age. But first, He warned, there would be catastrophic upheavals in the world's political and social order. To smooth humanity's transition, He urged the world's leaders to pursue justice. He called for general efforts at disarmament and urged the world's rulers to band together into some form of commonwealth of nations. Only by acting collectively against war, He said, could a lasting peace be established.

Continued agitation from opponents caused the Turkish Government to send the exiles to Acre, a penal city in Ottoman Palestine. Acre was the end of the world, the final destination for the worst of murderers, highway robbers and political dissidents. A walled city of filthy streets and damp, desolate houses, Acre had no source of fresh water, and the air was popularly described as being so foul that overflying birds would fall dead out of the sky.

Into this environment, Baha'u'llah and His family arrived on 31 August 1868, the final stage in His long exile. He was to spend the rest of His life, 24 more years, in Acre and its environs. At first confined to a prison in the barracks, Baha'u'llah and His companions were later moved to a cramped house within the city's walls. The exiles, widely depicted as dangerous heretics, faced animosity from the city's other residents. Even the children, when they ventured outside, were

pursued and pelted with stones.

As time passed, however, the spirit of Baha'u'llah's teachings penetrated the bigotry and indifference. Even several of the town's governors and clergy, after examining the teachings of the Faith, became devoted admirers. As in Baghdad and Adrianople, Baha'u'llah's moral stature gradually won the respect, admiration and, even, leadership of the community at large.

It was in Acre that Baha'u'llah's most important work was written. Known more commonly among Baha'is by its Persian name, the Kitab-i-Aqdas (the Most Holy Book), it outlines the essential laws and principles that are to be observed by His followers, and lays the groundwork for Baha'i administration.

In the late 1870s, Baha'u'llah was given the freedom to move outside the city's walls and His followers were able to meet with Him in relative peace and freedom. He took up residence in an abandoned mansion and was able to further devote Himself to writing.

On 29 May 1892, Baha'u'llah passed away. His remains were laid to rest in a garden room adjoining the restored mansion, which is known as Bahji. For Baha'is, this spot is the most holy place on earth.

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Social and Moral Teachings

A BLEND OF THE PROGRESSIVE AND THE

TRADITIONAL, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON UNITY

There has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the landscape before humanity.

One of the extraordinary features of the writings of Baha'u'llah is the degree to which they accurately forecast the cutting edge issues that humanity has increasingly faced.

Throughout His writings, Baha'u'llah called for a complete restructuring of the global social order. His vision of renewal touches on all aspects of life, from personal morality to economics and governance; from community development to religious practice.

The central theme of Baha'u'llah's writings is that humanity is one single race and the day has come for its unification into one global society. Through an irresistible historical

process, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed, faith and nation will break down. These forces will, Baha'u'llah said, give birth in time to a new universal civilization. The crises now afflicting the planet face all its peoples with the need to accept their oneness and work towards the creation of a unified global society.

Baha'u'llah outlined certain fundamental principles upon which this new world civilization should be founded. These include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; full equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; a high standard of personal conduct; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between nature and technology; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Covering questions pertaining to the role of women, race relations, economic justice, environmental degradation, and world order, these principles illustrate the concerns that have fueled the century's most dynamic movements. And, accordingly, they have come to head the social and political agenda of humanity.

There has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the social landscape. Far from fading, a century after He lived, the issues Baha'u'llah focused on have come to dominate the collective life of humanity.

Unity the Theme

The Baha'i Faith's progressive approach to human society originates with Baha'u'llah's emphasis on unity. Indeed, if one were to characterize His teachings in a single word, that word would be unity.

Throughout His writings, Baha'u'llah emphasized the importance -- and the reality -- of unity and oneness. First, God is one. All of the world's great religions are also one. They represent humanity's responses to the revelations of the word and will of God for humanity by

successive Messengers from the one God. These understandings lie at the heart of the concept of unity in Baha'u'llah's teachings.

From this fundamental concept of Divine and religious unity, other principles emerge.

Baha'u'llah teaches that all humans, as creations of the one God, are also one people. Distinctions of race, nation, class or ethnic origin are ephemeral when understood in this context.

Likewise, any notions of individual, tribal, provincial or national superiority are discarded in the Baha'i Faith. Speaking through Baha'u'llah, the voice of God proclaims:

"Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest "

The Oneness of Humanity

The idea that all humanity is one race forms the foundation for the other principles of social justice in the Baha'i Faith. Baha'u'llah condemned racial and ethnic prejudice, urging: "Close your eyes to racial differences, and welcome all with the light of oneness."

"Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."

-- Baha'u'llah

Baha'u'llah also unequivocally proclaimed the equality of the sexes -- at a time when the women's movement was only beginning its fight for suffrage

in the West and such ideas were unheard of in the Middle East -- thus becoming the first Founder of a world religion to explicitly uphold strict equality for women and men. Indeed, girls should receive priority in education if by some circumstance a family (or a society) cannot afford to educate its children equally. "Until the reality of equality between men and women is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible," the Baha'i scriptures state.

"He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body."

-- Baha'u'llah

This challenge to full equality does not ignore natural differences between the sexes. Baha'u'llah emphasized the importance of motherhood, fatherhood and family life.

Baha'u'llah's call for economic justice also reflects His central theme of human oneness. He wrote extensively about the necessity of promoting economic justice and proposed specific remedies to help control the extreme inequalities of wealth in human society. The redistribution of wealth through a tax on income, for example, and the concept of profit-sharing are both promoted in His teachings.

Education is given a special emphasis as humanity is considered capable of tremendous progress and advancement. "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value," wrote Baha'u'llah. "Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."

Education, accordingly, should be universal and should incorporate positive spiritual values and moral attitudes. Baha'is envision a future in which even "basic education" goes beyond

rote learning and the teaching of simple skills. Students must be given the tools to analyze social conditions and requirements themselves, to take part in community planning and action, and to investigate truth on their own. The oneness of humanity is an essential element of every Baha'i curriculum.

Science and Religion

The theme of unity also emerges in Baha'u'llah's teachings on science. His writings portray science and religion as different yet harmonious approaches to the comprehension of reality. These two paths are essentially compatible and mutually reinforcing. Scientific method is humanity's tool for understanding the physical side of the universe. It can describe the composition of an atomic nucleus or the molecular structure of DNA. It is the key to new technologies. Science cannot, however, guide us in the use of such knowledge. The revelation of God offers to humanity a basis for values and purpose. It provides answers to those questions of morals, human purpose, and our relationship to God that science cannot approach.

The independent investigation of reality, whether scientific or religious, is strongly encouraged in Baha'u'llah's writings. Individuals should strive, He said, to free themselves from prejudices, preconceptions and reliance on tradition or traditional authorities. Consultation is a critical tool for discovering truth. [See "Consultation" under "A System for Global Governance".]

Baha'u'llah also called for the adoption of a universal auxiliary language as a means to promote unity. "The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script," He wrote. "When this is achieved, to whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home." The term "auxiliary" is important: Baha'u'llah's injunction is not a mandate for cultural uniformity. Indeed, the Baha'i teachings both value and promote cultural

diversity.

When first outlined by Baha'u'llah more than 100 years ago, these principles were as radical as any social program ever drafted. The fact that they have not only borne the passage of time, but, indeed, become ever more widely proclaimed and recognized is a testimony to the vision that produced them.

Baha'u'llah's moral code for the individual, and His pattern for marriage and family life, are wholly consonant with the genuine needs of modern society. As with the social principles, the laws of Baha'u'llah on individual morality and family structure are aimed at the promotion of unity and well-being for society at large. "They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples," Baha'u'llah wrote.

"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."

-- Baha'u'llah

This insight -- that the standards for social justice and individual conduct outlined by Baha'u'llah offer an integrated and distinctive approach to the apparently intractable problems faced by humanity today -- underlies the essential optimism of the worldwide Baha'i community. Whether considering the threat of environmental degradation, the cancer of racism, or the erosion of the family, Baha'is believe firmly that answers are available in the writings of Baha'u'llah. Their commitment is to share these insights with the world.

Marriage and family life

Baha'is understand that the family is the basic unit of society. Unless this

all-important building block is healthy and unified, society itself cannot be healthy and unified. Monogamous marriage stands at the foundation of family life.

Baha'u'llah said marriage is "a fortress for well-being and salvation." The Baha'i writings further state that married couples should strive to become "loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity..."

Baha'is view preparation for marriage as an essential element in ensuring a happy marriage. The process of preparation includes a requirement for parental approval of the choice of a spouse. This does not mean that Baha'i marriages are arranged. Individuals propose marriage to the persons of their own choice. However, once the choice is made, the parents have both the right and the obligation to weigh carefully whether to give consent to, and thus guide, their offspring in one of life's most important decisions.

Baha'is believe that this requirement helps to preserve unity within the marriage -- and within the extended family. As did previous Messengers of God, Baha'u'llah asks His followers to honor their parents. Obtaining parental permission for marriage reaffirms the importance of the bond between child and parent. It also helps to create a supportive network of parents in the often difficult first years of a marriage.

Simple vows and ceremony

Once parental permission is obtained, the marriage takes place, requiring only the simplest of ceremonies. In the presence of two witnesses designated by the local Baha'i governing council, the couple recites the following verse: "We will all, verily, abide by the will of God." For Baha'is, that simple commitment to live by God's will implies all of the commitments associated with marriage, including the promises to love, honor, and cherish; to care for each other regardless of material health or wealth; and to share with and serve each other.

Beyond these simple requirements, Baha'is are free to design their own marriage celebration.

Depending on personal tastes, family resources, and cultural traditions, Baha'i ceremonies run the gamut from small to large, including all manner of music, dance, dress, food and festivity.

As in most religions, the marriage vow is considered sacred in the Baha'i Faith. The partners are expected to be absolutely faithful to each other.

The Faith's emphasis on the equality of women and men, however, and its promotion of consultation as a tool for problem-solving mean that the roles of husband and wife within a Baha'i marriage are not the traditional ones. Women are free to pursue careers that interest them; men are expected to share in household duties and child-rearing.

So-called "interracial marriage" is also encouraged in the Baha'i teachings, which stress the essential oneness of the human race.

Divorce is allowed but discouraged

If a Baha'i marriage fails, divorce is permitted, although it is strongly discouraged. If Baha'is choose to seek a divorce, they must spend at least one year living apart and attempting to reconcile. If a divorce is still desired after that year, it is then granted, dependent on the requirements of civil law. This "year of patience," as it is known to Baha'is, is supervised by the local Spiritual Assembly, the local Baha'i governing council.

The key purpose of Baha'i marriage -- beyond physical, intellectual and spiritual companionship -- is children. Baha'is view child-rearing not only as a source of great joy and reward, but as a sacred obligation.

While stating firmly that women must enjoy full equality with men, Baha'u'llah's teachings also recognize explicitly the innate differences between the feminine and masculine natures -- both physical and emotional. Baha'is understand, accordingly, that mothers have a special role to play in the early education of children -- especially during the first few years of

life when the basic values and character of every individual is formed.

Since Baha'is believe that the soul appears at the moment of conception, the parents pray for the well-being of the unborn child while it is still in the womb. Education in general, and Baha'i education in particular are of paramount importance in Baha'i families. From their earliest years, the children are encouraged to develop the habits of prayer and meditation, and to acquire knowledge, both intellectual and spiritual. o

He, She or It?

Like previous Messengers of God, Baha'u'llah used the masculine pronoun when referring to the Creator. To have done anything else would have violated all conventions of Arabic -- the principal language in which Baha'u'llah wrote.

Baha'u'llah stated explicitly, however, that God is beyond any comparison to human form or gender. Accordingly, the issue of whether to refer to God as "He," "She," or "it" does not arise in Baha'i discussions.

Heaven and hell: a Baha'i view of life after death

As in the world's other religions, the Baha'i concept of life after death is deeply integrated into teachings about the nature of the soul and the purpose of this earthly life.

Baha'u'llah confirmed the existence of a separate, rational soul for every human. In this life, He said, the soul is related to the physical body. It provides the underlying animation for the body, and is our real self.

Although undetectable by physical instruments, the soul shows itself through the qualities of character that we associate with each person. The soul is the focal point for love and compassion, for faith and courage, and for other such "human" qualities that cannot be explained solely by thinking of a human being as an animal, or as a sophisticated organic machine.

The soul does not die; it endures everlastingly. When the human body dies, the soul

is freed from ties with the physical body and the surrounding physical world and begins its progress through the spiritual world. Baha'is understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe -- and not some physically remote or removed place.

Entry into the next life has the potential to bring great joy. Baha'u'llah likened death to the process of birth. He explains: "The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother."

The analogy to the womb in many ways summarizes the Baha'i view of earthly existence. Just as the womb constitutes an important place for a person's initial physical development, the physical world provides the matrix for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Baha'is view life as a sort of workshop, where one can develop and perfect those qualities which will be needed in the next life.

"Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved," Baha'u'llah wrote. "By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue can describe."

In the final analysis, heaven can be seen partly as a state of nearness to God; hell is a state of remoteness from God. Each state follows as a natural consequence of individual efforts, or the lack thereof, to develop spiritually. The key to spiritual progress is to follow the path outlined by the Manifestations of God.

Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. "The nature of the soul after death can never be described," Baha'u'llah writes.