

BAHÁ'Í FAITH

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Introduction

The Bahá'í Faith is a religion founded in the 19th century that teaches the essential worth of all religions and the unity of all people. Established by Bahá'u'lláh, it initially developed in Iran and parts of the Middle East, where it has faced ongoing persecution since its inception. The religion is estimated to have 5–8 million adherents, known as Bahá'ís, spread throughout most countries and territories.

The Bahá'í Faith has three central figures: the Báb (1819–1850), considered a herald who taught his followers that God would soon send a prophet similar to Jesus or Muhammad; Iranian authorities executed the Báb in 1850; Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), who claimed to be that prophet in 1863 and faced exile and imprisonment for most of his life; and his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), who was released from confinement in 1908 and made teaching trips to Europe and the United States. After 'Abdu'l-Bahá died in 1921, the religion's leadership fell to his grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957). Bahá'ís annually elect local, regional, and national Spiritual Assemblies that govern the religion's affairs, and every five years, an election is held for the Universal House of Justice, the nine-member supreme governing institution of the worldwide Bahá'í community that is located in Haifa, Israel, near the Shrine of the Báb.

According to Bahá'í teachings, religion is revealed in an orderly and progressive way by a single God through Manifestations of God, who are the founders of major world religions throughout history; Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad are noted as the most recent of these, before the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís regard the world's major religions as fundamentally unified in purpose, though diverging in social practices and interpretations. The Bahá'í Faith stresses the unity of all people, explicitly rejecting racism, sexism, and nationalism. At the heart of Bahá'í teachings is the goal of a unified world order that ensures the prosperity of all nations, races, creeds, and classes.

Letters that were written by Bahá'u'lláh and sent to various people, including some heads of state, have been collected and assembled into a canon of Bahá'í scripture. This collection of scripture includes works by his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and by the Báb, who is regarded as Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner. Prominent among the works of Bahá'í literature are the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Some Answered Questions and The Dawn-Breakers.

Etymology

The word Bahá'í (بهائی) is used either as an adjective to refer to the Bahá'í Faith or as a term for a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. It is derived from the Arabic Bahá' (بهاء), a name Bahá'u'lláh chose for himself, referring to the 'glory' or 'splendor' of God. In English, the word is commonly pronounced bə-HYE (/bə'haɪ/), but the more accurate rendering of the Arabic is bə-HAH-ee (/bə'hɑ:ʔi:/). The proper Name of the religion is the Bahá'í Faith, not Bahá'í or Baha'ism (the latter, once familiar among academics, is regarded as derogatory by the Bahá'ís).

The accent marks above the letters, representing long vowels, derive from a system of transliterating Arabic and Persian script that was adopted by Bahá'ís in 1923 and which has been used in almost all Bahá'í publications since. Bahá'ís prefer the orthographies Bahá'í, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "Bahai," "Bahais," "Baha'i," "the Bab," "Bahauallah," and "Baha'ullah" are often used when accent marks are unavailable.

Beliefs

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh form the foundation of Bahá'í belief. Three principles are central to these teachings: the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humanity. Baha'is believe that God periodically reveals his will through divine messengers, whose purpose is to transform humankind's character and develop moral and spiritual qualities within those who respond. Religion is thus seen as orderly, unified, and progressive from age to age.

God

The Bahá'í writings describe a single, personal, inaccessible, omniscient, omnipresent, imperishable, and almighty God who is the creator of all things in the universe. The existence of God and the universe is thought to be eternal, without a beginning or end. Though inaccessible directly, God is nevertheless seen as conscious of creation, with a will and purpose expressed through messengers called Manifestations of God.

Bahá'í teachings state that God is too great for humans to fully comprehend or create a complete and accurate image of themselves. Therefore, human understanding of God is

achieved through his revelations via his Manifestations. In the Bahá'í Faith, God is often referred to by titles and attributes (for example, the All-Powerful or the All-Loving), and there is a substantial emphasis on monotheism. Bahá'í teachings state that the features applied to God translate Godliness into human terms and help people concentrate on their attributes in worshipping God to develop their potentialities on their spiritual path. According to the Bahá'í teachings, the human purpose is to learn to know and love God through such methods as prayer, reflection and being of service to others.

Religion

Bahá'í notions of progressive religious revelation result in their accepting the validity of the world's well-known religions, whose founders and central figures are seen as Manifestations of God. Religious history is interpreted as a series of dispensations, where each manifestation brings a somewhat broader and more advanced revelation that is rendered as a text of scripture and passed on through history with greater or lesser reliability but at least accurate in substance, suited for the time and place in which it was expressed. Specific religious and social teachings (for example, the direction of prayer or dietary restrictions) may be revoked by a subsequent manifestation to establish a more appropriate requirement for the time and place. Conversely, certain general principles (for example, neighborliness or charity) are seen to be universal and consistent. In Bahá'í belief, this process of progressive revelation will not end; it is, however, believed to be cyclical. Bahá'ís do not expect a new manifestation of God to appear within 1000 years of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

Bahá'ís assert that their religion is a distinct tradition with its scriptures and laws and not a sect of another religion. The religion was initially seen as a sect of Islam because of its origins. Most religious specialists now see it as an independent religion, with its religious background in Shi'a Islam being seen as analogous to the Jewish context in which Christianity was established. Bahá'ís describe their faith as an independent world religion, differing from the other traditions in its relative age and the appropriateness of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to the modern context. Bahá'u'lláh is believed to have fulfilled the messianic expectations of these precursor faiths.

Human beings

The Bahá'í writings state that human beings have a "rational soul, " which gives the species a unique capacity to recognize God's status and humanity's relationship with its creator. Every human is seen to have a duty to acknowledge God through his Messengers and to conform to their teachings. Through recognition and obedience, service to humanity, and regular prayer and spiritual practice, the Bahá'í writings state that the soul becomes closer to God, the spiritual ideal in Bahá'í belief. According to Bahá'í belief, when a human dies, the soul is permanently separated from the body and carries on to the next world, where it is judged based on the person's actions in the physical world. Heaven and Hell are taught to be spiritual states of nearness or distance from God that describe relationships in this world and the following, not physical places of reward and punishment achieved after death.

The Bahá'í writings emphasize the essential equality of human beings and the abolition of prejudice. Humanity is seen as essentially one, though highly varied; its diversity of race and culture is seen as worthy of appreciation and acceptance. Doctrines of racism, nationalism, caste, social class, and gender-based hierarchy are seen as artificial impediments to unity. The Bahá'í teachings state that the unification of humanity is the paramount issue in the religious and political conditions of the present world.

Social principles

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá first traveled to Europe and America in 1911–1912, he gave public talks that articulated the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith. These included preaching on the equality of men and women, race unity, the need for world peace, and other progressive ideas for the early 20th century. Published summaries of the Bahá'í teachings often include a list of these principles, and lists vary in wording and what is included.

The concept of the unity of mankind, seen by Bahá'ís as an ancient truth, is the starting point for many of the ideas. The equality of races and the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, for example, are implications of that unity. Another outgrowth of the concept is the need for a united world federation. Nationalism, according to this viewpoint, should be abandoned in favor of allegiance to the whole of humankind. Some practical recommendations to encourage its realization involve establishing a universal language, a

standard economy and system of measurement, universal compulsory education, and an international court of arbitration to settle disputes between nations. Concerning the pursuit of world peace, Bahá'u'lláh prescribed a world-embracing collective security arrangement.

Other Bahá'í social principles revolve around spiritual unity. Religion is viewed as progressive from age to age, but to recognize a newer revelation, one must abandon tradition and independently investigate. Bahá'ís are taught to view religion as a source of unity and religious prejudice as destructive. Science is also considered in harmony with true religion. Though Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá called for a united world that is free of war, they also anticipate that over the long term, the establishment of a lasting peace (The Greatest Peace) and the purging of the "overwhelming Corruptions" requires that the people of the world unite under a universal faith with spiritual virtues and ethics to complement material civilization.

Shoghi Effendi, the head of the religion from 1921 to 1957, wrote the following summary of what he considered to be the distinguishing principles of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, which, he said, together with the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas constitute the bedrock of the Bahá'í Faith:

The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition; the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the faith; the essential unity of all religions; the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national; the harmony which must exist between religion and science; the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar; the introduction of compulsory education; the adoption of a universal auxiliary language; the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty; the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations; the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship; the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind—these stand out as the essential elements which Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed.

Covenant

Bahá'ís highly value unity, and Bahá'u'lláh established rules for holding the community together and resolving disagreements. Within this framework, no individual follower may propose 'inspired' or 'authoritative' interpretations of scripture, and individuals agree to support the line of authority established in Bahá'í scriptures. This practice has left the Bahá'í community unified and avoided any severe fracturing. The Universal House of Justice is the final authority to resolve disagreements among Bahá'ís. The dozen attempts at schism have all become extinct or remained extremely small, numbering a few hundred collectively. The followers of such divisions are regarded as Covenant-breakers and shunned.

Texts and scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith

From Bahá'u'lláh

Days of Remembrance

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

The Four Valleys

Gems of Divine Mysteries

Gleanings

Kitáb-i-Aqdas

Kitáb-i-Íqán

Kitáb-i-Badí'

The Hidden Words

The Seven Valleys

Summons of the Lord of Hosts

Tabernacle of Unity

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh

List of writings of Bahá'u'lláh

From the Báb

Persian Bayán

Arabic Bayán

Writings of the Báb

From 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Paris Talks

The Secret of Divine Civilization

Some Answered Questions

Tablets of the Divine Plan

Tablet to Dr. Forel

Tablet to The Hague

Will and Testament

From Shoghi Effendi

God Passes By

The advent of Divine Justice

Promised Day has Come

Bahá'í literature

The canonical texts of the Bahá'í Faith are the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, and the authenticated talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are considered as divine revelation, the writings and lectures of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the writings of Shoghi Effendi as authoritative interpretation, and those of the Universal House of Justice as authoritarian legislation and elucidation. Some measure of divine guidance is assumed for all of these texts.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's most essential writings include the Kitáb-i-Aqdas ("Most Holy Book"), which defines many laws and practices for individuals and society, the Kitáb-i-Íqán ("Book of Certitude"), which became the foundation of much of Bahá'í belief, and Gems of Divine Mysteries, which includes other doctrinal foundations. Although the Bahá'í teachings strongly emphasize social and ethical issues, many foundational texts have been described as mystical. These include the Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys. The Seven Valleys was written to a follower of Sufism, in the style of 'Attar, the Persian Muslim poet, and sets forth the stages of the soul's journey towards God. It was first translated into English in 1906, becoming one of the earliest available books of Bahá'u'lláh to the West. The Hidden Words is another book written by Bahá'u'lláh during the same period, containing 153 short passages in which Bahá'u'lláh claims to have taken the fundamental essence of certain spiritual truths and written them in brief form.

History

Bahá'í timeline

1817 Bahá'u'lláh was born in Tehran, Iran

1819 The Báb was born in Shiraz, Iran

- 1844 The Báb declares his mission in Shiraz, Iran
-
- 1850 The Báb is publicly executed in Tabriz, Iran
-
- 1852 Thousands of Bábís are executed
Bahá'u'lláh is imprisoned and forced into exile
-
- 1863 Bahá'u'lláh first announces his claim to divine revelation in Baghdad, Iraq.
He is forced to leave Baghdad for Istanbul, then Adrianople
-
- 1868 Bahá'u'lláh is forced into harsher confinement in 'Akká, in Palestine
-
- 1892 Bahá'u'lláh dies near 'Akká
His will appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá as successor
-
- 1908 'Abdu'l-Bahá is released from prison
-
- 1921 'Abdu'l-Bahá dies in Haifa
His will appointed Shoghi Effendi as Guardian
-
- 1957 Shoghi Effendi dies in England
-
- 1963 The Universal House of Justice is first elected

The Bahá'í Faith traces its beginnings to the religion of the Báb and the Shaykhi movement that immediately preceded it. The Báb was a merchant who began preaching in 1844 that he was the bearer of a new revelation from God but was rejected by the generality of Islamic clergy in Iran, ending in his public execution for the crime of heresy. The Báb taught that God would soon send a new messenger, and Bahá'ís considered Bahá'u'lláh to be that person. Although they are distinct movements, the Báb is so interwoven into Bahá'í theology and history that Bahá'ís celebrate his birth, death, and declaration as holy days, consider him one of their three central figures (along with Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá), and a historical account of the Bábí movement (The Dawn-Breakers) is regarded as one of three books that every Bahá'í should "master" and read "over and over again."

The Bahá'í community was mainly confined to the Iranian and Ottoman empires until after the death of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892. At that time, he had followers in 13 countries in Asia and Africa. Under the leadership of his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the religion gained a footing in Europe and America and was consolidated in Iran, where it still suffered intense persecution. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in 1921 marks the end of what Bahá'ís call the "heroic age" of the religion.

Báb

On the evening of 22 May 1844, Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz gained his first conversion and took on the title of "the Báb" (الباب "Gate"), referring to his later claim to the status of Mahdi of Shi'a Islam. His followers were therefore known as Bábís. As the Báb's teachings spread, which the Islamic clergy saw as blasphemous, his followers came under increased persecution and torture. The conflicts escalated in several places to military sieges by Shah's army. The Báb himself was imprisoned and eventually executed in 1850.

Bahá'ís see the Báb as the forerunner of the Bahá'í Faith because the Báb's writings introduced the concept of "He whom God shall make manifest," a messianic figure whose coming, according to Bahá'ís, was announced in the scriptures of all of the world's great religions, and whom Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, claimed to be. The Báb's tomb, located in Haifa, Israel, is an important place of pilgrimage for Bahá'ís. The remains of the Báb were brought secretly from Iran to the Holy Land and eventually interred in the tomb built for them in a spot designated explicitly by Bahá'u'lláh. The writings of the Báb are considered inspired

scripture by Bahá'ís, though having been superseded by the laws and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. The main written works translated into English of the Báb are compiled in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (1976) out of the estimated 135 works.

Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith

Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Núrí was one of the early followers of the Báb and later took the title of Bahá'u'lláh. In August 1852, a few Bábís made a failed attempt to assassinate the Shah. The Persian government initially responded by killing and, in some cases, torturing about 50 Bábís in Tehran; further bloodshed was spread around the country: hundreds were reported in period newspapers by October and tens of thousands by the end of December. Bahá'u'lláh was not involved in the assassination attempt but was imprisoned in Tehran until his release was arranged four months later by the Russian ambassador, after which he joined other Bábís in exile in Baghdad.

Shortly after, he was expelled from Iran and traveled to Baghdad in the Ottoman Empire. In Baghdad, his leadership revived the persecuted followers of the Báb in Iran, so Iranian authorities requested his removal, instigating a summons to Constantinople (now Istanbul) from the Ottoman Sultan. In 1863, at the time of his removal from Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh first announced his claim of prophethood to his family and followers, which he said came to him years earlier while in a dungeon of Tehran. From the time of the initial exile from Iran, tensions grew between him and Subh-i-Azal, the appointed leader of the Bábís, who did not recognize Bahá'u'lláh's claim. Throughout the rest of his life, Bahá'u'lláh gained the allegiance of almost all of the Bábís, who came to be known as Bahá'ís, while a remnant of Bábís became known as Azalis.

After receiving chastising letters from Bahá'u'lláh, Ottoman authorities turned against him. They put him under house arrest in Adrianople (now Edirne), where he remained for four years until a royal decree of 1868 banished all Bábís to either Cyprus or 'Akká. He spent less than four months in Constantinople.

It was in or near the Ottoman penal colony of 'Akká, in present-day Israel, that Bahá'u'lláh spent the remainder of his life. After initially strict and harsh confinement, he was allowed to live in a home near 'Akká while still officially a prisoner of that city. He died there in 1892. Bahá'ís regard his resting place at Bahjí as the Qiblih to which they turn in prayer each day.

He produced over 18,000 works in his lifetime in Arabic and Persian, of which only 8% have been translated into English. During the period in Adrianople, he began declaring his mission as a Messenger of God in letters to the world's religious and secular rulers, including Pope Pius IX, Napoleon III, and Queen Victoria.

'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abbás Effendi was Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, known by the title of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá). His father left a will that appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the leader of the Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had shared his father's long exile and imprisonment, which continued until 'Abdu'l-Bahá's release as a result of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Following his release, he traveled, spoke, taught, and maintained correspondence with communities of believers and individuals, expounding the principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

As of 2020, there are over 38,000 extant documents containing the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which are of widely varying lengths. Only a fraction of these documents has been translated into English. Among the more well-known are *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, *Some Answered Questions*, the *Tablet to Auguste-Henri Forel*, the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, and the *Tablet to The Hague*. Additionally, notes of several of his talks were published in various volumes, like *Paris Talks* during his travels to the West.

Shoghi Effendi

Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* are foundational documents of the Bahá'í administrative order. Bahá'u'lláh established the elected Universal House of Justice, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá established the appointed hereditary Guardianship and clarified the relationship between the two institutions. In his will, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed

Shoghi Effendi, his eldest grandson, as the first Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi served for 36 years as the head of the religion until his death.

Throughout his lifetime, Shoghi Effendi translated Bahá'í texts; developed global plans for the expansion of the Bahá'í community; designed the Bahá'í World Centre; carried on a voluminous correspondence with communities and individuals around the world; and built the administrative structure of the religion, preparing the community for the election of the Universal House of Justice. He unexpectedly died after a brief illness on 4 November 1957, in London, England, under conditions that did not allow a successor to be appointed.

In 1937, Shoghi Effendi launched a seven-year plan for the Bahá'ís of North America, followed by another in 1946. In 1953, he founded the first international plan, the Ten-Year World Crusade. This plan included extremely ambitious goals for the expansion of Bahá'í communities and institutions, the translation of Bahá'í texts into several new languages, and the sending of Bahá'í pioneers into previously unreached nations. He announced in letters during the Ten-Year Crusade that it would be followed by other plans under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, which was elected in 1963 at the culmination of the Crusade.

Universal House of Justice

The Bahá'í House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois, is the oldest surviving Bahá'í House of Worship in the world.

Since 1963, the Universal House of Justice has been the elected head of the Bahá'í Faith. The general functions of this body are defined through the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and clarified in the writings of Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. These functions include teaching and education, implementing Bahá'í laws, addressing social issues, and caring for the weak and the poor.

Starting with the Nine-Year Plan that began in 1964, the Universal House of Justice has directed the work of the Bahá'í community through a series of multi-year international plans. Starting with the Nine-Year Plan that began in 1964, the Bahá'í leadership sought to continue the expansion of the religion but also to "consolidate" new members, meaning increase their knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings. In this vein, in the 1970s, the Ruhi Institute was founded

by Bahá'ís in Colombia to offer short courses on Bahá'í beliefs, ranging in length from a weekend to nine days. The associated Ruhi Foundation, whose purpose was to systematically "consolidate" new Bahá'ís, was registered in 1992. Since the late 1990s, the courses of the Ruhi Institute have been the dominant way of teaching the Bahá'í Faith around the world. The practices of the Ruhi Institute train communities to self-organize classes for the spiritual education of children and youth, among other activities. By 2013 there were over 300 Bahá'í training institutes worldwide and 100,000 people participating in courses. Additional lines of action the Universal House of Justice has encouraged for the contemporary Bahá'í community include social activity and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

Annually, on 21 April, the Universal House of Justice sends a 'Ridván' message to the worldwide Bahá'í community that updates Bahá'ís on current developments and provides further guidance for the year to come.

At local, regional, and national levels, Bahá'ís elect members to nine-person Spiritual Assemblies, which run the affairs of the religion. There are also appointed individuals working at various levels, locally and internationally, propagating the teachings and protecting the community. The latter do not serve as clergy, which the Bahá'í Faith does not have. The Universal House of Justice remains the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. Its nine members are elected every five years by the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies. Any male Bahá'í, 21 years or older, is eligible to be elected to the Universal House of Justice; all other positions are open to male and female Bahá'ís.

Demographics

Around 2020, there were about 8 million Bahá'ís in the world. In 2013, two scholars of demography wrote that "The Baha'i Faith is the only religion to have grown faster in every United Nations region over the past 100 years than the general population; Baha'i was thus the fastest-growing religion between 1910 and 2010, growing at least twice as fast as the population of almost every U.N. region."

The most significant proportions of the total world Bahá'í population were found in sub-Saharan Africa (29.9%) and South Asia (26.8%), followed by Southeast Asia (12.7%) and Latin

America (12.2%). Lesser populations are found in North America (7.6%) and the Middle East/North Africa (6.2%), while the minor people are in Europe (2.0%), Australasia (1.6%), and Northeast Asia (0.9%). In 2015, the internationally recognized religion was the second-largest international religion in Iran, Panama, Belize, Bolivia, Zambia, and Papua New Guinea; and the third-largest in Chad and Kenya.

From the Bahá'í Faith's origins in the 19th century until the 1950s, the vast majority of Bahá'ís were found in Iran; converts from outside Iran were primarily found in India and the Western world. From having roughly 200,000 Bahá'ís in 1950, the religion grew to have over 4 million by the late 1980s, with a comprehensive international distribution. Most of the growth in the late 20th century was seeded out of North America utilizing the planned migration of individuals. Yet, rather than being a cultural spread from either Iran or North America, in 2001, sociologist David Barrett wrote that the Bahá'í Faith is "A world religion with no racial or national focus." However, the growth has not been even. From the late 1920s to the 1980s, the religion was harassed and banned in the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc, and then again from the 1970s into the 1990s across some countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The most intense opposition has been in Iran and neighboring Shia-majority countries, considered by some scholars and watch agencies as a case of attempted genocide.

Meanwhile, in other times or places, religion has experienced growth. Before it was banned in certain countries, the religion "hugely increased" in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1989 the Universal House of Justice named Bolivia, Bangladesh, Haiti, India, Liberia, Peru, the Philippines, and Taiwan as countries where spiritual growth had been notable in the previous decades. Bahá'í sources claimed "more than five million" Bahá'ís in 1991-2. However, since around 2001, the Universal House of Justice has prioritized the community's statistics by their activity levels rather than their population of avowed adherents or numbers of local assemblies.

Because Bahá'ís do not represent the majority of the population in any country and most often represent only a tiny fraction of countries' total people, there are under-reporting problems. In addition, there are examples where the adherents have their highest density among minorities in societies that face challenges.

Social practices

Exhortations

The following are a few examples from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on personal conduct that are required or encouraged of his followers:

Bahá'ís over the age of 15 should individually recite an obligatory prayer each day, using fixed words and form.

In addition to the obligatory daily prayer, Bahá'ís should offer daily devotional prayer and meditate and study sacred scripture.

Adult Bahá'ís should observe a Nineteen-Day Fast each year during daylight hours in March, with specific exemptions.

There are specific requirements for Bahá'í burial, including a prayer to be read at the interment. Embalming or cremating the body is strongly discouraged.

Bahá'ís should make a 19% voluntary payment on any wealth above what is necessary to live comfortably after remitting any outstanding debt. The fees go to the Universal House of Justice.

Prohibitions

The following are a few examples from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on personal conduct that is prohibited or discouraged:

Backbiting and gossip are prohibited and denounced.

Drinking or selling alcohol is forbidden.

Sexual intercourse is only permitted between a husband and wife; thus, premarital, extramarital, or homosexual intercourse is forbidden.

Participation in partisan politics is forbidden.

Begging as a profession is forbidden.

The observance of personal laws, such as prayer or fasting, is the sole responsibility of the individual. Occasionally, a Bahá'í might be administratively expelled from the community for a public disregard of the laws or gross immorality. Such expulsions are administered by the National Spiritual Assembly and do not involve shunning.

While some of the laws from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are applicable at present, others are dependent upon the existence of a predominantly Bahá'í society, such as the punishments for arson or murder. When not in direct conflict with the civil laws of the country of residence, the rules are binding on every Bahá'í.

Marriage

The purpose of marriage in the Bahá'í Faith is mainly to foster spiritual harmony, fellowship, and unity between a man and a woman and to provide a stable and loving environment for the rearing of children. The Bahá'í teachings on marriage call it a fortress for well-being and salvation and place marriage and the family as the foundation of the structure of human society. Bahá'u'lláh highly praised marriage discouraged divorce, and required chastity outside of marriage; Bahá'u'lláh taught that a husband and wife should strive to improve the spiritual life of each other. Interracial marriage is also highly praised throughout Bahá'í scripture.

Bahá'ís intending to marry are asked to thoroughly understand the other's character before deciding to marry. Although parents should not choose partners for their children, once two individuals decide to marry, they must receive the consent of all living biological parents, whether they are Bahá'í or not. The Bahá'í marriage ceremony is simple; the only compulsory part of the wedding is the reading of the wedding vows prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh, which both the groom and the bride read in the presence of two witnesses. The vows are "We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God."

Transgender people can gain recognition of their gender in the Bahá'í Faith if they have medically transitioned and undergone sex reassignment surgery (SRS). After SRS, they are considered transitioned and may have a Bahá'í marriage.

Work

Bahá'u'lláh prohibited a mendicant and ascetic lifestyle. Monasticism is forbidden, and Bahá'ís are taught to practice spirituality while engaging in practical work. The importance of self-exertion and service to humanity in one's spiritual life is emphasized further in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, where he states that a job done in the spirit of service to humanity enjoys a rank equal to that of prayer and worship in the sight of God.

Places of worship

Bahá'í devotional meetings in most communities currently take place in people's homes or Bahá'í centers, but in some communities, Bahá'í Houses of Worship (also known as Bahá'í temples) have been built. Bahá'í Houses of Worship are places where both Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís can express devotion to God. They are also known by the Name Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (Arabic for "Dawning-place of the remembrance of God"). Only the holy scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith and other religions can be read or chanted inside, and while choirs may sing readings and prayers that have been set to music, no musical instruments may be played inside. Furthermore, no sermons may be delivered, and no ritualistic ceremonies practiced. All Bahá'í Houses of Worship have a nine-sided shape (nonagon), nine pathways leading outward, and nine gardens surrounding them. There are currently eight "continental" Bahá'í Houses of Worship and some local Bahá'í Houses of Worship completed or under construction. The Bahá'í writings also envision Bahá'í Houses of Worship being surrounded by institutions for humanitarian, scientific, and educational pursuits, though none has yet been built up to such an extent.

Calendar

The Bahá'í calendar is based upon the calendar established by the Báb. The year consists of 19 months, each having 19 days, with four or five intercalary days, to make a full solar year. The Bahá'í New Year corresponds to the traditional Iranian New Year, called Naw Rúz, and occurs on the vernal equinox, near 21 March, at the end of the month of fasting. Once every Bahá'í month, there is a gathering of the Bahá'í community called a Nineteen Day Feast with

three parts: first, a holy part for prayer and reading from Bahá'í scripture; second, an administrative part for consultation and community matters; and third, a social role for the community to interact freely.

Each of the 19 months is given a name that is an attribute of God; some examples include Bahá' (Splendour), 'Ilm (Knowledge), and Jamál (Beauty). The Bahá'í week is familiar in that it consists of seven days, with each day of the week also named after an attribute of God. Bahá'ís observe 11 Holy Days throughout the year, with work suspended on 9. These days commemorate significant anniversaries in the history of the religion.

Symbols

The symbols of the religion are derived from the Arabic word Bahá' (بهاء "splendor" or "glory"), with a numerical value of nine. This numerical connection to the Name of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as nine being the highest single-digit, symbolizing completeness, are why the most common symbol of the religion is a nine-pointed star, and Bahá'í temples are nine-sided. The nine-pointed star is commonly set on Bahá'í gravestones.

The ring stone symbol and calligraphy of the Greatest Name are also often encountered. The ring stone symbol consists of two five-pointed stars interspersed with a stylized Bahá' whose shape is meant to recall God, the Manifestation of God, and the world of man; the Greatest Name is a calligraphic rendering of the phrase Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá (يا بهاء الأبهى "O Glory of the Most Glorious!") and is commonly found in Bahá'í temples and homes.

Socio-economic development

Students of School for Girls, Tehran, 13 August 1933. This photograph may be of the students of Tarbiyat School for Girls, which the Bahá'í Community of Tehran established in 1911; the school was closed by a government decree in 1934.

Since its inception, the Bahá'í Faith has been involved in socio-economic development, beginning by giving greater freedom to women and promoting female education as a priority

concern. That involvement was given practical expression by creating schools, agricultural co-ops, and clinics.

The religion entered a new phase of activity when a message from the Universal House of Justice dated 20 October 1983 was released. Bahá'ís were urged to seek out ways compatible with the Bahá'í teachings, in which they could become involved in the social and economic development of the communities in which they lived. Worldwide in 1979, there were 129 officially recognized Bahá'í socio-economic development projects. By 1987, the number of officially recognized development projects had increased to 1482.

By 2017, the Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development estimated that there were 40,000 small-scale projects, 1,400 sustained projects, and 135 Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Current social activities initiatives include health, sanitation, education, gender equality, arts and media, agriculture, and the environment. Educational projects include village tutorial schools, large secondary schools, and some universities.

United Nations

Bahá'u'lláh wrote of the need for world government in this age of humanity's collective life. Because of this emphasis, the international Bahá'í community has chosen to support efforts to improve international relations through organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations, with some reservations about the present structure and constitution of the U.N. The Bahá'í International Community is an agency under the direction of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa and has consultative status with the following organizations:

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

World Health Organization (WHO)

The Bahá'í International Community has offices at the United Nations in New York and Geneva and representations to United Nations regional commissions and other offices in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Nairobi, Rome, Santiago, and Vienna. In recent years, an Office of the Environment and an Office for the Advancement of Women were established as part of its United Nations Office. The Bahá'í Faith has also undertaken joint development programs with other United Nations agencies. In the 2000 Millennium Forum of the United Nations, a Bahá'í was invited as one of the only non-governmental speakers during the summit.

Persecution

Bahá'ís continue to be persecuted in some majority-Islamic countries, whose leaders do not recognize the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion but rather as apostasy from Islam. The most severe persecutions have occurred in Iran, where more than 200 Bahá'ís were executed between 1978 and 1998. The rights of Bahá'ís have been restricted to greater or lesser extents in numerous other countries, including Egypt, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Morocco, Yemen, and several countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Iran

The most enduring persecution of Bahá'ís has been in Iran, the birthplace of the religion. When the Báb started attracting a large following, the clergy hoped to stop the movement from spreading by stating that its followers were enemies of God. These clerical directives led to mob attacks and public executions. Starting in the twentieth century, in addition to repression aimed at individual Bahá'ís, centrally directed campaigns that targeted the entire Bahá'í community and its institutions were initiated. In one case in Yazd in 1903, more than 100 Bahá'ís were killed. Bahá'í schools, such as the Tarbiyat boys' and girls' schools in Tehran, were closed in the 1930s and 1940s, Bahá'í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá'í texts were censored.

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to divert attention from economic difficulties in Iran and a growing nationalist movement, a campaign of persecution against the Bahá'ís was instituted. An approved and coordinated anti-Bahá'í campaign (to incite public passion against

the Bahá'ís) started in 1955. It included spreading anti-Bahá'í propaganda on national radio stations and in official newspapers. During that campaign, initiated by Mulla Muhammad Taghi Falsafi, the Bahá'í center in Tehran was demolished at the orders of Tehran military governor, General Teymur Bakhtiar. In the late 1970s, Shah's regime consistently lost legitimacy due to criticism that it was pro-Western. As the anti-Shah movement gained ground and support, revolutionary propaganda was spread, which alleged that some of Shah's advisors were Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís were portrayed as economic threats and as supporters of Israel and the West, and societal hostility against the Bahá'ís increased.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian Bahá'ís have regularly had their homes ransacked or been banned from attending university or holding government jobs. Several hundred have received prison sentences for their religious beliefs, most recently for participating in study circles. Bahá'í cemeteries have been desecrated, and the property has been seized and occasionally demolished, including the House of Mírzá Buzurg, Bahá'u'lláh's father. The House of the Báb in Shiraz, one of three sites to which Bahá'ís perform pilgrimage, has been destroyed twice. In May 2018, the Iranian authorities expelled a young woman student from the university of Isfahan because she was Bahá'í. In March 2018, two more Bahá'í students were removed from universities in the cities of Zanjan and Gilan because of their religion.

According to a U.S. panel, attacks on Bahá'ís in Iran increased under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights revealed an October 2005 confidential letter from the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces of Iran ordering its members to identify Bahá'ís and to monitor their activities. Due to these actions, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights stated on 20 March 2006 that she "also expresses concern that the information gained as a result of such monitoring will be used as a basis for the increased persecution of, and discrimination against, members of the Bahá'í faith, in violation of international standards. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that this latest development indicates that the situation about religious minorities in Iran is deteriorating."

On 14 May 2008, members of an informal body known as the "Friends" that oversaw the needs of the Bahá'í community in Iran were arrested and taken to Evin prison. The Friends court case has been postponed several times but was finally underway on 12 January 2010. Other observers were not allowed in the court. Even the defense lawyers, who have had minimal

access to the defendants for two years, had difficulty entering the courtroom. The chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said that it seems that the government has already predetermined the case's outcome and is violating international human rights law.

On 3 January 2010, Iranian authorities detained ten more members of the Baha'i minority, reportedly including Leva Khanjani, granddaughter of Jamaloddin Khanjani, one of seven Baha'i leaders jailed since 2008. In February, they arrested his son, Niki Khanjani. Further sessions were held on 7 February 2010, 12 April 2010, and 12 June 2010. On 11 August 2010, it became known that the court sentence was 20 years imprisonment for each of the seven prisoners, which was later reduced to ten years. After the verdict, they were transferred to Gohardasht prison. In March 2011, the sentences were reinstated to the original 20 years.

The Iranian government claims that the Bahá'í Faith is not a religion but a political organization, and hence refuses to recognize it as a minority religion. However, the government has never produced convincing evidence supporting its characterization of the Bahá'í community. The Iranian government also accuses the Bahá'í Faith of being associated with Zionism. These accusations against the Bahá'ís appear to lack basis in historical fact, with some arguing the Iranian government invented them to use the Bahá'ís as "scapegoats."

In 2019, the Iranian government made it impossible for the Bahá'ís to register with the Iranian state legally. National identity card applications in Iran no longer include the "other religions" option, effectively making the Bahá'í Faith unrecognized by the state.

Egypt

During the 1920s, Egypt's religious Tribunal recognized the Baha'i Faith as a new, independent religion, totally separate from Islam, due to the nature of the 'laws, principles and beliefs' of the Baha'is.

Bahá'í institutions and community activities have been illegal under Egyptian law since 1960. All Bahá'í community properties, including Bahá'í centers, libraries, and cemeteries, have been confiscated by the government, and fatwas have been issued charging Bahá'ís with apostasy.

The Egyptian identification card controversy began in the 1990s when the government modernized the electronic processing of identity documents, which introduced a de facto requirement that records must list the person's religion as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish (the only three religions officially recognized by the government). Consequently, Bahá'ís were unable to obtain government identification documents (such as national identification cards, birth certificates, death certificates, marriage or divorce certificates, or passports) necessary to exercise their rights in their country unless they lied about their religion, which conflicts with Bahá'í religious principle. Without documents, they could not be employed, educated, treated in hospitals, traveled outside the country, or voted, among other hardships. Following a protracted legal process culminating in a court ruling favorable to the Bahá'ís, the interior minister of Egypt released a decree on 14 April 2009, amending the law to allow Egyptians who are not Muslim, Christian, or Jewish to obtain identification documents that list a dash in place of one of the three recognized religions. The first identification cards were issued to two Bahá'ís under the new decree on 8 August 2009.