

The Baha'i Faith

The Bahá'í Faith was founded in Iran in the mid-19th century by Sayid Ali Muhammad — the Báb. It has its roots in Shi'ite Islam but has as its goal the unity of all the world's faiths.

In 1844, the Bab, himself a descendant of Muhammad, proclaimed the imminent appearance of a new Messenger of God who would overturn old beliefs and customs and usher in a new era. His teachings spread quickly in what is modern-day Iran, provoking strong opposition from both Shi'ite clergy and the government. Ultimately he was arrested and, after several years in prison, executed in 1850. 20,000 of his followers, the Babis, died in the persecution that followed.

One of the Báb's earliest disciples, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri, was arrested in 1852 and during his imprisonment realized he was the prophet whose coming had been predicted by the Bab. He assumed the name of Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God in Persian) and following his release revived the Babi community. The majority of Babis acknowledged his claim to be the predicted prophet and from then the movement became known as the Bahá'ís.

Bahá'u'lláh was ultimately exiled to Palestine. Before he died in 1892, he appointed his eldest son, "Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), to be the leader of the Bahá'í community and the authorized interpreter of his teachings. "Abdu'l-Bahá actively administered the movement's affairs and spread the faith to North America, Europe, and other continents. He, in turn, appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), as his successor.

The Bahá'í community grew rapidly in the 1960s, and by the late 20th century had more than 150 national governing bodies and 20,000 local assemblies worldwide. Today, it has about 7 million followers and is the second-most geographically widespread religion after Christianity.

God

Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, the Creator of the universe, who has absolute control over His creation (omnipotence) as well as complete knowledge of it (omniscience). Bahá'u'lláh emphasized that God has no need of human worship or allegiance, so the obedience he asks of humankind is entirely for the benefit of individuals and motivated only by his love for them.

Bahá'ís teach that although we may have different concepts of God's nature and call Him by different names — Allah, Yahweh, God or Brahma — we are speaking about the same Being. Just as the sun is the unique source of all life in a solar system, so ultimately there is only one force or power in the universe, the force we call God.

Man

According to Bahá'í teachings, everyone has an invisible, rational, everlasting soul that shows itself in his or her qualities of character. It is the soul that is capable of love and compassion, faith, courage and those other human qualities that cannot be explained by thinking of a human being as a mere animal.

The soul grows and develops only through the individual's relationship with God which is fostered through prayer, knowledge of the scriptures, love for God, self-discipline and service to humanity. This process of growth is what gives meaning to life.

Despite its emphasis on the soul, the Bahá'í Faith does not encourage a negative view of the body. As the vehicle of the soul in this life, it is important to maintain and care for it. Bahá'u'lláh strongly discouraged any form of asceticism or extreme self-denial. Therefore the Bahá'í writings contain a number of practical laws relating to the care of the human body: proper nutrition, regular bathing, and so forth.

Man's Problem

The Bahá'í Faith rejects any notion that people are basically evil or have intrinsically evil elements in their nature. Everything within us is God-given and potentially beneficial to our spiritual development. It also denies the existence of either Satan or any other evil force.¹ Evil is the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light and cold is the absence of heat.

If a person, through his own free will, fails to make the necessary effort to develop his spiritual capacities, the result is imperfection. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "Evil is imperfection." Each individual must therefore develop the spiritual and moral qualities that lie at the core of his or her nature. Bahá'u'lláh referred to the human being as a "mine rich in gems of inestimable value." These gems or qualities can be developed only when a person turns to God. While this task is the responsibility of each individual, humanity has received continual guidance from a loving Creator on how to accomplish it through the Manifestations — Bahá'u'lláh and the prophets of the great religions — and their writings.

The Solution to The Problem

Bahá'u'lláh stressed that only revealed religion can save us from our imperfections. It is because God has sent his Manifestations to show us the path to spiritual development and to touch our hearts with the spirit of God's love that we are able to realize our true potential and make the effort to be united with God. This is the "salvation" that religion brings. Salvation delivers people from imperfections that breed despair and threaten social destruction. Salvation is drawing near to God and progressing on the path to deep satisfying happiness.

The Final Outcome

At death, according to the Bahá'í Faith, the soul begins a spiritual journey towards God through many planes of existence. Progress on this journey towards God is "heaven." If the soul fails to develop, one remains distant from God. This condition of remoteness from God can in some sense be understood as "hell."

So Bahá'ís do not regard heaven and hell as literal places but as different states of being during one's spiritual journey toward or away from God. They understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe. Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "The nature of the soul after death can never be described."

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

Although God is unknowable Bahá'ís believe that He has made his nature and will known through of a series of Messengers or Manifestations. Each of these Manifestations — Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and others — has founded a great religion and each revealed the attributes and will of God as was appropriate to his own time. In this way, God has gradually revealed more of himself and his desire for humanity over thousands of years. This idea of progressive revelation — is central to Bahá'í doctrine.

All the Messengers or Manifestations of God are highly exalted in the Bahá'í Faith, as they provide the most complete knowledge of God available to humanity.

The most recent Manifestation of God was Bahá'u'lláh, whose message of unity and social justice ushered in a new age of divine revelation. The previous prophets are no less valid or respected, but Bahá'u'lláh's revelation supersedes them in that it is the most recent and most relevant for our time.

All of the 100 volumes written by Bahá'u'lláh, including the Kitab-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book), The Book of Certitude, The Hidden Words and The Seven Valleys, are believed to be inspired sacred texts. The writings of the Báb and those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are also considered sacred.

¹ Bahá'u'lláh explained that references to Satan in the Scriptures of earlier religions are symbolic and should not be taken literally. Satan is the personification of man's lower nature which can destroy him if it is not brought into harmony with his spiritual nature.

Distinctive Practices

To become a member of the Bahá'í Faith it is only necessary to profess belief in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. There are no sacraments or rituals and there is no professional clergy. Members are expected to pray daily, fast nineteen days per year, observe the holy days and make at least one pilgrimage in their lifetime to the world headquarters of the movement in Haifa, Israel.

Special emphases of the Bahá'í Faith include: independence in the search for truth, compulsory education for all, harmony between science and religion, the oneness of the human race, the goal of one universal language and the abolition of extreme wealth and poverty.

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you think makes the Bahá'í Faith appealing to so many?
2. What are its points of weakness?
3. What do you think would be the best approach to take if witnessing to someone who follows the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh?