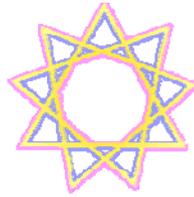


CULTURE AND RELIGION



Bahá'í Faith

Introduction

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions originating in Persia (Iran) in the year 1844. Geographically it is world's second-most widely spread religion with about six million believers worldwide who come from virtually every cultural, racial, social and religious background on earth.



Bahá'ís believe that the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), is the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and that includes Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ and Muhammad.

The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for its unification in one global society – “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”¹ Bahá'u'lláh has stated that God has set in motion historical forces that are breaking down traditional barriers of race, class, creed and nation and that will, in time, give birth to a universal civilisation.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to play a full part in the life of society and to maintain high standards of personal conduct.

Background and Origins

The Báb

The Báb was born in 1819 in Shiraz, Persia to a family of merchants. Bahá'ís believe that the Báb was an independent Messenger of God, whose mission was to inaugurate a new cycle in humanity's spiritual development and Whose Writings prepared the way for the mission of Bahá'u'lláh, much like John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of Christ. His title “the Báb” is an Arabic word meaning “the Gate”, by which He identified Himself as the gate for the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. His proclamation in 1844 marks the start of the Bahá'í Era and is celebrated by Bahá'ís throughout the world.

Bahá'u'lláh

Born in 1817 to a prominent and respected family in Persia, Bahá'u'lláh (an Arabic title meaning “the Glory of God”) is believed by Bahá'ís to be the Divine Teacher for this time, and the Promised One foretold by and referred to in all the spiritual Teachings and beliefs of the past.

His recognition of the religion of the Báb, His Forerunner, caused Him to be cast into prison and subsequently exiled, first to Baghdad, 'Iráq, later to the Turkish cities of Constantinople and Adrianople and finally to the prison city of Akká, Palestine. It was during this time in exile that He proclaimed His universal mission to the world and revealed divinely inspired passages equivalent to over 100 volumes, including His Book of Laws, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the “Most Holy Book”). This revelation comprises mystical writings, social and ethical teachings, as well as laws and ordinances.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892, still nominally a prisoner in Palestine, after almost forty years of suffering and fierce opposition by the two powerful courts of the Shah of Persia and the Ottoman Emperor.

'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, was born in 1844 in Tihrán, Persia, on the very night that the Báb had declared the beginning of a new religious cycle in history. From His childhood He shared Bahá'u'lláh's sufferings and banishments.

In His Will and Testament, Bahá'u'lláh named 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor and the authorised interpreter of the Bahá'í teachings and as Head of the Faith after His own passing. Bahá'u'lláh also vested in Him the attribute of being the Perfect Exemplar of His teachings for the rest of humanity to adopt as a model. While not regarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a prophet, Bahá'ís show special respect to His unique station. He took as His title 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the "Servant of Bahá", after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was, in short, the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant – the instrument for ensuring the unity of the Bahá'í community and preserving the integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This Covenant is a unique and distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í Faith. Its uniqueness is that for the first time in religious history the Manifestation of God, in clear and unambiguous language, provides for the authorised interpretation of His Word, and ensures the continuity of the divinely appointed authority that flows from the Source of the Faith's teachings.

During His lifetime, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote many books and tablets, interpreting and elucidating the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. He passed away in Haifa in 1921.

Shoghi Effendi

Born in 1897, Shoghi Effendi was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, appointed explicitly in His Will and Testament as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and authoritative interpreter and translator of its teachings and expounder of the Bahá'í sacred writings.

Although he did not have the authority to alter in any way what Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá had revealed, he performed the crucial tasks of clarifying points which may not have been clearly understood and of elaborating upon previously revealed teachings.

Shoghi Effendi was also the builder of a unique Bahá'í administrative order, first envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh in his Book of Laws and given further shape by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. At the head of this administrative order is the institution of the Universal House of Justice, first elected in 1963 and seated at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. According to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the establishment of the Universal House of Justice provides for the continuation of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant into the future, making it a unique instrument for the preservation of unity in the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'í Administration

The affairs of the Bahá'í community are the responsibility of elected councils at the local, state/territory and national levels. There is no priesthood and no individual leadership.

In each local government area where nine or more adult Bahá'ís reside, a nine-member Local Spiritual Assembly is elected on an annual basis to look after the affairs of the community. Bahá'ís facing personal difficulties are encouraged to turn to the Assembly for guidance. The Assemblies have elected officers including a chairperson and a secretary.

Each year the Local Assembly members in each state or territory of Australia participate in the election of a Regional Bahá'í Council, which represents and looks after the affairs of the Bahá'í community at the state or territory level. The Northern Territory has its own Regional Bahá'í Council.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia is the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in this country. Like the Local Assemblies, its nine members are elected on an annual basis. The National Assembly has its offices, which are staffed on a full-time basis, in the grounds of the Bahá'í House of Worship at Ingleside, Sydney.

Once every five years, an International Convention is held at which members of National Spiritual Assemblies from around the world gather to elect the nine members of the Universal House of Justice. This institution is the international governing body of the Bahá'í community and is empowered to legislate on issues not explicitly covered in the Bahá'í Scriptures. In addition to guiding the growth and development of the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice was exhorted by Bahá'u'lláh to exert a positive influence on the general welfare of humankind, and to promote a permanent peace among the nations of the world. Since its establishment it has vigorously promoted initiatives in the areas of human rights, the advancement of women, and social and economic development.²

Serving alongside the elected institutions, experienced and knowledgeable members of the community are appointed as advisers known as Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and their Assistants. They do not have an executive or decision-making role, but provide guidance, encouragement and counselling to individuals and the elected institutions at the continental, national and local levels. Women and men alike can be appointed to these roles.

Key Beliefs

The fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith consist of the following:

One Loving Creator

Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, unknowable in His essence, Who is the Creator and absolute ruler of the universe.

The Oneness of Mankind

Bahá'u'lláh says, "It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens."³

The Oneness of Religion

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the religions of the world come from the same heavenly Source and that "the difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed."⁴

Independent Investigation of the Truth

"God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept."⁵

Harmony between Religion and Science

'Abdu'l-Bahá likens religion and science to two wings, both of which are required if humanity is to progress. He says, "Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism."⁶

CULTURE AND RELIGION

International Auxiliary Language

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that in the future mankind will develop or choose a universal auxiliary language and common script that will “cause the whole earth to be regarded as one country” and be “conducive to unity and concord.”⁷ In each country, the language of the country will be taught, as well as the universal language.

Universal Education

Bahá'u'lláh has enjoined upon all the responsibility to become trained in a useful craft, trade or profession. He says, moreover, that “knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”⁸

The Elimination of All Forms of Prejudice

‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “... as to religious, racial, national and political bias: all these prejudices strike at the very root of human life; one and all they beget bloodshed, and the ruination of the world. So long as these prejudices survive, there will be continuous and fearsome wars.”⁹

Equality of Men and Women

Again, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the analogy of the cooperation of two wings necessary for the progress of humanity – this time to symbolise women and men. He teaches, in regard to opportunities for education and training, that “until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible”¹⁰ and that “it will come to pass that ... women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world.”¹¹

The Abolition of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “O Ye Rich Ones on Earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.”¹²

Spiritual Solutions to Economic Problems

‘Abdu’l-Bahá teaches that “until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained.”¹³

Universal Peace upheld by a World Federation

Bahá'u'lláh envisioned that the time will come “when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realised. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men. Such a peace demandeth that the Great Powers should resolve, for the sake of the tranquillity of the peoples of the earth, to be fully reconciled among themselves. Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him. If this be done, the nations of the world will no longer require any armaments, except for the purpose of preserving the security of their realms and of maintaining internal order within their territories.”¹⁴

The Purpose of Life

Bahá'ís believe that the purpose of life is twofold – to know and love God and attain His presence, and to “carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation.”¹⁵

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that human life is an eternal journey towards God, beginning in this physical world and continuing eternally after death through a series of spiritual worlds, the mysteries of which are hidden from us. Just as in the womb of the mother, the embryo develops physical

CULTURE AND RELIGION

faculties to enable it to live fully and ably in this world, so we must develop spiritual qualities during this earthly life to prepare our souls for their eternally continuing spiritual journey after their separation from our bodies. These spiritual qualities include truthfulness, love, kindness, justice, respect and humility. It is necessary therefore to strive daily to perfect such qualities within ourselves and put them into practice in our lives.

The ever-advancing civilisation which Bahá'u'lláh refers to requires not only the material progress of society, but spiritual progress also. He writes that the “well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”¹⁶ To serve humanity and to work for the advancement of its people is the duty and privilege of every person, no matter how great or small their capacity to contribute.

Demographics

In the 2006 national census, more than 12,000 Australians indicated that they are Bahá'ís under the optional question about religion. Almost half of the Bahá'ís were born in Iran, having fled from persecution there following the 1979 revolution. However, the Bahá'í community contains people of all backgrounds, its membership reflecting the diversity of the Australian population. There are over 130 Bahá'ís in the Northern Territory.

Greeting

The greeting known as the ‘Greatest Name’ of God became commonly used as a greeting amongst Bahá'ís during the time of Bahá'u'lláh. It is “Alláh'u'Abhá”, which translates to “God is Most Glorious” or “God is All-Glorious”.

Names and Titles

The Bahá'í Faith has no strict requirements regarding the use of titles.

Seating

There are no regulations as to how people of different genders and ages seat themselves in a gathering. It is important, however, to respect the culture of the people one interacts with and the culture of the land one abides in.

Dress and Appearance

Bahá'ís must practise modesty in their dress and not make themselves “the playthings”¹⁷ of others. It is up to the conscience of the individual to determine how to apply this principle.

Body Language and Behaviour

Bahá'í conduct may be defined by the practice of such virtues as courtesy, truthfulness, love for and service to all humankind, the exercise of pure and goodly deeds and striving for both personal excellence and the unification and progress of the people of the world. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá stated: “To be a Bahá'í simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood.”¹⁸

Bahá'ís are forbidden from backbiting and gossip and exhorted to practise moderation and modesty in their behaviour. This includes an elevated standard of moral behaviour which should distinguish the lives of Bahá'ís of both sexes. Bahá'ís are instructed not to engage in frivolous activities of physical intimacy such as indiscriminate kissing and easy familiarity, but rather to focus on first establishing strong bonds of a deeper, spiritual love with others.

CULTURE AND RELIGION

Food, Drink and Fasting

There are no dietary restrictions for Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í writings, however, point to nutrition as an essential factor in maintaining and restoring good health. It is preferable to content oneself with simple meals, exercising the virtue of moderation, and vegetarianism is encouraged.

The consumption of alcohol and other habit-forming drugs and intoxicants is prohibited, unless prescribed by a medical doctor. Smoking is not forbidden but is highly discouraged.

During the annual fasting period (March 2-20), Bahá'ís between the ages of 15 to 70 years do not consume food or drink between sunrise and sunset, except in the case of pregnancy, travel or ill health. Individual Bahá'ís are free to use their judgment, depending on their illness, as to whether to participate in the various practices and commemorations on the Bahá'í calendar such as the Fast, and to seek the counsel of a competent physician in cases of uncertainty. Fasting has a spiritual significance for Bahá'ís – it is a period of meditation, prayer and spiritual recuperation in order for the individual to refresh and reinvigorate his or her soul. It is also a symbolic reminder of abstinence from selfish and carnal desires, encouraging detachment from the material world and reliance upon God.

Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

The Bahá'í calendar was established by the Báb and was later approved by Bahá'u'lláh, and is based on a solar calendar. Each year is divided into nineteen months of nineteen days each, with four Intercalary Days (five in a leap year). New Year's Day (called Naw-Rúz) falls on the Vernal Equinox, 21 March which is a day of the year where day and night are of equal duration.

NB. Due to the solar calendar, the dates for the festivals and holy days below do not change from one year to the next. Dates marked with an asterisk are holy days on which work or school should be suspended.

26 February – festivities. 1 March	Ayyám-i-Há , the Intercalary Days reserved for charity, gift-giving and festivities.
2 – 20 March	Bahá'í fasting month , Bahá'ís over the age of 15 do not consume food or drink from sunrise to sunset.
21 March *	Naw-Rúz , the Bahá'í New Year.
21 April – 2 May *	Festival of Ridván , commemorates Bahá'u'lláh's public declaration of His mission in the Garden of Ridván in Baghdád in 1863. The first, ninth and twelfth days (21 April, 29 April and 2 May) are regarded as particularly holy, and work or school is suspended on these days.
23 May *	Declaration of the Báb , commemorates the Báb's declaration of His mission in 1844.
29 May *	Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh , marks the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892.
9 July * in 1850.	Martyrdom of the Báb , commemorates the execution of the Báb in Tabríz in 1850.
20 October *	Birth of the Báb
12 November *	Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

CULTURE AND RELIGION

- 26 November **Day of the Covenant**, celebrates the Covenant established between Bahá'u'lláh and His followers.
- 28 November **Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá**, marks the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh, in 1921.

Every 19 days, at the commencement of a new Bahá'í month, the Bahá'ís in every locality gather together to hold the Nineteen Day Feast. The Feast consists of three sections –

1. **Devotional:** Prayers and readings are read from the Holy Scriptures.
2. **Consultative:** Administrative and other affairs of the community are discussed and suggestions are given to be considered by the Local Spiritual Assembly.
3. **Social:** Refreshments are served and the community members interact with one another on a social basis to build bonds of love and friendship.

Language and Communication

The Holy Writings of the Faith have been translated into well over 800 languages and dialects. "The Nineteen Day Feasts and other official gatherings of the friends should be conducted in whatever is the conventional local language."¹⁹ One of the key principles of the Bahá'í Faith is the adoption of a universal auxiliary language (see Key Beliefs, above).

Family and Marriage

The family is viewed as the fundamental building block of society. A just social order must start from peaceful and just relations within the family. Accordingly, the establishment and maintenance of family unity is considered very important and the rights of all family members must be respected.

The Bahá'í Faith states unequivocally that women and men are equal. Women participate fully in decision-making, both within the family and within the Bahá'í community. Women are elected to the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and serve as their officers, just as men can. While men and women are equal, their roles are not identical. For example, mothers are considered to have a special role as the first educators of their children.

According to Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Laws, marriage is "highly recommended but not obligatory"²⁰ and is regarded as "a fortress for well-being and salvation."²¹ The couple must both freely agree they wish to marry, and then obtain the consent of all living parents in order to preserve the unity of the family. The only requirement for the Bahá'í ceremony is the recitation, by both the bride and groom, of the verse "We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God", which constitutes the Bahá'í marriage vow.

'Abdu'l-Bahá described "true marriage" as both a physical and spiritual union, "that they [the couple] may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God."²²

The practice of chastity and monogamy is obligatory. By chastity is meant that "no sexual act can be considered lawful unless performed between lawfully married persons. Outside of marital life there can be no lawful or healthy use of the sex impulse."²³

CULTURE AND RELIGION

Medical

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that individuals should seek the assistance of competent physicians for medical and psychological treatment. Since the Bahá'í Faith teaches that true science and religion cannot contradict each other, the application of medical and technological advances does not contradict Bahá'í beliefs.

Bahá'ís are only permitted to take drugs under prescription by a medical doctor. The use of blood transfusions, organ transplants, or advanced technology and engineering (such as amputation) is not prohibited. Since from a Bahá'í point of view, the soul is present from conception, abortion is strongly discouraged. It is not considered acceptable as a means of birth control, but is allowable for medical reasons.

From a Bahá'í perspective, true health extends beyond the physical. For an individual and a community to be healthy, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical well-being are all required. As humanity's understanding increases regarding the connection between the spiritual and emotional well-being of a patient and how this can affect their physical health, physicians and other health care providers will come to appreciate the benefit of understanding the beliefs and religious practices of their patients in order to provide optimal care for them. In care giving, the patient's spiritual needs and dignity should be supported whenever possible. Whether it is preferable that a same-sex doctor be assigned to a Bahá'í is entirely a matter of personal choice.

Death and Related Issues

Bahá'ís believe in life after death, holding that the soul is created at the moment of conception and will retain its individuality in an eternal realm. The body, which is compared to the lamp holding the light of the soul during its time in this world, should be treated with dignity.

Embalming is not to take place unless required by law. The body should be transported as little as possible after death, and interment must take place within an hour's travel time from the city or town where death occurs. The Bahá'í Writings teach that "the body of man, which has been formed gradually, must similarly be decomposed gradually,"²⁴ and thus cremation is forbidden. Autopsies are permitted if required for medical or legal reasons.

Counselling/Interviews

Like any other sector of the community, it is desirable to have a parent or another appropriate adult present when a child is interviewed.

Further Enquiries

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Official website of the worldwide Bahá'í community: www.bahai.org

CULTURE AND RELIGION

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- ¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 250
 - ² National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, About the Bahá'ís, pp. 50-51
 - ³ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 250
 - ⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 217
 - ⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 291
 - ⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 143
 - ⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 165
 - ⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 26
 - ⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 249
 - ¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 76
 - ¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 134
 - ¹² Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 41
 - ¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 283
 - ¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 249
 - ¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 214
 - ¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 286
 - ¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 76
 - ¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited by Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 71
 - ¹⁹ The Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 456
 - ²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 149
 - ²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 205
 - ²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 118
 - ²³ Shoghi Effendi, The Compilation of Compilations, Vol I, p. 56
 - ²⁴ The Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 201