

The Bahá'í Faith — An Introduction



The Bahá'í House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois

www.bahai.org ▪ www.bahai.us

1(800)-22UNITE

A world religion

*The Promised
One of All Ages*

The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion whose purpose is to unite all the races and peoples in one universal Cause and one common Faith. Bahá'ís are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, Who, we believe, is the Promised One of all Ages. The traditions of almost every people include the promise of a future when peace and harmony will be established on earth and humankind will live in prosperity. We believe that the promised hour has come and that Bahá'u'lláh is the great Personage Whose Teachings will enable humanity to build a new world. In one of His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh says:

“That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.”

*God is
unknowable*

One of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings is about God and our relationship with Him. Bahá'u'lláh teaches us that God is unknowable in His Essence. This means that we should not make images of God in our minds, thinking of Him, for example, as a man. In general, that which has been created cannot understand its creator. For instance, a table cannot understand the nature of the carpenter who made it. The carpenter's existence is totally incomprehensible to the objects he makes.

*God is the
Creator*

God is the Creator of all things. He has made the heavens and earth, with its mountains and valleys, its deserts and seas, its rivers, its meadows and trees. God has created the animals and God has created the human being. The reason behind our creation, Bahá'u'lláh told us, is love. He says:

*We were created
out of love*

“O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.”

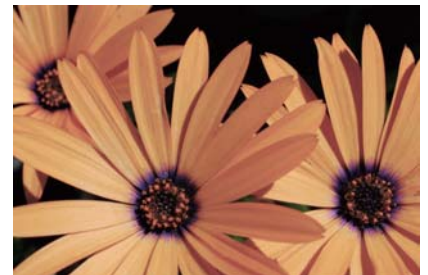
Eternal Covenant

Although God's existence is far beyond our understanding, His love touches our lives and our beings ceaselessly. The way this love flows to us is through His Eternal Covenant.

According to this Eternal Covenant, God never leaves us alone and without guidance. Whenever



Performers at the Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Faith in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Kinshasa, September 2003



Detail, flowers at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois

Manifestation of God

humanity moves away from Him and forgets His Teachings, a Manifestation of God appears and makes His Will and Purpose known to us.

The word “manifest” means to reveal, to bring forth something that was not known before. The Manifestations of God are those special Beings Who reveal to humanity the Word and the Will of God; thus when we listen to Them, we are responding to the Call of God.

There is an example from the physical world that helps us to understand the concept of “Manifestation” as taught by Bahá’u’lláh. In this world, the sun is the source of all warmth and light, without which life would not exist on the planet. Yet the sun itself does not descend to earth, and if we tried to approach it, we would be totally consumed. Suppose, however, we take a well-polished mirror and point it towards the sun. In it we will see the image of the sun, and the more perfectly polished the mirror, the more perfect the image will be. The Manifestations of God are like perfect Mirrors that reflect the Light of God in all its Splendor. All these Mirrors reflect the same Light. While God is beyond our reach, these perfect Beings come to us from time to time, live among us, give us guidance, and fill us with the energy we need to progress, materially and spiritually.

Many people were raised according to the Teachings sent by God to humanity some two thousand years ago through His Manifestation, Christ, Whose Station is that of the Son of God. The Teachings of the new Manifestation, Bahá’u’lláh, Whose title means the Glory of God, are in perfect harmony with the Teachings of Christ, and they address the condition of humanity today. If one considers the plight of humanity, it is clear that the time is right for another Manifestation of God to have appeared. Bahá’u’lláh speaks about the Day in which we live:

“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. It is incumbent upon all the peoples of the world to reconcile their differences, and, with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness.”

Time for a new Manifestation of God



Some junior youth in Perth, Australia participating in a Bahá’í study course, *Drawing on the Power of the Word*



Study circle attended by Spanish-speaking friends in Oregon



Olive trees in the gardens around the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh

*Unity of
Humankind*

*Join us in
striving to realize
His vision*

Another one of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings relates to the aim of the Bahá'í Faith, which is to unify humanity. In the Bahá'í Teachings we are told that we are 'the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.' Although we differ from one another physically and emotionally, although we have different talents and capacities, we all spring from the same root; we all belong to the same human family.

Humanity can be likened to a vast garden in which flowers of every form, color and perfume grow side by side. The charm and beauty of the garden lie in this diversity. We should not allow the differences that exist among us — in our physical characteristics, our temperaments, our backgrounds, our thoughts and opinions — to give rise to conflict and strife. We should see the members of the human race as beautiful flowers growing in the garden of humanity and rejoice in belonging to this garden.

Although the oneness of humankind is an undeniable truth, the peoples of earth are so far from it that unifying them is no easy task. If you choose to join the Bahá'í community you will participate with us in our efforts to build and maintain unity. We are all striving to bring our thoughts and actions in line with our belief in the oneness of humankind. We are told that when a thought of war enters our minds, we should immediately replace it with a stronger thought of peace. When a feeling of hate begins to take shape in our hearts, we should immediately replace it with a feeling of love. We should do everything possible to overcome our prejudices. Prejudices of race, color, nationality, culture, religion, and gender, these are among the greatest obstacles to building a better world. So many passages in the Bahá'í writings teach us how to walk in the ways of unity and how to help others take the same path. There is a wonderful passage from one of the talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh. He says:

"Bahá'u'lláh has drawn the circle of unity, He has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity. This is the work of the Divine Bounty, and we must all strive with heart and soul until we have the reality of unity in our midst as we work, so will strength be given unto us."



Organizers of the Hush Harbor devotional meetings in New York City



Bahá'ís on Pilgrimage enter the Shrine of the Báb

*Signs of
Greatness*

Bahá'u'lláh was born in 1817 in Tihrán, the capital of Iran. From His early childhood, He showed signs of greatness. He received some instruction at home but did not need to attend school, for He was endowed by God with innate knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh came from a noble family and when He was a young man, was offered a high position in the court of the King, but He refused it. He wished to dedicate His time to helping the oppressed, the sick and the poor, and to champion the cause of justice.

Two aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's life deserve particular attention. One is the suffering He endured. The other is the tremendous influence He had on the hearts and minds of people. In fact, these actually characterize the lives of all the Manifestations of God.

Bahá'u'lláh's sufferings began the moment He arose to proclaim the Cause of God. His life was one of exile, imprisonment and persecution. He was put in chains in a dark and dismal dungeon in Tihrán. He was exiled four times from land to land, finally being sent to the Prison City of Akká in the Ottoman Empire. So intense were His sufferings there that He has referred to Akká as the "Most Great Prison". In one of His Tablets, we read:

"Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison. And be thou so steadfast in My love that thy heart shall not waver, even if the swords of the enemies rain blows upon thee and all the heavens and the earth arise against thee."

Here is what Bahá'u'lláh has said about His sufferings:

"The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful. We have accepted to be abased, O



A pupil from a primary school reads a prayer at the service held in the Bahá'í House of Worship, in Sydney, Australia, on Universal Children's Day



A session at the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India

*Bahá'u'lláh's
sufferings*

*Bahá'u'lláh's
influence*

believers in the Unity of God, that ye may be exalted, and have suffered manifold afflictions, that ye might prosper and flourish. He Who hath come to build anew the whole world, behold, how they that have joined partners with God have forced Him to dwell within the most desolate of cities!"

Every effort was made by two powerful courts—those of the King of Iran and the Ottoman Emperor—to oppose Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings, but the Light of Truth is not easily extinguished. Nothing could be done to stop Bahá'u'lláh's growing influence. The farther the authorities banished Him, the greater the number of people who were attracted to His Teachings and recognized His Power and Majesty. In spite of constant persecution, Bahá'u'lláh continued to reveal the Word of God for more than forty years and brought so much love and spiritual energy into this world that the final victory of His Cause is certain.

Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892. His Shrine, which we consider the Holiest Spot on earth, is located near the city of Akká, near the city of Haifa, Israel.

*Two-fold station
of the Báb:
Independent
Prophet and
Forerunner of
Baha'u'llah*

Several years before Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Mission, God sent a special Messenger to announce His coming. This great Messenger took the title "The Báb," which means the Gate. He was indeed a gate to the knowledge of God and to a new era in human existence. For six years He taught ceaselessly that the appearance of the new Manifestation of God was near and prepared the way for His coming. He told the people that they were witnessing the dawn of a new Age, the dawn of the Promised Day of God. He called upon them to purify their hearts from earthly vanities so that they could recognize Him Whom God would soon manifest.

Thousands upon thousands of people accepted the Message of the Báb and began to follow His Teachings. But the government of Iran and the powerful clergy who ruled over the masses rose against Him. His followers were persecuted and large numbers were put to death. The Báb Himself at the age of 30 was martyred by a regiment of soldiers who, at the orders of the government,



Interior view of the prison cell where Bahá'u'lláh was first confined in Akká, in what was then Palestine



A conceptual drawing of the Bahá'í House of Worship to be built north of Santiago, Chile

suspended Him in a public square and opened fire on Him.

The Words of the Báb are quite penetrating. Here are two of His prayers:

*“Is there any Remover of difficulties save God?
Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His
servants, and all abide by His bidding!”*

*“Say: God sufficeth all things above all things,
and nothing in the heavens or in the earth but
God sufficeth. Verily, He is in Himself the
Knower, the Sustainer, the Omnipotent.”*

Many Bahá'ís know especially the first prayer by heart and say it either aloud or mentally in times of difficulties. It is easy to memorize.

Following His martyrdom, the remains of the Báb were recovered by His followers and taken from place to place, always hidden from the enemies of the Faith. Finally they were transferred to Mount Carmel in the Holy Land.

The twin cities of Akká and Haifa in Israel are today the spiritual and administrative world center of the Bahá'í Faith — the spiritual center because it is here that the Shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, as well as many other Holy Places, are located, and the administrative center because the Seat of the supreme governing body of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice, is also on Mount Carmel in Haifa.

The idea most central to our lives as Bahá'ís is that we have entered into a Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh. In all other religions, after the passing of the Manifestation, His followers had thousands of disputes among themselves and, as a result, split the religion into many sects. The cause of disunity was sometimes the desire for leadership of certain ambitious individuals. But, when differences of opinion arose between even sincere believers about what the Words of the Manifestation meant, no one had been authorized by the Manifestation Himself to settle the disagreements, and this contributed to conflict and dissension. Each set of interpretations led to the creation of a different sect.



The upper portion of the building where the Báb declared His mission on 23 May 1844 in Shiraz, Iran, before its destruction in 1979



The Seat of the Universal House of Justice, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel

Center of the Covenant

Bahá'u'lláh has protected His Faith against such division by endowing it with a unique power, the power of the Covenant. Before His passing, He stated in the clearest terms, in writing, that after Him all Bahá'ís should turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

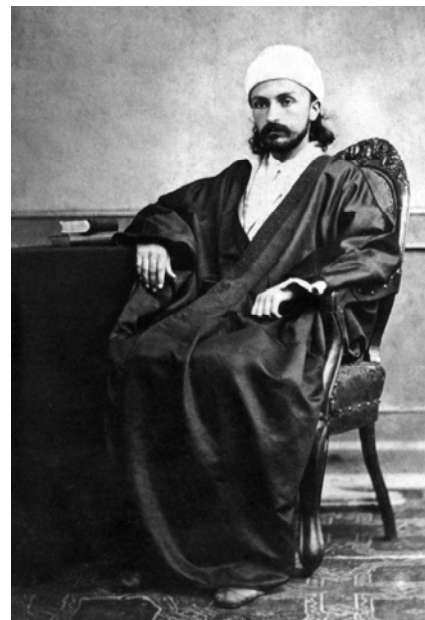
'Abdu'l-Bahá, His oldest Son, was thus named the sole Interpreter of His Words and the Center of His Covenant. He had been raised by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, had recognized His Station even as a child, and had shared the sufferings of His Father. He was a most precious gift given to humanity, the perfect Exemplar of all Bahá'í Teachings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá lived on this earth for 77 years. He was born on the same night the Báb declared His Mission in 1844 and passed away in November 1921. His life was filled with affliction, but to everyone who entered His presence He brought the greatest joy and happiness. After the passing of His Father, the responsibility for the Bahá'í community fell on His shoulders, and He labored day and night to spread the Faith throughout the East and the West. He wrote thousands of Tablets to individuals and groups everywhere and clarified the Teachings of His Father. His interpretations are now an essential part of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith.

By focusing on 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, the Bahá'ís of the world remain united in their efforts to live a Bahá'í life and to create a new civilization. We remember that as part of our promise to Bahá'u'lláh, we are to love one another and, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we see the perfect example of one who loves. We remember that we must uphold justice, that we must be generous, that we must overlook the faults of others, and from the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá we learn justice, generosity and forgiveness. More than anything else, by keeping our focus on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we are always aware of our covenant with Bahá'u'lláh that we will not allow the unity of His followers to be broken and that, united as a worldwide community, we will labor until the oneness of humankind has been firmly established.

The Guardianship

In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá named His grandson the Guardian of the Faith and after His passing, Shoghi Effendi became the authorized interpreter of the Teachings. For 36 years he



'Abdu'l-Bahá as a young man

continued the work of his Grandfather, clarifying the Words of the Manifestation and firmly establishing His Faith in all parts of the planet. Five and a half years after the Guardian's passing, the Bahá'ís of the world elected the Universal House of Justice, as envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh and clearly described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme institution of the Faith to which all the Bahá'ís of the world now turn.

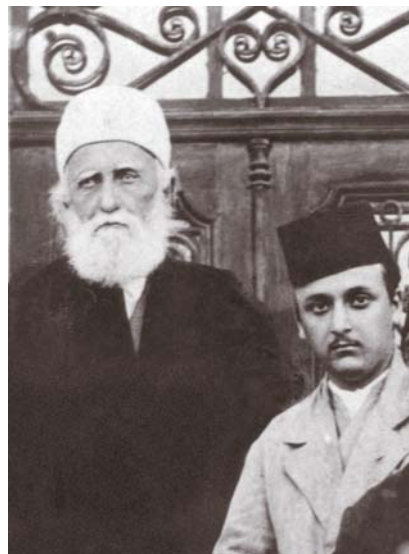
There are a few other facets of the Bahá'í Faith one should know right from the beginning. A most important aspect of every religion is the laws that the Manifestation brings to humanity in order to guide it in the right path. Some of these laws and commandments are eternal, while others change as humanity progresses and evolves. In the Faith Bahá'ís are taught not to think of Bahá'í laws as a series of dos and don'ts.

Bahá'u'lláh tells us that His laws are *“the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures.”* Nor should we obey these laws out of fear of punishment, for He clearly has stated in His Most Holy Book: *“Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.”*

These ideas will become clearer with a few examples of Bahá'í laws. In the physical world, human beings have to eat every day. This is a requirement of the human body; if we do not eat, we will get sick and die. We can say, then, that eating daily is a law of physical existence which has to be obeyed. In the same way one of the commandments of Bahá'u'lláh is that we should pray every day. Like our body, our soul needs constant nourishment, and prayer provides the nourishment for our spiritual growth. There are many beautiful prayers revealed by the Báb, by Bahá'u'lláh and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which we can say when we are alone or recite in gatherings. Some of these prayers are special, and some are obligatory. One obligatory prayer is recited by Bahá'ís everyday sometime between noon and sunset. It says:

*Obligatory
prayer*

“I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy



'Abdu'l-Bahá left, and His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, in a photograph taken in 1919.



The Seat of the Universal House of Justice, and entrance to the Centre for the Study of the Texts in foreground

*Backbiting
prohibited*

might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.

There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.”

In another commandment, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits backbiting. This is important because one of the greatest enemies of unity is backbiting. Unfortunately, it has become an established practice among most of humanity to talk about other people's faults in their absence.

Excessive concern with the shortcomings of others makes them bigger and bigger as they are constantly mentioned. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us to do just the opposite. If we see ten good qualities in someone and one fault, we should concentrate on the ten, and even if a person has ten faults and only one good quality we should focus on that one quality.

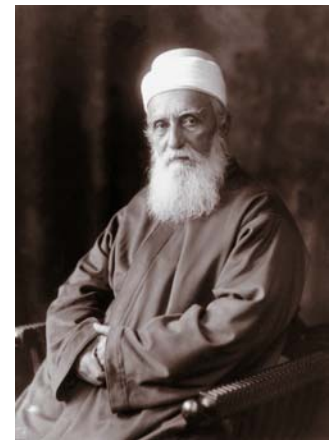
“O Companion of My Throne! Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed. Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom forevermore.”

Bahá'u'lláh prohibits the drinking of alcohol and, of course, substance abuse. Drinking alcohol is really one of the greatest social ills that exists today in the world. It is one of the most common causes of violence and the ruin of healthy family life. Drinking makes people capable of acting in shameful ways, when we have actually been created noble. Here is a beautiful quote from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings about nobility:

“O Son of Spirit! I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how



'Abdu'l-Bahá returning to his home on Haparsim Street in Haifa, in what was then Palestine



The eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was appointed by his Father to lead the Bahá'í Faith after His passing. Known as the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá played a crucial role in ensuring that the Bahá'í Faith would not fragment into different sects

Obligation to educate children

dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.”

Another commandment of Bahá'u'lláh is about the obligation of parents and society to educate children. In obedience to this command, Bahá'ís have established classes for the moral and spiritual education of children in most neighborhoods. Here is a short passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings that explains well the importance of such moral and spiritual education:

“Therefore, the beloved of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful must train their children with life and heart and teach them in the school of virtue and perfection. They must not be lax in this matter; they must not be inefficient. Truly, if a babe did not live at all it were better than to let it grow ignorant, for that innocent babe, in later life, would become afflicted with innumerable defects, responsible to and questioned by God, reproached and rejected by the people. What a sin this would be and what an omission!

“The first duty of the beloved of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful is this: They must strive by all possible means to educate both sexes, male and female; girls like boys; there is no difference whatsoever between them. The ignorance of both is blameworthy, and negligence in both cases is reprobable. Are they who know and they who do not know equal?”

Joining a religion is not the same as accepting a collection of nice ideals. The Bahá'í Faith is a very organized religion whose aim is nothing less than the unification of the entire human race. It will be helpful for you to think of the work of the Bahá'ís as the building of a world civilization. The Universal House of Justice tells us that there are three participants in this work, each with a very important role. The first participant is the individual believer. It is the duty of this individual to remain firm in the Covenant, to strive daily to bring his or her life in line with Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, and to serve humanity, always conscious of the fact that life does not end with death and that one's relation with God is eternal. After death, our souls become free and continue to progress towards God for all eternity. Our lives

The first participant is the individual believer



Shrine of the Báb at night



A devotional meeting outside the local Bahá'í Centre of Ntambo, Zambia

here are very much like the life of an infant in the womb of the mother. For some nine months the child develops faculties — eyes, ears, hands and so on — to be used later in this world. In the same way, we are to develop here the spiritual faculties that we need to progress in the other worlds of God. Of course, we do not achieve our purpose by just thinking about it. We have to work, serve our fellow human beings, and share the knowledge we gain with others.

The second participant is the community

The second participant is the community. Human beings were not created to exist alone. We live in communities and must work together to build the new civilization. The community closest to us is the local one which consists of the Bahá'ís of our village or town. It is in the local community where we learn to cooperate with one another, to grow together and become united. In addition to being members of the local community, we are also members of the national community and then the worldwide Bahá'í community which is constantly expanding and attracting people from every religious background, race, and nationality.

The institutions of the Faith represent the third participant in the building of the new civilization

The institutions of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice tells us, represent the third participant in the building of the new civilization. Bahá'u'lláh has many commandments related to the way society should be organized. In the past, the Manifestations of God have not said much about how their followers should organize themselves and people have had to discover how to do this by themselves. In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, however, Bahá'u'lláh has brought His own Administrative Order, which means that He has told us what institutions we must create, how they should function, and how humanity should be governed.

Earlier we spoke about the supreme institution, the Universal House of Justice. In each country, once a year Bahá'ís elect the National Spiritual Assembly, and in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly. There are no priests or clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, and it is the Local Spiritual Assembly that guides the affairs of the community and watches over the well-being of the individual believers. A Local Spiritual Assembly consists of nine members elected in a prayerful atmosphere by secret ballot by all the adult believers in the community. Spiritual Assemblies are extremely



The entrance to the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, the home of the Bahá'í Faith's international governing body



Inner staircase at a home occupied by Bahá'u'lláh in Akká, in what was then Palestine

important to Bahá'ís. Through them we learn how human affairs are to be administered and how a new order can be established in society, an order which is to be known as the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

“O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life. O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.”

~'Abdu'l-Bahá