

The Baha'i Faith

By Robert Pardon

Co-Founders: Mirza Ali Muhammad (Bab); Mirza Husayn Ali (Baha'u'llah).

Founding Date: 1844.

Official Publications: *The American Baha'i*, *The Baha'i Newsreel*, *Brilliant Star* (for children), *One Country*, *World Order*.

Organizational Structure: Universal House of Justice (nine members) administrates the Baha'i Faith internationally. National Spiritual Assemblies (nine members) administrate national Baha'i concerns. Local Spiritual Assemblies (nine members) administrate Baha'i concerns on a local level. All governing bodies are elected democratically.

Sacred Scriptures: Over 100 volumes written by the Bab, Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha. Some of the most notable are: *Selections From the Writings of the Bab*, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, *Kitab-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book)*, *Kitab-i-Iqan (Book of Certitude)*, *Baha'i Prayers*, *Some Answered Questions*.

Unique Terms: Most Great Peace, Manifestation, He-Whom-God-Will-Manifest, Fireside discussion.

HISTORY

The roots of the Baha'i faith lie in the Shi'ite sect of Islam which was led by 12 successive Imams, descendants of Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali. The 12th Imam, as a child, withdrew from society to escape assassination, the inevitable fate of his 12 predecessors. He would make contact with the faithful through "Gates," individuals through whom he would give his teachings.

In 1844, Mirza Ali Muhammad (1819–1850) declared himself to be the "Gate," the "Bab" (pronounced Bob). He claimed he was not just a "Gate," but rather *the* "Gate" of God, a major Manifestation of God equal to the prophet Muhammad. For six years he gathered the faithful around him, proclaimed a new revelation and the eventual appearance of the final Manifestation for this cycle of human history. After numerous armed conflicts with Muslim authorities, the Bab was martyred in 1850 and his followers scattered.

Before his death the Bab designated Mirza Yahya, a son of nobility, as a caretaker to follow him. Another devoted follower of the Bab, Yahya's half brother Mirza Husayn Ali, proclaimed himself to be "He-Whom-God-Will-Manifest," the major Manifestation of God prophesied by the Bab. He also changed his name to Baha'u'llah, "Glory of God," and proclaimed that the Bab was his forerunner. Mirza Yahya strenuously opposed this and both sides appear to have been involved in assassination plots.

The original followers of the Bab who gave their allegiance to Baha'u'llah became known as Baha'is. Baha'u'llah, a dynamic personality with great force of will, wrote over 100 volumes of Baha'i scripture, entertained dignitaries and maintained a large correspondence while under virtual house arrest for decades.

A troubled period of transition followed Baha'u'llah's death in 1892. He had

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designated his eldest son, Abdu'l Baha ("Slave of Baha"), as his successor. Abdu'l Baha's brother, Mirza Muhammad Ali, challenged the extent of his authority. Abdu'l Baha retaliated by "excommunicating" practically all his closest relatives and depriving them of their income from Baha'u'llah's estate.

The Baha'i Faith became worldwide under Abdu'l Baha's leadership, and his mission trips to the West. However, upon his death in 1921, the transition of power was once again very troubled. Shoghi Effendi, Abdu'l Baha's grandson, was designated the successor, the First Guardian of the Faith. With this position "...his decisions were absolute and final and his words authoritative."¹ This brought him into conflict with other family members and he soon excommunicated every living relative, including his own parents. However, under Shoghi Effendi's administrative skills the Baha'i Faith continued to grow until his death in 1957. He left no designated successor and the Faith is now under the administration of the Universal House of Justice, a group of nine people who are elected democratically and oversee the Cause internationally.

It is a daunting task to find a consistent, clear picture of Baha'i origins. Baha'i historians and authorities have suppressed and denigrated the earliest source materials and rewritten the early years of the Faith. One of the earliest and most important historical documents of the time, the Nuqtatu'l-Kaf, was written by the Babi, Mirza Jani. Jani personally knew the Bab and died for the Babi faith in 1852. Thus, his history was completed after the martyrdom of the Bab and before his own death. It clearly states that the Bab declared Mirza Yahya as his successor while also presenting Baha'u'llah in a favorable, though inferior position to his brother. Since that time, the Baha'is have strenuously suppressed this fact, publishing histories more favorable to their position. The history above may vary from *official* Baha'i versions but is consistent with original source materials. If the history of the Baha'i Faith reveals anything it is that the ethical injunctions of love and tolerance were not frequently applied at the highest levels. The bitterness, rancor, assassinations and lack of forgiveness amongst the very founders of this faith do not demonstrate the reality of its ethical teachings.

Despite that fact, in just 150 years Baha'is have grown to more than 5 million worldwide in 233 countries and territories, with 1,700 Spiritual Assemblies in the United States alone. New growth is occurring at the rate of 5.5% a year worldwide. By comparison, Christianity is expanding at a rate of 2.3% a year. Baha'u'llah's writings have been translated into 802 languages.

DOCTRINE

Baha'i theology, like Baha'i history, is very difficult to state concisely. The Faith is still relatively new, yet there are hundreds of volumes of written material. Symbolic meaning abounds, and interpretation of many points is in flux. However, in the broad sweep of doctrine many things can be said.

God: The nature of God is completely unknowable. He is transcendent to the point of total inaccessibility. Baha'u'llah spoke of God as,

...the unknowable Essence,... immensely exalted beyond every human attribute... He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient mystery of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.²

So transcendent is God that while He is the creator of all things He is not their cause. He simply eternally emanates all that exists. God by definition is the static, changeless One, forever separated from relationship with His created order.

Divine Manifestations: The figure of the Manifestation of God is, by far, the most important figure and concept of the Baha'i Faith. The great 500,000 year cycle of human history which began with Adam has been dominated by nine manifestations about whom we have historical knowledge. These are: Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah. True Manifestations are identified by

various criteria, the most important being: their very person as a self-validating truth, their sinless state, scripture (“a Book”) revealed through them, etc. Baha’u’llah is the apex of all previous Manifestations, they being Prophets who prepared the way for him. Thus, he is the Universal Manifestation for this cycle of human history. Other Manifestations will come but will be governed by the revelation of Baha’u’llah.

According to Baha’u’llah, God is so transcendent He could never incarnate. Rather, His human Manifestations act as pure mirrors to reflect the attributes of God into this temporal existence. The Primal Will, an eternal emanation from God, is the transcendent life force animating all Manifestations. These “reflections” of God are so pure and complete that, “Were any of the all embracing Manifestations of God to declare: ‘I am God,’ He, verily, speaketh the truth...”³

Though each Manifestation is said to perfectly reflect the same divine attributes, somehow each Manifestation is more perfect than the previous one. He therefore has authority to displace the teachings of the previous Manifestation, which have become distorted. Thus, Baha’i theology teaches the “relativity of truth;” that the teachings of any particular Manifestation are “absolute” only for his dispensation.

Manifestations function essentially as teachers, not as Saviors in the Christian sense. Baha’i Faith views the human soul as essentially good. Ignorance has clouded the soul and separated man from God. God intends the human soul to achieve the perfection of its humanity by each person coming under the “shadow of the True Educator (Manifestation) and [being] rightly trained...”⁴ Those lacking proper education to escape darkness may change in the next life through prayer and repentance.

Jesus Christ: Baha’u’llah states, “Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His essence and reveal it unto men.”⁵ Thus Jesus cannot be an actual incarnation of God. Still, it is appropriate to say that Jesus Christ is God but not that God is Jesus Christ. He is one of many Manifestations sent by God to assist humanity in its spiritual evolution.

Christ’s tomb is interpreted symbolically as the “tomb of unbelief.” Thomas seeing the risen Christ in John 20:28 is really only seeing the “believers willing to suffer for Christ.”⁶ Abdu’l Baha says the resurrection, “...is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material...”⁷ The “raising of the body of Christ” was actually the coming to life of Christ’s teachings in the disciples, the restoration of their beliefs and conviction. This is a critical Baha’i concept, as a physical resurrection would elevate Jesus above the other Manifestations by virtue of his victory over death.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

God: If the essence of God eternally emanates all that exists, then the material universe is co-eternal with Him and cannot logically be argued to be truly separate from God. Baha’i scholars have admitted this tends toward Monism (All is One). Baha’i scriptures affirming God’s separateness from creation are no solution; they only make Baha’i Faith self-contradictory. The Bible clearly portrays God separate from His creation. Being the Changeless One, eternally existent, He can create space and time without effecting His essence (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 40:28; 42:5; 44:24; Colossians 1:15–17; Hebrews 1:2).

If God is utterly unknowable and incomprehensible, nothing truly can be known about Him, not even by His prophets and divine Manifestations. By contrast the God of the Bible reveals Himself (Hebrews 1:1–2), wants to be known (Isaiah 45:22–25; Hosea 11:1–11), and invites relationship (John 14:23; Rev. 3:20). He also makes false teaching about God evidence of a false prophet, deserving punishment (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

Divine Manifestations: The infallible Center of the Covenant (Abdu’l Baha) said that Confucius was a Manifestation.⁸ The infallible Guardian (Shoghi Effendi) states, “Confucius was not a Prophet (Manifestation).”⁹ Both cannot be right. Likewise, it is

logically incoherent to state infallibly (i.e., as an absolute) that truth is relative, as Baha'u'llah does. This statement is self-defeating, self-contradictory, and thus meaningless.

All the Manifestations are declared to be sinless by the Baha'i Faith. Yet Muhammad is told in the Koran his sin will be forgiven by Allah (Sura 48:1-2). Nowhere does Baha'i theology adequately come to terms with the nature and depravity of sin, nor the necessity, under justice, of its punishment. The Baha'i Faith seeks to effect a moral transformation in man through education and recognition of the Manifestation. It seeks to make bad men good. Christianity seeks to make dead men live (John 10:10; Ephesians 2:1-6).

Shoghi Effendi writes, "...the great religions of the world are divine in origin...they differ only in non-essential aspects of their doctrines."¹⁰ They should agree, then, regarding their founder's teachings on the most foundational doctrine of God. They do not. Either the Manifestations contradict each other (making discernment between true and false Manifestations impossible), or the nature of God is contradictory (an absurd impossibility), or, the Baha'i Faith is false.

Jesus Christ: Baha'is believe Baha'u'llah's teaching that 'God cannot incarnate' is true "revealed word" simply because Baha'u'llah said it was. This is circular reasoning, neither verifiable nor falsifiable, and of no value.

According to the Bible, Christ is the outshining, the radiance of God's glory, His very image - not simply a reflection (Hebrews 1:3). He existed as God before taking on human flesh and living on earth (John 1:1-3, 14). Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). His truth and salvation was not for his time only, but for people of all times (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5; Philippians 2:6-11; Jude 3). Jesus resurrected physically (John 20:17, 20, 27; Luke 24:15, 39-43), just as He promised (John 2:19-21). The apostles proclaimed a physically risen Savior (Acts 2:24-32; 4:10; 17:31; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Only the most extreme "spiritualizing" of the clear intent of the text can render any other meaning.

RECOMMENDED READING

Baha'i, by Francis Beckwith. Brief, yet remarkably thorough treatment of the Baha'i Faith. Includes history, doctrine, and insights on Baha'i misuse of the Bible. Soft cover, 64 pages, footnotes, bibliography.

The Kingdom of the Cults, by Walter Martin. The classic volume that set the standard in cult research and apologetics, updated and revised. Chapter on Baha'i includes interview with a Baha'i teacher. Hardcover, 544 pages, footnotes, index, bibliography.

Notes

- ¹ William Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teaching* (Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers, 1984), 251.
- ² Shoghi Effendi trans., *Gleanings From the Writings of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, Ill: Bahha'i Pub. Trust, 1983), 46-47.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ⁴ Laura Clifford Barney, trans., *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill., Baha'i Pub. Trust, 1964), 236.
- ⁵ *Gleanings From the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, 49.
- ⁶ Michael W. Sours, *Preparing for a Baha'i/Christian Dialogue: Understanding Christian Beliefs* (Oxford: Oneworld), 142.
- ⁷ *Some Answered Questions*, 104.
- ⁸ Howard MacNutt, comp., *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Pub. Trust, 1982), 346.
- ⁹ Helen Hornby, comp., *Lights of Guidance: a Baha'I Reference File* (New Delhi, India: Baha'i Pub. Trust, 1988), 349.
- ¹⁰ Effendi Shoghi, *The Call to the Nations* Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Pub. Trust, 1977), xi.



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