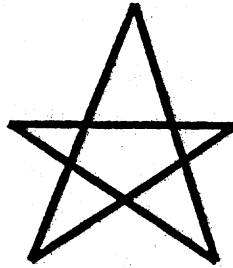


What is the Baha'i Faith?



Introduction

In the Vatican II 'Declaration on the relationship of the Church with Non-Christians' we find that the Church speaks with warmth and openness and greets People of Faith as partners in a single great enterprise. These religions contain much that is good and holy and provide ways of salvation for millions of people all over the world. Throughout the documents of Vatican II we find encouragement to respect, accept and meet as friends, those who profess faiths different from our own. The Baha'i Faith will be introduced here in this spirit. This leaflet is information about, not an endorsement of, the faith described.

Who are the Baha'is?

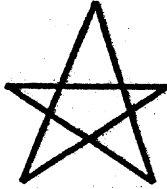
The Baha'i founders sprang from Islamic roots, but are seen by the Baha'is as found-

ing a religion that fulfils all previous religions. Today Baha'is are people who formerly had different religious backgrounds. They have been Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians or else they had no religion at all. They give equal homage to all the past prophets, but believe that religion progressively evolves, and that Baha'u'llah is God's spokesman for this age. Although Baha'is are from different religious, racial, national, economic and social classes, the Baha'i teachings have given them a higher loyalty – the loyalty to humanity.

To a Baha'i there is no demarcation between religion and everyday life. The most important prayer, Baha'is say, is a person's daily life. Religion, in other words, is an attitude towards God reflected in life.

Today there are between 5 and 6 million Baha'is in the world, extending over more than three hundred and forty countries, territories and island groups. In England

there are 6,000 registered Baha'is (1989) with 180 local Assemblies, resident in over 400 localities. At least 9 people are needed to form a local assembly. The Scriptures of the Baha'i Faith consist of the writings of the founders and are translated into over six hundred languages. The rapid growth they have experienced puts them in the category of a world religion, the youngest in the line of the prophetic tradition.



Origins of the Baha'i Faith

The Forerunner of the Baha'i Faith was a young Persian merchant known as the Bab (the Gate), who in 1844 proclaimed Himself to be a Messenger of God and a herald of One greater than Himself – One who would inaugurate a new era in religion and civilization. Like earlier Messengers of God, the Bab was opposed and denounced. After six years of persecution He was publicly martyred at the age of 30 in Tabriz.

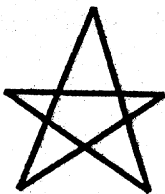
Its founder was Baha'u'llah (the Glory of God), a Persian nobleman who in 1863 declared Himself to be the One whose coming the Bab and all the previous Prophets had foretold. Like His predecessor, He was bitterly opposed and persecuted. During nearly forty years of exile and imprisonment He committed to writing the teachings of His revelation, some of them in letters to the most important kings and leaders of religion, as well as teaching and training His followers. His fourth and last place of banishment, reached in 1865, was the prison city of 'Akka (Acre), Palestine,

where He passed away in 1892 at the age of seventy-four.

Its authorised interpreter and exemplar was 'Abdu'l-Baha (the servant of the Glory), eldest son of Baha'u'llah, who was appointed by his father as the Centre of His Covenant and the one to whom all must turn for instruction and guidance. Abdu'l-Baha was the close companion and constant helper of his father, whose sufferings he shared. He remained a prisoner until 1908, when the old regime in Turkey was overthrown and all religious and political prisoners throughout the Turkish Empire were liberated. Afterwards he travelled widely in Egypt, Europe and America, explaining and exemplifying the principles of the Faith and inspiring and directing the activities of its followers throughout the world. He passed away in Haifa in 1921, mourned by people of all faiths. His life was and continues to be a shining example to all. In his will and testament, Abdu'l-Baha appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to be the Guardian of the Faith, and the interpreter of its scripture. Under his guiding hand, the faith spread rapidly. He passed away in London in 1957. Since 1963, the Faith has been under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

The Baha'i Faith

Proclaims:– The Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religion and of Mankind, and the equality of men and women. It encourages the elimination of prejudice of all kinds, universal education, elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, the protection of cultural diversity. It also advocates individual search after truth, the harmony of science and religion, use of an auxiliary universal language and world government.



The Baha'i House of Worship

A Baha'i house of worship is open to people of all nations, races, classes and creeds. It is a place of prayer and meditation for all, a gift from the Baha'is and a demonstration of their faith in the oneness of God, the oneness of His Prophets and the oneness of mankind.

There is one major Baha'i House of worship in each continent. For local regular gatherings the Baha'is hold meetings in their homes or in hired halls. The community has neither a priesthood nor rituals. The Baha'is see their teachings as a ringing call to action. They see them as offering hope, courage and vision, in a world beset with universal problems.

Baha'i Administration

Consultation is the keynote of all Baha'i administration. There is no clergy and no ritual.

The Scripture is in written form, preserved and authentic. Administrative bodies are called Spiritual Assemblies; they are local, national and international. All Assemblies meet in a spirit of prayer.

These spiritual Assemblies are elected by the people, but their responsibility is trust from God to whom alone they are answerable.

There is no seeking for votes, no candidates, no platform promises, no parties.

The Nineteen Day Feast is a community occasion, for the reading of prayers, discussion of affairs with the Local Spiritual Assembly, and material refreshment together.

The Universal House of Justice—an elected International body constituted by Baha'u'llah as the supreme legislative and governing body of the Faith—carries out its duties at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa Israel.

Only members of the Baha'i Faith may contribute to the Baha'i Fund.

Questions for discussion

1. Baha'is clearly place great emphasis on social teaching and the community of humankind. How do we as Christians respond to the social teaching of the Church?
2. In what areas would cooperation with people of Baha'i faith be most fruitful and possible?

Suggested further reading

A complete catalogue of Baha'i literature can be obtained by writing to: The Baha'i Publishing Trust, 6 Mount Pleasant, Oakham, Leicestershire LE15 6HY.

'The Baha'i Faith' leaflet.

'The Baha'i Faith' booklet.

'Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'lla by Baha'u'llah.

'Paris Talks' by Abdu'l-Baha.

'Guidance for Today and Tomorrow' by Shoghi Effendi.

'Baha'u'llah and the New Era' by Dr. J.E. Esslemont.

This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS

Getting to Know People of Other Faiths series: Catholics and Other Faiths, Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths. What is Islam?, What is Buddhism? Who was the Buddha?, What is Hinduism?, The Mosque, What is the Baha'i Faith?, Our Sikh Neighbours, Is God at work outside the Church?, Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation, What is Daoism?, Prayer and Prayers in Islam, What is Jainism?, Hindu Festivals, What is Shinto?, Who are the Zoroastrians? Aspects of Judaism, African Traditional Religion. The full set, one each of 18 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00p postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

Family Life in... series: Catholic Family Life (in preparation), Jewish Family Life, Family Life in Islam, Family Life among Sikhs, Hindu Families, Family Life in Buddhism: set of leaflets £1.00, 50 of one leaflet £5.00.

Ways of Sharing Faith (summary of Dialogue and Proclamation) is also available at 20p each post free, £5.00 for 50. **Hospital Chaplaincy and Other Faiths 20p, £6.00 for 50.**

ORDERS may be sent to: CFOF, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX.
Please make cheques payable to: **NCF (Other Faiths)**

Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from. Westminster Interfaith Centre: St Anne's, Underwood Road, LONDON E1 5AW.



COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS
Bishops' Conference of England and Wales