



## THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent monotheistic religion with a worldwide population of some 5 million people. They come from more than 2,000 different tribal, racial, and ethnic groups and live in 235 countries and dependent territories. The *Britannica Book of the Year* (1992) referred to the Bahá'í Faith as the second-most geographically widespread religion in the world, after Christianity. It originated in Iran in 1844 and has its own sacred scriptures, laws, calendar, and holy days.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that the Founders of the world's major religions, including Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, and Muḥammad, are divine Teachers sent by one God to educate humanity through teachings and laws suited to its stage of development. The Bahá'í Faith recognizes two additional Teachers for this age: the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís believe that religious revelation will continue in the future to provide guidance to “an ever-advancing civilization.”

In 1844 the Báb (“the Gate”) founded the Bábí Faith. His main purpose was to prepare humanity for the imminent appearance of another divine Teacher who would lead humanity into an age of universal peace. In 1863 Bahá'u'lláh (“the Glory of God”) announced that He was the figure foretold by the Báb, and the Bahá'í Faith was born. The Faith's unity has been preserved through the provisions of a written “Covenant,” which established the Faith's principles of succession and institutional authority. There are no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í community governs itself by elected councils at the local, national, and international levels, and only Bahá'ís are permitted to contribute to the funds of their Faith. Bahá'ís in Iran have suffered persecution for their beliefs since the Faith's earliest days.

The main theme of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is unity. He taught that “the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.” His writings contain principles, laws, and institutions for a world civilization, including: abandonment of all forms of prejudice; equality between the sexes; recognition of the common source and essential oneness of the world's great religions; elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth; universal compulsory education; responsibility of each individual to search independently for truth; establishment of a world federal system based on principles of collective security; and recognition that religion is in harmony with reason and scientific knowledge. Because of its commitment to these ideals, the Bahá'í community has been an active supporter of international organizations such as the United Nations. Service to humanity is another central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, which has led Bahá'ís to initiate thousands of social and economic development projects — most of them modest, grassroots efforts such as schools, village healthcare campaigns, and environmental projects — around the world.

The Bahá'í World Centre in the Acre/Haifa area of Israel has been both the spiritual and administrative center of the Bahá'í Faith since Bahá'u'lláh was exiled here in 1868. The Shrines (burial places) of the Báb on Mount Carmel in Haifa and of Bahá'u'lláh near Acre are the two holiest places on earth for Bahá'ís.

## THE BÁB

Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad, known to history as the Báb (Arabic for “the Gate”), was born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1819. He was a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, and his spiritual devotion and depth were noted early on by His teachers and family members.

Nineteenth century Iran was gripped by messianic fervor as Muslims awaited the appearance of “the Lord of the Age.” In such a climate, the Báb first declared Himself to be a Messenger of God on 23 May 1844.

The Báb founded a distinct religion, the Bábí Faith, which had its own laws, ordinances, and mystical and doctrinal works. Against a backdrop of widespread moral breakdown, He called for the spiritual and moral reformation of Persian society. He insisted that the station of women be uplifted and that the lot of the poor be improved. He promoted education and the useful sciences. However, the main theme addressed by the Báb and His teachings was the imminent appearance of another Messenger from God. This second Messenger would be far greater than the Báb Himself, and He would usher in the age of peace and justice promised in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the other great religions of the world. The Báb referred to this Figure as “Him Whom God shall make manifest.” The Báb thus heralded Bahá'u'lláh. His proclamation of an entirely new religion helped His followers to break free from their traditional frame of reference and mobilized them to prepare for the coming of “the Promised One of all ages.”

The Báb's mission was of short duration—only six years—but in that time He attracted thousands of followers. Most of the Bábís never met Him face to face but came to know of His religion by reading His writings, which were widely disseminated. His followers were severely persecuted by the authorities, who saw these conversions to the new Faith with alarm. The clergy were alarmed by His call for spiritual renewal and persuaded the secular authorities that the Báb's call for social reform could lead to civil unrest. Thousands of Bábís, exhibiting great heroism, were tortured and killed for their beliefs.

After three years' imprisonment, the Báb was executed by a firing squad in the city of Tabriz on 9 July 1850, in most unusual circumstances that were witnessed by more than 10,000 onlookers and reported widely in the Western media of the day. When first taken from His cell, the Báb was conversing with his secretary and warned the guards that “no earthly power” could silence Him until He had finished all that He had to say. A regiment of 750 Armenian soldiers carried out the execution, but when the smoke from their rifles had cleared, the Báb had disappeared from view. He was found back in His cell, finishing His instructions to His secretary. When the guards arrived, He calmly announced, “Now you may proceed to fulfill your intention.” The first regiment refused to have anything further to do with the execution, but a second regiment was brought in, and this time the bullets found their mark.

The remains of the Báb were hidden by His followers for many years and were eventually brought to the Holy Land. Bahá'u'lláh instructed that they should be buried on Mount Carmel and pointed out the exact spot where the tomb should be constructed. In 1909, the remains of the Báb were interred in a simple mausoleum, which was later beautified. The familiar golden-domed superstructure, known as the Shrine of the Báb, was completed in 1953. It is one of the two holiest spots in the world to members of the Bahá'í Faith.

## BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Bahá'u'lláh, which is Arabic for “the Glory of God,” is the title adopted by the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí (1817–1892). Born into a noble family in nineteenth century Iran, Bahá'u'lláh refused the political position offered to him when He was a young man and chose instead to spend His wealth caring for the poor and the sick. He became an early follower of the Báb (“the Gate”), a young merchant from Shiraz who claimed to be the bearer of a new religion destined to renew Persian society. The Báb moreover heralded the imminent coming of another Messenger of God, who would fulfill the prophecies of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the other major religions of the world, ushering in an era of peace and justice for all peoples. When the Báb was executed by the authorities in 1850, many of His movement’s members—called Bábís—turned to Bahá'u'lláh for leadership.

In 1852, while imprisoned in Tehran for his activities as a Bábí, Bahá'u'lláh received the first intimations of the mission foretold by the Báb. Upon His release from prison, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Baghdad and, in 1863, declared there that He was the long-awaited Messenger of God. The vast majority of the Bábís accepted this declaration and the Bahá'í community was born.

Through 40 years of exile at the hands of the Persian and Ottoman authorities, from Baghdad to Constantinople, Adrianople, and finally to the Ottoman penal colony of Acre, Palestine (now Israel), in 1868, Bahá'u'lláh revealed more than 100 volumes of divinely inspired mystical writings, ethical and social teachings, and laws and ordinances. He also addressed the kings and rulers of His day, including the Shah of Persia, the Sultan of Turkey, Pope Pius IX, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, Queen Victoria, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, Napoleon III, and the heads of governments in the West, informing them of the Revelation He bore. He exhorted them to govern their subjects with justice and compassion, and He warned them that if they did not, power would pass from their hands.

The key points of Bahá'u'lláh's message can be summed up as global unity and justice. He taught that there is only one God who has revealed His will through a series of divine Teachers such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muḥammad, Krishna, Buddha, and Zoroaster. While the social teachings of the great religions they founded differ according to the time and place they were delivered, the spiritual essence of all faiths is the same: that the purpose of all human beings is to know and worship their Creator. In this age, humanity is capable of recognizing the oneness of God, religion, and the human family. Bahá'u'lláh also taught that men and women are equal, that the teachings of science and religion are in harmony, that the extremes of wealth and poverty must be abolished, that education must be universal and compulsory, and that a universal auxiliary language must be chosen to facilitate international communication and understanding.

Before His death in 1892, Bahá'u'lláh provided for the succession of leadership of the Bahá'í community, ensuring its unity and protecting it from schism. His eldest son, ‘Abbás Effendi (who adopted the title ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, which means “servant of the Glory”), was appointed the head of the Bahá'í Faith and the sole authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. This act enabled the Bahá'í community to pass through the first century of its existence with its unity firmly intact, in the face of both external and internal challenges.

## ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

‘Abbás Effendi, known as “‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Arabic for “Servant of the Glory”), was born on 23 May 1844 — the same night that the Báb first declared His mission. He was the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh and was only eight years old when his Father was first imprisoned. He accompanied Bahá’u’lláh through 40 years of exile and imprisonment, and as he grew into adulthood he became not only his Father’s closest companion but also His deputy, His shield, and His principal representative to the political and religious leaders of the day. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s leadership, knowledge, and service brought great prestige to the exiled Bahá’í community.

After the passing of Bahá’u’lláh on 29 May 1892, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became the leader of the Bahá’í community, the position to which he had been formally appointed by Bahá’u’lláh. In this way, the question of religious succession that has plagued other faiths was avoided. Through His Will and Testament, Bahá’u’lláh prevented schism and established a firm foundation for the further development and progress of His Faith by preserving the integrity of His teachings.

Bahá’u’lláh titled ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “the Centre of the Covenant” to whom all Bahá’ís should turn for guidance. He was the sole authorized interpreter of his Father’s teachings, which he elucidated. As unerring guide and architect of the rapidly expanding community, he also amplified the doctrines and outlined the main features of the Faith’s administrative institutions. In doing so, he also devoted himself to providing members of the Faith, through the way he lived, with an example of the personal life called for in the Bahá’í teachings.

In 1911, after more than 40 years of imprisonment and suffering, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was able to journey to the West. He visited Europe and North America, where he spoke extensively to all sorts of audiences on Bahá’u’lláh’s prescription for the moral and spiritual renewal of society. He called himself a “herald of peace and reconciliation” and “an advocate of the oneness of humanity.” Highly acclaimed in the media and by leaders of society, he nevertheless made it clear that his greatest glory was to be “‘Abdu’l-Bahá”—the servant of Bahá’u’lláh—and that his Father’s teachings were the source of everything he said or did.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá died on 28 November 1921, in Haifa. Some ten thousand people of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem backgrounds, as well as Bahá’ís, gathered at his funeral. They eulogized him as a “living example of self-sacrifice,” a “pillar of peace,” and one who led humanity to the “Way of Truth.”

Like Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a Will and Testament. In his Will he appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as his successor, to be known as “the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith.” With this act, the unity of the Bahá’í community was again preserved and its progress and development assured.