

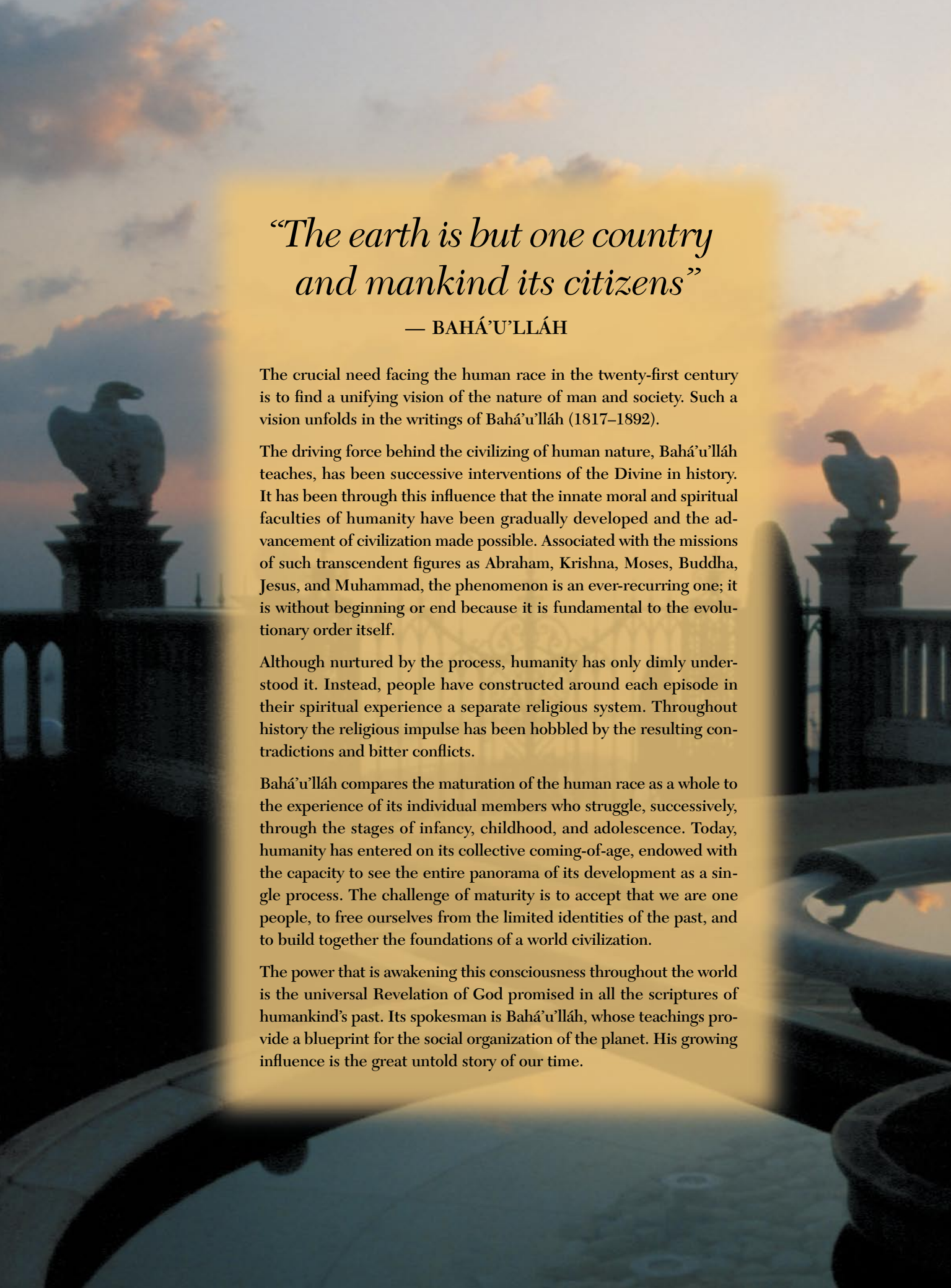
A PROFILE OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH AND ITS WORLDWIDE COMMUNITY

THE BAHÁ'ÍS



**IN JUST OVER
150 YEARS,** the Bahá'í

Faith has grown from an obscure movement in the Middle East to the second-most widespread of the independent world religions. Embracing people from more than 2,100 ethnic, racial, and tribal groups, it is quite likely the most diverse organized body of people on the planet. Its unity challenges prevailing theories about human nature and the prospects for our common future.



*“The earth is but one country
and mankind its citizens”*

— BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

The crucial need facing the human race in the twenty-first century is to find a unifying vision of the nature of man and society. Such a vision unfolds in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892).

The driving force behind the civilizing of human nature, Bahá’u’lláh teaches, has been successive interventions of the Divine in history. It has been through this influence that the innate moral and spiritual faculties of humanity have been gradually developed and the advancement of civilization made possible. Associated with the missions of such transcendent figures as Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, the phenomenon is an ever-recurring one; it is without beginning or end because it is fundamental to the evolutionary order itself.

Although nurtured by the process, humanity has only dimly understood it. Instead, people have constructed around each episode in their spiritual experience a separate religious system. Throughout history the religious impulse has been hobbled by the resulting contradictions and bitter conflicts.

Bahá’u’lláh compares the maturation of the human race as a whole to the experience of its individual members who struggle, successively, through the stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Today, humanity has entered on its collective coming-of-age, endowed with the capacity to see the entire panorama of its development as a single process. The challenge of maturity is to accept that we are one people, to free ourselves from the limited identities of the past, and to build together the foundations of a world civilization.

The power that is awakening this consciousness throughout the world is the universal Revelation of God promised in all the scriptures of humankind’s past. Its spokesman is Bahá’u’lláh, whose teachings provide a blueprint for the social organization of the planet. His growing influence is the great untold story of our time.



THE BAHÁ'ÍS

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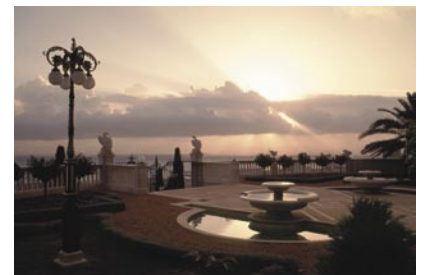
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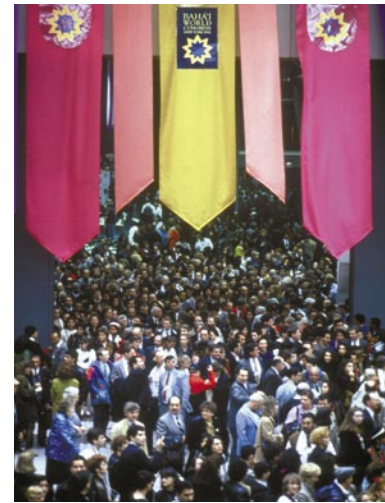


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The Bahá'ís

Founded a century and a half ago, the Bahá'í Faith is today among the fastest-growing of the world's religions. With more than five million followers, who reside in virtually every nation on earth, it is the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion but Christianity in its geographic reach. Bahá'ís reside in more than 100,000 localities around the world, an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship.

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH'S global scope is mirrored in the composition of its membership. Representing a cross section of humanity, Bahá'ís come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social or economic class. More than 2,100 different ethnic and tribal groups are represented.

Since it also forms a single community, free of schism or factions, the Bahá'í Faith comprises what is very likely the most diverse and widespread organized body of people on earth.

The Faith's Founder was Bahá'u'lláh, a Persian nobleman from Tehran who, in the mid-nineteenth century, left a life of princely comfort and security and, in the face of intense persecution and deprivation, brought to humanity a stirring new message of peace and unity.

Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be nothing less than a new and independent Messenger from God. His life, work, and influence parallel that of Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad. Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent in this succession of divine Messengers.

The essential message of Bahá'u'lláh is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's religions represent stages in the revelation of God's

◀ *People of virtually every background, in every nation, have become Bahá'ís. Shown here is a gathering of Bahá'ís from the Cochabamba region in Bolivia. Many are members of the Aymara and Quechua indigenous groups.*



*“He Who is
your Lord, the
All-Merciful,
cherisheth in His
heart the desire
of beholding the
entire human
race as one
soul and
one body.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

► Bahá'ís around the world seek to create a new and peaceful global civilization. They work towards this goal chiefly through individual and community transformation, including the sponsorship of a large number of small-scale, grassroots-based social and economic development projects, such as this small vegetable gardening effort in Erdenbulgan, Mongolia.



will and purpose for humanity. In this day, Bahá'u'lláh said, humanity has collectively come of age. As foretold in all of the world's scriptures, the time has arrived for the uniting of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society. "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens," He wrote.

The youngest of the world's independent religions, the Faith founded by Bahá'u'lláh stands out from other religions in a number of ways. It has a unique system of global administration, with freely elected governing councils in nearly 10,000 localities.

It takes a distinctive approach to contemporary social problems. The Faith's scriptures and the multifarious activities of its membership address virtually every important trend in the world today, from new thinking about cultural diversity and environmental conservation to the decentralization of decision making; from a renewed commitment to family life and moral values to the call for social and economic justice in a world that is rapidly becoming a global neighborhood.

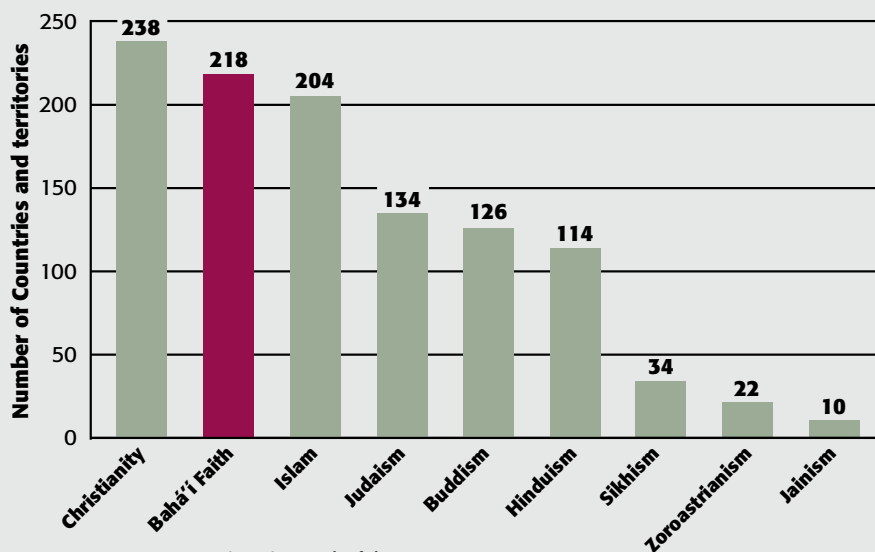
The Faith's most distinctive accomplishment by far, however, is its unity. Unlike every other religion — not to mention

The second-most global religion

The Bahá'ís have established significant communities in more countries and territories than any other independent religion except Christianity. This point was first made in 1982, in the World Christian Encyclopedia, which reported on the work of some 500 scholars, demographers, and statisticians who conducted the first comprehensive survey of religious believers worldwide.

According to the 2003 Britannica Book of the Year, the Bahá'í Faith is established in 218 sovereign countries and dependent territories. Christianity has communities in all 238 countries and territories defined by the United Nations.

Geographic spread of the world's independent religions



Source: 2003 Britannica Book of the Year

How the Bahá'í Faith is spread

Bahá'u'lláh explains that proselytism is an inappropriate practice in an age that should encourage spiritual maturity. Each person has the responsibility of investigating truth for himself or herself, and Bahá'ís can best contribute to the process by making information generally available and providing opportunities for interested individuals to explore Bahá'u'lláh's Message.

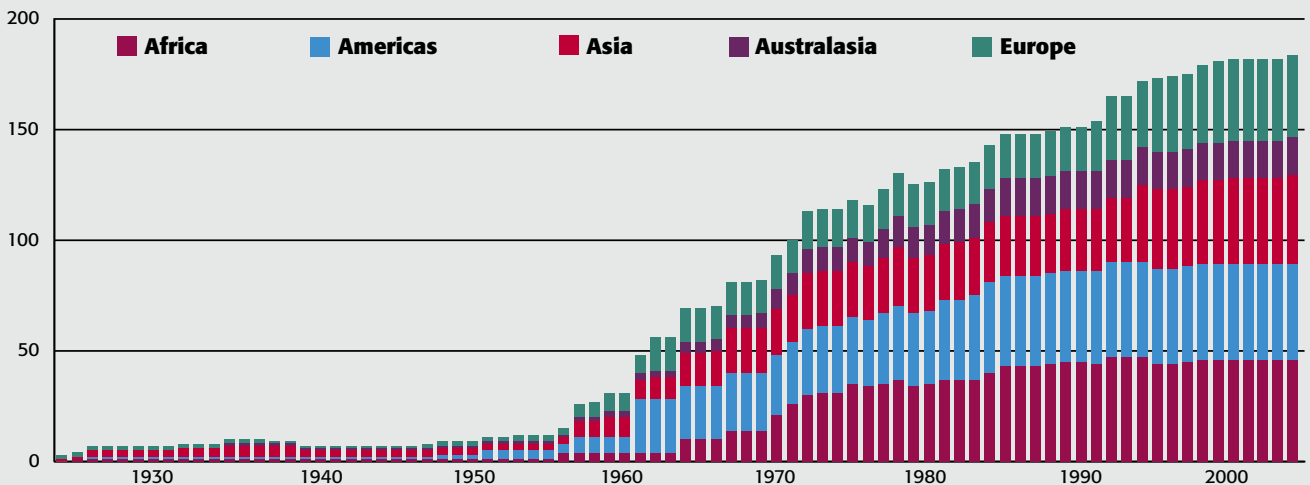
Three activities that have proven particularly effective are common to the work of Bahá'í communities throughout the world. Bahá'í classes for children, which are open to all, focus on moral development, in the context of the Bahá'í teachings of the oneness of humankind and the unity of the world's religions. Devotional meetings aim at providing participants, whatever their religious backgrounds, with the opportunity to discover their inner nature and to begin practicing the spiritual capacities latent in the human soul. Study circles, as the term implies, are small gatherings devoted to the exploration of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Apart from their other benefits, all three activities reflect the Bahá'í view that the traditional division between "believers" and "unbelievers" is a misunderstanding of the Divine purpose and an impediment

to human progress. Whether or not a seeker is led to become a Bahá'í is a matter of individual conscience and a decision to be respected by others.

In order to ensure that Bahá'u'lláh's Message is accessible to people everywhere, Bahá'ís have long shown a willingness to uproot themselves from their homes and move to other localities or countries. Such "pioneering," as it is known, differs sharply from the familiar work of missionaries, since those undertaking it are expected to pursue their own careers, to be self-supporting, and to integrate themselves into their adopted communities.

The wide range of other Bahá'í initiatives that seek to maintain the balance between doing everything possible to acquaint friends with the teachings and programs of the Faith and respecting the privacy of personal choice in a matter as central to life as religion includes production of literature and audio-visual materials, the holding of public meetings, and informal gatherings in homes. A term for the latter that gained popularity in the early years of the twentieth century — "firesides" — continues to be a common feature of Bahá'í discourse.

Growth in National Spiritual Assemblies



most social and political movements — the Bahá'í community has successfully resisted the perennial impulse to divide into sects and subgroups. It has maintained its unity despite a history as turbulent as that of any religion of antiquity.

In the years since Bahá'u'lláh lived, the process of global unification for which He called has become well-advanced. Through historical processes, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed, and nation have steadily broken down. The forces at work, Bahá'u'lláh predicted, will eventually give birth to a universal civilization. The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to accept the fact of their oneness and assist in the creation

of this new world.

For a global society to flourish, Bahá'u'lláh said, it must be based on certain fundamental principles. They include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; full equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between nature and technology; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Bahá'ís around the world express their commitment to these principles chiefly

through individual and community transformation, including the large number of small-scale, grassroots-based social and economic development projects that Bahá'í communities have launched in recent years.

In building a unified network of local, national, and international governing councils, Bahá'u'lláh's followers have created a far-flung and diverse worldwide community — marked by a distinctive pattern of life and activity — which offers an encouraging model of cooperation, harmony, and social action. In a world so divided in its loyalties, this is in itself a singular achievement.

This booklet is an attempt to tell this story. ■

Unity in Diversity

Around the globe, Bahá'ís are united by a common outlook that holds to high moral standards, a modern worldview, and a commitment to serving the wider community.



“The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

AS A YOUNG MAN, Hizzaya Hissani Mwani decided his goal in life would be to help his fellow Africans climb out of poverty, racism, and illiteracy. For a time, he thought a career in politics would be the best way to accomplish that. But since becoming a Bahá'í more than 25 years ago, his focus has been on working directly with people in remote villages on basic things like reading and writing, simple health practices, and moral virtues.

Tahireh Sanchez manages a computer training center in the jungle of western Panama. Located in the high school in the village of Soloy, the center serves the indigenous Ngabe-Bugle people. A member of the Ngabe-Bugle herself, Ms. Sanchez is also a second-generation Bahá'í. On her off days, Ms. Sanchez, who has a ninth-grade education, leads free classes in literacy and helps at a Bahá'í-run educational and research institute that serves the Ngabe-Bugle in the region. Her daily goal, she said, is to serve others in her community.

In Norway, Lasse Thoresen spends his days teaching about and writing music. A senior professor at the Norwegian State Academy for Music, he is also widely recognized as one of Norway's top composers of modern classical music. For inspiration, he often draws on various traditional music styles — ranging from aboriginal Norwegian songs to Gregorian chants. His works, reviewers say, bring together both simple and complex elements to create a new expression of diversity. The goal, Prof. Thoresen said, is to express through music what he sees as the spiritual principles for today.

Although different in their cultural heritages, educational backgrounds, and national origins, Dr. Mwani, Ms. Sanchez, and Prof. Thoresen are united by a common belief in the Bahá'í Faith — and a commitment to its ideals.

The worldwide Bahá'í community may

well be the most diverse and widespread body of people on earth. It is also among the world's most unified organizations, a feature that is perhaps its most distinguishing characteristic.

Bahá'ís the world over come from all religious backgrounds: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Zoroastrian, and animist. Yet they study a common set of sacred writings, observe a unifying code of religious laws, and look to a single international administrative system for continuing guidance.

Their sense of unity goes beyond a shared theology. It is expressed in an abiding commitment to a global program for moral, spiritual, and social progress that embodies the finest ideals of world society.

Promoting equality of women and men is a primary goal, as is ending racial and ethnic strife. Working towards the establishment of economic justice for all peoples is another major objective. So is ensuring access to good education for all. The community eschews all forms of superstition and sets for its followers high moral standards. Universal peace and the establishment of a united world community are primary concerns.

Indeed, no other world organization of similar diversity, whether affiliated along religious, political, or social lines, can claim a membership as committed to a vision that is at once so singular, coherent, and universal.

► *People of every nationality, race, ethnic group, and religious background around the world have declared their belief in the Bahá'í Faith, making the worldwide Bahá'í community perhaps the most diverse body of people on earth. Shown here is a group of young people from around the world who have volunteered to serve at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.*





“Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.”

— BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

The source of this vision is Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. A Persian nobleman who spent the last 40 years of His life as a prisoner and an exile, He authored the equivalent of more than 100 volumes — writings that form the foundation on which the worldwide Bahá’í community stands.

A way of life

From the earliest times, religion has been a powerful force for personal and social transformation. In both the lives of individual believers and the distinctive communities it has spawned, the Bahá’í Faith is a dramatic illustration of this principle in action.

The primary purpose of life for Bahá’ís is to know and to love God, and to contribute to an ever-advancing global civilization. Bahá’ís seek to fulfill this purpose through a variety of personal, family, and

▲ *Dr. Hizzaya Hissani Mwani, program manager of UPLIFT, a Bahá’í-inspired literacy project in Uganda’s West Nile Region. Dr. Mwani has played a key role in developing UPLIFT’s innovative and holistic approach to the teaching of literacy.*

community actions. The Bahá’í writings, for example, stress the importance of daily prayer and meditation, strong family and marriage ties, regular community worship, and efforts to serve the world at large.

Born in 1948 in East Africa, Hizzaya Hissani Mwani was orphaned at the age of three. Adopted and raised by a wealthy Indian Muslim family in Dodoma, Tanzania, he grew up in what was then a racially segregated society — and he was well aware of racism’s pain.

“There were areas for Europeans and areas for Indians and areas for Africans,”

Not a sect, an independent religion

In the past, some scholars referred to the Bahá’í Faith as a “sect” of Islam, owing to the fact that its Founder and early followers emerged from an Islamic society.

Today, religious scholars recognize that such a reference would be equivalent to calling Christianity a “sect” of Judaism, or referring to Buddhism as a “denomination” of Hinduism.

Although Christ was indeed born a Jew, and Buddha was likewise born into a social order defined by Hinduism, Their religious teachings went far beyond a simple reinterpretation of the religious systems in which They emerged.

In the same way, Bahá’u’lláh laid entirely new spiritual foundations. His writings are independent scripture, and His work transcends that of a religious reformer. As historian Arnold Toynbee noted in 1959:

“Bahaism [*sic*] is an independent religion on a par with Islam, Christianity, and the other recognized world religions. Bahaism is not a sect of some other religion; it is a separate religion, and it has the same status as the other recognized religions.”

said Dr. Mwani, describing the conditions some 40 years ago. “So during certain celebrations, even though I was a Muslim, I would have to eat separately, after all the other people had dispersed. I found that the community didn’t fully accept me, because I was African.”

These sorts of experiences led Dr. Mwani on a search for answers — for answers about religion, and for answers about how to help his own people. “I used to think I would be a politician,” he said, because that seemed the best way to change things.

In 1978, while teaching high school in Dar Es Salaam, he picked up a small book about the Bahá’í Faith — and was immediately attracted to the Bahá’í vision of unity.

“When I learned about the Bahá’í concept of the unity of mankind, I was very excited,” said Dr. Mwani. “I was inspired by the Bahá’í teachings, because they were free of prejudice.”

Soon after becoming a Bahá’í, Dr. Mwani moved to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to help with a Bahá’í project to promote development among the Bayanda (Pygmy) people. There he came to see literacy — and not politics — as a critical tool for helping others.

“So many people in that area believed that Pygmies are inferior, and not like other human beings,” said Dr. Mwani. “But slowly, through literacy, it was proved

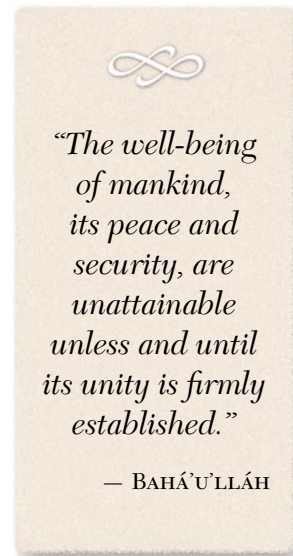
that they are just as good as anyone else.”

He began a serious study of literacy methods, obtaining first a master’s degree and then a doctorate. Today he is project manager of the Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT), a Bahá’í-inspired literacy project that serves more than 100 communities in the remote West Nile Region of northwest Uganda.

While traditional literacy programs focus mainly on getting adults to read and write, the UPLIFT method incorporates other kinds of knowledge — such as how to combat malaria, how to make compost, and how to obtain better nutrition — into its outreach. It is an integrated and holistic approach that has enabled most participants to learn to read and write in about 100 hours of class time — versus the usual 200 to 300 hours.

UPLIFT’s distinctive approach was devised in great part by Dr. Mwani himself, who credits the Bahá’í teachings on unity and oneness with helping him to see how literacy training can be something more than rote memorization. Rather, it can be used as part of an integrated approach to development.

“We look at the parts of language and experience, and relate them to the whole,” said Dr. Mwani, explaining his method for teaching literacy to the Alur people in the West Nile region. “For example, the people here believe that it is the witch doctors who cause malaria. So we must



Some statistics of the Bahá’í World Community						
	World Total	Africa	Americas	Asia	Austral- asia	Europe
National Spiritual Assemblies	183	46	43	40	17	37
Local Spiritual Assemblies*	9,631	3,067	2,741	2,186	777	860
Countries where the Faith is established:						
independent countries	191	53	35	45	14	44
dependent territories or overseas departments	47	6	17	3	13	8
Localities where Bahá’ís reside*	101,969	26,746	22,702	41,057	4,343	7,121
Continental Counsellors	81	19	19	19	11	13
Auxiliary Board members	990	234	234	288	108	126
Indigenous tribes, races, and ethnic groups	2,112	1,250	340	250	250	22
Languages into which Bahá’í literature is translated	802	266	172	174	110	80
Publishing Trusts	33	7	3	9	2	12

Compiled by the Department of Statistics at the Bahá’í World Centre for the year 2004. *As of 2003

∞

*“The peoples
of the world, of
whatever race
or religion,
derive their
inspiration from
one heavenly
Source, and are
the subjects of
one God.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



◀ *Tahireh Sanchez, pictured here with her husband, Benjamin, was born into a Bahá'í family. Her parents were among the first among the Ngabe-Bugle people to become Bahá'ís.*

teach them to use modern medicine. So when we learn the word for malaria, we don't do it in isolation. We study it in connection with prevention and the treatment and the cause and the cure.

“The approach is to look at the needs of the community as a whole and to relate the content of the program to the lives of the learners,” said Dr. Mwani.

Community service in Panama

In Panama, Tahireh Sanchez and her husband, Benjamin, likewise feel strongly about serving their community — the some 80,000 Ngabe-Bugle people who live in and around the Cordilla Central

Mountains in western Panama. Bound by a common language and diffusely settled throughout the region, the Ngabe-Bugle people exist largely on the margins of Panamanian society and have historically been among its poorest members.

Over the last 30 years, some 8,000 Ngabe-Bugle have embraced the Bahá'í Faith. Many were attracted to the Faith because of indigenous prophecy that spoke of the coming of a new religion that would teach love and unity.

With the help of the wider Panamanian Bahá'í community, the Ngabe-Bugle Bahá'ís built the Ngabe-Bugle (Guaymí) Cultural Center in the village of Soloy. Established in 1982, the center has over the years operated an agricultural research program, promoted the development of a series of tutorial schools in nearby villages, operated a secondary-level education program, and sponsored cultural and folklore festivals. All of these programs have sought to combine traditional wisdom and culture with modern knowledge in a curriculum of education appropriate to the Ngabe-Bugle people, who used to

The Nineteen Day Feast

A blend of worship, fellowship, and grassroots democracy

The centerpiece of Bahá'í community life is the Nineteen Day Feast. Held once every 19 days, it is the local community's regular worship gathering — and more.

Open to both adults and children, the Nineteen Day Feast promotes and sustains the unity of the local Bahá'í community. Although its program is adaptable to a wide variety of cultural and social needs, the Feast always contains three elements: spiritual devotions, administrative consultation, and fellowship. As such, the Feast combines religious worship with grassroots governance and social enjoyment.

The use of the word “feast” might seem to imply that a large meal will be served. That is not necessarily the

case. While food and beverages are usually served, the term itself is meant to suggest that the community should enjoy a “spiritual feast” of worship, companionship, and unity. Bahá'u'lláh stressed the importance of gathering every 19 days, at the beginning of each Bahá'í month, “to bind your hearts together,” even if nothing more than water is served [see *Bahá'í Calendar*, page 64].

During the devotional program, selections from the Bahá'í writings are read aloud. A general discussion follows, allowing every member a voice in community affairs and making the Feast an “arena of democracy at the very root of society.” The Feast ends with a period for socializing.

be known as the Guaymí people.

Ms. Sanchez and her husband are active supporters of many of these programs. Both have run training sessions in moral education, for example, and both have worked in the center's radio station, which broadcasts in the Ngabe-Bugle language and serves as a cohesive force in the community.

As with Dr. Mwani, the motive for their community service stems from their faith. "If I wasn't a Bahá'í, my way of thinking would be very different," said Ms. Sanchez. "I would just think about living day-to-day, not thinking about tomorrow or doing something good for others — especially doing something that will bring happiness and well-being to others."

The Sanchezes also strive to incorporate the principles of the Bahá'í Faith in their own family life. This is especially evident in the manner in which their married life differs from that of the typical Ngabe-Bugle husband and wife. As in many other places in the world, the woman is subservient to the man in a traditional marriage. If the couple has a horse, the man rides while the woman walks. And the woman typically does all of the cooking, washing, and child care.

In their household, the Sanchezes have over the years shared all duties, striving to follow the principle of equality between women and men. "In the house sometimes he cooks, and sometimes I do," said Ms. Sanchez. "Sometimes I wash the clothes, and sometimes he does. And we try to show respect towards each other."

Ms. Sanchez's parents were among the first Ngabe-Bugle to become Bahá'ís, and she was raised as a Bahá'í. The effects of the Faith's teachings on the oneness of all people are evident in the self-confidence and openness she projects to visitors — qualities that distinguish her from most Ngabe-Bugle people, who have traditionally been quite isolated and suspicious of outsiders.

"Among ourselves, we are very kind and socialize a lot," Ms. Sanchez said. "But with the outside people, we are very afraid to talk to them and relate to them. But in my family, I was taught to socialize with others and to treat everyone as equals. So this allows me to go out and make friends with all people."

After some years as a government literacy worker, Ms. Sanchez in 2003 took a new job coordinating the computer training center that has been established at the public high school in Soloy with the help of a Bahá'í-inspired development agency.

"The experience with Internet is something really great, in which we can become connected to the world and receive information from different places," said Ms.

How many Bahá'ís are there?

Accurately estimating the number of followers of any world religion is a difficult and complex task. In some regions of the world, religious persecution or government oppression may make individual believers reluctant to identify themselves. In other areas, poor communication or travel networks make it difficult to collect data.

Those engaged in counting religious believers, then, are often forced to resort to indirect data, such as statistical surveys, sociological studies, population projections, and such things as government estimates of ethnic, cultural, and religious populations.

Estimating the number of Bahá'ís is made even more complicated by the fact that the majority of the world's Bahá'ís live in the developing world and they come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and so are sometimes improperly counted in all but the most careful of surveys.

With these difficulties in mind, and out of a desire to be as accurate as possible, demographers at the Bahá'í World Centre are conservative in estimating the number of Bahá'ís worldwide. In their view, the most recent data indicates that there are about five million Bahá'ís in the world.

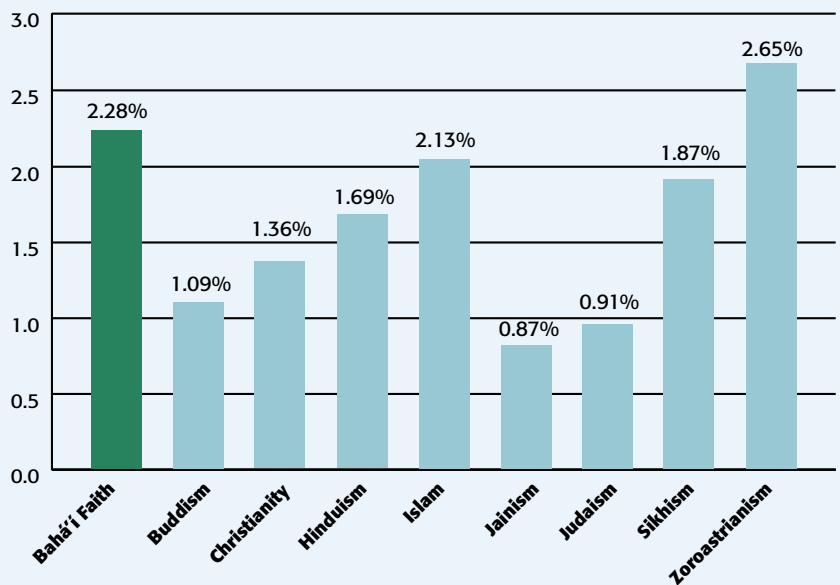
The inherent conservatism of their methodology is evident when Bahá'í statistics are compared with other estimates. Each year, for example, the Encyclopædia Britannica publishes a table of religious demographic statistics. The 2003 Britannica Book of the Year estimated that there were 7,406,000 Bahá'ís worldwide in 2002.

By almost any methodology, the rate of growth of the Bahá'í Faith is high, compared to other independent world religions.

According to the second edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia, published in 2001 and considered to be perhaps the most authoritative source on religious demographics, the Bahá'í Faith grew at an average annual rate of 2.28 percent during the 1990s.

Annual rate of growth, 1990–2000, of the world's independent religions

Religion Estimated Growth Rate in Percentage, 1990–2000 (Source: World Christian Encyclopedia 2nd Edition, 2001)



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“Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Sanchez. “This will let the whole world come in and is a way to communicate with different people as equals.”

The importance of prayer

In Norway, Lasse Thoresen strives to invoke the spiritual principles of the Bahá'í Faith through his music. Music, the Bahá'í writings say, is “spiritual food for soul and heart,” with a great capacity to inspire and motivate.

“The human spirit must undergo a metamorphosis and be transformed until it reflects divine qualities,” said Prof. Thoresen. “Prayer and meditation are important means, and music can be used to further reinforce the effect of the process.”

Like other Bahá'ís around the world, Prof. Thoresen makes a point of taking time to pray at least once a day, choosing from among the hundreds of prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and other central figures of the Bahá'í Faith, and to spend at least a few minutes in quiet reflection or meditation. “We have no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, we have no gurus or other spiritual authorities, so the type of meditation you do is left up to the individual,” said Prof. Thoresen.

Raised in the Lutheran Church, Prof. Thoresen felt “spontaneously religious” as a child but as a teenager began to question Christianity and declared himself

an atheist. “As a young intellectual it seemed somehow illogical to believe in God.” The shock of watching his father die spurred him to search again for the truth in religion. “I hadn't understood the reality of death,” he said. “So suddenly I found myself being an atheist, faced with the understanding that that is the fate of everyone.”

Then in his 20s, he began to investigate various belief systems, from Buddhism to Hinduism to Greek philosophy. In the summer of 1971, he heard about the Bahá'í Faith and was instantly attracted. Presented with a book of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, he felt that “it seemed very much to be a revelation from God,” said Prof. Thoresen.

“First of all, I saw in the Bahá'í writings there are some eternal things in the Bahá'í Faith that go through all religions, themes that have to do with eternity, detachment from the world, righteousness, justice, and love.”

“And it also seemed to fit the world situation today. From what I had studied, I knew we are all in a global village. And Bahá'u'lláh essentially said that more than 100 years ago.” ■

▼ Lasse Thoresen.



The worldwide Bahá'í community is established in virtually every country

Africa

Algeria
Angola
Benin
Botswana
Burkina Faso
Burundi
Cameroun
Cape Verde
Central African Republic
Chad
Comoros
Congo Republic
Côte d'Ivoire
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Djibouti
Egypt
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Ethiopia
Gabon
The Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Guinea Bissau
Kenya
Lesotho
Liberia
Madagascar
Malawi
Mali
Mauritania
Mauritius
Morocco
Mozambique
Namibia
Niger
Nigeria
Rwanda
São Tomé & Príncipe
Senegal
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Somalia
South Africa
Sudan
Swaziland
Tanzania
Togo
Tunisia
Uganda
Zambia
Zimbabwe

Americas

Antigua & Barbuda
Argentina
Bahamas
Barbados
Belize
Bolivia
Brazil
Canada
Chile
Colombia
Costa Rica
Cuba
Dominica
Dominican Republic
Ecuador
El Salvador
Grenada
Guatemala
Guyana
Haiti
Honduras
Jamaica
Mexico
Nicaragua
Panama
Paraguay
Peru
St. Kitts and Nevis
St. Lucia
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Suriname
Trinidad and Tobago
United States
Uruguay
Venezuela

Asia

Afghanistan
Armenia
Azerbaijan
Bahrain
Bangladesh
Bhutan
Brunei
Cambodia
China
Georgia
India
Indonesia
Iran
Iraq
Israel
Japan
Jordan
Kazakhstan
South Korea
Kuwait
Kyrgyzstan
Laos
Lebanon
Malaysia
Maldives
Mongolia
Myanmar
Nepal
Oman
Pakistan
Philippines
Qatar
Singapore
Sri Lanka
Syria
Tajikistan
Taiwan
Thailand
East Timor
Turkmenistan
United Arab Emirates
Uzbekistan
Vietnam
Yemen

Australasia

Australia
Cook Islands
Fiji
Kiribati
Marshall Islands
Federated States of Micronesia
Nauru
New Zealand
Palau
Papua New Guinea
Samoa
Solomon Islands
Tonga
Tuvalu
Vanuatu

Europe

Albania
Andorra
Austria
Belarus
Belgium
Bosnia-Herzegovina
Bulgaria
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Iceland
Republic of Ireland
Italy
Latvia
Liechtenstein
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Macedonia
Malta
Moldova
Monaco
The Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Russia
San Marino
Serbia and Montenegro
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
Turkey
Ukraine
United Kingdom



Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh's writings offer answers to the timeless theological and philosophical questions that have preoccupied humanity since antiquity — such as “Who is God?” “What is goodness?” and “Why are we here?” He also addresses modern questions posed by contemporary thinkers, discussing the basic motivations of human nature, answering whether peace is indeed possible, and explaining how God provides for humanity's security and welfare.

IN THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century, one of the most notorious dungeons in the Near East was Tehran's “Black Pit.” Once the underground reservoir for a public bath, its only outlet was a single passage of three steep flights of stone steps. Prisoners huddled in filth, languishing in the pit's inky gloom, subterranean cold, and stench-ridden atmosphere.

In this grim setting, the rarest and most cherished of religious events was once again played out: mortal man, outwardly human in other respects, was summoned by God to bring to humanity a new religious revelation.

The year was 1852, and the man was a Persian nobleman, known today as Bahá'u'lláh. During His imprisonment, as He sat with His feet in stocks and a 100-pound iron chain around His neck, Bahá'u'lláh received a vision of God's will for humanity.

The event is comparable to those great moments of the ancient past when God revealed Himself to His earlier Messengers: when Moses stood before the Burning Bush; when the Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended upon Jesus; or when the archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad [continued on page 20].



*“This is the Day
in which God's
most excellent
favours have been
poured out upon
men, the Day in
which His most
mighty grace
hath been
infused into all
created things.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

◀ Entrance to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh,
near Acre, Israel.

The Bábí movement, precursor to the Bahá'í Faith

Or, why Bahá'ís regard 1844 as the beginning of their Faith

The early nineteenth century was a period of messianic expectations in many lands. Deeply disturbed by the implications of scientific inquiry and industrialization, earnest believers from many religious backgrounds turned to the scriptures of their faiths for an understanding of the accelerating processes of change.

In Europe and America, groups like the Templers and the Millerites believed they had found in the Christian scriptures evidence supporting their conviction that history had ended and the return of Jesus Christ was at hand. A markedly similar ferment developed in the Middle East around the belief that the fulfillment of various prophecies in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions was imminent.

By far the most dramatic of these millennialist movements emerged in Iran. It focused on the person and teachings of a young merchant from the city of Shiraz, known to history as the Báb. From 1844 to 1863, Persians of all classes were caught up in a storm of hope and excitement, aroused by the Báb's announcement that the Day of God was at hand and that He was Himself the One promised in Islamic

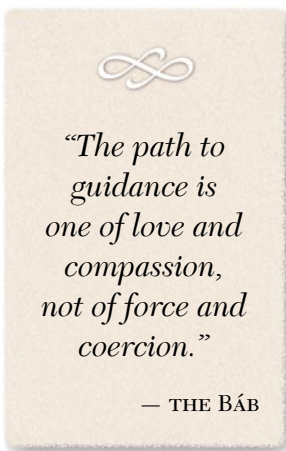
scripture. Humanity stood, He said, on the threshold of an era that would witness the restructuring of all aspects of life.

In some respects, the Báb's role can be compared to John the Baptist in the founding of Christianity. The Báb was Bahá'u'lláh's herald: His primary mission was to prepare the way for Bahá'u'lláh's coming. Accordingly, the founding of the Bábí Faith is viewed by Bahá'ís as synonymous with the founding of the Bahá'í Faith — and its purpose was fulfilled when Bahá'u'lláh announced in 1863 that He was the Promised One foretold by the Báb.

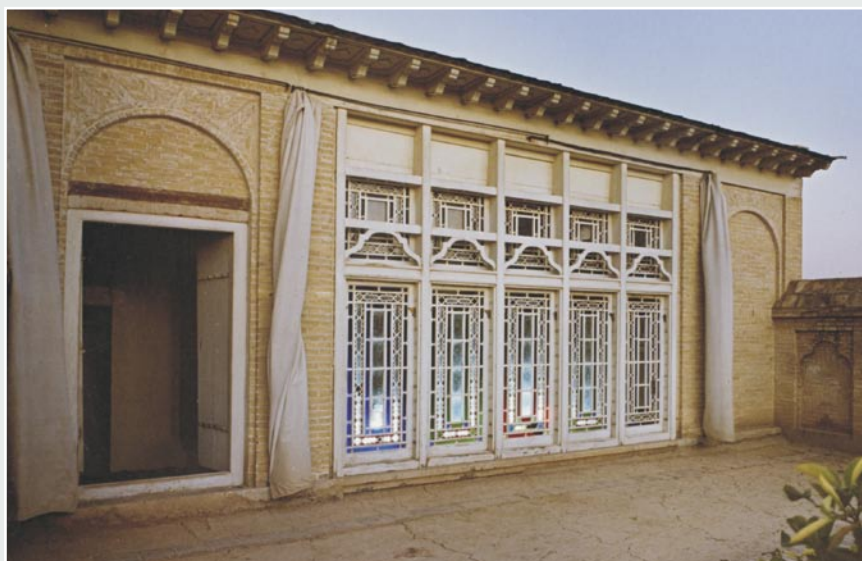
An independent religion

At the same time, however, the Báb founded a distinct, independent religion of His own. Known as the Bábí Faith, that religious dispensation spawned its own vigorous community, possessed its own scriptures, and left its own mark on history.

The Bábí Faith was founded on 23 May 1844 when the Báb, then a 25-year-old merchant in the Iranian city of Shiraz, announced that He was Islam's promised Qa'im, "He Who Will Arise." Although the young merchant's given name was Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad, He took the title "the Báb," which means "Gate" or "Door" in Arabic. His coming, the Báb explained, represented the portal through which the universal Messenger of God expected by all humanity would soon appear.



▼ *The upper portion of the building where the Báb declared His mission on 23 May 1844 in Shiraz, Iran.*



Accounts agree that the Báb was an extraordinary child. Born on 20 October 1819, He possessed a surprising wisdom and nobility, reminiscent of the young Jesus. Upon reaching manhood, the Báb joined his uncle in the family business, a trading house. His integrity and piety won the esteem of the other merchants with whom He came in contact. He was also known for His generosity to the poor.

After His announcement, the Báb attracted followers rapidly, and the new religious movement spread through Iran like wildfire. This growth stirred opposition and persecution — especially among the religious establishment, which saw a threat to its power and prestige. In the course of this persecution, the Báb was imprisoned several times.

His major work, the Bayan, abrogated certain Muslim laws and replaced them with new ones relevant to a more advanced age. The Bayan stressed a high moral standard, with an emphasis on purity of heart and motive. It also upheld the station of women and the poor, and it promoted education and useful sciences.

The central theme of the Bayan was the imminence of a second Messenger from God, Who would be far greater than the Báb, and Whose mission would be to usher in the age of peace and plenty that had for so long been promised in Islam, as well as in Judaism, Christianity, and all the other world religions.

Persecution and execution

The hearts and minds of those who heard the message of the Báb were locked in a mental world that had changed little from medieval times. By proclaiming an entirely new religion, the Báb was able to help His followers break free entirely from the Islamic frame of reference and to mobilize them in preparation for the coming of Bahá'u'lláh.

The boldness of this proclamation — which put forth the vision of an entirely new society — stirred intense fear within the religious and secular establishments. Accordingly, persecution of the Bábís quickly developed. Those opposed to the Báb ultimately argued that He was not only a heretic, but a dangerous rebel. The authorities decided to have Him executed.

On 9 July 1850, this sentence was carried out in the courtyard of the Tabriz army barracks. Some 10,000 people crowded the rooftops of the barracks and houses that overlooked the square. The Báb and a young follower were suspended by two ropes against a wall. A regiment of



▲ *The Báb's mortal remains are buried under this shrine, located on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel. The Shrine of the Báb is one of the holiest places in the world to Bahá'ís.*

750 Christian Armenian soldiers, arranged in three files of 250 each, opened fire in three successive volleys. The sky was darkened and the entire yard obscured by the volume of gunpowder smoke and the dust raised by the shots.

As recorded in an account filed with the British Foreign Office, the Báb was not to be seen when the smoke cleared. His companion stood uninjured and untouched by the bullets. The ropes by which he and the Báb had been suspended, however, were rent into pieces.

The Báb was found back in His cell, giving final instructions to one of His followers. Earlier in the day, when the guards had come to take Him to the place of execution, the Báb had warned that no “earthly power” could silence Him until He had finished all that He had to say. When the guards arrived a second time, the Báb calmly announced: “Now you may proceed to fulfill your intention.”

For the second time, the Báb and His young companion were brought out. The Armenian troops refused to fire again, and a Muslim firing squad was assembled and ordered to shoot. This time the bodies of the pair were shattered, their bones and flesh mingled into one mass. Surprisingly, their faces were virtually untouched.



▲ *This house was Bahá'u'lláh's residence in Adrianople (Edirne, Turkey) just before his final exile to the prison city of Acre. The house has been entirely restored and is considered a holy place by Bahá'ís.*

Bahá'u'lláh's experience in the Black Pit set in motion a process of religious revelation which, over the next 40 years, led to the production of the thousands of books, tablets, and letters that form the core of the sacred scripture of the Bahá'í Faith. In those writings, He outlined a framework for the reconstruction of human society at all levels: spiritual, moral, economic, political, and philosophical.

In the past, God's Messengers have for the most part presented Their teachings to humanity by speaking or preaching. These outpourings have been recorded by others, sometimes during the Messenger's life, sometimes later, from memory, by His followers. The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, however, took up pen and paper Himself and wrote down for humanity the revelation He received, or dictated His message to believers who served as secretaries.

Bahá'u'lláh addressed not only those timeless theological and philosophical questions that have preoccupied humanity since antiquity — such as “Who is God?” “What is goodness?” and “Why are we here?” — but also the questions of contemporary thinkers: What motivates human nature? Is real peace indeed possible? Does God still care for humanity?

From His words, the worldwide community of Bahá'u'lláh draws its inspiration, discovers its moral bearing, and derives creative energy.

Bahá'u'lláh, whose name means “the Glory of God” in Arabic, was born on 12 November 1817 in Tehran, Iran. The son of a wealthy government minister, Mirza Buzurg-i-Nuri, His given name was Husayn-‘Ali and His family could trace its ancestry back to the great dynasties of Iran's imperial past. Bahá'u'lláh led a princely life as a young man, receiving an education that focused largely on horsemanship, swordsmanship, calligraphy, and classic poetry.

In October 1835, Bahá'u'lláh married Asiyih Khanum, the daughter of another nobleman. They had three children: a son, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, born in 1844; a daughter, Bahiyyih, born in 1846; and a son, Mi-hdi, born in 1848. Bahá'u'lláh declined the ministerial career open to Him in government and chose instead to devote His energies to a range of philanthropies which, by the early 1840s, earned Him widespread renown as “Father of the Poor.” This privileged existence swiftly eroded after 1844, when Bahá'u'lláh became one of the leading advocates of the Bábí religion.

Precursor to the Bahá'í Faith, the Bábí

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*“This is the
changeless Faith
of God, eternal in
the past, eternal
in the future.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Faith swept through Iran like a whirlwind — and stirred intense persecution from the religious establishment. After the execution in 1850 of its Founder, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh was arrested and taken, in chains and on foot, to Tehran. Influential members of the court and the clergy demanded a death sentence. Bahá'u'lláh, however, was protected by His personal reputation and the social position of His family, as well as by protests from Western embassies.

Therefore, in lieu of execution, He was cast in 1852 into the notorious “Black Pit,” the Siyah-Chal. Authorities hoped this would result in His death. Instead, the dungeon became the birthplace for a new religious revelation.

Bahá'u'lláh spent four months in the Black Pit, during which time he contemplated the full extent of His mission. “I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been,” He later wrote. “This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. And He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven....”

Exile

Upon His release, Bahá'u'lláh was banished from His native land — the beginning of 40 years of exile, imprisonment, and persecution. He was sent first to

An English scholar's encounter with Bahá'u'lláh

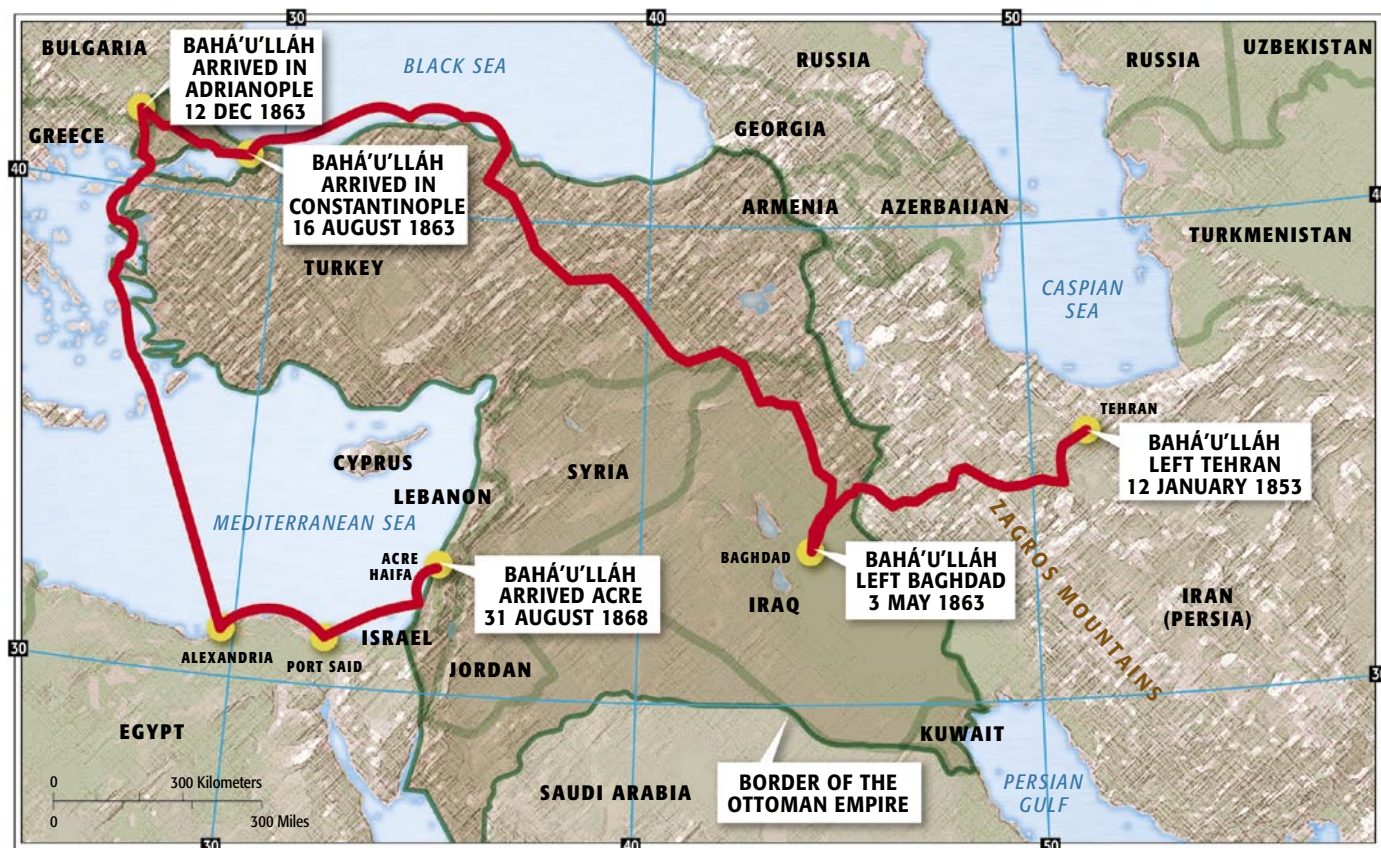
In 1890, famed Cambridge orientalist Edward G. Browne met Bahá'u'lláh; he was only Westerner to meet Him and leave an account of his experience. Browne, who visited Bahá'u'lláh in His residence near Acre, recorded the meeting this way:

The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow... No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!

A mild dignified voice bade me be seated, and then continued: “Praise be to God that thou hast attained!... Thou hast come to see a prisoner and an exile... We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us as a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”

neighboring Baghdad, arriving in April 1853. Twelve months later, He left for the mountainous wilderness of Kurdistan, where He lived entirely alone for two years, reflecting on the implications of the task to which He had been summoned. The interlude in Kurdistan is reminiscent of the periods of seclusion undertaken by the Founders of the world's other great

▼ Map showing the route of Bahá'u'lláh's exiles.





“He hath been made to dwell within the most desolate of cities, so that He may build up the hearts of Thy servants, and hath been willing to suffer the most grievous abasement, that Thy creatures may be exalted.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Faiths, such as the wanderings of Buddha, the 40 days and nights spent by Christ in the desert, and Muhammad’s retreat in the cave on Mt. Hira.

In 1856, at the urging of the exiled Bábís, Bahá’u’lláh returned to Baghdad. Under His renewed leadership, the stature of the Bábí community grew and Bahá’u’lláh’s reputation as a spiritual leader spread throughout the city. Fearing that Bahá’u’lláh’s acclaim would reignite popular enthusiasm for the movement in Persia, the Shah’s government successfully pressed the Ottoman authorities to send Him farther into exile.

In April 1863, before leaving Baghdad, Bahá’u’lláh and His companions camped in a garden on the banks of the Tigris River. Between 21 April and 2 May, Bahá’u’lláh announced to those in His company that He was the Promised One foretold by the Báb — foretold, indeed, in all the world’s scriptures.

The garden became known to Bahá’ís as the Garden of Ridván, which means “paradise” in Arabic. The anniversary of the 12 days Bahá’u’lláh spent there is celebrated as the most joyous Bahá’í holiday, the Ridván Festival.

On 3 May 1863, Bahá’u’lláh rode out of Baghdad towards Constantinople, the imperial capital, accompanied by His family and selected companions. He had become an immensely popular and cherished figure. Eyewitnesses described His departure in moving terms, noting both the tears of many scholars, government

officials, and onlookers, and the honor paid to Him by the authorities.

After four months in Constantinople, Bahá’u’lláh was sent to Adrianople (modern Edirne, Turkey), arriving on 12 December 1863. During the five years He spent there, Bahá’u’lláh’s reputation continued to grow, attracting the intense interest of scholars, government officials, and diplomats.

Beginning in September 1867, Bahá’u’lláh wrote a series of letters to the world leaders of His time, addressing, among others, Emperor Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander II, Emperor Franz Joseph,



▲ Interior view of the prison cell where Bahá’u’lláh was first confined in Acre.

▼ When He first arrived in Acre, Bahá’u’lláh and His family were confined in this prison on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea.





ALBATROSS PHOTOGRAPHY LIMITED

Pope Pius IX, Sultan Abdul-Aziz, and the Persian ruler, Nasiri'd-Din Shah.

In these letters, Bahá'u'lláh openly proclaimed His station. He spoke of the dawn of a new age. But first, He warned, there would be catastrophic upheavals in the world's political and social order. To smooth humanity's transition, He urged the world's leaders to pursue justice. He called for general disarmament and urged rulers to band together into some form of commonwealth of nations. Only by acting collectively against war, He said, could they establish lasting peace.

Continued agitation from opponents caused the Turkish government to send the exiles to Acre, a penal city in Ottoman Palestine. Acre was the end of the earth, the final destination for the worst of murderers, highway robbers, and political dissidents. A walled city of filthy streets and damp, desolate houses, Acre had no source of fresh water, and the air was commonly described as being so foul that birds

flying over would fall dead out of the sky.

Into this environment, Bahá'u'lláh and His family were sent on 31 August 1868, the final stage in His long exile. He was to spend the rest of His life, 24 more years, in Acre and its environs. At first confined to a prison in the barracks, Bahá'u'lláh and His companions were later moved to a cramped house within the city's walls. The exiles, widely depicted as dangerous heretics, faced animosity from the city's other residents. Even the children, when they ventured outside, were pursued and pelted with stones. As time passed, however, the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings penetrated the bigotry and indifference. Even several of the town's governors and clergy, after examining the teachings of the Faith, became devoted admirers. As in Baghdad and Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh's moral stature gradually won the admiration and respect of the community at large.

It was in Acre that Bahá'u'lláh's most important work was written. Known

▲ *The holiest spot in the Bahá'í world: Bahjí, the resting place of Bahá'u'lláh's earthly remains. Surrounded by gardens, the mansion of Bahjí is visited by thousands of pilgrims and members of the public each year. Their focus is the small garden house to the right of the main mansion, where Bahá'u'lláh's physical remains are buried.*

The process of revelation

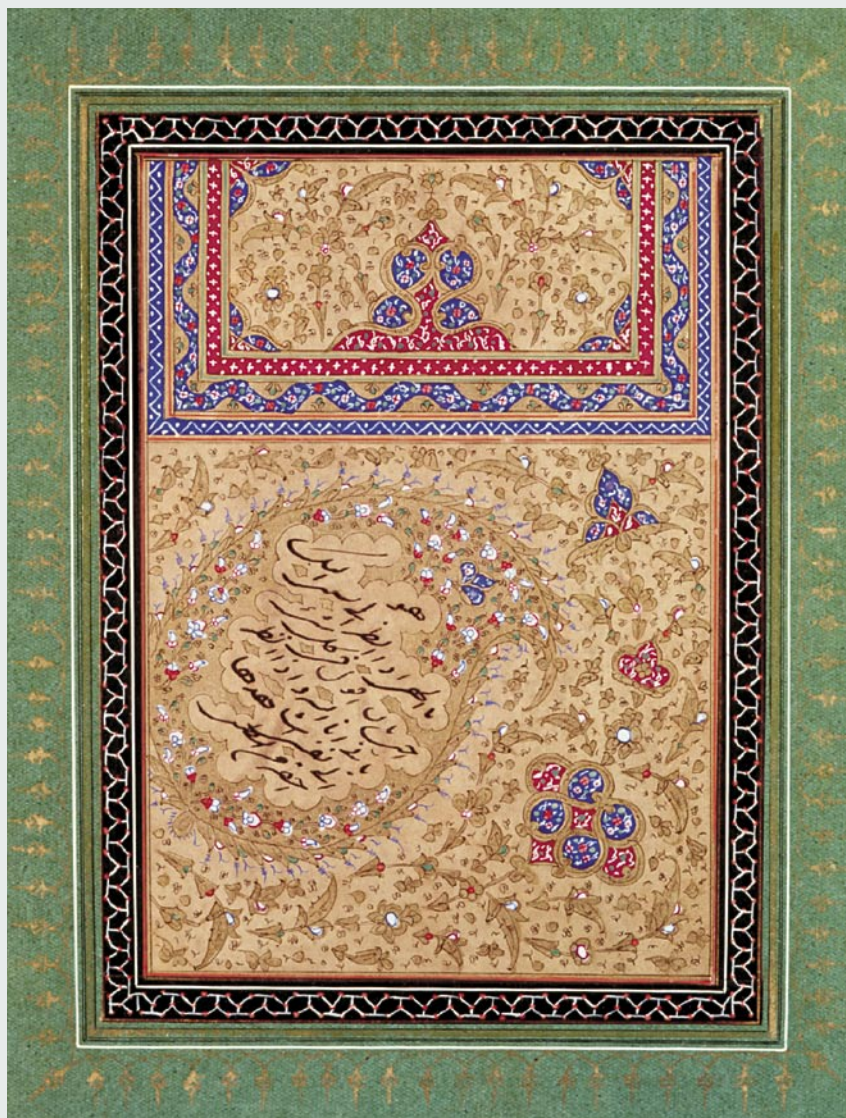
How the words of Bahá'u'lláh were recorded

A unique feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the authenticity of its revealed Word. Unlike the teachings of Christ or Buddha, for example, which were written down many years after they were uttered, the words of Bahá'u'lláh were recorded and authenticated at the time they were revealed.

The process of revelation — as Bahá'ís term the act of bringing forth the Word of God — is described in several historical documents. One observer recorded the following:

“Mirza Aqa Jan (Bahá'u'lláh's personal secretary) had a large inkpot the size of a small bowl. He also had available about ten to twelve pens and large sheets of paper in stacks. In those days all letters which arrived for Bahá'u'lláh were received by Mirza Aqa Jan. He would bring these into the presence of Bahá'u'lláh and, having obtained permission, would read them. Afterwards [Bahá'u'lláh] would direct him to take up his pen and record the Tablet which was revealed in reply...

“Such was the speed with which he used to write the revealed Word that the ink of the first word was scarcely yet dry when the whole page was finished. It seemed as if someone had dipped a lock of hair in the ink and applied it over the whole page.” After each period of Revelation, the original manuscript would be retranscribed, with Bahá'u'lláh Himself overseeing and approving the final version.”



▲ Among the unique features of the Bahá'í Faith is the existence of the actual writings of its Founder. Shown above is an actual tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, in His own handwriting, which has been subsequently “illuminated” with decorative adornments in a style common in the Middle East.



◀ The central work of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, also known as the Most Holy Book, which outlines the essential laws and principles of the Bahá'í revelation. In August 2000, the United States Library of Congress received for its collection copies of the *Aqdas* in a number of different languages, including Arabic, Danish, Dutch, English, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Urdu. Shown here, left to right, are two Bahá'ís who presented the editions and members of the Library of Congress staff who received them: William P. Collins of the Copyright Office and the library's recommending officer for Bahá'í materials; Allen Thrasher, head of the South Asian section; Helen Poe, chief of the Asian division; Cheryl Adams of the humanities and social sciences reference division; S.M. Waris Hamadani, an Urdu translator from Pakistan and a Bahá'í; and Mary Jane Deeb, one of the Library's Arabic specialists.

commonly among Bahá'ís by its Persian name, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the “Most Holy Book”), it outlines the essential laws and principles that are to be observed by His followers and lays the groundwork for Bahá'í administration [see page 43].

In the late 1870s, Bahá'u'lláh was given the freedom to move outside the city's walls, and His followers were able to meet with Him in relative peace and freedom.

He took up residence in a mansion that had been vacated during an epidemic and was able to further devote Himself to writing.

On 29 May 1892, Bahá'u'lláh passed away. His remains were laid to rest in a small house adjoining the mansion, which is known as Bahjí. For Bahá'ís, this spot is the holiest place on earth. ■

The writings of Bahá'u'lláh

As the Bible is to Jews, the Gospel to Christians, or the Qur'an to Muslims, the collected writings of Bahá'u'lláh are considered by Bahá'ís to be the Word of God — and they form the foundation of the Bahá'í Faith.

The quantity of writings produced by Bahá'u'lláh far exceeds the revelation of previous Messengers of God. Bahá'u'lláh Himself estimated that His collected works would amount to more than 100 volumes, if all were bound in a series of books.

The writings are characterized by a wide range of styles. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in both Arabic and Persian, showing superb mastery of both languages. Some works speak with the voice of God, in lofty and beautiful prose. Others are direct statements on morality and ethics. Others are mystical and poetic works. Many are letters to individuals, known as tablets. Many of these remain as yet untranslated. His central works, however, have been translated into most of the world's major languages — and selections of His writings have been translated into more than 800 tongues.

The heart of Bahá'u'lláh's ethical teachings is to be found in a small book entitled the Hidden Words, a compilation of aphorisms dating from the earliest days of His mission. He describes this work as a distillation of the spiritual guidance contained in the successive revelations of God.

Bahá'u'lláh's principal exposition of His doctrinal message is a book entitled the Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude). In laying out the entire panorama of the divine purpose, the Íqán deals with the great questions that have always lain at the heart of religious life: God, the nature of humanity, the purpose of life, and the function of Revelation.

Among the best known of Bahá'u'lláh's mystical writings is the

Seven Valleys. In poetic language, this mystical work traces the stages of the soul's journey to union with its Creator.

Foremost among Bahá'u'lláh's writings is the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (the “Most Holy Book”). Revealed during the darkest days of His imprisonment in Acre, the Aqdas, the “Mother Book” of the Bahá'í dispensation, is the chief repository of the laws and institutions which Bahá'u'lláh designed for the World Order He conceived.

The process of translating the sacred writings is ongoing. The standard for the work of translation into English was established by Shoghi Effendi, who headed the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957 [see page 63]. He was educated at Oxford, and his translations reflect not only a brilliant command of the English language, but also an authoritative exposition of the texts' meaning.

In undertaking the challenge of finding an English style that would faithfully convey the exalted and emotive character of Bahá'u'lláh's use of Persian and Arabic, Shoghi Effendi chose a form of English that echoes the King James Version of the Bible. In accordance with this style, he also chose to use the masculine pronoun for references to God — although Bahá'u'lláh's teachings make clear that no gender can be attached to the Creator. Shoghi Effendi made extensive use of diacritical marks as a guide to the pronunciation of Arabic and Persian names, a practice that is followed throughout the Bahá'í community today.

The result is a style that acts as bridge between modern English and the style in which Bahá'u'lláh wrote in Persian and Arabic. Accordingly, Shoghi Effendi's English translations, and not the Arabic or Persian originals, are used as the basis for translations into other Western languages.



*“And since there
can be no tie
of direct
intercourse to
bind the one true
God with His
creation, and
no resemblance
whatever can
exist between the
transient and
the Eternal, the
contingent and
the Absolute, He
hath ordained
that in every age
and dispensation
a pure and
stainless Soul be
made manifest in
the kingdoms
of earth
and heaven.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Social and Moral Teachings

There has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the landscape before humanity — or whose social teachings have been so utterly appropriate for the current age.



*“Possess a pure,
kindly and
radiant heart,
that thine may
be a sovereignty
ancient,
imperishable and
everlasting.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

ONE OF THE extraordinary features of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh is the degree to which they accurately identify the issues and changes that have most preoccupied humanity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

From women's equality to racial justice, from the explosion of scientific knowledge and information to the dynamic processes that have shrunk our planet into a global village, issues central to our modern world were prophetically and profoundly addressed by the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh's vision of renewal touches on all aspects of life, from personal morality to economics and governance; from community development to religious practice.

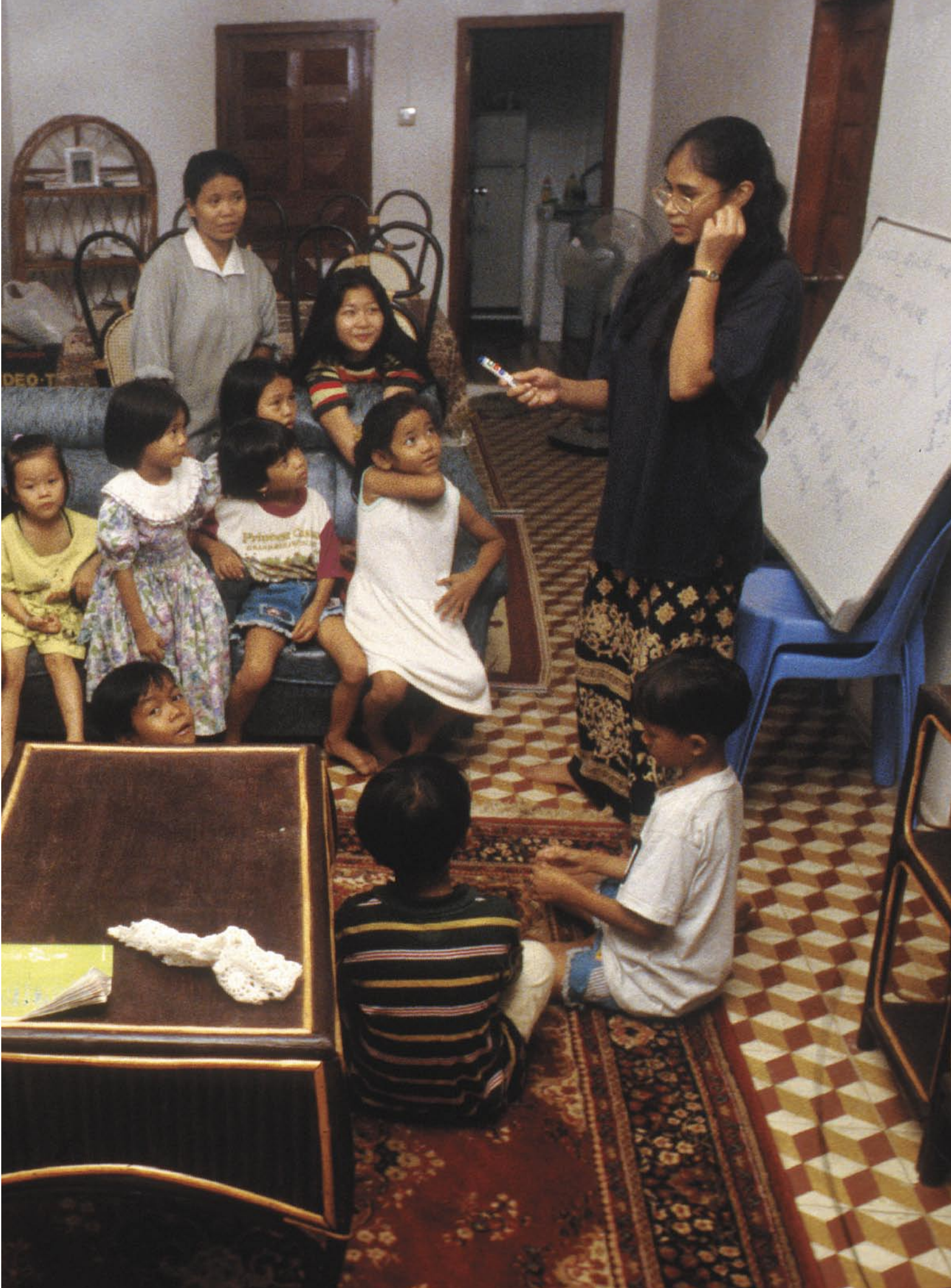
The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's social teachings is that humanity is one single race and the day has come for its unification into one global society.

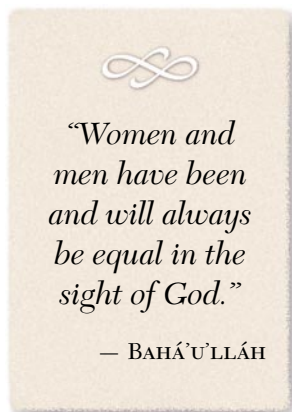
The recognition of our essential oneness, the Bahá'í writings state, gives rise to a number of progressive social principles and ideals, which Bahá'ís everywhere seek to promote in the world at large.

These essential social principles include the elimination of all forms of prejudice, establishment of full equality between the sexes, recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions, elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth, provision of universal education, promotion

► *One common activity in Bahá'í communities is moral and spiritual education classes for children. Shown here is a children's class in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.*







of a high standard of personal conduct, recognition of the harmony of science and religion, pursuit of a sustainable balance between nature and technology, and establishment of a world federal system based on collective security.

When one considers how closely these principles match the social concerns — from race relations to economic justice — that fueled the twentieth century’s most dynamic movements, it is clear that there has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the social landscape.

Far from fading into irrelevance, the issues that Bahá’u’lláh focused on have come to dominate the collective life of humanity in the twenty-first century.

Unity the theme

The Bahá’í Faith’s progressive approach to human society originates with Bahá’u’lláh’s emphasis on unity. Indeed, if one were to characterize His teachings in a single word, that word would be unity.

Throughout His writings, Bahá’u’lláh emphasized the importance — and the reality — of unity and oneness. First, God is one. All of the world’s great religions are also one. They represent humanity’s response to the revelation of the will of God for humanity by successive divine Messengers. This understanding of the

common origin and purpose of the great religions lies at the heart of the concept of unity in Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.

From this fundamental concept of divine and religious unity, other principles emerge. Bahá’u’lláh teaches that all humans, as creations of one God, are also one people. Distinctions of race, nation, class, and ethnic origin are ephemeral when understood in this context. Likewise, any notions of tribal, provincial, and national superiority are discarded in the Bahá’í Faith.

Speaking through Bahá’u’lláh, the voice of God proclaims: “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.”

The oneness of humanity

The idea that all humanity is one race forms the foundation for the other principles of social justice in the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh condemned racial and ethnic prejudice, urging: “Close your eyes to

“...you cannot stop the emancipation of women...”

One of the most stirring episodes in early Bahá’í history involves the great Persian poet, Tahirih, who was an early promoter of women’s rights and sacrificed her life rather than give up her beliefs. Born as Fatimih Braghani into a prominent clerical family in 1814, Tahirih was an exceptional woman for her time and place, attaining a high level of education and winning a considerable reputation for her scholarship and poetry. Upon learning of the Bábí Faith in 1844, she became one of its earliest followers and staunchest defenders.

Although many in the West believe the modern movement for women’s rights began in the USA that same year, thoughtful historians also recognize Tahirih, whose name means “the Pure One,” as among the earliest of the suffragettes. Intrepid and outspoken, she did not allow the social dictates of her society to hold her

back from reaching her potential. In her deeds, she openly proclaimed the equality of women and men, at one point boldly stripping off her veil in public. Indeed, her life and example have become an inspiration to women and men around the world.

She paid a terrible price for her courageous acts. She was imprisoned for some time by her husband, who objected to her beliefs, and when she escaped she was forced to leave her children behind, never to see them again. Brief years later, she was again imprisoned, this time by government officials who were disturbed by her success in winning converts to the Faith of the Báb, which they saw as heretical to Islam. Approached by a group of soldiers sent to strangle her, her last words offered a stirring vision of the future: “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”

Women: unambiguous equality

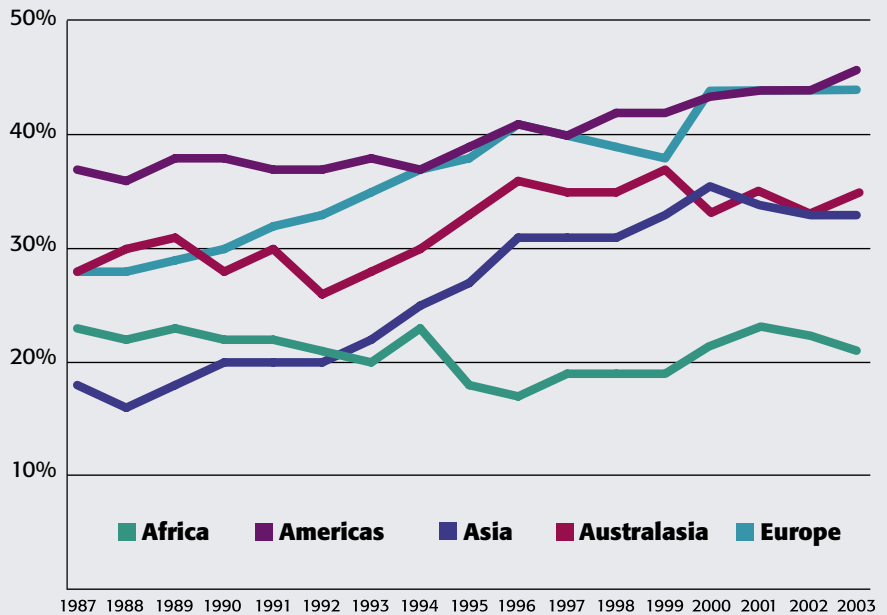
For the first time in history, the Founder of a major world religion has explicitly stated that women and men are equal. The Bahá'í writings also state:

- Girls should be given preference over boys when educational opportunities and resources are limited.
- In Bahá'í marriage, neither the husband nor the wife has a dominant voice.
- Any apparent inequality between the capacities of women and men is due solely to the lack of educational opportunities so far open to women.

In response to these principles, Bahá'í communities around the world are striving on a number of fronts to uplift and empower women, seeking to improve the education of women, establishing committees to promote equality, or simply stimulating a broad discussion about the role of women in community life. While the rate of progress in each country and region is affected by historical factors and local traditions, one significant statistic that marks the degree of progress is the high percentage of women — relative to similar institutions in their countries — who have been elected to national-level Bahá'í governing bodies.

Although both women and men are

Percentage of women on national Bahá'í governing bodies (National Spiritual Assemblies)



eligible to serve in elective and appointive institutions of the Bahá'í Faith at all other levels, the membership of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, is limited to men. Bahá'u'lláh Himself outlined this stipulation and it is therefore unchangeable. Further, He gave no clarification for

this feature of Bahá'í law. Accordingly, although individual Bahá'ís may speculate on the reasons, there is no official explanation. It remains, simply, a matter of faith.

◀ *Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Bermuda in the year 2000.*



∞

*“The well-being
of mankind,
its peace and
security, are
unattainable
unless and until
its unity is firmly
established.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

racial differences, and welcome all with the light of oneness.”

Bahá'u'lláh also unequivocally proclaimed the equality of the sexes — at a time when the women's movement was only beginning its fight for suffrage in the West and such ideas were unheard of in the Middle East — thus becoming the first Founder of a world religion to explicitly uphold complete equality for women and men.

Indeed, girls should receive priority in education, if by some circumstance a family (or a society) cannot afford to educate its children equally. “Until the reality of equality between men and women is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible,” the Bahá'í scriptures state.

This summons to equal treatment does not ignore natural differences between the sexes. Bahá'u'lláh emphasized the importance of motherhood, fatherhood, and family life. The challenge before society is to enable women to participate as equals in every field of human endeavor — whether scientific, economic, or political — while also allowing them to fulfill their essential roles as the bearers and first educators of children.

Bahá'u'lláh's theme of oneness is also upheld in a general summons to promote economic justice. Addressing the “rich ones on earth,” Bahá'u'lláh writes: “The

▼ *Responding to Bahá'u'lláh's message of human oneness, people from virtually every background have become Bahá'ís. In Thailand, many members of the Karin indigenous group, such as Rong Sujipong, headman of Pongdin village, and his family, have become Bahá'ís.*



Marriage and family life

Bahá'ís understand that the family is the basic unit of society. Unless this all-important building block is healthy and unified, society itself cannot be healthy and unified. Monogamous marriage between a man and a woman stands at the foundation of family life.

Bahá'u'lláh said marriage is “a fortress for well-being and salvation.” The Bahá'í writings further state that married couples should strive to become “loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity...”

Bahá'ís view preparation for union as an essential element in ensuring a happy marriage. The process of preparation includes a requirement for parental approval of the choice of a spouse. This does not mean that Bahá'í marriages are arranged. Individuals propose marriage to the persons of their own choice. However, once the choice is made, the parents have both the right and the obligation to weigh carefully whether or not to give consent to, and thus guide, their offspring in one of life's most important decisions.

Bahá'ís believe that this requirement helps to preserve unity within the marriage and within the extended family. Like previous Messengers of God, Bahá'u'lláh taught His followers to honor their parents. Obtaining parental permission for marriage reaffirms the importance of the bond between child and parent. It also helps to create a supportive network of parents for the newly married couple.

Simple vows and ceremony

Once parental permission is obtained, the marriage takes place, requiring only the simplest of ceremonies. In the presence of two witnesses designated by the Local Spiritual Assembly, the local Bahá'í governing council, the couple recites the following verse: “We will all, verily, abide by the will of God.” For Bahá'ís, that simple commitment to live by God's will implies all of the commitments associated with marriage, including the promises to love, honor, and cherish; to care for each other regardless of material health or wealth; and to share with and serve each other.

Beyond these simple requirements, Bahá'ís are free to design their own marriage celebration. Depending on personal tastes, family resources, and cultural traditions, Bahá'í ceremonies run the gamut from small to large, including all manner of music, dance, dress, food, and festivity.

The marriage vow is considered sacred in the Bahá'í Faith. The partners are expected to be absolutely faithful to each other.

The Faith's emphasis on the equality of women and men, however, and its promotion of consultation as a tool for problem solving mean that the roles of husband and wife within a Bahá'í marriage are not the traditional ones. Women are free to pursue careers that interest them; men are expected to share in household duties and child rearing.

So-called "interracial marriage" is also encouraged in the Bahá'í teachings, which stress the essential oneness of the human race.

Divorce is allowed but discouraged

If a Bahá'í marriage fails, divorce is permitted, although it is strongly discouraged. If Bahá'ís choose to seek a divorce, they must spend at least one year living apart and attempting to reconcile. If a divorce is still desired after that year, it is then granted, dependent on the requirements of civil law. This "year of patience," as it is known to Bahá'ís, is supervised by the Local Spiritual Assembly.

The key purpose of Bahá'í marriage — beyond physical, intellectual, and spiritual companionship — is children. Bahá'ís view child rearing not only as a source of great joy and reward, but as a sacred obligation. "Enter into wedlock, O people," is Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, "that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves."

While stating firmly that women must enjoy full equality with men, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings also recognize explicitly the innate differences between the feminine and masculine natures — both physical and emotional. Bahá'ís understand, accordingly, that mothers have a special role to play in the early education of children — especially during the first few years of life, when the basic values and character of every individual are formed.

Since Bahá'ís believe that the soul comes into existence at the moment of conception, the parents pray for the well-being of the unborn child while it is



still in the womb. Education in general, and Bahá'í education in particular, is of paramount importance in Bahá'í families. From their earliest years, the children are encouraged to develop the habits of prayer and meditation and to acquire knowledge, both intellectual and spiritual.

▲ *Interracial and cross-cultural marriages are encouraged in the Bahá'í teachings.*

▼ *The Bahá'í marriage ceremony is quite simple and lends itself to virtually any culture. Shown here is a newly married Bahá'í couple in Korea, wearing traditional wedding costumes.*



Among the principles emphasized by Bahá'ú'lláh are:

- the oneness of humanity
- the equality of women and men
- the elimination of prejudice
- the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty
- the independent investigation of truth
- universal education
- religious tolerance
- the harmony of science and religion
- a world commonwealth of nations
- a universal auxiliary language

Bahá'ís strive to uphold a high moral standard.

Bahá'ú'lláh stressed the importance of:

- honesty
- trustworthiness
- chastity
- service to others
- purity of motive
- generosity
- deeds over words
- unity
- work as a form of worship

Bahá'ís follow the moral code of the Ten Commandments – and more.

Bahá'ú'lláh forbids:

- killing
- stealing
- lying
- adultery and promiscuity
- gambling
- alcoholic drinks
- drug abuse
- gossip and backbiting

poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.” The Bahá'í writings call for both voluntary giving and government measures, such as the “equalization and apportionment” of excess wealth, so that the great disparities between the rich and the poor are eliminated. Bahá'ú'lláh also prescribes specific measures, such as profit sharing and the equation of work with worship, that promote general economic prosperity across all classes.

Education is given a special emphasis as the key to unlock humanity's tremendous capacity for progress, advancement, and prosperity. “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” wrote Bahá'ú'lláh. “Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”

Education, accordingly, should be universal and should incorporate positive spiritual values and moral attitudes. Bahá'ís envision a future in which even “basic education” goes beyond rote learning and the teaching of simple skills. Students must be given the tools to analyze social conditions and requirements themselves, to take part in community planning and action, and to investigate truth on their own. The oneness of humanity is an essential element of every Bahá'í curriculum.

Science and religion

The theme of unity also emerges in Bahá'ú'lláh's teachings on science. His writings present science and religion as the two most powerful channels for the advancement of civilization, with differ-

ent yet harmonious approaches to the comprehension of reality. These two paths are essentially compatible and mutually reinforcing.

The scientific method is humanity's tool for understanding the physical side of the universe. It can describe the composition of an atomic nucleus or the molecular structure of DNA. It is the key to discovering and unlocking new technologies. Science cannot, however, guide us in the use of such knowledge — a truth borne out by the excesses of the application of science and technology in the last century, exemplified at their worst in the atomic bomb and other weapons of mass destruction.

Bahá'ís believe that only in the revelation of God can humanity find a system of values that puts such developments into a proper perspective. Religion offers answers to those questions of morals, human purpose, and our relationship to God that science cannot approach.

At the same time, Bahá'ís believe, any religion that ignores modern scientific truths runs the risk of descending into fanaticism. It is only by recognizing the harmonious and complementary nature of science and religion, then, that human society can move safely forward.

▼ *The Bahá'í performance group Artworks presents the teachings of the Faith through a combination of rapid painting and dance routines. Based in Perth, Western Australia, Artworks takes its shows to schools and other venues where the energy and skill of its members attract an enthusiastic response.*



The independent investigation of reality, whether scientific or religious, is strongly encouraged in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Individuals should strive, He said, to free themselves from prejudices, preconceptions, and blind obedience to tradition or traditional authorities. Consultation is a critical tool for discovering truth [see page 45].

Bahá'u'lláh also called for the adoption of a universal auxiliary language as a means to promote unity. "The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script," He wrote. "When this is achieved, to whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home." The term "auxiliary" is important: Bahá'u'lláh's injunction is not a mandate for cultural uniformity. Indeed, the Bahá'í teachings both value and promote cultural diversity.

When first outlined by Bahá'u'lláh more than 100 years ago, these principles were as radical as any social program ever drafted. The fact that they have not only survived the passage of time but have, indeed, become ever more widely proclaimed and recognized is a testimony to the vision that produced them.

Bahá'u'lláh's moral code for the individual and His pattern for marriage and family life [see page 30] are consonant with the genuine needs of modern society. As with the social principles, the laws of Bahá'u'lláh on individual morality and family structure are aimed at the promotion of the unity and well-being of society at large. "They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples," Bahá'u'lláh wrote.

This insight — that the standards for social justice and individual conduct outlined by Bahá'u'lláh offer an integrated and distinctive approach to the apparently intractable problems faced by humanity today — underlies the essential optimism of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Whether considering the threat of environmental degradation, the cancer of racism, or the erosion of the family, Bahá'ís firmly believe that answers are available in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Their commitment is to share these insights with the world. ■



While socially progressive, the Bahá'í teachings on personal morality are uncompromising

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on individual morality start with the notion that there is only one God. Although religious teachings in relation to society at large must change to fit the needs of the times, there are certain fundamental moral and ethical teachings that are common to all faiths. Bahá'ís understand that these teachings are fundamental to the happiness and well-being of the human species, and they do not change.

The moral code of the Ten Commandments, with its condemnation of murder, adultery, theft, lies, covetousness, and disrespect for parents, can be found in all religions. Likewise, those commandments that define the individual's relationship with God have steadily emerged in the succession of divine revelations. Bahá'u'lláh reaffirmed these laws and elaborated them. He not only condemned murder and lying but particularly censured backbiting, gambling, assault, and trespassing are interdicted. So is the use of alcoholic drinks and narcotic drugs — unless prescribed by a physician.

▲ *The Bahá'í Faith upholds the highest standards of morality and ethics, and many Bahá'í communities offer classes for children that emphasize moral virtues, such as this class in Colombia.*

Honesty and trustworthiness are extolled in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. "Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. "In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend on it."

Although the world's ever-shifting moral climate has led some modernists to reject or modify elements of God's historic moral code, Bahá'ís believe that an unbiased survey of contemporary conditions leads inescapably to the conclusion that society will only suffer if human morality is not revitalized. Worldwide corruption in business and government, the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, and the dissolution of family life provide concrete examples of the need for a high standard of individual conduct.



Spiritual Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh

The coming of each new Messenger from God has marked a pivotal point in history. Each has released a fresh spiritual impulse, stimulating personal renewal and social advancement. Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, and the spiritual impulse accompanying it, is especially significant because it coincides with the maturation of humanity.

THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD, the Creator of the universe. Throughout history, God has revealed Himself to humanity through a series of divine Messengers — each of whom has founded a great religion. The Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. This succession of divine Teachers reflects a single historic “plan of God” for educating humanity about the Creator and for cultivating the spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacities of the human race. The goal has been to prepare the way for a single, global, and ever-advancing civilization. Knowledge of God's will for humanity in the modern age was revealed just over 100 years ago by Bahá'u'lláh, who is the latest of these divine Messengers.

That is the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about God, religion, and humanity. Bahá'ís often express these beliefs simply by speaking of the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of humankind. Unity is at all times the overarching theme of Bahá'í belief; in theological terms, it manifests itself in the understanding that the Creator has a single plan for all humanity.

◀ *For Bahá'ís, the Shrine of the Báb is the second-most holy spot in the world, a place for intense prayer and meditation. The recently completed garden terraces on the slope of Mount Carmel offer a distinctive vision of beauty and harmony, spiritual qualities that Bahá'ís the world over hold dear.*

Coupled with these ideas is an understanding that human nature is fundamentally spiritual. Although human beings exist on earth in physical bodies, the essential identity of each person is defined by an invisible, rational, and everlasting soul.

The soul animates the body and distinguishes human beings from animals. It grows and develops only through the individual's relationship with God, as mediated by His Messengers. The relationship is fostered through prayer, knowledge of the scriptures revealed by these Teachers, love for God, moral self-discipline, and service to humanity. This process is what gives meaning to life.

Cultivation of life's spiritual side has many benefits. First, the individual increasingly develops those innate qualities that lie at the foundation of human happiness and social progress. Such qualities include faith, courage, love, compassion, trustworthiness, and humility. As these qualities become increasingly manifest, society as a whole advances.

Spiritual development also aligns the individual with God's will and prepares him or her for the afterlife. The soul lives on after the body's death, embarking on a spiritual journey towards God through many “worlds” or planes of existence. Progress on this journey, in traditional terms, is likened to “heaven.” If the soul fails to develop, it remains distant from God. This, in traditional Christian or Muslim terms, is “hell.”

The coming of each new Messenger from God marks a pivotal point in history. Each releases a fresh spiritual impulse, stimulating personal renewal and social advancement. Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation,



“Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants... is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



The Fast

Virtually all of the world's religions emphasize fasting as a means of spiritual purification. Each year, for example, Muslims abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset for 28 days in a row. Fasting is referred to a number of times in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. Bahá'u'lláh called on Bahá'ís to refrain from eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset for 19 consecutive days each year from 2 March to 20 March. This period, known simply as "the Fast," is considered a time for deep reflection on one's own spiritual progress. Bahá'ís make efforts to detach themselves from material desires, rising before dawn to eat breakfast and to pray. Those who are ill are exempt from fasting, as are pregnant and nursing women, people under 15 or over 70 years old, travelers, and those engaged in arduous physical labor.

and the spiritual impulse accompanying it, is especially significant because it coincides with the maturation of humanity.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that humanity, as a whole, has today entered a new stage in its collective existence, like an adolescent entering adulthood. New levels of accomplishment are now possible, and global undertakings that were once considered impossible can now be achieved. Such undertakings include the realization of world peace, the attainment of universal social justice, and the furtherance of a harmonious balance between technology, development, human values, and the protection of the natural environment.

The Unknowable Essence

The best place to begin elaborating how Bahá'ís view the relationship between God, religion, and humanity is with the Bahá'í concept of God. That concept begins with the realization that God is unknowable.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that God is the Creator of the universe and its absolute ruler. His nature is limitless, infinite and all-powerful. It is therefore impossible for mortal men and women, with limited intellect and finite capacities, to directly comprehend or understand the reality of God,

▲ *For Bahá'ís, the purpose of earthly life is to acquire spiritual qualities, such as love, faith, and self-sacrifice.*

Performing works of service, such as this public gardening project in Bucharest, Romania, is one important means for the training of the soul.

His motives, or the way He operates.

While unknowable in His essence, God has chosen to make Himself known to humanity through a series of divine Messengers.

These Messengers have been the only way to know God, and their number includes the Founders of the world's great religions: Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad — to name those who are best known. Bahá'ís also include other prophets in this group, such as Noah and Abraham.

The Messengers, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, are "Manifestations of God." The Manifestations are perfect mirrors of God's attributes and perfection, providing a pure channel for the communication of God's will for humanity.

This idea — that God has sent a succession of Messengers to educate humanity — is called "progressive revelation." An

A Bahá'í view of life after death

The Bahá'í concept of life after death is deeply integrated into teachings about the nature of the soul and the purpose of this earthly life.

Baha'u'llah confirmed that every human possesses a separate, rational soul. In this life, He said, the soul is related to the physical body as the sun is to the earth. It provides the underlying animation of the body and is our real self.

Although undetectable by physical instruments, the soul shows itself through the qualities of character that we associate with each person. The soul is the focal point for love and compassion, for faith and courage, and for other such "human" qualities that cannot be explained solely by thinking of a human being as an animal or as a sophisticated organic machine.

The soul does not die; it endures everlastingly. When the human body dies, the soul is freed from ties with the physical body and the surrounding physical world and begins its progress through the spiritual worlds. Bahá'ís understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe — and not some physically remote or removed place.

Entry into the next life has the potential to bring great joy. Bahá'u'lláh likened death to the process of birth. He explained: "The world beyond is as different from this world as this world

is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother."

The analogy to the womb in many ways summarizes the Bahá'í view of earthly existence. Just as the womb constitutes an important place for a person's initial physical development, the physical world provides the matrix for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Bahá'ís view life as a sort of workshop, where one can develop and perfect those qualities that will be needed in the next life.

"Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. "By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe."

In the final analysis, heaven can be seen partly as a state of nearness to God; hell is a state of remoteness from God. Each state follows as a natural consequence of individual efforts, or the lack thereof, to develop spiritually. The key to spiritual progress is to follow the path outlined by the Manifestations of God.

Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. "The nature of the soul after death can never be described," Bahá'u'lláh wrote.

▼ *The Bahá'í terraces in Haifa, Israel.*



"Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter."

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



Prayer and meditation

For Bahá'ís, the purpose of life is to know and love God and to progress spiritually. Prayer and meditation are primary tools for spiritual development.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself wrote hundreds of prayers. There are prayers for general use, for healing, for spiritual growth, for facing difficulties, for marriage, for community life, and for humanity itself.

Bahá'u'lláh also asked His followers to choose one of three “obligatory” prayers for recitation each day. The shortest of these prayers is just three sentences long. It says much about the relationship between God and humanity. It reads:

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 might, to my

poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

The term “obligatory,” as applied to these prayers, implies for Bahá'ís an understanding that humans have certain spiritual duties before God. Bahá'u'lláh also urged His followers to spend time each day in meditation. Specifically, He encouraged us to reflect at the end of each day on our deeds and their worth. Other than this, Bahá'u'lláh did not specify a particular format for meditation — such as sitting cross-legged or using special breathing techniques. Instead, each individual is free to choose his or her own form of meditation.

analogy is the process of schooling. Just as children start with simple ideas in the primary grades and are given increasingly complex knowledge as they move on through secondary school and college, so humanity has been “educated” by a series of Manifestations. In each age, the teachings of the Messengers of God have conformed not to Their knowledge but to the level of our collective maturity.

A twofold station

The Manifestations of God have a twofold station. On the one hand, They are divine beings, reflecting perfectly God's will. On the other hand, They are humans, subject to birth, disease, suffering, and death. They have distinct physical identities and They address humanity at particular stages in history. These differences give rise to cultural distinctions between religions that sometimes conceal their inherent unity.

“Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared,” Bahá'u'lláh said.

Fundamentally, however, the spiritual message of God's Messengers has been the same. Each has stressed the importance of love for God, obedience to His will, and love for humanity. Although the words have varied, Each has taught the “Golden Rule”— that individuals should treat others as they would like to be treated themselves.

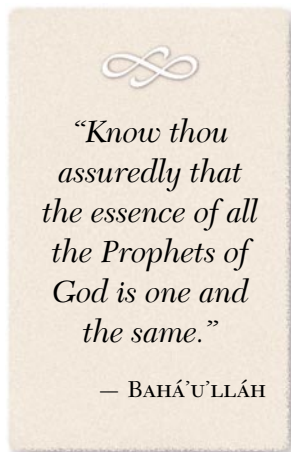
“Know thou assuredly that the essence

of all the Prophets of God is one and the same.” Bahá'u'lláh wrote. “Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, saith: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message...”

The Manifestations of God communicate God's will to humanity through the process of divine revelation. This process of revelation has been recorded in the world's great holy books — books that range from the Torah to the Qur'an, and which include Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Zoroastrian scriptures. These writings represent humanity's record of God's revealed Word.

Bahá'u'lláh says that the Word of God is the “master key” for the whole world. Only it can unlock the spiritual potential latent within every individual; only it can help us develop to our fullest potential. Without the Word of God, humans would remain captives of instinct and cultural conditioning, dwelling only on qualities that are associated with physical survival. Greed, selfishness, dishonesty, corruption, and the like inevitably flourish in the absence of divine guidance.

For Bahá'ís, the books, tablets, and letters penned by Bahá'u'lláh represent the Word of God renewed. Although they are consistent with past religious revelations and represent “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future,” the writings of Bahá'u'lláh also contain fresh truths about God's will for humanity today. ■



“The changeless Faith of God”

When Bahá'ís say that the religions are one, they do not mean that the various religious creeds and organizations are the same. Rather, they believe that there is simply one religion and all of the Messengers of God have progressively revealed its nature. Together, the world's great religions are expressions of a single unfolding divine plan, “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”

This concept goes far beyond the idea of “tolerance” of other faiths or some fusion of religious ideas. For while Bahá'ís respect and revere all the Founders of the world's great religions and recognize Their contributions to humanity's advancement, they also understand that all previous religions find fulfillment in the coming of Bahá'u'lláh.

As stated in the Bahá'í writings, the Bahá'í Faith “upholds uncompromisingly the eternal verities” of the religions that have come before it, recognizing “firmly and absolutely the Divine origin of their Authors....” At the same time, however, the Bahá'í Faith must be “hailed as the promise and crowning glory of past ages and centuries, as the consummation of all the Dispensations” of the past.



Bahá'ís of Jewish background, accordingly, revere Moses for His revelation of the Ten Commandments and for Judaism's contribution to humanity's general understanding of the importance of obedience to moral law. They also see Bahá'u'lláh as the appearance of the promised “Lord of Hosts” come down “with ten thousands of saints,” as promised by Isaiah, sent to lead the way for nations to “beat their swords into plowshares.”



Bahá'ís of Buddhist background venerate Buddha and treasure His teachings on detachment, meditation, and peace, which have greatly enriched world civilization. Further, they understand that Bahá'u'lláh fulfils the promise of the coming of “a Buddha named Maitreya, a Buddha of universal fellowship” who will, according to Buddhist traditions, bring peace and enlightenment for all humanity.



For Bahá'ís of Hindu background, the contribution of Hinduism to humanity's understanding of God as the all-pervading Ultimate Reality and the spiritual nature of human reality is firmly acknowledged. They see Bahá'u'lláh as the latest incarnation of Krishna, the “Tenth Avatar” and the “Most Great Spirit,” Who, “when goodness grows weak,” returns “in every age” to “establish righteousness,” as promised in the Bhagavad-Gita.



For Bahá'ís of Christian background, Christ's teachings on love, charity, and forgiveness are viewed as priceless gifts from God to humanity, as are the example of Christ's life and His sacrifice. They further understand that Bahá'u'lláh fulfils Christ's promise that He would come again, “in the glory of His Father,” bringing all people together so that “there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.”



For Bahá'ís of Muslim background, Muhammad's teachings on learning, submission to the Divine will, and the unity of God are understood to have shaped the development of human society in profound ways. In Bahá'u'lláh, they see fulfillment of the Qur'an's promise for the coming of the “Day of God” and the “Great Announcement,” when “God” will come down “overshadowed with clouds.”

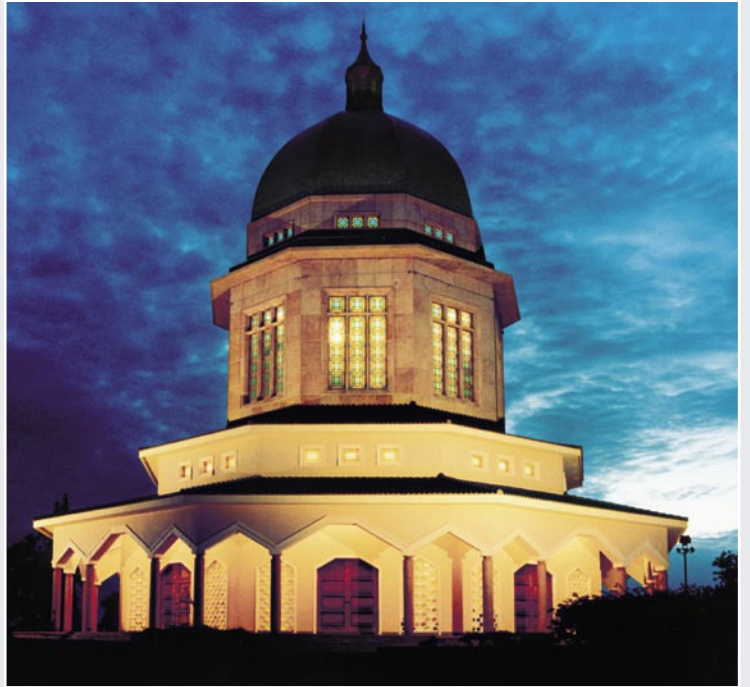
Bahá'ís understand as well that the spiritual guidance provided in other religions, including Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and indigenous religions of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, have likewise all served to educate humanity about its Creator and to teach people how best to conduct their lives.



*“All the
Prophets of
God, His well-
favored, His
holy and chosen
Messengers
are, without
exception, the
bearers of His
names, and the
embodiments of
His attributes.”*

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

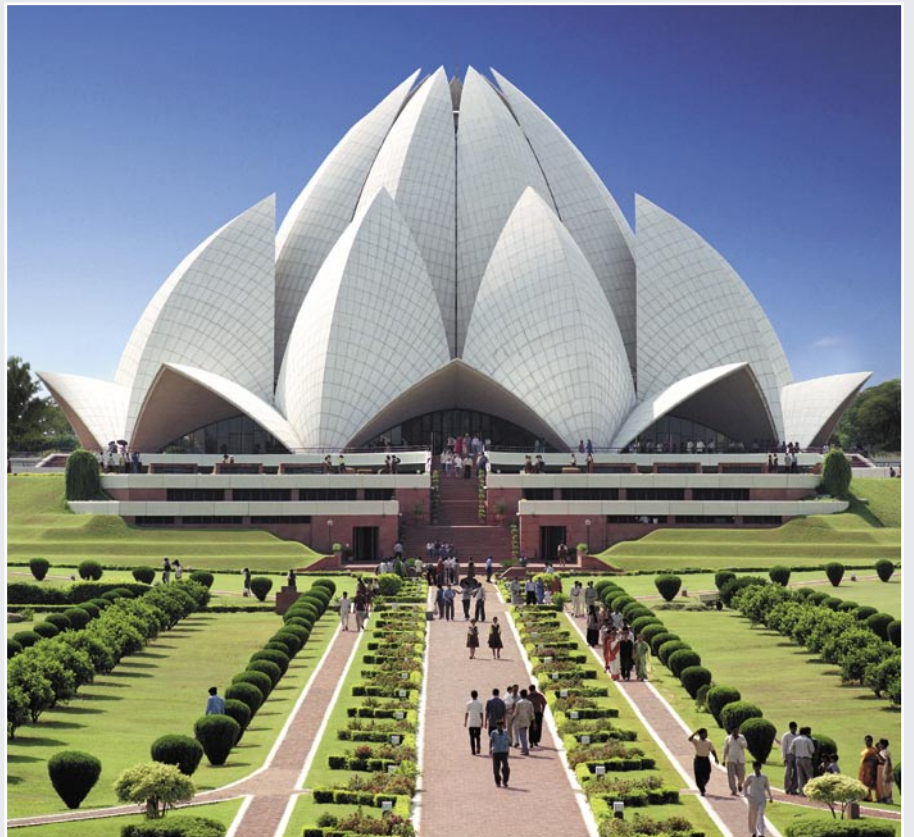
► *Kampala, Uganda*



▼ *Panama City, Panama*



▲ *Wilmette, Illinois, USA*



▲ *New Delhi, India*

Bahá'í Houses of Worship

Spiritual beacons for humanity

As gathering places for prayer and meditation, Bahá'í Houses of Worship are the buildings in the Bahá'í Faith that most closely approximate the role of the church, the temple, or the mosque. Yet they are also something more.

As envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh, local Houses of Worship will someday be the focal point for a community's spiritual life — and an expression of its humanitarian concern.

So far, eight Houses of Worship have been built — at least one on each continent, a token of the Faith's global progress. At the present stage of the Faith's development, Bahá'ís have focused on creating and developing the social and spiritual institutions of community life rather than on the construction of physical buildings in every community. Yet those Houses of Worship that have been constructed stand as beacons calling the world to a new mode of religious worship and life.

Each temple has its own distinctive design, and yet conforms to a set of architectural requirements that give a unifying theme. All Bahá'í Houses of Worship must have nine sides and a central dome.

The first House of Worship was built in Russia, in the city of Ashkhabad in Central Asia. Completed around 1908, the Ashkhabad House of Worship served the Bahá'í community of that region until 1938, when the site was appropriated by the Soviet government. The building was demolished in 1962 after being damaged by an earthquake.

The Ashkhabad House of Worship was in many ways ahead of its time. In addition to serving as a spiritual center for the thriving Bahá'í community in that region, it gave practical expression to the community's humanitarian ideals. Attached to it were a number of subsidiaries, including a hospital, a school, and a hostel for travelers.

The first Bahá'í House of Worship in the West was completed in 1953, in Wilmette, Illinois, USA, on the shores of Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago. Its filigreed dome and extraordinary ornamentation combine features drawn from the architectural styles of both East and West, and it has attracted millions of visitors over the years. Other Bahá'í Houses of Worship have also been built in Kampala, Uganda; near Sydney, Australia; outside Frankfurt, Germany; overlooking Panama City, Panama; and in Apia, Samoa. In the near future, Bahá'ís plan to start building a temple for South America in Santiago, Chile.

The newest House of Worship was completed in 1986 in New Delhi, India. Since that time the structure has won numerous architectural awards and has been featured in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles.

Inspired by the lotus flower, its design is composed of 27 free-standing marble clad "petals" arranged in clusters of three to form nine sides.

Nine doors open onto a central hall, capable of holding up to 2,500 people. Slightly more than 40 meters tall, its surface luminous, the temple at times seems to float above its 26-acre site on the outskirts of the Indian capital.

In a few short years the New Delhi temple has become one of the world's major attractions, drawing more than two and a half million visitors a year. On Hindu holy days, it has drawn as many as 100,000 — so revered is the Bahá'í temple by India's people, whatever their religious background.

Indeed, all Bahá'í Houses of Worship are open to people of every religion. There are no sermons, rituals, or clergy.

Around the world, more than 120 sites have so far been set aside for future Houses of Worship. Ultimately, every local Bahá'í community will have its own House of Worship. Like the first one in Ashkhabad, each will become the focus of community life, as well as a center for social, scientific, educational, and humanitarian services.



▲ Frankfurt, Germany



▲ Sydney, Australia



▲ Apia, Samoa



A System of Global Governance

Following a framework set down by Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í communities conduct their business through a distinctive administrative system that promotes new patterns of collective action.

UNDERLYING THE MOST dynamic movements, conflicts, and institutions of the last 100 years has been a key question: how shall humanity govern itself — and by what means can the greatest number of people achieve happiness and prosperity?

By early in the twentieth century, despotism had been widely rejected and the First World War utterly dismantled its most powerful examples. The Second World War settled the question of fascism and led to the end of colonialism. More recently, the most ambitious of the various economic and political ideologies, communism, has been thoroughly discredited.

As we begin the new millennium, a consensus has emerged that some form of government by the people — one that combines free elections, safeguards for individual expression, and yet a firm sense of responsibility to the common good — offers the best system of governance.

As an ideal, this system is often referred to as “democracy.” Yet, although clearly superior to other systems so far tried, democracy as practiced today is nevertheless undergoing its own convulsions.

In the West, despite its successes, the multi-party system increasingly reveals its limitations. In many countries, corrup-

tion, mud-slinging, negative campaigning, vote pandering, and the limited choice of candidates have led to voter apathy on a scale that threatens the integrity of the whole system.

In the East, new democratic experiments are threatened by a host of problems and forces, including a lack of experience at self-government, age-old ethnic tensions, varying cultural expectations, and continuing disagreement about the nature of human rights.

Around the world, growing numbers of people today have lost faith in their leaders, become cynical about their governmental systems, and rejected the responsibilities of citizenship. The resulting disillusionment has severely limited humanity's capacity for achieving collective social advancement, attaining prosperity for all, and ensuring widespread happiness.

An alternative to these trends can be found in the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Following principles and precepts laid down in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís have established a distinctive system of global self-governance that both protects personal freedom and safeguards the prerogatives of the community as a whole, striking a singular balance between individual initiative and the common good.

Utilizing a unique combination of freely elected councils and a complementary institution of appointed advisors, the system is in many ways far more “democratic” than the methods by which most parliaments or other representational systems operate. And yet, because of its distinctive procedures and principles, it avoids the processes of manipulation,

◀ *There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís elect their leadership by secret ballot, in a distinctive system without campaigning or nominations. Shown here are delegates from around the world voting in 1998 to elect the Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í Faith's supreme governing council.*



“In every country where any of this people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

factionalism, and partisanship that have become unseemly features of other systems of governance worldwide.

For example, the election process at all levels — the Bahá'í system functions at the local, regional, national, and international levels — excludes any form of electioneering or nomination. Yet it offers every individual elector the widest possible choice of candidates.

The decision-making process used by all bodies of the Bahá'í community is likewise distinctive. Known as “consultation,” its method is nonadversarial, seeking to build unity of purpose by welcoming and encouraging the free expression of views and by striving for consensus based on established principles.

Administrative system

The administrative system of the Bahá'í Faith comprises formally established structures that incorporate the benefits of direction by corporate bodies and counsel by wise and experienced individuals. This system consists, on the one hand, of elected councils, operating at global, national, and local levels. Their membership drawn entirely from the people, these institutions are vested by the Bahá'í sacred writings with legislative, judicial, and executive functions. The system is composed, on the other hand, of eminent and devoted individuals appointed for the specific purposes of propagating and protecting the Bahá'í Faith. These high-ranking individuals, appointed by and operating under the guidance of the Head of the Faith, counsel, stimulate and encourage individual Bahá'ís and elected institutions. Thus, they play a vital role in assisting community plans, promoting learning, fostering individual initiative, encouraging individual freedom and diversity of expression, while at the same time ensuring the protection of the Faith against schism.

Both elements of this system are guided by the central governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice. The nine members of the Universal House of Justice are elected every five years by members of the more than 180 national-level governing councils worldwide.

Altogether, these institutions form what is known as the “administrative order” of the Bahá'í Faith. Developed gradually over the course of the last century and a half, the system is a remarkable development: a principled system of world governance that, without resort to a priestly or ecclesiastical class, serves both to develop and channel the capacities of the individual without impinging on the rights of the whole — and above all else has the demonstrated ability to forge an

integrated world community, bringing unified direction to a body of people that is perhaps the most diverse on earth.

Certainly, as a system of religious administration, it stands without parallel. No other world religion, past or present, conducts its affairs through a system that, through all-encompassing free elections, harkens so closely to the concerns of the grassroots while at the same time, because of its basis on divine scripture, provides the explicit authority for steadfast unity.

Beyond its function as a system of religious administration, however, the administrative order of the Bahá'í Faith also stands as a singular model for the kind of system of global governance our new age so sorely needs. Indeed, Bahá'ís understand that the Bahá'í administrative order is nothing less than the “charter of a future world civilization.”

The Local Assembly

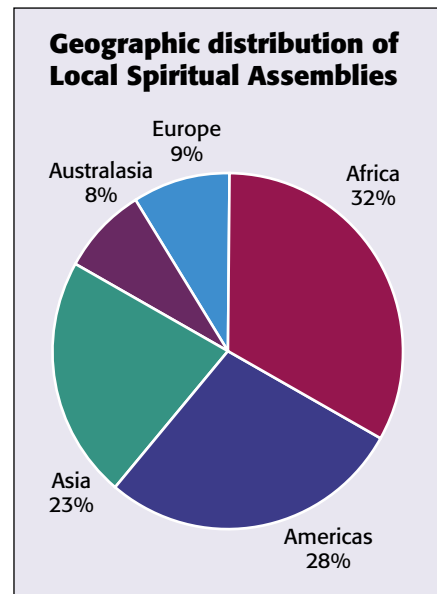
Perhaps the best way to understand the Bahá'í administrative system is to examine its basic unit, the Local Spiritual Assembly. Elected each year in every community where there are nine or more adult Bahá'ís, the Local Spiritual Assembly performs many of the functions that have traditionally been associated with clergy — and more. Indeed, the processes that underlie the Local Spiritual Assembly can be said to offer a new model for participatory, democratic decision making at the grassroots level.

At the present time, Local Spiritual Assemblies oversee the wide variety of activities that constitute the essence of Bahá'í community life. These include the education of children, the observance of holy days, devotional services, study classes, discussions, social events, mar-

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“The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



Consultation

Group decision making without factionalism

The administrative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith at all levels use a distinctive method of nonadversarial decision making, known as “consultation.”

The principles of consultation were laid down in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and, as a procedure for building consensus and investigating truth, they have the potential for wide application. Indeed, Bahá'ís have found them to be useful in virtually any arena where group decision making and cooperation are required. These principles are used not only by the Faith's own institutions, but in Bahá'í-owned businesses, in Bahá'í-operated schools, and in day-to-day decision making in Bahá'í families.

In essence, consultation seeks to build consensus in a manner that unites various constituencies instead of dividing them. It encourages diversity of opinion and acts to control the struggle for power that is so common in traditional decision-making systems.

Bahá'í consultation is based on the following principles:

- Information should be gathered from the widest possible range of sources and diverse points of view should be

sought. This may mean making efforts to seek the views of specialists — such as lawyers, doctors, or scientists. It may also mean looking for information outside traditional specialties or considering the views of community members from diverse backgrounds.

- During discussion, participants are encouraged to be as frank and candid as possible, while maintaining a courteous interest in the views of others. Personal attacks, blanket ultimatums, and prejudicial statements are not permitted.
- When an idea is put forth it becomes at once the property of the group. Although this notion sounds simple, it is perhaps the most profound principle of consultation. All ideas thus cease to be the property of any individual, subgroup, or constituency. When followed, this principle encourages those ideas that spring forth from a sincere desire to serve the well-being of the group, as opposed to ideas that emanate from a desire for personal aggrandizement or constituency building.
- The group strives for unanimity, but a majority vote can be taken to bring about a conclusion and make the decision. Once a decision is made, it is incumbent on the entire group to act on it with unity — regardless of whether one supported the measure or not.

In this sense, there can be no “minority report” or “position of the opposition” in consultation. Rather, Bahá'ís believe that the rightness or wrongness of a decision will become evident in its implementation — but only if the decision-making group and the community at large support it wholeheartedly.

This commitment ensures that if a decision or a project fails, the problem lies in the idea itself, and not in lack of support from the community or the obstinate actions of opponents.

The principle, again, harks back to an understanding of the power of unity. Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, said that Bahá'ís should strive always to seek agreement on an issue:

“If they agree on a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundations. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.”

▼ *Local Spiritual Assemblies, like this one in Guyana, use consultation as their means to reach decision, as do all other Bahá'í institutions.*





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“The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

▲ *Foremost among the group of advisors serving in the Faith’s multi-layered “counselling institutions” are the “Hands of the Cause of God,” who hold the highest station as appointed individuals. Some 50 individuals have held this title and since no more can be appointed, transferable elements of their duties have been taken up by the Counsellors. Shown here, left to right, are the three Hands of the Cause still living in 1992: ‘Ali-Muhammad Varqa, Anatu’l-Bahá Ruhíyyih Khanum, and ‘Ali-Akbar Furutan. Ruhíyyih Khanum passed away on 19 January 2000. Mr. Furutan passed away on 26 November 2003.*

riages, and funeral services. Many Local Spiritual Assemblies around the world also sponsor ongoing small-scale educational, social and economic, or environmental development projects.

Local Spiritual Assemblies also perform executive and judicial functions, handling correspondence and money for the community and overseeing the application of Bahá’í law in matters such as divorce or disputes between community members.

As with all other Bahá’í elected institutions, Local Spiritual Assemblies function only as a body, making all decisions as a group, using the process of consultation in arriving at those decisions. Individual Assembly members have no special au-

thority, status, or power outside the Assembly itself.

Typically, the reach of the Local Spiritual Assembly is defined by the municipal boundaries established by the government. In other words, all Bahá’ís who live within the boundaries of a particular village, town, city, or civic district are considered to be within the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Assembly of that locality.

The process by which Local Spiritual Assembly members are elected, likewise, is worth describing in some detail, as many of the features of local Bahá’í elections are mirrored at the regional, national, and international levels.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is elected each year by secret ballot. In April, all adult Bahá’ís in the community gather for the election. Those who cannot personally attend are encouraged to submit absentee ballots. After a period of prayer and meditation, each adult chooses the nine individuals that he or she feels are best qualified to administer the affairs of the community.

The qualities such individuals should possess are spelled out quite clearly in the Bahá’í writings. Those participating in the election should consider “the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.”

One of the most intriguing aspects of this process is the absence of a prepared ballot — or of any system of nominations. Instead, every adult Bahá’í in the community is eligible for election to the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Those elected to the Assembly need not receive a majority of votes; rather, the nine individuals who receive the highest number of votes are selected. Since every adult in the community is, in essence, up for election, individuals have the opportunity to vote according to their conscience with an absolute freedom of choice. In no other system do individuals exercise such a breadth of freedom in the electoral process.

Although this system defies political convention, it is remarkably effective in practice. The Bahá’í writings encourage the election of individuals with recognized ability, maturity, experience, and humility — instead of simply those who might be bold or ambitious enough to run for office. Indeed, the whole emphasis of the Bahá’í electoral system is to bring forth leaders who possess qualities of selflessness, intellectual capacity, moral integrity, and wisdom.

Local Spiritual Assemblies also supervise the Nineteen Day Feast, which,

as noted earlier, is the cornerstone of community activity and a means for the Assembly to hear directly from the community [see page 12]. And, although the Assembly is ultimately the final source for decision making in the community, the institution of the Feast is an important component of grassroots governance.

Counsellors and their institutions

Crucial to understanding how the Bahá'í administrative order works is to comprehend the role of the counselling institutions. Again, it is perhaps easiest to explain how this corps of experienced advisors functions by examining their role at the local level. But first it is necessary to describe the overall structure and role of the counselling institutions in the Bahá'í Faith.

Foremost among these advisers are the Hands of the Cause of God. This title has been given to some 50 individuals in the history of the Faith; all were appointed by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi [see next section for more on 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi]. As of 2004, the sole surviving Hand of the Cause, 'Ali-Muhammad Varqa, was still serving the Faith in Haifa, Israel. In 1968, after determining that no more Hands could be appointed, the Universal House of Justice began to designate a number of mature and experienced individuals as Counsellors, so as to extend into the future the indispensable functions of the Hands of the Cause.

Appointed for five-year terms, Counsellors are assigned either to one of five Continental Boards or to the International Teaching Centre. Those assigned to a Continental Board serve in one of five regions of the world: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, or Europe. The International Teaching Centre, based at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, directs the work of these five Boards. It is composed of nine Counsellors plus the remaining Hands of the Cause.

The Continental Boards appoint individuals to Auxiliary Boards. The members of these Auxiliary Boards currently number some 990, and they are each assigned to cover a specific region within the Continental Board's area of coverage. At the next level, Auxiliary Board members themselves appoint individuals to serve as their assistants.

The members of the counselling institutions at all levels constitute a corps of highly diverse men and women, who seek to inspire and enlighten Bahá'ís in the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in their everyday lives, working to help them realize their full potential. They seek to nurture and advise communities and institutions in their growth and development, working to ensure their proper



functioning, and they seek to promote the acquisition of knowledge and capacity at all levels so as to empower the Faith's institutions to become guiding lights for society at large. Although these servants of the Faith do not possess authority to direct the elected institutions, their advice plays a major role in shaping their plans and in developing Bahá'í community life.

At the local level, for example, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants work closely with Local Spiritual Assemblies to offer insight, advice, and encouragement. Drawing upon the experience of working with other communities and their own maturity as believers, Board members and their assistants help the Assemblies to focus on the principles in the Bahá'í writings, offer ideas as to how to promote community cohesion, and suggest proven methods for stimulating growth.

Thus working together, the two institutions — the Local Spiritual Assembly and the Auxiliary Board — strive to create an atmosphere of learning and disciplined behavior, characterized by patience and forbearance towards mistakes. They seek to build and maintain unity of thought and action in an environment free of excessive criticism, of backbiting, of conflict and contention, which at the same time welcomes the freedom of expression on the part of every believer.

It is worth noting also that those elected or appointed to Bahá'í institutions

▲ *In the Bahá'í administrative order, the Institution of the Counsellors complements the Faith's elected institutions at all levels. Shown here is a photograph of the members of the International Teaching Centre in Haifa, Israel, in 2003. The members are known as Counsellors and they and their counterparts at the continental level play a vital role in fostering individual initiative, diversity, and freedom of action in the worldwide Bahá'í community.*

with few exceptions serve entirely without pay, often offering many hours a month in service to their communities.

The National Spiritual Assembly

At the national level, Bahá'í community life is governed by the National Spiritual Assembly. Like the Local Spiritual Assembly, this national-level governing council is elected annually, following the same basic electoral procedures: no nominations are permitted, campaigning is forbidden, secret ballots are used, moral character and practical ability are emphasized, and those men and women who receive the most votes are elected.

The electoral process at the national level is different in one respect. While the local Assembly is elected by all adult community members, the National Spiritual Assembly is elected by delegates, who, in turn, are chosen in "district" conventions. All adult Bahá'ís are eligible to vote in district conventions, and so the connection between the individual and his or her national-level governing body remains quite close.

In choosing members of the National Spiritual Assembly, delegates may vote for any adult Bahá'í residing in the country — once again preserving the freedom of choice that is fundamental to the Bahá'í electoral system.

As the Faith has grown, so have the number of National Spiritual Assemblies.

In 1954, for example, there were just 12 National Spiritual Assemblies. By 2004, there were 183 National Spiritual Assemblies around the world — in nearly every country.

Just as the men and women serving on Local Spiritual Assemblies oversee Bahá'í community affairs within a municipal locality, National Spiritual Assemblies are charged with guiding and coordinating Bahá'í activities within a given country. Their activities range from the adoption of nationwide teaching plans to the initiation of large-scale social and economic development projects; from overseeing relations with their respective national governments to coordinating with other religious groups and nongovernmental organizations.

And like Local Spiritual Assemblies, National Spiritual Assemblies benefit from the wisdom and experience of members of the counselling institutions. National Spiritual Assemblies work with members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, individuals who function on all continents and larger regions of the globe. Just as Auxiliary Board members serve Local Spiritual Assemblies, Counsellors advise, assist, and encourage the work of National Assemblies in consultation and decision making. Collaborating in a spirit of harmony, the two branches elevate public discourse to principled consultation, concerning themselves not only with the

▼ *At the national level, Bahá'í communities are guided by elected councils known as National Spiritual Assemblies. Shown here are the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa as elected in 2003.*





laws and regulations of the Faith, but also with the encouragement and embrace of measures that foster individual initiative and a whole-hearted response to the spiritual truths of the Faith.

The Universal House of Justice

As noted above, the head of the Bahá'í administrative structure is the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith. Composed of nine individuals, the Universal House of Justice is elected every five years by the combined membership of all the world's National Spiritual Assemblies.

The process of election is much the same as for Local and National Spiritual

Assemblies: there are no nominations, campaigning is forbidden, and the nine individuals who receive the most votes are elected. As with local and national elections, voters are expected to consider only individuals of recognized ability and spiritual capacity.

The entire election process is a powerful expression of democratic ideals. Although it is an international institution, the Universal House of Justice is nevertheless surprisingly close to the grassroots. The final election of the Universal House of Justice is just three steps away from the local level: every adult Bahá'í is eligible to participate in the election of a "district" delegate; district delegates in turn elect

▲ *Whether at the local, regional, national, or international level, Bahá'í elections follow a similar process that seeks to choose spiritually minded leaders from the entire body of believers in the area. Shown here is a Bahá'í election in process in Panama.*

Questions about money – or, how Bahá'ís raise funds

Bahá'u'lláh forbade accepting from outside sources any form of funds that would be used for purely Bahá'í purposes. Accordingly, Bahá'í institutions are supported solely by the registered membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to give to their local and national Bahá'í funds on a regular basis. Local and national finances are usually discussed at each Nineteen Day Feast. All individual contributions to these funds are strictly voluntary and confidential.



▲ At the Dang Bahá'í Institute in Ahwa, Gujarat, India, students gather for training courses in community development and moral education.

Developing capacity for service to humanity

A relatively new feature of the Bahá'í system has been the development of a series of national and regional training institutes which are aimed at increasing the capacity of the Bahá'í community to render service to humanity at large.

Generally using an approach of distance learning through the deployment of tutors at the grassroots level, these institutes are designed to help members of the Bahá'í community and other interested individuals acquire the kinds of knowledge and skills that are necessary to help foster the development of the peaceful and prosperous world civilization envisioned in the Bahá'í writings.

Recent years have also seen a proliferation of other Bahá'í agencies and associations devoted to special areas of interest within the Bahá'í community. These range from professional associations, such as the European Bahá'í Business Forum and the Bahá'í Justice Society, to academic groups, such as the Association for Bahá'í Studies and its various branches around the world, to Bahá'í-sponsored nongovernmental organizations devoted to social and economic development, such as Health for Humanity or the International Environmental Forum. Some of these organizations are sponsored by National Spiritual Assemblies; others are organized by associations of individual Bahá'ís.

Noninvolvement in partisan politics

The Bahá'í teachings stress the importance of obedience to civil government and laws. While Bahá'ís may accept nonpartisan government posts or appointments, they do not engage in partisan political activity — including the discussion of individual candidates or parties. As individuals, however, Bahá'ís are free to vote according to their conscience in civil elections.

the members of their respective National Spiritual Assemblies; and the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies around the world in turn elect the Universal House of Justice. The first election was held in 1963.

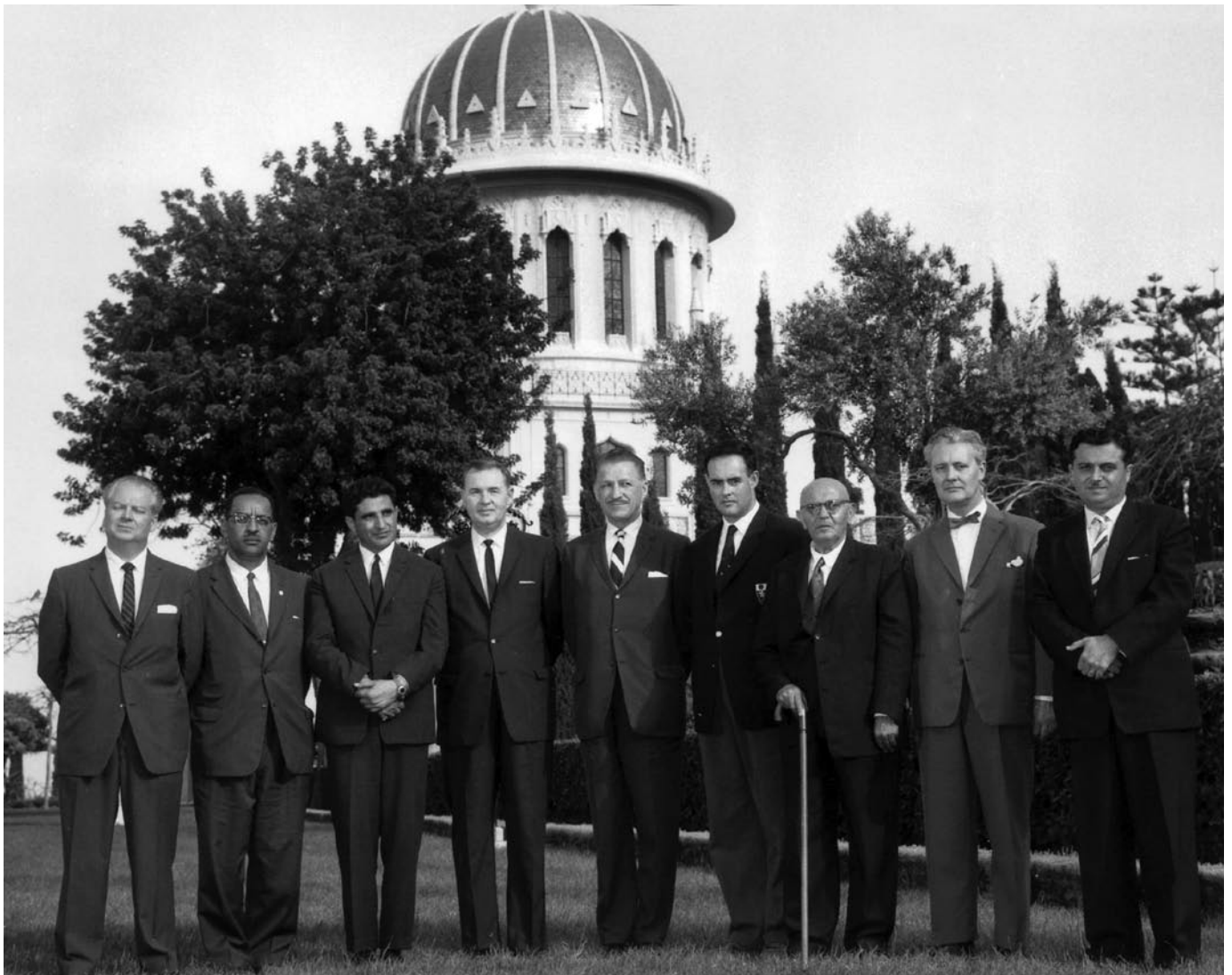
Bahá'u'lláh Himself established the institution of the Universal House of Justice, and it occupies a unique position in the Bahá'í administrative order. Bahá'ís understand that its decision making is unerringly guided by God.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are the foundation of Bahá'í belief and practice. However, the Universal House of Justice has the authority both to legislate on all matters which Bahá'u'lláh Himself did not explicitly address and also to repeal or change its own legislation as conditions change. This provides Bahá'í law with an element of flexibility. If, for example, the development of some future technology poses a moral question which was unknown at the time of Bahá'u'lláh, the Universal House of Justice would deter-

mine how to address that question. In this way, Bahá'ís believe, the Bahá'í Faith will continue to be guided by God until such time as the next Manifestation of God appears — an event which Bahá'u'lláh said will not occur before the passing of at least a thousand years.

Like members of National and Local Assemblies, members of the Universal House of Justice have no power or authority on their own. It is the institution of the Universal House of Justice, not its individual members, that is considered to be divinely inspired. ■

▼ *Members of the first Universal House of Justice, elected in 1963.*



The Bahá'í World Centre: focal point for a global community

High on Mount Carmel stands the administrative center of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

Before His passing, Bahá'u'lláh indicated that the world headquarters for the Faith He had founded would be in the Haifa/Acre area in the north of what is now Israel. The region today is home to the spiritual and administrative heart of the Bahá'í Faith.

The final resting places of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb are in the region. The golden-domed Shrine of the Báb sits on the slopes of Mount Carmel in Haifa while the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is located just across the bay at Bahjí, north of Acre. Situated in magnificent gardens, these two spots are the holiest places in the Bahá'í world.

The administrative center of the Bahá'í Faith is in Haifa. Located on Mount Carmel, just above the Shrine of the Báb and at the apex of an arc-shaped path in a hillside garden, is the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. From this building and others nearby, a staff of over 600 people from more than 60 countries administers the international affairs of the Bahá'í world community.

From Haifa, information is exchanged with national Bahá'í communities; international goals and plans are disseminated; social and economic development projects are monitored; statistics are collected and kept; laws are clarified; and international funds are managed. There is also an International Archives Building, within which are housed writings and artifacts associated with the history of the Faith — particularly the lives of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

As the Faith and its work have expanded, so has the need for new buildings and structures at the World Centre. In 2001, work was completed on two new administrative buildings, the International Teaching Centre building and the Centre for the Study of the Texts.

The International Teaching Centre building houses a body of appointed individuals who function collectively to assist the Universal House of Justice and to provide guidance to the worldwide Bahá'í community through a network of fellow Counsellors who reside around the world [see page 47].

The Centre for the Study of the Texts houses an institution of scholars, whose role is to study the Bahá'í sacred writings,



▲ *The Seat of the Universal House of Justice on Mount Carmel. This building houses the international governing council of the worldwide Bahá'í community.*



translate the texts, prepare compilations, and draft commentaries as required.

In addition, in an attempt to showcase the Bahá'í vision of beauty, harmony and peace, a series of 19 majestic garden terraces that bracket the Shrine of the Báb were likewise completed in 2001. Compared by early visitors to famous gardens and monuments of the past, such as Versailles or antiquity's Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the terraces extend more than a kilometer up the face of Mount Carmel, virtually reshaping the face of what has long been known as "God's Holy Mountain."

Collectively, the completion of these projects, which cost more than US\$250 million, brings the Faith into a new level of prominence in the world. The gardens and buildings are designed to promote Bahá'í concepts of harmony, unity, and peace.

Each year, thousands of pilgrims come from around the world to pray and meditate in the Shrines, and to visit the other Bahá'í holy places in the Haifa/Acre area. In addition to inspiring those individual believers who make them, these pilgrimages, by bringing together Bahá'ís from all over the world, help to give social cohesion to the Faith.



▲ *The Centre for the Study of the Texts.*



▲ *The International Teaching Centre building.*

▼ *Bahá'ís on pilgrimage enter the Shrine of the Báb.*



“Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

A Century of Growth and Expansion

The question of religious succession has been crucial to all faiths. Failure to resolve this question has inevitably led to schisms. Alone among world religions, the Bahá'í Faith has resisted fragmentation and maintained its unity.



“My object is none other than the betterment of the world and the tranquility of its peoples.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

AT THE TIME of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892, there were some 50,000 Bahá'ís in the world. The Faith had spread to most of the countries and territories in the Middle East and to the Indian subcontinent. In Europe, the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia, and most of Asia, however, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings were unknown.

Today, the Bahá'í Faith is the most geographically widespread independent religion after Christianity, with communities in at least 235 countries and dependent territories. There are more than five million Bahá'ís in the world, a hundredfold increase.

The story of this growth and expansion is intimately tied to two major figures in the Bahá'í Faith: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, who headed the Faith successively after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892.

As noted in the last section, the governance of the Bahá'í Faith is now largely in the hands of democratically elected bodies. The achievement of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose in this regard was the work of these two hereditary leaders. The role they played in maintaining the essential unity of the Bahá'í Faith is without parallel in religious history.

The question of religious succession has been crucial to all Faiths. Failure to resolve this question has inevitably led to enduring schisms. Today, there are more than 2,000 sects of Christianity, 1,000 or more in Islam, and comparable divisions in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Many of these sects emerged because of disagreements about who had final

authority over the interpretation of sacred scripture.

Bahá'u'lláh prevented schism in the Bahá'í Faith through a seemingly simple means: a will and testament. In that will, Bahá'u'lláh not only appointed His eldest son to succeed Him but passed to Him clear-cut authority to interpret His writings and to be the focal point for unifying the community.

'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Master

'Abdu'l-Bahá was born on 23 May 1844, the very night of the Báb's declaration. It is clear that from the start Bahá'u'lláh carefully prepared 'Abdu'l-Bahá to succeed Him. As a child, He suffered along with His Father during the first round of persecutions against the Bábis.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was only eight when Bahá'u'lláh was first thrown into prison. He visited Him there and saw the iron collar and chains around His Father's neck.

As He grew older, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became His Father's closest companion and carried out for Him many important tasks. He interviewed in advance the numerous visitors who came to see His Father and protected Him from frivolous or ill-intentioned impositions on His work.

In Acre, when nearly the entire group of Bahá'ís there became ill with typhoid fever, malaria, and dysentery, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

► *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.*



The Covenant

Bahá'ís believe that the distinctive unity of the Bahá'í Faith stems from a promise from God to humanity that assures His continuing guidance after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. This promise is referred to as the Covenant.

The idea of a covenant between man and God is, of course, familiar to the followers of many religions. Jews understand that God entered into a covenant with them, promising to guide them as long as they obeyed His laws. Christians, too, understand that Jesus entered into a new covenant with His followers.

For Bahá'ís, the Covenant made by Bahá'u'lláh is both a renewal of the promise of divine guidance and a system that ensures its continuance. Specifically, the Covenant can be understood to be synonymous with the line of succession after Bahá'u'lláh, as set down in the written scriptures of the Faith. This line goes from Bahá'u'lláh to His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and to the Universal House of Justice.

To be faithful to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is to be obedient to Him as God's Messenger. This means to accept the authority of His appointed successors and to adhere to the arrangements He made for the advancement of His Faith. To break the Covenant is to reject or deliberately attempt to usurp or undermine the authority Bahá'u'lláh has established, while still claiming to be a Bahá'í. Such an action constitutes an attack on the Faith's unity — its distinguishing characteristic.

Anyone who persistently engages in such behavior becomes known as a Covenant-breaker and is therefore denied access to the Bahá'í community. Such a person can gain readmittance through genuine repentance.

Moral shortcomings, such as a failure to conform to Bahá'í standards, are not a breach of the Covenant.



washed, nursed, and fed the patients, taking no rest for Himself. Finally, exhausted, He took ill Himself and suffered in a critical condition for nearly a month.

His qualities of selflessness, erudition, and great humility, along with Bahá'u'lláh's obvious admiration for His son, soon won for 'Abdu'l-Bahá the title of "the Master." It is a term still used today by Bahá'ís in referring to Him.

Despite the explicit terms of Bahá'u'lláh's will and testament, some envious relatives attempted to usurp 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position after Bahá'u'lláh's passing. Repeated attempts were made by these ambitious individuals to create followings of their own.

It is significant, in view of the swift emergence of schisms in the world's other religions, that none of the resulting dissident groups was able to maintain itself or create a division of the Bahá'í Faith. Ultimately, each group disintegrated with the death of the leader who had tried to establish it, and no sects or denomina-

▲ 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a young man. This photograph, taken for a passport, is similar to the only known photograph of Bahá'u'lláh. That photograph is kept at the Bahá'í World Centre and copies are not distributed, in order to prevent the possibility that people would worship the image.

tions have endured. Bahá'ís attribute this unity to the power of the "Covenant" [see sidebar this page].

'Abdu'l-Bahá also played a key role in explaining the global vision of His Father in terms that the Western world could understand, an accomplishment that greatly accelerated the transformation of the Bahá'í Faith from a small, Middle Eastern movement into the worldwide religion it is today.

Following the passing of His Father, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remained a prisoner of the
[continued on page 62]

A description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Seldom have I seen one whose appearance impressed me more. A tall, strongly-built man holding himself straight as an arrow, with white turban and raiment, long black locks reaching almost to the shoulder, broad powerful forehead indicating a strong intellect combined with an unswerving will, eyes keen as a hawk's, and strongly-marked but pleasing features — such was my first impression of 'Abbas Effendi, "the master" as he *par excellence* is called.... One more eloquent of speech, more ready of argument, more apt of illustration, more intimately acquainted with the sacred books of the Jews, the Christians, the Muhammadans, could, I should think, scarcely be found even amongst the eloquent, ready, and subtle race to which he belongs. These qualities, combined with a bearing at once majestic and

▼ In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent from April to December touring North America. He is shown here with Bahá'ís at Lincoln Park, Chicago, Illinois, USA, in 1912.



genial, made me cease to wonder at the influence and esteem which he enjoyed even beyond the circle of his father's followers. About the greatness of this man and his power no one who had seen him could entertain a doubt."

— Edward G. Browne, a Cambridge scholar who initially met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1890 and came to know Him well

▲ 'Abdu'l-Bahá toured Europe for three months in 1911 and visited a second time in 1913. He is shown here at Clifton Guest House, Bristol, England, in September 1911.



'Abdu'l-Bahá on racism

According to the words of the Old Testament, God has said, "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." This indicates that man is of the image and likeness of God — that is to say, the perfections of God, the divine virtues, are reflected or revealed in the human reality. Just as the light and effulgence of the sun when cast upon a polished mirror are reflected fully, gloriously, so, likewise, the qualities and attributes of Divinity are radiated from the depths of a pure human heart. This is an evidence that man is the most noble of God's creatures....

Let us now discover more specifically how he is the image and likeness

of God and what is the standard or criterion by which he can be measured and estimated. This standard can be no other than the divine virtues which are revealed in him. Therefore, every man imbued with divine qualities, who reflects heavenly moralities and perfections, who is the expression of ideal and praiseworthy attributes, is, verily, in the image and likeness of God. If a man possesses wealth, can we call him an image and likeness of God? Or is human honor and notoriety the criterion of divine nearness? Can we apply the test of racial color and say that man of a certain hue — white, black, brown, yellow, red — is the true image of his Creator? We must conclude that color is not the standard and estimate of judgment and that it is of no importance, for color is accidental in nature. The spirit and intelligence of man is essential.... Therefore, be it known that color or race is of no importance. He who

is the image and likeness of God, who is the manifestation of the bestowals of God, is acceptable at the threshold of God — whether his color be white, black or brown; it matters not. Man is not man simply because of bodily attributes. The standard of divine measure and judgment is his intelligence and spirit....

A man's heart may be pure and white though his outer skin be black; or his heart be dark and sinful though his racial color is white. The character and purity of the heart is of all importance.

— Excerpts from a talk given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the Fourth Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 30 April 1912, Handel Hall, Chicago, Illinois, USA





▲ Bahá'í communities in the United States have in recent years sponsored annual Race Unity Day events, such as this parade in Springfield, Oregon, USA.



▲ Evans and Kylie Omari, and their son Beko, at the Sydney, Australia, Bahá'í House of Worship.



◀ In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bahá'í community of the United States sponsored a series of "race amity" conferences and meetings, like this one held by the New York Bahá'í Assembly and the New York Urban League in New York City in 1930.



"The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity and dissension."

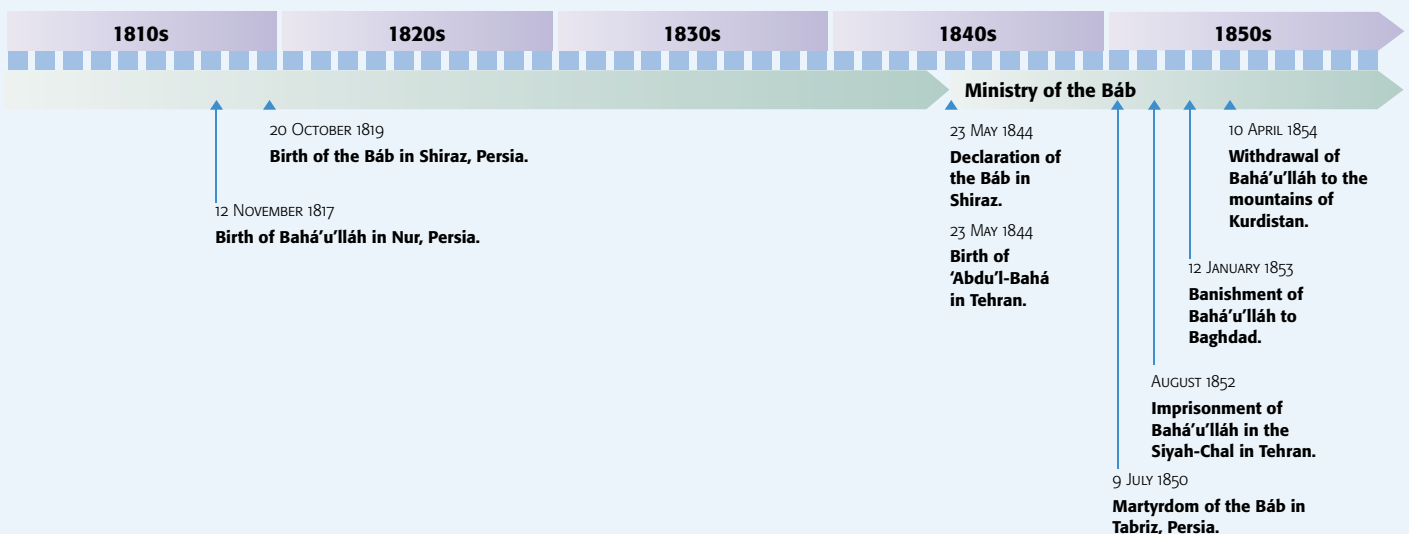
— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

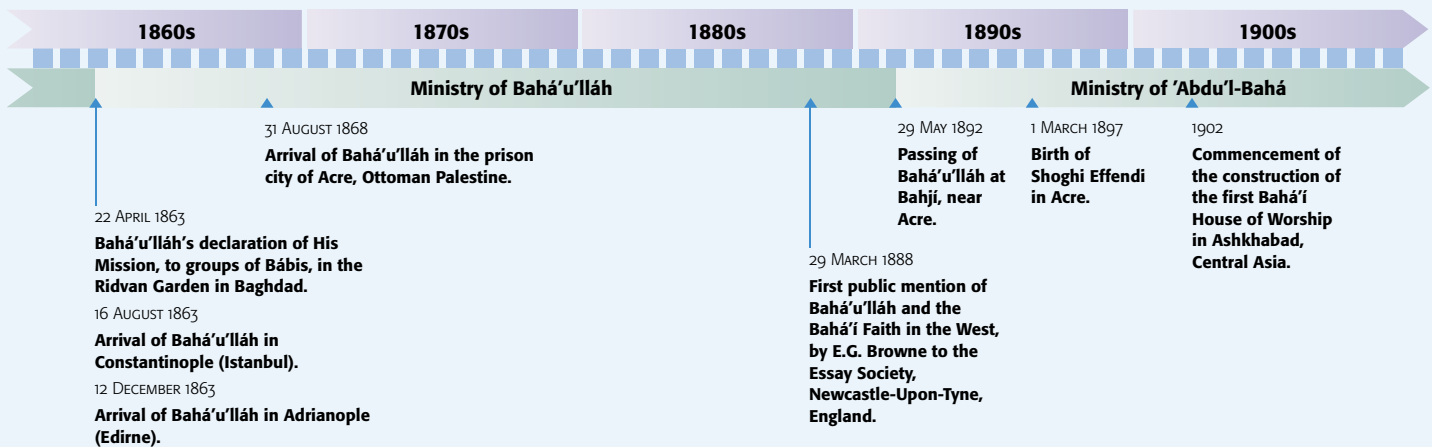


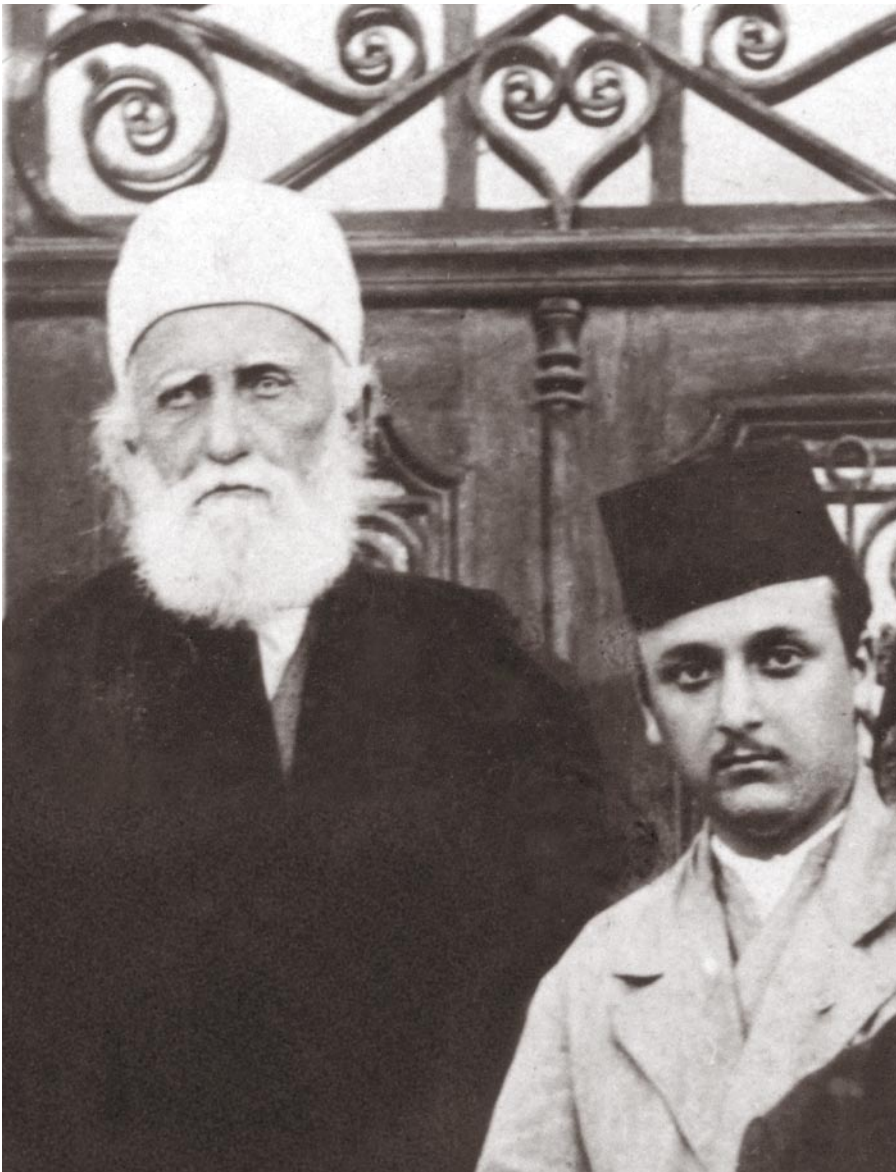
■ *The dramatic growth of the Bahá'í Faith over the last century is exemplified by these two photographs, taken in Paris, France, under the Eiffel Tower. The first, above, was taken in 1912, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Europe. Shown with him is a small entourage of Persians and a handful of European Bahá'ís. The second photograph, at right, was taken in November 1998, on the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in France, when more than 2,000 people came from some 50 countries to celebrate.*



A timeline of significant Bahá'í events, 1810s–1900s







[Continued from page 56]

Ottoman Empire. Via letters and through direct contact with early Western believers who traveled to Palestine, He guided the Faith's spread outside the Middle East.

After the revolution of the Young Turks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was free to travel. In August 1911, He left the Holy Land on a four-month visit to Europe, stopping in London and Paris. There He met with early Western Bahá'ís and gave daily talks on the Faith and its principles.

The following spring, 'Abdu'l-Bahá embarked on a year-long tour, again to Europe, and then to the United States and Canada. The visit greatly stimulated the spread of the Bahá'í Faith in those two countries.

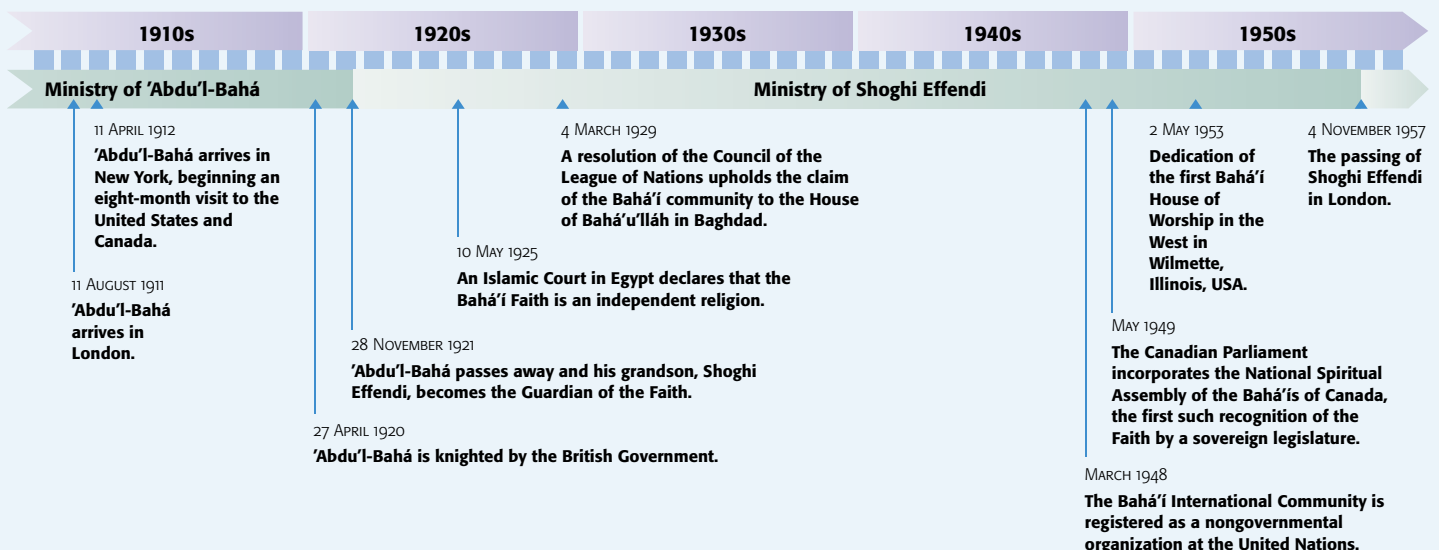
During visits to more than 40 cities in North America, He was greeted with respect and acclaim by both Bahá'ís and the general public. In city after city, He was invited to speak at churches and synagogues, to distinguished groups and organizations.

The result was the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith as a major new force for social reform and religious renewal. The message of Bahá'u'lláh — with its call for a new and peaceful human society — had been proclaimed in the industrialized world, and a new generation of firm believers had been enlisted.

'Abdu'l-Bahá established an ongoing plan for the internationalization of the Faith. In a series of letters to followers in

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

A timeline of significant Bahá'í events, 1910s–2000s



North America, He asked them to spread out around the world to promulgate the Bahá'í Faith and its principles.

At the outbreak of World War I, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was again in the Holy Land. In His addresses in the West, He had warned about the coming conflagration, and He had spoken unceasingly about the need to establish some form of world commonwealth that might forestall such a conflict.

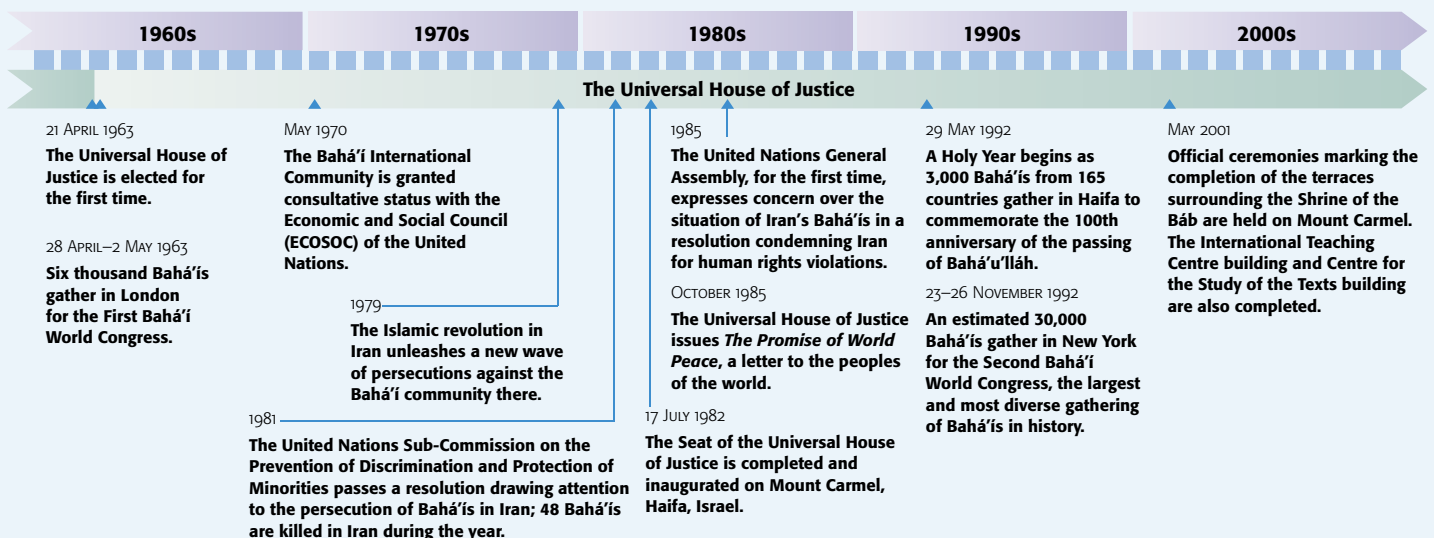
During the War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent His time acting on the principles that He and His father had preached. He personally organized an extensive agricultural project near Tiberias, which provided an important source of wheat to the region and helped to avert a famine in the area. For these humanitarian acts, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was knighted by the British government at the end of the War.

The era of the Guardian: The work of Shoghi Effendi

On 28 November 1921, 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away peacefully in His sleep. Like His father, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was concerned with the potential for religious schism after His passing. So He, too, left a clear and explicit will and testament — an extension of the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh.

In that document, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, to succeed Him as the head or “Guardian” of the Bahá'í Faith. The Guardianship was an institution anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh.

► *Shoghi Effendi, known as the Guardian, led the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 until his death in 1957.*





◀ In November 1992, more than 27,000 Bahá'ís from some 170 countries assembled in New York City for the Second Bahá'í World Congress, which commemorated the centennial of Bahá'u'lláh's passing. It was the largest and most diverse gathering of Bahá'ís ever, a demonstration of humanity's oneness.

In this office, Shoghi Effendi was designated as the authoritative interpreter of the Bahá'í teachings.

Born in Acre on 1 March 1897, Shoghi Effendi spent much of his early childhood at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's knee. He later attended the American University in Beirut and then Oxford University in England — which gave him a superb knowledge of the English language and of Western culture.

During Shoghi Effendi's ministry, the Bahá'í Faith became a truly global religion. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing in 1921, there were 100,000 Bahá'ís. Most were Iranian, living in Iran or other countries in the Middle East. A handful of followers lived in India, Europe, and North America — about 35 countries in all. Some 36 years later, by the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing in 1957, there were nearly 400,000 Bahá'ís who resided in more than 200 countries, territories, and colonies.

The letters of Shoghi Effendi also developed guidelines for the system of elections and group decision making that has become one of the Bahá'í Faith's distinguishing features. He wrote letters to fledgling Bahá'í institutions that explained the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on issues ranging from family life to world government. He elaborated on the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other

A new calendar

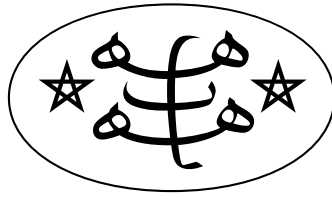
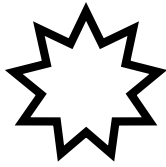
▲ Holy Day

The Bahá'í Calendar

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bahá Splendor 21 March- 8 April	Jalál Glory 9 April- 27 April	Jamál Beauty 28 April- 16 May	'Azamát Grandeur 17 May- 4 June	Núr Light 5 June- 23 June	Rahmat Mercy 24 June- 12 July	Kalimát Words 13 July- 31 July	Kamál Perfection 1 August- 19 August	Asmá' Names 20 August- 7 September	'Izzat Might 8 September- 26 September
Feast of Naw-Rúz Bahá'í New Year 21 March		Festival of Ridván Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh 21 April - 2 May		Anniversary of the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh 29 May Anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb 23 May		Anniversary of the Martyrdom of the Báb 9 July			
MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	AUGUST		SEPTEMBER	

Every new religion has brought its own calendar, and the Bahá'í Faith is no exception. The Bahá'í calendar begins on 21 March, the vernal equinox, and divides the year into 19 months of

19 days each. There are nine holy days in the Bahá'í year on which Bahá'ís suspend work to commemorate various events in the Faith's history, such as the birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the martyrdom of the



Bahá'í Symbols

A simple nine-pointed star is generally used by Bahá'ís as a symbol of their Faith. The number nine has significance in the Bahá'í Revelation. Nine years after the announcement of the Báb in Shiraz, Bahá'u'lláh received the intimation of His mission in the dungeon in Tehran. Nine, as the highest single-digit number, symbolizes completeness. Since the Bahá'í

Faith claims to be the fulfillment of the expectations of all prior religions, this symbol, as used, for example, in nine-sided Bahá'í Houses of Worship, reflects that sense of fulfillment and completeness. Particularly cherished by Bahá'ís are calligraphic forms of the word Bahá (Arabic for "Glory"), known as the Greatest Name, a reference to Bahá'u'lláh. In this category is the above symbol which is engraved on

personal rings and on buildings to establish their Bahá'í identity.

Another calligraphic form of the Greatest Name involves an invocation in Arabic "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá," which says: "O Glory of the All Glorious." It is displayed in Bahá'í homes and places of Bahá'í activity.

religions and doctrines. His lucid and incisive writings further helped to clarify the distinctive Bahá'í views on matters of ethics, theology, and history.

Perhaps most important, insofar as the growth of the Bahá'í Faith is concerned, Shoghi Effendi's letters to the Bahá'í world provided a continuing source of encouragement and support. Although the Bahá'í Faith today enjoys wide respect, to become a Bahá'í in the 1930s, 1940s, or 1950s was to expose oneself to suspicion and ridicule.

Shoghi Effendi's clear vision of the Bahá'í Faith as God's revelation to our age, and his certainty of its ultimate triumph helped to invigorate a generation of believers who, though few in number, spread

Bahá'u'lláh's message to every corner of the globe.

The Universal House of Justice

By the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing in 1957, the Faith had a broad base of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies that permitted the election of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh.

For Bahá'ís, the long-awaited establishment of the first Universal House of Justice on 21 April 1963 represented an event of transcendent importance. Bahá'u'lláh ordained it, gave it the authority to legislate on all matters not specifically laid down in the Bahá'í scriptures, and promised that it

Báb. The announcement of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is celebrated during a twelve-day festival known as Ridván, at the end of April and beginning of May. With the division of the year into 19 months, four

intercalary days are needed. These days occur at the end of February and are celebrated as a gift-giving time known as Ayyám-i-Há.

11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Mashíyyat Will 27 September- 15 October	'Ilm Knowledge 16 October- 3 November	Qudrat Power 4 November- 22 November	Qawl Speech 23 November- 11 December	Masá'il Questions 12 December- 30 December	Sharaf Honour 31 December- 18 January	Sultán Sovereignty 19 January- 6 February	Mulk Dominion 7 February- 25 February	'Alá Loftiness 2 March- 20 March
	Anniversary of the Birth of the Báb 20 October	Anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh 12 November	Anniversary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 28 November	Day of the Covenant 26 November				The Fast 2 March- 20 March
								Ayyám-i-Há or Intercalary Days 26 February-1 March

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

JANUARY

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

would be infallibly guided by God in its decisions.

The nine members chosen that year by secret ballot came from four continents, represented three major religious backgrounds (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), and were of several different ethnic origins. Since that time, elections for the Universal House of Justice have been held every five years [see page 49].

As the supreme institution of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice has taken on the task of directing the growth

and development of the worldwide Bahá'í community. This is accomplished through a series of plans that outline goals for the expansion and development of the Faith during specific periods of time.

In 1963, worldwide Bahá'í membership had reached 400,000. Bahá'ís lived in 11,000 localities and were organized into 56 national and regional communities. By 2004, there were more than 5 million Bahá'ís, residing in more than 100,000 localities, and organized into 183 national communities. ■

The Bahá'í International Community

The worldwide Bahá'í community manages its relations with society at large through the offices of the Bahá'í International Community.

Since 1948, the Bahá'í International Community has enjoyed recognition as an international nongovernmental organization at the United Nations. Since 1970, it has held consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It also holds consultative status with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The Community also has working relations with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and is associated with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

The work of the Bahá'í International Community is handled by several specialized offices. These include a Secretariat, a United Nations Office, an Office of Public Information, an Office of the Environment, and an Office for the Advancement of Women. An affiliate agency, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, exists as a nonprofit educational and research organization.

With main offices at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa and in New York, branch offices in Geneva, Paris, and Jerusalem, and representatives in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Nairobi, Rome, Santiago, and Vienna, the Community's agencies are involved in a wide range of activities, including efforts in peace-building, human rights, education, health, environmental conservation and sustainable development, and the promotion of women's equality. Many of these activities are undertaken in collaboration with national Bahá'í communities. An international newsletter,



▲ Since 1948, representatives of the Bahá'í International Community have participated in numerous meetings and conferences at the United Nations. In the photograph above, the Bahá'í International Community's principal representative to the United Nations addresses the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. He spoke on behalf of the Millennium Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations, in which the Bahá'í International Community was a participant.

One Country, reports on these activities. It is available online at <http://www.onecountry.org>.

The Bahá'í International Community also collaborates with many international nongovernmental and interfaith organizations. It is, for example, a member of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, the World Faiths Development Dialogue, and the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO). Over the years, the Bahá'í International Community has issued a number of statements, which can be read at <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org>.

The persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran

Suffering for their commitment to an international vision, Bahá'ís demonstrate the courage of their convictions.

Throughout the history of the Faith, the Bahá'ís of Iran have been persecuted. In the mid-1800s, some 20,000 followers were killed by the authorities or by mobs, who viewed the infant movement as heretical to Islam.

In the twentieth century, periodic outbreaks of violence were directed against Bahá'ís in Iran, and the government often used Bahá'ís as a scapegoat. In 1933, for example, Bahá'í literature was banned, Bahá'í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá'ís in public service were demoted or fired. In 1955, the government oversaw the demolition of the Bahá'í national center in Tehran with pickaxes.

Bahá'ís understand this pattern of persecution as a manifestation of the misunderstanding and fear that often occur when a new religion emerges from the matrix of a well-established orthodoxy. The pattern has been repeated through the ages; indeed, virtually all of the world's great religions have faced intense persecution in their early history.

In 1979, with the establishment of an Islamic Republic, the persecutions took a new direction, becoming an official government policy and being pursued in a systematic way. Since that year, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been executed or killed, hundreds more have been imprisoned, and tens of thousands have been deprived of jobs, pensions, businesses, and educational opportunities. All national Bahá'í administrative structures were banned by the government, and holy places, shrines, and cemeteries were confiscated, vandalized, or destroyed.

The 350,000-member Bahá'í community comprises the largest religious minority in that country, and Bahá'ís have been oppressed solely because of religious hatred. Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and elsewhere have long viewed the Bahá'í Faith as a threat to Islam, branding Bahá'ís as heretics and apostates. The progressive position of the Faith on women's rights, independent investigation of truth, and education has particularly rankled Muslim clerics.

In June 1983, for example, the Iranian authorities arrested ten Bahá'í women and girls. The charge against them: teaching children's classes on the Bahá'í Faith — the equivalent of Sunday school in the West.

The women were subjected to intense physical and mental abuse in an effort to coerce them to recant their Faith — an option that is always pressed on Bahá'í prisoners. Yet, like most Bahá'ís who were arrested in Iran, they refused to deny their beliefs. As a result, they were executed.

International protest against the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran has been widespread. Thousands of newspaper articles about the persecution have appeared around the world. Prominent international organizations, including the European Parliament and several national legislatures, have passed resolutions condemning or expressing concern about the Bahá'ís of Iran. More important, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the UN General Assembly have passed numerous resolutions expressing concern over Iran's human rights record. Virtually all of these resolutions have specifically mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran.

By the late 1980s, in the face of intense international pressure, the Iranian government had reduced the rate of execution and released many Bahá'ís held in prison. In the early 1990s, however, clear evidence emerged that the government had not given up on its goal of destroying the Bahá'í community. A secret government memorandum came to light in 1993 aimed at establishing a coordinated policy regarding “the Bahá'í question.” Drafted by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by Ali Khamenei, the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the document states unequivocally that the “progress and development” of the Bahá'í community “shall be blocked.”



One example of this subtle campaign to block the development of the Bahá'í community can be seen in an effort to prevent Bahá'ís from educating their youth. Blocked by the government from enrolling in public universities, the Bahá'í community of Iran established in 1987 its own decentralized Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE). At one point, the Institute had more than 150 faculty members and offered some 200 distinct courses, all in an “open university” concept that provided a college education for more than 900 Bahá'í youth throughout the country.

In a series of raids in the fall of 1998, government agents arrested some 32 BIHE faculty members, raided some 500 private homes, and confiscated books, papers, computer equipment and furniture, all in an effort to shut down the institute.

A pattern of arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, property confiscation, and denial of access to education and other rights has continued into the new millennium, with no indication by the government that it will end

▲ *With its young people banned from public institutions of higher education in Iran since the early 1980s, the Bahá'í community of Iran established in 1987 its own Institute of Higher Education, which at one point enrolled more than 900 students. The Institute operated in private homes, as shown above, and by correspondence. In 1998, Government agents raided more than 500 homes across Iran in an effort to shut down the Institute. Some 30 faculty and staff members were arrested and hundred of thousands of dollars worth of books, furniture, and equipment were confiscated.*

its effort to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable element of Iranian society.

As of late 2004, the Bahá'ís of Iran continued to be denied fundamental human rights, including the right to practice their religion freely. The full emancipation of this peaceful, law-abiding community therefore remains a central concern of Bahá'ís around the world.



◀ *The House of the Báb in Shiraz, one of the most holy sites in the Bahá'í world, was destroyed by Revolutionary Guardsmen in 1979 and later razed by the government.*



For the Betterment of the World

Historically, religion has been among the most powerful agents of change. Bahá'ís draw on God's spiritual, social, and administrative laws for today in their efforts to effect social transformation and the advancement of civilization.

THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY'S commitment to social and economic development is rooted in its sacred scriptures, which state that all human beings "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." Fundamental to Bahá'í belief is the conviction that every person, every people, every nation has a part to play in building a peaceful and prosperous global society. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

"And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight....

"How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he

◀ *Development efforts undertaken by Bahá'í communities around the world are part of a global enterprise to bring prosperity to all peoples in the context of an emerging world civilization. Projects range in scale and sophistication, but all recognize the need to address both the spiritual and material aspects of life. This community gardening initiative in Erdenbulgan, Mongolia, is helping to improve nutrition in the region through the production of fresh vegetables while increasing community capacity for collective action through consultation.*

shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice."

Bahá'í experience in the field of development stretches back to the beginnings of the Faith in Iran during the nineteenth century. In that country, the community of adherents was able, in just a few generations, to advance from a population consisting largely of illiterate villagers to one whose members were in the forefront of many areas of endeavor. By 1973, for example, Iranian Bahá'ís had achieved a 100 percent literacy rate among women followers under the age of 40, in contrast to a national literacy rate among women of less than 20 percent.

Widespread involvement in social and economic development, however, is a relatively new thrust for the Bahá'í world community; it rose in significance in the early 1980s, chiefly as a result of a substantial increase in the Bahá'í populations of many nations. The ensuing decade constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and trepidation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks. From this initial stage of diverse activity, the community emerged with the social and economic development work firmly established as a feature of its organic life and with enhanced capacity to gradually shape a distinctly Bahá'í approach.

Concept

Bahá'ís view development as a global enterprise whose purpose is to bring

prosperity to all peoples, an enterprise that must pursue its aim in the context of an emerging world civilization. Humanity, the Bahá'í writings explain, is experiencing an age of transition best described as a passage from collective childhood to collective maturity. The hallmark of the age of maturity will be the unification of the human race, which, in turn, requires the establishment of the principles of justice. The current disparity between rich and poor cannot be permitted to persist. All of the earth's inhabitants should be able to enjoy the fruits of a materially and spiritually prosperous global society. To create such a society, it is essential that people everywhere be empowered to participate in the constructive processes that will give rise to it. Building the capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute effectively to these processes is the primary task of development.

For the individual, this implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities — scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life. In terms of the community, capacity building entails fostering its development so that it can act as an environment conducive to the enrichment of culture.

Beyond the training of individuals and the cultivation of community life, development strategies have to pay attention to the strengthening of organizational structures. At every level of society institutions are needed that can act as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals and groups can be expressed in service to humanity. One of the accomplishments in which the Bahá'í community



“Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

takes particular pride is the erection over its 160 years of existence — sometimes under the most adverse circumstances — of a structure of elected bodies that operate at the local, regional, national, and international levels. This collective hierarchy devolves decision making to the lowest level practicable — providing thereby a unique vehicle for grassroots action — while at the same time conferring a level of coordination and authority that makes possible cooperation on a global scale. Bahá'í development efforts throughout the world benefit from the guidance and support supplied by this administrative order.

Building the capacity of the world's peoples and their institutions to participate effectively in weaving the fabric of a prosperous civilization requires a vast increase in their access to knowledge. Given that such a civilization will have to be aware of both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence, development theory and practice must draw on the two basic knowledge systems that have propelled humanity's progress over the centuries: science and religion. Through these two agencies, humanity's experience has been organized, its environment interpreted, its latent powers explored, and its moral and intellectual life disciplined. Together, they have acted as the real progenitors of civilization.

Bahá'ís reject the notion that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion, a notion that became prevalent in intellectual discourse at a time when the very conception of each system was far from adequate. The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism.

A cursory survey of the historical forces that are shaping the structure of society should convince even the most avid defenders of today's global policies that unchecked material progress will never lead to true prosperity. From the heart of the great masses of humanity a dual cry can be heard. While it calls for the extension of the fruits of material progress to all peoples, its appeal for the values of spiritual civilization is no less urgent. For, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, material civilization is “like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant, and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit...”

Approach

Bahá'í development activities are governed by certain underlying principles. In the Bahá'í Faith, proselytizing is prohibited, and development projects are not conducted for the purpose of public relations or as a means of converting people. In the appropriate context, funding for projects of a humanitarian nature can be accepted from government and donor agencies, but Bahá'ís do not accept or use funds from outside sources for the progress of their internal community affairs. As a religion it, of course, affords opportunities for people to learn about the precepts of the Faith and to join it; so too, there are a range of community activities, including those for worship and for education, in which all are welcome to take part. Development activities are, however, intended to involve Bahá'í communities in disinterested service to humanity.

Endeavors of social and economic development play a distinct function in the life of the Bahá'í community. They represent the efforts of individuals, groups, and Bahá'í governing councils to apply their religious principles to the achievement of material and social progress. They are intended not to serve Bahá'ís alone but people of all beliefs, and they strive to elicit the widest possible participation.

Because the Bahá'í community is global in scope, it transcends divisions prevalent in society today such as urban and rural, “North” and “South,” “developed” and “underdeveloped.” The process of capacity building that defines development has to be carried forward in every part of the world. In whatever country Bahá'ís reside, whether in their native lands or elsewhere, they are morally bound to participate in this process and contribute their talents to its advancement as members of that national community. Bonds of collaboration, however, extend across national boundaries, and resources flow from the more materially prosperous countries to those with less. Bahá'ís believe that it is the right of every people to trace its own path of development and direct its own affairs. The Bahá'í global administrative structure safeguards this right. Thus, while outside support and resources may be readily available to a project, it is left to those directing it to determine whether the capacity exists to utilize such support constructively.

Progress in the development field, from a Bahá'í perspective, depends largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community, and it is from such stirrings that it should derive its motivating force. In general, then, Bahá'í efforts in social

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Grassroots initiatives

Of the several thousand social and economic development activities worldwide, the majority are small-scale efforts of Bahá'ís in villages and towns across the globe to draw on the guidance of their Faith's spiritual and social teachings in order to address challenges faced by local communities. Central to these teachings is the principle that individual potential finds fulfillment in service to humanity. Below is a sampling of initiatives of this type.

■ A small group in Tanzania gathers to study materials on the purpose of life, the spiritual nature of humanity, and the power of communion with God. Animated by their ongoing discussions, they broaden their collective efforts in a simple yet natural way, first to include literacy activities to better comprehend the materials under study and then to address vocational needs through tailoring classes.

■ The Bahá'ís of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, concerned about the moral education of youth, meet with the Minister of Education, who encourages them to undertake a campaign, address high school students and staff, conduct classes, present books to schools and libraries, and hold public meetings on the topic.

■ With the help of the town council, which provides saplings, manpower, and equipment, the Bahá'í community of Klang, Malaysia, organizes a tree planting project. Local dignitaries, teachers, and students participate.

■ In order to help young people in their community learn about the importance of the environment, Bahá'ís in Évora, Portugal, coordinate a “Clean Dam, Live Wa-

ter” campaign in two schools, with student volunteers cleaning the dam that provides drinking water to their city.

■ A local Bahá'í governing council in India encourages the establishment of a fish pond, with proceeds from the sale of the fish going towards a hatchery and a training program to help local people acquire and use appropriate technology.

■ In South Perth, Australia, the Bahá'í community, seeing the concern of its fellow citizens with issues such as race unity, leadership, and education in the twenty-first century, organizes public discussions that offer valuable insights as well as practical suggestions for change.

■ Concerned about declining moral values, a small group in Bulgaria decides to use the power of the media and the arts to reach young people. It produces a short video, puts on a puppet show, and writes a newspaper column — all focused on improving interethnic relations and living a drug-free life.

■ In a town in Sri Lanka, Bahá'ís go door-to-door to promote children's health, responding to a request by local doctors to raise awareness about worm treatment. As a result, 300 children arrive at the designated clinic for diagnosis and treatment.

■ In an effort to help prison inmates turn their lives around, a group of Bahá'ís in the United States develops a course, “Successful Self-Direction,” which results in a significant drop in the number of repeat offenders among those who have completed it.



▲ A public discussion on social issues organized by the Bahá'í community in South Perth, Australia.

▼ “Clean Dam, Live Water” campaign in Évora, Portugal.



Learning to undertake systematic action: Barli Development Institute for Rural Women

Once a Bahá'í development effort gains a certain amount of experience, it is able to consolidate its activities and begin to benefit, in line with its human resources, large numbers of people. An example is the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, which has been operating in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh since 1985. Its programs are aimed at the empowerment of women, which it sees as crucial to any process of enduring change in the largely rural areas of the state.

The institute has designed its programs to foster change and to overcome obstacles that outworn practices of the past place in the pathway of development. To this end, it provides the women with an opportunity to reflect on the nature of their relationships with others and with their social institutions, as well as on age-old caste, tribal, and class prejudices. At the same

time, they are encouraged to identify positive elements in their culture which need to be preserved and strengthened. Special emphasis is placed on art, music, and dance. Aware that such reflection alone will not help the women become equal partners with men in the development of their communities, the institute also seeks to assist them in acquiring an awareness of their own innate capacities and in developing practical skills to improve health and nutrition, raise household income, increase literacy, and preserve the environment. Besides focusing on women, the institute views the change of attitudes of the other members of their communities — their husbands, parents, and children — as essential and endeavors to promote such change through its programs.

Since its inception, more than 1,600 women have taken part in the flagship component of Barli's program, a residen-

tial course of several months' duration. Graduates return home to initiate small business ventures, form youth groups, provide moral education to children, and hold parenting and literacy classes. The education of young girls is given priority, and a measurable increase in the number of girls attending school in some areas has been witnessed.

▼ *Since 1985, more than 1,600 young women have participated in the flagship residential program of the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India. Empowered by their experiences that enhance their capabilities to be agents of social change, graduates have had a measurable impact on the well-being of their families and home villages. Shown here is a group of participants at the institute.*





Programs of the Barli Development Institute have the ultimate goal of assisting women to be equal partners in the development of their communities. Activities in a wide variety of areas, including literacy, environmental preservation, health, and nutrition, all serve to further this end.



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and economic development begin with a relatively simple set of actions that can be managed by the local community itself. Complexity emerges naturally and in an organic fashion, as the participants achieve success, gain experience, and increase their capacity to make decisions about their spiritual and material progress and implement them. Local action gives rise to projects of a more sustained nature with more ambitious goals. Invariably, organizational structures are created to support such projects, and some of these

nascent agencies possess the potential to evolve into fully fledged development organizations with the ability to undertake programs in a wide field of action.

The existence of such an organization in a region or microregion is imperative if significant progress is to be achieved. For while an isolated project can yield tangible results, experience worldwide amply demonstrates that fragmented activities in health, education, agriculture, and so on do not lead to sustainable development. No one discipline can offer solutions to all the problems besetting humanity. Effective development calls unequivocally for coordinated, interdisciplinary, and multi-sectoral action. Organizational structures capable of dealing with increasing degrees of theoretical and administrative complexity are needed to integrate efforts across various fields and to provide the coherence required for consistent advancement. The growing network of such organizations in the Bahá'í world community allows, too, for well-conceived methods



“Be united in counsel, be one in thought. Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

▼ This “Conquering the Word” program in Colombia, one of the Bahá'í community’s many initiatives for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth, focuses on young people aged 12–15. Its materials are designed to improve their power of expression and enhance their capabilities related to making moral choices.



and approaches that have emerged in one country or region to be shared with others, providing a natural channel for the flow of knowledge.

At whatever level they operate, the central theme of all Bahá'í development efforts is learning. As members of a religious community, Bahá'ís hold to a common set of beliefs and fundamental principles. Yet the wise application of these principles to social transformation is something that must be learned through experience. At the heart of all collective action, therefore, is a concern for the application of spiritual principles. Not only do such principles point the way to practical solutions, but they also induce the attitudes, the will, and the dynamics that facilitate implementation. Equally important to the learning process are the content and methods of science, for by religious truth is not meant mere assertions about the esoteric, but statements that lead to experimentation, application, and the creation of systems and processes, whose results can be validated through observation and the use of reason. Further, the advancement of civilization requires the multiplication of material means, and these have to be generated by scientific endeavor. Development as a learning process, then, can best be described as one of action, reflection, and consultation — all carried out in the light of the guidance inherent in religious teachings and drawing on scientific knowledge.

Systematization of learning

As Bahá'í development organizations in the field systematize the knowledge being generated through action and reflection, the learning that is a prerequisite for enabling individuals, communities, and institutions to transform society occurs. To facilitate this learning about development theory and practice within the Bahá'í community, the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) has been established at the Faith's world headquarters in Haifa, Israel. Through a network of collaborators working in the field, the agency supports organizations that have reached a certain level of complexity. In addition, it ensures that material resources become increasingly available to Bahá'í development efforts, coordinating the international flow of such resources and administering some of the funds intended for this purpose. OSED also offers general advice, technical and otherwise, in response to questions that arise.

The functions OSED performs provide it with the perspective needed to gather and systematize the learning about development taking place in Bahá'í communities around the world. When it identifies



certain approaches and methodologies that are achieving particularly good results in some area of action, OSED arranges for pilot projects to be launched in different continents, the aim being to refine the content and methods and assemble them in a tested program. The program is then disseminated worldwide, so that national Bahá'í communities can adapt it to their specific needs, as they wish. Two examples will help illustrate how the process unfolds.

The identification of trends in Bahá'í literacy efforts gave rise to what is known as the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program. In 1994, a group of edu-
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▲ In several countries in Africa, Bahá'í efforts have helped establish groups of Community Health Workers, such as the woman pictured here, who carry out a wide array of activities. A set of modules to assist individuals to share with their families and communities information and concepts on a variety of health-related topics is currently being developed and refined.

Institutional capacity for social transformation: FUNDAEC



▲ *The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT, System of Tutorial Learning) has enabled thousands of young people in remote areas in Colombia to receive a high-quality secondary education. Its methodology and materials are now being adopted by several other countries.*

► *FUNDAEC offers several pre- and post-graduate programs to students from many parts of Latin America.*

As Bahá'í development projects grow and diversify, organizational structures evolve to ensure their long-term viability and to meet expanding needs. These agencies systematically train human resources and manage a number of lines of action to address problems of local communities and entire regions in a coordinated, interdisciplinary fashion. The existence in a region of a development organization dedicated to the advancement of a population provides a coherent framework for actions of various kinds. Capacity is created to assess social forces and conditions, to build a vision of the future, to evaluate resources, and to devise well-defined strategies. As the organization systematizes the knowledge being generated through action and reflection in diverse fields, the learning that is a prerequisite for meaningful transformation occurs. An example of this type of organization is the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC, Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences).

FUNDAEC was established in Colombia in 1974. It is animated by two key concepts: first, that in order for a population to walk its own path of development, there must be institutions and structures that genuinely belong to the people; second, if people are to take charge of their own development, they must engage in systematic learning. To translate these principles into action, FUNDAEC has created the

Universidad para el Desarrollo Integral (University for Integral Development) — a framework in which learning processes can be set in motion in a given population. The processes include the search for alternative systems of production, the establishment of viable systems of formal education, and the strengthening of local economies.

Most notable among the results of this learning is a program now being implemented in several other countries in Latin America. Through years of research and action to address the needs of rural youth, FUNDAEC has developed an alternative secondary tutorial school system, Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT, System of Tutorial Learning), and a corresponding university-level teacher training program. The SAT program, with its emphasis on the application of scientific capabilities to local contexts, reaches some 30,000 students in Colombia alone. A central concern of the curriculum it delivers is the integration of knowledge. A unit of instruction focusing on the development of any given capability will draw its material from a number of academic disciplines, while at the same time seamlessly weaving elements of knowledge about social and spiritual reality into course content. Theory is studied in the context of practice, and students are asked to consider the broader implications of what they are learning for the betterment of their lives and society.

Apart from its own research and action





▲ *The campus at which some of the university-level programs of FUNDAEC are conducted.*

among the populations it serves directly, FUNDAEC has also developed the capacity — with the help of a postgraduate program called “Education for Development” — to enable other organizations to apply the approaches of the Universidad para el Desarrollo Integral (University for Integral Development) to their programs and projects: to effectively foster people’s motivation and aspiration to take responsibility for their own development; to build local institutions, which are essential if rural communities are not to be swept away or assimilated by the process of globalization; to place the powers of science in the hands of rural people so they can become protagonists in the collective enterprise of generating and applying new knowledge; and to wed the knowledge systems of science and religion in the investigation of reality and the transformation of society.



▲ *FUNDAEC’s approach enables communities to generate and apply scientific knowledge to address locally-identified needs and to contribute to the transformation of society.*

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cators was invited by OSED to analyze the experiences gained by Bahá'í communities in eliminating illiteracy. On this basis, pilot literacy projects were created in Cambodia, the Central African Republic, and Guyana. It became clear from these and subsequent projects that the group most receptive to programs that could enhance the power of expression were junior youth, aged 12 to 15. Beyond instructions in the simple mechanics of reading and writing, the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program seeks to endow young people in this age group with the capabilities of reading with good comprehension and expressing thoughts clearly and eloquently. Emphasis is placed on the need for positive words and thoughts to be accompanied by pure deeds.

Primary health care is another area of concerted effort. During the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s a wide range of health-related projects were undertaken by Bahá'ís. In analyzing their experience, OSED noted that the most successful projects belonged to a network in East Africa that promoted primary health care, especially through the training of Community Health Workers. Those involved in the projects were brought together by OSED for consultations at the end of 1996. Out of their discussions emerged a program of several modules that will train individuals to promote health within their extended families and communities. A text for the first level is currently being offered to development organizations throughout the world, while materials for the other levels, including supplementary ones that focus on specialized areas such as nutrition, women's health, prevention of alcohol use, and HIV/AIDS, are being written and field-tested.

Contributing to the Global Development Discourse

For the Bahá'í community, the expanding network of activities described in the foregoing has had significance well beyond the immediate benefits that have accrued. The experience of applying the principles in the Faith's writings to a highly diverse range of situations has progressively clarified the community's understanding of current challenges in the development field and equipped it to contribute ever more confidently to the global discourse taking place. That involvement, in turn, represents another important and continuing learning opportunity.

At the general level, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has participated in a number of major international summits and nongovernmental forums. No-

table among them have been the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit") in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that same year, as well as the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001.

Because of the worldview deriving from the Bahá'í system of belief, the community has taken a particularly keen interest in discussions that explore the contribution of religion to questions of development. These have included the World Faiths Development Dialogue Conference, cosponsored by the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury, held in Lambeth Palace, London, in 1998, and the Parliament of the World's Religions held in South Africa in 1999. Especially enriching has been the involvement, from 1995 to 2000, in a project sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada, which explored the relationship between science, religion, and development.

The community has found in this series of activities welcome opportunities to give expression to the central conviction animating Bahá'í work in the development field. As early as the Earth Summit, a statement submitted by the BIC to the plenary session on behalf of all religious nongovernmental organizations concluded: "The profound and far-reaching changes, the unity and unprecedented cooperation required to reorient the world towards an environmentally sustainable and just future, will only be possible by touching the human spirit, by appealing to those universal values which alone can empower individuals and peoples to act in accordance with the long-term interests of the planet and humanity as a whole."

Two major BIC documents develop this conception at greater length: *The Prosperity of Humankind*, distributed at the World Summit for Social Development, and *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*, prepared for presentation at the World Faiths Development Dialogue Conference. The first of two statements, which defines human prosperity in both spiritual and material terms, advances a frank analysis of the prevailing materialistic notions and practices in the development field, and proposes a development strategy aimed at empowering the generality of humankind to take responsibility in the shaping of the planet's future. *Valuing Spirituality in Development* suggests five principles fundamental to the attainment of a civilization that



"Do not busy yourselves with your own concerns, let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men."

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



is just, united, and sustainable: unity in diversity, equity and justice, the equality of the sexes, trustworthiness and moral leadership, and the independent investigation of truth. The statement goes on to focus attention on areas of work that it believes must command priority in the application of these principles: economic development; education; environmental stewardship; the meeting of basic needs in food, nutrition, health, and shelter; and governance and participation.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Bahá'í institutions had reached the conclusion that a permanent forum was required for ongoing, in-depth exploration of the spiritual and material basis of development. The result was the creation of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, whose first initiative, in November 2000, was to sponsor a colloquium on science, religion, and development in New Delhi, India. The conference, devoted to the discussion of integrating religious values and scientific methods in development work, brought together more than a hundred representatives of nongovernmental organizations from all regions of the coun-

try. Greatly encouraged by the success of the event and the responses it evoked, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity is now setting in motion a similar process of consultation with organizations of civil society in different countries around the world.

No serious observer can fail to appreciate the need for the massive investments of human and material resources that governments and organizations of civil society dedicate to promoting the well-being of the human race; nor indeed to value the intelligence and spirit of idealism that animates this work. Committed to the expansion of its own development programs, the Bahá'í community continues to refine its vision that the key to successful development is the building of capacity. Such a vision calls for engaging people everywhere in the generation and application of knowledge. Spiritual principles and the methods of science, together, can mediate such engagement. It is in sharing the learning thus acquired, the community believes, that its most useful contribution to the global discourse on development must ultimately lie. ■

▲ *The Colloquium on Science, Religion, and Development, held in November 2000 in New Delhi, India, brought together some 150 development specialists, religious leaders, and scientists to discuss how the complementary knowledge systems of science and religion could be systematically applied to development efforts. Shown here on the final day of the event, representatives of different consultative working groups that held in-depth deliberations on specific topics report their findings to all the participants.*



“The earth is but one country...”

Bahá'ís understand that the dramatic changes and transformations in global human society over the last century — changes which have not yet run their full course — have been initiated by the coming of a new Messenger of God. It is the breaking light of a new Revelation that illuminates the divine pattern for future society.

IN RECENT YEARS, perhaps the most significant phenomenon on the international scene has been the process of “globalization” — the progressive “shrinking” of the world and an ever greater mixing of its people, cultures, and economies.

In countless books, news articles, and political speeches, the processes of globalization have been analyzed and reanalyzed. Some say it is a good thing; others say it is bad.

Those who defend globalization say it is bringing material prosperity to untold millions around the world, breaking down national, economic, and cultural barriers and helping to speed the process of peace-building.

Critics say that the chaotic manner in which market forces have scaled up to the global level has unleashed a destructive whirlwind that exploits workers, impoverishes the poor at the expense of the rich, wreaks environmental destruction, and drives the most disaffected to acts of terrorism. They say that globalization's side effects are equally horrific, ranging from the spread of AIDS and drug abuse to the creation of a world monoculture that destroys local traditions and squelches diversity.

Either way, it is impossible to ignore the vast social, cultural, and political changes that stem from this process. Youth everywhere now seem to imbibe the same

soft drinks, wear the same styles of clothing, and listen to the same type of music. Former global enemies now participate in joint peacekeeping missions. New patterns of emigration mean there are suddenly many more foreign faces and accents in every town and city.

For better or worse, human society is being dynamically reshaped in every land. And the ultimate trend is clear: we are witnessing nothing less than the emergence of a new civilization that is global in nature.

More than 100 years ago, Bahá'u'lláh articulated this new reality when He said: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.”

The critical question facing humanity today is what sort of global civilization shall we have? Will it be dominated by a shallow materialism, in which people's highest aspirations seem simply to be surrounded by products bearing fashionable corporate trademarks while billions live in abject poverty? Will it be one in which the losers of the game must surrender their culture, their jobs, and the natural beauty of their environment so that others elsewhere may prosper?

Or is it possible for humanity to collectively seize control of its own destiny and to ensure that all that is best in human civilization is not lost? Is it possible to create a world in which material and scientific development is governed by ethical



“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. This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

and spiritual principles that promote the prosperity of all people everywhere?

Bahá'ís believe the dramatic changes and transformations in global human society in the last century — changes that have not yet run their full course — were initiated by the coming of a new Messenger of God. And it is the breaking light of a new revelation that illuminates the best pattern for future society.

In other words, religion is the motive force in human history — and will continue to set its direction and design. The progressive revelation of God's will to humanity through His Messengers has been responsible for the increasing integration of human society and its advancing civilization. The circle of human unity has widened successively from the tribe, to the city-state, to the nation-state.

Today, this process of integration is culminating in the development of a global civilization. Indeed, when viewed through the lens of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, the history of the twentieth century has been little more than a steady process of evolution — albeit a painful one at times — towards a new pattern for future society.

The collapse of the great nineteenth century colonial empires, the failed experiments with totalitarianism, fascism, and communism, and the increasing rejection of previously glorified concepts

Elements of a world commonwealth

As forecast by Bahá'u'lláh more than 100 years ago, the new world order must be based on the following elements if a lasting world peace is to be established:

- Recognized and secure borders for all nations
- Freedom of movement and thought for all peoples
- A general disarmament
- The establishment of a world federation of nations
- The establishment of a world tribunal for the adjudication of international disputes
- The creation of an international military force capable of enforcing peace through principles of collective security
- A commitment to the protection of cultural diversity

of racial superiority, masculine authority, and religious conceit have all cleared the ground for the changes that must come.

At the same time, scientific discoveries and new social insights during the last century have spurred many progressive social, economic, and cultural transformations, opening the door to the possibility of a future in which no one's material needs are unmet.

In the first years of this new century, the ongoing processes of globalization will undoubtedly continue to break down traditional barriers posed by outmoded and false concepts of race, class, or national superiority. And scientific and cultural changes that promise prosperity for all will surely continue to accelerate.

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh warned that the dynamics of fusing the peoples of the world into one race and establishing a new civilization would be potentially cataclysmic. “The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing Order appeareth to be lamentably defective,” He wrote. “Soon will the present-day order be rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead.”

In other words, the negative effects of this ongoing global revolution can be likened to the demolition of an old building in preparation for the erection of a new structure. Bahá'ís believe, however, that humanity's future will inevitably be a peaceful and prosperous one — and that that day can be hastened if we begin to live in accord with the new spiritual laws and principles that govern our age.

These principles start with the recognition of our fundamental oneness in all spheres, which requires the end of all prejudices grounded in race, class, or nationality, and it mandates full equality between women and men. It also includes taking strong and meaningful steps to erase great disparities of wealth and poverty. In the recognition that all the world's religions are one, religious strife and intolerance will forever be put to rest.

At the personal level, the pattern for future society outlined by Bahá'u'lláh invokes the highest moral standards. People will be guided in all their interactions by the principles of trustworthiness, honesty, and courtesy. Selfless service to others will be the rule, and a general striving for excellence in all things will give new meaning to the concept of personal fulfillment. Widespread chastity and sobriety will help to end the spread of many diseases and much human suffering.

At the community level, Bahá'u'lláh calls for a reordering of priorities such that no one ever goes hungry, no family finds itself without shelter, and no child is



deprived of an education. The institutions of society, whether at the local, regional, or national level, will put justice and the common good first, and the widespread understanding of humanity's spiritual reality will lead to ever greater levels of cooperation, learning, and discovery.

At the world level, Bahá'u'lláh called for the creation of new institutions capable of managing the coming global civilization. Specifically, the Bahá'í writings indicate, the world will ultimately be governed by a democratically elected world legislature, a world court, and a world executive, all backed by an international force capable of carrying out the collective will of the world's peoples. Committed to the principle of collective security, these global institutions will also work together to end war and poverty, to promote the development of science and technology for the benefit of all humanity, and to coordinate markets and trade in a manner that fosters the well-being of all.

Far from prescribing a monstrous "big brother" at the world level, however, the Bahá'í teachings emphasize the importance of local autonomy and grassroots input. In the Bahá'í administrative order, with its freely elected governing councils and appointed advisors at local, regional, national, and international levels, there is a pattern for a system of governance that addresses problems at the global level without crushing local viewpoints and initiative. As well, the spiritual and social principles of the Bahá'í writings uphold the highest standard of human rights.

At all levels, the new institutions of the global society envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh

will set justice as their main goal. "The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. Bahá'ís are working towards the establishment of a world in which the governors of human society ensure that everyone receives just and equitable treatment; that basic needs for food, shelter, and dignity are met; and that lawbreakers receive swift and fair punishment. The widespread acceptance of Bahá'í principles of consultation and election procedures will bring into public life a new type of moral leader, one who puts the welfare of the whole community ahead the interests of any particular party, ideology, tribe, or corporation — and especially ahead of his or her own self-interest.

The acceptance of all these ideas and their realization in practice by the world's peoples, Bahá'ís believe, is inevitable and will bring about nothing less than the Promised Day of all religions. It is synonymous with the vision set down by Isaiah in the Bible, of the time when the nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, ... nor shall they learn war any more." It is what Christians have prayed for throughout the centuries when they recite the Lord's Prayer, testifying to the coming of God's Kingdom: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It will be the fulfillment of the promise in the Qur'an that the light of God's justice will one day break over the entire earth and "Thou shall see in it no hollows or rising hills."

Of course, many in society today promote similar principles and ideas. As noted earlier, Bahá'u'lláh's social teachings have in many ways become synonymous with the

▲ *Bahá'ís believe that the future will be marked by harmony and cooperation among the world's religions. In 1995, for example, leaders from nine major religions, including the Bahá'í Faith, gathered in London for a summit meeting on how they might work together to protect the global environment. The group founded the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), and since then many of these same religious leaders have joined with the World Bank in a further initiative to tackle world poverty.*



“The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing Order appeareth to be lamentably defective. Soon will the present-day order be rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead.”

— BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

► *The worldwide Bahá'í community has long supported the United Nations, an institution which many Bahá'ís see as a prerequisite for the kind of unified world commonwealth called for by Bahá'u'lláh.*

modern definition of a progressive society. And the emergence of global institutions like the United Nations offer humanity a starting point for the kind of global coordination needed in this new age.

Yet, if anything, the failed ideological experiments of the last century have shown that attempts to bring about greater coordination must be backed by moral principle and spiritual vision. Without a deep comprehension and recognition of humanity's spiritual reality, which is the real basis of human nature, the path ahead will surely be very difficult.

The development of society has been carefully guided by the great religious teachers of the past. The moral code of the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule — both of which find their expression in nearly every religious tradition — exemplify those religious teachings and serve both as ethical guidelines and a summons to spiritual achievement. They have permeated human consciousness and restructured cultures everywhere. Even for the nonbeliever, the value of such teachings is evident.

The spiritual world is the source of those human qualities that engender unity and harmony, that lead to insight and understanding, and that make possible cooperative undertakings. Among such qualities are love, courage, vision, self-sacrifice, and humility. Essentially spiritual in nature, these qualities form the invisible yet essential foundation of human society.

In the past, spiritual teachings have been concerned primarily with individual

actions — or with the harmony of relatively small groups of people. Moral concern has likewise focused mostly on individual behavior: do not steal; do not lie; love your neighbor.

Today, our understanding of spirituality must embrace not only personal and group life, but also the collective progress of humanity as a whole. This is part of what has been promised in all of the world's scriptures. Indeed, it is only because the human race has at last entered its age of maturity that age-old prophecies foretelling an era of peace and justice can now be fulfilled.

The essential message of Bahá'u'lláh is the call to unity; its audience, the entire world: “Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own selves.” A century after His passing, this summons has begun to take visible shape in a community that represents a microcosm of the human race itself, a community that has established itself in every corner of the globe, a community that, unlike every other comparable movement, has resisted the perennial impulse to disintegrate into sects and subgroups, a community that is consciously creating a new pattern for a global civilization.

The emergence of the Bahá'í community offers persuasive evidence that humanity, in all its diversity, can learn to live and work as a single people in a global homeland. It represents, as well, a compelling argument for earnest and dispassionate examination of the claims of the extraordinary Figure whose spirit created and sustains it. ■



“IN SUCH A WORLD SOCIETY...”

In the 1930s, Bahá'u'lláh's vision for a unified world commonwealth was summarized by Shoghi Effendi in an often-quoted letter written to the Bahá'ís of the West.

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds, and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs, and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples.

A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system.

A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.

In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether

private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding, and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

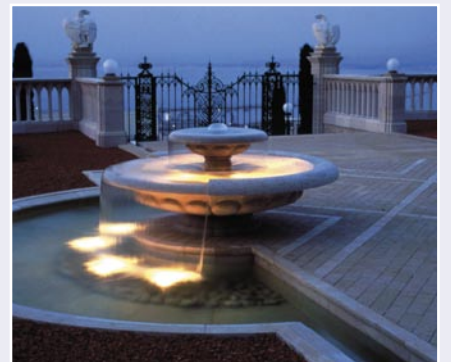
A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation — such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.

— Shoghi Effendi,
The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh

■ *These magnificent terraces on the slopes of Mount Carmel were completed in 2001. Extending nearly a kilometer up the side of a mountain that is considered holy in Judaism and Christianity, as well as in the Bahá'í Faith, they bracket the Shrine of the Báb, the second-most holy place in the Bahá'í world. Extensively gardened, and featuring a diversity of plants from throughout the region, the 19 terraces are open to the public and have already begun to win praise from landscape and architectural experts. Bahá'ís believe their completion signals a new stage in the growth and development of the Faith, reflecting a beauty and grandeur befitting its global expansion and commitment to the highest moral principles.*







For further information

If you wish to learn more about the Bahá'í Faith, there is a wide range of resources. More than 2,000 books about the Faith have been published, and they are available in virtually every major language. Many Bahá'í books can be ordered through commercial bookstores, online services and/or from Bahá'í publishing trusts, which have been established in more than 30 countries (see below for a partial list of mostly English-language trusts).

Selected Books

GLEANINGS FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

by Bahá'u'lláh

Selected passages representing important themes in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, such as spiritual evolution, justice, peace, harmony between the races and peoples of the world, and the transformation of the individual and society.

THE HIDDEN WORDS

by Bahá'u'lláh

A slim book of short verses, originally written in Arabic and Persian, which reflect the "inner essence" of the religious teachings of all of the Prophets of God.

SOME ANSWERED QUESTIONS

by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

A popular collection of informal "table talks" which address a wide range of spiritual, philosophical, and social questions.

GOD PASSES BY

by Shoghi Effendi

A history of the first 100 years of the Bahá'í Faith, 1844–1944, written by its appointed Guardian.

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH: THE EMERGING GLOBAL RELIGION

by William S. Hatcher and J. Douglas Martin

A comprehensive introduction to the origins, development, and recent history of the Bahá'í Faith and its worldwide community of followers.

THE REVELATION OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

by Adib Taherzadeh

A four-volume series on the life and work of Bahá'u'lláh, setting His Writings in their historical context.

THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD

World Centre Publications

An annual volume, containing articles, major documents, and statistical data, published as the principal public record of the Bahá'í community's growth, development, and activities.

CHRIST AND BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

by George Townsend

A detailed look at how the coming of Bahá'u'lláh fulfills the prophetic promise of the return of Christ.

BUDDHISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

by Moojan Momen

A comparison of Buddhist and Bahá'í teachings.

ISLAM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

by Moojan Momen

An authoritative account of the connection between Islam and the Bahá'í Faith, drawing on Islamic prophecies, teachings, and traditions.

On the World Wide Web

THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD

<http://www.bahai.org/>

The principal official site of the worldwide Bahá'í community. The site offers extensive information on the Faith's history, teachings, and activities, along with selections from the Bahá'í sacred writings.

BAHÁ'Í WORLD NEWS SERVICE

<http://www.bahaiworldnews.org/>

Provides up-to-date reports on news-worthy events involving Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities around the world, offering articles and photographs which may be freely reproduced by news organizations.

ONE COUNTRY

(the online newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community)

<http://www.onecountry.org/>

Carries the text and photographs of the Bahá'í International Community's quarterly newsletter, One Country, which reports principally on Bahá'í activities addressing social issues, such as sustainable development, human rights, peace, the advancement of women, and interfaith relations.

As well, the Bahá'í International Community maintains several informational Web sites, as do many national and local Bahá'í communities. A number of films and videos about the Faith have also been produced. And in many cities and towns around the world, the local Bahá'í community can be contacted by looking under "Bahá'í Faith" in the telephone directory.

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THE BAHÁ'ÍS

The Bahá'í Faith...

- is established in more than 190 countries
- is the second-most widespread independent world religion
- has significant communities in more countries than any other religion except Christianity
- is among the fastest growing religions in the world
- has some five million members who come from virtually every nationality, religious background, ethnic group, and social class

Bahá'u'lláh...

- was the founder of the Bahá'í Faith
- lived from 1817 to 1892
- was a Persian nobleman
- suffered 40 years of exile and imprisonment
- revealed more than 100 volumes of sacred writings
- was the most recent in the line of Messengers from God that includes Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, and Muhammad

Bahá'u'lláh taught...

- that there is only one God
- that all of the world's religions represent one changeless, eternal Faith
- that all humanity is one race, destined to live in peace and harmony
- that the purpose of life on earth is to develop ourselves spiritually, in preparation for an everlasting existence hereafter

Bahá'í principles include...

- the oneness of humankind
- the equality of women and men
- full racial integration
- economic justice
- universal education
- the harmony of science and religion
- the adoption of a universal auxiliary language
- the creation of a world commonwealth of nations that will keep the peace through collective security

Bahá'ís...

- are working towards the creation of an ever-advancing, sustainable world civilization
- strive to uphold high moral standards in all their actions
- pray and meditate daily
- understand that strong and healthy families stand at the foundation of society
- have launched more than 3,000 educational, environmental, social and economic development projects, ranging from village-level tutorial schools to regional health campaigns to national literacy projects

The Bahá'í community...

- has no clergy and accepts no funds from outside
- conducts its affairs through a distinctive system of freely elected lay governing councils, which comprise a global network
- has established local Bahá'í governing councils in nearly 10,000 localities worldwide, and national councils in virtually every nation

For further information contact:

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