

Voices from Bahá’I Worldview Traditions

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

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General note:

In English, Bahá’i writings refer to Almighty God as ‘He’, as there is no respectful neutral word, unlike in the original Arabic and Persian. Wherever a Manifestation is referred to as ‘He’, or with possessive pronouns referring to the Manifestations, capitalization is used as a mark of respect. This is common throughout the Bahá’i writings

1. Do Baha’is believe in a God?

Bahá’is belief in one God, Creator of the universe, Who is essentially beyond human understanding. God is also referred to as The Great Being, Great Spirit, and Unknowable Essence amongst other titles. Through a succession of Divine Messengers, referred to by Bahá’is as “Manifestations of God” – including Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh – guidance has been given to humanity to enable its civilization and advancement.

Through prayer, meditation, reflection and by following the teachings of these Manifestations, each individual can move forwards in their personal relationship with the Creator.

2. What do you believe happens to you after death?

Bahá’u’lláh taught that the soul is our reality, housed temporarily in the temple of the body. From the time of conception, the soul is 'associated' with the body, neither contained within it nor dependent on it for existence. Our purpose in life is to develop our spiritual qualities, love, empathy, and oneness amongst many others. At the point of death, though the body returns to the earth, the soul is released from physical association and continues to progress in the spiritual realms.

"To consider that after the death of the body the spirit perishes," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said "is like imagining that a bird in a cage will be destroyed if the cage is broken, though the bird has nothing to fear from the destruction of the cage. Our body is like the cage, and the spirit is like the bird...if the cage becomes broken,

the bird will continue and exist. Its feelings will be even more powerful, its perceptions greater, and its happiness increased.

The Bahá'í writings teach that this can be likened to the embryo in the womb, developing limbs and organs for which it has no use in that 'world', their purpose only clear once the baby is born.

"The world beyond, writes Bahá'u'lláh, "is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother." Just as the womb provides the environment for a person's initial physical development, the phenomenal world is the arena within which we develop the spiritual characteristics and capacities that we need for our onward journey. Both here and in the next life, we advance with the assistance of God's bounty and grace. Also important to the progress of our souls in the next world are the good deeds carried out in our names here on earth, and the sincere prayers of our families and friends."

Bahá'is also believe in a time of accountability as the soul progresses from this physical world to the next spiritual realm, that we are faced with our actions and 'deeds' and gain an understanding of both the positive and negative things we have thought, said and done. There is no concept of hell, but of realization of the consequences of our actions. The soul is on an eternal journey towards closeness to Almighty God.

3. What is the Baha'i view of evil?

Perhaps the simplest way to explain the Bahá'í teaching about evil is to compare it to light and dark. Light is a physical reality, whereas darkness is the absence of light; it does not exist as an entity itself. In the same way, the Bahá'í Writings refer to evil as the absence of good:

Evil is non-existent; it is the absence of good; sickness is the loss of health; poverty the lack of riches. When wealth disappears, you are poor; you look within the treasure box but find nothing there. Without knowledge there is ignorance; therefore, ignorance is simply the lack of knowledge. Death is the absence of life. Therefore, on the one hand we have existence; on the other, nonexistence, negation or absence of existence.¹

One of the questions asked whether an act of evil can be categorised as both natural and moral – which I understand as asking whether, if we act upon our natural impulses, we can still be judged in a moral way. Emotions such as anger are not 'evil' in themselves – we have the ability to feel them for a reason – but how we choose to use them determines whether our actions are 'evil' or not.

The answer to this is that desire, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So, if a man has the desire to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praiseworthy. If he exercises his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, it is very praiseworthy; but if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy. ... It is the same with all the natural qualities of man... if they be used and displayed in an unlawful way, they become blameworthy.²

Sometimes people consider natural phenomena – earthquakes, floods and so on - as evil, asking why, if God is good, He would allow such things to happen. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation can also be extended to the natural world: these phenomena are not evil in their own right, but can cause untold pain and suffering to us. They are 'evil' in relation to us, but are not in themselves: if a volcano blows but injures no-one, is it a 'good' volcano in comparison to the one which erupts and destroys a village? It is our challenge as humans sharing this planet to increasingly understand natural forces and phenomena and help each other to be safe. So too, perhaps, with the damaging behaviours of some people.

*Suffering is both a reminder and a guide. It stimulates us better to adapt ourselves to our environmental conditions, and thus leads the way to self-improvement. In every suffering one can find a meaning and a wisdom. But it is not always easy to find the secret of that wisdom. It is sometimes only when all our suffering has passed that we become aware of its usefulness. What man considers to be evil turns often to be a cause of infinite blessings.*³

One final question I have been asked is whether it is possible to gain true happiness without natural evil. This is a thread which runs throughout religion, and the following passage seems appropriate:

*“The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most.”*⁴

Perhaps ultimately, it is how we react to the actions of others, the choices we make and the situations in which we find ourselves that define evil for each of us throughout our lives.

Sources:

¹Abdu’l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, p. 76-79

²Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 250- 251

³Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 434

⁴Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 178

4. What rituals, objects and words do you use?

There are no rituals in the Bahá’i Faith. We hold devotional meetings where people may read prayers or passages from the Writings (scriptures) of the faith. Some people use music – singing or with instruments- but there’s no standard way: it depends on the culture and talents of the Bahá’is in any particular area.

Other gatherings may include community celebrations or the studying the teachings of the Faith and Holy books of other religions.

As a Bahá’i of more than 30 years, the only objects I have which are purely ‘Bahá’i’ are prayer books, books of the Bahá’i teachings, a set of prayer beads (similar to a Rosary) and a picture of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who was the son of the Founder of the Faith and is seen as an excellent example for us to follow. I also have a necklace with a 9-pointed star, the Bahá’i symbol.

‘Things’ are not really a big part of being a Bahá’i, and I probably value my books most, but only because they help me to understand and deepen my faith.

As for words, there are just a few terms which Bahá’is use which are Arabic or Persian, as the Faith originated in Persia (now called Iran). One example is a greeting, “Allah’u’Abhá” which means “God is the most Glorious”. Most things are translated though and people use the language of whichever country they are from or living in. In a devotional meeting you might find that all of the prayers are read in English, or in many

different languages, depending where the participants are from. Discussions (or 'consultations' as we call them) are in whatever language most people present can understand, and people will make a big effort to make everyone, wherever they are from, welcome and included. The teaching of unity applies on a world-wide scale, too. Bahá'is see people around the world as one big family.

"To be a Baha'i simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood." ~ Abdu'l-Bahá

You can find lots more information on www.bahai.org.uk or www.bahai-belfast.org

I feel like I've only just scratched the surface here, but hopefully it will be enough to get you started. Please do get back to me if you need more details.

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." – Bahá'u'lláh

Although there are no rituals as such, though there are some requirements which Bahá'is must strive to fulfil:

Obligatory Prayer:

Bahá'is choose from the Short Obligatory Prayer - a single verse to be said between noon and sunset each day; the Medium Obligatory Prayer - a longer prayer with genuflections to be recited three times in 24 hours; and the Long Obligatory Prayer - a much longer prayer with genuflections to be said once in 24 hours. It is entirely the choice of the individual which prayer is said on any given day, and all of the Obligatory Prayers are said in private, and ablutions - washing of hands and face - are performed immediately before the prayers.

Prayer for the Dead:

A certain prayer is to be said in the presence of the deceased before burial, with those present standing whilst the prayer is recited. Bahá'is are buried, not cremated, and bodies of the deceased should not be embalmed, nor moved more than an hour's journey from the place of death.

5. What do you think is the most fundamental principle or aspect of your religion?

I would say it is 'Unity'. This principle runs throughout all aspects of the Bahá'i Faith:

Unity of God - Bahá'is believe in one God, the Creator, Who is unknowable and beyond the scope of the human mind.

Unity of Religion - Throughout history, God has sent to humanity, according to the needs of the time, a series of Divine Educators, known as Manifestations of God. These Divine Educators include Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Their distinct social and spiritual teachings have guided humanity's efforts to advance civilisation. The nature of God is reflected in these Manifestations - like perfect mirrors reflecting the sun.

Unity of Mankind - The Bahá'í Faith emphasises the unity of humanity transcending all divisions of race, nation, gender, caste, and social class, while celebrating its diversity. Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'i Faith wrote: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

When Bahá'is consult together, unity is regarded as of the utmost importance.

6. Do you have festivals?

The Bahá'í calendar has several Holy Days across the year, some are commemorations and some celebrations. Bahá'í New Year (*Naw-Ruz*), the anniversaries of the births and deaths (ascensions) of the key figures and the period of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation (*Ridván*) are all days when work should be suspended. A 19-day fast takes place in March of each year, where food and drink are avoided between the hours of sunrise and sunset. There are exemptions, such as pregnancy, illness and infirmity but otherwise the fast is required from the age of 15 to 70.

In addition to the Holy Days, every 19 days is a Feast Day. Not necessarily a food feast, these are essentially times for the community to come together. Though the same in format across the world – with devotional, administrative and social sections- the Nineteen Day Feast will reflect the local customs, foods and character of each community.

“The Feast hath been enjoined upon you once in every month, though it be with water only. God hath verily purposed to bring the hearts... together.”- Bahá'u'lláh

The Festival of Ridvan is very important in the Bahá'í calendar, when Bahá'ís commemorate the time that Bahá'u'lláh revealed that He was a Manifestation of God. <https://bahaiteachings.org/ridvan-the-greatest-bahai-festival>

7. How do you commit to your faith? How does your faith affect your everyday life?

It is first and foremost a commitment to Almighty God, a matter of the heart and soul of the individual. However, if someone wishes to 'become a Bahá'í' and join the community they can register their commitment with the National Assembly of whichever country they live in. This is known as 'declaring' one's faith and desire to be a Bahá'í.

The first step is recognising the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, as the Messenger of God for this day. Accepting Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and way of life is the next, and for most people involves linking up with their nearest community. There are Bahá'ís in almost every part of the world, and in the UK and Eire there are several communities in cities, towns and villages.

Being a Bahá'í is a lifelong process and commitment: there are ways of living and common beliefs which are an important part of committing to the Faith. For example, the Bahá'í teachings hold that unity is very important, and that finding common ground with all people of all beliefs and backgrounds is essential. Backbiting (gossiping) is seen as one of the worst things people can do, and we try very hard to avoid it- even though it may be a struggle for people not to join in when others see it as acceptable.

There are lots of ways of finding out about the Bahá'í Faith including books, websites and talking to other Bahá'ís, and part of committing to being a Bahá'í is deciding to find out as much as possible. We are not supposed to follow blindly, but to make a decision based on knowledge.

On a day-to-day level, committing to the Faith also involves: saying a daily obligatory prayer; trying to live a life which serves mankind; not drinking alcohol; avoiding gossip and trying to be the best person you can possibly be.

As to How my faith affects my everyday life, It actually informs everything I do! If we are to live up to the standards of the Bahá'í Faith, we should be honest, caring, kind, trustworthy, uphold justice, and work for the good of mankind. There are many passages in the Bahá'í writings which talk about the importance of good character: that backbiting is one of the worst things a person can do, that unity and fellowship should be our goal. Humility (being humble) is regarded as an important virtue, but so is the strength to defend others who may be weak or vulnerable. I think that this passage from Bahá'u'lláh is my kind of ideal of what a human should be:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbour and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgement and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.

8. Is there a place of worship for your faith? Do you have any special priests?

There are Bahá'í Temples (also called Houses of Worship) in every continent, and Bahá'í Centres in many cities and towns across the world. Until recently, however, the low numbers of Bahá'ís in many places have made having a dedicated place of worship impractical. Bahá'ís are free to gather in each other's homes, community centres, village halls and such places, and regularly hold 'Devotional' meetings where prayer, reading of Holy Scriptures, meditation, quiet contemplation, music and fellowship take place.

Ideally, Bahá'ís gather on their Holy Days (that will be a separate blog!), and for Feasts every 19 days. The Feast is not necessarily a food feast - it can be with water only - it is more a spiritual feast for the community to come together, pray, consult, and share a time of fellowship. Again, in many places around the world these are currently held in homes or community centres.

Although some places in the world have their own Bahá'í centres or local places of worship, in many communities Bahá'ís will meet in each other's homes or village and community facilities. Worship is essentially about the purity and expression of spirit rather than any physical location, and whilst community gatherings are an important part of any Bahá'í group, prayer and worship are not dependent on access to any particular place.

"Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island where mention of God hath been made and His praise glorified." – Bahá'u'lláh

There are no priests in the Bahá'í faith. Everyone has a duty to be the best they can, and everyone is valued for who they are. We elect people every year to help guide the community, but it's not an election where people say 'vote for me!' like in politics. It's a secret ballot, and everyone votes for who they think is wise and kind and will do the best for the Bahá'ís of their village or town. We are not allowed to electioneer or try to

persuade people to vote for us. Nine people are elected and this is called a Local Spiritual Assembly. There's a similar election for the National Spiritual Assembly, too.

9. Do you have a sacred book or key piece of writing. If so, what is the most important teaching?

We have many books, as Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Whom Bahá'ís believe to be the latest Manifestation, wrote many volumes and letters. Personally, The Hidden Words is a book I turn to again and again. It is a collection of short verses which are the essence of divine teachings across the ages. There are others which deal with social teachings, those which explain metaphors and mysteries in religious traditions, and devotional passages which praise and glorify God.

As to the most important teaching I would say "Unity" is the most important Bahá'í teaching: unity of races (i.e. the oneness of mankind) and unity of religion. The belief that all religions come from the same Source, Almighty God, across time in a succession known to Bahá'ís as Progressive Revelation – is an essential teaching of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís believe that there is one God, Who is unknowable to His creation, and that the founders of the great religions were 'Manifestations of God', or Divine Teachers, filled with the knowledge and vision to advance the progress of humanity.

10. What are your thoughts on the euthanasia and meat eating?

There is, at this time, no specific ruling about euthanasia in the Baha'i Faith. I found the following information, which may help:

Euthanasia

"As to the questions relating to euthanasia ... the House of Justice has asked us to share with you these two statements...

'As to the Baha'i viewpoint on the removal or withholding of life support in medical cases where intervention prolongs life in disabling illnesses, nothing has been found in the Sacred Text specifically on this matter. In such cases decisions must be left to those responsible, including the patient.'

(From a letter dated 31st May 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

'We have received your letter of March 18, 1974 in which you ask for the Baha'i viewpoint on euthanasia and on the removal of life support in medical cases where physiological interventions prolong life in disabling illnesses. In general our teachings indicate that God, the Giver of life, can alone dispose of it as He deems best, and we have found nothing in the Sacred Text on these matters specifically but in a letter to an individual written on behalf of the beloved Guardian by his secretary regarding mercy killings, or legalized euthanasia, it is stated:

"...this is also a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to legislate."

'Until such time as the Universal House of Justice considers legislation on euthanasia, decisions in the matters to which you refer must be left to the consciences of those responsible.'"

(From a letter dated 17 May 1974 from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska; last selection also in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the compiler, October 27, 1981, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 985)

Source: <https://bahai9.com/wiki/Euthanasia>

Meat eating

There are currently no restrictions on diet for Baha'is other than alcohol being forbidden. Many Baha'is are vegetarian or vegan, and all Baha'is are aware of the need for kindness to animals and concern for their welfare. In the Baha'i writings, it is held that the foods of the future will be fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains suggesting that humanity will develop towards a vegetarian diet. Whilst eating meat is still acceptable, being conscious of the welfare of the animals involved, as well as valuing (honouring?) animals for what they give is also important.

Here's some further reading:

www.bahai.org for all kinds of information about the Baha'i Faith

I'll Have The Fruit and Grains Please! by Victoria Leith, George Ronald Publisher, 2005, ISBN 0-85398-490-5

https://bahai-library.com/warwick_kindness_animals