

# **Baha'i Worldview Traditions**

## **In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay**



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This in-depth subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying glossary, available both on our website and for download.

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## Introduction

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's main religions and was founded in the Middle East in the 19th century by Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri, known as Bahá'u'lláh.

Although smaller than the older religions, it is nevertheless a worldwide religion with nearly 8 million adherents. The resources contained in the list of subjects below are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Bahá'ís. They are a portal or window into the world of the Bahá'ís and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of the Bahá'í Faith but also address the issues that Bahá'ís encounter as they engage with the 21st century.

## Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

### Basic Beliefs

Bahá'ís believe that the Universe is a deliberate creation, but that the Creative Force is by definition unknowable. Any created thing is incapable of understanding that which created it. **Bahá'u'lláh** used a number of terms such as the Unknowable Essence or the Supreme Being to refer to this entity. He also stated that the Universe has always existed, and will always exist. Humans were created, "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation". At the individual level, we were created "to know God and to worship Him". The purpose of life on earth is to acquire virtues and therefore become nearer to God in this world and the next.

### Scriptures

Bahá'u'lláh wrote the equivalent of one hundred volumes, in both Persian and Arabic. About one tenth of his Writings have been translated into English, and varying amounts into over 800 other languages. The most important texts are available in book form and online. Divine revelation can often be understood at various levels. Different individuals may form their own opinions on the meaning of a particular passage but have no right to assert that theirs is the only correct interpretation.

## Revelation

Bahá'í belief incorporates the principle of progressive revelation, in which each religion builds on the one before. “Messengers of God” (or “Manifestations of God”) always confirm the spiritual laws of the previous religion, but may change some of the social laws, thereby instituting a new era. Bahá'ís recognise, among others, the Buddha, Krishna, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (pbuh) as Manifestations of God.

The primary purpose of each Messenger is the transformation of the individual, which has the purpose of preparing each soul for the next life but simultaneously results in a collective transformation of society. In the Bahá'í religion, the global aims – world administration, unity of mankind, abolition of class barriers, etc. – are major goals, but clearly depend upon the transformation of individuals for their achievement. Nonetheless, these goals profoundly influence Bahá'í behaviour in a very positive way, which is often remarked upon.

## The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh

The Bahá'í Faith is based upon the claim of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) to be the Promised One of all religions. He was preceded by Siyyid Ali-Muhammad (1819-1850), who took the title of the Báb (“Gate”), and who came to prepare the way for Bahá'u'lláh. For a Bahá'í, the events of this period were in fulfilment of Biblical and Qur'anic prophecy, and the Writings of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are seen as the Word of God. Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh suffered years of persecution, imprisonment and banishment, and the Báb was publicly martyred in Iran.

## Successors and Authority

In Bahá'u'lláh's “Book of the Covenant”, He appointed his eldest son, `Abdu'l-Bahá, as his successor and interpreter. `Abdu'l-Bahá, freed by the Young Turk Revolution (1908), left the Holy Land (to which Bahá'u'lláh had been banished) and travelled through Europe and North America, speaking to the early Bahá'í groups there. According to Bahá'u'lláh's specific instructions, `Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings have the same authority as those of his father.

Succession of authority has always been a difficulty within religious movements, but the Bahá'í community has been virtually spared this problem. Having himself been appointed in writing, `Abdu'l-Bahá similarly appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as “Guardian” of the Faith, in his “Will and Testament”. Shoghi Effendi's writings, however, are not regarded as scripture. After the Guardian's death, according to the explicit instructions of `Abdu'l-Bahá's

same “Will and Testament”, the Bahá’ís elected the Universal House of Justice, which sits in Haifa, in the Holy Land.

Authority within each Bahá’í community rests with the Local Spiritual Assembly, a body of nine people elected annually within the city, town or village. Theirs is not an authority to reveal or interpret scripture, but to oversee the needs of the local Bahá’í community. A similar body exists within each country (National Spiritual Assembly), and it is these which elect the Universal House of Justice.

The Bahá’í Faith has no priesthood, and no class of persons with any special roles in religious observance. Placing the “Greatest Name” symbol in a prominent place in the room, wearing one’s best clothing for a Bahá’í meeting, etc. are therefore symbols of respect for God, rather than indications of authority.

## **Founders and Exemplars**

The figures associated with the foundation of the Faith are the Báb, who declared the new age in 1844 but was executed in 1850; Bahá’u’lláh, who despite repeated exile and imprisonment was able to develop the Báb’s new religious community into an outward-looking force; and `Abdu’l-Bahá, who took his father’s religion to new parts of the world. The lives of both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh are exalted above those of ordinary humans, but the life of `Abdu’l-Bahá is an example of how human beings should ideally behave.

A number of the dedicated associates of `Abdu’l-Bahá, such as Martha Root and Mr. and Mrs. Gregory stand out as examples of what can be achieved. The courageous Martha Root, beginning in 1915, spent more than 20 years travelling alone around the world, organising public meetings, meeting political figures and newspaper editors, ensuring the world was aware of the new religion. In 1912 Louis Gregory, a black American of slave stock, married Louisa Mathew, a white Englishwoman from a privileged background, as a deliberate example of inter-racial unity.

The period from the declaration of the Báb in 1844 to the death of `Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921 is referred to as the Heroic Age. Although Shoghi Effendi, as Guardian of the Faith from 1921 until his death (1957), inspired and encouraged the Bahá’ís, the faith has not really had “leaders” since that time. The members of the Universal House of Justice do not have any cult of personality, and like all the elected members of Bahá’í bodies, have no special rights and privileges other than that of service. The chairmanship rotates, so no-one can be regarded as the “leader”.

While not leaders in any religious sense, many individual Bahá’ís are accomplished in their chosen field of work. Well-known Bahá’ís in recent years have included the athletes Kathy

Freeman and Nelson Evora, His Highness Malietoa Tunamafili II of Samoa and the comedian Omid Djalili. The acclaimed potter, Bernard Leach, consciously united eastern and western styles in his work. The artist Mark Tobey was a Bahá'í, as was the actress Carole Lombard in her later days. The jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie was well-known as a Bahá'í. Apart from the examples of the spiritual side of their lives, all these people sought to exemplify excellence, which is cherished in the Bahá'í Writings.

## **Ways of Living**

### **Religion and Religions**

Bahá'ís see the major world religions as being chapters in the same one book. Each religion has an original Founder, often termed by Bahá'ís as a “Manifestation of God” or “Messenger of God”. The teachings he brings are built upon that which has gone before, but are invariably presented in a fresh, new way. His “Revelation” has a spiritual force which gradually unfolds its impact as the new religion spreads, and there is a certain flowering of civilisation. However, over succeeding centuries the religion loses its freshness and its impact, until a point is reached at which a new Manifestation appears.

In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, it is the very newness of the religion which gives it some of its impact. Although there are families which have been Bahá'ís for several generations (there are even fourth-generation British Bahá'ís), a large proportion of the believers have accepted this religion for themselves, not being from a Bahá'í background. This involves personal investigation, personal decision and personal commitment, sometimes in the face of open opposition. Naturally, this all strengthens the impact of the individual's belief.

As Bahá'u'lláh teaches his followers to treat all human beings as members of one family, to abandon their prejudices, to “Consort with the followers of all religions with joy and with fragrance”, these teachings guide Bahá'ís to behave in an open and loving way towards all humanity. Bahá'ís are also exhorted to be kind to animals, to regard knowledge and education as praiseworthy, to be honest, truthful and loyal citizens. These teachings directly address many of the deficiencies in current society, and should have a very beneficial impact on the world.

## Organisation

The Bahá'í Faith also concentrates on the promotion of loving, united communities, and there is a clear structure to both Bahá'í consultation and Bahá'í administration. A democratic but non-confrontational system is gradually being built up, which the Bahá'ís will increasingly be able to offer as a model for the world, as humanity struggles to choose a collective way forward in an increasingly globalised set of structures.

## Guidance for Life

For Bahá'ís the central principles of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, together with the laws and ordinances of the Faith, are to be found in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. His written work is very extensive, with a very large quantity of tablets, books and prayers. He refers to his Writings as an ocean. The Kitáb-i-Iqán, the "Book of Certitude", is his main theological work, tackling many of the important questions facing Jews, Christians and Muslims in the interpretation of Holy Texts. "The Hidden Words" purports to include the essential spiritual teachings of all religions. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the "Most Holy Book", contains ordinances pertaining to the future. "The Seven Valleys" describes the progress of the soul in a mystical style. The book, "Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh" contains a number of tablets concerned with the social principles of the new religion. Bahá'u'lláh's Writings are the repository of his teachings, and Bahá'ís are encouraged to read them for themselves. Bahá'u'lláh also appointed his son `Abdu'l-Bahá as the authorised interpreter of his teachings, and Bahá'ís treat his Writings as authoritative.

Some of Bahá'u'lláh's main teachings could be summarised as: belief in one God, one Creative Force; the divine origin of all religions; the oneness of humanity; the elimination of prejudice; the equality of men and women; harmony between religion and science; the individual investigation of truth; the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth; world government; a world tribunal; a world police force; choice of a common world language; universal education.

## Religious Practice

Every Bahá'í should read something from the writings each morning and evening. The purpose is to understand and to think about how the teachings can be applied in action. Bahá'u'lláh wrote that it is better "to read a single verse with joy and radiance than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God".

Within the community, scripture is used in commemoration of Bahá'í Holy Days, in the Nineteen-Day Feast, which is the principal community meeting, and in open devotional

meetings, where music and readings from the writings of other faiths and other inspirational material may be used.

## **The Scriptures**

Great effort has been made to translate each of Bahá'u'lláh's works into a similar, corresponding English style; so the lofty Biblical translations of the prayers and meditations are in some contrast to the plain language of some of the "Tablets". A few specialist terms may be encountered. Alláh-u-Abhá means "God the most glorious". The days of hospitality and the giving of gifts are the "Ayyám-i-Há". The New Year is called "Naw-Rúz", while the next world is frequently referred to as "The Abhá Kingdom", (Abhá meaning "Most Glorious").

There are also English words which are used in ways which might be unfamiliar to readers. The sayings and writings of the Founders of the world's principal religions are spoken of as "revealed". "Revelation" is used to denote the teachings and message of a Manifestation, while the period from one Manifestation to the next is called a "dispensation".

Bahá'u'lláh's works were either revealed in his own hand, or after a poisoning incident, through an amanuensis (secretary). Bahá'u'lláh checked through anything written by an amanuensis, and marked it as authentic with his seal. Many tablets were addressed specifically to individual Bahá'ís, others to enquirers, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Sufis. He also, during the 1860s, wrote to the world's principal rulers, urging them to resolve their differences and work for the unification of the world. The Bahá'í World Centre has collected and catalogued all these Writings. The original texts are preserved in Haifa, where there is a Centre for the Study and Interpretation of the Holy Texts. An individual believer is free to voice opinions on any interpretation, but if they wish, he or she may refer the matter to the Universal House of Justice.

## **Ultimate Questions**

The great questions of life will vary from one individual to another, but often include whether the universe was deliberately created, and whether there is a deity of some sort; what the purpose of creation might be; whether there is a spiritual aspect to man, and whether the spirit survives after death; why there is evil in the world, and why innocents suffer; and why life has been confined to one planet when there are incalculable billions of galaxies.

On every one of these questions the Bahá'í Faith offers at least a partial answer, although proper answers to these sort of questions are beyond the scope of this brief overview. The

universe was created by an Unknowable Essence, which knew its love for us, and therefore created us. Each human has a soul, which learns through experience, including through suffering. Evil does not exist as an independent force, it is the absence of good, in the same way that darkness is merely the absence of light. Without “evil” good could not be recognised. Bahá’u’lláh explicitly states that there is life on other planets.

Bahá’u’lláh attempts to show humanity the futility of trying to describe the Ultimate Reality: “To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.” Instead, titles which exalt his attributes are used, such as the Omniscient, the Almighty and the Ever-Forgiving.

The individual is in essence spiritual in nature, and only when living in the spirit is he truly happy. The soul associates with the body at the point of conception, and through the matrix of life it acquires virtues, so that when the body ceases to function, the soul continues to progress, through the next world(s). After death, souls recognise other souls which they have known in this world.

Although it is impossible for the finite mind to fully grasp the infinite, the transcendent, this is one of the supreme privileges and challenges for the human being, and is in itself one of the many things which the entire human race has in common.

## **Holy Days & Celebrations**

There are nine full Holy Days, eight of which commemorate specific events in Bahá’í history. On these nine days, work should be suspended. Children are usually granted absence from school for these days.

New Year (“Naw Rúz”) is at the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere, and usually falls on 21st March. There are no Bahá’í rituals as such, but the month of fasting comes to an end at Naw Rúz, so there is often a big party.

Bahá’u’lláh was born in Teheran on November 12th, 1817, into a noble family. His father was a minister in the court of the Shah. The date of Bahá’u’lláh’s birth is often celebrated with a party, beginning with prayers and finishing with refreshment and entertainment.

The Báb was born on October 20th, 1819. His birthday is celebrated on this day, often with readings from his own Writings and from accounts of his childhood in Shiraz.

The Báb declared that he was the promised Qa'im which Shi'a Muslims were expecting, in his own home in Shiraz, Persia, after sunset on 22nd May, 1844. This event is therefore celebrated within the same 24 hours – late on 22nd or during daylight on 23rd. Passages from the story, as related by his first disciple, are often read. [It is of historical interest that Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, `Abdu'l-Bahá, was born at some time within the same 24 hour period.]

Noon on 9th July, 1850 was the time of the "Martyrdom of the Báb". An entire regiment was lined up, in three ranks, to shoot him and one of his disciples. This is commemorated at noon on this date, and is naturally a more solemn event.

There are three holy days in the Ridván period: The First Day of Ridván (April 21st) celebrates the day in 1863 when Bahá'u'lláh first announced that he was the Messenger of God for this age. The Ninth Day of Ridván (April 29th) was the day his family was able to join him in the Garden of Ridván, near Baghdad. The Twelfth Day of Ridván (May 2nd) was the Day he and his family started on their enforced journey to their next exile, in Constantinople.

In addition to these nine, there are two other holy days commemorating `Abdu'l-Bahá, but work need not be suspended on these. All of these events can be held in private homes, but for larger numbers a town hall, community centre or school may be hired.

There are nineteen months in the Bahá'í year, and nineteen days in each month. This totals 361 days, not the astronomical 365. The remaining four days (five in a leap year) are called the "Ayyám-i-Há", and are special days for exchanging presents, visiting friends and having parties.

## **Ways of Knowing**

### **Stories and Faith**

The most important sections of Bahá'í history are the life stories of the Báb and of Bahá'u'lláh. Books are available, suitable either for adults or for children, to tell each of these stories. Shorn of any detail, the outlines are as follows:

The Báb, a saintly and spiritual individual, declared in Persia in 1844 that he was the Promised One of Islam. He quickly acquired thousands of followers, including many from the priesthood. However, He was imprisoned and finally executed in 1850. The only leading

follower of the Báb whose life was spared was Bahá'u'lláh, who had a spiritual experience while in prison, leading him to believe that he was the One foretold by the Báb. He was exiled to Iraq, to Turkey and to the Holy Land. On the point of leaving Iraq, he declared himself as the Promised One of all religions. Despite imprisonment, poisoning, torture and banishment, he lived to lay out to the rulers and peoples of the world a vision of a world transformed from injustice, prejudice and oppression to one of calm, of spirituality, of peace and justice.

The very suffering endured by both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh is in itself meant as demonstrating a supreme spiritual story. As Bahá'u'lláh himself explains it, "The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness." The stories of the lives of these two beings are central to any understanding of, or belief in, the Bahá'í Faith, as each is believed to have been an inspired figure of supreme stature. The religion rests on their station and teachings. Excerpts from their life stories are often included in the Holy Day commemorations.

A further rich vein of touching stories comes from the life of Bahá'u'lláh's son, `Abdu'l-Bahá. After his father's death, he toured Europe and North America, and a large number of pen portraits exist from this period of his life, in addition to those records kept by Western pilgrims visiting `Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land. These record many instances of `Abdu'l-Bahá's extraordinary compassion and concern for his fellow human beings. His behaviour serves as an example as to how a person should respond to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

A theme which can be identified throughout these life stories is that of "crisis and victory". Repeated setbacks and seemingly hopelessly situations are each followed by new milestones or unprecedented events – weaving a storyteller's thread through early Bahá'í history.

## **Symbols of Faith**

The symbol most frequently used for the Bahá'í Faith is a nine-pointed star. The word Bahá, (Glory) as used in the title Bahá'u'lláh, has a numerical value of nine in the Arabic abjad system. Other explanations sometimes given are that nine (in a decimal system) is the greatest single unit; that nine is the number of both unity and spirituality; that there are nine major religions in the world, etc. This symbol is the one most frequently used when portrayed alongside those from its sister religions, or on leaflets and similar materials. Its exact form and proportions are not important, and indeed artists and publishers sometimes

use geometric designs based on the number nine, or rosettes with nine petals, rather than a star.

The “Ringstone” symbol gets its name from its common use on personal jewellery, although there is no requirement to wear it. It consists of stylised forms of the Arabic letters B and H, arranged in a particular way. Three of these letters are arranged horizontally, representing, from the top: the world of God, the world of the Manifestations of God, and the world of man. The central letter of the three is reprised vertically, to show symbolically how the Manifestations (Teachers) connect the world of man to the world of God. There are two stars to the sides of this design. Each has five sides, and they represent the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, the twin Manifestations of the Bahá’í dispensation. The design is frequently within an oval frame. This design is found on the outside of the Shrine of the Báb. It is worthy of note that Bahá’u’lláh had some of his letters to the world’s rulers and others of his most important works arranged in the shape of a five-pointed star (pentacle).

The Greatest Name, “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá” (O Glory of the Most Glorious!) is an invocation, and is presented visually in a stylised form which often appears in a prominent place in Bahá’í homes. This is the symbol which looks down from the highest point in the House of Worship.

Symbolism is in use in the practice of the longer obligatory prayers. Devotional practices such as bending down, putting one’s forehead to the ground, etc., symbolise a person’s humility before God. Also the believer faces the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh, near Akka, while saying the obligatory prayer.

Bahá’í prayers sometimes use animal metaphors to suggest desirable qualities which humans ought to acquire, e.g. “Be lions roaring in the forests of knowledge, whales swimming in the oceans of life”. Metaphors from nature are also used to illustrate the relationship between God, his Manifestation and humanity. For example, Bahá’u’lláh speaks of himself as the Nightingale of Paradise, as he warbles captivating melodies in a time of profound darkness. Another common symbol is that of water, with its flowing and cleansing properties: “Make my prayer, O my Lord, a fountain of living waters whereby I may live as long as Thy sovereignty endureth ... ”

Symbolism is a useful tool to explain beliefs. Bahá’í scripture, for instance, compares the succession of Manifestations to the way in which the sun rises each day, but from a different point on the horizon. Similarly, when Bahá’u’lláh says that humans should be “the fruits of one tree” or the “leaves of one branch”, Bahá’ís understand that this implies that they should be unified, because they are all created from the same root. The frequent use of symbols derived from nature reflects the Bahá’í idea that the material world is, among other things, a teaching matrix for the training of the human soul.

Bahá'u'lláh also, echoing Sufi tradition, in his work, “The Seven Valleys”, compares the journey of the soul to a physical journey from valley to valley, or from one spiritual state to another. However, Bahá'ís are quite clear that such word pictures are symbolic rather than literal.

## **Places of Worship**

Symbolism is also significant in the design of the Bahá'í Houses of Worship. Each one has nine sides, with nine gardens, nine paths, and nine doors. Among other meanings, this carries the symbolism that all paths ultimately lead to truth. Each is built to have three tiers, symbolising the world of humanity at the ground level, the world of the Manifestation of God in the vertical section, and the world of God in the topmost tier, which usually carries the invocation, “Ya Bahá u'l-Abhá”! This is referred to as the Greatest Name, and translates as “O Thou Glory of the Most Glorious!” The inaccessibility of this level of the building speaks for itself.

Worship can in principle take place anywhere, but in practice the vast majority of Bahá'í devotional meetings take place either in a private home or in a Bahá'í Centre. In the future, each town or village will have its own Mashriqu'l-Azhkar, or House of Worship. Mashriqu'l-Azhkar literally means “Dawning Place of the Remembrance of God”. The House of Worship should not be considered complete until it has a number of dependencies built round it – such as a care home, a clinic, a library or a hostel.

The House of Worship has nine sides, nine gardens and nine doors, and all the world's Scriptures are to be read there. The building is open to people of all races and of all religions or none. The first to be built was at Ishqabad (Ashkabad) in what is now Turkmenistan. It was confiscated by the Soviet authorities, and later suffered earthquake damage. There is one Mashriqu'l-Azhkar in each continent at present, with a further one being constructed in Chile. The architecture of some of these buildings is very striking, particularly that of the Chile temple and the one in India. Known locally as the “lotus mandir”, the House of Worship in New Delhi is built on the design of a giant lotus flower, and is reputed to have now become the most visited building in the world. Each of these Houses of Worship has three tiers, representing the world of God (topmost), the world of man (lowest), and the world of the Manifestations of God, connecting man to God.

## **Prayer and Meditation**

Prayer is seen as conversation with God, while meditation can be seen as conversation with your own soul. A wide range of prayers were revealed by the Central Figures of the faith, but there is no reason to exclude prayers from any other source. In addition to the prayer part of

the Nineteen Day Feast, families and communities have devotional meetings open to everyone. There is no set format for these. Through prayer, it is hoped that people feel closer to God, and therefore more contented, spiritual and detached. At the same time, the experience of praying together brings people together in a very real way. In a Bahá'í prayer meeting, individuals read out prayers in turn; congregational prayer is forbidden, other than the Prayer for the Dead.

## **Pilgrimage**

Pilgrimage is made to Bahá'í sites in the Holy Land. On a full nine-day pilgrimage the pilgrims are taken to Bahá'u'lláh's prison cell in Akká, to the house where He was subsequently confined, and to the two houses in the countryside where He ended his days. Adjacent to Bahji, His last house, is the building in which He was interred. This is referred to as "The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh", and is the spot Bahá'ís face when saying their obligatory prayers.

The pilgrimage also includes prayer at the Shrine of the Báb, where the latter's remains were interred, some years after his execution. The steps and terraced gardens leading up to the Shrine, and beyond the Shrine towards the top of Mount Carmel, provide a fitting and spiritual setting to the building itself. The beauty of the Shrine and the tranquillity of the gardens bring peace to the soul. The effect of the experience upon each pilgrim is naturally personal and individual, but the visits to different historical and sacred sites take place in companionship with others, allowing each pilgrim to take back both personal glimpses and shared experiences.

## **Identity, Diversity and Belonging**

### **Responsibility and Belonging**

Being a Bahá'í fundamentally involves a sense of belonging to the Bahá'í community. This creation of a united community is fundamental to the purpose of the Faith. At the same time, a Bahá'í believes that Bahá'u'lláh is the Messenger of God for this age, so following his laws is also a basic expression of this belonging.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote three special prayers which are known as Obligatory Prayers. Each day a Bahá'í should say one of these prayers, e.g. the short one which is to be said in the middle of the day. Each morning and evening Bahá'ís should read something from the Bahá'í scriptures and meditate upon it.

Bahá'ís should try to find a job which is useful and constructive. If a person does a job to the best of his or her ability, in a spirit of service to others, this is another way of worshipping God. Bahá'ís should be honest, trustworthy and fair.

Once each Bahá'í month, Bahá'ís meet together for a “Feast”. There are three parts to this. First there are prayers together. Then there is discussion on local matters. Then it becomes a social gathering, strengthening the social bonds. There are also 11 Holy Days commemorating various events in Bahá'í history, and on nine of these Bahá'ís should not work.

There is no baptism of children – up to the age of 15 they are automatically accepted as belonging to the Bahá'í community. Bahá'í children are taught about all the religions of the world. When they reach the age of 15 they can decide for themselves.

Bahá'ís fast for one Bahá'í month in the year. This means that they do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset each day. Children under the age of 15 are exempt, as are the elderly, pregnant and nursing mothers, people who are ill or travelling.

In each area the Bahá'ís elect a Local Spiritual Assembly to organise their affairs. Bahá'ís should support these bodies with their prayers and follow their guidance and turn to them with any problems. Only Bahá'ís can give money to support the Bahá'í Faith.

Accepting a religion into one's life is by definition a personal decision. No other person has the right to insist on particular forms of behaviour. Nevertheless, for a Bahá'í there are clear obligations laid out by Bahá'u'lláh himself. One of three “Obligatory” prayers should be chosen, and recited each day. There is a mantra to assist in a short daily meditation. From 2nd – 20th March, there is a daytime fast, which is applicable to those between the ages of 15 and 70, who are in good health. (There are exceptions: pregnant women, nursing mothers, those travelling, etc.) The practice of all of the above is a personal matter between the individual and God.

However, these outward forms should be mirrored by spiritual behaviour: kindness, honesty, consideration, etc., which are essential if a more unified, more spiritual civilisation is to be achieved. The various virtues or attributes of the spiritual person are expressed in Bahá'u'lláh's teaching for the individual, but although explicit, are not codified into measurable forms. To do so would run counter to the Bahá'í spirit of individual search for truth and to healthy, organic development of both the community and the individual.

Bahá'ís should not drink alcohol or take drugs, nor should they indulge in sex outside marriage. However, there are no stipulations as to dress or, for example, the cut of the beard.

However united a religious community may be, the individuals will, in reality, understand the common beliefs in slightly different ways. To prevent the Bahá'í Faith splitting into competing sects, Bahá'u'lláh set out clearly, in writing, that the only person authorised to interpret his Writings after his passing would be his eldest son, `Abdu'l-Bahá. In terms just as clear, `Abdu'l-Bahá left written instructions that all the Bahá'ís should turn to his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Cause, for authorised interpretation of anything considered unclear. The Universal House of Justice is now the body to which Bahá'ís turn with questions for elucidation, but it has been made very clear that, "At the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views". For example, Bahá'í study circles consist of a number of "collaborators", each with a workbook, and the method is one of question and answer. One of the great strengths of this system is the varied insights of the different members of the circle, and another is the way that the questions invite the members to explore ideas, rather than expecting uniform responses.

The level of "commitment" of the individual believer is a personal thing, and no-one else has the right to judge it. Bahá'u'lláh encouraged everyone to attend the Nineteen Day Feast unless illness prevents it. Every Bahá'í has the right to give to the Fund, but as with prayer, fasting and attendance at meetings, no other person has the right to monitor this.

## **Religious/Spiritual Identity**

The Bahá'í writings state that each human being has a soul. It is this which provides humans with a unique capacity to recognise both God's station and humanity's relationship with its creator. Every human has a duty to recognise the Messenger of God for that Day, and to follow his teachings. Through this recognition, and through service to humanity, together with prayer, meditation and fasting, the soul becomes closer to God. The individual can never completely understand God, any more than a flower can understand the gardener, yet can understand his attributes, and move closer to him. This journey towards the divine is the subject of one of Bahá'u'lláh's mystical works, "The Seven Valleys".

The development of the soul, which is the real purpose of this life, is enhanced by understanding and acquiring such attributes as tolerance, compassion, trustworthiness and detachment. These will assist us in the next world, although we clearly do not yet understand how! Heaven and Hell are understood to be metaphors for the spiritual states of nearness to, or distance from, God. It must be emphasised that each soul is individual, as noted by Bahá'u'lláh in his saying, "Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration." This reflects the unending variety between souls, as well as the infinite aspects of change through time.

## Family and Community

Within the family group, it is stressed that the rights of no-one should be ignored, whether husband, wife or child. Within a religion dedicated to unity, the family is clearly an essential unit. If only one partner within a marriage is Bahá'í, then for the sake of family unity they may have to forego attendance at Bahá'í meetings. However, a non-Bahá'í partner does not have the right to insist that the Bahá'í leave the faith. Religious belief is seen as between the individual and God.

Being part of the Bahá'í community is seen as a very important part of being a Bahá'í. For this reason Bahá'u'lláh said that all Bahá'ís should attend the local Feast every Bahá'í month. This includes praying together, discussion of local matters and a social time. All of these are equally important and all are conducive to the unity of the community.

The family is ideally based upon a secure marriage, marriage having been termed “a fortress for wellbeing”. In this context, children should be taught morals and a spiritual outlook. The Bahá'í family should have the outlook encouraged by Bahá'u'lláh in his advice: “Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.”

As a part of general moral development, Bahá'ís offer children's classes, open to all, which encourage positive social behaviour. Children from Bahá'í families are considered as Bahá'ís, and have the rights this entails. However, from the age of maturity, set by Bahá'u'lláh as 15, the choice of religion is the prerogative of the individual – the parents cannot force the young person to be a Bahá'í. The general principle which applies is that of “the individual investigation of truth”.

Offspring have a duty towards their parents. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to them, choose ye to serve them, and let such a service be a path leading you to Me”.

A Bahá'í has a duty both to the Bahá'í community and to the wider community, local, national and global. The centre of the local Bahá'í community is the Nineteen Day Feast, which is the basic meeting of the community. If possible, all should attend. There are always three parts: prayers and readings are followed by open consultation on issues facing the community, and then by a social part, deepening the bonds between the community members.

The duty of the Bahá'í towards the wider community is manifold. “Be urgently concerned with the exigencies of the age in which you live”, Bahá'u'lláh wrote. The Bahá'í scriptures

emphasise the essential oneness of all human beings, and the need for the abolition of prejudice. The diversity of race and culture is seen as a positive thing, in the way that the variety of colour and form makes a garden beautiful. The vision, therefore, is of humanity being one huge extended family.

## **Foundations of Identity**

The foundation of the Bahá'í Faith is much more recent than that of any other major religion. Although there are gaps in our knowledge, the main events of early Bahá'í history are generally well established. Various writers left their memoirs of the time, and Bahá'u'lláh asked Nabil-i-Azam to interview survivors from the earliest period of the Faith, and to compile a record, something he did with great thoroughness.

In 1844, in Shiraz, Persia, a young descendant of the Prophet Muhammad declared himself to be the Promised One of Islam, and took the title of "The Báb" (The Gate). He revealed a book known as the Bayán ("Utterances"), and was almost immediately imprisoned as a heretic. He was executed by firing squad in Tabriz, in northern Persia, in 1850. Throughout his life he was known for his piety and devotion to God, and his apparent innate knowledge.

One of his leading followers, Mirza Husayn-Ali, known as Bahá'u'lláh ("Glory of God") was thrown into prison, and was spared the fate of death which befell around 20,000 others who adhered to the new religion. Exiled to Iraq, he declared himself, in 1863, to be the Promised One of all religions. He was exiled three more times, finally incarcerated in the prison-city of Akka (Akko, Acre), in the Holy Land. He wrote theological treatises, books of a mystical nature, and works addressing the state of the world. He endured 40 years of exile and banishment before succumbing to illness in 1892. At no time did he waver from his claim to be the Messenger of God, although persecuted, slandered, imprisoned, chained, tortured and poisoned. Wherever he went, he became a centre of attraction and utmost respect.

His son, `Abdu'l-Bahá, led the infant religion, visiting Egypt, Europe and North America after being freed in 1908. He spoke in synagogues, churches, mission halls and literary salons, before returning to Palestine. He was knighted by the British Crown for his services to humanity during the terrible events of the First World War. He continued his father's efforts for world peace before passing away in 1921. Two essential roles are united in his person. Firstly, he is seen as the "Centre of the Covenant", in other words the focal point of the unity of the Bahá'í community. Secondly, he was the Exemplar, meaning that he was the perfect example of how a Bahá'í should live.

`Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi, was given the title "Guardian of the Cause", and had to leave his studies at Oxford University to undertake his new role. He died of influenza during a visit to London in 1957, and is buried in New Southgate Cemetery. In life, he was so

humble that he never attended any of the international conferences to which he was invited, always asking someone else to go in his stead. He was a tireless worker, encouraging the Bahá'ís to elect the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies ordained by Bahá'u'lláh.

Upon his death, the Bahá'ís turned again to the “Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá”, which stipulated what should happen should the Guardian die childless, as was the case. Accordingly, the Universal House of Justice laid down by Bahá'u'lláh was subsequently elected. This body has the power to make laws on anything not specifically legislated by Bahá'u'lláh himself, and such new laws can be altered by a succeeding Universal House of Justice should conditions change. The next Manifestation of God, which Bahá'u'lláh stated would appear in “not less than a thousand years”, will have the authority to replace any of Bahá'u'lláh's laws which are no longer appropriate.

While `Abdu'l-Bahá provided an example to us all, the lives of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were so outside normal human capacity as to be inimitable. A Bahá'í accepts that these two were directly inspired by God in a way that only the Founders of religions (Manifestations of God) are.

## **Unity within Diversity**

The Bahá'í community is very diverse. Many Bahá'ís were previously adherents of other religions, and even during Bahá'u'lláh's own lifetime the new religion was attracting Muslims, Jews and Zoroastrians. As the oneness of humanity and the essential oneness of religion underpin Bahá'í thinking, there is a conscious awareness of the multi-cultural nature of many local Bahá'í communities. It is quite normal for prayers to be said or chanted in a number of languages at the Nineteen Day Feast, and translations are often given during the administrative (second) part of the Feast.

The modern “interfaith” movement could be said to have begun with the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. There were no Bahá'ís in America at that time, and in the absence of any Bahá'í presence, a Christian clergyman presented a paper to that Parliament on Bahá'u'lláh and his new religion. Now that the interfaith movement is more widespread, it is notable that proportionate with their numbers, Bahá'ís are often well-represented at the local level.

Following the man-made tragedy which befell New York in 2001, an act which was given a “religious” aspect by its perpetrators, the Universal House of Justice issued a message, “To The World's Religious Leaders”. In it they laid out some of the reasons why the different religious authorities should begin to recognise the truth in one another's religions. (Copies of this letter are easily available.) Bahá'u'lláh himself stated that “Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine

power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction.” Bahá’u’lláh exhorted his followers to obey a just government, and forbade sedition.

The Bahá’í watchword is “unity in diversity”, recognising the endless variety in the human family, but the central need for a unifying factor. In his letter to Queen Victoria, Bahá’u’lláh wrote: “That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.” This approach naturally leads to a consciousness of being world citizens. Again, in Bahá’u’lláh’s own words, “This earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.” In the context of the interfaith movement, the Bahá’ís must, as an act of faith, respond to Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction to “Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.”

## **Meaning, Purpose and Truth**

### **Religious Experience**

Feelings such as awe, praise and thanks are valid emotional and spiritual responses, and are reflected in many of the prayers revealed by the Central Figures of the Faith. That there is an interplay between the experience received from communal belonging and that derived from personal worship and meditation is obvious. What is worth noting is that any personal spiritual experiences, visions, epiphanies, etc. are simply that, and should be treated as personal by the rest of the community. Religious belief should not really rest on apparently miraculous events. Bahá’ís are discouraged from recounting “miracles” (which, after all, are merely events which at first sight seem to run contrary to the known physical laws), and miracles are not in themselves a sufficient basis for a belief system.

Worship is seen as benefiting the individual, and not as benefiting God. But worshipping together with other people helps to unify those people – they have had a shared spiritual experience. The most basic meeting of the Bahá’í community, the Nineteen Day Feast, builds on this fact. The first part consists of prayers and readings. The readings may well include sections which relate to personal morals and behaviour, as without the transformation of human behaviour, religion achieves very little. The second part is the administrative part, where community matters are discussed. In the third part, social bonds are strengthened through refreshments, conversation and entertainment.

### **The Soul and the Next World**

According to Bahá’í belief, the soul becomes associated with the body at the point of conception. While in this life, it acquires virtues, such as honesty, love, truthfulness,

kindness, etc. These qualities are needed in the next world, which is “as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother”. At the point of death, the soul separates from the body. Souls continue to progress “throughout the worlds of God”.

The Bahá'í Faith has few rituals. Parents may choose to have a naming ceremony, but this is not a religious requirement. Bahá'u'lláh fixed 15 years as the age of spiritual maturity, and therefore “obligatory prayer” and fasting commence from that age. No pressure can be put upon the young person to become a Bahá'í if they choose not to.

A Bahá'í has complete freedom of choice when looking for a husband or wife. But when a couple wish to marry, both sets of (natural) parents must then agree to the wedding. Bahá'ís believe that the main purpose of marriage is to rear children in a happy, secure environment, and the active support of both families makes this more likely. If a couple are spiritually united, they will progress together in the next world. During the marriage ceremony, the bride and groom each repeat the sentence, “We will all, verily, abide by the will of God”. This has to take place in front of two reliable witnesses. In addition, the bride and groom will add prayers, readings and music of their choice.

When a person dies, the body must be treated with respect and there is a special prayer which is said when a Bahá'í is buried. We should be happy for the soul who is progressing to the next world. Bahá'u'lláh says: “I have made death a messenger of joy unto thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve?” In addition to the “obligatory” Prayer for the Dead there are a number of others which can be used at will. The body should be wrapped in cloth and placed in a coffin made from a substantial material, and a ring, engraved with a specific sentence, placed on one of the fingers. In Bahá'í understanding, life after death is neither cyclical (as in reincarnation theories) nor static, as progress is without end.

## **Religion and Science**

It is one of the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith that religion and science should work together for the improvement of the world. Bahá'ís believe that truth is relative rather than absolute. If science is discovered truth, then religion is revealed truth, and they are two sides of one coin. Each Founder of religion is the vehicle for bringing to humanity that which is needed to advance society at that particular time. The underlying theme is that “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation”.

Bahá'ís believe that the universe has always existed in some form, but that it evolves from one state to another. Any reference to “creation” in the Bahá'í Writings does not imply an instant appearance in a static form. The Bahá'í Writings also affirm the existence of creatures

on other planets: “Know thou that every fixed star has its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute.”

The Bahá'í Writings use the development of the human embryo as proof of the development of man as a species. From a tiny cell, it passes through various stages, in some of which it really does not resemble a human being at all. At one stage the embryo even has a tail. However, at every stage it is destined to reach human form, which fact could be used as a metaphor for the development of the human species being predestined rather than being a historical accident.

As humanity moves into a new era, the advantages bestowed by both religion and science need to be woven together in order for civilisation to progress. There are a number of implications in this principle. Religion should be able to give moral and ethical guidance in areas where scientific advance could lead to new areas of uncertainty. Religion should guide science ethically, and ensure that science is put to good uses rather than bad. At the same time, religion which does not take account of science may degenerate into superstition. Bahá'ís look to the creation, in the near future, of a world peace treaty. The excesses of unbridled military invention will be curbed, and technological advance be encouraged as the servant of world peace.

Science should be able to provide more answers to those global problems which as yet have not been seriously addressed, such as initiating a genuine worldwide administrative communications system, solving world food production and distribution problems, and meaningfully tackling worldwide pollution.

## **Moral and Spiritual Qualities**

A Bahá'í considers the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to be the message of God for today. As the major religions are all thought to be part of one progression, these Teachings naturally reflect those of the earlier religions. So the spiritual qualities: honesty, trustworthiness, truthfulness, kindness, compassion, etc., are present in all religions, although the mode of expression may differ from age to age. In addition to these timeless values, each religion will have social teachings suited to the age. These will relate to social questions such as marriage or crime and punishment.

Human beings are thought to have two sides to their nature. The body has obvious material needs, while the soul should be acquiring higher qualities. Bahá'ís tend to use the words “good” and “evil” in the context of whether people are behaving as they are exhorted in religious codes or whether they are following the selfish dictates of their lower natures.

## Rules and Ethical Guidelines

Bahá'ís are taught to avoid all habit-forming drugs, including alcohol. Sexual activity is only legitimate within the context of marriage. No excuse is acceptable for fraud or theft, and the word of a Bahá'í should be his/her bond. No discrimination is regarded as acceptable in any circumstances.

Questions relating to abortion have both spiritual and medical aspects. Practical decisions rest, on a case-by-case basis, with the doctors. Bahá'ís believe that the soul becomes connected with the body at the point of conception, that it makes spiritual progress through its life in this world and that it continues to develop in the next world. These beliefs also impinge on the question of euthanasia.

Criminal activity relates to spiritual immaturity or irresponsibility, but Bahá'u'lláh emphasises the crucial importance both of justice and of carrying out the penal laws. Certain ordinances relating to crime and punishment are found in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "The Most Holy Book", but they are intended for a future Bahá'í civilisation and are not enforced at present. Bahá'u'lláh said, "The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment." At the same time, the Bahá'í Writings stress the need for the proper education and upbringing of children, in such a way that people will shy away from committing crime.

Bahá'u'lláh forbids Bahá'ís from any form of retaliation, and his exhortation to the rulers of the world, that they should fix the boundaries and agree rules for the conduct of international affairs, has not yet been taken up. The goals of the necessary world peace conference are set out in some detail, and the result should be a world united in ensuring that every country adheres to its agreed level of armaments. Bahá'u'lláh predicts that war will cease and a long period of peace will follow. Bahá'ís see this as gradually evolving into a world civilisation, incorporating the many diverse cultural expressions of human existence. Bahá'u'lláh said: "This earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

The approach to social justice is clearly implicit in the main principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh urged the adoption of a Bill of Rights, as part of the world civilisation he was advocating. He proclaimed the principle that humans are one people, and rejected divisions based on gender, race, class, income and level of education. He unequivocally asserted justice as the guiding principle in social policy, and instituted mechanisms for the fairer distribution of wealth. Men and women are to have equal rights, everyone is entitled to an education, and a world-wide system of administration should be introduced. He stated, "This earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

## **Individual Responsibilities**

Individual responsibilities in becoming a Bahá'í include the requirement to be kind to all; to look at each person's good points and ignore their bad ones; to reject prejudice; to treat all human beings as of equal worth; to "Prefer thy neighbour to thyself". They include the need to support moves towards the imposition of limits on extreme personal wealth, and the removal of poverty. They include the responsibility to support a just government and to champion the oppressed. Bahá'ís can look to the example of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, who devoted a lifetime to promoting racial unity, helping the disadvantaged, and arguing for peace and disarmament.

## **Community Support**

The Bahá'í framework for action includes the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice. It is clear from the Bahá'í Writings that initiative rests largely with the Local Spiritual Assembly within each locality to make decisions – social, economic, environmental, etc., – for the benefit of humanity. The Universal House of Justice has the written authority to legislate anything not specifically laid down by Bahá'u'lláh, and crucially has the right to alter legislation which the passage of time renders obsolete or unworkable. [Study of the "Constitution of the Universal House of Justice" (Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1972) will elucidate its other functions and prerogatives.] The National Spiritual Assemblies have an intermediary role between the two other bodies. This administrative system allows for action on a local, regional or global level, and uses clear principles of consultation to allow it to function.

## **Decision-making Processes**

The Bahá'í community uses a system of consultation based on certain principles, in order to arrive at decisions on the best way forward, and the Bahá'í administrative system of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, supporting a Universal House of Justice, is being gradually augmented and developed throughout the world.

## **Global Vision**

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings revolve around the goal of a world civilisation. Bahá'u'lláh said that heads of state or their representatives should attend a universal peace conference, with the goal of creating a world peace treaty. This would then lay down the basis for a form of world (federal) government, assisted by a world tribunal for the solution of disputes. Bahá'u'lláh also advocated the creation of a world currency, which would allow a world free trade area,

a world police force and the selection of a language to be used in international communication.

Also mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh are a bill of human rights, laws to limit excessive personal wealth, and a system to eliminate poverty. Various specific ordinances, such as profit sharing and the laws for intestacy can be seen to work towards a more equitable distribution of wealth. Further, Bahá'u'lláh exalts justice to the station of the guiding principle in governance.

In addition to constant promotion of the above ideas, and the dedication to the ideals of one human family and the essential oneness of religions, Bahá'ís are able, as their numbers increase, to involve themselves in social and economic development to a greater degree. When the need exists, Bahá'í Assemblies will set up primary schools, secondary schools, rural colleges, radio stations and agricultural development colleges, as well as programmes for the development of children and of young people. The development of the status of women is also frequently addressed. Although believing that environmental issues can ultimately only be effectively addressed by global institutions, the Bahá'í “Junior Youth” groups in particular frequently undertake small-scale local environmental projects.

From a Bahá'í perspective, there is no real division between spiritual goals and material development, because the creation of a better human world will allow a more effective nurturing of the spirit. This is clearly seen by the encouragement given to individual Bahá'ís to join like-minded organisations, and by the high respect in which the Bahá'í community is held in the United Nations Organisation.

Although religion has many basic personal aspects, at this stage in human history the global dimension is of paramount interest. Previous Manifestations of God (e.g. Moses, Jesus, Muhammad (pbuh)) built up wider and wider loyalties, but this is arguably the first age in which a truly global civilisation is possible. Faced with a world in which so many competing divisions – political, religious, racial, class, tribal, etc., obscure the way forward, Bahá'u'lláh set out a world system which he offered to humanity as the solution to its problems.

He proposed that a world peace conference should take place, to lead to arms limitation, and specified the elimination of disease as one of the areas to which the money saved should be redirected. Bahá'u'lláh stated that humanity was created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation, and overcoming disease should be seen as part of this process. Specific actions, such as smoking tobacco or the use of habit-forming drugs, can severely impair the health of both the individual and the community. The Bahá'í emphasis on moderation should also be seen as relevant to growing trends such as obesity. The Bahá'í Writings say that “in a large measure, happiness keeps our health while depression of spirit begets disease”, and also that only when we live in the spirit are we truly happy. A spiritual

life, therefore, based on moderation and avoiding habit-forming substances should improve health substantially. It is also predicted that “the food of the future will be fruits and grains”.

## The Environment

Bahá'u'lláh regarded kindness to animals as a pre-requisite to anyone sincerely setting out on a search for truth, and said that we should “show forth the utmost consideration to every living creature”. His son, `Abdu'l-Bahá, stated that “our natural food is that which grows out of the ground”. Bahá'u'lláh regarded the natural environment as the Will of God, and proclaimed its inviolability. “Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator ... Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.” `Abdu'l-Bahá said, “Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.” Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “If carried to excess, civilisation will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.”

Many of Bahá'u'lláh's ordinances reflect the ideal of a more equitable distribution of wealth. In the Bahá'í Writings it states that, “Moderation should be established by means of laws and regulations that would limit personal wealth and provide everyone with access to the means for living a dignified life.” The specific measures suggested are often characterised as “the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth”. Increasingly, the Bahá'ís are devoting their time and effort to social and economic development. Bahá'ís are encouraged not just to involve themselves in direct action, but also to involve themselves in the social discourses taking place in the world at present.

From a Bahá'í viewpoint, the effort put into the betterment of social and material conditions is essential in improving the opportunities for people to grow up with spiritual values. No contradiction is therefore seen between the two. In essence, the material universe parallels the spiritual universe, and so the two are interdependent. Religious and social progress must go hand in hand.

## Websites

### Useful Websites

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

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

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A set of photocopiable R.E. worksheets on the "The Bahá'í Faith", and priced £5 per set, plus 66p postage available from [www.warwickbahaibookshop.co.uk](http://www.warwickbahaibookshop.co.uk) In Association with Amazon