

The Bahá'í Faith

Interfaith Evangelism

BELIEF BULLETIN

World Religions

Official Name:	Bahá'í International Community
Founders:	Mirza Siyyid Ali Muhammad, the "Báb" (1819-1850) Mirza Husayn-Ali, "Bahá'u'lláh" (1817-1892)
Current Leaders:	The "Hands of the Cause of God" and nine members of the Universal House of Justice elected every five years at an international convention of delegates from more than 160 Bahá'í national communities.
World Headquarters:	Seat of the Universal House of Justice on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel (www.bahai.org)
U.S. Headquarters:	Bahá'í House of Worship, 100 Linden Ave., Wilmette, IL 60091 (www.us.bahai.org)
Canadian Headquarters:	Bahá'í Community of Canada, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, Ontario L3T 6L8 (www.ca.bahai.org)
Adherents:	Worldwide: 6.5 million in 235 countries; 17,000 local spiritual assemblies (Source: www.bahai.org [cited 29 March 2001]) U.S.A.: 300,000 in 1200 local spiritual assemblies (Source: www.us.bahai.org [cited 21 March 2001]) Canada: 25,000 in 337 local spiritual assemblies (Source: external_affairs@cdnbnc.org [cited 21 March 2001])

Introduction

According to the official Bahá'í Faith Web site:

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions. Its founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), is regarded by Bahá'ís as the most recent in the line of Messengers of God that stretches back beyond recorded time and that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad.

The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for its unification in one global society. God, Bahá'u'lláh said, has set in motion historical forces that are breaking down traditional barriers of race, class, creed, and nation and that will, in time, give birth to a universal civilization. The principal challenge facing the peoples of the earth is to

accept the fact of their oneness and to assist the processes of unification ("The Bahá'í Faith," www.bahai.org/article-1-2-0-1.html [cited 21 March 2001]).

Brief History of the Bahá'í Faith

In the early nineteenth century, just as today, the nation of Persia, now called Iran, was steeped in the culture and law of the Islamic Shi'ites. However, into that environment was born a man, Mirza Ali Muhammad, who in 1844, at the age of 25 years old, declared that God had chosen him to be "the Báb" (the "Gate" or the "Door") to create a new religious tradition. It would be a religion that would eventually be led by a yet to be revealed great "Manifestation" of God. That declaration was considered heretical by Muslims, drew great persecution upon the Báb and his followers, and led to his execution in 1850.

One of the Báb's followers was a Persian named Mirza Husayn-Ali. Though two years older than the Báb, Mirza

Husayn-Ali was a dedicated disciple of his teaching and was imprisoned in Persia after the Báb's death. In 1853, Mirza Husayn-Ali fled to Baghdad, Iraq, where he continued to preach the Báb's message.

In 1863, Mirza Husayn-Ali declared that he was the Great Manifestation of God that the Báb had promised was coming. He then adopted the title of "Bahá'u'lláh" ("the glory of God"). In the years following this bold declaration he was again imprisoned by Muslim rulers and eventually exiled to Palestine in 1868. There he produced the writings that would later be the holy scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith.

When Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892, his eldest son, Ábdu'l-Bahá, was designated the leader of the new faith. His authority, however, was only as interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and not as another manifestation of God.

Ábdu'l-Bahá, like his father, spent time in prison, but in 1908 began a world tour proclaiming the Bahá'í message and advocating world peace. He visited the United States in 1912 where he was warmly received by some Americans. In 1920 he was knighted by the British crown for his humanitarian work during the First World War.

Ábdu'l-Bahá died in 1921 and was succeeded by his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as "the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith." Shoghi Effendi died in 1957 after establishing the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel. It stands as the permanent governing body for the Bahá'í International Community.

Beliefs

Authority: The "Holy," the "Hands," and the "House"

Bahá'ís are respectful of the scriptures of other religious traditions such as the Bible for Jews and Christians and the Koran for Muslims. Nevertheless, they regard the "holy" writings of Bahá'u'lláh as the supreme revelations of God. Most important are *The Most Holy Book* and *The Book of Certitude*. The writings of the Báb, Ábdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi are also considered authoritative.

Since Shoghi Effendi's death in 1957, leadership for Bahá'ís worldwide resides with the few surviving members of "The Hands of the Cause of God," a group of leaders selected by Shoghi Effendi personally to guide the movement, and the nine elected counsellors of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel. The Hands' and Counsellors' official writings and edicts are regarded by Bahá'ís as authoritative and binding.

Christian Response: The Bible is God's unique Word and the only true source of divinely inspired Scripture. No human source or other writing is equal to, or can supersede, its authority. It is the basis alone for Christian doctrine and practice.

Jesus Christ Himself affirmed the authority of the Bible in the lives of all people (see Matt. 5:17-19; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

God: One Divine Being

Bahá'ís are monotheistic in their belief in one divine supernatural Being who created all that exists. That Being, who they call God, exhibits the characteristics of omnipotence, perfection, and omniscience. Bahá'ís maintain that various religions may pray or worship different gods, using different names, but that in essence they all worship the same unique Being.

Bahá'ís, however, believe that God's essence is unknowable by finite human beings. Thus, we can understand the attributes or qualities of God, but never experience direct knowledge of His divine essence. What we can know of God is revealed progressively throughout history by His Manifestations (prophets).

Christian Response: The Bible teaches that there is indeed only one God (Deut. 6:4) and that He is the Creator of all that exists. However, the Bible warns that all other gods are false and those who worship them are guilty of idolatry (Ex. 20:3-4; Isa. 44:6-8).

The New Testament teaches that God exists eternally in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Pet. 1:2). The Bible also teaches that people can know God through a personal relationship with His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2), and not just have information about Him.

Jesus: One of the "Manifestations" of God

Bahá'ís regard Jesus Christ as a great messenger/prophet or "Manifestation" of God. However, they do not regard Him as particularly unique. In their view, Jesus Christ was just one of at least nine such Manifestations, or prophets, who have appeared in various times and places throughout the world. Each Manifestation contributed new light to the progression of revelation from God given by each Manifestation to his generation. The nine Manifestations included Moses, Krishna, Abraham, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh. Some Bahá'í sources have also included Confucius, Hud, and Salih. In any case, Bahá'u'lláh is considered the primary prophet for the modern era. His teachings are expected to eventually unify the world's peoples, governments, and religions under God's universal principles of peace and justice. The next Manifestation is not expected for about 900 years.

The divine Manifestations are not understood by Bahá'ís as "incarnations" of God in the Christian sense, as He is too far removed from His finite creation. Nonetheless, they are all regarded as sinless and possessing of such self-validating truth so as to be true "mirrors" of the divine nature.

Christian Response: Jesus Christ is the "one and Only Begotten Son of God" (John 3:16). He is the unique incarnation (embodiment) of God who perfectly reveals God's nature and character to mankind (Heb. 1:1-2). He was, is, and always shall be the Second Person of the eternal Holy Trinity. He was born of a virgin, lived a

sinless life, was crucified as an atonement for sin, and rose physically from the dead. He now reigns with the Father in heaven and someday will return to close the age and judge all people. There is no other one in all of history like Him (John 1:1-14; 5:17-18; 8:56-59; 10:30-33; 14:6; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9).

Granted, many of the other Bahá'í "Manifestations" taught high moral standards and encouraged peace and social justice. None, however, demonstrated the level of divine authority as did Jesus who demonstrated His power by His resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1-11).

Salvation and Life after Death

Bahá'í Faith teaches that humanity is possessed with a duality of spiritual and material natures. The material nature, if allowed to dominate one's personality, leads to selfish desires and evil results. If the spiritual nature dominates, it leads to a life of virtue, compassion, self-sacrifice, and nearness with God and his principles.

If one follows those principles and lives a life of spiritual good deeds, he or she will enter the kingdom of paradise, or heaven, both in this life and after death. If one turns away from a life of spiritual deeds and does evil, he or she is already in hell, which will continue after death.

Christian Response: The Bible teaches that salvation is a free gift to those who acknowledge their sinfulness (Rom. 3:23; 6:23), repent of their sin (Acts 26:20), and receive Jesus Christ, by faith, as their personal Lord and Savior (John 1:12; Rom. 10:9-13). Only His death on the cross provides atonement for mankind's sin and His resurrection guarantees eternal life in heaven (Rom. 4:23-25; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; 1 Pet. 3:18).

Those who reject that free gift will be lost forever in hell (Matt. 18:8-9; 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-48).

Basic Moral Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Bahá'í Faith maintains that the basic moral teachings of its primary prophet, Bahá'u'lláh, can be summarized in eight basic principles. Each of them, Bahá'ís believe, embody the essence of all religions and then are valid for all people in all time.

1. The abandonment of all forms of prejudice

Bahá'ís argue that humanity is essentially one race. All differences among people based on race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or religion are regarded as contrary to God's desire for one world unity. As a result, cross-cultural, interracial, and international marriages are encouraged in order to facilitate the total integration of humanity.

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 (Source: Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, p. 20, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-14.html [cited 19 March 2001]).

Christian Response: Christians affirm the unity of humanity as all descendants of mutual parents, Adam and Eve (Gen. 1—2). Cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity is a part of God's plan as He has created all people in His image and placed them in the times and places He desires (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; Acts 17:24-28). Only in Christ, however, can mankind find a unity of purpose that transcends superficial human divisions (Gal. 3:28-29 ;Eph. 2:11-15).

2. Assurance to women of full equality of opportunity with men

The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations (Source: *The Promise of World Peace*, Universal House of Justice, 1985, www.bahai.org/article-1-7-0-6.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: Jesus Christ elevated the status of women more than any religion in history.

Thus Christians strongly affirm the equality and rights of women before God as persons made in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). The Bible, however, celebrates the complementary roles within the family and church for men and women as they work together to build the kingdom of God (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-21; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).

3. Recognition of the unity and relativity of religious truth

Bahá'ís maintain that all of the world's great religions teach the same basic principles. Each of the founders of the world's religions, the "Manifestations" of God, have contributed their light to their time and place. The principle of unity of religion, nonetheless, means that all the great religious founders have come from the same God, and all of the systems they established as part of a single plan directed by Him.

These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2nd rev. ed., 1976, pp. 287-288, www.bahai.org/article-1-4-0-4.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: The Bahá'í assertion that all religions are the same ignores the doctrinal and philosophical contradictions that characterize them. Most important, Bahá'í ignores the unique claims of Jesus Christ to be the one and only begotten Son of God and the unique incarnation of God (John 1:14,18; 3:16-18; Heb. 1:1-14; 1 John 4:9).

Bahá'ís also ignore the important differences in how salvation is realized in Christianity as opposed to most other faiths. In most religions salvation is earned by adherence to

various laws of behavior and human achievement. Christianity asserts that salvation is entirely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ as a result of His life, sacrificial atoning death, and resurrection (John 14:6; Eph. 2:8-9).

4. The elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth

Bahá'ís regard the economic disparity between the wealthy and the poor as a grave moral injustice. This is true, as they see it, between individuals and nations. Thus, Bahá'ís actively seek to correct this imbalance through economic and legal methods. Bahá'u'lláh warned the wealthy:

The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease (Source: Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, p. 41, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-15.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

And

Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth (Source: Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, p. 39, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-15.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: The Bible does not teach that accumulating wealth, in and of itself, is necessarily evil or sinful. Nonetheless, Scripture warns that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil: (1 Tim. 6:10, NIV) and that Christians are to be faithful stewards (managers) of the material resources God entrusts to us (Gen. 1:27-28; Matt. 25:14-30).

This principle of stewardship has applications for the total-ity of a person's economic and spiritual life:

- It applies to the ways a Christian earns his living. Christians should work honestly in occupations that are ethical and build the kingdom of God (Eph. 6:7-8; Col. 3:17,23-24).
- It applies to the ways Christians spend their income. God's people should think carefully about the purposes and value of the items they purchase.
- It applies to how and why the Christian saves his resources. The believer should save and invest his money wisely (Matt. 6:19-21).
- The Christian steward also should, with reasonable foresight, consider how his or her estate will be distributed upon death. Well-planned wills and trusts can provide adequately for future generations and benefit the spreading of the gospel for years to come.
- The Christian, of course, is expected to give generously to his or her local church and support Christian ministries in proportion to his or her resources (Matt. 15:3-6; 23:23-24; Mark 12:41-44; 2 Cor. 9:6-8).

5. The realization of universal education

The cause of universal education, which has already enlisted in its service an army of dedicated people from every faith and nation, deserves the utmost support that the governments of the world can lend it. For ignorance is indisputably the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples and

the perpetuation of prejudice. . . . In keeping with the requirements of the times, consideration should also be given to teaching the concept of world citizenship as part of the standard education of every child (Source: *The Promise of World Peace*, Universal House of Justice, Oct. 1985, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-16.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: Christians affirm the benefits of literacy and education and support the goal of universal education. However, the Bible does not teach that a lack of education is the basic problem of mankind. The Bible states that sin is the basic root of mankind's problems, including war and injustice. Sin is defined as rebellion or indifference to the will of God for each person (Rom. 3:23) which results in death (Rom. 6:23).

The only solution for sin is the salvation granted by God by grace through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ which results in good works (Eph. 2:8-10). Education that ignores this basic sin problem will not necessarily value righteousness, justice, or peace, but often results in oppressive indoctrination as illustrated historically by the highly educated societies in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

6. The responsibility of each person independently to search for truth

Bahá'í Faith encourages each individual to think critically and to search for ultimate truth for themselves. Uncritical attachments to traditional ways of thinking and ideologies that dogmatically reject others may lead to intolerance and conflict. Bahá'ís believe that there is only one reality, thus all those who diligently and sincerely seek truth, will be united ultimately.

Being one, truth cannot be divided, and the differences that appear to exist among the many nations only result from their attachment to prejudice. If only men would search out truth, they would find themselves united (Source: Ábdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 129, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-17.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

And

The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is one (Source: Ábdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 136, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-17.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: The Bahá'í statement that truth is one, but that it is wrong to question or criticize others' beliefs, is self-contradictory. The truth claims of various religious traditions are in many cases totally incompatible. Bahá'ís simply ignore the discrepancies, in order to synthesize them into a unitary system. This doctrinal compromise, however, actually elevates Bahá'ísm to the level of the superior faith and denigrates the unique beliefs of all other faiths.

In any case, Jesus Christ, and the biblical writers, made exclusive truth claims about Him that Christians cannot com-

promise (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). The Bible warns in the Old and New Testaments against blending counterfeit faith with authentic faith. It also warns God's people to reject false gods, false prophets, and false worship (Gen. 4:3-4; Num. 33:52-56; Deut. 12:2-3; 18:9-22; 1 Kings 18:16-40; Jer. 14:14-16; Matt. 7:15-21; 24:4-5, 23-26; Mark 13:5-23; Luke 17:23-27; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 11:4-15; Gal. 1:6-7; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 3:9; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-5; 2 John 7-11).

7. The establishment of a global commonwealth of nations

Bahá'ís are convinced that a major priority for mankind is the establishment of a just and lasting world peace. Bahá'u'lláh declared that the world "is but one country and mankind its citizens" (www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-19.html [cited 29 March 2001]). In order to realize this vision of one united world, Bahá'ís advocate new international social structures that transcend the authority of autonomous nations in order to ensure and maintain world peace and security. Bahá'ís would desire that these systems guarantee individual freedom and be based on democratic principles.

Christian Response: Christians agree that people should work to establish societies and peace among humanity. However, they would maintain that the true remedy for war is not a world government, but the transforming message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Total peace will come only with the coming of the Lord at the end of the age (Isa. 2:4; Matt. 5:9, 38-48; 6:33; 26:52; Rom. 12:18-19; 13:1-7; 14:19; Heb. 12:14; Jas. 4:1-2).

8. Recognition that true religion is in harmony with reason and the pursuit of scientific knowledge

When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles—and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God (Ábdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 146, www.bahai.org/article-1-3-2-18.html [cited 29 March 2001]).

Christian Response: Christians agree that there is no conflict between biblical faith and objective scientific inquiry. However, they reject the dogmatic materialistic and naturalistic worldview that characterizes most of the modern scientific community. Science is a valid source of truth, but Christians likewise regard divine revelation as providing information that science cannot explain by its methods of inquiry (Rom. 1:20-23).

Witnessing to Bahá'ís

1. Have a clear understanding of your faith and the Bible. Study the reasons why we believe the Bible and Christianity are true.

2. Try to establish a sincere personal relationship with Bahá'ís. Make it clear to them that you respect their right to believe as they will, but that you reserve the right to disagree.
3. Focus your discussion on the Person and work of Jesus Christ and explain why He is unique among the world's religious leaders.
4. Share with your Bahá'í friend that mankind's basic problem is sin, not illiteracy or social injustice.
5. Explain to the Bahá'í the basics of the Christian gospel. Stress the need for confession of sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior.
6. Provide written materials for the Bahá'í to read that explain and defend Christianity, such as Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* or C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*.
7. Pray and trust the Holy Spirit to lead you in witnessing to your Bahá'í friend.

Sources

- Beckwith, Francis. *Baha'i*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985.
- Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

Tal Davis, Associate, Interfaith Evangelism

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission.

© 2001, North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta, Georgia

All rights reserved. The North American Mission Board grants permission for reproduction of this publication for educational purposes. Alteration of this publication is strictly prohibited. May not be sold for profit.

All other inquiries should be addressed to: Editorial and Design Manager, North American Mission Board, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, Ga. 30022-4176; or fax (770) 410-6006; or e-mail permissions@namb.net.

For more information contact Interfaith Evangelism via e-mail at interfaith@namb.net.

<http://www.namb.net/interfaith>



NORTH AMERICAN MISSION BOARD, SBC
NAMB

4200 North Point Pkwy.
Alpharetta, GA 30022-4176

A Southern Baptist Convention agency supported by the
Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering®

P000400/03-02