

Baha'i – An Emerging Global Religion

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The Baha'i Faith

During this talk I plan to cover:

- (a) Something about who Baha'is are**
- (b) Their history**
- (c) most important, the principles that form a basis of their religion—why it is so compelling to so many people**

How many of you have know about or come in contact with Baha'is?

I hope you will share your experiences with the group at the end of the talk.

Some interesting facts – an overview (from the Baha'i Website)

Founded a century and a half ago, the Baha'i faith is today among the fastest growing of world religions. With approximately six million followers in 235 countries and territories, it has already become the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion except Christianity in its geographic reach. Baha'is reside in more than 116,000 localities around the world and come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession and social or economic class. More than 2,100 different ethnic and tribal groups are represented. (Who knew!)

There are approximately 2,200 Baha'is in Virginia – (according to a recent article--200 in Richmond. There is an active Baha'i chapter at UVA—can find a lot of information on their web site. There are groups of Baha'is on college campuses throughout the country. I find this encouraging—after spending time in this religion—affects approach the rest of their lives. Would make good UU's.

- Baha'i is an independent religion but did not began in a vacuum**
- Buddahism emerged from a traditional Hindu background – crossed the Himalayas to acquire its full character as a separate faith**
- Jesus Christ and his immediate followers began their mission within the context of Judaism and for two centuries was regarded as a reformed branch of the parent religion. Christianity did not appear as a separate religion until it had begun to attract large numbers of followers.**
- The Baha'i faith first appeared in Persia, a predominately Moslem country. It then spread to neighboring Muslim lands in the Ottoman and Russian Empires and to northern India. Though some early**

followers were of Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian background, the vast majority had been followers of Islam. Their religious ideas were drawn from the Qur'an—primarily interested in those aspects of their belief system that represented the fulfillment of Islamic prophecies. Islamic clergy saw those who followed the new faith as heretics. When you understand their principles it is easy to understand why.

The Baha'i religion favors peace, progress, tolerance, the equality of all men and women before God, and it respects nature as God's Creation. It has no Pope, no priests, no sacred rituals, no holy dogmas, and no churches. (Also no sin, no redemption, no purgatory, no hell, or no paradise.) It takes its name from its prophet, Baha'u'llah and is still based entirely on his authentic writings and teachings. Every Baha'i considers him or herself as a world citizen and longs for and believes in the coming of a global civilization—not necessary in the distant future.

Baha'is follow the laws of the Ten Commandments. They forbid gambling, alcohol, drug abuse, extramarital sex, and gossip. They constantly strive to live a life of high moral standards.

The number nine has significant importance in the Baha'i Faith. The Arabic word baha's numerical value is nine. Nine is also the number of openings in the human body therefore, "an organizing principal of the entire universe. Celebrations include an annual fasting time and 8 other holiday days in remembrance of events in the lives of the founders. New Year's Day is celebrated on March 21. (Based on the solar year with what in the northern hemisphere is the spring equinox.) Baha'is do not work on holy days and (since work is considered a vital part of life) this is considered a sacrifice.

A Little background – history

As I read over the history of the Baha'is it really brought home: (1) the intolerance of authorities of the "established" religions to protect their turf—power and economic well-being and how far they will go to do it. (2) that there are people who are seeking things that are just and decent in their lives (and embraces all people) and will make any sacrifice to achieve that. (A great instinctive truth)

For example, although in Iran Christians and Jews are permitted to freely practice their religion, Baha'is are denied that right. In most Muslim countries they are not allowed to stay as residents.

In 1844 Sayyid Ali Muhammad a Shi'ite Moslim deemed himself "The Bab" (Arabic for "door") In Shi'ite Islam his title means that he has special access to the Twelfth or Hidden Imam. The Bab was arrested and imprisoned for heresy which led to his (pretty horrible) execution in 1850. The early years for the Babis, as the Bab followers were called, were constantly filled with conflicts with the Persian administration and many thousands of his followers were put to death. Persians disagreed with the Bab's interpretation that he was the promised Qa'im who "would start a new era in religious history." The Bab did not feel in contradiction with Islam--on the contrary, he believed he was fulfilling the prophesies. He laid the groundwork of beliefs that became part of the Baha'i Faith such as women's emancipation, racial tolerance, and a more equitable distribution of wealth. He insisted that his role was to announce one that would come after him—"the Promised One".

Among the new converts was a man two years older than the Bab, Mirza' Husayn Ali born in Tehran in 1817. He belonged to a rich family with much influence in the government. (His father was the Minister of State—son offered the position). From childhood he was known as an extremely kind and generous person.—drew people to him. From 13 or 14 years of age was known for his learning . Conversed with the leading mullahs on religious questions. (Like Jesus) After the Bab's death he became the spiritual leader of the Baha'i Faith. In 1852 two followers (maddened by the cruel death of the Bab) attempted to assassinate the Shah. Baha'u'llah (Arabic for the "Glory of God") was imprisoned because he was the spiritual leader of the faith even though he did not condone violent action. While in prison, Baha'u'llah received a revelation from God proclaiming that he was the Promised One and, thus, he founded the Baha'i Faith. (The name means "the people of Glory.")

I get the feeling in reading the history about the Baha'u'llah that he initially assumed leadership because so many people were seeking his guidance. Even after his release from prison after it became so evident that he was not guilty of trying to kill the Shah, when he withdrew to mountains to live like a hermit to meditate and pray, as soon as people found where he was they flocked to his side. He was persuaded to return to Baghdad, to the Babi community to put things straight, to teach, settle quarrels—and to get them back to useful activity. During this time he wrote *The Book of Certitude* which presented new interpretations of the Old and new Testaments of the Qur'an saying that all prophets can be considered as a single person because they all, each in their own way, revealed the divine essence. The Shi'ite clergy—seeing so many people flocking to this new faith—pestered the Iranian consul in Baghdad that the Babis were a menace to the Muslim religion and to the Iranian empire. (Baha'u'llah spent 40 years in exile from his native land.)

In a way the people who would later be named Baha'is became a political football between the various regimes of Sunni and Shi'ite Moslems. For this reason Baha'u'llah and his followers moved often on requests of host governments. Asked to move to

Adrianople, gateway to the West. Here he sent letters to heads of State throughout Europe asking them to join with him to bring about an era of brotherhood and universal peace. It appears that Queen Victoria was the only monarch who reacted favorably to Baha'u'llah's message—in fact the British government has maintained a friendly, sometimes protective, attitude toward Baha'is throughout history. One of Queen Victoria's granddaughters, Queen Marie of Romania, became a Bahai. He even urged Pope Pius IX to renounce all temporal authority, to stop spending so much time in fashionable society, and to move out of the palace that was far too sumptuous for Peter's successor. Baha'u'llah felt Catholics needed reform—condemned priests' celibacy and monastic life. He considered it to be non-productive.

Since the Baha'i Faith's birth it has faced resistance and persecution particularly in Iran. The Shi'ite clergy views the Baha'is as heretics. Some of the Baha'is views are in contradiction to Islamic beliefs such as the Baha'is beliefs that there are more prophets to come after Muhammad, that the Qu'ran has been abrogated in favor of Baha'u'llah's writings, that women should play an active role in society, that there is no importance of the holy war (jihad), and that clergy are not essential--due to increased literacy. Their emphasis on education places them in prominent occupations in society and this power and influence is threatening to Shi'ite clergy.

Anti-Baha'i sentiment increased under "Ayatollah Khomenini when many were killed. Although in later 1988 oppression slightly lessened, Baha'is were still being accused of prostitution since their marriages are view as illegitimate, of spying since some of conferences were in foreign cities, and of being Zionist supporters since their headquarters are in Haifa, Israel. Their holy buildings are on Mt. Carmel including the tomb of the "Bab" and the original tablets of Baha'u'llah.

In general, totalitarian governments have difficulty accepting people who refuse to think in the same way as they do. In the USSR under Stalin, Baha'is were deported and their temples seized. In Hitler's Germany, Baha'is were hunted and many were sent to concentration camps.

It should be noted that the Baha'i religion takes a stand on a number of problems not mentioned by other religions. Subjects that might seem to be of a purely social nature are religious issues in Baha'i eyes because they are approached with a sense of spirituality.

The Principles of the Baha'i Faith

Think of it—this is 19th century Moslem male—sitting in a dark hole of a prison –the notorious dungeon known as the "Black Pit" (pretty unspeakable conditions)– Bha'u'llah had a revelation that he was the one chosen to continue the mission that the "Bab" has begun. He left 14,000 tablets in his own writing and his chosen heirs (his son and grandson) left more than 40,000.

When you think about it--Jewish scriptures are three thousand years old, Christ's teachings are almost twenty centuries old, Muhammad's are thirteen centuries old. The scriptures they left have been interpreted by religious authorities and inevitably, whether in good or bad faith, deformed with the passage of time. Because it is a young religion, the Baha'i Faith can provide direct reference to the authentic texts of its founders.

The oneness of Mankind – a fundamental teaching of Baha'u'llah—is the oneness of the world of humanity. Addressing mankind he says, “**ye are all leaves of one tree and fruits of one branch.**” Central theme is that humanity is one single race and the day has come for its unification into one global society. Unity is not synonymous with uniformity. Baha'u'llah says “how unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers, leaves and branches were of the same shape and color....”

Universal peace upheld by a world government - Baha'u'llah felt it was necessary for nations and governments to organize an international tribunal to which all their disputes and differences shall be referred. Maintained that rulers of the world to establish a board of international arbitration; that from all nations and governments of the world there should be delegates selected for a congress of national which should constitute a universal arbitral court of justice to settle international disputes. **(This is long before anything like the U.N. was conceived)**

Independent Investigation of the truth.

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend by another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. **(Reminds me of the writings by the Buddha)**

There is no clergy in the Baha'i faith, all believers participate equally. Members learn about their faith reading and weekly gatherings. In every Baha'i community, at the local, national and international level, nine members re elected to serve one-year terms on a board called a Spiritual Assembly. Because no campaigning or nominations are permitted, any Baha'i in good standing can be elected to the Assembly which handles administrative duties for the Community. Every 19 days, Baha'is gather for feasts during which they hold devotions, share information about activities in the community and participate in group discussions to find the truth about a situation or issue. **(sort of a Phood and Philosophy)**

Work is an integral part of their faith and is considered part of their daily worship. Having a job is seen as serving mankind.

The common Foundation of all Religions

The Baha'i faith is perhaps unique in that it unreservedly accepts the validity of other great faiths. Baha'is believe that Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Jesus, Krisna, and Muhummad are all equally authentic messengers of one God. Each is given a mission adapted to the historical and social conditions in which they live. The teachings of these divine messengers are seen as paths to salvation which contribute to the "carrying forward of an ever-advancing civilization. The latest of these divine Messengers was Baha'u'llah whose role, along with past messengers, was to educate humanity. Baha'u'llah felt that there would be other messengers after him.

The Essential Harmony of Science and Religion

Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise it is superstition. The Baha'i Faith unlike other religions, has never been closed to scientific discovery. Since our intelligence comes from God, and science is the result of our intelligence, the Baha'i Faith incorporates recognized discoveries into its thinking and sees no contradiction between science and religion.

Equality of Men and Women (Men are not superior to women)

There must be an equality of rights between men and women. Women shall receive an equal privilege of education. This will enable them to qualify and progress in all degrees of occupation and accomplishment. **"For the world of humanity possesses two wings—man and woman. If one wing remains incapable and defective, it will restrict the power of the other, and full flight will be impossible."** Religious doctrines do not usually deal with this subject – look at Christianity and Islam. Last week I asked Ron Woodruff about the second class status of women in Islam. He said that it was a design of man.

Elimination of Prejudice of All Kinds

Prejudices of all kinds – whether religious, racial, patriotic or political—are destructive of divine foundations in man. All the warfare and bloodshed in human history have been the outcome of prejudice. This earth is one home and native land. God has created mankind with equal endowment and right to live upon the earth.

Universal Compulsory Education

The basic principle of the Baha’I Faith insist on the necessity of education, considered as one of the keys to economic and social development. Education must not limit itself to transmitting knowledge but should be as concerned with teaching moral and spiritual values (ethics) along with science, literature, history, and geography.

Abolition of Extreme Wealth and Poverty

Baha’is are not capitalists nor socialist nor communists, they consider all such doctrines obsolete. Since national economies have become interdependent, the Baha’is advocate a global approach to economic problems. No country can boast of a stable prosperity as long as pockets of absolute poverty exist.

According to the most recent count, Baha’i communities operate more than 1,300 local development projects around the world. These efforts range from simple literacy centers to reforestation efforts, from health clinics to environmental research centers. The largest share of these projects is in the developing world.

A Universal Auxilliary Language

Baha’u’llah has proclaimed the adoption of a universal language. A language shall be agreed upon by which unity will be established in the world. Each person will require training in two languages—his native tongue and the universal auxilliary form of speech. This will facilitate intercommunication and dispel the misunderstanding which the barriers of language have occasioned in the world. The Baha’is have followed with interest the birth and development of Esperanto, created by Ludwig Zamenhop, whose daughter became a Baha’i. While they are waiting for this language to emerge, Baha’is use English as the common language in their international meetings.

One of the challenges—keeping the Faith from dividing into a number of sects (as has happened to most religions) as it grows larger. Baha’u’llah tried to prevent future schism in the Baha’I Faith by having a will and testament. In that will, Baha’u’llah not only appointed his oldest son, Abdu’l Baha’ to succeed him but passed to him clear-cut authority to interpret his writings and to be the focal point for unifying the community. So far it has worked.

Closing Words:

**Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit
who know that without darkness, nothing comes to birth
as without light nothing flowers.**

