

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

SERMON NOVEMBER 25, 2012

An Exploration of the Bahá'í Faith and a Modern Bahá'í Parable on the "Tree of Truth":

How Do We Know, What We Know? (or Should Know)

Presented by David W. Rowden, PhD.

First there are some key names we need to keep in mind. The pronunciation is difficult; I hope the following will be helpful.

- Bahá'í: Ba-HIGH—The Faith
- Bahá'u'lláh: Ba-ha-ul-LAH—One of the Two Founders
- Báb: Bahb (Bob)—The Original Founder claiming to be the Hidden Imam of the Shia Sect of Islam
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Abdul ba-HAH—Son of Bahá'u'lláh and his successor as leader of the faith.

I would like to begin with the following excerpt from the words of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of Bahá'í; it provides what I think is essence of Bahá'í.

"O CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory."

There is also a Bahá'í saying that closely parallels my personal favorite UU Principle

“Independent Investigation. A Prerequisite for All Seekers of Truth.”

Sounds much like our Principle: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

What is Bahá'í—History and Origins

Islamic In origin, Shia Islam to be precise. It began in Persia in the mid 1800's

It is a Shia off shoot and is considered a heresy by the Shia. It is legally persecuted in Iran.

Abrahamic origins but Mohamed is not the last prophet and Jesus was the prophet of his time --not divine.

In the Bahá'í Faith, religious history is seen to have unfolded through a series of divine messengers, each of whom established a religion that was suited to the needs of the time and the capacity of the people. These messengers have included Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and others. For Baha'is, the most recent messengers are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. In Bahá'í belief, each consecutive messenger prophesied of messengers to follow, and Bahá'u'lláh's life and teachings fulfilled the end-time promises of previous scriptures. Therefore he may be considered the last prophet. It is important to note the end time in Bahá'í is not the destruction of the world, but a time of never ending universal justice. Humanity is understood to be in a process of collective evolution, and the need of the present time is for the gradual establishment of peace, justice and unity on a global scale.

What is God?

- A Being too awesome , mysterious and powerful to be he completely understood by man

- One God many Names, many religions
- Each time has its own prophet and religion
- One God many manifestations through time, (In Bahá'í writings, God refers to itself as “We”.)

My first contact

I first came across the Bahá'í faith in 1962. A pledge in my college fraternity was a Bahá'í. My fraternity was Sigma Phi Epsilon founded by six Baptist Seminary students at the University of Richmond. My University was Texas Christian University, so both the University and the fraternity were quite conservative—especially in the early 1960's. When it came time for initiation of the pledge class one of our more conservative members decided to “black ball” our Bahá'í pledge because he was not Christian. Purely out of intellectual interest I had talked with the pledge about his Bahá'í faith, and I was impressed with inclusive nature of the theology. To be honest, I did not much care for the conservative member who wanted to black ball the pledge in question. So I decided to intervene. I stated “you don't actually know if he is Christian or not, so lets call him in ask him.” We did and I asked the pledge if he believed in the teachings of Jesus Christ. He answered honestly that he did—I announced he was a Christian and cut off any other questioning, and the pledge became the first Bahá'í member of our Christian Fraternity—perhaps the first Bahá'í member of any Christian Fraternity.

Admittedly my question to the pledge was carefully worded to get the correct misleading response. I have no guilt what so ever about this—then or now! I had already concluded that the Bahá'í faith was a more ethical, more inclusive and peaceful faith than what I knew about most Christian sects—then and now.

History and Development of the Faith

Two men are considered the Founders of the Bahá'í faith.

The Báb (1819-1850)

The Báb fulfilled a role similar to John the Baptist in Christianity. The followers of the Báb (It means the gate) eventually developed into a sect that was in direct conflict with mainstream Shia because the Báb claimed to be the Mahdi (the hidden Imam), and mainstream Shia did not accept this and regarded the claim as heresy.

The origin of the Bahá'í faith can be traced to the city of Shiraz in southwest Iran, where, in 1844, Sayyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi confided to a select group of Shi'a Muslims that he was the Báb, the gate to the Hidden Imam of the Shi'a. The Báb took eighteen as his disciples, whom he called the "Letters of the Living." The Babi movement became a significant insurgency movement. In an effort to quash the insurrections erupting in parts of Iran, the government (Ottoman Empire) executed the Báb on July 9, 1850.

A Mormon Parallel? While the Mormons could not be considered an insurgency, The Báb and Joseph Smith were active in approximately the same time frames, and the Mormons also suffered violent persecution as heretics. Apparently this was a time of religious fervor and new off shoots seemed to have been very active in both Christian and Muslim cultures.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)

Born in 1817, Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri who -later became Bahá'u'lláh was a member of one of the great patrician families of Persia. The family could trace its lineage to the ruling dynasties of Persia's imperial past, and was endowed with wealth and vast estates. Turning His back on the position at court which these advantages offered Him, (*much like the figure who became known as the Buddha*) Bahá'u'lláh became known for His generosity and kindness which made Him deeply loved among His countrymen. In 1866, Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, publicly proclaimed himself to be , “ He Whom God Shall Make Manifest”, the successor of the Báb. Known as Bahá'u'lláh, (the Glory of God), he emerged as the leader of the majority of Babis, and his followers adopted the label Bahá'ís.

This Co-Founder of Bahá'í while a public supporter of the Báb, was much less confrontational, worked on keeping a relatively low profile but did proselytize and his privileged position did not long survive his announcement of support for the message of the Báb.

Historical Note: the Mahdi rebellion (of Lord Kitchner fame) in Sudan was also about the same time as the Báb was active. This was another instance of Shia religious/political leader claiming to be the Hidden Imam. As I said, a period of great unrest in Shia Islam.

Engulfed in the waves of violence unleashed upon the Bábis after the Báb's execution, Bahá'u'lláh suffered not only the loss of all his worldly endowments but was subjected to imprisonment, torture, and a series of banishments. The first was to Baghdad where, in 1863, he announced Himself as the One promised by the Báb. From Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh was sent to Constantinople, to Adrianople, and finally to Accra, in the Holy Land, where he arrived as a prisoner in 1868. (Accra was considered a Prison City at this time)

During his travels in exile he visited Haifa and Mt Carmel. He loved Mt Carmel and he along with the remains of Báb are buried there and it the major shrine of the Bahá'í

Succession

Bahá'u'lláh was succeeded by his son Abbas Effendi ('Abdu'l-Bahá.) (1844-1921) From earliest childhood, `Abbas Effendi, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, shared His father's life including suffering and banishments. Abbas took as his title `Abdu'l-Bahá, the "servant of Bahá", and his father, in his will, appointed his son as the authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í teachings and Head of the Faith. The life of `Abdu'l-Bahá is considered a perfect example of the Bahá'í way of life.

While `Abdu'l-Bahá was still a prisoner of the Ottomans the first Bahá'í pilgrims from the western world arrived in Accra in 1898 to see him. After His release in 1908, `Abdu'l-

Bahá set out on a series of journeys which, in 1911-1913, took him to Europe and America. There he proclaimed Bahá'u'lláh's message of unity and social justice to church congregations, peace societies, the members of trade unions, university faculties, journalists, government officials, and many public audiences. He died in November of 1921.

On November 29, 1921, ten thousand people--Jews, Christians, and Muslims from all persuasions and denominations--gathered on Mount Carmel to mourn his passing. He was eulogized as the essence of "Virtue and Wisdom, of Knowledge and Generosity." He was described by a Jewish leader as a "*living example of self-sacrifice*," by a Christian as one who led humanity to the "*Way of Truth*," and by a prominent Muslim leader as a "*pillar of peace*" and the embodiment of "*glory and greatness*." His funeral, according to one western observer, "*brought together a great throng sorrowing for His death, but rejoicing also for His life.*"

His eldest son (Shogi Effendi) assumed leadership in accordance with the Will of his father. Shogi Effendi spent his life interpreting holy writings and setting up the administrative structures that would succeed him. He died in 1957. Apparently he had no plans to continue the hereditary leadership of the Bahá'í, or to designate any specific person as the new leader of the faith.

Up until this point, this is one of the few incidents of multigenerational familial leadership of a Abrahamic religious sect. (The hereditary priest cast the Cohen blood line in pre-rabbinical Jewish history is an exception to this observation.) The hereditary succession in Bahá'í might have been based on the precedent of the Shia belief that the grandson of Mohamed who founded the Shia sect was the natural successor of the Prophet.

Shogi Effendi had no heirs when died and named no one to succeed him. Leadership of the Bahá'í' was assumed by the primary organizational body of the Bahá'í—The Universal House of Justice.

Current Organization

Universal House of Justice is founded on a set of unique electoral and consultative principles, the Bahá'í administrative order is organized around elected governing councils, operating at the local, national, and international levels. The Universal House of Justice – the supreme, international legislative authority of this system – is a nine-member body elected at five-year intervals by the entire membership of the national governing institutions of the Bahá'í world.

(This is an application of our UU Principle of the Respect for the Democratic Process!)

The members of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh wrote, are "the Trustees of God among His servants."

Bahá'í in the US-- What Attracts converts"

Distinguishing Features:

Shoghi Effendi, the appointed head of the religion from 1921 to 1957, wrote the following summary of what he considered to be the distinguishing features of Bahá'í.

Note how many of them closely parallel our own principles.

1. The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition;
2. The oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith;
3. The basic unity of all religions;
4. The condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national;
5. The harmony which must exist between religion and science;
6. The equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of humankind is able to soar;

7. The introduction of compulsory education;
8. The adoption of a universal auxiliary language; (*There may yet be a future for Esperanto!*)
9. The abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty;
10. The institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations;
11. The exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship;
12. The glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations;
13. The establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind

I must say that this articulation of Bahá'í beliefs, while closely paralleling our own UU principles and beliefs seems to be better articulated and more specific on the issues that should guide our moral/ethical behavior. We could learn something from this on how to best present to others, what we stand for.

Two Examples of the attraction of Bahá'í – by Converts in their own words

There have been sociological studies done of the Bahá'í. The following are two excerpts from a study conducted in the Atlanta, Georgia area on what attracts people to Bahá'í.

“It was difficult to some extent to switch loyalties. Because Christianity is centered on Christ, and he is your only door to heaven, so if you turn your back on Christ, you're doomed, you know? So it is a very serious consideration ... So the only way that I could make the switch was when I realized that I had the same feelings towards Bahá'u'lláh as I did towards Christ, and there was no conflict between them. That was it. When I realized that Bahá'u'lláh had the

same loyalty, and I wasn't diminishing my feelings towards Christ and my loyalty towards him. Bahá'u'lláh kind of stepped into Christ's spot, yea, but without Christ moving."

Perhaps more typical of the Bahá'í converts are those who found the rational, logical aspect of the faith to be the most compelling:

"I remember at one period I really started studying some of the other religions. I came back and said, you know, they all claim to be right. They can't all be right. How do you sort this stuff out? [The man who taught her the Bahá'í Faith] turned to me and said, 'Well, they were all right for their time.' It was like light bulbs went off. God! Of course! ... The concept of progressive revelation was what makes perfect sense. So that really attracted me."

Summary of the Bahá'í Faith

The basic belief system of Bahá'í can be distilled into the following Ten Principles or Tenants

- All humanity is one family.
- Women and men are equal.
- All prejudice—racial, religious, national, or economic—is destructive and must be overcome.
- We must investigate truth for ourselves, without preconceptions.
- Science and religion are in harmony.
- Our economic problems are linked to spiritual problems.
- The family and its unity are very important.
- There is one God.

- All major religions come from God. (*Universalism*)
- World peace is the crying need of our time.

One last Note: Bahá'í and UU share one more characteristic I haven't mentioned. Both are listed as cults on Billy Graham's web site. Mormons were also listed as a cult until earlier this year. Mitt Romney made the obligatory pilgrimage to Graham's North Carolina home to obtain his blessing and approval for Romney's candidacy and subsequently the Mormons lost their cult status.

The Parable: So how does a contemporary Bahá'í see the essence of knowledge and how we know (or should know) what we know?)

This parable was written by Jon Trevathan and posted on his Face Book Page in April of this year. Jon is a lawyer practicing in the DC area, and a practicing Bahá'í. I first met him when Cliff Schelling and I attended a Socrates Café in Warrenton, VA. We were planning to start one of the cafes here in the Northern Neck, and we wanted to see how an actual café worked. Jon was the moderator. Jon is much more than a lawyer. Much in keeping with his Bahá'í faith, he is a seeker of truth, from whatever source that may come. He recently has been taking courses in quantum physics at George Mason University in his quest to expand his knowledge and seek truth according to Bahá'í principles. His parable is an excellent articulation of how both UUs and Bahá'í seek truth based on the exploration of many paths through and honest rational examination of what we know—and don't know. So—here is the parable.

A Parable of the TREE of TRUTH

By Jon Trevathan

Once upon a time men came upon the TREE OF TRUTH, a TREE so great that not even the smallest twigs on its lowest Branches could be fully encompassed by the minds of men.

SCIENCE

Some of the men were scientists who said, we will study this TREE with our senses and with all of the instruments of our material sciences and that which is not subject to our tests cannot be truth to us.

PHILOSOPHY

Some of the men were philosophers who said we will study this TREE with our reason and that which cannot be understood by reason cannot be truth to us.

THEOLOGY

Some of the men were theologians who said, we will test this TREE by the Divine Texts that God has given us and that which cannot be understood in the context of these Texts cannot be truth to us.

MYSTICISM

Finally, some of the men were mystics and said we will apprehend this TREE through our insights and inspirations and that which is beyond our apprehension will forever remain a mystery.

The scientists then tested the TREE and its Branches. They naturally started with those Branches that were closest to the ground and could be easily seen. In doing so, they were able to turn those twigs that they could comprehend into useful arts that were beneficial to men. Then each generation of the scientists congratulated themselves and bragged that their understanding of the TREE OF TRUTH was approaching all that could be known. However, in each generation a scientist or two found a ladder and in climbing discovered new Branches that rendered all that had previously been understood – incomplete

The philosophers consider the TREE and its Branches with their reason, but each stood separated from their fellow philosophers, some near and some far, and from these differing frames of reference and having chosen different twigs upon the Branches to observe, naturally, their perceptions and presumptions were not the same. Because each philosopher was convinced that their assumptions were correct and their arguments were sound, they disputed endlessly among themselves. Because few useful arts that were beneficial to men arose from their disputations, most could not find teaching positions and became bankers (or lawyers). However, in each generation a philosopher or two found a ladder and in climbing was able to see new Branches that

created new opportunities for disputation and a few unemployed philosophers found profitable employment.

The theologians considered the TREE OF TRUTH and those Branches that they called Religion in the context of the sacred Texts of God. Most would only contemplate the Branch and Texts that their ancestors' ancestors had called their own. Most forgot that the Text itself was a Truth that could not be encompassed by the minds of men. They then acted as the philosophers had. Sometimes a group of theologians came to have a shared understanding of a Text or Twig and they called these understandings "Doctrine". Other times, they could not agree on how the twig should be understood and would break their favored twig from the Branch to grow a separate Tree. Often they would worship their Doctrines as their only Tree and the TREE OF TRUTH was forgotten. However, in each generation a theologian or two found a ladder and in climbing was able to see new Branches. But then those who had no ladders would cry "heresy" with loud voices and shake the ladders until all again stood upon the ground of literalness.

The mystics then considered the TREE OF TRUTH and its Branches as mystics do, but because much of what they apprehended could not be encompassed by the minds of men, they called their apprehensions Truth and worshiped their apprehensions as God.

Then, a day came when some scientists, theologians, philosophers and mystics came to understand that the many trees were all from one TREE and the four paths to knowledge were perception, reason, the sacred texts, and inspiration. They then agreed to study the TREE OF TRUTH at the intersection of these paths in collaboration and cooperative good will. They shared their frames of reference and the ladders of their insights with each other without egotistic attachment to their views and were amazed at how quickly higher and higher branches came to be within their view. They learned that for every apparent paradox, there exists a higher frame of reference wherein the

conflict would be resolved. They further understood that at the tip of the tree perfect unity would be found.

Discussion—So what do you think?*

Addendum—some factoids

- There are 5 million Bahá'í world wide
- There are approximately 175,000 in the United States
- Bahá'í is the second most geographically dispersed religion. Christianity is the most dispersed.
- Bahá'í is most active in India. They are also active in Africa, South America and the Pacific.
- In July, 1989, Bahá'í became a presence in Mongolia.
- There are only two countries that have no Bahá'í. They are North Korea and Vatican City.

* The information for this Sermon was gleaned from an extensive web search and on my personal experiences with Bahá'í. I relied heavily on the Official Bahá'í site, and on academic discussions of Bahá'í by non-members. Because Bahá'í is regarded as a cult in some fundamentalist circles, I avoided using any references that I could clearly identify as focusing on this issue—since without exception they were negative in nature, and focused on what seemed to me to be unverifiable assertions. Finally, this is a sermon and not an academic presentation. I did not footnote specific sources. If anyone wishes to explore the information included in this sermon at more length and would like to talk about the sources I was able to indentify, please feel free to contact me at david.rowden2@gmail.com or call me at 432-386-0146