



# BAHÁ'Í:

*World Faith for Modern Man*

by ARTHUR L. DAHL

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### *Nature and Purpose*

The Bahá'í Faith is a new, independent, universal religion, whose goal is to revitalize mankind spiritually, to break down the barriers between peoples, and to lay the foundation for a unified world society based upon principles of justice and love.

The Faith recognizes that the major problem of our age is the resolution of a series of deeply ingrained conflicts which are interrelated and penetrate various levels of society: conflicts between ideologies, nations, religions, races, and classes. Such conflicts, when combined with the weapons of annihilation our age has produced, threaten the future of civilization as we know it. They misdirect the efforts of science and technology at a time when man is beginning to discover the mysteries of interplanetary space and harness new sources of power. They consume an inordinate proportion of our productive energies and divert attention from the

conquest of our natural enemies: ignorance, disease, hunger.

World opinion increasingly recognizes that the solution of these conflicts must be applied on a world level to have a lasting chance of maintaining peace. The conviction also grows that all of these conflicts have as a root cause the lack of a spiritual dynamic, a moral or ethical power strong enough to counteract divisive social forces and channel men's efforts in constructive directions. Yet when we look at the field of religion, the historic source of spiritual guidance and assistance, we find that the major religions are sharply divided and are themselves one of the principal areas of conflict. They exist exclusive of each other and have, down through the centuries, developed in their followers widely diverse attitudes toward life which hinder general understanding and cooperation among peoples.

Since a lasting solution of our political and economic problems can only be achieved on a world level, something must first be done to bridge the vast spiritual gap existing between the followers of the major faiths. It is difficult to visualize, for example, the establishment of any genuine world government while various segments of the world's population differ so markedly in their fundamental attitudes, purposes, and values. What is needed is a new spiritual approach which will at once reconcile the basic contradictions in major religious beliefs, be consistent with modern scientific and rational principles, and offer to all peoples a set of values and a meaning to life that they can accept and apply. To meet this need the Bahá'í Faith presents a challenging set of Teachings, founded on the concept of progressive revelation.

## *Progressive Revelation*

The main stumbling block to religious unity has been the insistence of each major faith that its Founder and Prophet possesses some degree of exclusive authority or finality. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that this traditional division has resulted from a misinterpretation of the symbolic words of these great spiritual figures. In the Bahá'í view, the unknowable force which is responsible for all creation, God, guides and assists the apex of His creation, mankind, by periodically sending an Educator. This Educator, a man physically like other men, has been selected by God and divinely inspired to carry out three functions: (1) to restate the eternal spiritual truths, such as the Golden Rule, which are to be found in most religious Teachings; (2) to bring laws and teachings which apply to the needs of society at His particular time but which are not necessarily meant to be permanent; and (3) to release throughout the world a spiritual force intangible but very measurable in its effects, which eventually causes millions of people to respond to the Prophet and His Teachings, recognizing both as being from God and enabling the new religion to be the major impetus for the next cyclical upturn in civilization.

The key to the Bahá'í interpretation of the meaning of religion in the development of society is its emphasis on the periodic, evolutionary nature of this influence. If God chooses to guide mankind at all, it is logical that He would do so from the very beginning of man's existence as a species and continue this help indefinitely. And since change and orderly progress are characteristic of all other aspects of our lives, why should they not also apply to our spiritual development?

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By regarding God's Messengers as divinely inspired, speaking the Word of God, occupying a level of existence well above that of ordinary man, Bahá'ís revere Them in Their exalted position of spiritual leadership and as a source of man's knowledge of God, but they do not worship these Messengers as God incarnate. By accepting the Revelators of the existing major faiths, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus Christ and Muḥammad, as equally occupying the station of Manifestations of God, and recognizing the religions They established as being genuine and true expressions of God's message, the Bahá'í view reconciles the basic concepts of these faiths without requiring that loyalty to or belief in the divinity of the Founders of any of them be repudiated. Wide differences in their Teachings today can be explained by the alterations made by successive Prophets in the laws applicable to the changing needs of society, and by the fact that many of the current teachings of the orthodox churches stem, not from the original words of the Prophets, but from subsequently added dogma and interpretations of fallible church leaders. In effect the Bahá'ís regard all of these major faiths as being a part of the same evolving religion, which has been restated and reinvigorated periodically by the coming of a new Prophet, drawing on the same source of wisdom and spiritual power.

Bringing this concept down to our own age, Bahá'ís believe that this period in history is comparable in many respects to the ages in the past when the great Prophets have come to enlighten and guide mankind. Certainly the world has turned away from religion, at least in its pure sense, as an influence and inspiration in the daily

lives and actions of large bodies of people. As a result we are lacking a basic morality and have permitted a state of mind to develop in which conflict has prospered and become the dominant fact and critical problem of our time. Many people are looking for a spiritual revitalization but are divided as to how to achieve it. If the lessons of the past are meaningful, it will come, but through the appearance of a great new spiritual Educator, rather than from the renewal of any of the religious institutions of the past.

And that is exactly what the Bahá'í Faith claims has happened. Bahá'u'lláh, Who founded the Faith, is accepted by Bahá'ís as the Prophet of God for this day, possessed of the same divine guidance and spiritual dynamic as Christ, Muḥammad, Moses, and the other Prophets, and come to the world to perform the same three functions. He is believed to have the same decisive potential for counteracting dominant negative influences and for leading mankind to a new level of peaceful, unified, and constructive existence.

### *History of the Bahá'í Faith*

On May 23, 1844, a young Persian declared that He was the forerunner of an important new spiritual Figure, and took the title of Báb (Gate). His Teachings were profound and poetic and were widely accepted throughout Persia. But they were also considered heresy by the fanatical Islamic mullás, who taught that Muḥammad was the greatest and the last of the Prophets and who feared that the Bábís represented a threat to their entrenched position. Therefore the Islamic clergy combined with the corrupt government to stamp out the new Faith by force. During two decades more than 20,000



Bábís were martyred, often being cruelly tortured first. The Báb Himself was publicly shot in 1850 before some 10,000 spectators. This period is one of the heroic and dramatic episodes in modern history and deserves to be better known in the Western World.

One of the most active Bábís was Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, son of one of the government ministers, who from an early age had shown more interest in spiritual concerns than in the world of politics and society. He embraced the Bábí Faith in its early stages and demonstrated a profound grasp of the deeper meanings of the Báb's Teachings. In 1853, while in prison because of His Bábí activities, He had an intimation that He was the great Prophet foretold by the Báb, but He did not announce this publicly until 1863. The title He used—Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God)—had been given Him by the Báb. Most of the Bábís accepted His claim and became Bahá'ís (Followers of the Glory), though there were some defections on the part of disappointed would-be leaders.

Many people today tend to think of Prophets in terms of past ages. It seems hard to connect these remote and holy Figures with the modern world and everyday problems. Yet Bahá'u'lláh not only lived in our time but was contemporary in the fullest sense of the word. His Teachings are extremely advanced and personally He had a profound influence upon all who came in contact with Him, an influence which will continue to spread for centuries. A distinguished orientalist of Cambridge University, Professor Edward G. Browne, who visited Bahá'u'lláh in 1890 and was one of the few Westerners to have the privilege of such a meeting, wrote vividly of Him: "The face of Him on Whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot

describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie. No need to ask in Whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before One Who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!"

Because of continued persecutions by the Islamic hierarchy and the Persian and Turkish governments, Bahá'u'lláh and His close followers were kept prisoners until Bahá'u'lláh's death in 1892 and for sixteen years thereafter. The last years of Bahá'u'lláh's life were spent in the Holy Land, at the fortress city of 'Akká and at nearby Bahjí. During all these years of imprisonment He actively worked to establish a firm foundation for the new Faith through copious and inspired Writings and through administering its affairs by correspondence and contact with a stream of visitors. His strong letters to the reigning monarchs of that time accurately foretold the trend of modern history. His spiritual Writings represent the Scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith, in which for the first time the Holy Book of a major religion is available in the authenticated handwriting of its Founder, or signed by the Founder if in the handwriting of a secretary. These Writings are accepted by Bahá'ís as the Word of God for this age, and an important portion of them are now available in English.

In His Will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the central figure in the Faith after His passing. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is in no sense of the word considered to be a divinely inspired Prophet like Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb; but He is regarded as a per-

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fect exemplar of the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings as applied to one man's life, and His explanations of the meanings of these Teachings, written in a somewhat more westernized style than His Father's, are accepted as authentic. He was a saintly man and was loved and revered by all who came in contact with Him.

'Abdu'l-Bahá and His entourage were freed from prison by the Young Turks Revolution in 1908. He moved to Haifa, and today the international headquarters of the Faith are there on Mount Carmel, where a beautiful series of Shrines and gardens have been constructed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Europe in 1911 and Europe and America in 1912, where He spoke to audiences from coast to coast. He was knighted by the British Commonwealth in 1920 for His humanitarian activities during World War I. He died in 1921.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will established the institution of the Guardianship and appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, then a student at Oxford, as Guardian. For thirty-six years Shoghi Effendi labored strenuously to strengthen and develop the Bahá'í Administrative Order. His own writings, many of them in English, have expanded the horizons of the Faith and have given it direction during an exceedingly difficult period in its history. His vision of the Faith, his understanding of world conditions, and his superior abilities as an administrator have been considered by Bahá'ís as the product of divine guidance granted to him in his position as Interpreter of the Bahá'í Teachings.

On November 4, 1957, Shoghi Effendi passed away in London of a heart attack. At the time of his passing, there were

twenty-seven persons known as the Hands of the Bahá'í Faith who had been appointed by Him to carry on the unified teaching work and to protect the interests of the Faith. Through their efforts the first Universal House of Justice was elected in 1963 by the fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies (the nationally elected administrative boards) existing at that time, in accordance with explicit provisions in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the election of this supreme institution of the Bahá'í Faith. While democratically elected, The Universal House of Justice, functioning as an entity, is the recipient of divine guidance as assured in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. It acts as the supreme legislative body in the Bahá'í world, applying the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to specific conditions and problems, and providing the necessary adaptability to new circumstances essential in this fast-changing age.

### *Religious Teachings*

Bahá'u'lláh reestablished and reaffirmed the Covenant between God and man, the glorious promise recorded in various religions of the past but largely ignored today. Under this Covenant God agrees to guide and assist man toward spiritual progress through His Manifestations; man, in return, accepts a continuous responsibility to love God and to follow His precepts and laws, as revealed by the Prophets, at all times and in all aspects of his life. It is the lack of responsibility toward his Creator that makes modern man so morally rudderless and thus susceptible to the prejudices and conflicts which work against his own best interest.

The Bahá'í Teachings require an extremely high standard of moral conduct. Monogamy is enjoined on all, and chaste conduct is extolled. Marriage requires the

consent of all living parents, and divorce must be preceded by a year of trial separation and an attempt at reconciliation. Alcohol and narcotics are prohibited except for medical purposes. Purity, honesty, generosity, and selflessness are regarded as fundamental virtues; and a sense of responsibility for one's fellowmen is emphasized. Backbiting and gossiping are condemned. Bahá'ís are not straitlaced but are encouraged to enjoy the legitimate beauties and pleasures this world offers. The restrictions in the moral laws are not outmoded vestiges of puritan doctrine but a fresh assurance from God that this pattern of conduct will lead to the greatest happiness and life-fulfillment.

Bahá'u'lláh reaffirms a belief in the immortality of the individual soul and extends man's knowledge of the nature of life after death. Man's purpose on this earth is to love and worship God, to gain knowledge of Him through the Teachings of the Prophets, and to progress spiritually through applying these Teachings in his daily life. Progress so attained will be carried forward after the soul is released from the body and moves to its next level of existence. This is the measured reward of spiritual achievement, so different from the assignment of the soul to a literal heaven or hell.

The Bahá'í Writings also contain many explanations of the more difficult and symbolic sections of the Scriptures of past religions, clarifying questions that have been sources of religious division and relating many of the prophetic passages to actual events. The approach is rational and in accord with modern scientific principles, yet also includes an element of faith in areas which go beyond natural law as now comprehended.

Prayer plays an important role in Bahá'í worship, and many beautiful prayers have been revealed in the Writings. The effect of the whole Bahá'í approach to life is to make the individual believer a balanced, well-adjusted person, at home in his environment. This is not an ascetic Faith, but teaches that the most spiritual life is lived actively in society, contributing toward the productive process and carrying the principles of Bahá'u'lláh to people through personal example and teaching.

### *Political and Social Teachings*

The Bahá'í Faith offers more comprehensive Teachings on political, economic, and social subjects than other major religions of the past. It should be borne in mind that Bahá'u'lláh enunciated these principles in the period between 1863 and 1892 when monarchy was the prevailing form of government and the industrial revolution was barely getting under way.

The keynote of these Teachings is the principle of the oneness of mankind. In the past, religions have been regional in their impact and influence. But in our age, for the first time, the world has become one physically, and so for men to flourish under such conditions they must also achieve spiritual, political, and economic unity. Through the principle of progressive revelation, Bahá'u'lláh has made possible the reconciliation of the doctrines of the major faiths. It is envisaged that the Bahá'í Faith will gradually lead people to the adoption of a universal faith, which will close the spiritual and cultural gaps that now exist. Included in this process will be a realization that our basic loyalty is to mankind as a whole, rather than to any nation or smaller group. This will temper the intensity of nationalism, one of the major sources of conflict today.

To implement this principle of the oneness of mankind, Bahá'u'lláh visualized a comprehensive World Order built around a federated world government with authority over all international affairs and with such necessary attendant institutions as a world court and an international police force. An international language would be learned by all in addition to one's native tongue, as an important means of increasing understanding through better communication. A universal approach to economic problems would be adopted, gradually eliminating the barriers to free world trade. Work performed in the spirit of service would be regarded as a form of worship of God. Wars must be abolished and the full energies of men concentrated on constructive pursuits. Extremes of wealth and poverty will be eliminated, and men will happily aid their less fortunate fellowmen.

Bahá'u'lláh enjoined the elimination of all forms of prejudice and superstition, particularly racial prejudice. This issue is dealt with more specifically and emphatically than in past religions and is regarded as a spiritual responsibility, not merely a humanitarian or educational problem.

The Bahá'í Faith also teaches that religion and science are not contradictory but are in harmony and accord. Each deals with an aspect of existence necessary to man's progress and should be regarded as complementary allies in man's eternal struggle to better himself. The Faith also advocates universal education, the equality of men and women, and the independent investigation of truth. No coercion should be used to induce anyone to accept any particular point of view with respect

to the fundamental questions of life; everyone should face these questions squarely, study and weigh various approaches, and consider that making a decision and acting upon it is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Bahá'ís believe that together these principles represent a blueprint of the world society of the future, which God, through Bahá'u'lláh, has given to mankind as the sole remedy for the problems engulfing the modern world. It is incumbent upon us to put these advanced principles into practice if we are to avoid self-destruction and realize the tremendous potential for constructive development modern science and technology have made possible. None of these principles can be separated from the others; and for their full realization all are dependent upon the spiritual regeneration which must occur before mankind will be ready ideologically to apply them successfully. There are many deeply entrenched prejudices and attitudes which must be overcome first, and only the power of God, which has brought about equally dramatic alterations in social trends in the past, can be expected to achieve this.

### *Administrative Order*

As a new religious expression operating under vastly changed conditions, the organizational structure of the Bahá'í Faith differs in important respects from the organization of the orthodox faiths of the past. In the Bahá'í Faith there is no professional clergy. The various functions of administration, teaching, welfare, and worship are carried out by Bahá'ís, none of whom ever have clerical distinction but who are elected by democratic process to administrative posts or arise voluntarily to



serve according to preparation and ability. The unit at the base of the structure is the Local Spiritual Assembly, which consists of nine members elected annually and which exists wherever nine or more adult Bahá'ís live in a city, town, or judicial district. It can appoint committees to handle specific tasks but is responsible for the progress and well-being of the Faith and of the believers in its area. Similarly, the National Spiritual Assembly, also with nine elected members, is responsible for the affairs of the Faith on a national level. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme administrative authority for Bahá'ís throughout the world.

Great emphasis is placed in the Faith on a spiritual approach to group consultation. Much effort is made to leave behind the human tendencies which so often cause groups to break down into petty bickering and unproductive conflicts. Each member is expected to advance his views as ably as he can, but to relinquish any personal identification with his original position. Then a genuine effort is made to develop a group view which represents the combined wisdom and which is wholeheartedly supported by all.

The activities of the Faith are financed solely by voluntary contributions from Bahá'ís. Contributions from non-Bahá'ís are accepted only for charitable purposes, and collections are never taken at Bahá'í meetings. By orderly process each community of Bahá'ís establishes a Fund. To local and national Funds the believers contribute, without pledge or pressure, through the official treasurer elected for each.

The most important Bahá'í building in the United States is the magnificent

Bahá'í House of Worship at Wilmette, Illinois, on the shore of Lake Michigan. It is recognized as one of the great examples of architecture in this country, and annually attracts more than 200,000 visitors. Associated with it is the National Bahá'í Headquarters Building on Sheridan Road. Nearby is the Faith's first humanitarian institution in North America, the Bahá'í Home, open to men and women sixty-five and over with no distinction as to racial or religious backgrounds.

In time there will be Bahá'í Houses of Worship in all localities, but at the moment, while numbers and resources are relatively small, there are only a few modest local centers, and most communities hold their meetings in private homes or rented halls. Bahá'ís gather every nineteen days for worship, discussion of community affairs, and fellowship. They observe a number of Bahá'í Holy Days, with non-Bahá'ís being invited to certain of the commemorations.

Teaching activities for the public are at the discretion of the individual communities and take many forms. The emphasis at this time is to spread the Faith as widely as possible. A succession of worldwide teaching plans, in progress since 1937, has established the Faith in most countries and territories of the globe. Many Americans have gone out "pioneering" in obscure parts of the earth, settling down as residents of the area, without title, office, or uniform, working and earning an independent livelihood, if that is at all possible, and presenting the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in whatever manner local conditions permit.

Bahá'ís have a conviction that the Administrative Order which they are build-

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ing, putting all the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into practice as completely as they can, is actually a laboratory model of the world order of the future. It is a miniature international society, without nationalistic or ideological conflicts, without racial bias, without class distinction, without the barriers of religious differences. Bahá'ís are now settled in some 317 countries and dependencies and come from every conceivable national, racial, religious, and class background. They believe that in time, as the world seeks desperately for a way out of chaos, it will become aware of the example of the Bahá'í Society in its midst—a society founded on spiritual principles, yet blending these with advanced secular concepts to achieve a successfully functioning social organism. The world then might be ready to follow.

### *Conclusion*

The Bahá'í Faith is a religion, a society, and a way of life. It reoffers spiritual truths the world needs but from which it has turned away, and it provides laws for regulating society that are new and suited to the requirements of our own age. It is still in its infancy, with its greatest accomplishments and period of growth lying ahead. In line with the experience of many older religions, its progress at this stage may appear relatively slow, for its ideas are advanced, and it demands of its followers many adjustments and sacrifices. In return it offers them not only an answer to the personal problems that a complex, high tension modern society creates but also the inspiring realization that they are participating in the formative years of a Faith destined to greatness—a Faith which is nurturing God's newest message to the world and is the channel through

which all mankind will be led to the unity that is its only salvation.

In the words of Shoghi Effendi: "The principle of the Oneness of Mankind . . . represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

"The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it."

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Listed below are a number of basic Bahá'í books which will assist the reader wishing to secure a broader knowledge of Bahá'í history and Teachings. Many of them can be found in public, state, or college libraries. A catalog is available upon request from the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 415 Linden Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois 60091, or orders may be placed through your own bookstore. College professors, administrators, or students who would like assistance or suggestions may write to the National Bahá'í Center, Dept. C, 112 Linden Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois 60091.

## *Sacred Writings*

### **BAHÁ'Í WORLD FAITH**

A comprehensive selection of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

### **GLEANINGS FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ-'U'LLAH**

Excerpts touching on the nature of religion, the spiritual nature of man, and the transformation of human society.

### **PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS OF BAHÁ-'U'LLAH**

Prayers and devotional passages.

### **KITÁB-I-ÍQÁN, THE (BOOK OF CERTITUDE) by Bahá'u'lláh**

Sets forth the grand redemptive scheme of God, revealing the oneness of religion, its continuity and evolution through the successive Prophets of God.

### **HIDDEN WORDS OF BAHÁ-'U'LLAH, THE**

Brief, poetic meditations, crystallizing the essence of all revealed truth.

### **SOME ANSWERED QUESTIONS by 'Abdu'l-Bahá**

Explanations on a wide variety of spiritual and philosophic questions, with particular emphasis on Christian subjects.

### **SECRET OF DIVINE CIVILIZATION, THE by 'Abdu'l-Bahá**

Contains the spiritual sociology needed for attaining global peace.

**FOUNDATIONS OF WORLD UNITY** by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Addresses and letters on the theme of the spiritual foundations of world unity.

*Basic, Miscellaneous, Introductory Works*

**BAHÁ'Í WORLD, THE, Vol. XIII**

Invaluable reference work, recording the international progress of the Bahá'í Faith.

**BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND THE NEW ERA** by J.E. Eslemont

Introduction to history and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Includes recent developments and many quotations from Bahá'í Writings.

**CHRIST AND BAHÁ'U'LLÁH** by George Townshend

Traces the history and explains the meaning of the Christian expectation of the advent of God's kingdom on earth.

**PRESCRIPTION FOR LIVING** by Rúhíyyih Rab-bani

A Bahá'í approach to the intimate problems of everyday life, by the widow of Shoghi Effendi.

**RELIGION FOR MANKIND** by Horace Holley

Essays and talks dealing with the application of Bahá'í principles to the solution of modern man's dilemma.

**RENEWAL OF CIVILIZATION, THE** by David Hofman

A brief general introduction to the Bahá'í Faith.

*History and Administrative Development*

**GOD PASSES BY** by Shoghi Effendi

The definitive history of the first century of the Bahá'í Faith.

**DAWN-BREAKERS, THE** by Nabíl

A superb account of the early days of the Bahá'í Era, centering around the mission of the Báb.

**EDWARD GRANVILLE BROWNE AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH** by H. M. Balyuzi

Masterful examination of a distinguished orientalist's work on the Bahá'í Faith.