

The Bahá'í Faith

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1. *A Worldwide Spiritual Community*

The Tabernacle of Unity has been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. . . . Of one tree are ye all the fruit and of one bough as the leaves. . . . The world is but one country and mankind its citizens.—*Bahá'u'lláh*.

Upon the spiritual foundation established by Bahá'u'lláh during the forty year period of his mission (1863-1892), there stands today an independent religion represented by nearly eight hundred local communities of believers. These communities geographically are spread throughout all five continents. In point of race, class, nationality and religious origin, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh exemplify well-nigh the whole diversity of the modern world. They may be characterized as a true cross-section of humanity, a microcosm which, for all its relative littleness, carries within it individual men and women typifying the macrocosm of mankind.

None of the historic causes of association served to create this worldwide spiritual community. Neither a common language, a common blood, a common civil government, a common tradition nor a mutual grievance acted upon Bahá'ís to supply a fixed center of interest or a goal of material advantage. On the contrary, membership in the Bahá'í community in the land of its birth even to this day has been a severe disability, and outside of Persia the motive animating believers has been in direct opposition to the most inveterate prejudices of their environment. The cause of Bahá'u'lláh has moved forward without the reinforcement of wealth, social prestige or other means of public influence.

Every local Bahá'í community exists by the voluntary association of individuals who consciously overcome the fundamental sanctions evolved throughout the

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centuries to justify the separations and antagonisms of human society. In America, this association means that white believers accept the spiritual equality of their Negro fellows. In Europe, it means the reconciliation of Protestant and Catholic upon the basis of a new and larger faith. In the Orient, Christian, Jewish and Muhammadan believers must stand apart from the rigid exclusiveness into which each was born.

The central fact to be noted concerning the nature of the Bahá'í Faith is that it contains a power, fulfilled in the realm of conscience, which can reverse the principal momentum of modern civilization—the drive toward division and strife—and initiate its own momentum moving steadily in the direction of unity and accord. It is in this power, and not in any criterion upheld by the world, that the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has special significance.

The forms of traditional opposition vested in nationality, race, class and creed are not the only social chasms which the Faith has bridged. There are even more implacable, if less visible differences between types and temperaments, such as flow inevitably from the contact of rational and emotional individuals, of active and passive dispositions, undermining capacity for cooperation in every organized society, which attain mutual understanding and harmony in the Bahá'í community. For personal congeniality, the selective principle elsewhere continually operative within the field of voluntary action, is an instinct which Bahá'ís must sacrifice to serve the principle of the oneness of mankind. A Bahá'í community, therefore, is a constant and active spiritual victory, an overcoming of tensions which elsewhere come to the point of strife. No mere passive creed nor philosophic gospel which need never be put to the test in daily life has produced this world fellowship devoted to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

The basis of self-sacrifice on which the Bahá'í community stands has created a religious society in which all human relations are transformed from social to spiritual problems. This fact is the door through which one must pass to arrive at insight of what the faith of Bahá'u'lláh means to this age.

The social problems of the age are predominantly

political and economic. They are problems because human society is divided into nations each of which claims to be an end and a law unto itself and into classes each of which has raised an economic theory to the level of a sovereign and exclusive principle. Nationality has become a condition which overrides the fundamental humanity of all the peoples concerned, asserting the superiority of political considerations over ethical and moral needs. Similarly, economic groups uphold and promote social systems without regard to the quality of human relationships experienced in terms of religion. Tensions and oppositions between the different groups are organized for dominance and not for reconciliation. Each step toward more complete partisan organization increases the original tension and augments the separation of human beings; as the separation widens, the element of sympathy and fellowship on the human level is eventually denied.

In the Bahá'í community the same tensions and instinctive antagonisms exist, but the human separation has been made impossible. The same capacity for exclusive doctrines is present, but no doctrine representing one personality or one group can secure a hearing. All believers alike are subject to one spiritually supreme sovereignty in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Disaffected individuals may withdraw. The community remains. For the Bahá'í teachings are in themselves principles of life and they assert the supreme value of humanity without doctrines which correspond to any particular environment or condition. Thus members of the Bahá'í community realize their tensions and oppositions as ethical or spiritual problems, to be faced and overcome in mutual consultation. Their faith has convinced them that the "truth" or "right" of any possible situation is not derived from partisan victory but from the needs of the community as an organic whole.

A Bahá'í community endures without disruption because only spiritual problems can be solved. When human relations are held to be political or social problems they are removed from the realm in which rational will has responsibility and influence. The ultimate result of this degradation of human relationships is the

frenzy of desperate strife—the outbreak of inhuman war.

2. *The Renewal of Faith*

Therefore the Lord of mankind has caused His holy, divine Manifestations to come into the world. He has revealed His heavenly books in order to establish spiritual brotherhood, and through the power of the Holy Spirit has made it possible for perfect fraternity to be realized among mankind.—‘*Abdu’l-Bahá*.

In stating that the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh is an independent religion, two essential facts are implied.

The first fact is that the Bahá’í cause historically was not an offshoot of any prior social principle or community. The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh are no artificial synthesis assembled from the modern library of international truth, which might be duplicated from the same sources. Bahá’u’lláh created a reality in the world of the soul which never before existed and could not exist apart from him.

The second fact is that the faith of Bahá’u’lláh is a religion, standing in the line of true religions: Christianity, Muhammadanism, Judaism and other prophetic faiths. Its existence, like that of early Christianity, marks the return of faith as a direct and personal experience of the will of God. Because the divine will itself has been revealed in terms of human reality, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh are confident that their personal limitations can be transformed by an inflow of spiritual reinforcement from the higher world. It is for the privilege of access to the source of reality that they forego reliance upon the darkened self within and the unbelieving society without.

The religious education of Bahá’ís revolutionizes their inherited attitude toward their own as well as other traditional religions.

To Bahá’ís, religion is the life and teachings of the prophet. By identifying religion with its founder, they exclude from its spiritual reality all those accretions of human definition, ceremony and ritualistic practice emanating from followers required from time to time to make compromise with an unbelieving world. Furthermore, in limiting religion to the prophet they are able to perceive the oneness of God in the spiritual

oneness of all the prophets. The Bahá'í born into Christianity can whole-heartedly enter into fellowship with the Bahá'í born into Muhammadanism because both have come to understand that Christ and Muhammad reflected the light of the one God into the darkness of the world. If certain teachings of Christ differ from certain teachings of Moses or Muhammad, the Bahá'ís know that all prophetic teachings are divided into two parts: one, consisting of the essential and unalterable principles of love, peace, unity and cooperation, renewed as divine commands in every cycle; the other, consisting of external practices (such as diet, marriage and similar ordinances) conforming to the requirements of one time and place.

This Bahá'í teaching leads to a profounder analysis of the process of history. The followers of Bahá'u'lláh derive mental integrity from the realization made so clear and vivid by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that true insight into history discloses the uninterrupted and irresistible working of a providence not denied nor made vain by any measure of human ignorance and unfaith.

According to this insight, a cycle begins with the appearance of a prophet or manifestation of God, through whom the spirits of men are revived and reborn. The rise of faith in God produces a religious community, whose power of enthusiasm and devotion releases the creative elements of a new and higher civilization. This civilization comes to its fruitful autumn in culture and mental achievement, to give way eventually to a barren winter of atheism, when strife and discord bring the civilization to an end. Under the burden of immorality, dishonor and cruelty marking this phase of the cycle, humanity lies helpless until the spiritual leader, the prophet, once more returns in the power of the holy spirit.

Such is the Bahá'í reading of the book of the past. Its reading of the present interprets these world troubles, this general chaos and confusion, as the hour when the renewal of religion is no longer a racial experience, a rebirth of one limited area of human society, but the destined unification of humanity itself in one faith and one order. It is by the parable of the vine-

yard that Bahá'ís of the Christian west behold their tradition and their present spiritual reality at last inseparably joined, their faith and their social outlook identified, their reverence for the power of God merged with intelligible grasp of their material environment. A human society which has substituted creeds for religion and armies for truth, even as all ancient prophets foretold, must needs come to abandon its instruments of violence and undergo purification until conscious, humble faith can be reborn.

3. *The Basis of Unity*

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee.—*Bahá'u'lláh*.

Faith alone, no matter how whole-hearted and sincere, affords no basis on which the organic unity of a religious fellowship can endure. The faith of the early Christians was complete, but its degree of inner conviction when projected outward upon the field of action soon disclosed a fatal lack of social principle. Whether the outer expression of love implied a democratic or an aristocratic order, a communal or individualistic society, raised fundamental questions after the crucifixion of the prophet which none had authority to solve.

The Bahá'í teaching has this vital distinction, that it extends from the realm of conscience and faith to the realm of social action. It confirms the substance of faith not merely as source of individual development but as a definitely ordered relationship to the community. Those who inspect the Bahá'í Cause superficially may deny its claim to be a religion for the reason that it lacks most of the visible marks by which religions are recognized. But in place of ritual or other formal worship it contains a social principle linking people to a community, the loyal observance of which makes spiritual faith coterminous with life itself. The Bahá'ís, having no professional clergy, forbidden ever to have a clergy, understand that religion, in this age, consists in an "attitude toward God reflected in life." They are therefore conscious of no division between religious and secular actions.

The inherent nature of the community created by Bahá'u'lláh has great significance at this time, when the relative values of democracy, of constitutional monarchy, of aristocracy and of communism are everywhere in dispute.

Of the Bahá'í community it may be declared definitely that its character does not reflect the communal theory. The rights of the individual are fully safeguarded and the fundamental distinctions of personal endowment natural among all people are fully preserved. Individual rights, however, are interpreted in the light of the supreme law of brotherhood and not made a sanction for selfishness, oppression and indifference.

On the other hand, the Bahá'í order is not a democracy in the sense that it proceeds from the complete sovereignty of the people, whose representatives are limited to carrying out the popular will. Sovereignty, in the Bahá'í community, is attributed to the divine prophet, and the elected representatives of the believers in their administrative function look to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for their guidance, having faith that the application of his universal principles is the source of order throughout the community. Every Bahá'í administrative body feels itself a trustee, and in this capacity stands above the plane of dissension and is free of that pressure exerted by factional groups.

The local community on April 21 of each year elects by universal adult suffrage an administrative body of nine members called the Spiritual Assembly. This body, with reference to all Bahá'í matters, has sole power of decision. It represents the collective conscience of the community with respect to Bahá'í activities. Its capacity and power are supreme within certain definite limitations.

The various local communities unite through delegates elected annually according to the principle of proportionate representation in the formation of a National Spiritual Assembly for their country or natural geographical area. This National Spiritual Assembly, likewise composed of nine members, administers all national Bahá'í affairs and may assume jurisdiction of any local matter felt to be of more than local impor-

tance. Spiritual Assemblies, local and national, combine an executive, a legislative and a judicial function, all within the limits set by the Bahá'í teachings. They have no resemblance to religious bodies which can adopt articles of faith and regulate the processes of belief and worship. They are primarily responsible for the maintenance of unity within the Bahá'í community and for the release of its collective power in service to the cause. Membership in the Bahá'í community is granted, on personal declaration of faith, to adult men and women.

Eight National Spiritual Assemblies have come into existence since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921. Each National Spiritual Assembly will, in future, constitute an electoral body in the formation of an International Spiritual Assembly, a consummation which will perfect the administrative order of the faith and create, for the first time in history, an international tribunal representing a worldwide community united in a single faith.

Bahá'ís maintain their contact with the source of inspiration and knowledge in the sacred writings of the faith by continuous prayer, study and discussion. No believer can ever have a finished, static faith any more than he can arrive at the end of his capacity for being. The community has but one meeting ordained in the teachings—the general meeting held every nineteen days, on the first day of each month of nineteen days given in the new calendar established by the Báb.

This Nineteen Day meeting is conducted simply and informally under a program divided into three parts. The first part consists in the reading of passages from writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá—a devotional meeting. Next follows general discussion of Bahá'í activities—the business meeting of the local community. After the consultation, the community breaks bread together and enjoys fellowship.

The experience which Bahá'ís receive through participation in their spiritual world order is unique and cannot be paralleled in any other society. Their status of perfect equality as voting members of a constitutional body called upon to deal with matters which

reflect, even though in miniature, the whole gamut of human problems and activities; their intense realization of kinship with believers representing so wide a diversity of races, classes and creeds; their assurance that this unity is based upon the highest spiritual sanction and contributes a necessary ethical quality to the world in this age—all these opportunities for deeper and broader experience confer a privilege that is felt to be the fulfilment of life.

4. *A Background of Heroic Sacrifice*

O My beloved friends! You are the bearers of the name of God in this day. You have been chosen as the repositories of His mystery. It behooves each one of you to manifest the attributes of God, and to exemplify by your deeds and words the signs of His righteousness, his power and glory. . . . Ponder the words of Jesus addressed to his disciples, as he sent them forth to propagate the cause of God.—*The Báb*.

The words of Bahá'u'lláh differ in the minds of believers from the words of philosophers because they have been given substance in the experience of life itself. The history of the faith stands ever as a guide and commentary upon the meaning and influence of the written text.

This history, unfolded contemporaneously with the rise of science and technology in the West, reasserts the providential element of human existence as it was reasserted by the spiritual consecration and personal suffering of the prophets and disciples of former times.

The world of Islám one hundred years ago lay in a darkness corresponding to the most degraded epoch of Europe's feudal age. Between the upper and nether millstones of an absolutist state and a materialistic church, the people of Persia were ground to a condition of extreme poverty and ignorance. The pomp of the civil and religious courts glittered above the general ruin like fire-damp on a rotten log.

In that world, however, a few devoted souls stood firm in their conviction that the religion of Muhammad was to be purified by the rise of a spiritual hero whose coming was assured in their interpretation of his gospel.

This remnant of the faithful one by one became conscious that in Ali Muhammad, since known to his-

tory as the Báb (the "Gate" of access to the prophet), their hopes had been realized, and under the Báb's inspiration scattered themselves as his apostles to arouse the people and prepare them for the restoration of Islám to its original integrity. Against the Báb and his followers the whole force of church and state combined to extinguish a fiery zeal which soon threatened to bring their structure of power to the ground.

The era of the Báb covered only the six years between 1844 and his martyrdom by a military firing squad in the public square at Tabriz on July 9, 1850.

In the Báb's own written message he interpreted his mission not to be the new prophet of a regenerated and modernized Islám, but to herald a world educator and unifier, one who was to come for humanity and not Islám alone. All the Báb's chosen disciples, and many thousands of followers, were publicly martyred in towns and villages throughout the country in those years. The seed, however, had been buried too deep in hearts to be extirpated by any physical instrument of oppression.

After the Báb's martyrdom, the weight of official wrath fell upon Hussein Ali, around whom the Bábis centered their hopes. Hussein Ali was imprisoned in Tihran, exiled to Baghdad, from Baghdad sent to Constantinople under the jurisdiction of the Sultan, exiled by the Turkish government to Adrianople, and at length imprisoned in the desolate barracks at Akka.

In 1863, while delayed outside of Baghdad for the preparation of the caravan to be despatched to Constantinople, Hussein Ali established his cause among the Bábis who insisted upon sharing his exile. His declaration was the origin of the Bahá'í Faith in which the Báb's cause was fulfilled. The Bábis who accepted Hussein Ali as Bahá'u'lláh (the "Glory of God") were fully conscious that his mission was not a development of the Bábí movement but a new cause for which the Báb had sacrificed his life as the first of those who recognized the manifestation or prophet of the new age.

During forty years of exile and imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh expounded a gospel which interpreted the spiritual meaning of ancient scriptures, renewed the

reality of faith in God and established as the foundation of human society the principle of the oneness of mankind. This gospel came into being in the form of letters addressed to individual believers and to groups in response to questions, in books of religious laws and principles, and in communications transmitted to the kings and rulers calling upon them to establish universal peace.

This sacred literature has an authoritative commentary and interpretation in the text of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings during the years between Bahá'u'lláh's ascension in 1892 and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure in 1921, Bahá'u'lláh having left a testament naming 'Abdu'l-Bahá (his eldest son) as the Interpreter of His Book and the Center of His Covenant.

The imprisonment of the Bahá'í community at Akka ended at last in 1908, when the Young Turks party overthrew the existing political régime.

For three years prior to the European War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then nearly seventy years of age, journeyed throughout Europe and America, and broadcast in public addresses and innumerable intimate gatherings the new spirit of brotherhood and world unity penetrating his very being as the consecrated servant of Bahá. The significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary and explanation is that it makes mental and moral connection with the thoughts and social conditions of both East and West. Dealing with matters of religious, philosophical, ethical and sociological nature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded all questions in the light of his conviction of the oneness of God and the providential character of human life in this age.

The international Bahá'í community, grief-stricken and appalled by its loss of the wise and loving "Master" in 1921, learned with profound gratitude that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a will and testament had provided for the continuance and future development of the Faith. This testament made clear the nature of the Spiritual Assemblies established in the text of Bahá'u'lláh and inaugurated a new center for the widespread community of believers in the appointment of his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as guardian of the Bahá'í Faith.

During the twelve years of general confusion since

1921, the Bahá'í community has carried forward the work of internal consolidation and administrative order and has become conscious of its collective responsibility for the promotion of the blessed gospel of Bahá'u'lláh. In addition to the task of establishing the structure of local and national Spiritual Assemblies, the believers have translated Bahá'í literature into many languages, have sent teachers to all parts of the world, and have resumed construction of the Bahá'í House of Worship on the shore of Lake Michigan, near Chicago, whose completion will be impressive evidence of the power of this new faith.

In the general letters issued to the Bahá'í community by Shoghi Effendi in order to execute the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's testament, believers have been given what they are confident is the most profound and accurate analysis of the prevailing social disorder and its true remedy in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.