

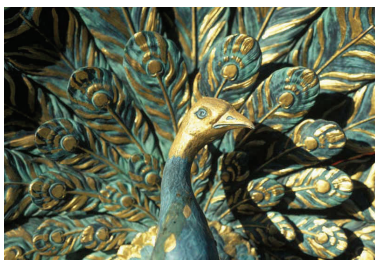
Bahá'í Religion: A Brief Summary



Overview

The roots of the Bahá'í religion can be traced to the Shí'ah branch of Islám in the middle years of the nineteenth century. The religion's rapid spread among young Muslim theologians, the merchant class and the general public in the 1840s and 50s may be explained in part by its claim to fulfill the messianic expectations then current in that milieu. At a relatively early stage, however, it gained significant numbers of adherents among the Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities in Írán and later attracted a smaller number of Levantine Christians. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, an important connection was made with messianic expectations in Protestant Christianity, as exemplified by the Millerites. This linkage facilitated its acceptance in North America, which became the principal base for its spread to the rest of the world during the twentieth century.

Although it was initially treated as an Islamic heresy, the teachings of the Bahá'í religion soon placed it entirely outside the framework of its mother religion. Symbolic actions such as the discarding of the veil by a woman who had assumed a leading role in the faith were accompanied by explicit claims to a fresh revelation from God and unequivocal acts of theocratic legislation establishing an independent system of religious law clearly different from that of the Qur'án.



As it stands today, the Bahá'í religion is completely independent of Islám, their relationship being comparable to that between Christianity and Judaism. Having also transcended its original Levantine cultural matrix and acquired a following of about five million, with a geographic and ethnic distribution approximating that of the general population of the planet, it has won recognition as a world religion unlimited by any particular ethnic, regional or cultural identity.

Doctrine

Bahá'í theology is based on the axiom that the extraordinarily complex and sophisticated system we call "creation" could not have come into existence or continued to function in the absence of a power and an intelligence vastly superior to that possessed by humans. Bahá'ís see that creative power and intelligence as being concentrated in a Being, necessarily beyond our capacity to define or fully understand, Who is the source and object of all religions, notwithstanding all differences in name, concept and description.

In order to preserve the independence and free will of each individual, Bahá'ís believe that the Divine Being chooses to communicate with humanity indirectly through prophets or messengers, who although human in all physical respects, are transformed to serve as unobstructed channels and "manifestations" of the Divine. Such manifestations, including Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus Christ and Muḥammad, have appeared, periodically throughout history and in various parts of the world, as teachers in a vast scheme for the spiritual education of humankind.



Bahá'í belief distinguishes between the basic moral and spiritual principles that are common to all religions, on the one hand, and secondary teachings and laws, which are adapted to the needs of the time and place of appearance of each prophet or messenger, on the other. It follows that, aside from the universal common core, religious truth is not seen as absolute, but rather relative to circumstances and the capacity and needs of the society being addressed. This understanding enables followers of the Bahá'í religion to respect the beliefs and heritage of others and to embrace the scientific and egalitarian values of the modern world without abandoning a fundamentally spiritual approach to life and its challenges.

The life of a human being in this physical world is understood as a training process, the purpose of which is to realize the capacities with which our Creator has endowed us. The qualities of character and spirit thus acquired will be the means of progress in an eternal afterlife that is purely non-material. These attributes are developed through social interactions and continuous efforts to achieve excellence in constructive fields of human endeavor (e.g. arts, crafts, professions, personal comportment, service to others, family life). Prayer, meditation and consultation with others guide and reinforce individual and collective action, while ascetic practices and monastic retreat from the world are seen as counter-productive.

Central Figures

THE BÁB

Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad was born in Shíráz, Írán, in 1819 into a family descended from the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imám Ḥusayn. Orphaned in infancy, He was raised by a maternal uncle and received the meager education common to the merchant class

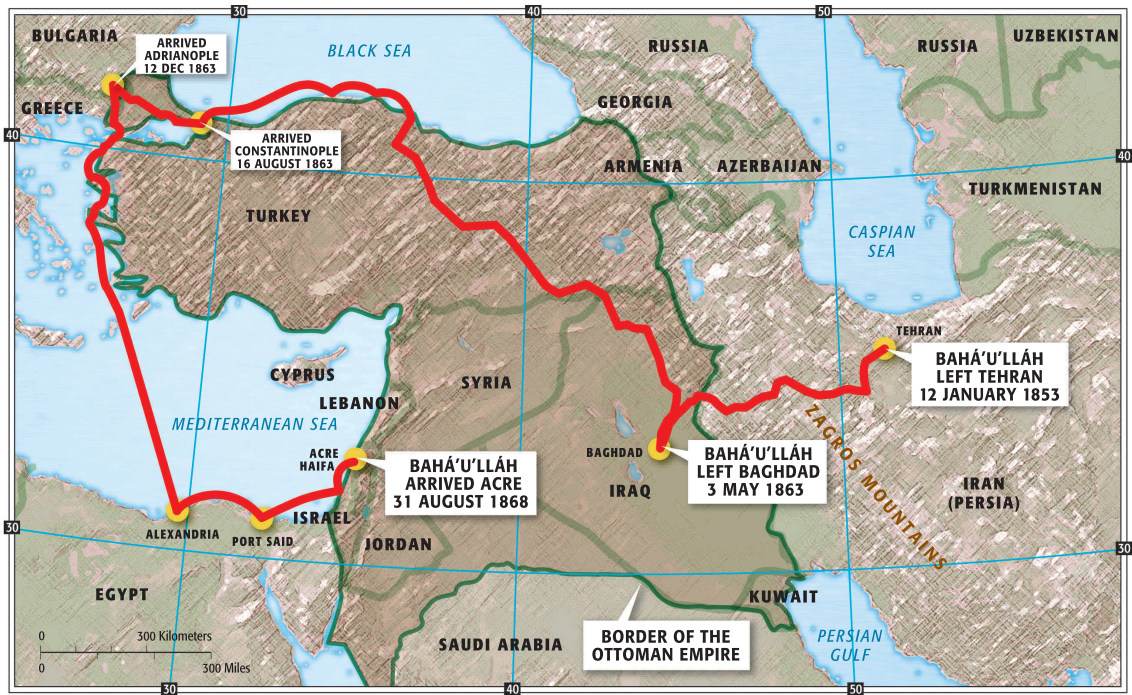
The world's religious symbols as displayed on a pylon of the Bahá'í House of Worship located in Wilmette, Illinois reflect acceptance of all major religions.



before joining the family business at the age of about fifteen.¹ During a pilgrimage to the Shí'ah shrines in 'Iráq in 1841, He attended gatherings of a messianic sect known as the Shaykhís, without becoming a member.² On 22 May 1844, in an apparently chance encounter with one of the leaders of the sect, who became His first disciple, He declared Himself as the messianic figure for whom they were searching and took the title of "the Báb" (Gate). A central aspect of the Báb's message was the imminent arrival of a second and greater messenger referred to as "He whom God shall make manifest". After seventeen more disciples, including one woman, had independently found their way to Him and accepted His claim, He instructed them to disperse and spread His message. Within months, His followers numbered in the thousands and the Shí'ah clerical establishment embarked on a campaign of brutal repression of what they saw as a dangerous heresy. Returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca during which He announced His claim to be the promised *Qá'im* (The Twelfth Imám), the Báb was met by public acclaim and clerical opposition in Shíráz and Isfáhán. The powerful governor of the latter city offered Him protection but

A vegetable farming project initiated by the Bahá'í community of Erdenbulgan, Mongolia.

passed away a few months later. Muḥammad Sháh instructed that the Báb be brought to his presence in Ṭíhrán, but the Grand Vizir arranged instead for Him to be imprisoned in isolated fortresses in the mountains of northwestern Írán. Muḥammad Sháh died in 1848, and his successor, Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, was too weak to restrain the clergy, who redoubled their efforts to repress the Bábí movement through violent persecution, obtaining in many cases the active support of the civil authorities. Following massacres of the Báb's followers in many parts of Írán, the new Grand Vizir ordered Him to be executed publicly by a firing squad in Tabríz in July 1850.³ The inexplicable failure of the first attempt to carry out this order confirmed the Báb's supernatural powers, while the success of the second made Him a martyr. An attempt to prevent His remains from receiving a decent burial was frustrated by His followers, who succeeded in removing them from the field where they had been unceremoniously dumped literally under the noses of the soldiers who had been detailed to guard them.



Exiles of Bahá'u'lláh

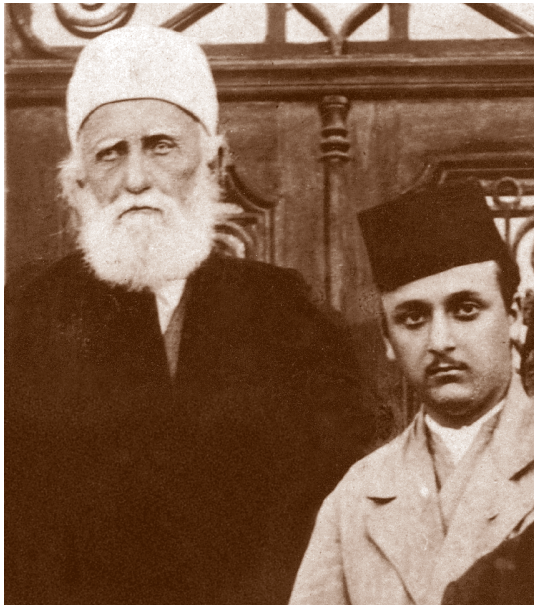
BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí was born in Ṭihrán in 1817 into a family of the political class, which claimed descent from Zoroaster and the kings of the Sasanian dynasty. One of the leading followers of the Báb, He was known as “Jináb-i-Bahá’”, or “Bahá’u’lláh” (Glory of God). In the wave of persecution that followed the execution of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh was stripped of all His possessions and incarcerated in an underground prison in Ṭihrán, where He experienced His first divine revelation. After some months, He was liberated and banished to Baghdád,

where He assumed leadership of the surviving followers of the Báb. Upon being summoned to Istanbul by the Ottoman Grand Vizier in 1863, Bahá’u’lláh gathered the believers in a garden outside Baghdád and announced that He was “He whom God shall make manifest”. After a few months in Istanbul and nearly five years in Edirne, a *firmán* (decree) of Sulṭán ‘Abdu’l-Azíz condemned Bahá’u’lláh to perpetual banishment in Acre, then a remote outpost of the Ottoman Empire, where He arrived in August 1868 and lived until His passing in May 1892. Bahá’u’lláh’s quarter-century sojourn in the Holy Land was marked by a

COMPARATIVE CHRONOLOGY

Historical Benchmarks	Birth of <u>Shaykh</u> Ahmad-I-Aḥsá’í, founder of <u>Shaykhism</u>	American Revolution	French Revolution	Birth of Charles Darwin	Birth of Bahá’u’lláh	Birth of Karl Marx	Birth of the Báb	Declaration of the Báb; birth of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
Events Related to Bahá’í History								
YEARS (C.E.)	1753	1776	1789	1809	1817	1818	1819	1844



Bahá'u'lláh's successors at the head of the Bahá'í community: His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and His great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi.

voluminous outflow of written works as well as many significant events, some of which will be referred to below.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

'Abbás Effendí, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, was born in Tīhrán in 1844 and accompanied his father throughout His exiles. Before His passing, Bahá'u'lláh designated 'Abbás Effendí to succeed Him as head of the community, with authority to explain and interpret His teachings and resolve differences among His followers. Adopting the title " 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Servant of Bahá), 'Abbás Effendí brought the remains of the Báb from

Írán and interred them on Mount Carmel, established the administrative center of the community in Haifa, and spread the new religion to the West, all in accordance with his father's instructions. He passed away in Haifa in 1921.

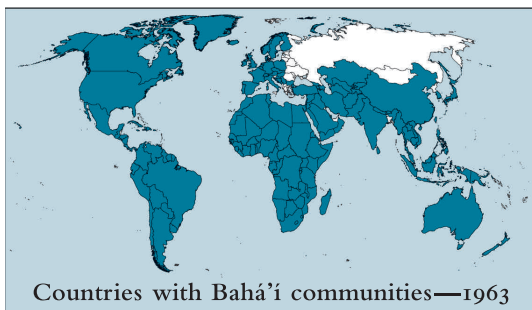
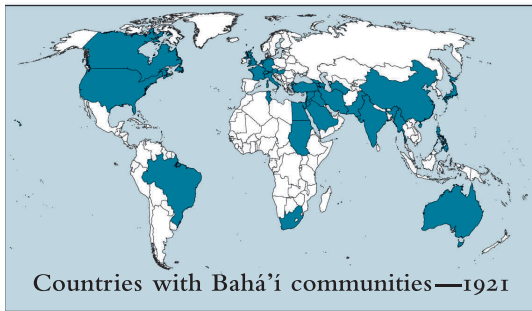
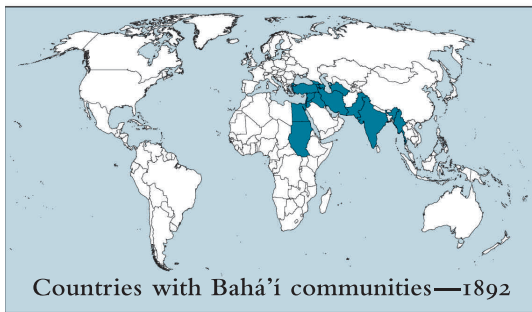
SHOGHI EFFENDI

The eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and a relative of the Báb, Shoghi Rabbani was born in Acre in 1897 and studied at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut and Oxford University. At the age of 24, he succeeded 'Abdu'l-Bahá pursuant to the latter's will. His fruitful thirty-six year ministry witnessed the worldwide spread of the Bahá'í religion, the development of its institutional structure and the consolidation of its world center in Haifa and Acre. He passed away in 1957 during a visit to London.

Institutional Development and Worldwide Spread

Issues of leadership succession and the transition to a permanent institutional structure are of great importance in the formative period of religious movements, and Bahá'u'lláh chose to address them explicitly in His writings. He not only formalized the powers conferred on His designated successor and forbade the establishment of any form of clergy, but also outlined the structure of the elected institutions that would provide a permanent system of governance for the community, making these arrangements an integral part of His religious teachings,

Death of Muḥammad Sháh and ascension of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh	Execution of the Báb	Banishment of Bahá'u'lláh from Iran and His arrival in Baghdád	Birth of Sigmund Freud	Ascension of Sulṭán 'Abdu'l-Azíz	Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdád and His arrival in Istanbul	Assassination of Abraham Lincoln	Bahá'u'lláh's arrival in Acre
1848	1850	1853	1856	1861	1863	1865	1868



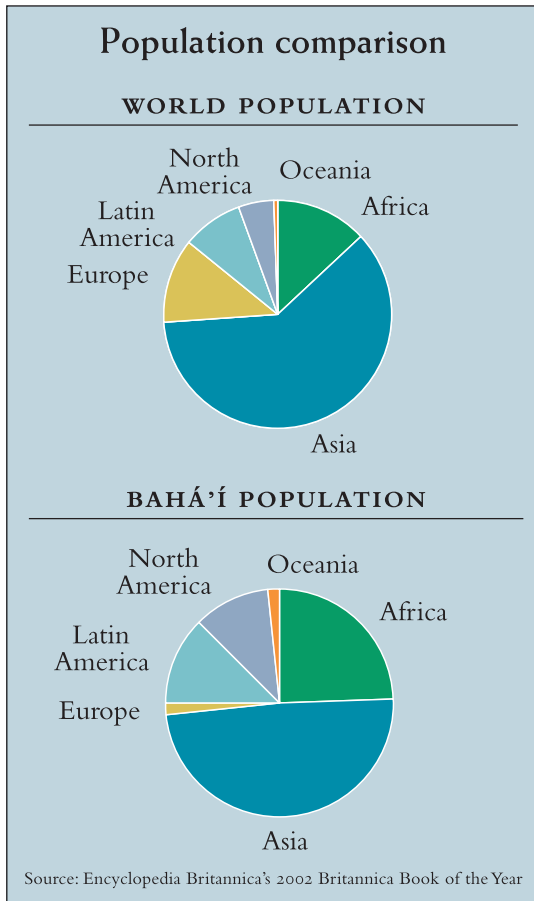
invested with the full authority of scripture. Exercising the interpretative powers granted to them, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá fleshed out the details while Shoghi Effendi guided the community through the initial stages of practical implementation.

In parallel with the migration from personal to institutional governance, the period after the passing of Bahá’u’lláh witnessed the transformation of an obscure religious movement in the Middle East into a recognized world religion, largely as a result of its successful implantation in the West. Following a period of consolidation of the community in North America, which lasted until 1937, Shoghi Effendi initiated a systematic campaign for its extension to Central and South America. This campaign was broadened to include the European continent at the end of the Second World War, followed by Africa and the rest of the world in the early 1950s.

Despite the succession arrangements described above, the passing of Bahá’u’lláh and that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had each precipitated a crisis leading to the rebellion and expulsion of prominent believers, including members of the family of the Prophet. The ultimate test, however, came in 1957 when Shoghi Effendi died unexpectedly at the age of 60, without appointing a successor or leaving a will. Under his leadership, the religion had achieved a global spread, with at least a minimal representation in some 251 countries and dependent territories, and elected institutions had begun to function at the local and national levels. Although initial steps had been taken toward the establishment of the international governing body,

COMPARATIVE CHRONOLOGY

Birth of Mahatma Gandhi	Death of Sulṭán ‘Abdu’l-Azíz and ascension of Sulṭán ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd	Bahá’u’lláh moves to Mazra‘ih	Bahá’u’lláh moves to Bahjí	Passing of Bahá’u’lláh	Assassination of Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh	Birth of Shoghi Effendi	Young Turks’ Revolt
1869	1876	1877	1879	1892	1896	1897	1908



Bahá'ís come from all national, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

which Bahá'u'lláh had called the “Universal House of Justice”, Shoghi Effendi had not yet called for its election, apparently feeling that the national bodies, whose members would serve as electors, were insufficiently mature and too few in number to represent the diversity of the community. The vacuum was filled by a group of 27 deputies who had been appointed by Shoghi Effendi and to whom he had referred to as the “Chief

Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's Embryonic World Commonwealth”.⁴ They led the community based on detailed plans left by Shoghi Effendi for the period up to 1963, consolidated the 26 existing national bodies and brought another 30 into being, arranged for the Universal House of Justice to be elected in 1963 and immediately delivered all the assets and affairs of the religion into its hands.

The remains of the Báb are buried in the shrine on Mount Carmel	'Abdu'l-Bahá travels to Europe and North America	First World War	Declaration of the Turkish Republic by Ataturk	Second World War	Establishment of the State of Israel	Passing of Shoghi Effendi	First election of the Universal House of Justice
1909	1911-1913	1914-1917	Passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1921	1939-1945	1948	1957	1963

Notes

¹ H.M. Balyuzi, *The Báb* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973), p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴ Four such deputies had been appointed by Bahá'u'lláh, who had honored them with the title of “Hands of the Cause of God”. The power to appoint others was specifically conferred on Shoghi Effendi by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his will.

