THE BAHÁ'ÍS: A profile of the Bahá'í Faith and its worldwide community
The coming of each new Messenger from God has marked a pivotal point in history. Each has released a fresh spiritual impulse, stimulating personal renewal and social advancement. Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, and the spiritual impulse accompanying it, is especially significant because it coincides with the maturation of humanity.

Coupled with these ideas is an understanding that human nature is fundamentally spiritual. Although human beings exist on earth in physical bodies, the essential identity of each person is defined by an invisible, rational, and everlasting soul.

The soul animates the body and distinguishes human beings from animals. It grows and develops only through the individual’s relationship with God, as mediated by His Messengers. The relationship is fostered through prayer, knowledge of the scriptures revealed by these Teachers, love for God, moral self-discipline, and service to humanity. This process is what gives meaning to life.

Cultivation of life’s spiritual side has many benefits. First, the individual increasingly develops those innate qualities that lie at the foundation of human happiness and social progress. Such qualities include faith, courage, love, compassion, trustworthiness, and humility. As these qualities become increasingly manifest, society as a whole advances.

Spiritual development also aligns the individual with God’s will and prepares him or her for the afterlife. The soul lives on after the body’s death, embarking on a spiritual journey towards God through many “worlds” or planes of existence. Progress on this journey, in traditional terms, is likened to “heaven.” If the soul fails to develop, it remains distant from God. This, in traditional Christian or Muslim terms, is “hell.”

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**For Bahá’ís, the Shrine of the Báb is the second-most holy spot in the world, a place for intense prayer and meditation. The recently completed garden terraces on the slope of Mount Carmel offer a distinctive vision of beauty and harmony, spiritual qualities that Bahá’ís hold dear.**

**“Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants... is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.”**

— Bahá’u’lláh
The Fast

Virtually all of the world’s religions emphasize fasting as a means of spiritual purification. Each year, for example, Muslims abstain from food and drink between sunrise and sunset for 28 days in a row. Fasting is referred to a number of times in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. Bahá’u’lláh called on Bahá’ís to refrain from eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset for 19 consecutive days each year from 2 March to 20 March. This period, known simply as “the Fast,” is considered a time for deep reflection on one’s own spiritual progress. Bahá’ís make efforts to detach themselves from material desires, rising before dawn to eat breakfast and to pray. Those who are ill are exempt from fasting, as are pregnant and nursing women, people under 15 or over 70 years old, travelers, and those engaged in arduous physical labor.

The Unknowable Essence

The best place to begin elaborating how Bahá’ís view the relationship between God, religion, and humanity is with the Bahá’í concept of God. That concept begins with the realization that God is unknowable.

Bahá’u’lláh taught that God is the Creator of the universe and its absolute ruler. His nature is limitless, infinite and all-powerful. It is therefore impossible for mortal men and women, with limited intellect and finite capacities, to directly comprehend or understand the reality of God, and the spiritual impulse accompanying it, is especially significant because it coincides with the maturation of humanity.

Bahá’u’lláh teaches that humanity, as a whole, has today entered a new stage in its collective existence, like an adolescent entering adulthood. New levels of accomplishment are now possible, and global undertakings that were once considered impossible can now be achieved. Such undertakings include the realization of world peace, the attainment of universal social justice, and the furtherance of a harmonious balance between technology, development, human values, and the protection of the natural environment.

For Bahá’ís, the purpose of earthly life is to acquire spiritual qualities, such as love, faith, and self-sacrifice. Performing works of service, such as this public gardening project in Bucharest, Romania, is one important means for the training of the soul. His motives, or the way He operates.

While unknowable in His essence, God has chosen to make Himself known to humanity through a series of divine Messengers.

These Messengers have been the only way to know God, and their number includes the Founders of the world’s great religions: Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad — to name those who are best known. Bahá’ís also include other prophets in this group, such as Noah and Abraham.

The Messengers, in Bahá’u’lláh’s words, are “Manifestations of God.” The Manifestations are perfect mirrors of God’s attributes and perfection, providing a pure channel for the communication of God’s will for humanity.

This idea — that God has sent a succession of Messengers to educate humanity — is called “progressive revelation.” An

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A Bahá’í view of life after death

The Bahá’í concept of life after death is deeply integrated into teachings about the nature of the soul and the purpose of this earthly life.

Bahá’u’lláh confirmed that every human possesses a separate, rational soul. In this life, He said, the soul is related to the physical body as the sun is to the earth. It provides the underlying animation of the body and is our real self.

Although undetectable by physical instruments, the soul shows itself through the qualities of character that we associate with each person. The soul is the focal point for love and compassion, for faith and courage, and for other such “human” qualities that cannot be explained solely by thinking of a human being as an animal or as a sophisticated organic machine.

The soul does not die; it endures everlastingly. When the human body dies, the soul is freed from ties with the physical body and the surrounding physical world and begins its progress through the spiritual worlds. Bahá’ís understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe — and not some physically remote or removed place.

Entry into the next life has the potential to bring great joy. Bahá’u’lláh likened death to the process of birth. He explained: “The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother.”

The analogy to the womb in many ways summarizes the Bahá’í view of earthly existence. Just as the womb constitutes an important place for a person’s initial physical development, the physical world provides the matrix for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Bahá’ís view life as a sort of workshop, where one can develop and perfect those qualities that will be needed in the next life.

“Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote. “By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe.”

In the final analysis, heaven can be seen partly as a state of nearness to God; hell is a state of remoteness from God. Each state follows as a natural consequence of individual efforts, or the lack thereof, to develop spiritually. The key to spiritual progress is to follow the path outlined by the Manifestations of God.

Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. “The nature of the soul after death can never be described,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote.

“Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter.”

— Bahá’u’lláh
Prayer and meditation

For Bahá’ís, the purpose of life is to know and love God and to progress spiritually. Prayer and meditation are primary tools for spiritual development. Bahá’u’lláh Himself wrote hundreds of prayers. There are prayers for general use, for healing, for spiritual growth, for facing difficulties, for marriage, for community life, and for humanity itself.

Bahá’u’lláh also asked His followers to choose one of three “obligatory” prayers for recitation each day. The shortest of these prayers is just three sentences long. It says much about the relationship between God and humanity. It reads:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.

The term “obligatory,” as applied to these prayers, implies for Bahá’ís an understanding that humans have certain spiritual duties before God. Bahá’u’lláh also urged His followers to spend time each day in meditation. Specifically, He encouraged us to reflect at the end of each day on our deeds and their worth. Other than this, Bahá’u’lláh did not specify a particular format for meditation — such as sitting cross-legged or using special breathing techniques. Instead, each individual is free to choose his or her own form of meditation.

analogy is the process of schooling. Just as children start with simple ideas in the primary grades and are given increasingly complex knowledge as they move on through secondary school and college, so humanity has been “educated” by a series of Manifestations. In each age, the teachings of the Messengers of God have conformed not to Their knowledge but to the level of our collective maturity.

A twofold station

The Manifestations of God have a twofold station. On the one hand, They are divine beings, reflecting perfectly God’s will. On the other hand, They are humans, subject to birth, disease, suffering, and death. They have distinct physical identities and They address humanity at particular stages in history. These differences give rise to cultural distinctions between religions that sometimes conceal their inherent unity.

“Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared,” Bahá’u’lláh said.

Fundamentally, however, the spiritual message of God’s Messengers has been the same. Each has stressed the importance of love for God, obedience to His will, and love for humanity. Although the words have varied, Each has taught the “Golden Rule”— that individuals should treat others as they would like to be treated themselves.

“Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same.” — Bahá’u’lláh

of all the Prophets of God is one and the same.” Bahá’u’lláh wrote. “Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, saith: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message....”

The Manifestations of God communicate God’s will to humanity through the process of divine revelation. This process of revelation has been recorded in the world’s great holy books — books that range from the Torah to the Qur’án, and which include Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Zoroastrian scriptures. These writings represent humanity’s record of God’s revealed Word.

Bahá’u’lláh says that the Word of God is the “master key” for the whole world. Only it can unlock the spiritual potential latent within every individual; only it can help us develop to our fullest potential. Without the Word of God, humans would remain captives of instinct and cultural conditioning, dwelling only on qualities that are associated with physical survival. Greed, selfishness, dishonesty, corruption, and the like inevitably flourish in the absence of divine guidance.

For Bahá’ís, the books, tablets, and letters penned by Bahá’u’lláh represent the Word of God renewed. Although they are consistent with past religious revelations and represent “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future,” the writings of Bahá’u’lláh also contain fresh truths about God’s will for humanity today.
When Bahá’ís say that the religions are one, they do not mean that the various religious creeds and organizations are the same. Rather, they believe that there is simply one religion and all of the Messengers of God have progressively revealed its nature. Together, the world’s great religions are expressions of a single unfolding divine plan, “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”

This concept goes far beyond the idea of “tolerance” of other faiths or some fusion of religious ideas. For while Bahá’ís respect and revere all the Founders of the world’s great religions and recognize Their contributions to humanity’s advancement, they also understand that all previous religions find fulfillment in the coming of Bahá’u’lláh.

As stated in the Bahá’í writings, the Bahá’í Faith “upholds uncompromisingly the eternal verities” of the religions that have come before it, recognizing “firmly and absolutely the Divine origin of their Authors....” At the same time, however, the Bahá’í Faith must be “hailed as the promise and crowning glory of past ages and centuries, as the consummation of all the Dispensations” of the past.

Bahá’ís of Jewish background, accordingly, revere Moses for His revelation of the Ten Commandments and for Judaism’s contribution to humanity’s general understanding of the importance of obedience to moral law. They also see Bahá’u’lláh as the appearance of the promised “Lord of Hosts” come down “with ten thousands of saints,” as promised by Isaiah, sent to lead the way for nations to “beat their swords into plowshares.”

Bahá’ís of Buddhist background venerate Buddha and treasure His teachings on detachment, meditation, and peace, which have greatly enriched world civilization. Further, they understand that Bahá’u’lláh fulfils the promise of the coming of “a Buddha named Maitreye, a Buddha of universal fellowship” who will, according to Buddhist traditions, bring peace and enlightenment for all humanity.

For Bahá’ís of Hindu background, the contribution of Hinduism to humanity’s understanding of God as the all-pervading Ultimate Reality and the spiritual nature of human reality is firmly acknowledged. They see Bahá’u’lláh as the latest incarnation of Krishna, the “Tenth Avatar” and the “Most Great Spirit,” Who, “when goodness grows weak,” returns “in every age” to “establish righteousness,” as promised in the Bhagavad-Gita.

For Bahá’ís of Christian background, Christ’s teachings on love, charity, and forgiveness are viewed as priceless gifts from God to humanity, as are the example of Christ’s life and His sacrifice. They further understand that Bahá’u’lláh fulfils Christ’s promise that He would come again, “in the glory of His Father,” bringing all people together so that “there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.”

For Bahá’ís of Muslim background, Muhammad’s teachings on learning, submission to the Divine will, and the unity of God are understood to have shaped the development of human society in profound ways. In Bahá’u’lláh, they see fulfillment of the Qur’an’s promise for the coming of the “Day of God” and the “Great Announcement,” when “God” will come down “overshadowed with clouds.”

Bahá’ís understand as well that the spiritual guidance provided in other religions, including Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and indigenous religions of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, have likewise all served to educate humanity about its Creator and to teach people how best to conduct their lives.
S P I R I T U A L  B E L I E F S

Kampala, Uganda

Panama City, Panama

Wilmette, Illinois, USA

New Delhi, India
As gathering places for prayer and meditation, Bahá’í Houses of Worship are the buildings in the Bahá’í Faith that most closely approximate the role of the church, the temple, or the mosque. Yet they are also something more.

As envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh, local Houses of Worship will someday be the focal point for a community’s spiritual life — and an expression of its humanitarian concern.

So far, eight Houses of Worship have been built — at least one on each continent, a token of the Faith’s global progress. At the present stage of the Faith’s development, Bahá’ís have focused on creating and developing the social and spiritual institutions of community life rather than on the construction of physical buildings in every community. Yet those Houses of Worship that have been constructed stand as beacons calling the world to a new mode of religious worship and life.

Each temple has its own distinctive design, and yet conforms to a set of architectural requirements that give a unifying theme. All Bahá’í Houses of Worship must have nine sides and a central dome.

The first House of Worship was built in Russia, in the city of Ashkhabad in Central Asia. Completed around 1908, the Ashkhabad House of Worship served the Bahá’í community of that region until 1938, when the site was appropriated by the Soviet government. The building was demolished in 1962 after being damaged by an earthquake.

The Ashkhabad House of Worship was in many ways ahead of its time. In addition to serving as a spiritual center for the thriving Bahá’í community in that region, it gave practical expression to the community’s humanitarian ideals. Attached to it were a number of subsidiaries, including a hospital, a school, and a hostel for travelers.

The first Bahá’í House of Worship in the West was completed in 1953, in Wilmette, Illinois, USA, on the shores of Lake Michigan, just north of Chicago. Its filigreed dome and extraordinary ornamentation combine features drawn from the architectural styles of both East and West, and it has attracted millions of visitors over the years. Other Bahá’í Houses of Worship have also been built in Kampala, Uganda; near Sydney, Australia; outside Frankfurt, Germany; overlooking Panama City, Panama; and in Apia, Samoa. In the near future, Bahá’ís plan to start building a temple for South America in Santiago, Chile.

The newest House of Worship was completed in 1986 in New Delhi, India. Since that time the structure has won numerous architectural awards and has been featured in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles.

Inspired by the lotus flower, its design is composed of 27 free-standing marble clad “petals” arranged in clusters of three to form nine sides.

Nine doors open onto a central hall, capable of holding up to 2,500 people. Slightly more than 40 meters tall, its surface luminous, the temple at times seems to float above its 26-acre site on the outskirts of the Indian capital.

In a few short years the New Delhi temple has become one of the world’s major attractions, drawing more than two and a half million visitors a year. On Hindu holy days, it has drawn as many as 100,000 — so revered is the Bahá’í temple by India’s people, whatever their religious background.

Indeed, all Bahá’í Houses of Worship are open to people of every religion. There are no sermons, rituals, or clergy.

Around the world, more than 120 sites have so far been set aside for future Houses of Worship. Ultimately, every local Bahá’í community will have its own House of Worship. Like the first one in Ashkhabad, each will become the focus of community life, as well as a center for social, scientific, educational, and humanitarian services.