

# The Baha'i Faith

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## Introduction and History

**“The claim which Baha’u’llah has advanced is no ordinary claim, and He does not ask anyone to accept it without serious investigation. Indeed, one of His most important Teachings is on the subject of independent investigation of the truth.”<sup>5</sup> — Gloria Faizi, *The Baha’i Faith—An Introduction***

Within the world of modern religions, the Baha’i faith is known by its claims for religious tolerance. Baha’is with pride declare, “We accept all the manifestations of God.” In fact, Baha’is make such substantial claims here that we feel it best to start with a short treatment of this idea to set the stage for our subsequent discussion.

Throughout our study of different religious groups we have witnessed a number of common themes. One is that religions which earnestly allege to be religiously open-minded are in actuality often the opposite. In the end, what they believe is that *they* have the only way to God, or at least the best way. Despite their claims for tolerance, it is frequently an empty gesture; upon examination, an obvious lack of tolerance often exists.

The Baha’i faith stands at the pinnacle, perhaps, in claims for religious harmony and tolerance. Yet, as we shall see, these claims are essentially without foundation, since each religion it claims to accept is not permitted to speak for itself but is re-interpreted to conform, more or less, to the teachings of the Baha’i faith. In essence, other religions are reinvented to teach the Baha’i philosophy. Whether it be Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or Islam, when sifted through Baha’i apologists, such religions are recreated in the image of Baha’i. No amount of intellectual gymnastics can change this basic fact: the Baha’i faith is not as tolerant as it would have us believe. Fundamentally, it recognizes what all religions have accepted: only absolute truths have value. It is thus underhanded in claiming one thing (the acceptance of the basic teachings of all religions) while teaching another (religious exclusivism).

The Baha’i faith does not claim to be a new religion, but instead a *renewal* of religion. It claims to be a renewal of the true teaching of all religions, which time has corrupted. Baha’is stress “we are *not* a new religion” because they wish to harmonize all religion under Baha’i teachings, and thus they cannot be understood as being just one more “competing” religion. This is why Baha’i literature argues that all *other* religions are “obsolete,” that they have “bankrupt and broken” beliefs which are mere “imitations” of God’s true religion, and that Baha’is alone have the true way.<sup>6</sup> The truth according to Baha’i is that its religion is unique and represents the essence of Divine Truth that God has molded throughout history in various religions, but which has become distorted. Nevertheless, in spite of this claim that they are not a new religion, even Shoghi Effendi, the onetime “Guardian” and absolute ruler<sup>7</sup> of the Baha’i faith, once approved of an Islamic court verdict declaring that “The Baha’i Faith is a new religion, entirely independent, with beliefs, principles and laws of its own, which differ from, and are utterly in conflict with, the beliefs, principles, and laws of Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

Before continuing, three other facts of Baha'ism bear stressing. First, while the articles in the leading Baha'i periodical *World Order* do not necessarily reflect "official" Baha'i views, they are a valid source of Baha'i teachings on many subjects. (*World Order* encourages non-Baha'is to write articles as an expression of religious unity. To our knowledge no conservative Christian articles examining Baha'i claims critically have ever been accepted.)

Second, since Baha'is at least *proclaim* belief in an independent search for truth, there is a sense in which the Baha'is are similar to the Unitarian-Universalists and modern New Age religions, where ultimate authority resides in the individual. Hence, not everything quoted herein will necessarily be accepted by every Baha'i. On the other hand, there are also limits to individual opinion. Baha'is have their own scriptures, which are believed to be divinely inspired, and these carry authority above any individual's personal views. From the beginning, members have been required to submit to a higher authority, whether it be the divine Manifestations (the Bab, Baha'u'llah), the infallible interpreters of them (such as 'Abdu'l-Baha), the Guardian of the Faith (Shoghi Effendi) or, today, the "Universal House of Justice," which is the nine-member authoritative ruling body. "Baha'u'llah says that all Baha'is must obey the Universal House of Justice because anything they decide is the Will of God." <sup>9</sup> The fact is, then, that the Baha'i claim to "independent investigation of the truth" is true only insofar as members first obey a higher authority and accept its rule over their lives. As we will see, this claim to independent investigation of truth turns out to be artificial.

Our third point is that many Baha'i writers think that Protestant critiques of Baha'i incorporate a "one-sided bias" in that they employ secondary literature, with a "preference given to unreliable sources" on Baha'i. These supposedly cause "gross misrepresentation of Baha'i," "false interpretations of the Bible" and "many misunderstandings." Such claims are made despite Baha'i's *own* historic misrepresentations of other religions and their own lack of primary source documentation. <sup>10</sup> Regardless, the claim is not true, at least of the evangelical critiques of Baha'i which we cite in this series.

For our own, we have answered this criticism beforehand by quoting from accepted authoritative Baha'i sources that contain primary documents: *Baha'i World Faith—Selected Writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha; Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah; The Al-Kitab al-Aqdas* (the Most Holy Book) by Baha'u'llah; *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah* by Adib Taherzadeh; *The Kitab-I-Ian* (the Book of Certitude); *Christ's Promise Fulfilled* by 'Abdu'l-Baha; *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* by Baha'u'llah; *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah* (transl.) by Shoghi Effendi; and Esslemont's *Baha'u'llah and the New Era* (a text with over sixty printings and recognized as accurate by the Baha'i Publishing Trust). We have also used secondary sources by modern Baha'is. Generally, these reflect historic Baha'i teachings, at least as far as our doctrinal concerns extend—for example, George Townshend's *The Heart of the Gospel* and *Christ and Baha'u'llah*.

The Baha'is represent a fairly solid international movement. Despite severe persecution in Iran and elsewhere, often by Muslims who see them as the worst of heretics, they remain stable and evangelistic. In the United States, Baha'is claim that membership doubled from 25,000 to 50,000 in less than two years (1970 to 1971). By 1975, there were over 1,000 local spiritual assemblies ("churches") in the United States, and Baha'is resided in over 5,500 cities and towns. There were also three permanent schools and the Baha'i Publishing Trust distributed over three hundred book titles. <sup>11</sup>

By 1976 their writings had been translated into 546 languages, and they claimed 2,000,000 plus adherents around the globe in some 18,000 "churches" in over 72,000

localities (550 countries and territories, including 119 National Spiritual assemblies). <sup>12</sup> In 1999, according to their website, they claimed membership in 200 countries and territories with Baha'i literature being translated into over 700 different languages. U.S. membership is now estimated at 40,000-75,000. (Baha'is do not supply precise figures.) The religion also has official parliamentary (although non-voting) recognition within the United Nations.

Next month we will continue our look at Baha'i history.

**Notes:**

5. Gloria Faizi, *The Baha'i Faith—An Introduction* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978), p. 35.
6. *World Order*, Fall 1977, p. 11; "Baha'i Teachings for a World Faith," Baha'i Publishing Trust 1943, pp. 5-7, 20.
7. Cf. William McLwee Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974), chapters 12-13.
8. Huschmand Sabet, *The Heavens Are Cleft Asunder* (Oxford, England: George Ronald Publishing, 1975), p. 51; verdict of May 10, 1925, by the Islamic Court of Appeal of Beba, Egypt, quoted in *God Passes By*, p. 365.
9. Peter Simple, Kolstoe, *Baha'i Teachings, Light for All Regions* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970), pp. 17-18.
10. Udo Schaefer, *The Light Shineth in Darkness* (Oxford, England: George Ronald, 1973) p. 1; J. E. Esslemont, *Baha'u'lla'h and the New Era* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 9.
11. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, 1975, p. 8; various introductory literature and pamphlets.
12. Sabet, p. 143.