

The Baha'i Faith—Part Three

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Teachings and Practice

In this section we will discuss two principal tenets of Baha'i, "one worldism" and the Baha'i concept of the "Manifestation." Because of the nature of the Manifestation as disclosure of "God," some overlap will be found between this section and our discussion of the Baha'i concept of God that follows later.

One Worldism

The fundamental principles of Baha'i revolve around an emphasis on world unity. Thus Baha'is emphasize belief in the oneness of God, the oneness of religion (in a sense, a world religion evolving "into" oneness through progressive revelation) and the oneness of mankind. They also stress the harmony of science and religion and universal compulsory education—presumably this would incorporate Baha'i teachings. They advocate the equality of the sexes, a universal auxiliary language, religion as a source of unity, international peace maintained by a one-world government, "the elimination of all forms of prejudice," the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty and so on.²⁶ In general, they advocate things that allegedly help to promote the growth of mankind into a united, peaceful and prosperous planetary body.

A key element for instituting this one-worldism is their syncretistic theology of accommodation, the idea of "religion as a source of unity." It is also their Achilles heel, which abandons them to an indefensible position.

As we have seen, Baha'is insist that they are a progressive, uniting factor among all religions, and that they are not a new religion. Nevertheless, their writings prove that the Baha'i faith is a new religion, one in active competition with all others and hence not a uniting factor. This rejection of other faiths is maintained even while Baha'i offers the other faiths the hand of unity and friendship. When this is seen for what it is, this spiritual pretense is distasteful to the neutral observer or committed member of another faith. Baha'is only tells a member of another religion exactly what he or she may wish to hear: "Baha'i does not deny your beliefs, it teaches that you can be a devout Christian and also a Baha'i." Thus new prospects are promised, "The Baha'i Faith invites us to broaden our religious horizons, not to become an apostate."²⁷

Unfortunately, this is precisely what happens. After one commits oneself to the Baha'i faith, one learns that "true religion" is found only in the teachings of Baha'u'llah; it is one's own religion that has been seriously corrupted. Given the lofty ideals espoused by Baha'is (religious harmony, racial brotherhood, world peace), which naturally attract many people, usually one does not discover this religious "subversion" until it is too late. After all, if world religions do not teach "One Truth," the only way Baha'is can make it seem so is by deceptive methods, intentional or not. Not unexpectedly, as an article in *World Order* observes, "Baha'is have always evinced a profound reticence with regard to theology."²⁸

"Properly" understood then, all religions teach the same truth, despite variation due to

local customs, cultures and the depth of religious evolution of man at that point. The world's religions will eventually accept the truth and unite under Baha'i teachings into one grand ecumenical brotherhood. The Baha'i community itself is held to represent a miniature version of this coming, divinely-ordained utopia.

The Manifestations and the Nature of God

To understand the origin of the Baha'i concept of the Manifestation, we need to understand the Islamic and mystical origins of the Baha'i faith. Although Baha'is claim that they are not a Muslim sect, their leader, the Bab (Syyid Ali Muhammad), was in fact a heretical Shi'ite Muslim and Iranian mystic who based his teachings on Gnostic and neo-Platonic ideas, which had found their way into Islam (for example, through the mystical Sufis).²⁹ He was also the leader of the stronger section of a split in the spiritistic Shaykhis Shi'ite sect. This stronger group became known as the "Babis," after the name "Bab," which Syyid Ali Muhammad took for himself.

Because it is true in traditional Islam that Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet, the Bab's heralding of himself as a greater manifestation of truth classified him as a Shi'ite Muslim apostate. This explains why Baha'is have been persecuted and murdered by Muslims, especially Shi'ite Muslims, from the beginning. The Bab taught that he was a greater revealer of truth than Muhammad, and that an even greater prophet than him would some day appear. Orthodox Sunni or Shi'ite Muslims will not tolerate such teaching.

Reflecting Islamic influence, however, the Baha'i faith believes that God is fundamentally and eternally unknowable. He "reveals" himself in historic Manifestations, which are not incarnations since the Baha'i faith, again reflecting Islamic influence, rejects the possibility of an incarnation of God. These prophets, or Manifestations of God, have revealed truth to mankind in progressively larger and larger increments and taught that no Manifestation is a final revelation of God.

This revelation is accomplished either in harmony with the evolutionary level of mankind or as it becomes necessary. And because the Manifestations all represent revelation from the same God, allegedly they do not contradict one another. As their web site declares, citing Baha'u'llah:

Every true Prophet hath regarded His message as fundamentally the same as the Revelation of every other prophet gone before him.

Baha'is view religion as a progressive, evolutionary process which needs to be updated as humanity evolves mentally, socially, and spiritually. Every so often a new Prophet is sent to humanity to update religion to the current needs of mankind. These Prophets bring essentially the same spiritual message to mankind; in a form that meets the need of the people of their time. Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah has brought an updated message for mankind today.³⁰

Even though the most recent Baha'i prophet in many ways replaces the previous one, one prophet is supposedly not superior to another. Thus Muhammad and Baha'u'llah are not superior to Jesus, even though their revelation of truth is allegedly much greater. Unfortunately, the Baha'is have differed historically as to the exact number of their prophets, apparently uncertain as to who the exact Manifestations of God are. The Bab and Baha'u'llah (having been influenced by Shi'ite teachings) spoke of six previous Manifestations of God: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Because of their Koranic background, the Manifestations were entirely Semitic. 'Abdu'l-Baha, however, was

more ecumenical, adding Manifestations of a more oriental flavor: Zoroaster and the Buddha.³¹ Modern Baha'is, deleting Adam and Noah, believe in nine to 12 Manifestations: an unknown Prophet, Krishna, Abraham, Hud (an ancient Arabian prophet; the eleventh surah of the Koran is named after him), Salih, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab and Baha'u'llah.³²

The Baha'is have never declared the exact number of prophets (nine is often used), nor precisely how a Prophet is to be known.³³ The most recent prophet, Baha'u'llah, is the most complete Manifestation to date. But as we have seen, there is genuine reason to doubt his authenticity based on the teachings of the Bab. Nevertheless, even though Baha'u'llah is *not* the final prophet, his words are absolutely binding as the words of God, despite their replacement some day through the revelations of a prophet with more spiritually evolved teachings. In addition, the interpretation of Baha'u'llah's writings by 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi are held to be infallible.

(to be continued)

Notes:

25. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-I-Iqan The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 87, 89, see also p. 86.

26. Baha'i World Faith website.

27. *World Order*, Fall, 1977, p. 11.

28. *Ibid.*, Fall 1978, p. 10.

29. William McLwell Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974), pp. 52-59, 11.

30. Baha'i World Faith website.

31. Miller, *The Baha'i Faith*, p. 227, citing *Baha'i Scriptures* (1923), p. 330, cf. Miller, p. 53 (book).

32. Baha'i introductory literature; *World Order*, Fall 1978, p. 14.

33. *World Order*, Fall 1978, p. 14. The alleged characteristics of a Manifestation are no guide at this point.