

The Challenge of the Bahá'í Faith

A Non-Bahá'í Assessment Of Reasons For Studying The Bahá'í Religion,
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Why study the Bahá'í Faith? Is the religion worthy of the time and effort required for its investigation? Could not one spend the time more profitably on some other subject? Actually, rather than being a subject on the periphery of vital concerns, the Bahá'í Faith may be regarded as a subject of central importance not only for the student of the history of religions but for anyone interested in world problems and proposals for their solution. Ernst Kliemke, president of the Esperanto Society of Germany, said in an address in Esperanto delivered in Danzig on July 30, 1927: "Because of their cultural principles alone, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are worthy to be regarded among the highest Lights of all times, even by those who are not able to accept the religious pan of Their teachings . . ." The Bahá'í Faith is worthy of intensive study for the following reasons.

Its Imposing Claims

The Bahá'í Faith compels attention, first, because of its imposing claims. It claims that the prophets of all religions of the past have foretold the coming of Bahá'u'lláh and the golden age which would be ushered in by his coming. This claim was not manufactured by the Faith's followers but is based on the word of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet or Manifestation of God after whom the religion is named, who himself declared:

The Revelation which, from time immemorial, hath been acclaimed as the Purpose and Promise of all the Prophets of God, and the most cherished Desire of His Messengers, hath now, by virtue of the pervasive Will of the Almighty and at His irresistible bidding, been revealed unto men. The advent of such a Revelation hath been heralded in all the sacred Scriptures. Behold how, notwithstanding such an announcement, mankind hath strayed from its path and shut out itself from its glory.²

Bahá'ís maintain that as the Jews were blinded from accepting Jesus as the Messiah because of their preconceived ideas about the Messiah and about interpretations of the prophecies concerning him, Christians are guilty of rejecting Bahá'u'lláh as the returned Christ because of preconceived interpretations of New Testament prophecies concerning Christ's return and the events connected with His coming. If Jesus has returned in Bahá'u'lláh, as Bahá'ís maintain, that event is the most singularly important event since the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth; for Christians to fail in recognizing him would be the most grievous sin.

William S. Hatcher, who became a Bahá'í while a student at Vanderbilt University, testifies that he studied the thought of such philosophers and theologians as Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Niebuhr, Nels Ferré, and Paul Tillich but found "nothing which is in any way comparable to the Bahá'í Revelation either in the dynamic qualities of the Spirit or in the satisfaction of the intellect."³ Hatcher is disturbed that Christian leaders "refuse to consider even the possibility that the claims of Bahá'u'lláh might be true."⁴

Could Bahá'u'lláh's claims be true? Bahá'ís not only acknowledge Bahá'u'lláh as the returned Christ but also make the astounding claim that Bahá'u'lláh is the expected deliverer hoped for in all the revealed religions; he is the expected Lord of Hosts of Judaism, the Fifth Buddha of Buddhism, the Sháh-Bahrám of Zoroastrianism, the "Great Announcement" of Islam, and the return of Krishna for the Hindus. Since Bahá'u'lláh, according to the Bahá'ís, fulfills the hopes of the world's religions, Bahá'ís believe that the adherents of these diverse religions may at last be united in Bahá'u'lláh by one common devotion.

The Bahá'í claim to be a uniting influence among the diverse peoples of the world finds verification in actual practice, for in Bahá'í gatherings one may find converts from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and other religions, worshiping and serving together in their common loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í Faith puts to shame some of the older religions which, although holding in theory that men are equal in God's sight, often sadly fail to carry theory into practice.

Bahá'ís claim not only that Bahá'u'lláh is the return of Christ and of the prophets of other religions but that in him is to be found the solution to the world's ills. When men accept Bahá'u'lláh and begin to put into action his teachings, the world's millennium will become a reality, peace will finally be achieved, and men will be able to live in harmony and unity with one another in world brotherhood. The religious of the world, moreover, will become united under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh. When the nations, races, religions, and other divisions of men find their unity in Bahá'u'lláh, many of the world's current problems will disappear, and whatever problems remain will find solution under the direction of Bahá'u'lláh's divinely guided administrators. The Bahá'í Faith aims at nothing less than the union of all the world's presently existing divisions—racial, religious, national, political, economical, social, and sexual—in one world brotherhood and one common faith.

No wonder George Craig Stewart exclaimed: "Of all the fantastic dreams that men have ever dreamed this religion is the most ambitious." ⁵

Certainly, other religions have had great dreams, and other religious figures have claimed to be the return of Christ, but Bahá'u'lláh's claims are not so easily dismissed. The Bahá'í Faith has proved to an extraordinary extent its ability to unite in its cause the members of various religious creeds and backgrounds, and this diversity in unity is evident in many Bahá'í gatherings.

If Bahá'u'lláh is the return of Christ, if he is the expected deliverer of all the world's religions, if he is the hope for world peace and unity, his appearance in the world is an event of unsurpassed importance, and to ignore him would be tantamount to a betrayal not only of one's own religious heritage but of all humanity. The Bahá'í claims are of a nature to demand that attention be given and some response be made to them.

Its High Praise by Non-Bahá'ís

Another reason the Bahá'í Faith is worthy of study is the high praise lavished upon the new Faith by non-Bahá'ís. The adherents of a religion might naturally praise it highly and see great prospects for its future; but when non-Bahá'ís, many of distinguished merit, speak of the Bahá'í Faith in the terms they do, one's attention may properly be aroused.

Robert E. Speer, for some forty-six years the secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., a world traveler familiar with religious currents of the time, said of the Bábi religion: "It is one of the most remarkable movements of our day . . ." ⁶ Edward G. Browne, who translated various Bahá'í works into English, called the Bábi-Bahá'í movement "the greatest religious movement of the century." ⁷

Herbert A. Miller, a sociologist at Ohio State University, wrote: "What will be the course of the Bahá'í Movement no one can prophesy, but I think it is no exaggeration to claim that the program is the linear fruit of the religious contributions of Asia." ⁸ A Christian theologian, Nels F.S. Ferré, admits: "I have been surprised at the depth and devotional character of the best in Bahá'í scriptures as presented, for instance, in Townshend's *The Promise of All Ages*." ⁹

Marcos Bach, formerly a professor of comparative religion at the University of Iowa, says of the Bahá'í Faith: "Wherever I have gone to research the faith called Bahá'í, I have been astonished at what I have found."

He mentions his astonishment when he visited the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, and stood on Mt. Carmel in the shadow of the golden-domed Shrine of the Báb and his equal astonishment at the Bahá'í Nine Year Plan, projected for the years 1964-1973. He then says;

But most of all, I am continually intrigued by the Bahá'í people, . . . representing the basic cultural and ethnic groups around the world and embracing obscure and little-known localities in far-flung lands where even Christianity has barely gone. . . . I have met them in the most unexpected places, in a war-torn village in southeast Asia, in African cities, in industrial Mexico, in the executive branches of big industry in Iran, in schools and colleges on foreign campuses, in American cities and villages, wherever people dream of the age-old concept of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God, somewhere in the unfolding rapture of the phrase, the Bahá'ís are there.¹⁰

Although the Bahá'í are a small and sometimes unnoticed presence amid the fast-moving, technological currents of the modern world, the historian, Arnold Toynbee, suggests something of the potential of the Bahá'ís when he observes how the Christian faith, at the beginning of its second century, was little esteemed by the cultured elite of the time:

In a Hellenizing World early in the second century of the Christian Era the Christian Church loomed no larger, in the sight of an Hellenically educated dominant minority, than the Bahá'í and Ahmadi sects were figuring in the sight of the corresponding class in a Westernizing World mid-way through the twentieth century.¹¹

Toynbee feels that syncretistic religions constructed artificially from elements of existing religious (such as the attempts of the Roman Emperor Julian and of Emperor Akbar, in India) have little chance of capturing mankind's imagination and allegiance because such attempts are made partly for utilitarian rather than religious reasons, but Toynbee says, "At the same time, when I find myself in Chicago and when, travelling northwards out of the city, I pass the Bahá'í temple there, I feel that in some sense this beautiful building may be a portent of the future."¹²

Such recognitions by non-Bahá'í scholars of the importance and possible destiny of the Bahá'í Faith require that the religion be given careful attention.

Its Approximation to Christianity

Another reason for studying the Bahá'í Faith, particularly for Christians and those in the Western part of the world, is its approximation to Christianity. "No religion," one writer observes, "shows more strange parallels to Christianity. . . ."¹³ William A. Shedd, a Christian missionary in Persia, reported: "For the most part the ethical ideals are Christian."¹⁴ When Edward G. Browne visited Persia in 1887-88, he was "much touched by the kindness" of the Bahá'ís. When he mentioned this to his Bahá'í com-

panion, the latter responded by saying that the Bahá'ís were nearer in sympathy to Browne than were the Muslims:

*To them you are unclean and accursed: if they associate with you it is only by overcoming their religious prejudices. But we are taught to regard all good men as clean and pure, whatever their religion. With you Christians especially we have sympathy. Has it not struck you how similar were the life and death of our Founder (whom, indeed, we believe to have been Christ Himself returned to earth) to those of the Founder of your faith? . . . But besides this the ordinances enjoined upon us are in many respects like those which you follow.*¹⁵

Browne observed that few of the Muslims were conversant with the Christian Gospels, whereas the reverse was true of the Bahá'ís, many of whom, he noted, "take pleasure in reading the accounts of the life and death of Jesus Christ."¹⁶

Unlike many Muslims who believe that the Qur'án teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross, Bahá'ís accept the Gospel accounts of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, and whereas Muslims refuse to regard Christ as more than merely a prophet or teacher from God, Bahá'ís profess him to be indeed the Son of God, a perfect manifestation of deity.¹⁷

In one eloquent passage, Shoghi Effendi, great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, delineates the striking parallels between the ministry of Jesus Christ and that of the Báb:

*The passion of Jesus Christ, and indeed His whole public ministry, alone offer a parallel to the Mission and death of the Báb, a parallel which no student of comparative religion can fail to perceive or ignore. In the youthfulness and meekness of the Inaugurator of the Bábi Dispensation; in the extreme brevity and turbulence of His public ministry; in the dramatic swiftness with which that ministry moved towards its climax; in the apostolic order which He instituted, and the primacy which He conferred on one of its members; in the boldness of His challenge to the time-honored conventions, rites and laws which had been woven into the fabric of the religion He Himself had been born into; in the role which an officially recognized and firmly entrenched religious hierarchy played as chief instigator of the outrages which He was made to suffer; in the indignities heaped upon Him; in the suddenness of His arrest; in the interrogation to which He was subjected; in the derision poured, and the scourging inflicted, upon Him; in the public affront He sustained; and, finally, in His ignominious suspension before the gaze of a hostile multitude—in all these we cannot fail to discern a remarkable similarity to the distinguishing features of the career of Jesus Christ.*¹⁸

In the distorted reports of their teachings and activities, in the persecution to which the Bábis were subjected, in their religion's power to effect progressive social change and to inspire its followers to self-sacrifice and martyrdom, the Bábi movement reminds one of essential features of early Christianity.

Early Christian appraisals of the Bábi-Bahá'í movement saw it as a stepping stone in reaching the Muslims with the Christian gospel. An early notice in *The Missionary Review of the World* reported that the new teaching

*has opened the door to the Gospel as nothing else has done. Bible circulation is almost doubled every year. It is computed that in many towns and villages half the population are Bábis. This is a clear indication that the people of Persia are already, in large measure, wearied with Islam, and anxious for a higher, holier, and more spiritual faith. Almost all through the country the Bábis are quite friendly to Christians. The rise of this faith is in a large measure due to the spread of the Gospel, the best of their doctrines are borrowed from it, while they openly reverence our Scriptures and profess to be ready to reject any opinion they may hold when once proved to be contrary to the Bible.*¹⁹

As late as 1925 Jules Bois wrote, "It is quite possible that Baháism has a mission to pacify and spiritually quicken races and tribes which we have so far been unable to evangelize."²⁰ If Muslims could be won to an acceptance of the mission of Jesus as a divine revealer of God, perhaps they could eventually be won to a full acceptance of Christianity. This expectation, however, seems to have been premature, for instead of being won to the gospel, Bahá'ís began winning converts from Christianity. Robert P. Richardson, a strong critic of the Bahá'í religion, observed that "although so recent, this religion has spread from its birthplace, Persia, to the furthest ends of the earth" and noted with alarm that "Christians by the thousands have deserted the banner of Jesus for that of Bahá'u'lláh."²¹

Christian converts to the Bahá'í Faith, however, do not feel that they are deserting Jesus for Bahá'u'lláh but are reaching out to Jesus in his second coming. Just as Christians believe that if the Jews had actually believed Moses they would have believed in Jesus (John 5:46), so Bahá'ís believe that true Christians will accept Jesus in his returned form, Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í Faith thus becomes, in Bahá'í thought, a truer form—the modern form—of Christianity. Firuz Kazemzadeh, an eminent Bahá'í and a professor of history at Yale University, in a recorded commentary on one of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, says: "The Bahá'í Faith . . . encompasses all the previous faiths and is organically linked with them. . . . The Bahá'í Faith is Christianity today; the Bahá'í Faith is Islam today."²²

Because of the Bahá'í approximation to Christianity, Samuel G. Wilson, a Christian missionary to Persia, felt it necessary to stress that the Bahá'í Faith is "a distinct religion" from Christianity.²³ Since the Bahá'í ethics also are similar to those of

Christianity, the transition to the Bahá'í Faith is easy for some Christians. Be that as it may, the Bahá'í approximation of Christianity affords another reason for studying this remarkable religion.

Its Appeal to the Modern Age

A further reason for studying the Bahá'í Faith is its appeal to many people in the modern age. Charles W. Ferguson wrote in 1929, and his statement is still true in the 1970s, that "No cult bears a gospel better suited to the temper of our times than the Bahá'í."²⁴ Indeed, Bahá'ís believe that the Bahá'í message is God's word to the present age just as his word through prophets of the past was directed in a special way to the people of those former ages. Part of God's message through previous prophets, such as the requirement of love to God and man and the "Golden Rule," is eternal and is restated by succeeding prophets. But another part of the prophet's message is directed to the special needs of the time. It is at this point that the prophet employs his divine authority to annul previous laws and to issue new ones commensurate with the requirements of the new age. Bahá'ís feel, therefore, that in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are to be found those divine laws, principles, and requirements which speak with special force to the present age. Whether one subscribes to this religious philosophy, it is true that many of the Bahá'í teachings deal with important issues of the time, and this explains in part the Bahá'í appeal to the modern age.

The Appeal to Modern Issues.

The Bahá'í teaching concerning prejudice speaks about the current racial problem. The Women's Liberation Movement finds a friend in the Bahá'í teaching of the equality of the sexes. The threat of nationalism, the problem of war, the hope for a durable peace, the efforts at international cooperation and arbitration by a "United Nations" tribunal, the modern friction between science and religion, the language barriers, the problem of poverty, the scandal of religious plurality—all these important issues of the modern period are dealt with (and the Bahá'ís would say, find their solution) in the Bahá'í revelation.

No religion has addressed itself in such specific manner to so many of the major problems and issues of an age than has the Bahá'í Faith. Arthur L. Dahl, a Bahá'í, explains that the Bahá'í Faith "recognizes that the major problem of our age is the resolution of a series of deeply ingrained conflicts which are interrelated and penetrate various levels of society: conflicts between ideologies, nations, religions, races, and classes."²⁵ The Bahá'í Faith, thus, addresses itself specifically to these issues and offers to modern man a faith, based on the concept of progressive revelation, which reconciles these conflicting divisions of man.

At a time when Christians are seeking ways to make the gospel more relevant to the modern world, Bahá'ís feel they already have a gospel which speaks to the modern age in God's latest revelation. Why, the Bahá'ís ask, should one seek to make a

revelation which was directed to a previous age applicable to a later period, when God already has vouchsafed to modern men and women His new message which is specifically designed for the new age? Bahá'ís have for years been directing their energies toward the solution of certain modern problems which some Christians are only now confessing their guilt in having encouraged.²⁶ This helps explain the appeal today of the Bahá'í Faith over more traditional forms of religious expression.

The Appeal in a Modern Ecumenical Age

The Christian Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century has been widely acclaimed as a trend which future historians may recognize as “the most significant event of the twentieth century.”²⁷ The Ecumenical Movement within Christianity no doubt has been one of the major events of modern times, but Floyd H. Ross says, “The great issue of the hour is not Christian ecumenism but human ecumenism.”²⁸ It is to this larger ecumenism that the Bahá'í Faith addresses itself. The Bahá'ís are concerned not simply with union within the existing religions but with the union of all the religions in one faith and the union of all people in one universal brotherhood.

The Bahá'ís, thus, represent a gigantic ecumenical movement. In an age when the distances which separate peoples and cultures of the world grow smaller every day, when events in one part of the world dramatically affect the entire globe, when the threat of total annihilation endangers all life forms on earth, and when man constantly searches for better and more effective means toward world understanding and cooperation, the worldwide Bahá'í ecumenical program marks one more reason for this Faith's appeal to men and women of the modern age.

The Appeal to Today's Religiously Disenchanted

The modern world is justly described as a “post-Christian” and “secular” world. However much some may think these descriptions have been overplayed, the reality remains. Edmund Perry writes:

Respect for the Church is no longer axiomatic in the West and the norms of Christian behavior do not as formerly dictate the morals of Western culture. Indeed, Christian faith, the Church and Christian behavior have become quite unacceptable to the vast majority of folk in the West. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has aptly characterized this loss of the Church's power and influence in the West by the phrase "the breakdown of Christendom."²⁹

Not only does the secular man outside the church deem the church irrelevant, but a number of notable persons within the church have left it in recent times because of its irrelevance to modern man. James Kavanaugh, the "modern priest" who took a look at his "outdated church" and later decided to leave it, noted that "the most

significant religious experiences are taking place outside or in spite of the institutional Church."³⁰ He writes:

It is too hard to convince an irrelevant institution that the world finds it intransigent and obsolete. It is hard to "go through channels" when the "channels" are more a vested interest than a reflection of an honest search for faith. A man can only abandon the institution and search for God on his own or with a few friends.³¹

This search for God outside of the institutional church, of which Kavanaugh speaks, is being carried on by an increasing number of modern men and women, from the youthful "Jesus people" to experienced churchmen and trained theologians.

Kavanaugh's indictment of the institutional church is quite similar to what the Bahá'ís are saying, but instead of looking at only one segment of the modern religious world—the Roman Catholic church, as Kavanaugh did—the Bahá'ís have taken a look at Christianity as a whole and also at Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other religions and found them all outdated and irrelevant to the modern age.

In Bahá'í thought, all religions go through an inevitable process of development and deterioration. For a time each religion develops and makes a significant impact on the world but eventually begins to depart from the pure teachings of its founder and starts a decline in which it continuously loses its spiritual power and its relevance to the world. At an appropriate point, God sends a new revelation to renew and revitalize the religion and to make it more applicable to the religious and social needs of the time.

This revelation of God is continuous and progressive, determined by the world's needs and by man's ability to receive new revelation. The various religions are created because the followers of one revelation refuse to accept the succeeding one but continue instead to adhere to the prophet who brought the revelation with which they are familiar. To the Bahá'ís, therefore, since God has sent His latest revelation through Bahá'u'lláh, all previous revelations and the religions which have been built around them have become obsolete, except for the eternal laws which deal with matters such as love, kindness, justice, and humility; and these are restated in the Bahá'í revelation. The messages of previous prophets relating to religious institutions (rituals, sacraments, ordinances, religious laws concerning prayer, fasting, and pilgrimages) and laws directed to social needs are superseded.

To the person who has grown weary of seemingly empty religious practices and teachings designed only to perpetuate the religious establishment regardless of whether it makes any meaningful contribution to society, the Bahá'í Faith, which claims to have no clergy or ordinances and a minimum of dogma but an important social message, makes a definite appeal. Marcus Bach points out that the "many Americans" who "were ready to accept Bahá'u'lláh as the mouthpiece of God" were

"not people whom the churches have passed by; some of them had passed up the churches, feeling that creeds and sects were narrow and confining."³²

Its Fertility for Insights into Religious Development

Another important reason for studying the Bahá'í Faith is the insight it may provide in studying other religions, in tracing and understanding the developments which religions experience. To focus today on the birth and rise of a world religion which is so close to one's own day at such an early stage in its development may provide in no small way important, insights into the origin and development of religions of the past.

To be sure, each religion is unique in some respects so that one could not always conclude that what is true of one is necessarily true of all others; but every religion as a historical and social phenomenon also shares certain common features with other religions, else one could not speak of the general category of "religions." Every religion, for example, originates within a particular historical context, and it passes through certain stages of development. Every religion possesses a body of "sacred" literature or oral tradition, which is regarded by the religion's adherents as set apart from other literature or knowledge in a special way.

The Bábi-Bahá'í movement provides the historian of religion with invaluable sources for studying its origin and development as with no other religion. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the Bahá'í Faith is the most recent religion. Other religions began hundreds or thousands of years ago. Of the so-called eleven major, living religions of the world, only Islam (seventh century A.D.) and Sikhism (sixteenth century A.D.) are centuries old, the others—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity—date back thousands of years. The Bahá'í Faith originated only in the last century (1844 A.D.), and only since 1963 has it reached possibly the last phase of its formative development, which incidentally makes the present time most appropriate for making a study of that development. The Bahá'í Faith is, therefore, a religion of modern times and is naturally more accessible for study and understanding than the older religions.

A second reason that this faith is an excellent subject of study is that its origin coincided with the nineteenth-century development of interest in the scientific and critical study of religion. Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau and Edward G. Browne were among the scholars who took an academic and scientific interest in the religion, and the material they collected and their observations of the movement have placed all succeeding students of the Faith in tremendous debt to them. Edward G. Browne, for example, had a number of interviews with Bahá'u'lláh himself, the founder of the

religion. Moreover, he talked with and corresponded with a number of leaders in the movement and gained much valuable information.

In spite of these researches, a number of important questions regarding the origin and early development of the movement remain unresolved, but the information which is available is considerably greater than is available concerning the rise of any other major religion. Thus the Bahá'í Faith is important not only for its own significance but for the insights it may provide in understanding the manner in which other religions are born and develop.

Its Remarkable Growth

The Bahá'í Faith, moreover, deserves study because of its remarkable growth and extension around the world. Since its birth in 1844 the Faith has spread from Persia to all parts of the world and may be called quite appropriately a world religion. The Faith is reporting spectacular successes in recent years. When William McElwee Miller wrote his first book on the Bahá'í Faith, published in 1931, he said:

*All impartial observers of Bahá'ism in Persia are agreed that here in the land of its birth this religion, which once showed promise of capturing all Central Asia, is now steadily losing ground. . . . It is only a matter of time until this strange movement, like Manichaeism and Mazdakism before it, shall be known only to students of history.*³³

That description was written in the early 1930s. Much has happened since then. Miller himself was to note later, in 1940, that the number of Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies and the number of voting members had doubled in the decade from 1926 to 1936.³⁴ John Elder referred in 1948 to the "surprising vitality" observable in the Bahá'í movement in Iran.³⁵ Edward B. Calverly, in 1955, remarked, "The Bahá'í cause two decades ago was decreasing in influence in Iran, but is, at present, experiencing remarkable vitality."³⁶ Frank S. Mead reported that "since 1963 there has been a marked growth in membership" in the Bahá'í Faith.³⁷

Bahá'ís do not give statistics of their worldwide membership, but they do publish periodically, among other statistics, information on the number of countries opened to the Faith, the number of Spiritual Assemblies, and the number of languages into which Bahá'í literature has been translated. A look at the growth of the Bahá'í Faith in countries and territories during the periods of the Faith's successive leaders reveals the rapidly developing outreach of its influence. During the Báb's ministry (1844-1850), Bábis could be found in Persia and Iraq. By the end of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry (1892), Bahá'ís had penetrated into fifteen countries, and when 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The numbers quoted in this 1974 paper are, of course, obsolete. As of 2006, the Bahá'í Faith has over 5 million followers in over 100,000 centers throughout the world, making it the second most wide-spread religion after Christianity, with 12,500 local administrative bodies, and 182 national administrative bodies. The community is composed of over 2100 different ethnic groups. The Faith has participated as an NGO at the United Nations since 1948 and presently enjoys Special Consultative Status.

passed away (1921), an additional twenty countries had been opened to the Faith.

The period of spectacular extension, however, began under the able administrative direction of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Cause from 1921 until his death in 1957. At the time of Shoghi Effendi's passing, Bahá'ís had penetrated 254 countries and dependencies. Most of this extension occurred after 1953, when Shoghi Effendi launched the Ten Year Plan. Achievements during this decade (1953-1963) included the following: the number of countries and territories where Bahá'í resided more than doubled (from 128 in 1953 to 259 in 1963); the addition of 220 languages into which Bahá'í literature is translated and printed more than tripled the previous figure; the number of National Spiritual Assemblies (the national administrative bodies) quadrupled (forty-seven were formed in this period); seven new Bahá'í publishing trusts were established; three new Bahá'í temples were built (in Frankfurt, Germany; Sydney, Australia; and Kampala, Uganda, Africa); and the acquisition of forty-six new temple sites more than quadrupled the original goal of eleven.

This Ten Year World Crusade was climaxed in 1963 by two important events: (1) the election by the members of fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies convened at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, of the first Universal House of Justice, composed of nine men, forming the highest administrative body in the Bahá'í Faith, and (2) the convening of the first Bahá'í World Congress in London, England, where more than six thousand Bahá'ís from around the world gathered for the formal celebration of the Most Great Jubilee (April 21-May 2), commemorating the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of his mission.

The Universal House of Justice launched in 1964 the Nine Year Plan concluded in 1973. The reported growth of Bahá'í membership in the United States within this period is extraordinary. The sixty-second annual National Bahá'í Convention (1971), for example, reported that Bahá'í membership more than doubled within the past one-year period.³⁸ In a one-month period, nine thousand converts were won in a thirteen-county "teaching conference" based in Dillon, South Carolina.³⁹ The number of National Spiritual Assemblies has presently reached 119, with 12 more to be established in the course of the present Five Year Plan for the expansion of the Faith.

From the few hundred centers in thirty-five countries in which Bahá'ís could be found when 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away in 1921, the Bahá'í Faith has expanded today to more than 69,500 centers in more than 300 countries, islands, and territories of the world. The remark made by a Protestant minister to Marcus Bach that "If these Bahá'ís ever get going, they may take the country by storm" may be coming true today.⁴⁰

Notes

This article is based on a portion of the first chapter of the author's doctoral dissertation, "An Historical Analysis of Critical Transformations in the Evolution of the Bahá'í World Faith," Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 1974.

1. Ernst Kliemke, "The Cultural Principles of the Bahá'í Movement: Address in Esperanto Delivered at Danzig," trans. Martha Root, *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record*, April 1928-April 1930, ed. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, III (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930), 288.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952), p. 5.
3. *Power to Renew the World: A Challenge in Christians* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965), p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. George Craig Stewart, "The New Persian Temple in Illinois," *The Missionary Review of the World*, 44 (Oct. 1921), 793.
6. Robert E. Speer, *Missions and Modern History: A Study of the Missionary Aspects of Some Great Movements of the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1904), I, 121.
7. Edward G. Browne, "Bábism," in *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the Study of Comparative Religion*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Limited, 1902), p. 350.
8. Herbert A. Miller, "Religion in Asia: 'Round the World Log of a Sociologist,'—II," *World Unity*, 7, No. 3 (Dec. 1930), 187.
9. Nels F. S. Ferré, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, (London: Collins, 1956), p. 54.
10. Marcos Bach, *Strangers at the Door* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 75-76.
11. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, VIII (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), 117.
12. Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World* (New York: Scribners, 1957), p. 104.
13. E. E. Kellett, *A Short History of Religions* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 362.

14. William A. Shedd, "Baháism and Its Claims," *The Missionary Review of the World*, 24 N.S. (Oct. 1911), 732.
15. Edward G. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians: Impressions as to the Life, Character, & Thought of the People of Persia*, 3rd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1950), p. 235.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 235n.
17. The Muslim belief that Jesus did not die on the cross is based on an interpretation of a passage in the Qur'án (4:157-58) which reads: "They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; [and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof;] they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain, but Allah took him up unto Himself" (Marmaduke Pickthall, *The meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation*, A Mentor Religious Classic (New York and Toronto: New American Library, n.d.), p. 93). Various interpretations of these verses are given today by both Muslims and Christians. The traditional Muslim view is that some substitute, Judas Iscariot or some other, actually died on the cross in the "appearance" of Jesus. The more probable interpretation is that the Qur'án is denying any Jewish victory in Jesus' crucifixion since Jesus willingly laid down his life. Geoffrey Parrinder calls attention to a possible parallel to these verses in Surih 8:17 in reference to the Muslims who were taking credit for victory at Badr: "Ye (Muslims) did not kill them but God killed them. . . ." (Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'án* [New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1965, p. 120). Ultimately, the victory was the work of God. Similarly, the crucifixion was the work of God, who "gathered" (3:55; 5:117) Jesus to himself. Cf. Julius Basetti-Sani, "For a Dialogue between Christians and Muslims: Second Installment," *The Muslim World*, 57, No. 3 (Jul. 1967), 192.
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19. "Babism in Persia," *The Missionary Review of the world*, II N.S. (Jan. 1898), 55.
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21. Robert P. Richardson, "The Persian Rival to Jesus, and His American Disciples," *The Open Court*, 28 (Aug. 1915), 460.
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25. Arthur L. Dahl, *Bahá'í: World Faith for Modern Man*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972), p. 5.
26. See, for example, the Chicago "Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern," in *Christianity Today*, 18, No. 6 (Dec. 21, 1973), P. 38.
27. See Henry P. Van Dusen, *World Christianity: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1947), P. 69.
28. Floyd H. Ross, "The Christian Mission in Larger Dimension," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 214.
29. Edmund Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute: The Relation of Christian Faith to Other Missionary Religions* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 1.
30. Kavanaugh is the author of *A Modern Priest Looks at His Outdated Church* (New York: Trident Press, 1967).
31. James J. Kavanaugh, *The Struggle of the Unbeliever* (New York: Trident Press, 1967), p. viii.
32. Marcus Bach, *They Have Found a Faith* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1946), pp. 190-91.
33. William McElwee Miller, *Bahá'ism: Its Origin, History, and Teachings* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1931), p. 9. Miller has revised and updated this book in his new volume, *The Bahá'í Faith: its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1974).
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