

# 5 minute guide

to the

# BAHÁ'Í

faith

**Des McCabe**

# Contents

Introduction	3
History of the Bahá'í Faith	3
Bahá'u'lláh	3
Abdu'l-Bahá	4
Traditions and Beliefs	4
Worship	5
Holy Days and Celebrations	5
Timeline	6

## Introduction

There are approximately 5 million members of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide. It is the second most widespread of all world religions – currently found in 253 countries.

Central to the Bahá'í Faith is the conviction that all people are equal and share a common destiny. It is a monotheistic faith that recognizes the validity of all the world's great religions. The religion was founded approximately 160 years ago, making it the world's youngest monotheistic faith.

## History of the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith revolves around three central Figures, the first of whom was a youth, a native of Shíráz, named Mírzá 'Ali-Muhammad, known as the Báb (Gate) who, in May 1844 at the age of twenty-five, advanced the claim of being the Herald who, according to the sacred scriptures of previous dispensations, must prepare the way for the advent of One greater than Himself, whose mission would be to inaugurate an era of righteousness and peace, an era that would be hailed as the consummation of all previous dispensations, and initiate a new cycle in the religious history of mankind.

Swift and severe persecution, launched by the organized forces of church and state in Iran, led to his arrest, his exile to the mountains of Adhírbáyján, his imprisonment in the fortresses of Máh-Kú and Chihríq, and his execution, in July 1850, by a firing squad in the public square of Tabríz. No less than twenty thousand of his followers were put to death with barbarous cruelty. The remains of the Báb were preserved and concealed for over sixty years and then transferred to the Holy Land.

## Bahá'u'lláh

Mírzá Husayn-'Alí, known as Bahá'u'lláh (the Glory of God), a native of Mázindarán, whose advent the Báb had foretold, was imprisoned in Tihrán, banished (in 1852) to Baghdád, and then to Constantinople and Adrianople, and finally to the prison city of 'Akká, where he remained incarcerated for twenty-four years, and where he died in 1892. In the course of his banishment, and particularly in Adrianople and 'Akká, he formulated the laws and ordinances of his dispensation; expounded, in over a hundred volumes, the principles of his faith; proclaimed his message to the kings and rulers of both the East and the West, both Christian and Muslim; and addressed the Pope, the Caliph of Islám, the Chief Magistrates of the Republics of the American continent, the entire Christian sacerdotal order, the leaders of Shí'ih and Sunní Islám, and the high priests of the Zoroastrian religion.

## Abdu'l-Bahá

His eldest son, 'Abbás Effendi, known as `Abdu'l-Bahá (the Servant of Bahá), was appointed by him as his lawful successor and the authorized interpreter of his teachings. Since early childhood `Abdu'l-Bahá had been closely associated with his father, shared his exile and tribulations and remained a prisoner until 1908 when, as a result of the Young Turk Revolution, he was released. Establishing his residence in Haifa, he embarked soon after on his three-year journey to Egypt, Europe and North America, in the course of which he expounded before huge audiences the teachings of his father and predicted the approach of that catastrophe that was soon to befall mankind. He returned to his home on the eve of the First World War, in the course of which he was exposed to constant danger, until the liberation of Palestine by the forces under the command of General Allenby. In 1921 `Abdu'l-Bahá passed away, and was buried in a vault in the mausoleum erected on Mount Carmel, at the express instruction of Bahá'u'lláh, for the remains of the Báb.

## Traditions and Beliefs

Like Christianity, Bahá'ís believe in one God and that Jesus is His Son. Like Islam, Bahá'ís believe that God has sent many prophets, including Jesus and Muhammad. Bahá'ís have no priests, ministers or prayer leaders, and have very little public ritual. Daily private prayer and study are essential parts of individual Bahá'í life, and the Bahá'í community meets regularly for worship and consultation.

The primary belief is in the oneness of the human race. The Bahá'í goal is lasting world peace and unity which Bahá'ís believe can be reached only when the barriers of prejudice - from gender imbalance to racism - have been broken.

Bahá'ís believe all humans are equal, part of God's creation and on a spiritual journey which begins in the womb, continues throughout life and goes on after death. There is no concept of "heaven" or "hell" - at least not as places. To Bahá'ís, "heaven" is closeness to God and "hell" is distance from God. In this life, we make choices which bring us closer to God: developing honesty, generosity, justice in our dealings with others, and other spiritual qualities.

Like people of all religions, Bahá'ís believe that actions in this life prepare us for the next. Bahá'ís pray and meditate, hold an annual fast, and study the Bahá'í writings. The Bahá'í teachings make clear that work done in the spirit of service is equivalent to worship. This practical expression of the Bahá'í Faith takes many forms. There are Bahá'í social and economic development projects around the world - schools, village literacy projects, healthcare, and the development of village democracies. All work done in service to others, Bahá'ís believe, takes us closer to God.

After death, Bahá'ís believe that the journey towards God continues - and, if we use our time in this life well, we will already have made progress on this journey. Bahá'ís do not believe that non-believers will not reach God, but they will not have come as far along the way. Bahá'ís believe that in the end, however, we are all dependent on God's mercy.

Bahá'u'lláh's main message was that the earth is truly one country, and that lasting peace will be impossible until we really live with this in our hearts and minds. Bahá'ís regard world peace as being not just desirable, but inevitable. However Bahá'ís are not pacifists. The

religion took no stance on the Iraq war, for example, or any other conflict. It takes no sides in the political controversies of the day. Nor do Bahá'ís have any quarrel with the other great religions. Bahá'ís believe that all the religions come from one divine source: God. Bahá'í followers believe that they are parts of a single historical process taking humankind from its beginnings to the global civilisation that Bahá'ís believe will be the inevitable development in human life.

## Worship

Bahá'í houses of worship hold ceremonies which include readings from sacred texts, prayers, meditations and choral music. At certain times, fasting is also practiced. The faith has no clergy or sacraments. There is no equivalent of the Sabbath for Bahá'ís, The Nineteen-Day Feast would be the closest approximation. As the name implies, this observance occurs every 19<sup>th</sup> day.

The Bahá'í community believes that in offering service to humanity one is worshipping God, however there is still a very strong emphasis on the need for community worship and Bahá'í communities hold regular devotional meetings that are open to people from all faith communities.

As already has been said, there are few rituals in the Bahá'í Faith:

- The obligatory daily prayer.
- At funerals, the recitation of a special Prayer for the Dead.
- A simple marriage vow.

## Holy Days and Celebrations

- **Naw-Rúz.** The New Year, celebrated on the first day of spring (March 21<sup>st</sup>).
- **Ayyám-i-Ha.** 26 February – 1 March. Days in which followers should offer hospitality, gift-giving and kindness.
- **Fasting.** 2 – 21 March. Fasting is required from sunrise to sunset. This occurs during the last calendar month of the Bahá'í year.
- **Ridván.** 21 April – 2 May. It marks the time that the Bahá'u'lláh spent in the garden of Ridván, just before he announced that he was the prophet heralded by the Báb.
- **Bahá'u'lláh's public declaration of His mission.** April 21, 29, and May 2.
- **Báb's declaration of His mission:** 23 May.
- **Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh.** 3am, on 29 May.
- **Martyrdom of the Báb.** 9 July.
- **Birth of the Báb.** 20 October.
- **Birth of Bahá'u'lláh.** 12 November.
- **The day of the Covenant.** 26 November
- **The Passing of Abdu'l-Bahá.** 28 November.

## Timeline

1817	Birth Bahá'u'lláh.
1819	Birth of the Báb
1844	Declaration of the Báb
1850	Execution of The Báb
1863	Bahá'u'lláh declares His mission
1863-1892	Bahá'u'lláh spends the rest of His life in prison or exile.
1892	Death of the Bahá'u'lláh
1892	Abdu'l-Bahá (servant of Bahá), Bahá'u'lláh's son, is appointed by his father to be the leader of the Bahá'í Faith.
1898	The first person in Britain becomes a Bahá'í, an American called Mary Thornburgh-Cropper
1911	Abdu'l-Bahá visits the UK.
1921	Death of Abdu'l-Bahá
1921	Shoghi Effendi, Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, is appointed his successor, the Guardian of the Faith.
1957	Death of Shoghi Effendi
1963	The Universal House of Justice is elected with nine members as the supreme governing council of the Bahá'í Faith.



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