

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH: FACT SHEET

Founded a century ago, the Baha'i Faith is today among the fastest growing of world religions. With more than five million followers in at least 233 countries and dependent territories, it has already become the second-most widespread faith, surpassing every religion but Christianity in its geographical reach. Baha'is reside in more than 120,000 localities around the world, an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship.

BAHA'U'LLAH

The Baha'i Faith's unifying vision outlined in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, a nineteenth century prophetic figure whose mission began in the dungeons of Teheran, in 1852. Bahá'u'lláh (whose name means "the Glory of God") was born in Persia, November 12 1817. He was born into a family which could trace its nobility back to the most ancient of Persian dynasties. At a young age Bahá'u'lláh decided not to embark on the ministerial career He was offered in government, but rather He chose to devote His energy to philanthropic acts, to helping others. He was often referred to as "Father of the poor". This life of comfort soon vanished, however, when Bahá'u'lláh claimed that he was the new and independent Messenger from God. The Muslim clergy found they could not hang him for this claim, due to His great personal reputation and the social position of his family, they could nevertheless imprison him and sentence him to a life of exile, which He willingly undertook for over forty years.

The pivotal theme of Bahá'u'lláh message is unity. Baha'is believe that we are all from God, and therefore all equal. Baha'u'llah not only condemns prejudice; "close your eyes to racial differences and welcome all with the light of oneness" but he also condemns any notions of individual, tribal, provincial or national superiority.

Baha'u'llah teaches the oneness of religion. This doesn't mean that Baha'is believe that the hundreds of different religious sects and creeds are the same, but rather that there is only a single religion and all the different messengers of God have progressively revealed the nature of this one religion. These messengers include Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and Baha'u'llah. They comprise "The changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future ". This is the day, Baha'u'llah said, in which humanity has collectively come of age. Baha'is believe that the world is ready for the unification of 'all the peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society. " The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens, " Baha'u'llah wrote

A UNIQUE APPROACH

Unlike many other religions, the Baha'i Faith has no clergy. Instead, it has a unique system of global administration, which exist in local national and international levels. This system consists of freely elected governing bodies called 'Spiritual Assemblies'. The Baha'i election process forbids campaigning or nomination.

The method of decision making within the Assemblies is non-adversarial and seeks to build consensus from a diversity of opinions. The decisions arrived at in the process of consultation are acted upon in unity - regardless of how many supported the measure. It

takes a distinctive approach to contemporary social problems. The Faith's Scriptures and the activities of Baha'is address virtually every important trend in the world today, from environmental conservation to a renewed commitment to family life and morality. The Baha'i Faith's most distinctive accomplishment by far, however is its unity. Unlike every other religion - not to mention most social and political movements, the Faith has successfully resisted breaking into sects and subgroups.

TODAY'S CHALLENGE

These past 100 years have been truly overwhelming in terms of humanity's development. In this mere blink of human history, the process of global unification has been achieved in terms of communication. From Morse's first formal message in 1844 through to faxes, the internet and teleconferences that we use today, you can reach almost any corner of the globe. Other advancements in science have raised new questions and problems that cannot be confined within national boundaries, for example environmental degradation and injustices in the world economic system, International conferences and programmes, exchanges of knowledge - all reflect our interdependence and a growing awareness of the need for international co-operation. But huge problems remain. It is our challenge to achieve an understanding and realization of the oneness of humanity; as Bahá'u'lláh said "The well being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."

That may have been radical for 150 years ago in Persia, but peace, love and unity didn't work in the flower power 1960's why should it work now and with what concrete material can we create a united world? What are Baha'is doing towards this ideal?

GRASS ROOTS

The Baha'i Faith stipulates twelve fundamental principles These include:

- elimination of all forms of prejudice
- recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions
- full equality of the sexes
- elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty
- harmony of science and religion
- universal education
- a sustainable balance between nature and technology
- the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

These social principles are accompanied by spiritual guidelines. This involves striving to acquire virtues such as justice, honesty and generosity, as well as daily prayer and meditation. Baha'is express their commitment to these principles through their day to day interaction as individuals, as well as within the community aiming to contribute to humanity's development in a positive ways. The Baha'i International Community collaborates with many non-governmental organizations such as World Wide Fund for

Nature and branches of United Nations. Baha'is around the world have launched a large number of small-scale, locally based social and economic development projects, including literacy programmes, reforestation and environmental research centres, health clinics and projects for the advancement of women.

CONCLUSION

In a world disillusioned by many of the existing systems and ideology, the Baha'i Faith offers an encouraging model for co-operation, harmony and social action in the world. Is Baha'u'llah who he claims to be? Does this religion hold solutions for humanity?..

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