

Bahá'í World Faith

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to offer the student of religion a compilation of Bahá'í Sacred Writings which, in one convenient volume, discloses their universal range of themes, their direct application to modern life and their incomparable spiritual power. Here is a World Bible revealed for men of all races and lands; a new creation which affirms and fulfils the highest assurance which, from age to age, the succession of Prophets have enkindled within the human soul. The past is not denied but extended through the present to establish a firm foundation for a new era of justice and peace. The illumination cast upon our own age, indeed, reveals the former religions and their Founders in a clearer light than they have ever been manifest before. The Bahá'í concept of the unity of the Prophets of God bans religion as creed and ceremony but resurrects faith in realization of one eternal divine Truth which now, for the first time, can be apprehended in its plan and purpose for the human race.

What is the meaning of the word Bahá'í?

This word derives from the title by which the Founder of the Faith is known: Bahá'u'lláh, meaning "Glory of God." It designates the individual follower or believer, as Christian or Buddhist identifies the follower of Christ or Buddha. Like those words, it is also the adjective form used to describe whatever is directly related to the Faith, as for example, in the term Bahá'í religion, Bahá'í meeting or Bahá'í community. A Bahá'í is one who accepts Bahá'u'lláh as his Lord, knows His teachings and obeys His precepts; the Bahá'í religion is the religion of Bahá. The name 'Abdu'l-Bahá means "Servant of Bahá" and identifies the rank and mission of Bahá'u'lláh's eldest Son, the One appointed by Him to be the Interpreter of His Word, the Exemplar of His new creation, and the Center of His Covenant with mankind.

The range of themes found in the Bahá'í Writings is indicated by the subjects chosen for the nine chapters. In Chapter One we find passages on Bahá'u'lláh's statement of His Mission, and the nature of this Day. Chapter Two reveals the station of the Prophets in the one eternal Faith of God and of Bahá'u'lláh the Promised One. Chapter Three expounds the nature of the soul and the relationship of man to God through His Manifestation. In Chapter Four, Bahá'u'lláh establishes laws and principles for the new era. Chapter Five presents passages appointing 'Abdu'l-Bahá and describing His Mission as Interpreter and Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant.

The next four chapters contain excerpts from writings and public addresses of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which disclose application of the Bahá’í Teachings to life in our age. Thus, Chapter Six presents the text of addresses delivered in America on universal peace, and Chapter Seven illumines the spiritual mystery of man’s being. In Chapter Eight we find passages which offer us ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s consummate wisdom and love. Chapter Nine contains excerpts from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament, together with passages which trace the development and function of Bahá’í institutions as embodiment of the spirit of unity.

Bahá’u’lláh, whose given name was Ḥusayn-‘Alí, was born on November 12, 1817, in the ancient land of Persia. Like Buddha, He appeared in a family of wealth and high degree qualified to secure for Him an eminent appointment in the imperial government of the Sháh. The Persia of that time remained in a condition resembling the feudalism of Europe. Arbitrary authority, unchecked by a constitution, was vested in the person of the Sháh and exercised through a socially irresponsible aristocracy at court and in provincial palaces. The system was interpenetrated by the customs and laws of a traditional Islám supported by a vast army of priests, teachers and ecclesiastical lords. Theology determined the aim and content of education. The mass of the people lived under the exploitation of a medieval church-state.

Confined within its own culture and territory, divided theologically even from other Islamic peoples by the bitter schism between Shí’ih and Sunni, left far behind by a West swiftly changing through science and technology, Persia nevertheless was stirring with its own vision of righteousness and religious reform.

Within Islám itself, certain teachers had, in prophetic tradition, found conviction that the fulfilment of ancient assurances was at hand. They felt that God had willed an end to evil, ignorance, injustice and hypocrisy. They foresaw a new Dispensation superseding the decadence that had overtaken the Faith of Muḥammad. They awaited a time of judgment and sifting of the people of the entire world. In the darkness engulfing their society they were as men with lanterns looking for the place of dawn.

In such a land, ignored by the West, where spiritual enlightenment contrasted with official corruption, feudal pomp with helpless serfdom, memory of departed glories with betrayal of the trust committed to them by Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets, Providence found the theatre for the enactment of the most stupendous events in the long, dramatic history of revealed religion.

Respected and admired for His qualities, virtues and essential dignity, untempted by the prizes of a public career, Ḥusayn-‘Alí came to His spiritual Mission on the path of sacrifice laid down by ‘Alí Muḥammad, known to history as the Báb. From

May 23, 1844 to July 9, 1850, the Báb (the term meaning “Door” or “Gate”) proclaimed the birth of a new, world Faith. He abrogated laws of the Muhammadan Dispensation no longer effective; called upon kings and rulers to heed the Call and govern with justice; identified true faith in God with moral purity and righteous deeds; gathered about Him a company of devoted, heroic believers; aroused the spirit of hope among the people; and caused the clergy and civil authorities to be fearful of losing their privilege and power.

By order of church and state, the Báb was denounced as heretic and instigator of rebellion, subjected to the bastinado, twice immured in isolated castle-dungeons, and in 1850 this Martyr-Prophet was publicly executed in the city of Tabriz.

The Báb accomplished a twofold Mission. His Dispensation brought to an end the cycle of prophecy. He revealed the oneness of the Prophets. He inaugurated a new cycle of reality when the ancient assurances of faith are to be fulfilled in the unity of mankind. He also described His religion as preparation for the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh and Himself as Precursor, or Herald, of the greater One to follow Him. Though the spirit of all former Prophets returned to earth in Him, the religions of East and West knew Him not.

After the martyrdom of the Báb, official rancor centered upon Ḥusayn-‘Alí, who had become the outstanding leader of the Bábí community. He was immured in a dungeon of Tīhrán. During the year 1853, while He was suffering this affliction, the Holy Spirit descended and revealed to Him His Mission as Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of all religions and nations. In a letter addressed in a later year to the Sháh of Persia, Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “O king! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing, and He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven...” (p. 55)

Forty years of exile and imprisonment had begun. From Tīhrán, Bahá'u'lláh, members of His family and a company of followers of the Báb were sent to Baghdád, in the expectation that His absence from Persia would further weaken the remnant of believers. From Baghdád Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Constantinople, which transferred jurisdiction of the civil and ecclesiastical charges from Persia to the Sultán, head of Sunni Islám. Under the Sultán, the policy of repression and of refusal to give Bahá'u'lláh a hearing continued. From Constantinople the party was dispatched to Adrianople. In 1868 the Turkish regime committed Bahá'u'lláh and His party to the pestilential prison-fortress of ‘Akká, in Syria, now Israel.

Before leaving Baghdád for Constantinople, Bahá'u'lláh declared His Mission

(1863) to the company of Bábís, and from that time the believers have been Bahá'ís save for the few who rejected His claim and sought to perpetuate Babism beyond its destined time. It was in that city also that He revealed the incomparable Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Assurance) which opened the Holy Books and interpreted their laws and precepts as formative stages in the evolution of one World Faith. The Kitáb-i-Íqán is unsurpassed in its exposition of the unique stations of the former Prophets. Followers of those Faiths may well ponder those passages in which their essential purposes and spiritual significances are extolled.

At Adrianople Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Mission in Tablets addressed to kings and rulers, summoning them to true faith in God as trustees of the welfare of their people.

The period of Bahá'u'lláh's exile and confinement in 'Akká witnessed the climax of His Ministry and the rich harvest of His voluminous Revelation. Both to kings and to the world's religious leaders He directed appeals, warnings and exhortations, foreseeing the tribulations which must overtake mankind through repudiation of the Prophet whose Mission alone can unite the peoples and establish peace. (Excerpts from these Tablets are identified in the index of the present volume.) "Never since the beginning of the world hath the Message," He has stated, "been so openly proclaimed."

What have been termed "mighty and final effusions of His indefatigable pen"—Tablets revealing ordinances and truths—together with the Holy Book, characterize this fateful time. (Some of these Tablets appear in Chapter Four.)

Bahá'u'lláh's works include the mysticism of Seven Valleys, the succinct and vital wisdom of Hidden Words, the approach to God in prayer and meditation, proclamation to kings, appeal and warning to sacerdotal heads of religion, the interpretation of Sacred Scriptures, the establishment of institutions, the formulation of laws and the appointment of a Center of His Covenant effective after His own Ascension. No prior Revelation has so fully provided for the preservation and spread of its teachings in their essential purity, nor created the Order in which the religious community is to function and evolve.

Bahá'u'lláh ascended in 'Akká in 1892, His Revelation completed, His Mission fulfilled. His arrival in the Holy Land under decree of the Sulṭán brought to consummation the prophecy of Jewish and Christian scriptures. The land made holy by all the Prophets had received its Lord. His incarceration could not prevent Bahá'u'lláh from His expression of the divine Will.

The appointment by Bahá'u'lláh of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be the Interpreter of His Word, Exemplar of His Faith and Center of His Covenant has no historic parallel. It

means that divine authority and guidance continued after Bahá'u'lláh's Ascension. Revelation ceased, but the form, the mode, the pattern and the criterion were set up to assure the creation of a religious society unconditioned by the racial, creedal and nationalistic attitudes of the believers themselves. It means that the qualities requisite for such a task were available. The Bahá'ís have more than a Book; they have a continuing leadership raised above their human control. From 1892 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Mission unfolded until His death in 1921—thirty years, the life of a generation, expressed through countless actions, letters, discussions and public discourses which proclaimed the Faith to the world and gave it application to the mental and social life of our time.

Unlike former Prophets, Bahá'u'lláh likewise could create a social institution, the House of Justice, its members to be chosen by the Bahá'ís and its deliberations promised His inspiration.

By His appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and His establishment of a new social order, Bahá'u'lláh has provided for the uninterrupted continuance of the providential element in religion and supplied the means by which humanity can direct its powers into the channels of progress and peace.

'Abdu'l-Bahá fulfilled His Mission by providing a Will and Testament to take effect after His departure. In this document He described the social institutions of the Faith and established a hereditary Guardianship within the family of Bahá'u'lláh qualified to interpret the sacred writings and preside at deliberations of the International House of Justice.

The Bahá'í community has survived and been tested and purified at successive stages by bitter persecution, by the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh and by the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Their faith is not only reverence for Bahá'u'lláh but unity of action in a worldwide order. The whole man, and the wholeness of his relationship to society, now has a spiritual meaning and sanction. The division of religion into lay and clerical elements has come to an end.

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