

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

**Conference: Faith, Feeling and Identity.
Roehampton University, 2003**

Abstract:

Feelings within the UK Bahá'í Faith about the potential contribution of their faith to the unity of humankind.

Dr Stephen Bigger

ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation conducted with members of the Bahá'í Faith (BF) community in the UK. The contributor is not a Bahá'í but has researched Bahá'í literature and practice over the past 8 years and has close links with regional and national Bahá'ís.

This conference presents an opportunity to ask specific questions about faith, feeling and identity as seen through Bahá'í eyes. The Bahá'í Faith is small but worldwide and internationalist in theology, with central beliefs of the unity of human kind and the importance of developmental agendas which nurture global peace and prosperity through unity. The Bahá'í community locally nationally and internationally is typically multi-ethnic and lives out the theology of unity in diversity. The theology of the unity of spiritual revelation gives multi-faith dialogue a high profile in Bahá'í activities.

The analysis will be based around the following questions:

What contributions to you feel Bahá'ís make to the local community?

What contributions to you feel Bahá'ís make globally?

How do you think schools should promote spiritual development?

How important do you regard dialogue with a) other faiths and b) secularists?

How do you approach truth claims which are different than yours?

How important do you regard the revelation of the scripture?

How in practical terms does belief in the unity of humankind affect your thinking and attitudes?

How do you see the role of the Bahá'í World Centre?

What do you see as the Bahá'í distinctive contribution to the world community?

Faith, feeling and identity will be used as three analytical themes to interrogate the responses using grounded theory as the analytical technique. Responses have been sought from a range of ages. This will interrogate Bahá'í practical theology from the standpoint of the individual worshippers' feelings about the potential contribution of their faith.

The views in this paper are based on the responses of Bahá'ís to a structured questionnaire. The schedule of questions is given above. Responses are referenced to the question number followed by the respondent number (e.g. 3.6 is respondent 6's response to question 3).

I

Introduction.

This paper was a contribution to the conference at Roehampton university in 2003 on *Faith, feeling and Identity*. It investigated the feeling about global identity of members of the Bahá'í Faith (BF) community in the UK. The author is not a Bahá'í but a phenomenologist at heart has researched

Bahá'í literature and practice over the past 8 years and has close links with regional and national Bahá'ís.

This conference presents an opportunity to ask specific questions about faith, feeling and identity as seen through Bahá'í eyes. The Bahá'í Faith is small but worldwide and internationalist in theology, with central beliefs of the unity of human kind and the importance of developmental agendas which nurture global peace and prosperity through unity. The Bahá'í community locally nationally and internationally is typically multi-ethnic and lives out the theology of unity in diversity. The theology of the unity of spiritual revelation gives multi-faith dialogue a high profile in Bahá'í activities.

The Bahá'í Faith is a minority world faith with worshippers in most countries. A monotheistic faith, its initial founding and development were in Iran and Iran still has a large community of worshippers, much persecuted up to the present day. The name Bahá'í derives from their favoured divine name Baha, 'Glory'. Their main teachings concern the oneness of the human race, world peace, the end of foreign-ness, harmony, and equality (e.g. race and gender). Other world religions and their scriptures are respected, their founders being regarded as 'manifestations of God'. Worship is based around small local communities often meeting in people's homes. There are Bahá'í national assemblies (182 currently), and a major Bahá'í House of Worship in each continent (at Wilmette (USA), Kampala, Sydney, Frankfurt, Panama City, Apia (Western Samoa) and New Delhi. The Bahá'í World Centre is in Haifa, Israel, near the former home of Bahá'ullah and mausoleum of the Bab.

Most significant figures were Sayyid Ali Muhammad (1819-1850), commonly known as 'The Bab' ('gate'), and Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri (1817-1892), commonly known as Bahá'ullah, 'the glory of God'. Their writings are regarded as scripture, dealing with values and ethics for a technological and global age. International missionary activity started in the latter decades of Bahá'ullah's life who corresponded with world leaders. It accelerated under his successor Abbas Effendi (who took the title Abdul-Baha, 'servant of the Glory') who was active in world diplomacy between 1910 and his death in 1921. The mantle was then taken up by Shoghi Effendi who translated texts and organised the Bahá'í Faith and World Centre.

The Bahá'í Faith is a young major world faith but it has important things to say about world politics (particularly the critique of nationalism), technology, environmental trusteeship, world communication and global harmony, consultation and democracy and even unity. Yet the Bahá'ís are the least known of the principal religions found in Britain, and generally not included in religious education even though with more than 25,000 worshippers in Britain (Smith 1996, 141) they may not be the smallest. They have influenced the world stage with *The Promise of World Peace* (Universal House of Justice 1985), and *The Prosperity of Humankind* (Bahá'í International Community 1995).

II

Methodology.

This survey was carried out by email questionnaire. Access was arranged through the National Spiritual Assembly. The following questions were asked of a snowball sample (that is, known contacts were asked to send it to their friends and colleagues).

Age range	I am under 18. I am 18 or over. (Please delete as appropriate.)
1	What contributions to you feel Bahá'ís make to the local community?
2	What contributions to you feel Bahá'ís make globally?

3	How do you think schools should promote spiritual development?
4	How important do you regard dialogue with a) other faiths and b) secularists?
5	How do you approach truth claims which are different than yours?
6	How do you feel God reveals himself through scripture? How do the scriptures of other faiths fit in with this?
7	How in practical terms does belief in the unity of humankind affect your thinking and attitudes?
8	What do you see to be the role of the Bahá'í World Centre?
9	What do you see as the distinctive contribution of the Bahá'í Faith to the world community?
10	Please add anything else you feel relevant.

III

Spiritual Imperative and Religious Contribution

The BF sets out in its core beliefs to recognise all major religions of the world as authentic. This links with a core doctrine of the 'oneness of religion' which comes with a necessary condemnation of the tendencies to disunity brought about by exclusive attitudes to faith. This sets up a tension between the belief that Bahá'ullah is the current divine manifestation and the recognition of previous 'Manifestations' (Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha and so on). Dialogue must be one sided, if Bahá'ís doctrinally recognise the authenticity of other founders, but these do not in turn recognise Bahá'ullah or for that matter any other religious founder. For Bahá'ís, a steady stream of 'progressive' divine revelation leads to the present: the world's ignorance of the Bahá'í message must by definition deprive the earth of current and relevant divine guidance, leaving most to try to cope with out of date messages for other eras and different value systems and world problems – that is with inappropriate tools. In the Bahá'í identify therefore, concepts such as mentors, world welfare, custodianship, and pioneer are highly significant. Bahá'ís see themselves with a world-transforming mission. However, the BF is not a proselyting faith since Bahá'ullah warned against hard-nosed evangelism. It spreads by discussion and example, and not by 'Missions' or recruitment events.

Who?

A Bahá'í is someone who accepts the authority of Bahá'ullah as God's latest 'Manifestation' who revealed God's word to the current industrial and technological age. Other Bahá'í leaders have authority through their interpretative roles. Whilst recognising other religious leaders and traditions, these are not the prime focus of devotion. The religious tradition is the Judaeo – Christian – Shia-Islamic line of development with an emphasis on inward and spiritual reflection rather than external ritual. A great effort goes into interfaith dialogue and collaboration: this is assertion of identity, or the right to take part as a religion in its own right. This is more of an assertion of confidence than an apologetic insistence to the doubting. Whatever the attitudes of others to them, Bahá'ís have no doubts about their right to exist and operate, and (with all humility) about their spiritual stature.

This spirituality affects daily lives and work:

Bahá'ís help provide meaning and spiritual content to everyday activities and happenings and can help infuse their workplaces and local communities with a sense of purpose and worth (1.5).

Where?

The BF has local, regional and national bodies all under the auspices of the international body. These circles coexist and interact constantly. In the UK, there are likely to be local groups with a regional organisation, meeting in homes and public meeting rooms rather than a distinct place of worship. There are however key places of meeting and worship across the world, that the World Centre in Haifa, Israel, and on each continent. The European House of Worship is in Frankfurt; that in Delhi, India, shaped like a lotus, is the best known for its very distinctive architecture.

Why?

Emphases on 'faith in action' involves Bahá'ís in many local projects involved in the environment, education and community development, empowering people to help themselves.

“In general, Bahá'ís are socially active people, have a heightened awareness of social issues and are concerned with the welfare of others, with the functioning of their communities and with effecting positive change for the benefit of all. As a result, many Bahá'ís are inspired to involve themselves with various community-based initiatives and activities. My own experience is that you will find a disproportionate number of Bahá'ís on voluntary bodies e.g. magistrates, women's refuges, equality fora, etc. Bahá'ís like myself who attend UN summits e.g. Social and Economic Development Summit in Copenhagen 1995, 4th Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, Habitat II in Istanbul 1996, Social Development in Johannesburg 2002, etc.) also bring back to their local communities information and insights which then inform local action.” (1.5)

Bahá'ís bring distinctive values into the encounter, seeking for consensus and trying to win over hearts and minds:

“Bahá'ís are often excellent facilitators and peacemakers, and in most fora can smooth things over.” (1.1).

This involvement is to help to shape society:

Bahá'ís try to be 'good citizens' and are more conscious than most of environmental issues. They tend to be outgoing so, for instance, many of my local community are involved in local groups (1.6)

How?

Actions are generally down to individuals and groups.

“Bahá'ís are often excellent facilitators and peacemakers, and in most for a an smooth things over. Here in West Oxfordshire Bahá'ís do many things as individuals which people don't connect with their Faith - a project to clear a Mozambique Minefield with the UNA, a big project in Honduras for Agriculture and rural development, the UK end of which is run from Duckington, the V-P of the UNA's Southern Region, the President of the Oxfordshire Family History Assn, the organiser of the Chipping Norton Music Festival, members of the North Oxon Meditation Group, a guide at Kelmescott, also lots of friendship links with church people and councillors, someone who works in the WCRP, several in education” (1.1).

This may be an individual being a member of a pressure group, or a group putting on a library display of artistic event. Devotional events such as festivals and feasts are used to invite non-Bahá'ís.

Bahá'ís are principled people who conduct their daily lives and the life of their community in accordance with a set of values that reflect the spiritual nature of the human being and who are committed to ideals which are a matter of deep spiritual conviction. Because Bahá'ís identify the main ill of humanity as its disunity, the efforts of individual Bahá'ís and their communities are almost always directed towards initiatives that will promote a consciousness of the oneness of humanity and will provide practical ways to demonstrate and achieve this. (1.5)

This provides “a spiritual framework for social action” which is “concerned with evoking change in public policy”. Bahá'ís often assist a community “to raise its sense of the important issues of the day” eliciting change from the grassroots, welling up “from the hearts of individuals” (1.5)

Global influence

The BF has always set out to be a global religion:

The Bahá'í faith has given us the concept of a world community. It was a central theme of Bahá'ullah's message long before the term 'Global Village' was coined. The distinctive contribution is the realisation that we are part of a global community.

From the earliest days, the BF have sought to influence world opinion and work policy. This was no easy route and leaders spent much of their time oppressed and imprisoned. They have supported efforts to bring about world harmony as a precursor to world unity.

Since the League of Nations was started Bahá'ís both internationally and nationally have worked with the UNO and the League, so carrying forward international law. Bahá'ís are well represented among international civil servants and international lawyers, and indeed weapons inspectors. (2.1)

This has earned respect:

In addition, in global organisations like the United Nations, there is often a respect for Bahá'í ideals and Bahá'í representation is often relatively high. (2.2)

Globally, they play a significant part in feeding ideas and ideals into leaders of thought in the fields of international discussion and humanitarian agencies. (2.6)

The BF therefore is involved with global policy formation at the highest levels:

In addition, the Bahá'í International Community (the agency that interfaces with international institutions such as the UN), as an NGO, has a high profile at the international level and is involved at UN Summits and Commissions. It is influential in shaping thought in such areas as the environment, social and economic development and the status of women. (2.5)

This was linked to personal qualities that the BF promote:

Their behaviour (honest, moderate, sober, chaste) and attitudes (positive, loving, compassionate, encouraging) raise the general spiritual atmosphere and the ethos of the communities they live in. ... also work to promote oneness via UN, tolerance and understanding between faiths.

Others work on developmental projects:

Globally, the contribution is somewhat greater. There are many Bahá'ís who work in the third world, doing lots of very good socio-economic developmental work which substantially benefits local and even some national communities, often under the aegis of a Bahá'í inspired project. (2.2)

Even though the general public may not be aware of what the BF does, its their own quiet way they feel that the world is changing by taking seriously the Bahá'í agenda.

The Bahá'í Faith has had an impact on the language used to refer to a global society, a language that was previously unthinkable. I believe that we have had a very positive impact on environmental issues through Agenda 21, in human rights, on matters of civil society generally with our contributions at the UN. (2.11)

Cynics might say that the world is changing notwithstanding Bahá'í statements, that the social concern is a sign of the times. It is true that Bahá'ís today find supportive audiences, but this has not always been so over the past two centuries: this is not a case of jumping on a modern bandwagon. There is a difference to in the concepts of global exploitation (exploitation of global markets) and the unity of humankind: the world is divided by nationhood, politics and religion. The journey from here to world unity will be a difficult one.

Local influence

Bahá'ís stand for local involvement, consultation and democracy and we have seen that individuals tend to be avid local volunteers. Since the Bahai vision is one of empowerment, it is not surprising to find educational, social and cultural involvement.

As its focus is on unity, Bahá'ís might seek “to overcome fragmentation in society” (1.6). This fragmentation might apply to any group who are disadvantaged. Work to support disenfranchised or disadvantaged women has not disappeared from the agenda in the past two centuries; also action against poverty, discrimination and racism.

In providing a model for developing and expressing unity, the Bahá'í community supports the developing understanding of those worshipping within it:

“The Bahá'í community does have an internal momentum and substance however, and so acts principally as a resource for those few who actively wish to explore the Bahá'í faith in practice.” (1.2)

The community is a collection of individuals who each make a difference. The community does not act in any regimented way but is a social structure within which people grow. Respondents worried that the local Bahá'í community was not doing much, whilst saying that individuals within that community were doing a great deal.

Religious Inter-faith Dialogue.

We have seen that a high importance is placed on dialogue: this is affirmed by all respondents. Theologically the concept of progressive revelation helps, in that all monotheistic religions are defined inclusively as being within the same family. However, we have seen that this is theologically not mutual: a ‘current’ Manifestation of God with an updated divine revelation is threatening to those (Muslims and Christians) who affirm that their revelation is definitive. Just as ‘the hidden Christ within Hinduism’ could be accused of cultural imperialism, so the unity of religion could assume the ambition that everyone become Bahá'ís. The line between inclusivity and exclusivity is a fine one.

An important concept to come out is that of **reconciliation**:

To make religions and cultures reconcile with each other without sinking into a colourless coca cola society.

Revelation is seen by Bahá'ís to be not exclusive but across history a regular feature of the human-divine interface:

I believe God is like a radio station broadcasting at all times to all places. Messengers of God are the receivers who bring the signal down to earth. The scriptures are the channels of this

power. That applies to those books which we claim to be the 'Word of God' and those which are traditional scriptures of other faiths. (6.8)

Therefore, monotheistic religions have a common root:

Scripture then is a record of God's will for humanity for the age. As a Bahá'í I accept the concept that the essential heart of all religion is the same; to love and honour God, to put the spiritual self ahead of the material self, to obey God's will and to serve and love others. God's message within scripture evolves throughout the ages as humanity grows to maturity and therefore I regard all monotheistic scripture as one developing, evolving truth, with each tradition possessing equal validity in the wider sweep of history, but also a priority message in the age in which it was revealed. (6.9)

Unity

All respondents saw the concept of **unity** as the Bahá'ís most distinctive contribution.

The distinctive contribution of the Bahá'í Faith is the exaltation of unity to the status of overarching principle. (9.6)

Unity, a beacon of hope for the future and a good example of how things may work constructively in practice even now. A blueprint for reconciling the multifarious differences of view in the world. (9.2)

'Blueprint' is used of the process and not of the solution: it is the idea of unity that fuels discussion, debate and decision making all are seeking commonly acceptable solutions. This is no easy task. A majority vote can disenfranchise and disempower almost half of the voters. Consensus assumes that everyone can sign up and therefore the proposition may need to be watered down, perhaps even unacceptably. The strident voices may assume greater dominance than their views justify. The worst scenario is that no one decides anything.

Empowerment of people by involvement in decision making is one of the common Bahá'í strategies:

They also have a useful tool in 'Bahá'í consultation'. Everyone's voice is equally valid and all should have their say. (9.7)

This has implications for the spread of democracy:

One fundamental contribution the Bahá'í faith has made to world society has been to establish a real global democracy. While other idealists dream of such a thing, the Bahá'ís have made it a reality, representing 6 million souls from the widest array of humanity that is conceivable. (9.9)

Unity needs to be an example for the whole world system:

As the Bahá'ís struggle to create unity within their own community they can be used as a model for the rest of the world. (9.7)

I think the Bahá'í Faith is one of those small, quiet organisations which has been growing steadily and widely in obscurity but if people choose to open their eyes, they will see it everywhere having a profound effect on society. The distinctive contribution it can make is its concept of oneness which genuinely operates in the community and is an example to the whole world. (9.8)

Social, cultural and religious unity are interlinked:

The most important contributions that the Bahá'ís will make to their fellow human beings will simply be the recognition of three core ideas of unity; the oneness of humanity, the oneness of religion, the oneness of God. The healing effect of these beliefs as they grow in stature and permeate people's thinking around the world will ultimately do far more good

than the thousands of development projects and human rights campaigns facilitated by Bahá'ís. (9.9)

This is a vision of a world without disagreements and divisions, without different, rival and hostile constructions of 'the truth'. It is however a spiritual rather than a secular vision in which belief in God is central. One construction of theological truth is assumed, the others become outdated revelations, as it were 'old testaments'. Bahá'ullah discouraged aggressive conversions; but attitudes towards other theological and philosophical constructions is important.

The greatest benefit to me and effect on my life of the belief in the unity of humankind is staggering possibilities that are open me from accepting this idea. The narrow doctrines of racial, religious or national tribalism that continue to divide many sections of humanity shut people out from the richness and potential that accrues from living as members of a true global society. In practical terms I have been received as an equal by fellow Bahá'ís in many lands far from my home, and I feel enriched through my friendships with people from all manner of backgrounds.

This belief is also a responsibility because it challenges a Bahá'í to view all humanity equally, and there is no doubt that we all retain social and cultural programming from an early age that can militate against such a philosophy. This belief strongly hones my sense of social justice in view of such global issues as continuing poverty in huge swathes of Africa and Asia and the brutal denial of fundamental rights to so many of my fellow beings. (7.11)

The concept of unity helped one respondent in daily personal decisions and behaviour:

It helps me to spot racial and ethnic and religious prejudices. It stops me being cliquish or divisive towards others. In world affairs it helps me to see other peoples' points of view. (7.4)

Others said:

Belief in the unity of humankind means that I must curb any impatience, irritation with others, anger, jealousy and prejudice. It shapes my assessment of other groups of people and my adoption of "political" goals. (7.6)

I try to see all people as members of the human race and I try not to be misled by my first impression. (7.7)

It means I do not see colour. That I appreciate diversity. That I feel free to travel anywhere. That I am open to conversations with anyone about anything. (7.8)

Having not become a Bahá'í from being something (or nothing) else it is difficult to know how it is affected as all I can remember is this world view. However I know that I consciously view the world with the firm belief in attaining and lasting unity between all peoples and that when I see disunity I feel strong in the knowledge that I am part of something that tries to unite and reconcile. (7.11)

Attitudes to other truth claims.

We asked *How do you approach truth claims which are different than yours?* This is a challenging question at the best of times.

I used to get very tense and feel I had to prove myself and my beliefs, now I take an interest in hearing what others have to say and am happy to answer any question they have about the Bahá'í Faith, but I am never happy to get into a tit-for-tat debate. (5.11)

Debate was seen generally as a serious quest for understanding rather than cheap points scoring. A common insistence is that faith should be logical:

I am sceptical about any claims that ... ask me to believe six impossible things before breakfast or ask me to accept as fact events that do not accord with science. (5.5)

Revelation also was a source of confidence. The concept of progressive revelation allows the belief that all religions are rooted in God's message. One respondent said he viewed other truth claims:

With an open mind and an understanding that this will be another way in which God has presented his message. (5.10)

For another,

Ultimately, when approaching people of other traditions it is necessary to combine wisdom and humility with candour. (5.9)

On the one hand, once we have made up our minds, it is hard to change them again:

I try to have an open mind but must admit my ideas are very much coloured by what I believe as a Bahá'í. (5.5)

On the other hand, some argued that other traditions may be equally valid as routes to God:

There are many paths to God. The Bahá'ís would not claim to be the only way. The Bahá'í way is to emphasise the similarities rather than the differences. (5.7)

I appreciate that truth is not exclusive or final and that everyone has different perceptions of what is true. I would not force my version of the truth on others or reject theirs. (5.8)

They all are speaking the truth, yet their respective truths collide. Truth, and religious truth, is relative. (5.9)

Alternative society

The BF "gives a vision of the way the world could be – peaceful, just, prosperous, unified – and practical steps for achieving this" (9.5). Bahá'ís have aspirations for world society which they model in their own communities.

"Because the Bahá'í community is engaged in creating an alternative model of social relationships. They offer their own community as a model of peaceful co-existence among diverse peoples, of unity in diversity, and demonstrate how to use the Bahá'í concept of consultation to make decisions." (1.5)

The BF wishes to provide a model for an alternative society, a transformed vision of arranging social relations and affairs.

The Bahá'ís are involved in building an alternative society in which barriers of race, class, gender, ageism and other prejudices are removed. Within many local Bahá'í communities there is a good mix. In overcome barriers within their own community they make a good model for the rest of the world. (2.7)

Building community as a model to others is very important. Then there's the work at the United Nations, with NGOs, in social and Economic development, education, healthcare etc. All in all we are creating a community which does not recognise barriers of race, creed, class or religion and that is a model that others can study and emulate. (2.8)

In an age when many people's social and political beliefs are motivated by a reaction to what they oppose (i.e. anti-globalism), the Bahá'ís seek to build another model of an alternative kind of world they believe is possible, and the world-wide community exists as an experiment in global living for others to examine. (2.9)

The BF have been accused of world imperialism, running an American style police state from Haifa – so it is important to reflect on the meaning of the above examples. The Bahá'í community runs itself

by consultation, democracy and open management. There is no room for personal ambitions since everything is channelled to communal good. The vision for world politics is the same – no nations, with the whole human race regarding itself as one community managed and policed by open and transparent democratic decision-making where decisions are for the public good and not for sectional benefits. This would need a base, a physical centre, preferably one which is clearly not tied into vested interests. A judicial process based on law and precedent would need to be created as former precedents are underpinned with different judicial assumptions. They call this the International House of Justice. Bodies such as the United Nations are tentative steps in this direction.

Spiritual education in schools

This will receive separate discussion but the main points to emerge were:

- It's not the job of schools to destroy people's faiths, but to help people see that without spirituality we cannot live. (3.1)
- Worship which connects with the children and varies between faiths (3.1) – not a hotch potch but which gives real understanding of worship.
- The practical real-life aspects of spiritual development. (3.2) – how spirituality affects and influences daily life.
- Examples which are focused around the actual experiences (and predictable future experiences) of the children in the class. (3.2)
- I think schools should teach moral values -- as commonly taught by all world religions. (3.3)
- We could also teaching religion as religion rather than as 'things'. (3.5). RE tends to be about festivals, foods and rituals – but not on the essence of religion itself.
- Schools should promote spiritual development... spiritual development should be something which frees us as individuals (3.6)
- Tranquillity Zones (3.5) – encouragement of meditation and quiet reflection.
- Drawing out and developing virtues (3.7) – it is about what kind of people we are and want to be.
- Respect for faiths (3.7) – and in general better and more balanced information about all religions (3.10)
- Spiritual education is not the same as religious education. Spiritual education is holistic, covering all school processes: 'Through emphasising morals, ethics, values, virtues, citizenship, an appreciation of beauty, nature, the arts and music, prayer.' (3.8)
- Community service should be encouraged, as in the IB (3.9)
- More emphasis needs to be made on the concept that we are spiritual beings in a material world. (3.10)
- A marrying up of personal and spiritual development and citizenship – pupils need to see that these things are connected.

APPENDIX

The Bahá'í Faith

The roots of faith are in Shi'í Islam in Iran (see further Momen 1985). From the beginning and still today, Iranian Bahá'ís have suffered persecution first by the Shah's forces and latterly by the revolutionary Shi'ite government after 1979. Many have died for their faith, enduring harassment with a fortitude that stems from the understanding that martyrdom is the ultimate and most profound form of dedication and commitment. There are many Iranian Baha'is in European and worldwide fellowships, each with a story to tell and with beleaguered family still in Iran. Nevertheless, Bahá'í communities are multi-ethnic and international, with a respect for all world religions which, Bahá'ís affirm, were founded by 'Manifestations' of God – Adam, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha. (It is an interesting question whether, had the early Bahá'ís had contact with Sikhs, Nanak would also have been included).

“This doctrine holds that God is in essence unknowable and inaccessible. The purpose of human creation is the knowledge and love of God, but this is only possible through the Manifestations of God. These beings originate from the Primal Will or Logos. They combine the station of revelatory divinity with human servitude...Each is the rising and setting of the same sun, but each gives a more comprehensive and developed expression of the divine teachings, encompassing all previous Manifestations" (Smith, 1996, 37).

This is essentially a mystery in the spiritual sense of that word. Manifestations appear in suffering and persecution, announced by forerunners, and opposed by the religious authorities headed by the Dajjal, or antichrist. Eventually their dispensation triumphs, but eventually a new Manifestation will be sent. This however will not happen for a millennium. The figures in our story are the Bab or 'gate' (Sayyid ' Ali-Muhammad 1819 -1850) and Bahá'ullah or 'glory of God' (Mirza Husayn-' Ali Nuri, 1817-1892).

In Shi'í Islam, the twelfth Imam had become hidden (the 'occultation') in the Islamic year 260AH (874 BCE). In May 1844 (Islamic year 1260 AH, a millennium later) the Bab declared himself to have a divine mission as, or as the spokesman for, the hidden Imam, the Imam Mahdi. His followers became known as Babis. The Bab had written over 5 million words by 1847: most no longer extant. His revelations were compiled into the *Bayan*, some elements of which still survive in the Bahá'í Faith – pilgrimage, the 19 months of 19 days (in numerology , 19 represents the words wahid, 'unity' and wujud, 'God's absoluteness') and the ending of instant divorce. The Bab began to foresee the coming of a Manifestation for the current age. Opposition to the Bab was as much political as religious, since Babism had a fervour which led to public excitement and unrest. The Bab was executed by firing squad in 1850.

Both Bahá'ullah and his brother Azal (Subh-i Azal) commanded a following which caused tension and ultimately schism. Bahá'ullah recognised as leader of the Babis, spent some time in prison. in the "black pit" in Tehran. He wrote *The Hidden Words* in 1858 (Bahá'ullah 1932) and *Kitab-i Iqan* or "Book of Certitude" in 1862, works which were much more accessible than those of the Bab. Between these came a deeply spiritual mystical work, *The Seven Valleys* (Bahá'ullah 1992a) which owes much to the Sufis, especially Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* ensuring that the mystical path is theocentric and channelled through God's messengers, the Manifestations.

Bahá'ullah left Baghdad in 1863 for exile in Edirne (1863-8) and on departure declared himself privately, in the Garden of Ridvan, to have spiritual authority: many accepted him to be the expected Manifestation and became known as Bahá'ís rather than Babis. Some did not accept him, some of these remaining or becoming Azalis - Babis under Azal's leadership. The complete split between Bahá'ís and Azalis happened in 1866.

From 1868 Bahá'ullah was in prison in Akka, Palestine, eventually commuted to house arrest in his house called Bahji. He lived and continued teaching there until his death in 1892. He wrote many letters, books and devotional writings. Letters to foreign rulers advertised the Bahá'í message and demanded ethical government. Predictions of the fall of the Ottomans, the defeat of France and the first world war all added to his status when they came true. He stood for just constitutional rule, with rulers protecting and educating their people, eliminating poverty and working to international reconciliation with arms reductions, collective security, a single language and a world tribunal which would gradually work for the unification of an integrated world homeland without national tensions (the Most Great Peace'). He produced a law book, the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* in 1873 which set out Bahá'í devotions, practices, ethics and values stressing propriety in conduct and the moral life, based on conscience rather than enforcement. Prohibitions included backbiting, disharmony, enslavement, gambling, intoxicants and ascetic religious practices - as well as criminal activities such as murder, theft and adultery. Music was accepted as being 'the ladder for the soul'. Bahá'ís should not be exclusive but should associate with other faiths in friendship (Smith, 1996, 71-3; Bahá'ullah 1992b and see further Balyuzi H.M 1980; Taherzadeh 1974; Esslemont, 1923).

His work was continued by his son Abbas Effendi (1844-1921) who took the title Abdu'l-Baha, 'servant of the Glory'. Most of his writings (chiefly letters and speeches) date after 1892 and selections are available (Abdu'l-Baha 1978). His life and work (Balyuzi H.M. 1987) falls into three phases. From 1892 - 1908, imprisoned in Akka he was interpreter of Bahá'ullah and "The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'ullah", seeking unity, creating locally elected Bahá'í councils and outlining the system of election to the Universal House of Justice. At a very early stage he declared his grandson Shoghi Effendi to be his ultimate successor, The Guardian of the Faith. After the Young Turk revolution in 1908, political prisoners were freed. Abdu'l-Baha moved to Haifa, buried the Bab and built a mausoleum on Mount Carmel and traveled between 1910 and 1913 around the world, including Europe, America and Canada, meeting world leaders and local Bahá'í communities. That he predicted a European war was a cause of some concern. The final stage, from 1913-1921 saw him in poor health, helping the poor and hungry, helping in European restructuring but warning of instability and tensions to come. His writings are significant to Bahá'ís: 27,000 letters survive, and many talks, including those on his world mission.

Shoghi Effendi was educated in Oxford University (Balliol) from 1920. In his grandfather's will he was named 'Guardian of the Cause of God', the 'Centre of the Cause', and the 'Sign of God'. He was less patriarchal and devoted himself to writings: many of the English translations of Bahá'í scriptures are his work. He quickly set up the system of elected local spiritual assemblies and encouraged the development of national spiritual assemblies also. His emphasis on organization had beneficial effects, with a Global Crusade (from 1953) which helped to create a rapid geographical expansion. He established the Bahá'í World Centre in Akka/Haifa: the land around Bahá'ullah's house, Bahji, was developed into gardens; in Haifa, around the Bab's mausoleum. the International Archives building was completed in 1957. After Shoghi Effendi's death, no successor was appointed. After caretaker arrangements, elections took place to establish the International House of Justice in 1963. The development of the World Centre has continued with a constitution based on elections and consultation. By 2002 there were 182 national spiritual assemblies on five continents. Houses of Worship have been built at Wilmette [N America]; Kampala (Africa); Sydney (Australia); Frankfurt [Europe]; Panama City [S America]; Apia [Western Samoa] and New Delhi (India).

References

- Abdu'l-Baha 1978 *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre)
Bahá'í International Community 1995 *The Prosperity of Humankind* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust)
Bahá'ullah 1932 *The Hidden Words* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust)
Bahá'ullah 19928 *The Seven Valleys of Bahá'ullah* (Oxford: Oneworld) Bahá'ullah 1992b [1873] *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre)

- Balyuzi H.M. 1987 [1971] *'Abdu'l -Baba: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'ullah* (Oxford: George Ronald) Balyuzi H.M 1980 *Bahá'ullah: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald)
- Esslemont, J. 1974 [1923] *Bahá'ullah and the New Era* (4th edition. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust)
- Hainworth, P. 1986 'Bahá'í Festivals' in Alan Brown, (ed.) *Festivals in World Religions* (London /New York.: Longman) pp. 19-30
- Hatcher W S and Martin J D 1984 *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* San Francisco: Harper & Row
- Huddleston. J. 1980 *The Earth is But One Country* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust)
- Forward, M 1995 *Ultimate Visions: Reflections on the Religions We Choose* (Oxford: Oneworld)
- Gouvion C. and Jouvion P. 1993 *The Gardeners of God: an encounter with five million Bahá'ís* (Oxford: Oneworld)
- Momen. M. 1985 *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (Oxford and New Haven: George Ronald/Yale University Press)
- Momen. W. 1995 'Why I am a Bahá'í in Forward 1995, pp.196-206
- Nikoo, H. and Vickers, S. 1993 *Distinctive Aspects of Bahá'í Education* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust)
- Schaefer, U. 1977 *The Light Shineth in Darkness: Five studies in revelation after Christ* (Oxford: George Ronald)
- Shoghi Effendi 1955 *The World Order of Bahá'ullah* Wilmette, Illinois.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- Smith, P. 1987 *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Smith, P. 1988 *The Bahá'í; Religion: A Short Introduction to its History and Teachings* (Oxford: George Ronald)
- Smith, P. 1996 *A Short History of the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: Oneworld)
- Stockman, R. 1995 'The Vision of the Bahá'í Faith', in Forward 1995, pp.266-274
- Taherzadeh, A. 1974 *The Revelation of Bahá'ullah: Baghdad 1853-63* (Oxford: George Ronald)
- Universal House of Justice 1985 *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre)
- Vickers P. 1992 *The Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: Oneworld)