

## About the Reform Bahai Faith

The Reform Bahai Faith affirms the universal spiritual and moral principles taught in all of the great religious traditions. Similar to Mahayana Buddhism, Reform Bahais believe the Example set by Abdul-Baha during his travels to Europe and the United States in the early 20th century, an Example of universal love and brotherhood, was perhaps his greatest Teaching.

As Abdul-Baha often suggested, far from having the exclusive truth and the fanaticism to which that notion has so often led, Reform Bahais look to what is universal and non-creedal in the world's religious experience, and include prayers and meditations from other religions in their private and community worship, listen to and learn from God's other religions—all of which is to say the Reform Bahai Faith has moved on from its historical and cultural roots, as all living religions have and do, and is now a global, universal faith.

The Reform Bahai Faith, known during Abdul-Baha's time as the Bahai Movement or Cause, is not an organization, but a way of life. Abdul-Baha taught that the Bahai Movement was a way for people of all religious persuasions to come together in neutral territory and worship the Divine Being in a mutually respectful atmosphere of peace and harmony. "You can be a Bahai-Christian, a Bahai-Freemason, a Bahai-Jew, a Bahai-Muhammadan."

Reform Bahais believe Abdul-Baha's Interpretation of His Father's Teachings, as the Center of His Covenant, is much more profound than the prevailing conception of religion in modern society.

Speaking in Europe and North America from 1911 to 1913, Abdul-Baha stated on a number of occasions that the Bahai Faith could not be organized, and yet often spoke paradoxically of the growth of the Bahai community throughout the world, grounded in democratic pluralism.

More "Protestant" along the lines, in some ways, of Unitarian Universalism or other similarly liberal denominations, Reform Bahais believe it's largely the responsibility of the individual to read the Bahai Writings and prayerfully decide, prayerfully discern, how to follow the Teachings of Baha'u'llah, Founder of the Bahai Faith, and those of Abdul-Baha, the Interpreter of Baha'u'llah's Covenant, striving for spiritual development and service to humankind.

It is the individual soul that God has created to develop in the integrity and freedom of his or her own search for spiritual maturity and conscience, through prayer and meditation, transforming the community and the world one soul at a time, achieving the timeless goal of self-sacrificing love, compassion, and service to humanity.

In practice, there are individual Reform Bahais who follow all or many commonly shared Bahai forms and teachings observed by other Baha'i denominations because they themselves believe they should or want to; not because they're pressured into them. There are other Reform Bahais who don't feel comfortable with one thing or another, believing perhaps the time is not right for themselves and others, or the particular teaching may be more culturally bound to the past than the more universal principles of Baha'u'llah. Reform Bahais follow Abdul-Baha's 1912 Authentic

Covenant, which he delivered publicly in New York City, a broad, open, loving vision of God's relation to humanity.

While emphasizing what is universal in humanity's religious experience, Baha'u'llah taught the changing, evolutionary, and progressive nature of religious truth, demonstrating it by his own example and teaching which evolved away from much of his forerunner the Bab. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha demonstrated essentially a re-Interpretation of Baha'u'llah's teachings for the modern world. Reform Bahais do not regard the Bahai Teachings as a rigid set of unchanging and inflexible doctrines and formulas. Nor is the universality of the Teachings frozen in a form subservient to the exclusivism of the Judeo-Christian or Islamic and Sufi cultural heritage of the Bahai Faith. The universal, global Teachings of Baha'u'llah transcend the limitations of all past Dispensations, inspire and envision a new spiritual worldview and civilization.

Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha taught that it is the Spirit that is important, not form, doctrine, or organization. Accordingly, God is interested in the human heart, sincere worship, communion, and prayer, the individual cultivating the virtues of the spirit in selfless service to humanity, in practice and deed, not merely doctrine and theory, in every walk of life, respecting the unique cultures of the earth, even while revering what's universal or held in common by humankind.

Abdul-Baha envisioned the Bahai House of Worship as open to the faithful of all religions and traditions, as a place of universal prayer and meditation, not exclusively Bahai. Consequently, Reform Bahais honor the spirit wherever it is found and expressed in the writings and oral traditions of wisdom and belief.

Following Abdul-Baha, Reform Bahais elect Spiritual Assemblies, with nine members, for community consultation and guidance. Largely "congregational" in structure, local communities are independent grass-root associations, though they will ultimately elect national and an international unit with non-binding advisory and coordinating duties and responsibilities. While Abdul-Baha stated he had not "appointed" anyone, he did not mean that the local assembly could not appoint people to serve in any position necessary, "to engage in service of the Kingdom." At every level of Bahai consultation, the independence of the individual is preserved.

Reform Bahais believe Baha'u'llah taught that the separation of church and state is the Will of God and distance themselves from any interpretations of an eventual Bahai theocracy, following Abdul-Baha's vision of a global spiritual democracy.

Reform Bahais are free to express, write, and publish, without any type of "review" or censorship. The Reform Bahai Faith does not teach or practice shunning, nor any form of excommunication, following Abdu'l-Baha's teaching that "The conscience of man is sacred and to be respected."

Universal Religion, Brotherhood, and Peace  
A Sketch of its History and Teachings

The object of the Bahai Movement is the establishment of universal religion, which will be the

foundation of interreligious, interracial, and international brotherhood and peace. It offers to mankind a practical basis of unity, one which is in direct line with the great world needs of our time. It is paving the way for the great universal civilization which will evolve as people of all religions, races, and nations unite both spiritually and materially into one world order.

#### The Bab (The Gate)

This movement began in Persia in 1844, with the rise of a teacher known as the Bab, a John-the-Baptist figure, who proclaimed the coming of a greater teacher whose mission would be that of establishing universal religion, the brotherhood of man, and universal peace. The Bab, a reformer within Islam, was but the forerunner or herald of this greater teacher who was to come, and to this Promised One and to His cause the Bab and thousands of his followers testified by suffering martyrdom inflicted upon them by Muslims under the charge of heresy.

#### Baha'u'llah (The Glory of God)

Shortly after the martyrdom of the Bab, the great teacher and world reformer who was promised appeared in the person of Baha'u'llah (1863), from whom the movement now takes its name. His mission lasted forty years, during which time he was subjected to all manner of imprisonment and suffering at the hands of Oriental despots, because of his teaching, which brought freedom of thought and enlightenment to all people who heard it. Baha'u'llah was sent in exile as a prisoner from Iran to Baghdad, to Adrianople at the southern edge of Europe, and then eventually incarcerated in the Turkish penal colony of Akka, Syria, where, after having given His great teaching of universality to humanity, He passed naturally from this world in the year 1892.

#### Abdu'l-Baha (Servant of the Glory)

Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, was the one chosen by his father to further establish this great movement and to explain and demonstrate it before the world. He was constantly at his father's side during the exile and imprisonment of the latter, and was in every way Baha'u'llah's chief disciple. For forty years Abdu'l-Baha was a prisoner in the fortress of Akka, held there by the Sultan of Turkey for no other reason than that his teaching was bringing enlightenment and freedom of thought to all who came within the radius of its power. With the fall of the old despotic regime of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the present constitutional rule, which occurred in the summer of 1908, he was liberated from prison. During the summer and fall of 1911, he visited England and France, where he spent some months in teaching his Interpretation of Baha'u'llah's Teachings for the modern world. From there he traveled to the United States, speaking across the country to early American Bahais and others from New York to Chicago, Iowa and San Francisco, and elsewhere, addressing people in churches, lecture halls, and universities. Abdu'l-Baha wished to be known as the servant of humanity. He sought no higher station. As the "Master" of Baha'u'llah's Teachings, he set the Example of self-sacrificing love, compassion, and service to humankind that Bahais strive to emulate.

Abdu'l-Baha continued to pray at a mosque until the end of his life, even as he continued to teach and spread the knowledge of the universal teachings of Baha'u'llah and Bahai communities grew and developed in both the East and West. Reform Bahais believe it's a matter of individual conscience whether and how someone continues to worship with the traditional religious community of one's heritage. As recorded in Abdu'l-Baha in London, it is up to the individual to

define his or her relationship to the Bahai Cause: "You can be a Bahai-Christian, a Bahai-Freemason, a Bahai-Jew, a Bahai-Muhammadan. The number nine contains eight, and seven, and all the other numbers, and does not deny any of them. Do not distress or deny anyone by saying 'He is not a Bahai!' He will be known by his deeds" (98).

### Bahai Teachings

The Bahai philosophy is simplicity itself. It is expressed in this short quotation from Baha'u'llah's writings, "The root of all knowledge is the knowledge of God." Each of the world's great spiritual teachers has taught the same eternal Truth, revealing it in the measure and in terms applicable to the people of his time. This truth has ever been the mainspring and source of human advancement and civilization.

### Relation of the Bahai Movement to the Religions of the Past

The people of each religion look for the coming of a prophet or teacher who will fulfill the hopes of their own teaching and establish the truth in the world. The Christians look for the coming of the Christ (spirit), and the establishment of Christ's Kingdom; the Jews await the coming of their Messiah and God's Kingdom on earth; the Muslims believe that the Mahdi will come and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and the Kingdom; the Zoroastrians have prophecies relating to the coming of Shah Bahram; the Hindus believe that the divine spirit Krishna will speak again to the world for the enlightenment of the people; and the Buddhists look for the coming of the great Fifth Buddha or Maitreya, whose mission will be that of bringing a general worldwide spiritual enlightenment.

Bahais believe that all the prophecies of all traditions have been fulfilled in the appearance of Baha'u'llah. His universal Teachings offer the spiritual and practical solutions for both the individual and the global problems of today. The Bahai teachings confirm all religious teachings which have gone before, and offer a practical philosophy which meets the present day spiritual needs of humanity, free from the exclusivism, triumphalism, and fanaticism of past Dispensations.

Baha'u'llah wrote many books and epistles, in which He demonstrates the oneness of the spirit of all of the former religious teachings; also treating of the present teaching in its relations to the religions of the past. Many of these writings were in reply to special questions asked by men of learning and were therefore written from various points of thought, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, etc. The writings and example of Abdu'l-Baha are explanatory and interpretative of the teachings of Baha'u'llah, bringing them into the modern, democratic, pluralistic realm of the twentieth century, until his passing in 1921, and laying the foundation for a spiritual vision beyond even his own Islamic heritage, as well as that of the other religions, looking towards what is held in common, truly universal, the transcendent heritage and oneness of humanity.

### Social Reforms, Laws and Ordinances

In addition to the purely spiritual teachings of Baha'u'llah, He ordered certain changes in the manners and customs of people, through the observance of which the world in general will be helped both materially and spiritually. He advises the Bahais to be tolerant, and in no way to separate themselves from other people, nor denounce those of other beliefs. All men are free to believe as

they wish, but all are exhorted to unite in faith and to lay aside the prejudices and superstitions of past ages. Warfare should be abolished and international questions settled by arbitration, consultation, and negotiation. A universal language is favored as a means of bringing people together in unity. Legislation should be representative. The Bahais should be peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Their thought should be humanitarian before all else. Faith without works is not acceptable. One's worship should be supplemented by a pure and useful life in the world. Men and women should marry. Asceticism is discouraged. Monogamy is taught. Harshness and hatred are to be overcome by gentleness and love. Man should not use intoxicants as a beverage. Opium and kindred drug habits are denounced, as is also gambling.

The practical affairs of the Bahai movement are conducted by assemblies of consultation, composed of nine democratically elected members. Eventually there will be a general assembly of consultation composed of representatives from all parts of the world. This, when properly elected, will be known as "The Universal House of Justice."

Adapted from Charles Mason Remey, 1912.

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