

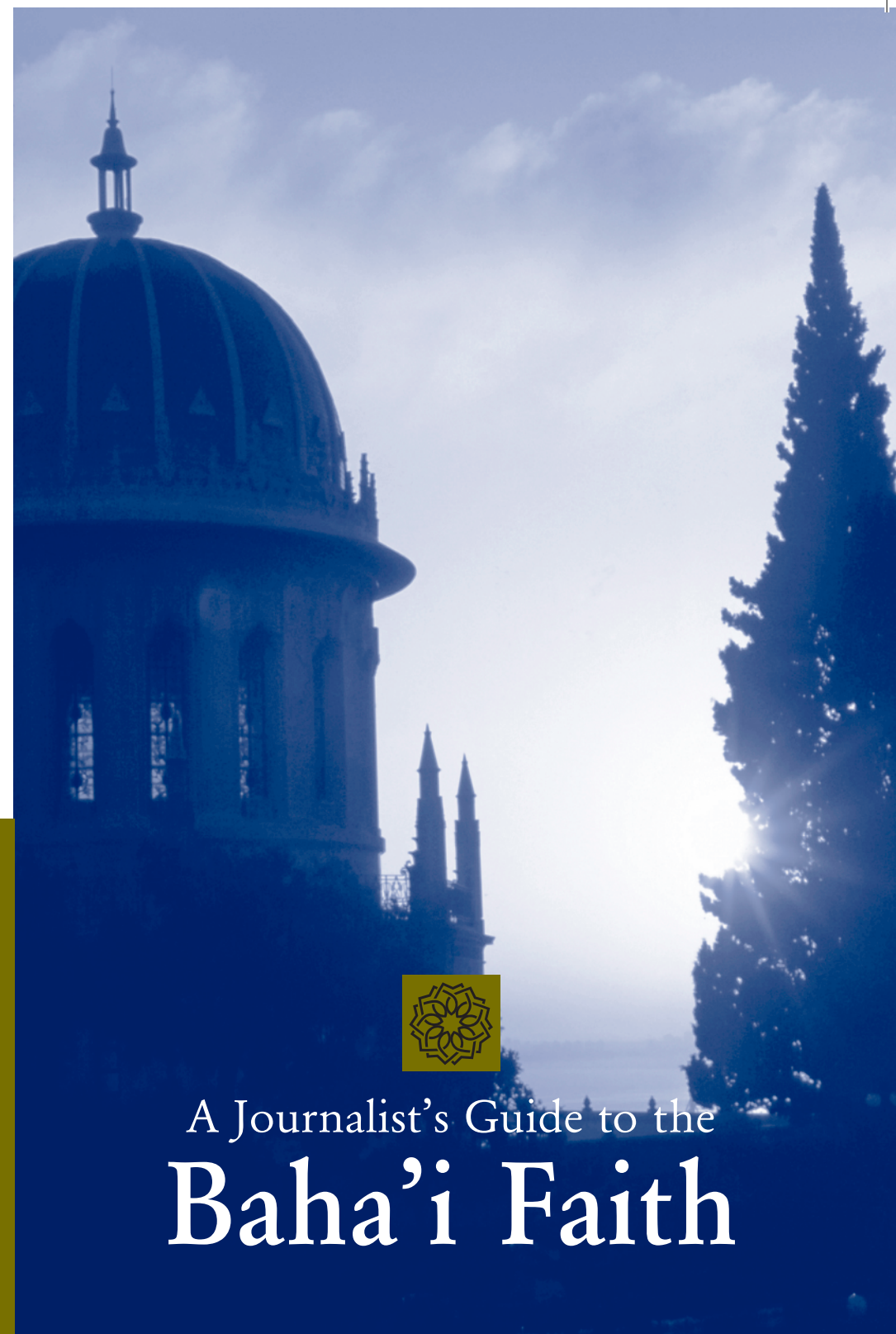


CENTRE FOR **FAITH** AND THE **MEDIA**



A Journalist's Guide to the Bahá'í Faith

P.O. Box 5694, Station "A"
Calgary, Alberta T2H 1Y1
Telephone: 1.877.210.0077
Fax: 403.278.7354
Email: info@faithandmedia.org
Web: www.faithandmedia.org



A Journalist's Guide to the Baha'i Faith

Foreword

Canadians, by an overwhelming majority, are people with spiritual values and religious beliefs. According to the 2001 Canadian census, eighty-four percent of Canadians indicated they had religious affiliations.

Yet there are only a handful of full time religion news reporters in Canada. With an increase in immigration and changing world events, stories involving religious communities and spiritual issues at home as well as around the world are dramatically increasing. General assignment reporters who must find accurate information about highly complex, sensitive concerns most often cover these stories. The Centre for Faith and the Media exists in part to help journalists have access to quick and accurate information, and the right contacts for Canada's diverse religious community. On our Web site, contacts in major centres for religious communities and traditions are available, as well as a growing body of background information. With these printed guides on major world faiths, we hope to help busy journalists cover stories involving faith. We hope these resources are both helpful and informative.

Richelle Wiseman
Executive Director
The Centre for Faith and the Media

A Journalist's Guide to the Baha'i Faith

Secret of Divine Civilization: A work composed by 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1875 detailing the role of religion in social reforms that Iran should implement in order to become a modern nation. It serves as one of the Baha'i Faith's major treatises on social reform.

Seven Valleys: A major mystical work composed by Baha'u'llah between 1856 and 1862.

Shoghi Effendi: (1896-1957) Great-grandson of Baha'u'llah, appointed by 'Abdu'l-Baha as the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith.

Shrine of the Bab: Shrine in which the Bab is buried, located on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad: The given name of The Bab.

Tablet: A letter (epistle) written by the Bab, Baha'u'llah or 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Universal House of Justice: The supreme administrative institution of the Baha'i Faith.

Writings: The holy works of The Bab, Baha'u'llah, and 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Quick Facts

- The Baha'i Faith (incorrectly called Baha'ism) is an independent world religion founded in Persia (now Iran) in 1844. It has been described as the youngest of the world's major religions.
- The word "Baha'i" is used as an adjective, e.g. "the Baha'i Faith," or "the Baha'i community." However, in reference to people, it can be used as either an adjective or noun, e.g. "he is a Baha'i," or "the Baha'i speaker." The plural is formed by adding an "s," e.g. "the Baha'is of Winnipeg." Spelling the word with acute accents over the second "a" and "i" (Bahá'í) is correct but not strictly required.
- It is not a sect or branch of Islam.
- Canada's 2001 census found 18,000 Canadians who declared themselves Baha'i, a 22 percent increase over a decade before. Based on its national membership list, community leaders state that the number in Canada as of the end of 2005 was slightly more than 30,000.
- The Baha'i Faith arose from the Babi Faith, founded by Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad. Born in 1819 he assumed the title of "the Bab" (the Gate) and proclaimed himself to be the Promised One of Islam, the Qa'im. The Bab also told of the imminent advent of another prophet. The Bab was executed in 1850 in Tabriz.
- In 1863 the founder of the Baha'i Faith, Mirza Husayn- 'Ali, declared that he was the prophet foretold by the Bab. He became known as Baha'u'llah ("Glory of God").
- Baha'is believe in one God, and that Baha'u'llah, like his predecessor, the Bab, was one in a succession of prophets, including Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, serving the same God.
- The religion's central belief is the unity and equality of the human race.
- There are roughly 5 million adherents in some 236 countries, making the Baha'i Faith the second most geographically widespread religion, after Christianity.
- There is no clergy and only a minimum of ritual.
- The religion's global headquarters, the Baha'i World Center, are located in Haifa, Israel. It is home to the seat of the Universal House of Justice (the governing body of the worldwide Baha'i community), and the gold-domed Shrine of the Bab.

Baha'is and What They Believe

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.” - Baha'u'llah

The faith's central theme is that humanity is one single race and that the day has come for humanity's unification into one global society. Service to humanity and social and economic justice are upheld as two of the highest ideals.

The Baha'i Faith teaches that the goal of the unity of humankind can be achieved through the following beliefs and principles:

- The oneness of God
- The oneness of religion
- The oneness of humanity
- Equality of men and women
- Elimination of all forms of prejudice
- World peace
- Harmony of religion and science
- The need for universal compulsory education
- Obedience to government
- Elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty
- Moderation in all things

Perhaps the most common and enduring misconception about the Baha'i Faith is that it is an offshoot or sect of Islam. A better understanding is the analogy that the Baha'i Faith is to Islam what Christianity is to Judaism. It is rooted in Islam but is a fully independent religion.

Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah was the latest in a series of God's messengers, including Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha and Krishna, all of whom are embraced as divinely inspired. While the core spiritual teachings of all religions are one, their teachings represent progressive stages in the revelation of God's will to humanity. Each messenger brought social teachings specific to the time and place in which they appeared.

The Baha'i Faith is monotheistic and its deity is the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God. But in the Baha'i Faith, God is regarded as unknowable, indescribable and transcendent. God's attributes can be known through the teachings and lives of the messengers and prophets of God.

Lesser Covenant: Baha'u'llah's agreement with his followers that in exchange for their obedience to his laws and institutions, he will protect the unity of the religion.

Local Spiritual Assembly: Elected body that administers the local affairs of a Baha'i community.

Lote Tree: In the Writings of Baha'u'llah, the Lote Tree generally means the Manifestation of God, which ordinary humans can never be.

Martyrdom of the Bab: July 9, a holy day when work should be suspended.

The Master: A title for 'Abdu'l-Baha, given to him by Baha'u'llah.

Manifestation of God: A term for the founders of the major world religions, who are seen as messengers of divine revelation and examples of a divine life.

Mirza Husayn-'Ali: The given name of Baha'u'llah.

Mona Mahmudnizhad: One of 10 young Baha'i female martyrs who refused to recant their faith in Shiraz, Iran on June 18, 1983.

Most Mighty Branch: One of the names given to 'Abdu'l-Baha.

National Spiritual Assembly: The elected body that deals with the affairs of the Baha'i Faith at a national level.

Naw Ruz (New Year): First day of the Baha'i New Year, March 21, when work should be suspended.

Obligatory Prayer: a special prayer required by religious law. Baha'u'llah specified three obligatory prayers, one of which Baha'is choose to recite each day.

Progressive Revelation: The Baha'i belief that God has sent successive revelations in order to uplift and educate humanity.

Qiblih: The Shrine of Baha'u'llah at Bahji; the direction in which Baha'is turn when reciting the obligatory prayer.

Regional Council: An elected body of nine Baha'is who assist in the growth of the community at a regional level. It lies between a Local Spiritual Assembly and the National Spiritual Assembly.

Ridvan, Festival of (“Paradise”): Twelve-day festival celebrating Baha'u'llah's public declaration of his mission. The first, ninth and twelfth days of Ridvan are holy days when work should be suspended.

Fast: Baha'is fast for a period of 19 days starting March 2nd in the last month of the Baha'i calendar. During the fast, adult Baha'is refrain from eating and drinking between sunrise and sunset. Children, the elderly, pregnant and nursing mothers and the ill are exempt.

Feast: The Baha'i Feast is held every 19 days. The Feast consists of three portions: devotional, administrative, and social.

Fireside: A small meeting held in someone's home for the purpose of educating people about various aspects of the Baha'i faith. Non-Baha'is are welcome.

The Guardian: Official title of Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Haifa: The administrative centre of the Baha'i Faith, located in Israel. This is also the location of the resting place of the Bab.

Hands of the Cause of God: A designation given by Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi to some 43 individuals in the history of the Baha'i Faith whose role has been to inspire and enlighten Baha'is in the application of the Faith's teachings in their daily lives.

Hidden Words: A work composed by Baha'u'llah in 1858. It consists of 71 Arabic and 82 Persian sections. Each section consists of an aphorism on an ethical or spiritual topic.

Holy Days: See individual entries.

Holy Land: Refers to Israel, specifically the Haifa, Akka, Bahji area. It is considered holy because it is home to the resting places of the Bab, Baha'u'llah, and 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Pioneer: A Baha'i who leaves his or her home and takes up residence in another area to spread Baha'u'llah's teaching.

Kitab-i-Aqdas: The "Most Holy Book" of Baha'u'llah. Composed around 1873 and contains the main laws and ordinances of the Baha'i faith."

Kitab-i-Iqan: (Book of Certitude): Composed around 1873 and contains the main laws and ordinances of the Baha'i faith. It consists of interpretation of biblical and Quranic terms, images, and prophecies, and contains many ethical and spiritual exhortations.

Knight of Baha'u'llah: The first Baha'i to travel to a country or territory.

The Baha'i Faith teaches the oneness of God, the unity of all faiths, the inevitable unification of humanity, and the harmony of all people.

Baha'i teachings also centre on the harmony of religion and science, the equality of men and women, the independent investigation of the truth, and universal education.

Baha'is believe in an afterlife and therefore treat the body with great respect after death. Cremation is not permitted. Burial should take place within an hour's journey of the place of death.

A History of the Baha'i Community of Canada - and a Canadian Connection to the Faith

The Baha'i Community of Canada dates from 1898 when Edith Magee, a youth from London, Ont., became the first member of the Baha'i Faith living in Canada. In 1902 the first Baha'i group was formed by May and William Sutherland Maxwell in Montreal.

William Sutherland Maxwell (1874-1952) was a well-known Canadian architect. He designed such Canadian landmarks as the Château Frontenac Tower in Quebec City, the Legislative Assembly Building in Regina, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal. In the Baha'i world, he's known for his design of the well-known Baha'i shrine that graces Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

His wife, May Maxwell, was an early Western Baha'i when she met her husband in Paris in the 1890s.

In 1912, the small band of believers that formed around the Maxwells had the honour of receiving 'Abdu'l-Baha, the son and appointed successor of the founder of the faith, Baha'u'llah, during his tour of North America. 'Abdu'l-Baha's speeches in Montreal attracted widespread attention from the press and the public. The Maxwell home where he stayed is today the only Baha'i shrine in the Western hemisphere.

As a result of 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit, Canada came to merit a mention in a Baha'i sacred text:

"The future of Canada, whether from a material or spiritual standpoint, is very great," 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote in a work called *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

Following 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Canada, small Baha'i communities took root in major urban centres and then in towns and villages throughout the country. Today, there are over 260 Baha'i

communities in all parts of Canada, with elected administrative institutions called Local Spiritual Assemblies. Baha'is live in 1,200 localities in Canada.

The Canadian Encyclopedia notes that some 35 of the faith's elected Local Spiritual Assemblies are on Native reserves, and others, with Inuit members, are in remote Arctic centres.

More than 15% of Canadian Baha'is come from an aboriginal background. A comparable segment of the community are first or second-generation immigrants. The community functions bilingually with its French/English monthly newsletter and national meetings that operate in both official languages. This cohesion and unity among the great cultural streams that make up Canada is a conscious and much prized feature of Canadian Baha'i community life.

Canada's Parliament was the first sovereign legislature to formally recognize the faith by incorporating its governing institution, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada, by a special Act of Parliament in 1949, one year after the formation of that national Baha'i institution.

In 1937, the Maxwells' daughter, Mary, (1910-2000), married the head of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi. After the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, Mary Maxwell, or Amatu'l-Baha Ruhiiyyih Khanum, as she is known in the faith, wrote letters and books, wrote and directed two major film documentaries, and contributed to the consolidation and growth of the faith.

Earlier in the 20th century, the French-Canadian architect Louis Bourgeois (1856-1930) designed the "Mother Temple of the West," the Baha'i House of Worship, now protected as an American historical site, in Wilmette, Ill., just north of Chicago.

The remarkable architectural contribution of Canadian Baha'is continued in the last decades of the 20th century when Hossein Amanat, a Vancouver architect, designed the seat of the Universal House of Justice at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, along with several of the other principal administrative buildings there, as well as the South Pacific Baha'i House of Worship in Samoa.

Canadian Fariborz Sahba managed the enormous construction project that extended and completed the Baha'i World Centre complex, designing the magnificent garden terraces that cascade down the side of Mount Carmel. Sahba had previously designed

Baha'u'llah (Glory of God): (1817-1892) Mirza Husayn-'Ali, the Manifestation of God for this day. He spread the message of unity and peace, and authored over 100 volumes to form the core of the Baha'i holy writings. He spent his 40-year ministry in prison and exile.

Bahji: The area where Baha'u'llah spent his final years (1879-1892). Baha'u'llah is buried in a shrine at Bahji, the holiest spot on Earth for Baha'is.

Bayan (Book of Laws): The major work of the Bab.

Birth of the Bab: Oct. 20, a holy day when work should be suspended.

Birth of Baha'u'llah: Nov. 12, a holy day when work should be suspended.

Center of the Covenant: a name given to 'Abdu'l-Baha.

Continental Board of Counsellors: An appointed administrative body created by the Universal House of Justice. Members are appointed on the basis of wisdom, maturity, and experience and primarily act as advisors to National Spiritual Assemblies in their areas.

Covenant: an agreement between God and humanity. Baha'is believe in two covenants: The "Greater Covenant" is the belief that God will continue to send manifestations of the divine to Earth. The "Lesser Covenant" is specific to the Baha'i Faith and involves Baha'u'llah's assurance that the unity of his followers will be maintained.

Dawn-Breakers: The account by Nabil-i-Zarandi of the life of the Bab and the development of the Babi religion. It was edited and translated into English by Shoghi Effendi in 1932.

Day of the Covenant: November 26, a holy day when work is not suspended; a celebration of 'Abdu'l-Baha's unique position in the Baha'i Faith.

Declaration Card: A card that is filled out by someone wanting to become a Baha'i. Though the true definition of a Baha'i is anyone who believes in Baha'u'llah, signing a declaration card is the formalization of that belief. The declaration then registers the new Baha'i as a voting member of his or her community.

Declaration of the Bab: May 23, a holy day when work should be suspended.

Deepening: Studying the holy writings and sometimes other religions as well.

Glossary:

‘Abdu’l-Baha: (“Servant of Baha”) (1844-1921):

Eldest son of Baha’u’llah. Designated by Baha’u’llah as the authorized interpreter of his father’s writings. Born Abbas Effendi; also known as “Centre of the Covenant,” “Most Mighty Branch,” and the “Master.”

Ablutions: a ritual washing of hands and face Baha’u’llah required as part of the daily obligatory prayer.

Administrative Order: all the institutions that administer the affairs of the Baha’i Faith. Created by Baha’u’llah and developed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice.

Akka: The one-time prison city in present day Israel where Baha’u’llah was kept for the last 20 years of His life. He died while still a prisoner, and is buried on the outskirts of Bahji.

Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Baha: November 28, a Holy Day when work is not suspended.

Ascension of Baha’u’llah: May 29th a Holy Day when work should be suspended.

Auxiliary Board: an appointed administrative body created by the Universal House of Justice. Members are appointed on the basis of their wisdom, maturity, and experience and act as advisors to Local Spiritual Assemblies and individuals in their areas. Assists the work of the Continental Board of Counsellors.

Ayyam-i-Ha (The Days of Ha): a four day period (five in leap year) of gift exchange. Also known as Intercalary Days (February 25-March 1) immediately before the period of fasting.

Bab, the (the Gate): (1819-1850) Siyyid ‘Ali-Muhammad, the Prophet-Founder of the Babi Faith and “Herald” of the Baha’i Faith. His ministry ended with his public execution on July 9, 1850 in Tabriz, Persia.

Baha’i Calendar: a solar calendar consisting of 19 months of 19 days, with four intercalary days.

Baha’i Era: The period since the declaration of the Bab until the next manifestation of God.

Baha’i World Center: At Mount Carmel in Haifa (Acre) Israel. Home to the seat of the Universal House of Justice, the Shrine of the Bab and other buildings. Also close to the Shrine of Baha’u’llah.

the famous “Lotus Temple,” the Baha’i House of Worship in New Delhi, India, reported to be the most visited building in the world.

As of this writing, work is proceeding on a House of Worship in Chile, which will serve as the “Mother Temple” in South America. The architect is another Canadian Baha’i, Siamak Hariri of Toronto.

The Baha’i National Centre is located in Markham, Ont., a suburb of Toronto. Developments in recent years in Canada include the operation of the Maxwell International Baha’i School on Vancouver Island, the opening of the Office of Governmental Relations in Ottawa, which is housed at the Centre for Baha’i Studies on the University of Ottawa campus, the conferences and publications of the Association for Baha’i Studies, annual conferences of the Baha’i Medical Association of Canada, and the opening of the Baha’i Office for the Advancement of Women in Quebec City.

Canada has done much to assist the Baha’i community, notably by welcoming and helping to settle several thousand Baha’i refugees following the 1979 revolution in Iran, which brought to power a fundamentalist Islamic regime that turned with ferocity on the Baha’i community, Iran’s largest religious minority.

Canada’s government has continued to play a leading role in calling the world’s attention to the plight of the Baha’is, specifically by co-sponsoring resolutions at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the UN General Assembly for more than 12 consecutive years.

Canada’s international development agency, CIDA, has worked closely with the Baha’i Community of Canada on international development projects in India, Central and South America, and several countries in Africa.

Who was Baha’u’llah?

Baha’u’llah, whose name means “The Glory of God” in Arabic, was born in 1817 in Tehran, Persia (now Iran). The son of a wealthy government minister and nobleman, his given name was Mirza Husayn- ‘Ali and his family could trace its ancestry back to the great dynasties of Iran’s imperial past.

Choosing a life of religious devotion over that of a wealthy courtier, Baha’u’llah became an early follower of the Babi Faith, whose leader, Sayyid ‘Ali-Muhammad, was a merchant from southern Iran who announced in 1844, after a series of revelations, that he was “the Bab,” (“Gate”) and the Imam Mahdi (the 12th Imam) of Shi’a

Islam, inaugurating a new revelation from God.

The Bab was executed for heresy in 1850. Two years later, Baha'u'llah was imprisoned in a dungeon known as the Black Pit of Tehran. There, he received several revelations that gave him a premonition of his future role.

Exiled to Ottoman Iraq, he withdrew to the mountains of Kurdistan, where he lived for two years. Returning to Baghdad in 1856, he soon became a leading figure among the Babis, alarming the Iranian government, which exiled him to Istanbul. Just before he left, in Baghdad in 1863, in a spot that came to be known to Baha'is as the Garden of Ridvan ("Paradise"), Baha'u'llah declared that he was "He whom God shall manifest" - the one foretold by the Bab.

He spent short periods of exile in Istanbul and Adrianople (1863-1868) before being sent to the prison-city of Akka (Acre) in Ottoman Syria (now in Israel), where he lived out the rest of his life in extended exile from 1868 to 1892. It was during this time that he wrote many of the works that make up the Sacred Writings of the Baha'i Faith.

Baha'u'llah died at Bahji, just north of Akka on May 29, 1892 and is buried there. His shrine is today one of the focal points of the world Baha'i community.

For almost 40 years, his teachings were shrouded in obscurity; today Baha'u'llah is recognized by millions of followers around the world as the Manifestation of God, or Divine Teacher, for this age.

housing also issued a report in June 2006 indicating that more than 640 Baha'i properties had been seized since 1980. By July 2006 more than 125 Iranian Baha'is were awaiting trial, many without formal charges, solely because of their beliefs.

Contacts and Websites

The Baha'i Community of Canada

7200 Leslie St.,
Thornhill, Ont. L3T 6L8
(905) 889-8168
Fax: (905) 889-8184
www.ca.bahai.org

Baha'i Shrine

177 Ave. des Pins Est,
Montreal, Que. H2W 1N9
(514) 849-0753

Baha'i Distribution Service:

1-800-465-3287
www.bahaibooksonline.com

Association for Baha'i Studies

34 Copernicus Street
Ottawa, Ont. K1N 7K4
(613) 233-1903
www.bahai-studies.ca

Baha'i Medical Association of Canada:

www.bahaimedicalassociation.ca

Centre Baha'i Louis-Bourgeois

4747 Blvd. Saint-Charles
Pierrefonds, Que. H9H 3C7
(514) 696-7694

Ottawa Baha'i Centre

211 McArthur Avenue
Vanier, Ont. K1L 6P6
(613) 742-8250

Toronto Baha'i Centre

288 Bloor Street West
Toronto ON M5S 1V8
(416) 944-0911

Vancouver Baha'i Center

5880 Main Street
West Vancouver, B.C. V5W 2S8
(604) 323-9919

The International Website of the Baha'i Faith:

www.bahai.org

Baha'i World News Service

news.bahai.org

Baha'i Reference Library:

reference.bahai.org

Baha'i International Community United Nations Statement Library

bic-un.bahai.org

One Country:

The online newsletter of the Baha'i International Community
www.onecountry.org

The Life of Baha'u'llah

www.bahauallah.com

Facts on the Baha'i Faith:

www.religionfacts.com/bahai

Media Contact:

Gerald Filson, Director of External Affairs, Baha'i Community of Canada
gfilson@cdnbnc.org
905-889-8168
cell 416-587-0632

The Persecution of Baha'is

Numbering 300,000, Baha'is form the largest religious minority in Iran and have endured severe persecution over many years. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has condemned the religion as heresy.

According to the Baha'i International Community office at the United Nations, between 1978 and 1998, the Iranian government executed more than 200 Baha'is. Hundreds more were subjected to arrest and imprisonment, and tens of thousands were deprived of jobs, pensions, businesses, and educational opportunities.

International human rights agencies report that ongoing violations include the confiscation and destruction of Baha'i holy places, seizure of assets, and the harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals.

In December, 2005, for the 18th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution put forward by Canada expressing "serious concern" over the human rights situation in Iran, making specific mention of the persecution of the Baha'i community there.

The resolution noted the "escalation and increased frequency of discrimination and other human rights violations against the Baha'i, including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, the denial of freedom of religion or of publicly carrying out communal affairs, the disregard of property rights, the destruction of sites of religious importance, the suspension of social, educational and community-related activities and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits..."

In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion released information about a confidential letter sent on 29 October 2005 by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran to a number of governmental agencies including the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard and the Police Force. It stated that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had instructed the Command Headquarters to identify persons who adhere to the Baha'i faith and monitor their activities. The letter requested the recipients to collect any and all information about members of the Baha'i faith. This ominous news came in the wake of mounting media attacks on the Baha'is by government sponsored media. More Baha'is were arrested in 2006, including 54 young people in Shiraz in May. The UN Special Rapporteur on

Some Key Dates

November 12, 1817:

Birth of Baha'u'llah

October 20, 1819:

Birth of the Bab

May 23, 1844:

Declaration of the Bab in Shiraz, Iran.

July 9, 1850:

Martyrdom of the Bab in Tabriz, Iran.

1852:

While imprisoned for four months in an underground dungeon in Tehran, Baha'u'llah receives the first intimations that he is the prophet foretold by the Bab.

Jananuary 12, 1853:

Exile of Baha'u'llah from Tehran to Baghdad.

April 21-May 2, 1863:

Declaration of Baha'u'llah in the Garden of Ridvan in Baghdad on the eve of his exile to Constantinople.

August 31, 1868:

Arrival of Baha'u'llah into the prison-city of Acre in the Holy Land.

May 29, 1892:

Ascension of Baha'u'llah.

1893:

First newspaper mention of the Baha'i Faith in United States.

1898:

First pilgrimage by Western believers to the Holy Land, where they visited with 'Abdu'l-Baha in prison.

September, 1908:

'Abdu'l-Baha is released from exile and imprisonment at the age of 64.

April-December 1912:

Travels of 'Abdu'l-Baha in North America.

1914-1918, World War I:

'Abdu'l-Baha writes the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

April 27, 1920:

'Abdu'l-Baha is knighted by the British Empire for his humanitarian work during World War I.

November 28, 1921:

Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Baha in Haifa.

1944:

Publication of *God Passes By* by Shoghi Effendi.

1951:

Eleven functioning National Spiritual Assemblies.

1951-1957:

Appointment of 32 "Hands of the Cause of God" by Shoghi Effendi.

November 1957:

Death of Shoghi Effendi.

1957-April 1963:

Faith is guided by 27 remaining Hands of the Cause.

April 1963:

Election, by secret, democratic ballot, of the first Universal House of Justice, now head of the Baha'i Faith worldwide, by representatives of 56 National Spiritual Assemblies gathered in Haifa.

1979:

Revolution in Iran brings to power a hardline Islamic government; crackdown against Baha'is begins, resulting in ongoing human rights violations.

Succession, Structure and Governance

After Baha'u'llah died, leadership was passed to his son 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921, born Abbas Effendi and known to Baha'is as "the Master") who interpreted much of his father's writings. He is responsible for bringing the Baha'i Faith to North America.

'Abdu'l-Baha was succeeded by his grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) who became the "Guardian of the Baha'i Faith." Six years after his death, the first Baha'i Universal House of Justice was elected to serve as the head of the Baha'i Faith. It has since been the governing body of the Baha'i world community. The Universal House of Justice is a nine-person council that applies the laws of Baha'u'llah and is made up of elected representatives.

There is no priesthood or clergy as such. Nine elected members of the community form a Local Spiritual Assembly for the area. While responsible for promoting the faith, the assembly has largely administrative duties and serves as liaison with the National Spiritual Assembly.

All of these councils use a method of decision-making called consultation. It is a non-adversarial method of group discussion and decision-making that relies on building consensus and on the unity of decision and action in the group and community.

National Spiritual Assemblies are elected by delegates, who are themselves elected at the local level. They are responsible for promoting the faith, stimulating and coordinating activities of Local Assemblies, and communicating with the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel.

The Baha'i World Centre consists of:

- the Shrine of Baha'u'llah, the Bab and 'Abdu'l-Baha
- holy sites associated with the lives of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha
- the seat of the Universal House of Justice
- the International Teaching Centre
- the International Archives Building
- the Centre for the Study of the Texts

The Hidden Words is a collection of poetic statements containing religious and ethical injunctions.

The Seven Valleys is a mystical work describing the stages of spiritual growth.

Scriptures of any of the world's great religions may be read in prayer and contemplation.

The quantity of writings produced by Baha'u'llah is vast. Baha'u'llah himself estimated that his collected works would amount to more than 100 volumes if all were bound in a series of books.

Houses of Worship

Baha'i Houses of Worship are few - there are only seven around the world. All are open to all people. A nine-sided structure and central dome, common to all of them, symbolize both the diversity of the human race and its essential oneness.

As well, Baha'i Houses of Worship are known for their elaborate and lush gardens.

There is at least one House of Worship on each of the inhabited continents:

- Wilmette, Illinois, U.S.A.
- Frankfurt, Germany
- Kampala, Uganda
- Sydney, Australia
- Panama City, Panama
- Apia, Samoa
- New Delhi, India

A new House of Worship for South America is being built in Santiago, Chile.

There are currently many other sites set aside around the world for future Houses of Worship, but local Baha'i communities tend to emphasize developing the social and spiritual institutions of communal life rather than the construction of physical buildings.

Apart from these major centers, Baha'i communities commonly have no specific places of worship and often meet in members' homes or in local community centres.

Holy Days

There are eleven holy days on the Baha'i calendar, which is divided into 19 months of 19 days each per year. On these days, Baha'is are urged to suspend work and school, and spend the day with family and community. The remaining four intercalary days (five in a leap year), called Ayyam-i-Ha, are set aside for visits and gift-giving.

The 9 holy days when work should be suspended are:

- March 21, New Year (the vernal equinox, known as Naw-Ruz).
- April 21, First Day of Ridvan
- April 29, Ninth Day of Ridvan
- May 2, Twelfth Day of Ridvan
- May 23, Declaration of the Bab
- May 29, Ascension (Death) of Baha'u'llah
- July 9, Martyrdom of the Bab
- October 20, Birth of the Bab
- November 12, Birth of Baha'u'llah

The Ridvan festival (April 21-May 2) marks the anniversary of Baha'u'llah's first declaration of his mission in 1863.

The other 2 holy days are considered minor holidays when work is not suspended:

- Day of the Covenant: November 26.
- Passing of 'Abdu'l-Baha: November 28.

Special Observances

Baha'i Fast

Baha'is over the age of 15 fast for 19 days from sunrise to sunset. The fast period begins at sunrise March 2 and extends until sunset March 20.

This is a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, during which the believer must strive to make the necessary readjustments in his inner life, and to refresh and reinvigorate spiritual forces. Fasting is seen as a reminder of abstinence from selfish and carnal desires. Baha'u'llah considered fasting, like obligatory prayer, as among the greatest of spiritual obligations.

Children, expectant and nursing mothers, the sick, the elderly, travelers, persons engaged in heavy labour and menstruating women are exempt from fasting.

Nineteen Day Feast

A three-part gathering held every 19 days, on the first day of each Baha'i month. All Baha'is are encouraged to attend. The Feast always contains three elements: spiritual devotion, administrative consultation, and social fellowship.

Devotional Life/Prayer

The Baha'i Faith places great importance on an individual's relationship with God, but not on formal ritual. Baha'is have no priesthood or clergy, no initiation ceremonies, no sacraments, and no worship rituals.

At the centre of Baha'i community life are four core activities. Study circles are small informal groups that get together to study spiritual and moral principles, learning how to apply them to daily life. Devotional gatherings, like study circles, are informal, open to anyone, and often take place in people's homes. The gatherings allow friends to pray and meditate together on the scriptures of the Baha'i Faith and other religions. Children's classes provide an opportunity for the spiritual education and moral development of children. Programs for "junior youth" are a fourth core activity to which the Baha'i community is dedicated.

Every Baha'i is obliged to pray daily, read the sacred writings each morning and evening, perform a pilgrimage once in their life if they are able to afford it, and support their faith with material offerings. Baha'u'llah wrote hundreds of prayers for general use, healing, spiritual growth, facing difficulties, marriage, community life, and humanity.

He also asked his followers to choose one of three obligatory prayers, said facing the Qiblah (the shrine of Baha'u'llah at Bahji in present day Israel) for recitation each day. The shortest of these prayers is just three sentences long:

"I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."

In addition to daily prayer, Baha'u'llah urged His followers to reflect at the end of each day on their deeds and worth. Every Baha'i is free to choose his or her own meditational form.

Morality

The Baha'i perspective on moral issues reflects to some extent moral understandings and practices that have long been associated with the great religious traditions of the world. Rejecting a moral relativism, Baha'is do feel that the emergence in the modern era of human rights and other moral ideals that embrace inclusive notions of society while respecting the autonomy of the individual is also essential to a moral understanding that is both progressive and universal. Among other moral dictums, the Baha'i Faith specifically forbids lying, promiscuity, gambling, gossip and backbiting while upholding the virtues of honesty, trustworthiness, courage and compassion.

There are no dietary restrictions, but Baha'is may not consume alcohol or abuse drugs.

Matrimony is considered a holy state. Marriage requires the consent of both parties and their parents. Couples must remain chaste before marriage and be faithful to each other in marriage.

Soliciting of funds from individuals is strictly prohibited, and Baha'i institutions are forbidden to accept contributions from people who are not Baha'i.

Sacred Texts

There is no single, authoritative Baha'i scripture, but Baha'is accept as sacred all the writings of Baha'u'llah, and adhere to the interpretation of those writings by his appointed successors, 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi. Baha'u'llah's writings are considered divinely inspired, and are believed to contain God's revelation for the present age.

Only a portion of Baha'u'llah's writings have been translated into English from the original Persian and Arabic.

The seminal text is considered to be the *Most Holy Book (Kitab-i-Aqdas)* for its summary of Baha'i laws. It was revealed during his imprisonment in Akka.

Other texts include *The Book of Certitude (Kitab-i-Iqan, 1862)*, which gives a clear account of Baha'u'llah's main teachings and deals with the great questions that have always lain at the heart of religious life: God, the nature of humanity, the purpose of life, and the function of Revelation.