

# Unity in Diversity: The Attraction of the Bahá'í Message in the 1990s

On May 29 of every year the Bahá'í celebrate the "passing" or "Ascension" of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í faith. This year's celebration comes on the tail end of the Bahá'í holy year, marking the 100th anniversary of the founder's death. The Bahá'í faith is growing rapidly. The Bahá'í faith claims followers in almost every country and a membership of over 5 million people. More than 30,000 Bahá'í from the world over came to New York in November, 1992 for the Bahá'í World Congress that commemorated the centennial of the prophet's passing.

**The Birth of a Religion • Universal "Oneness" • A Global Administrative Order • Social Justice and Sustainable World Development • Riding the Wave of Expansion**

By Nicholas Breyfogle

The picture that graces the front cover of the Bahá'í magazine tells at least a thousand words about the Bahá'í religion today. The photograph was taken at the 1988 Bahá'í International Convention in Haifa, Israel and shows a crowd of men and women smiling on the steps in front of a large building replete with facade of white classical columns. The color of the people's skin seems to vary as widely as the style of their hair and the color and fashion of their clothing. It is at once a microcosm of the world around us today and a vision of a desired future, reminiscent of Disney's "It's a Small World After All."

Over not much more than one hundred years, the Bahá'í faith has grown from its obscure roots in what is present day Iran to a worldwide religion that stands second only to Christianity in the scope of its geographic reach (measured in the number of countries in which adherents are found).

Accompanying the regional diversity is a numerical growth rate that has recently risen in almost exponential jumps. Adherents have grown from approximately 50,000 in 1892, to 400,000 in 1963, to the well over 5 million in 1991. In the last six years alone, the faith grew by 43% and has the fastest growth rate of any of the world's independent religions.

How is it that this religion, which has been around for little more than one hundred years, has come to boast such ethnic, national, class and gender diversity and to draw in increasingly large numbers of fol-

lowers? One answer lies in the Bahá'í beliefs and practices. The core of the Bahá'í religion responds to the very social problems that the world is facing today—problems about which people are talking whether they are Bahá'í or not. The faith seemingly provides answers and a framework to confront these issues.

It is an integral, holistic blueprint that encompasses spiritual, intellectual, emotional as well as social and physical aspects. Followers are inspired by Bahá'í beliefs in the inherent unity of humanity, in social justice and self-sufficiency, their commitment to environmental, educational, health, and development projects, and their drive for a world commonwealth based upon supranational, egalitarian administrative structures. As the earth becomes smaller and smaller and the goals of social justice become increasingly central to international movements, the Bahá'í faith stands prepared to provide the spiritual foundations and roots to those projects.

## The Birth of a Religion

The central figure in the Bahá'í faith is Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) whose name in Arabic means "The Glory of God." Born into a well-to-do family in Teheran, Bahá'u'lláh became a follower of the Bábí faith, a precursor to the Bahá'í. The Bábí faith began in 1844 when a merchant, who later took the name "Báb" meaning "Gate" or "Door," first declared himself to be the Qa'im promised in the Islamic religion. The Qa'im was understood to be the precursor—a preparer of the way—to the arrival of the next uni-

versal messenger of God.

Bahá'u'lláh paid with imprisonment for his Bábí beliefs. During this time, however, Bahá'u'lláh became aware that he was the next messenger of God. He revealed his chosen status to intimates at the end of April in 1863. Although he spent the remainder of his days in prison, the faith grew and he produced a series of writings documenting God's revelations to him.

What is notable about the Bahá'í faith is the lack of splinter sects. Whereas the Islamic faith, for example, split into factions following the death of Mohammed in 632, the passing of Bahá'u'lláh witnessed no such division. Stewardship of the faithful and the right to interpret writings and beliefs were clearly and efficiently passed from Bahá'u'lláh to his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá through a written will and testament. Certain sects did appear led by other relations or retainers of Bahá'u'lláh but none of these lasted beyond the life of the sect leader and never grew in any importance.

The same orderly pattern of succession occurred when leadership was passed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to his grandson Shoghi Effendi in 1921 and again in 1957 when the powers were passed to the administration of the Universal House of Justice, which remains the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í. That the Bahá'í faith remains unified and not stricken by in-fighting provides greatly for its strength.

## Universal "Oneness"

Central to Bahá'í teachings is the theme



of unity. Bahá'ís believe that God and all of the world's religions are one "changeless and eternal faith." Each religion represents a distinct stage in the progression of divine revelations to humanity. The human race, just as an individual, must go through a maturation process. Throughout, the nature and specificity of information imparted to them changes and increases. The revelations of God to Bahá'u'lláh represent only the most recent and important in a series of revelations that date back thousands of years.

Bahá'ís acknowledge the existence and importance of such other prophets as Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed. Bahá'ís do not deny the validity of the message of these groups—in fact Bahá'í religious services are composed in part of readings from the sacred texts of these religions—only that the development of the human race has in certain ways outdated what they have to say.

The belief in unity extends to the oneness of humanity. Bahá'ís consider all humans to be of the same "race." Distinctions such as nation, class, and ethnic origin are considered human constructs that will disappear during humanity's maturation along with creeds of racial or tribal superiority. World harmony is humankind's destiny.

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh specifically underscored the equality of the genders in his writings. To their credit, the Bahá'í became the first world religion to institu-

tionalize the equality of the sexes at a time when women's movements in the West were only beginning to gather steam. Paradoxically, despite these guarantees, Bahá'u'lláh stipulated that women could not form part of the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá'í state that this discrimination—otherwise a breach in their beliefs—is taken as "a matter of faith," the reason for which, Bahá'u'lláh stated, would become clear in the future.

#### A Global Administrative Order

Since the death of Shoghi Effendi, the Bahá'í, who have no clergy, have been governed by an administrative order that they consider a model for all governing systems the world over. In fact, they point to the negative aspects of western democracies—voter apathy, deadlocked and obstructionist parliaments, negative campaigning and the pandering of votes—as examples of a failing system. In general terms, the Bahá'í administration strives to function non-adversarially in a manner that will strengthen the bonds of community and unite, not divide, the peoples of different districts.

The system is structured around a three-tiered network of freely elected governing councils—Spiritual Assemblies—that act on the local, national and international levels. Bahá'ís believe that members of the Assemblies hold no personal power or authority in the community. They receive no special treatment or perks. Only when together as a group conducting community business are they considered to be divinely inspired.

Central to Bahá'í government is the concept of "consultation"—a "non-adversarial decision-making" process that seeks to unite and build consensus. Consultation is a four stage process. Bahá'ís seek information from a wide variety of sources. Once collected discussion takes place in which a diversity of opinion is encouraged and frankness of presentation desired. Once an idea has been put forward for discussion it becomes the idea of the group as a whole. In this manner, individual egotists and larger factions within the group are theoretically avoided.

Unanimity is the goal of all discussion. However, a majority vote does suffice if the group cannot entirely agree. Nevertheless, once a decision has been reached, Bahá'ís believe that the whole community must unify in unreserved sup-

port for the decision. As such, oppositions or minorities are avoided. In theory, the failure of a policy will result from the incorrectness of the decision itself, not the implementation of the decision.

#### Social Justice and Sustainable World Development

As part of their religious beliefs, Bahá'ís adhere to the goal of social justice and the development of a progressive, sustainable world order. Bahá'ís are actively involved throughout the world in educational, environmental, health and development projects—some 1,300 exist worldwide. Bahá'í tenets emphasize the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency combined with an integral or holistic approach to the solution of problems.

For example, Bahá'ís do not believe that injustices in one part of life can be fully resolved without also resolving other injustices. Thus, the struggle for gender equality cannot be divorced from efforts to alleviate poverty and these two are inseparably intertwined with environmental degradation, racism, and under-education. To solve one, the roots of all problems must be taken on together. The solution, as they see it, lies in the changing of human attitudes and behavior.

In the Chaco project in Bolivia—an agriculture oriented project that strives to aid farmers—technical training is combined with skills for community organization and decision-making as well as the



'Abdu'l-Bahá—second leader of the Bahá'í  
[Bahá'í Office of Public Information]



Shoghi Effendi—Bahá'í leader, 1921-1957  
[Bahá'í Office of Public Information]



requisite spiritual training. These latter, Bahá'ís believe, will allow the farming community to continue to function once the Bahá'í support is gone.

The greatest tragedy of the peaceful Bahá'í is their persecution in the religion's native Iran. There, where the 350,000 Bahá'í constitute the largest single minority ethnic group, more than 200 Bahá'í have been killed since the 1979 revolution, hundreds of others have been imprisoned or beaten, and all appear to have suffered from discrimination. The oppression has lessened since its apex in the beginning of the 1980s and the number executed has declined—in many ways due to the pressure of the United Nations—but Bahá'ís remain second class citizens without the guarantee of fundamental human rights.

### **Riding the Wave of Expansion**

Bahá'ís appear to be riding a wave of expansion and growth that will soon bring them into the limelight of world religions. Up to now the ride has been relatively smooth. Their beliefs in the unity of God and humanity, their social consciousness, the written nature of their religion, and the strengths of their administrative and

governing structures have seen to that. The unity that they have fostered among diverse peoples, classes and genders bodes well for the future. However, the future will provide a series of tests that may prove troublesome. The Bahá'í will feel pressures both from the inside and the outside.

Externally, conflict with the world's other great religions will increase as the Bahá'í expand into their domains. So too will secular and governmental pressure. Despite movements towards international integration such as the United Nations (which the Bahá'í support whole-heartedly) and the European Community, nations continue to carefully guard their powers and privileges from supranational organizations.

At the same time, the Bahá'í may also suffer from the absence of a majority population in any one country. The status of Bahá'ís as adherents to a minority religion may, as in Iran, result in negative action taken against them.

The greatest tests, however, will come from the inside. To this point, the Bahá'í have been successful in assimilating a variety of cultures and perspectives under their

umbrella. But, as a "minority" religion, adherents tend to be believers as well. The Bahá'í have increased their numbers primarily through conversions. But as increasingly larger numbers of Bahá'í are born into the religion it will undergo generational pressures and changes. Affected by other forces and beliefs, children often grow up having ingested the culture and practices of the religion without developing the spiritual faith. As in other religions, such changes have often resulted in the "secularization" of many beliefs.

While the social and the spiritual messages are inseparable for the Bahá'í, the danger does exist that the earthly call for social equality and justice will come to dominate the spiritual call. Many will join in the cause of humanity, fewer for the love of God. How the Bahá'í will address spiritual non-believers among the ranks and how the community will be affected by the presence of members who do not share the spiritual faith will to a great degree define the future of the religion. Despite these hurdles, however, Bahá'ís feel ready to take up the torch of the religious future and the peaceful growth of humankind.



*Global Unity—"Race Amity" Conference, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1921. This conference, one in a series, attracted 1,200 people. [Bahá'í Office of Public Information]*