

האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים

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The Bahá'í Faith – Its Significance as an Independent World Religion

The nineteenth century has a particular place in the history of religion. It was characterized by an outburst of religious activity in the East and in the West resulting in the birth and development of major religious movements, some of which became distinct denominations and others even independent world religions.

Among the most significant of these phenomena are the development of the HABAD (Lubavitch) movement in the Jewish Hassidut ("Hassidism"); the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (commonly known as the "Mormons"), which has become an independent world religion severed from its Christian roots; the appearance of the Adventist movement in the United States and particularly the development of the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses into self-contained denominations or churches within modern Christianity. The messianic fever that gripped Christianity during this period had many other more ephemeral manifestations such as the German Templar movement, which concentrated its activity in the Holy Land.

In the East, the nineteenth century witnessed the birth and development of the Bábí-Bahá'í faith in Iran, which cut itself away completely from its Shí'ite Muslim origins and very rapidly became an independent world religion balanced between East and West and attracting believers from all parts of the world. Within Sunnī Islam, there were several messianic and "renewal" movements, some of which, like the Ahmadiyyah in India, the Wahnabiyyah in Arabia, the Mahdiyyah in the Sudan, and the Sanusiyyah in Libya, wrote impressive chapters in modern Islamic history, while others, like the religious/intellectual movement of Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, enriched modern Islamic thinking generally without spawning a distinct organization or stream.

All but one of the religious movements born in the nineteenth century remained attached either to their original mother religion or at least to the cultural world to which that religion belonged. The Bahá'í faith is the exception. It is not a sect, denomination or stream of thought within Islam, but an independent religion free of any affiliation to other religious systems. In addition, it completely transcended the cultural world of the Levant and became a worldwide movement divorced from any particular cultural ties and disconnected from any particular social association or ethnic group.

There are a few necessary components, which show the independence of a religious movement and define it as an independent religion. These components are **Holy**

Persons, Holy Times, Holy Scriptures, and Holy Places. The existence of all these four components together in a unique form in the Bahá'í faith testify not only to its independence as a religion, but also to its departure from its Islamic roots and its Iranian ethnic and cultural background.

Holy Persons: The founders of the religion, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, are its holy figures. Both are regarded as divine manifestations, but according to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb was his herald. Although the life, ministry and martyrdom of the Báb are highly important, his message is valid only when confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh. The immediate two heirs of the latter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, are also regarded as divinely guided persons, and as such can also be included among the Holy Persons of the religion. All these persons are unique to the Bahá'í faith and the first indication of its independence.

Holy Times: The Bahá'í faith has its own calendar, a year composed of 19 months and a month composed of 19 days, with 4 or 5 intercalary days every year to complete the 365 days of the solar year. By establishing this calendar (which begins in the year 1844), the Bahá'í faith broke away completely from the twelve-month lunar calendar of the Muslims, as well as from the Hijri-solar calendar of the Iranians. The Bahá'ís have their own holidays relating directly to the history of the faith and the lives of its founders. None of these holidays, including the 19-day fast (in the 19th month), bears any relation to any other existing religion.

Holy Scriptures: The writings of Bahá'u'lláh are the holy scriptures of the Bahá'í faith. Although none of these writings is more sacred or authoritative than the others, the "Most Holy Book", written in Acre in about 1873 is the Holy Book *par excellence* of the Bahá'ís, for it contains the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's legal and moral teachings. The book was written in Arabic but unlike Islam, the Bahá'í faith does not regard Arabic as a holy tongue. In fact, there is no Bahá'í holy language and every believer may pray, as well as read and study the holy scriptures, in his own language. Bahá'u'lláh advised the human race to choose one auxiliary language with which all people would be able to communicate with each other. It seems that English is occupying this position now, and the House of Justice, the highest administrative body of the faith, decided that all official translations of the Most Holy Book should be made from the English translation, rather than the Arabic original.

Holy Places: Although the Báb lived and died in Iran, and Bahá'u'lláh was born in Iran and lived there for the first 35 years of his life, the religion which was born from their activity was established in the Holy Land, more particularly in Acre and Haifa. It was in the prison cell in the citadel of Acre, and then in the various places where he lived in the city, and outside it, in Mazra'ih and the estate of Bahjí, that Bahá'u'lláh wrote many of his works including the Most Holy Book (written within the walls of the city, in the House of 'Abbúd). All these places, which served also the immediate heirs of Bahá'u'lláh, are intimately connected with the history of the faith and with the creation of its intellectual and spiritual heritage. Bahá'u'lláh chose Haifa to be the final resting place of the Báb, and his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, fulfilled his instructions, building the mausoleum where the remains of the Báb were interned in 1909 and over which was erected the beautiful golden dome encircled by gardens that has become the symbol of the whole city. Bahá'u'lláh singled out Mount Carmel as his own mountain in the same way that Sinai is the mountain of Moses, Hirá' is the mountain of Muhammad and the Mount of Beatitude, Mount Tabor, and the Mount of Olives

are the mountains of Jesus. Standing on this mountain, he communicated one of his most beautiful prophecies, the “Tablet of Carmel”, and pointed out the place where the centre of his world religion would be erected in the future. The Holy Places in Acre and Haifa do not have only historical significance, they are sites of pilgrimage for Bahá’ís from all over the world, and the point to which they direct their prayers (particularly the tomb of Bahá’ulláh in Bahjí near Acre, which is the most sacred spot on earth for the Bahá’ís). The eyes of millions of believers in 193 countries all over the globe turn to these Holy Places and their prayers are directed towards them. A common memory has already been created that connects every stage in the birth and development of the religion with these sites, which have become doors of hope to many unprivileged individuals in all continents.

In addition to these four points that characterize the independent nature of the Bahá’í faith as a world religion, there are two more things that are unique to it.

First is the message, which, from the very beginning of his activity, Bahá’ulláh addressed to the whole human race – a message emphasizing the unity of humanity in the full sense of the word. The world is one country, he said, and all human beings are its citizens, entitled to enjoy life in an egalitarian society, and to experience the right to live in peace, free from poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, and fear.

Second is the absence of any religious offices or public rituals in this faith. Bahá’ulláh did away with the religious ceremonies and clerical institutions which occupy a central place in all other religions. Bahá’í communities all over the world are run by elected bodies composed of laymen. There is no clergy, no arm of mission, no conversion methods or ceremonies, and there are no special seminaries, *madrasahs*, or *yeshivas* for training religious functionaries. From this point of view, the Bahá’í religion is unique among all religions whether universal or ethnically or culturally centered, where the clerical functionaries are essential for the running of the religious institutions or the spreading of the religious message. There is nothing in the Bahá’í faith which is even remotely reminiscent of the Christian mission. The Bahá’í faith spreads by the believers themselves, who endeavour to attract more members to their religion, but there is no official body that is responsible for such activity.

In addition to the positive points that have been discussed concerning the independence of the Bahá’í faith, the opposition to it is no less significant. The faith has been declared as non-Islamic by all the Muslim official bodies, and it is forbidden or unrecognized in most of the Muslim countries, including Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others. It was even opposed by the Soviet Union at the time.

Based on all the foregoing elements, the Bahá’í faith was chosen by The Hebrew University of Jerusalem as an independent field of study on a parallel with much older religions and social-cultural systems such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. The study of the Bahá’í sacred texts (which include the writings of Bahá’ulláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) is the prime interest of the Chair in Bahá’í Studies at the University. These scriptures, like the scriptures of the earlier monotheistic religions, are the main source for learning the nature of the Bahá’í religion, understanding its rich legal, theological and moral systems, and appreciating its contribution to the human spiritual endeavour.

After a thorough study of all the components which signify the originality and the independence of any cultural and socio-religious system, it is perfectly clear that the Bahá'í faith is a unique historical and sociological phenomenon, which stands on the same level as the other world religions. And in spite of its relatively short history, it has had an impressive impact on the universal arena and brought hope and meaning to the lives of millions.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Sharon', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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