

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

PEOPLE

Many people at first believed the Bahá'í faith to be just a sect of Islam, but over the years it has established its independence. In some places however, notably Iran, there has been considerable tension between Bahá'ís and Muslims. Because it is a relatively young religious movement there was initial uncertainty among scholars as to how to regard the faith, but now it has begun to be acknowledged as a significant world religion.

BELIEFS

In May 1844 (the year in which Bahá'ís believe their faith to have been founded) a Persian called *Siyyid Alí Muhammad* (1819-1850) declared himself to be the Mahdi, the "hidden imam" of Shi'a Islam. He took the title of **the Báb**, which means 'the Gate', and declared that he was preparing the way for another messenger of God. He gained many followers (known at first as *Bábís*) but his teachings were severely condemned by the religious (Shi'a) authorities. He was imprisoned and in 1850 was executed.

A few years later *Mirza Husayn* (1817-1892) declared himself to be the fulfilment of the Báb's prophecy – the **Bahá'u'lláh**, a title meaning the Glory of God. After being exiled several times he spent his final years in Israel where his remains were buried near Mount Carmel.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh include the following:

- the oneness of the world's religions
- the oneness of humanity
- science and religion are fully compatible
- men and women are equal
- the responsibility of people to seek for truth.

Bahá'ís believe that the Great Manifestations of God, the great prophets, have revealed the word of God to humanity. They are up to the present: Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

COMMUNITIES

In the 1990s it was reckoned that the faith was established in well over 200 countries. Particularly large communities of Bahá'ís can be found in India, Iran, South America and Southeast Asia. The faith is also the fastest-growing of the independent world religions, having grown at an average rate of 3.63% per year between 1970 and 1985 (according to the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*).

There is some evidence of splits in the Bahá'í movement dating back to the time of the guardianship of Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) and the refusal of some Bahá'ís to accept his authority and leadership.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Every 19 days the community meets for worship, discussion and the sharing of food together – known as the Nineteen Day Feast.

One of the best-known of the Bahá'í houses of worship, and the first to be built in the West (1953), is at Wilmette in Illinois, just outside Chicago. Other houses of worship can be found in Kampala (Uganda), near Sydney (Australia), near Frankfurt (Germany), Panama City, Apia (Western Samoa) and New Delhi (India).

In each country there is a democratically elected National Spiritual Assembly, and each local community is governed by its own Spiritual Assembly.

The international governing body of the Bahá'í faith is the *Universal House of Justice*, which is based on Mount Carmel (close to the burial place of Bahá'u'lláh) at Haifa, Israel.

FESTIVALS

During the 19 days prior to Naw-Ruz (2 March to 20 March) Bahá'ís observe the Fast, refraining from eating and drinking during the hours of daylight. It is a time for deep reflection on one's spiritual state. Exemptions are permitted for those who are ill, the under-15s and over-70s, and for pregnant and nursing women.

Other special days in the Bahá'í faith include:

The Declaration of the Báb	23 May
The Martyrdom of the Báb	9 July
The Birth of the Báb	20 October
The Birth of Bahá'u'lláh	12 November

SCRIPTURES

During the last years of his life Bahá'u'lláh devoted much time to writing and these writings are regarded as revelations from God. Many of these writings were translated into English by Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who had been educated at Oxford. He used a slightly archaic English style, reflecting the style of the King James Version of the Christian bible which was most familiar at the time. His translations into English, rather than the Persian originals, have been the basis for translations into other Western languages.