

The Religious Cycle

Introduction

One of the basic teachings of the Baha'i Faith is the unity of humanity. This is a basic purpose of the Baha'i Revelation and a primary goal of the Baha'i community. Baha'u'llah proclaimed the coming of age of humanity and the necessity for the spiritual unification of all people. The Baha'i teachings provides the tools (principles, laws, and institutions) to bring about human unity. The Baha'i Faith also fulfills the prophecies of earlier religions regarding the establishment of peace on earth through the return of the founders of those religions.

A Brief History

The Baha'i Faith began in Iran in the mid-1800s. The founder was Baha'u'llah (a title meaning The Glory of God). The Baha'i Faith was introduced to the US and Canada in 1893. It is now established in over 300 countries and territories around the world making it the second most widespread religion after Christianity. The Baha'i Faith is an international religion in that it is not associated with any particular nationality or ethnic group.

Some Basic Principles

- There is one God which all peoples worship.
- We are one human family.
- The various religions are of divine origin and have common spiritual teachings.
- Each is responsible for his/her own beliefs and has a responsibility to independently search for the truth.
- Science and religion are in agreement. They are different ways of looking at the same reality.
- Men and women have equal rights.
- All forms of prejudice must be eliminated.
- A basic system education must be established globally so that all children are schooled.
- The root of global economic problems is spiritual. Long term solutions are also spiritual.
- A universal second language must be established and taught in the schools so that all people will be able to communicate.

This is the beginning of the age of human unity. Recognizing the divine origin of all the major religions is the spiritual basis for establishing world harmony and unity. Baha'u'llah brought a new view of reality with this teaching.

Religious history shows little unity. We see the rise and decline of religions with conflicts between empires based on different religions and religions breaking into conflicting sects. The principle of a common divine origin for all the religions has certain implications:

- All the religions are from God
- All the religions have the same essential
- The Founders of the religions are spiritually linked
- All the followers of all the religions are comrades in God's Faith
- The fulfillment of all the religions' prophecies of a golden age of human unity and peace may be found in the Baha'i Revelation
- The oneness of religion is the basis for unity and true fellowship amongst all peoples

The Founders of the Religions

Baha'u'llah tells us that the Founders of the major religions have two stations or natures. Each is a mouthpiece for God, speaking the Words of God to humanity. Baha'u'llah wrote of these Founders or Manifestations of God:

These sanctified Mirrors, these Day Springs of ancient glory, are, one and all, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose. From Him proceed their knowledge and power; from Him is derived their sovereignty. The beauty of their countenance is but a reflection of His image, and their revelation a sign of His deathless glory.

They are the Treasuries of Divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom. Through them is transmitted a grace that is infinite, and by them is revealed the Light that can never fade.... These Tabernacles of Holiness, these Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty, and grace, are made manifest.

These attributes of God are not, and have never been, vouchsafed specially unto certain Prophets, and withheld from others. Nay, all the Prophets of God, His well-favored, His holy and chosen Messengers are, without exception, the bearers of His names, and the embodiment of His attributes. They only differ in the intensity of their revelation, and the comparative potency of their light. Even as He hath revealed: "Some of the Apostles We have caused to excel the others."

It hath, therefore, become manifest and evident that within the tabernacles of these Prophets and chosen Ones of God the light of His infinite names and exalted attributes hath been reflected, even though the light of some of these attributes may or may not be outwardly revealed from these luminous Temples to the eyes of men. That a certain attribute of God hath not been outwardly manifested by these Essences of Detachment doth in no wise imply that they who are the Day Springs of God's attributes and the Treasuries of His holy names did not actually possess it. Therefore, these illuminated souls, these beauteous Countenances have, each and every one of them, been

endowed with all the attributes of God, such as sovereignty, dominion, and the like, even though to outward seeming they be shorn of all earthly majesty....

Baha'i World Faith, pp 19-20

Each Founder or Manifestation is also a distinct personality, an individual.

The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation. Even as He saith: "Some of the Apostles We have caused to excel the others. To some God hath spoken, some He hath raised and exalted. And to Jesus, Son of Mary, We gave manifest signs, and We strengthened Him with the Holy Spirit."

Baha'i World Faith, pp 23

So what is the mission of these individuals? They all led humanity to further spiritual and material development so that we might increasingly reflect the attributes of God as individuals and as a group. In the Jewish books (the Torah or the Old Testament books of the Bible) we see the development of family, tribe, and kingdom by Abraham and Moses. Zoroaster emphasized virtuous actions and combating evil. Jesus taught love and forgiveness as the basis for relations between individuals. The Buddha corrected some excesses of Hinduism, taught the responsibility of the individual for correct behavior, and taught detachment from the material world. Muhammad corrected some of the excesses that had developed in Christianity, reemphasized monotheism (there is only One God) and introduced laws as a basis for a nation-state encompassing many tribes and races. The Manifestations for other parts of the world and for earlier periods of human development are largely lost in the mists of time. We know the names of a few but very little about what They taught. We might guess that They were associated with important milestones in human development such as the control of fire for cooking and heat, language, the fitting of stone blades onto handles or arrows, the domestication of crop plants and animals, the use of irrigation, the development of writing systems, etc. The major theme of Baha'u'llah's mission is human unity and the emergence of a global civilization. Perhaps the next Manifestation will deal with an interstellar civilization?

Religious Cycles

Each religion has followed a pattern. The religion starts at a time and place of unrest and despair. The Founder appears and calls the people to righteousness. He (or perhaps She) raises up spiritual truths that have been neglected or discarded by the leaders of the time. He decries the evils and excesses of the time. He assembles disciples and gives teachings to the people through them. He is persecuted by the powerful and is imprisoned or martyred or exiled. The disciples establish a movement which becomes the germ for a new civilization. Ultimately that movement and civilization turn to materialism and decay. The Bagavad Gita has one of the earliest references to this cycle.

Albeit I be Unborn, undying, indestructible, The Lord of all things living; not the less— By Maya, by my magic which I stamp on floating Nature-forms, the primal vast— I come, and go, and come. When Righteousness Declines, O Bharata! when Wickedness Is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take Visible shape, and move a man with men, Succoring the good, thrusting the evil back, and setting Virtue on her seat again.

Hinduism, Bagavad Gita Chapter 4

The Manifestation always confirms preceding Manifestations and gives prophecies of One Who will come.

His followers are transformed in character. They become pure, radiant, and fearless. The new religious movement is fertilized with martyrs blood.

Each of the Manifestations is from the same God and has the same knowledge and authority. The content of the Message is related to the capacity and needs of the listeners. The Message includes the eternal spiritual and social laws for the current time and area. Thus as an example Moses and Mohamud declared pork as taboo. They did not talk about the trichinosis bacteria that can infect poorly raised pigs that can only be killed by high temperature cooking (impossible for nomadic peoples) - they just made pork taboo. Jesus was talking to settled peoples so he lifted the ban on pork - again without confusing people with talk about microscopic organisms.

Baha'u'llah has told us that the current cycle will be somewhat different. It is the beginning of the cycles of humanity maturity so it will not be ended in a period of chaos and despair. We do not know exactly how this cycle will evolve into the next cycle, only that it will be a full 1000 years in the future.

The Challenge of the Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i Faith presents a view of reality that is in sharp contrast to the accepted standards of our times (and in even sharper contrast to the 19th century). This has certain implications.

- Harmony with other religions is a major purpose of each religion.
- There is no distinction between the 'saved' and the 'heathen' since humanity is one family.
- Religious prejudice contradicts the purpose of religion so it is a corruption of religion.
- Prophecies of the different religions should agree and hence throw light on each other.
- The essential teachings of religion emerge from comparative study of all religions - these include the golden rule; to know, love, and obey God; respect our fellow humans and nature; and strive for good character and right living.