

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM A SEEKER

by Shirley Macias

Dear Friend:

I am sorry for the delay in responding to your most wonderful questions in your e-mail. As mentioned, I had an emergency which has thankfully passed and am able to send my reply. Below are my responses to your fifteen questions.

Please note that these responses are based on my personal understanding of the Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'í Faith is but in its 165th year and its guidance and teachings are to last for at least 500,000 years, which is the length of the Bahá'í Cycle. All followers of Bahá'u'lláh are in different stages of development and our understandings naturally may be different. In one place, Bahá'u'lláh writes: *“Thus it is recorded: ‘Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qa'im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth.’ He also saith: ‘We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain.’”*¹

However, the Bahá'í Writings themselves are the standard to which we attempt to follow and understand. One of the most wonderful teachings brought by Bahá'u'lláh is the principle of the independent investigation of truth. For this reason, there are no clergy or “experts” with authority in the Bahá'í Faith; rather, the authority for the establishment of the administrative order is based on the teachings and on the direction of its elected representatives on the local, national and international levels.

The Adamic Cycle, which is estimated to be about 6,000 years, was a preparation for the Bahá'í Cycle (the Cycle of Light) which is to last for some 500,000 years. A long time indeed! The Bahá'í Cycle will have within it many further Revelations. Bahá'u'lláh states that in a thousand or thousands of years another Manifestation will appear to lead humankind to still greater unity; that the Revelation of God is ongoing and never final.

In any event, here are my answers to your questions. I will also give you some references that you may wish to peruse at your leisure. I will first put your question and then my response. (You will note that many of my answers are long as they contain quotations from the Bahá'í Writings on the subject.)

1. What elements of the history of the formation of the Bahá'í Faith—such as Shiite Islam, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi—do you think have most contributed to its rapid rise, in less than two centuries, to a very united and organized independent religion with widespread adherence of several million people? Was the Guardian instrumental in the establishment the religion as the second most widespread?

The rapid rise of the Bahá'í Faith is not especially due to the history of its inception; rather

from the tremendous impulse released to this planet at the time of the Declaration of the Báb (1844). For example, in *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, the Book of Certitude, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the quantity of spiritual power being compared to twenty-seven letters.

From the time of Adam to the Declaration of the Báb, only two “letters” of knowledge were revealed to the world. In 1844, the remaining twenty-five “letters” were revealed. At that point, all created things were endowed with the capacity to recognize this Revelation. However, that recognition depends on our individual free will. See the following quotation from Shoghi Effendi:

“In the *Iqán*, Bahá'u'lláh, wishing to emphasize the transcendent character of this new Day of God, reinforces the strength of His argument by His reference to the text of a correct and authorized tradition, which reveals the following:

‘Knowledge is twenty and seven letters. All that the Prophets have revealed are two letters thereof. No man thus far hath known more than these two letters. But when the Qa’im shall arise, He will cause the remaining twenty and five letters to be made manifest.’

“And then immediately follow these confirming and illuminating words of Bahá'u'lláh:

‘Consider: He hath declared knowledge to consist of twenty and seven letters, and regarded all the prophets, from Adam even unto Muhammad, the “seal,” as expounders of only two letters thereof. He also saith that the Qa’im will reveal all the remaining twenty and five letters. Behold from this utterance how great and lofty is His station! His rank excelleth that of all the prophets, and His revelation transcendeth the comprehension and understanding of all their chosen ones. A revelation, of which the prophets of God, His saints and chosen ones have either not been informed or which, in pursuance of God’s inscrutable decree, they have not disclosed - such a revelation, these vile and villainous people have sought to measure with their own deficient minds, their own deficient learning and understanding.’”ⁱⁱ

In other words, the “Promised Day had come” and all creatures were catapulted into this new dispensation, this new era in the history of humankind. If you but look at the history of the world from the middle of the 19th century to today, you will see a tremendous rise in knowledge. For example, although this may be but a coincidence, on the very day that the Báb declared Himself as the Qa’im (23 May 1844) in Shiraz, Persia, during His meeting with Mulla Husayn (see *The Dawn-Breakers*), far across the sea in Baltimore, Maryland, Samuel Morse sent his first telegraphic message, which he arbitrarily chose at random from the Bible, which said “What hath God wrought!” Also, in 1844, the United States Patent Office decided to close its doors because it believed that no new inventions would be forthcoming. From “horse and buggy” transportation in the middle of the 19th century to space travel in this century. there has been quite a jump indeed! And progress continues increasing at an enormous rate.

I believe that when this “spiritual power” was released to the world, all latent possibilities were made evident. Another example is that there have always been resourceful individuals in the past who “invented” new technologies (such as Da Vinci), which although innovative, were not put into action because it wasn’t yet time. Below are some pertinent quotes from the Bahá’í Writings on this theme:

“In every age and cycle He hath, through the splendid light shed by the Manifestations of His wondrous Essence, recreated all things, so that whatsoever reflecteth in the heavens and on the earth the signs of His glory may not be deprived of the outpourings of His mercy, nor despair of the showers of His favors. How all-encompassing are the wonders of His boundless grace! Behold how they have pervaded the whole of creation. Such is their virtue that not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life. The autumn hath gone by, and the reviving spring is here. All things are now made new. Arts and industries have been reborn, there are new discoveries in science, and there are new inventions; even the details of human affairs, such as dress and personal effects - even weapons - all these have likewise been renewed. The laws and procedures of every government have been revised. Renewal is the order of the day.”^{iv}

“The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new. Speak, and hold not thy peace. The day star of blissfulness shineth above the horizon of Our name, the Blissful, inasmuch as the kingdom of the name of God hath been adorned with the ornament of the name of thy Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Arise before the nations of the earth, and arm thyself with the power of this Most Great Name, and be not of those who tarry.”^v

As to the last part of your question, “Was the Guardian instrumental in establishing the religion as the second most widespread?”

The events commencing with the Declaration of the Báb on 23 May 1844 to the establishment of the Guardianship in 1921 were as follows: The short six-year Dispensation of the Báb (whom we consider a major Prophet or Manifestation such as Moses, Christ, etc.) ended with His martyrdom on 9 July 1850 in the city of Tabriz, Persia (now Iran). In those few short years, even though the Báb had been held captive in two remote prisons, the power of His Message inflamed many thousands of followers who had been awaiting the imminent appearance of God’s Messenger. (In Islám they were awaiting the Qa’ím, the Promised One.) A similar response occurred in many parts of the world where great numbers of Christians were awaiting the imminent Return of Christ—for example, the Millerites who gathered in 1844 and other such groups. You can read about this in William Sears’ *Thief in the Night*. Again, as a result of the Báb’s declaration, some 20,000 followers of the Báb were martyred in Persia. (See Nabil’s *The Dawn-Breakers* as well as Shoghi Effendi’s *God Passes By* for more details and information.

Bahá'u'lláh, who had recognized the Báb, and who was from a prominent ministerial family residing in the province of Núr in Persia, was arrested and placed in an underground prison known as the Siyáh-Chál (adjacent to the palace of the Shah in Teheran) in 1853 for a period of no less than five months, shackled and chained. It was here that Bahá'u'lláh received His Summons as the Promised One. He was ultimately released from this prison due to the diplomatic efforts of the then Russian Counsel and was forthwith exiled to Baghdad (then under Turkish rule) where He remained for ten years, except for a period of two years when he removed Himself to the remoteness of Sulaymaniyyih, located northeast of Baghdad on the Iraq/Iranian frontier (similar to the withdrawal of Christ, as well as other Prophets of the past). Because of the government's and clergy's fear of the growing influence of the Bábís in such close proximity in Persia, Bahá'u'lláh and His family and some of His followers were again exiled to Constantinople [now Istanbul] in 1863.

On the eve of His departure from Baghdad, He and His followers gathered in a Garden outside of the city limits known as the Garden of Ridván (Paradise). It was here that Bahá'u'lláh announced to His family and friends that He was the One Whom God Would Make Manifest as prophesied by the Báb. (Although He had been aware of His station, He was not to reveal it publicly for a period of ten years to protect the Bábí community.)

In Constantinople and then in Adrianople from 1863-1868, He publicly announced His Mission with Letters to the Kings; the rulers of the world at that time, such as Napoleon III, Czar Alexander II, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Emperor Franz Joseph, Sultan 'Abdu'l-Aziz, the Shah of Persia, the Rulers of America, as well as to the world's religious leaders collectively and to Pope Pius IX. (See *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1967).

As can be imagined, the powerful and proud kings and rulers would not listen or even acknowledge such letters from a mere prisoner incarcerated in the Ottoman Empire. However, there were some interesting reactions on the part of a few of these rulers. (See Sears, *The Prisoner and the Kings*.) Bahá'u'lláh had counseled them to gather together to resolve their differences. Here is a statement by Bahá'u'lláh setting forth His vision of His Cause. It was made to E. G. Browne, a scholar and, as far as we know, the only Westerner to meet Bahá'u'lláh while He was imprisoned in 'Akká, Palestine (now Israel).

"We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment.... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled - what harm is there in this?... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the "Most Great Peace" shall come.... Do not you in Europe need this also? Is not this that which Christ foretold?... Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind.... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family.... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind...."

Bahá'u'lláh was again exiled in 1868 from Adrianople, this time to the prison city of 'Akká, Palestine (also then part of the Ottoman empire) where He remained until His passing in 1892. During the period from 1853 to His passing, Bahá'u'lláh revealed the equivalent of some 100 books and numerous Tablets, some of which are now translated into many hundreds of languages throughout the world. Among these Tablets is one titled the *Kitáb-i-Ahd* [Book of the Covenant], which was Bahá'u'lláh's Will and Testament. In this Tablet He appointed His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of His Covenant. 'Abdu'l-Bahá served in this capacity from 1892 until His passing in 1921, when He appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian of the Faith, who served in that capacity until his passing in 1957. (See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "*Will and Testament*".) In that Testament, the Guardian was to appoint His eldest son to succeed him:

"O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the Guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the Guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the words: - "The child is the secret essence of its sire," that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the Guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the Guardian of the Cause of God) choose another branch to succeed him."

"The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the Guardian of the Cause of God. The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the Guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given in such wise as the assenting and dissenting voices may not be distinguished (i.e., secret ballot). O friends! The Hands of the Cause of God must be nominated and appointed by the Guardian of the Cause of God."^{vii}

At the time of the passing of Shoghi Effendi without issue, because he had not appointed a successor, it was determined by the Hands of the Cause of God (who had been appointed by Shoghi Effendi) that there could not be another Guardian. The then Hands of the Cause elected nine from among their number to serve as Custodians of the Faith from 1957 until the election of the Universal House of Justice in April 1963. Since that time, the supreme institution of the Universal House of Justice, which is currently elected by members of the more than 182 National Spiritual Assemblies worldwide every five years, by secret ballot and no electioneering, has been guiding the Bahá'í world community in its continuing development. For more details on the period from 1963 to the present time, you may wish to refer to the following book, which contain letters and messages from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world: *Messages from the Universal House of Justice - 1963-1986*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois (1996).

All of the above have contributed to the "rapid rise" of the Bahá'í Faith.

2. “What are the main differences and similarities between the teachings of the Báb and the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh?”

Briefly, the Báb was the Gate from the Adamic Cycle to the Bahá’í Cycle, also known as “The Primal Point.” The Adamic Cycle lasted for some 6,000 years. Bahá’u’lláh inaugurated the Cycle of Fulfillment, which is destined to last for some 500,000 years. Bahá’u’lláh refers to the Dispensation of the Báb (1844-1850) and His Book, “The Bayán” (literally “Exposition”) as the “Mother Book,” which contains the seed of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation. There were some differences in certain laws revealed by the Báb, which He said that “Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest” may accept or reject at His desire. All of the Báb’s laws, He said, were conditional on the acceptance of “Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest. Some of those laws were rather strict because they were then needed to break the fetters of Shariah (Islamic law) which was no longer relevant to the modern age, and which served as a passage from Islamic law. Bahá’u’lláh Himself says of the Báb:

“Had the Primal Point (the Báb) been someone else beside Me as ye claim,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s explicit statement, “and had attained My presence, verily He would have never allowed Himself to be separated from Me, but rather We would have had mutual delights with each other in My Days.” “He Who now voiceth the Word of God,” Bahá’u’lláh again affirms, “is none other except the Primal Point Who hath once again been made manifest.” “He is,” He thus refers to Himself in a Tablet addressed to one of the Letters of the Living, “the same as the One Who appeared in the year sixty [1260 A.H..1844 A.D.] This verily is one of His mighty signs.” “Who,” He pleads in the Suriy-i-Damm, “will arise to secure the triumph of the Primal Beauty (the Báb) revealed in the countenance of His succeeding Manifestation?” Referring to the Revelation proclaimed by the Báb He conversely characterizes it as “My own previous Manifestation.”^{viii}

In other words, all of the Prophets of God can be considered as one entity, even though they were manifest in different ages, different places and under different names. Each of Them, starting with Adam, was the Bearer of God’s message and the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Shoghi Effendi states of Bahá’u’lláh:

“To Israel He was neither more nor less than the incarnation of the “Everlasting Father,” the “Lord of Hosts” come down “with ten thousands of saints”; to Christendom Christ returned “in the glory of the Father,” to Shi’ah Islam the return of the Imam Husayn; to Sunni Islam the descent of the “Spirit of God” (Jesus Christ); to the Zoroastrians the promised Shah-Bahram; to the Hindus the reincarnation of Krishna; to the Buddhists the fifth Buddha.”^{ix}

3. “Do the interpretive writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice have the same authority as the writings of Bahá’u’lláh?”

Yes and no. Bahá’u’lláh is the instrument for God’s Message to humanity. Bahá’u’lláh appointed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of His Covenant as the infallible interpreter and Exemplar of His teachings. In turn, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed Shoghi Effendi as the infallible interpreter and expounder of the Holy Scripture. In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

“The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God”^x

For a period of thirty-six years, Shoghi Effendi developed the machinery of the Bahá’í administrative order. The Guardian’s interpretation has the same authority as that of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Although the Universal House of Justice is the supreme institution of the Baha’is, it does not interpret, but does elucidate the teachings. The House of Justice may not change even one comma of the Writings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, but it does have the right to legislate, according to the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such new laws and regulations that are not in conflict with the teachings, according to the needs of the time. It also has the right to abrogate any of its own laws and regulations as well.

4. “Are there any descendants of Bahá’u’lláh alive today? If so, what is their role in the Faith?”

As far as is known, there are no living descendants of Bahá’u’lláh who are Bahá’ís. All of Bahá’u’lláh’s relatives and issue, except for two loyal brothers, his sons ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and one known as the Purest Branch who died in prison, his daughter, Bahiyyih Khanum, and his wife, Navab, either rebelled or kept themselves aloof from the shelter of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant. As such, if there remain any living descendants, they are unknown and are not members of the Bahá’í community.

5. “I know that in addition to a belief in the unity of God and religion, Bahá’ís believe in the unity of humankind. Are there any particular steps that Bahá’ís feels are especially essential to the elimination of strife between genders, races, nations, and religions?”

In response, yes, there are constant and active steps in the teachings and lives of the Bahá’ís in establishing the principles of equality of men and women, the oneness of humankind, the unity of nations and religions. These principles are the cornerstone and backbone of all Baha’i teachings and activities throughout the world. The Bahá’í community worldwide is constantly involved in the spread of these principles to every level of society, from the local community to the United Nations, where the Bahá’í International Community has permanent non-governmental observers and participants.

See the following quotation from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the subject of the unity of humankind:

“In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of all mankind could not have been achieved. Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were wellnigh impossible. Consequently intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable. In this day, however, means of communication have multiplied, and the five continents of the earth have virtually merged into one. And for everyone it is now easy to travel to any land, to associate and exchange views with its peoples, and to become familiar, through publications, with the conditions, the religious beliefs and the thoughts of all men. In like manner all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century. Of this past ages have been deprived, for this century—the century of light—hath been endowed with unique and unprecedented glory, power and illumination. Hence the miraculous unfolding of a fresh marvel every day. Eventually it will be seen how bright its candles will burn in the assemblage of man.

“Behold how its light is now dawning upon the world’s darkened horizon.

The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned.

The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed.

The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass.

The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour.

The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.

The sixth candle is unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race.

The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse.

Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization.”^{xi} [formatting added by author]

6. “What specific individuals do Bahá’ís recognize as being Manifestations of God? In particular, I am wondering whether Bahá’ís think of Taoism and Confucianism as being religions with Manifestations associated with them, or as being influential Chinese systems of thought founded by philosophers rather than Manifestations. Also, are there Manifestations associated with either Hinduism or Shinto, which have no traditional founders?”

Bahá’ís recognize that of the extant major religions, the major Prophets or Manifestations of God are as follows:

Sabeanism (Prophet’s name unknown), Hinduism (Krishna), Zoroasterism (Zoroaster), Judaism (Moses), Christianity (Christ), Buddhism (Buddha), Islam (Muhammad), Bábism (the Báb) and the Bahá’í Faith (Bahá’u’lláh). Of course, we believe that God has always sent His Manifestations to humanity, but traces of past dispensations have been lost. Muhammad does refer to some of these in the Qur’án, such as Salih, Enoch, Hermes and Hud. As for Taoism, Confucianism, etc, we believe that these disciplines were perhaps influenced by earlier Manifestations, but that those founders were philosophers. A corollary could be the minor prophets referred to in the Old Testament such as Isaiah, Daniel, etc., who were not independent prophets, but restated the teachings of Moses; or even of the many Christian saints or Islamic imams who restated and renewed the teachings of Christ and Muhammad.

7. “What aspects of the revelations of the Manifestations preceding Bahá’u’lláh (e.g., the Buddha, Jesus) do Bahá’ís most concentrate on during their worship and find most relevant to the modern era? What do you think are the common terms to be found in the revelations of each of the Manifestations of God?”

Bahá’u’lláh has restated the essential truths of previous revelations, but has refashioned them for the needs of today. As He has stated: *“Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.”*^{xii}

Primarily, when Bahá’ís gather to worship as a community, they recite passages from the Writings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who have left a veritable treasure-house of prayers, meditations and guidance. Bahá’u’lláh revealed the equivalent of one hundred tablets, books and writings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also wrote many tablets and letters and prayers. The Bahá’í Houses of Worship currently on seven continents throughout the world, known as Mashriqu’l-Adhkars (translated as dawning-place of the praises or remembrances or mention of God), are reserved for devotions and readings from the revealed Word of God. In these Houses of Worship, all of which are nine-sided symbolizing unity, nine being the highest single number, readings from all of the Holy Books of religions are read here as well. Currently, these Houses of Worship can be found in Wilmette, Illinois; Kampala, Uganda; Frankfurt, Germany; Sydney, Australia; Samoa; Panama and New Delhi, India; and one is currently being constructed in Chile. These Houses of Worship are open to all peoples. They are gifts from the Bahá’ís to the peoples of the world. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh reveals:

Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centring his thoughts on God, occupied with His

remembrance, and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God, the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised. Say: The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar is each and every building which hath been erected in cities and villages for the celebration of My praise. Such is the name by which it hath been designated before the throne of glory, were ye of those who understand.”^{xiii}

In the future, all of these Houses of Worship will have attached to them dependencies such as hospitals, drug dispensaries, traveler’s hospices, schools for orphans, universities for advanced studies, etc. Also in the future, it is anticipated that every city and town worldwide will have as its center a House of Worship open to all peoples of all religions.

As to the second part of your question, as stated above, Bahá’ís believe that the foundation of all religions is one, that the spiritual and ethical teachings are universal and are restated and amplified by each subsequent Manifestation of God. The only differences to be found in the various religions, aside from the man-made interpretations over many centuries, are centered in the social teachings, which necessarily change from age to age according to the needs of the time.

8. “The teachings of the Buddha emphasized that egoism is harmful, and Bahá’u’lláh taught that work done in the spirit of service (rather than self-interest) was equivalent to worship and that the extremes of wealth and poverty should be abolished. Do Bahá’ís support the idea of social democracy—i.e., limited socialism combined with private ownership of property. Do the majority of Bahá’ís tend to have a particular political ideology, or do Bahá’ís occupy a fairly diverse range of positions on the political spectrum?”

You have several points in this question. Yes, Bahá’ís agree with Buddha that egoism is harmful. Also, as to work done in the spirit of service, Bahá’u’lláh teaches that we have been created for two purposes: One is to know, to love and to worship God, and the other is to bring forward an ever-advancing civilization. In another place, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated that the highest station that an individual can attain is the station of servitude. His title, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, means “Servant of Bahá.”

As to Bahá’í participation in partisan politics, I will answer this question by quoting Shoghi Effendi:

“Such a rectitude of conduct must manifest itself, with ever-increasing potency, in every verdict which the elected representatives of the Bahá’í community, in whatever capacity they may find themselves, may be called upon to pronounce. It must be constantly reflected in the business dealings of all its members, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, and in any service they may, in the future, render their government or people. It must be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá’í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions. It must characterize the attitude of every loyal believer towards nonacceptance of political posts, nonidentification with political parties, nonparticipation in political controversies, and nonmembership in political organizations and ecclesiastical institutions. It must

reveal itself in the uncompromising adherence of all, whether young or old, to the clearly enunciated and fundamental principles laid down by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His addresses, and to the laws and ordinances revealed by Bahá’u’lláh in His Most Holy Book.^{xiv}

Aside from the above, Bahá’ís are enjoined to obey the laws of the country in which they reside. This principle is followed to such an extent, that if the government of a country forbids the association of Bahá’ís at meetings, or otherwise, the Bahá’ís will obey that government, as has occurred recently in Iran. Bahá’u’lláh set forth this cardinal principle: *“In every country or government where any of this community reside, they must behave toward that government with faithfulness, trustfulness and truthfulness.”*^{xv}

9. “I have a couple of questions concerning Bahá’í eschatology. I know that Bahá’ís view Heaven and Hell as being conditions of the soul rather than actual places, and I know that Bahá’ís believe that the soul is eternal. What else can you tell me about the Bahá’í view of afterlife and how it relates to God, the Manifestations, and the unity of humankind?”

See the following quotation from Bahá’u’lláh:

“The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High. The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest. Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon men, and the earth bringeth forth its fruits. All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being. The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth. Wert thou to ponder in thine heart the behavior of the Prophets of God thou wouldst assuredly and readily testify that there must needs be other worlds besides this world.”^{xvi}

Additionally, Bahá’u’lláh has written much concerning the soul and the afterlife. One of the purposes of our life on this planet is to acquire the qualities and attributes that will be necessary and needed in the world to come. Our life is likened to the condition of the embryo before its release into this world; that this world is the womb-world to the next and just as dark in comparison. If while we were in the womb we were able to perceive that we were growing eyes, limbs, organs, etc.,

we would still have had no idea why they were developing, since they were of no use in the warm and safe confines of the womb. The purpose of God's Manifestations is to bring us guidance so that we will be enabled to acquire these qualities and attributes. We, of all created things, have the ability to reflect all of the qualities and attributes of God, as manifested by God's Prophets, but this can only be done by our own volition. As is stated in The Hidden Words:

"O SON OF MAN! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty."

"O SON OF MAN! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life."

"O SON OF BEING! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant."^{xvii}

10. "How do Bahá'ís view the ideal future? For instance, would it include a world government? And do Bahá'ís believe in a culminating point in time (like the 'judgment day' found in other religions), when God's progressive revelation will be complete and humankind in its ideal state?"

Bahá'ís believe in the Judgment Day and we are currently living in it. But Judgment Day means the end of the time of separation and the beginning of the day of justice founded on the principle of unity. As to the ideal future, please see the following statement by Shoghi Effendi, which sums up the future world commonwealth:

"The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Baha'u'llah, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its

energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

“National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

“A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.”^{xviii}

As to the latter part of your question, there is no end to perfection. Humanity will continue to progress endlessly, in ways that we are unable to fathom at this point in time.

11. “Bahá’ís, I understand, place a strong emphasis on reason, science, and education and believe that an individual must find religious truth on his or her own, without being

fettered by superstition. Do Bahá'ís believe that God, in addition to interacting with the metaphysical universe by sending His Manifestations, also interacts with the physical universe by performing miracles?"

First of all, the term “miracle” should be defined. What may be a miracle to some, may have a hidden scientific reality. God is All-Powerful, the Creator of the seen and the unseen, who out of His love for His creation, sends guidance through His Representatives. God is unknowable but is omnipresent. As to miracles, during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh, one of His followers chronicled hundreds of miracles performed by Bahá'u'lláh and presented it to Him. Bahá'u'lláh thanked him very much and promptly threw the chronicle into the Tigris River, saying to the effect that miracles can only be a proof to the one experiencing it and that this is the age of reason.

For an exposition of the meaning of miracles, I direct you to the book *Some Answered Questions*, being talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and especially to Chapter XXII.

12. “What is the Bahá'í view on the role of religion to the role of science? How do Bahá'ís view the relationship between their faith and morality?"

You have two questions here. Bahá'u'lláh teaches that science and religion must go hand in hand. As Muhammad said, “Truth is but one point that the ignorant have multiplied.” There are many expositions on this subject in the Bahá'í writings. The following are a few quotes:

“Religion and Science are inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough. Every religion which does not concern itself with Science is mere tradition, and that is not the essential. Therefore science, education and civilization are most important necessities for the full religious life.”^{xix}

“We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any religion that contradicts science or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance - for ignorance is the opposite of knowledge. Religion which consists only of rites and ceremonies of prejudice is not the truth. Let us earnestly endeavour to be the means of uniting religion and science.”^{xx}

“Alí, the son-in-law of Muhammad, said: “That which is in conformity with science is also in conformity with religion”. Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept. Religion and science walk hand in hand, and any religion contrary to science is not the truth.”^{xxi}

“Now, all questions of morality contained in the spiritual, immutable law of every religion are logically right. If religion were contrary to logical reason then it would cease to be a religion and be merely a tradition. Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to

fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.”^{xxvii}

As to the second part of your question, I am not sure I understand it sufficiently to respond. As to the relationship between faith and morality, I cannot see that there is any separation. Faith to a Bahá'í is not blind, but instead is conscious knowledge. The spiritual and ethical principles brought by all of the Prophets of God are the basis of morality.

13. “How important is the role of the Universal House of Justice to Bahá'ís and what are its most important functions?”

The Universal House of Justice was conceived by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book. It is the supreme institution of the Faith; the final arbiter of any difference or question. The foundation of the Universal House of Justice is the local Bahá'í communities and the national Bahá'í communities worldwide. Although it is an elected body (at this time every five years), it has unerring guidance, as stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

“The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God.”^{xxiii}

This supreme institution is destined to guide the Bahá'í community until the appearance of the next Manifestation of God, which, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, will not be for at least one thousand years:

“He has ordained and established the House of Justice, which is endowed with a political as well as a religious function, the consummate union and blending of church and state. This institution is under the protecting power of Bahá'u'lláh Himself. A universal, or international, House of Justice shall also be organized. Its rulings shall be in accordance with the commands and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and that which the Universal House of Justice ordains shall be obeyed by all mankind. This international House of Justice shall be appointed and organized from the Houses of Justice of the whole world, and all the world shall come under its administration.”^{xxiv}

“Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant.”^{xxv}

For further information on the functions of the Universal House of Justice, you are directed to the publication, "Constitution of the Universal House of Justice."

14. "What religious activities, such as prayer and worship, do Bahá'ís perform in their daily lives? How does Bahá'í worship differ from the worship of other religions?"

Bahá'u'lláh has ordained upon His followers prayer and fasting. He revealed three Obligatory Prayers, one of which to be recited daily, in the privacy of one's own chamber. The believer is free to choose any of the three. He has also named one of the Bahá'í months, the month of 'Alá, as the month of fasting, where Bahá'ís from the age of 15 to 70 neither eat nor drink from sunup to sundown for nineteen days. (There are nineteen months of nineteen days each in the Bahá'í calendar, the last month of the year being the month of Fasting, and which ends with the Bahá'í New Year (Naw-Rúz) on 21 March. Additionally, Bahá'ís gather and worship together at their Nineteen Day Feasts (the first day of each Bahá'í month). These Feasts are in three parts: devotional, administrative and social.

As to differences of worship, I am not completely familiar with the worship rituals of other religions, except that prayer is between the individual and God and is "conversation with God," where one can bare his/her soul and seek guidance from the Almighty. Here are two quotes from Bahá'u'lláh on this subject:

"We, verily, have set forth all things in Our Book, as a token of grace unto those who have believed in God, the Almighty, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting. And We have ordained obligatory prayer and fasting so that all may by these means draw nigh unto God, the Most Powerful, the Well-Beloved."^{xxvi}

"One who performeth neither good deeds nor acts of worship is like unto a tree which beareth no fruit, and an action which leaveth no trace. Whosoever experienceth the holy ecstasy of worship will refuse to barter such an act or any praise of God for all that existeth in the world. Fasting and obligatory prayer are as two wings to man's life. Blessed be the one who soareth with their aid in the heaven of the love of God, the Lord of all worlds."^{xxvii}

There is so much more I could say on this subject, but this response to your questions is already much too long.

15. "Finally, what do you personally like most about being a Bahá'í? What do you think attracts many people to Bahá'í? also, feel free to include any additional comments about your faith that you think might be important but are not generally well-known to people of other religions."

I became a Bahá'í in 1956 after several years of intensive search for answers to my most pressing questions. I needed to know who I was, where I came from, where I was headed, and most

important, why. I was not brought up with any religious training, but did associate with people of other religions and faiths. I attended some religious services from time to time, and was always disturbed that the different religions were teaching the same basic truths, but were estranged from people of other religions, and that they each felt they had the only answer and that everyone else was in error.

When I first heard about Bahá'í and read some of the principles, I was struck with the notion that my ideas of equality, unity and oneness of all peoples was not as farfetched as others had indicated. However, I was not anxious to join any group, basically because I felt that by joining a group, I would be closing myself off from other groups. I continued my search and after reaching a place where I could go no farther, I said out loud, "Oh God, if you exist, please send me a teacher." Almost immediately I received an answer and it was as if a voice in my head verbally said the word "Bahá'í." I had not even thought about Bahá'í for quite a long time, but recalled that I had some literature someplace and went to look at it. After reading a little bit, my telephone rang and a very old friend who I had not seen for several years was on the phone and invited me to dinner. I accepted. As we left the house, he asked me whether I would like to attend a Bahá'í meeting after dinner. I had not even mentioned my previous experience that day and was a bit taken aback. I said OK and we did attend the meeting. After that, I did begin a sincere investigation into the Bahá'í Faith and after much prayer and meditation, I woke up one morning with the strong desire to become a Bahá'í, which I did. I feel today just as enthusiastic about being a Bahá'í as I was at the beginning. What I like most about being a Bahá'í is that I feel that I can make a difference, even if only a small way, to bring love, justice and peace to this world of contention. Additionally, I have been privileged to live in Bahá'í communities throughout the world and to work with peoples of all backgrounds and cultures for the establishment of universal peace on this planet.

I cannot say what attracts many people to Bahá'í. However, I do believe that God has sent Bahá'u'lláh for every soul and that each individual person has the ability and capacity to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as God's Messenger for this day. However, this depends on each individual's personal volition and free will. Bahá'ís do not try to "make Bahá'ís," but instead to "find" Bahá'ís. We are anxious to share these teachings with everyone, but we refuse to force our belief on anyone. It is offered as the greatest gift one can give to others.

I have now responded to your questions with some 19 pages. Your questions are really wonderful and thought-provoking and if I had more time (and energy), I am sure that I could augment these pages considerably. There are many wonderful Bahá'í books available on almost every subject you can imagine. If you like, you can find out more information about Bahá'í by going to the Bahá'í website <http://www.bahai.us>

Most sincerely,
Shirley Macias
Eloy, Arizona
August 2009

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