LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

Cultural Diversity

Religious Identities

Bahá'í Identities

Followers of the Bahá'í faith follow the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith. Bahá'í staff and students form part of the La Trobe community. Acknowledging and respecting Bahá'í identities at La Trobe therefore requires, in part, a basic understanding of what the Bahá'í faith is about.

Bahá'ís in Australia

- The Bahá'í faith was brought to Australia in 1920.
- By 1934, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand was established.
- In 1957, plans were announced to build a Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney. Officially dedicated in 1961, it remains one of only seven Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world.
- The gradual growth of the Bahá'í community in Australia was accelerated by Iranian Bahá'í refugees fleeing the resurgence of persecution following the 1979 Iranian revolution.
- In 1986, the International Year of Peace, the Bahá'í community sponsored a 'Peace Expo' in the grounds of the House of Worship that attracted 10,000 visitors. It received a Peace Messenger Award from the United Nations for activities throughout Australia.
- The Australian Bahá'í community reflects the diversity of modern Australia. There are an estimated 13,000 Baha'is in more than 400 Baha'i communities throughout Australia. People come from all backgrounds, including those born in Iran, Australia, England, New Zealand, USA, Malaysia and India.

About the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í faith is based on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (Glory of God). Bahá'u'lláh, a manifestation of God, is the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith. He was born on 12 November 1817 in Tehran, the capital of Persia (now Iran). His coming was heralded by another who was called the Bab.

Abdu'l-Bahá, the son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh, was the interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the Centre of the Covenant. Abdu'l-Bahá spread Bahá'í teachings in Europe and North America and established the world headquarters of the Bahá'í' faith in Haifa, Israel. He developed Bahá'í ideas of social reform and international justice and expounded on Bahá'í beliefs through thousands of talks and letters.

From 1921, Shoghi Effendi continued the work of Abdu'l-Bahá as head of the Bahá'í faith and developed the administrative structure which currently directs Bahá'ís. Shoghi Effendi was the great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Bahá'í Beliefs and Teachings

Oneness of God

One of the fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í faith is the principle that the universe and all that is within it has been created by one God who has absolute control and knowledge over this creation. Human beings may call God by different names, but the Bahá'ís understand that all are speaking about the same unique being.

Oneness of religion

This fundamental teaching indicates that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin. From time to time in the history of humanity God has sent manifestations of God, who are principally the founders of the major revealed religions, to assist humanity in its collective evolution. These manifestations of God are the educators of humanity who, through their teachings and laws, establish social systems according to human beings' level of maturity at the time. According to the principle of progressive revelation, Bahá'ís believe that when humanity reaches the next level of growth, God will send another manifestation to educate and guide humanity.

Oneness of humanity

This principle refers to the declaration that the entire human race is one unified species. It implies that everyone has the same basic God-given capacities which are, in essence, noble. The physical appearance of a human being does not make one ethnic group superior to another.

Bahá'í perspective on education

The primary intention that underlies the Bahá'í approach to education is spiritual empowerment in order to bring about unity. Bahá'ís believe that the purpose of life is to know and to worship God, and to foster an ever-advancing civilisation. The Bahá'í approach to education promotes the principle of independent investigation of truth, where faith and reason collaborate to train the mind. .

Sacred texts

The Bahá'í scriptures consist of the books, essays and letters written by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Most Holy Book (Kitab-i-Aqdas)* is the book of laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

Other well known writings of Bahá'u'lláh are *The Book of Certitude, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words* and *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys.*

Bahá'í Religious Observance

The Bahá'í faith has no clergy or sacraments, and virtually no rituals. Independent investigation of truth, private prayer, collective discussion and action are all ways in which Bahá'ís observe their religion.

Prayer

Daily private prayer is a religious obligation for all Bahá'ís from the age of 15. Bahá'ís must recite one of the three daily obligatory prayers in accordance with specific directions. The short obligatory prayer is recited once every 24 hours between noon and sunset. The medium obligatory prayer is recited three times a day, in the morning, at noon and in the evening. The long obligatory prayer is recited once every 24 hours at any time.

Congregational prayer, in the sense of formal prayer which is to be recited in accordance with a prescribed ritual, is forbidden in the Bahá'í faith, with the exception of the Prayer for the Dead. There are many prayers for different occasions such as meetings, healing, gratitude, praise, children, marriage, test and difficulties, and spiritual qualities. Bahá'ís are encouraged to use these prayers to supplicate God. These prayers are regarded as the Words of God, therefore no change can be made to them.

Meditation

Each individual is free to choose his or her own meditational form, but all are encouraged to spend time each day in meditation.

Fasting

Adult Bahá'ís in good health fast each year from 2 March to 20 March, abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset.

The sick, elderly and very young are exempt from fasting, as are pregnant or nursing mothers, travellers and those doing heavy physical work.

Structure and organisation

The Bahá'í community has no clergy. Following an administrative framework set down by Bahá'u'lláh, the faith is organised around a set of elected governing councils which operate at the local, national and international levels. Election is by secret ballot. Electioneering is forbidden and there is no system of nominations.

Bahá'í administrative institutions which supervise Bahá'í events

In 1963 the world governing body of the Bahá'í faith, the Universal House of Justice, was elected. The Universal House of Justice resides in Haifa, Israel and consists of nine members elected every five years from the Bahá'ís of the world through a democratic system. The Universal House of Justice is a male-only body, by decree of Baha'u'llah.

National

At the national level, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia administers the affairs of the Bahá'í community. Nine members are elected annually at a national convention attended by elected delegates from all parts of the country.

State

At the state level, the Bahá'í Council for Victoria represents the Bahá'í community. Nine members are elected annually by members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the state.

The Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast is the monthly Bahá'í community meeting when followers get together to pray, discuss, consult on social issues and administrative matters, and plan social activities. The Feast is held every nineteen days in each Bahá'í community, usually on the first day of each Bahá'í month. The Nineteen Day Feast is the most important occasion for communication between Bahá'í administrative institutions and members of the faith.

Places of worship

Most Bahá'í meetings occur in individuals' homes, local Bahá'í centres or rented facilities.

There are currently seven Bahá'í Houses of Worship, one per continent, with an eighth under construction in Chile. Each House of Worship has its own distinctive design, but all Bahá'í Houses of Worship have nine sides and doors and a central dome.

The number nine is significant in the Bahá'í faith. The Arabic word baha (splendour) has a numerical value of nine. Nine, as the highest single digit number, symbolises completeness. For Bahá'ís, the number nine symbolises completeness and fulfilment, concepts which they believe are embodied in their religion. The nine doors signify the faith's openness to people of all religions.

Customs

Rites of passage

- There is no formal naming ceremony in the Bahá'í faith.
- Children of Bahá'í parents are encouraged to conduct a personal, independent investigation before making a commitment to enter the Bahá'í faith. From the age of 15, they can choose to enter the faith or not.
- Marriage is conditional on the consent of both parties and their parents. The only essential requirement of the marriage ceremony is that both partners repeat the vow 'We will all, verily, abide by the will of God' in front of witnesses.
- When a Bahá'í dies, the body should be buried within one hour's journey from the place of death, and as soon as possible after death. Embalming and cremation are prohibited unless required by law.

Relationships between men and women

- The principle of equality of the sexes is an essential tenet of the faith. Women participate fully in decision making within the family and within the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. But roles are not seen as identical – mothers, for example, are considered to have a special role as the first educators of their children.
- The Bahá'í faith prescribes monogamy and promotes hastity outside marriage.
- Divorce is discouraged – Bahá'í law requires a year of trial separation.

Other laws and customs

- Gambling is prohibited.
- The use of any substance that tampers with the power of judgement (including alcohol and narcotics) is prohibited.
- Bahá'ís are expected to respect the authority of established governments and their laws.
- Bahá'ís are forbidden to join political parties and cannot accept political appointments or run for elected office. This is because participation in partisan politics is characterised by an adversarial approach to oppose the ideologies and policies of other political parties. It is there fore not considered conducive to attaining unity of the generality of mankind, which is the cornerstone of the teachings of the Bahá'í faith.

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The Bahá'í faith is an independent religion. It is not a branch or sect of any other religion. The Baha'i faith views itself as the latest in a series of continuing divine revelations including Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

Significant Bahá'í Dates and Events

The Bahá'í calendar

The Bahá'í calendar is based upon the calendar established by the Báb. The year consists of 19 months of 19 days, with four or five intercalary days, to make a full solar year. Each month is named after one of the attributes of God e.g.Splendour, Glory, Beauty, Grandeur.

The Bahá'í week is seven days, with each day of the week also named after an attribute of God e.g.Istiqlál (Independence), Kamál (Perfection) and Idál (Justice).

Holy days

Bahá'ís observe eleven holy days throughout the year, which commemorate important anniversaries in the history of the faith.

During the year, nine days are designated holy days on which Bahá'ís should suspend work. Bahá'í days begin and end at sunset.

Naw Rúz (Bahá'í New Year)

Naw Rúz is celebrated as a day of festivity, gift giving or celebration with community, family and friends. The festival comes at the end of the Nineteen Day Fast.

First Day of Ridvan, Ninth Day of Ridvan, Twelfth Day of Ridvan

The 12 day Festival of Ridvan commemorates Bahá'u'lláh's public declaration of his mission in the Garden of Ridvan in Baghdad in 1863. The first, ninth and twelfth days are regarded as particularly holy.

Declaration of the Báb

The Báb was the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh. This day marks the anniversary of the Báb's declaration of his mission in 1844.

Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh

This day marks the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892.

Martyrdom of the Báb

The Báb was executed by firing squad in Tabriz on this day in 1850.

Birth of the Báb

Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

Other special days

Suspension of work is not obligatory on these holy days.

Ayyam-i-Ha

These are the Intercalary Days, reserved for charity, gift giving and festivities.

Nineteen Day Fast

During this month, Bahá'ís over the age of 15 years do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset.

Day of the Covenant

This day celebrates Bahá'u'lláh's appointment of his eldest son, Abdu'l-Bahá, as the Centre of the Covenant, to whom his followers should turn after his passing.

Ascension of Abdu'l-Bahá

This day marks the passing of Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921.

For specific dates, see the Cultural Diversity calendar at **http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip**

Some common misconceptions about Bahá'í

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Further Reading

Australian Bahá'ís
http://www.bahai.org.au

Faith and Food Fact Files: Bahá'í
http://www.faithandfood.com/Bahai.php

The Bahá'ís – the International Website of the Bahá'í Faith
http://www.bahai.org/

United Communities of Spirit – A Global Interfaith Initiative: The Bahá'í Faith
http://origin.org/ucs/sbcr/bahai.cfm