The Baha’i Faith has some five million adherents around the world. It preaches the oneness of God, the unity of all faiths, universal education, and the harmony of all people, but has no priesthood and few formal rituals. In this book, Peter Smith traces the development of the Baha’i Faith from its roots in the Babi movement of mid-nineteenth-century Iran to its contemporary emergence as an expanding worldwide religion.

- Explores the textual sources for Baha’i belief and practice, theology and anthropology, and understanding of other religions.
- Covers the concept of the spiritual path, Baha’i law, and administration and aspects of community life.
- Examines the Baha’is’ social teachings and activities in the wider world.

This introduction will be of particular interest to students of new religious movements, Middle East religions, and comparative religion and for those studying short courses on the Baha’i Faith.

AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH

PETER SMITH
Mahidol University International College
For Anne, Corinne, James, William, and Lua
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Emerging out of the earlier Babi movement in the 1860s, the Baha’i Faith has since developed into a religion of considerable scope and dynamism. Now established throughout the world, the Faith has attracted several million adherents from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, its followers lauding this multiplicity as a demonstration of the Faith’s claims to be a universal religion able to unite all the peoples of the world.

Baha’is are followers of Bahá’u’lláh (1817–92), an Iranian nobleman who spent much of his life as an exile in the Ottoman Empire, and whose teachings provide the core elements of their beliefs. For Baha’is, Bahá’u’lláh is the latest in a series of divine messengers and as such is God’s prophet for the present age, summoning all humanity to unite and establish the millennial peace promised in the religions of the past. Regarding the world’s major religions as various aspects of the same truth and all human beings as members of a single race and nation, Baha’is believe that their religion provides the ideas and structures for a new world order.

The present book provides first a brief survey of the historical development of the Baha’i Faith and of the Babi movement out of which it emerged (Section I), followed by overviews of the major beliefs and practices of present-day Baha’is (Sections II and III). There is also a select bibliography and an appended list of recent Baha’i leaders.

In preparing this book, I have drawn extensively from my Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá’í Faith (2000; 2nd ed. 2002), and I extend my particular thanks to Oneworld Publications for permitting me to reuse material from that earlier work. I also acknowledge the kind assistance of the Baha’i Office of Public Information in Haifa, the Baha’i National Office in London, and my friends on the ‘Tarikh’ internet Baha’i history discussion group for responding to particular queries. Very special thanks are due to Dr. Moojan Momen and Dr. Stephen Lambden for reading and commenting on the manuscript before publication – such faults as remain of course are entirely my responsibility. My thanks also to my colleagues.
Preface

and friends at Mahidol University International College and to Kate Brett, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for their encouragement and support.

Peter Smith
Bangkok
December 2006
Chronology

I. The Early Babi Period, 1844–53

1843/44  Death of Sayyid Kázim Rashtí (31 December/1/2 January) leads to a leadership crisis in the Shaykhi movement.
1845  Trial of Mullá ’Alí Baštámi, the Báb’s emissary in Iraq (13 January). First persecution of Babis in Iran.
1846  The Báb escapes from Shíráz (23 September) and proceeds to Isfahán, where he is favourably received by the governor, Manúchihr Khán.
1847  Following the death of Manúchihr Khán (21 February), the Báb is taken to the fortress-prison of Mákú (July). Ţáhirih returns to Qazvín (July) and is accused of involvement in her uncle’s murder (August–September?). The first killings of Babis occur. The Báb begins his composition of his book of laws, the Bayán.
1848  The Báb is brought for trial in Tabríz, where he makes public claim to be the Mahdi (July/August). Mullá Husayn leads a growing band of followers in a proclamatory march from Khúrásán (July). Following the death of Muḥammad Sháh (4 September), the conflict of Shaykh Ţábarsí begins (10 October–10 May 1849).
1849  The Ţábarsí conflict ends (10 May).
1850  Seven leading Babis in Tehran are executed (19/20 February). Váhid’s preaching in Yazd leads to disturbances (January–February), and when he goes to Nayríz, an armed struggle between the Babis and their opponents follows (27 May–21 June). An armed struggle also occurs in Zanján
Chronology

(c. 13 May–c. 2 January 1851). The Báb is executed at the instructions of Amír Kabír (8/9 July).

1851
The Zanján conflict ends (January). Several Babis are killed in Yazd and elsewhere.

1852
Amír Kabír is killed at the order of the king (January). One Babi faction makes an attempt on the life of Nasírí’d-dín Sháh (15 August). Many Babis are killed, including Táhirih. Bahá’u’lláh is arrested (16 August) and imprisoned in the ‘Black Pit’ (August–December), where he experiences his initiatory vision.

1853
Renewed conflict in Nayríz (March–October).

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF BABISM, 1853–66

1853
Bahá’u’lláh is exiled from Iran. He and his family journey from Tehran to Baghdad (12 January–8 April).

1854–56
Bahá’u’lláh leaves Baghdad for Kurdistan (10 April 1854–19 March 1856).

1856–63
Bahá’u’lláh gradually revivifies the Babi community and becomes the dominant Babi leader, overshadowing Subḥ-i Azal, who remains in hiding.

1863
Bahá’u’lláh stays in the garden of Ridván (22 April–3 May) prior to his journey to Istanbul (3 May–16 August). He remains in Istanbul until his journey to Edirne (1–12 December). Claims to divinely bestowed authority become prominent in his writings.

c. 1865
Bahá’u’lláh is poisoned by Azal, but survives. Western scholarly interest in Babism begins.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH, 1866–92

1866
Bahá’u’lláh makes formal announcement to Azal to be He Whom God Shall Make Manifest. Most of the local Babi community choose to follow him (as ‘Bahá’ís’) rather than Azal. The first Bahá’í missionaries begin to convert the Babi remnant in Iran.

1867
Bahá’u’lláh begins his proclamation to the rulers. Persecutions in various parts of Iran.

1868
Arrest of Bahá’ís in Egypt and Baghdad. Conversion of first Bahá’í of Christian background. Bahá’u’lláh is banished to
Akka under an order of life imprisonment (he and his companions leave Edirne on 12 August and reach Akka on 31 August). Azal and some others are sent to Famagusta (arr. 5 September).

1869 Bahá’u’lláh’s letter to Násírí’d-dín Sháh is delivered and its bearer tortured and killed.

1870 Bahá’u’lláh leaves the Akka barracks and lives in the city (October).

1873 Bahá’u’lláh completes the Kitáb-i Aqdas.


1876 Deposition of Sultan Abdulaziz (30 May).

1877 Bahá’u’lláh leaves Akka, residing in country houses in the region.

1889 Murder of a Bahá’í in Ashkhabad by Shi’ís (8 September) prompts Russian intervention. The Bahá’ís in Russian Turkestan henceforth emerge as a separate religious community free of persecution.

1892 Death of Bahá’u’lláh (29 May). He designates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as his successor as head of the Faith.

4. The Period of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Leadership, 1892–1921


1896 Assassination of Násírí’d-dín Sháh by a follower of Jamálu’d-dín ‘Al-Afghání’ (1 May).

1897 Consultive council of Hands of the Cause in Tehran prepares for the formation of a Bahá’í Assembly (1899).

1898 Tarbiyat Bahá’í school for boys established in Tehran. The first Western pilgrims arrive in Akka (December).


1902 Construction of the Bahá’í temple in Ashkhabad begins.

1905 Bahá’í activities begin in Germany. The Constitutional Revolution begins in Iran.

1908 The Young Turk Revolution transforms Ottoman government and releases political and religious prisoners.
Chronology

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is released from Ottoman confinement and subsequently moves his family to Haifa (1909).

1909
The remains of the Báb are interred in a shrine on Mount Carmel (21 March). American Bahá’ís start their project to build a temple in Chicago.

1910

1911
‘Abdu’l-Bahá completes his first tour of Europe (August–December). A systematic teaching campaign is launched in India.

1912
‘Abdu’l-Bahá begins his second Western tour (North America, 11 April–5 December; Europe, 13 December–13 June 1913). He returns to Haifa on 5 December.

1914
World War I begins. Bahá’í activity started in Japan.

1918
British take Palestine from the Turks, ensuring ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s safety. World War I ends.

1919
The Tablets of the Divine Plan are ceremonially ‘unveiled’ in New York. Martha Root travels to Latin America to teach the Bahá’í Faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá composes his Tablet to the Hague.

1920
First Bahá’í pioneers arrive in Australia and South Africa. Work begins at the site of the proposed Bahá’í House of Worship at Wilmette, Illinois. The first All-India Bahá’í Convention is held. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is knighted by the British.

1921
Shi’is seek to gain possession of the House of Bahá’u’lláh in Baghdad (January), leading to a long-running legal dispute. The first pioneer arrives in Brazil. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dies (28 November).

5. The Guardianship of Shoghi Effendi, 1922–57

1922
Shoghi Effendi is publicly named as Guardian (January). He calls a conference of leading Bahá’ís to discuss the future of the Faith. His first general letter on Bahá’í administration is sent to the West (5 March).

1923
Bahá’í national assemblies are elected in Britain, Germany, and India.

1925
The International Bahá’í Bureau is established in Geneva. A Bahá’í Esperanto magazine begins publication in Germany. An Egyptian court declares the Bahá’í Faith to be separate from Islam. Shoghi Effendi establishes definite qualifications
for Baha’i membership. Qajar rule in Iran formally comes to an end, and Reza Khan becomes Shah.

1926
Queen Marie of Romania meets Martha Root and pays public tribute to the Faith.

1928
Persecution of the Baha’is in Soviet Asia. The case of Bahá’u’lláh’s House in Baghdad is brought before the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, which finds in favour of the Baha’is (but to no effect).

1932
Bahá’í Khánum dies (15 July).

1934

1937
First American Seven Year Plan (–1944) marks beginning of a systematic campaign to establish the Faith in Latin America. Other national plans follow (1938–53). The Baha’i Faith is banned in Nazi Germany.

1938
Mass arrests and exile of Baha’is in Soviet Asia. The Ashkhabad temple is turned into an art gallery.

1939–45
World War II.

1946
Systematic campaign begins to establish the Baha’i Faith throughout Western Europe.

1948

1951

1953
Ten Year Crusade begins (–1963). The Baha’i temple in Wilmette is dedicated for worship.

1954
Women become eligible to serve on Baha’i assemblies in Iran. Shoghi Effendi establishes the Auxiliary Boards.

1955
Construction of the International Archives Building begins (–1957). National campaign of persecution against the Baha’is in Iran.

1957
Death of Shoghi Effendi in London (4 November). The Hands of the Cause assume leadership of the Baha’i world.
Chronology


1960 Charles Mason Remey makes claim to be the second Guardian and is declared a Covenant-breaker. All Baha’i activities in Egypt are banned by presidential decree (August).

1961 The Baha’i temples in Kampala and Sydney are dedicated for worship. ‘Mass teaching’ begins in India.

1962 Persecution of Baha’is in Morocco (–1963). Baha’i institutions are banned in Indonesia.

7. THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE, 1963–

1963 Establishment of the Universal House of Justice (21–22 April) as head of the Faith. It announces that it knows of no way in which further guardians can be appointed (6 October). First Baha’i world congress held in London (28 April–2 May).

1964 The Baha’i temple in Frankfurt is dedicated for worship. The Universal House of Justice declares that there is no way to appoint further Hands of the Cause. The Nine Year Plan begins (–1973). Other international plans follow.


1968 Establishment of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

1970 All Baha’i institutions and activities are banned in Iraq. The BIC gains consultative status with the United Nations’ Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

1972 The Panama temple is dedicated for worship. The Universal House of Justice adopts its Constitution.

1973 Establishment of the International Teaching Centre.


1977 First Baha’i radio station established in Latin America (Ecuador). The first of a series of international Baha’i women’s conferences are held.

1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Major persecution of Baha’is begins. The House of the Bab is destroyed.
**Chronology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>The Universal House of Justice issues its statement, <em>The Promise of World Peace</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>The Bahá’í temple in New Delhi is dedicated for worship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>The Bahá’í Office of the Environment is established as part of BIC. Collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>A special teaching plan for former Eastern Bloc countries is launched (–1992).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Official opening of the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb (May).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Babi and Baha’i religions originated in the Middle East in the mid-nineteenth century, but they developed in significantly different contexts. The Babi movement of the 1840s was largely confined to the Iranian Empire at a time when it was still relatively isolated from the wider world, whilst the Baha’i Faith developed from the 1860s in the more cosmopolitan Ottoman world at a time when even Iran was experiencing greater foreign influence and ideological debate.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant Middle Eastern power was the Ottoman Empire, which then incorporated much of the Balkans and the Arab world as well as the Ottoman heartlands in what is now the Republic of Turkey. To its east was Iran, and to the south Egypt, the later still technically an Ottoman vassal. All three states were monarchies with theoretically autocratic rulers, albeit local governors and landowners, and, in Iran, leaders of the numerous nomadic tribes, often enjoyed considerable power. Traditional Islamic religious leaders were also important, with official state-controlled hierarchies in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt and a powerful independent clerical order in Iran – a Shi’i state, unlike its Sunni neighbours. More heterodox forms of Islam were also present, notably various branches of Sufism, as well as large Christian and Jewish minorities, and, in Iran, Zoroastrians.

Throughout the region, European interference and the threat of colonial expansion was a reality (the Ottoman and Iranian empires had already lost considerable territory to Russia by the early nineteenth century; Egypt was effectively incorporated into the British Empire in 1882). European cultural influence was already strong in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt by the early nineteenth century and increased after the Crimean War (1853–56) and the completion of the Suez Canal (1869), both countries seeing major movements of Western-influenced modernization. Iran was more isolated and less economically developed than its western neighbours, but even there...
Prologue: The Middle East in the Nineteenth Century

a modernist movement emerged, albeit it lagged behind its Ottoman and Egyptian counterparts.

Linguistically, the region was dominated by three languages: Ottoman Turkish, the official language of the Ottoman Empire; Persian, the language of Iran – but also widely known as a literary language in British India; and Arabic, the language of Islam, studied by all Islamic scholars everywhere and spoken in various popular forms in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world.

It should be noted that during the whole Babi and early Baha’i periods (1844–92), transportation in the Middle East was generally poor. Steamship companies provided the first modern transportation links from the 1830s onwards, with a network of sailings eventually being established across the waters linked to both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea, as well as river services up the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates, but small sailing ships remained the main form of water transportation throughout the period. On land, apart from railway construction in Egypt (from 1851), a few miles of railway in Anatolia, and some short stretches of modern roads, the means of transportation remained traditional, with travellers riding or walking along ill-maintained tracks or across open land. There were few bridges. Given the great distances involved (Iran is some 1.6 million square kilometres in extent, three times the size of France; the modern road from Baghdad to Haifa – only completed in 1941 – is 616 miles [919 kilometres]; the direct distance from Tehran to Akka is 1,532 kilometres), journey times between the major cities and towns referred to in this book might then take weeks or even months. Modern communication, in the form of the electric telegraph, was established between the main centres in the 1850s.