

A Review of the Basic and Distinguishing Principles of the Baha'i Faith

The Guardian's summary of the "basic and distinguishing principles" of the Baha'i Faith "that 'Abdu'l-Baha expounded, with brilliant simplicity, with persuasiveness and force, and for the first time in His ministry...which together with the laws and ordinances revealed in the Kitab-i-Aqdas constitute the bed-rock of God's latest Revelation."

'Abdu'l-Baha "expounded" many more "basic and distinguishing principles of His Father's Faith" in His talks and selected Tablets in North America and Western Europe, between 1911 and 1913 than the fourteen chosen here by the Guardian, as compared in my paper on the subject, which can be found here:

https://bahai-library.com/terry_explanation_teachings_bahaullah

It is precisely because these fourteen were chosen by the Guardian and described "together with the laws and ordinances of the Kitab-i-Aqdas" as constituting "the bed-rock of God's latest Revelation" that they have been chosen for careful consideration at this time.

I want to recommend to you the recently-published book, Exploring the Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Baha'i Faith by [Omid Ghaemmaghami](#) and [Shahin Vafai](#).

The Guardian listed fourteen principles in a passage from God Passes By, his incomparable portrait of the first hundred years of the Baha'i Faith:

It was in the course of these epoch-making journeys and before large and representative audiences, at times exceeding a thousand people, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded, with brilliant simplicity, with persuasiveness and force, and for the first time in His ministry, those basic and distinguishing principles of His Father's Faith, which together with the laws and ordinances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas constitute

the bed-rock of God's latest Revelation to mankind. [1]The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition; [2]the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith; [3]the basic unity of all religions; [4]the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national; [5]the harmony which must exist between religion and science; [6]the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar; [7]the introduction of compulsory education; [8]the adoption of a universal auxiliary language; [9]the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty; [10]the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations; [11]the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship; [12]the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, [13]and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; [14]and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind--these stand out as the essential elements of that Divine polity⁽¹⁾ which He proclaimed to leaders of public thought as well as to the masses at large in the course of these missionary journeys. (Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, chapter XIX, pp. 281-282)

(1)Definition of "Divine polity" -- government emanating from and established by God

Sunday, June 14, 2026

Part One

The first seven principles listed by the Guardian in God Passes By (chapter XIX, p. 281) are as follows:

[1]The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition; [2]the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith; [3]the basic unity of all religions; [4]the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national; [5]the harmony which must exist between religion and science; [6]the equality of men and women, the two wings on

which the bird of human kind is able to soar; [7]the introduction of compulsory education;

Today we will examine these seven teachings, considering them from various points of view.

[1]The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition;

We find this principle in the Seven Valleys, the Hidden Words and the Kitab-i-Iqan of Baha'u'llah, as well as other treatises. The Guardian cited it first in his list, and so did 'Abdu'l-Baha, in many of His talks. 'Abdu'l-Baha often contrasted this principle, which is always depicted as a positive good and with no limitations or drawbacks, with "blind imitation", that is, with following the ideas of other people rather than seeking for an finding the truth for oneself.

When we examine this principle in the light of contemporary values, we find that it very widely espoused in much of the world...except for those countries and communities of faith and ideology that value unanimity and conformity over "independent search", that cling to unverified ideas often regarded as authoritative because they are ingrained traditions. We should have no illusions that this principle has been embraced by all people, or even by a majority of the inhabitants of the earth. To cite one example, there are widespread and deeply rooted prejudices against certain people as a group which are undoubtedly derived from "blind imitation" and which have proven to be impervious to the broad endorsement of objectivity, fairmindedness and eradication of prejudice that is claimed seemingly by most people we know.

Among the Baha'is there has been a tendency to regard any challenge to traditional or popular views of the teachings of the Faith as a threat to the unity of doctrine of the Faith, to the unity of the community, and to the projection of a united front to a world that doubts every word uttered by Baha'u'llah and His divinely appointed interpreters. This principle encourages Baha'is, as well as humanity as a whole, to respect and encourage the individual to seek out truth for herself and himself. While individual Baha'is may well have beliefs that are not shared by their co-religionists, this should

not be troubling to us, because we are called upon to investigate truth for ourselves. In order to do so we must be at liberty to engage in that investigation.

Baha'u'llah encouraged His followers to engage in consultation with one another, to permit each other to express beliefs that clash so that the spark of truth can emerge, and to adopt a scientific method so that all matters are examined in relation to all of the Baha'i teachings and cognizant of the multiple meanings of many of the words revealed to humanity by the Manifestations of God. We can be confident of our convictions while remaining open to others, seeking always to learn more. On the other hand, our beliefs as Baha'is are distinctive and we should not conceal their authentic characteristics, or feel that we have to agree with everyone. Unity in diversity is as important in belief and speech as it is in fellowship and community building.

[2]the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith;

This principle may appear to be obvious, and entirely uncontroversial, but that is not necessarily the case. Since 'Abdu'l-Baha spoke of this principle there have been many discoveries of proto-human beings, including the Neanderthal, the Cro-magnon, as well as Homo erectus, Denisovans, Homo floresiensis, and Homo naledi. 'Abdu'l-Baha explained that humanity has evolved over the course of ages and may appear quite different in the course of that evolution but that Homo Sapiens was always the intended maturation of our species. Only a divinely inspired person could make such a statement with complete confidence. The Guardian assured the Baha'is that this Baha'i doctrine will stand up to rational and empirical examination, and many scientists have affirmed this to be the case, even though the majority may still believe otherwise. The Baha'i principles are not subject to a test of popularity, but rather to a test of truthfulness.

Another dimension of this teaching is that humanity will become united as one race as it embraces this principle, for boys and girls of all heritages will play together, learn together, and, as adults will marry and from them will come forth children who will

demonstrate the oneness of the human race. It is not only a reality pertaining to our heritage, our past, but also an emblem of our future.

[3]the basic unity of all religions;

This teaching is and in some ways quite unique to the Baha'i Faith. While a number of religions regard some other religions as related to and even united with their own faith, no Faith other than the Baha'i Faith affirms that Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Joseph, David, Solomon, and the other prophets found in the Hebrew scriptures, along with the prophets cited in the Qur'an, the prophets of the Zoroastrian religion, Krishna and Buddha, and many others whose names are lost to history are actually messengers sent by God to educate humanity as a whole, with perennial teachings alongside dispensational teachings suitable to the time in which of them appeared. We can expect a lot of disagreement from the followers of other religions on this subject! And we have our work cut out to convince all of them of the authenticity of Manifestations they have rejected for millennia in some cases and centuries in others. But this is a fundamental tenet of our Faith because without humanity recognizing the validity of all of the Manifestations it is not possible for us to understand that the religion that we practice is, fundamentally, one and the same.

[4]the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national;

We may believe that everybody believes in this principle, and certainly many of us know people who have no knowledge of the Baha'i Faith but nevertheless espouse this truth. However, most of humanity retains some form of prejudice, whether it be religious, class or national. Consider the hatred that exists between the peoples that are clashing today – the Buddhists who hate Rohingya, the Chinese who hate Tibetans and Uyghurs, the Hindus who hate Muslims, the Russians who hate Ukrainians, the Palestinians who hate Israelis...and lest we suppose that this has nothing to do with us, how about the Republicans who hate Democrats, and vice versa; the whites who hate blacks, and vice versa; the poor who hate the rich, and vice versa; the educated who hate the unschooled, and vice versa. While the religious divisions in other countries appear to be much more destructive than those in the USA, the fact remains that many American Catholics hate Protestants, and vice versa; that Buddhists hate Christians,

and vice versa; that Muslims hate Jews and Christians, and vice versa...and I am just getting warmed up. Erasing all of these “**forms of prejudice**” will take a lot longer than a few hundred years, because we have been steeped in them for centuries, even millennia. Baha’u’llah stated that to love humanity in all of its diversity is the highest level of spiritual attainment to which we can attain.

[5]the harmony which must exist between religion and science;

We may think we know the full meaning of this principle, for we have certainly heard a great many Baha’is speak about it, and read what they have written about it, and assumed that their understanding and our understand were right. But the vast and rapid expansion of scientific knowledge has unveiled that fact that, in many respects, religion and science are not in harmony. Contemporary scientists describe evolution in a manner that is contrary to its depiction in the Baha’i writings, and in the revealed scriptures of Manifestations of God through the ages. The scientific understanding of gender is radically different from that depicted by the Manifestations. The scientific view of alcoholic beverages and recreational drugs is markedly different from the teachings of the Manifestations. The existence of metaphysical, spiritual worlds beyond this physical world is not affirmed by most scientists.

How then can we assert, as Baha’s, that this principle of the harmony of science and religion is true? There are many indications of how this harmony can exist. One of them is to recognize that the definition of science has changed a great deal since the early twentieth century which ‘Abdu’l-Baha spoke on this theme. In that time, science described the systematic study of phenomena, and was not reserved for physically observable phenomena. In addition to this dimension of the language of science, there is also the dimension of the application of science in different societies, about which most of us knew either very little or assumed were pre-modern, superstitious and without enduring value. That has been repeatedly been proven to be erroneous. Also, religion was defined differently in the past, and is still defined differently in the present, not as consisting in the teachings of Manifestations but rather the theological and traditional views of our ancestors. Furthermore, there is a dimension of science and religion which is separate from its views of reality, whether physical or metaphysical...it is the realm of morality, the utilization of the fruits of science and religion in order to enrich the lives of some or all human beings and other creatures.

These are among the dimensions that need to be considered as we explore the meaning of this principle and the positive influence it is destined to have upon humanity as a whole.

One of the unique references to the agreement of science and religion that we find in the Baha'i Writings and in a number of the talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha is to the two kinds of science, or, what is often translated into English as "philosophy". There is material science/philosophy and divine science /philosophy. Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha describe many philosophers as having taught and written about both kinds of science/philosophy. Baha'u'llah stated in at least two Tablets that the origin of philosophy is from the prophets of God, and in other Tablets He indicated that one of the signs of the coming of age of humanity is the flourishing of divine science/philosophy, which 'Abdu'l-Baha, citing the Imam 'Ali ibn Abu Talib, called "the sister of revelation".

[6]the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar;

In the birth pangs of feminism, the equality of women and men was espoused, with a conventional belief that women and men are alike and therefore equal, that a man can do whatever a woman can do and a woman can do whatever a man can do. Ideologies change over time. Those who wanted women to have the same opportunities as men, in their educational formation and their subsequent employment may have believed that in order for this to take place, women and men must be regarded as equals, as fundamentally the same. But was that what Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha have in mind? Baha'u'llah didn't talk about equality, but rather about individuality – the uniqueness of every person, male or female, and the different capacities of individuals which are by design, that is, in harmony with the Will of God, our Creator. They also affirmed that ranks are required by humanity – bosses and employees, generals and privates, owners and workers – and that the contributions of every person must be respected and acknowledged as worship that is pleasing to God. And neither did they consider unlimited freedom of choice to be good either for the individual or for humanity as a whole. This is a markedly different view than that generally held by men and women in our time.

The essential truth of this principle is that whichever individual who attains to the greatest service of humanity and the most dedicated service to the kingdom of God on earth is the one most beloved of our Creator and should likewise be most beloved of humanity. It is not the potential of the individual that is the indicator of his or her status but rather the dedication of whatever she or he has received to do the most good for all of us. In God's eyes the true identity and rank of the soul is not its gender...our greatest honor and blessing is to be servants of the Cause of God.

[7]the introduction of compulsory education:

Here is another principle that most of us may believe to be settled and no longer of particular relevancy...certainly not one of the **“basic and distinguishing characteristics of the Baha'i Faith”**. We have been assuming that the **“compulsory education”** that is now provided in many countries fulfills this requirement and embodies this principle. But contrary to that assumption, the most important education that Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha endorsed, and what they considered to be **“compulsory”** was something that most schools do not teach. Ethics, morality, the behavioral requirements of children and adults and the beliefs that uphold those behaviors are mission from most of the “compulsory education” systems of the world. Those teachers and schools that teach religion do so in a sectarian, literal, intellectually and emotionally stifling manner which is the opposite of what is endorsed in the Baha'i teachings. Instead of a spiritual education, the “compulsory education” of most of the world is purely materialistic, inhibits creativity, stunts critical thinking, forbids deviation from traditional norms, and many have been better suited to training factory workers (among the working class) or parasitical dependents upon a privileged class of societal elitists (among the wealthy) than to the members of democratic societies that need to practice wise behavior and practical skills in order to contribute to the well being of the entire commonwealth.

On the balance, all of these seven principles have remained potential but largely unimplemented since they were espoused by 'Abdu'l-Baha. We think we are modern and highly developed, and in some ways we have much to show...but we have neglected our spiritual growth, and so much so that in many regards we are less adept at living

ethically and morally than our ancestors were. Hence, the Baha'is have a lot of learn and a great deal to teach our fellow children, men and women. Before we teach them, whoever they are, we must teach ourselves. Authentic learning is lived.

Sunday, June 21, 2026

Part Two

A review of the basic and distinguishing principles of the Baha'i Faith -- the second seven principles listed by the Guardian in God Passes By (chapter XIX, pp. 281-282):

[8]the adoption of a universal auxiliary language; [9]the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty; [10]the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations; [11]the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship; [12]the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, [13]and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; [14]and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind

Each of these principles will now be discussed in the context of their unfolding meanings to the student of the Baha'i Revelation.

[8]the adoption of a universal auxiliary language;

Baha'u'llah cited the adoption of a universal auxiliary language, to be taught to all children and utilized by all of humanity, as one of the signs of the coming of age of humanity, that is, the arrival, after being prophesied for thousands of years, of the cycle of fulfillment, the Baha'i cycle. This principle was acknowledged in the past as necessary to knit together nations and empires. Alexander the Great and his successors established Greek as the language of an empire, and the Romans established Latin as the language of their empire. The nations conquered by the Muslims established Arabic as the language of their realms. The Persian Empire established Farsi as its language of choice, which was used as far East as India. The European and Communist empires promulgated their various languages in whatever

lands they conquered – Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, Russian, Chinese. Baha'u'llah called for a global adoption of one language, not through conquest, but through the adoption of the governments of the world. While the United Nations chose English and French as the two languages for its communications, this has not resulted in the global adoption of either language. Baha'u'llah called upon the governments of the world to make this choice, while expressing His own preference for Arabic. Humanity has made progress towards the implementation of this goal, but it is far from universal.

[9]the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty;

Baha'u'llah does not side with either capitalists or socialists, and specifically rejects communism because of its atheism, its obliteration of human diversity, and its totalitarian control of property. He calls for humanity to choose sharing wealth, to choose caring for the needy, to choose humanity over self. He also praises the utilization of wealth attained through work and not basking in inherited or stolen luxury. Wealthy men and women who give away their fortunes to benefit others are highly praised in His writings. But He does not leave the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty to the altruism of the individual. He asserts that this is a matter of justice and obligatory to establish the unity of mankind. Consequently He called for heirs to be designated for the reception of inherited wealth based upon the capacity of the recipients to do the best for the most, rather than to hoard for purely personal pleasure. His interpreter 'Abdu'l-Baha called for a share of specific sources of wealth to be turned over to the community for the benefit of those in the greatest need. Shoghi Effendi indicated that the economy of the future would involved the management of global resources by a global government. This vision of the future is neither one which exalts the right of the individual to unlimited wealth nor one which condemns the wealthy to dispossession and ostracism.

[10]the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations;

Baha'u'llah called upon the rulers of the world to establish what He called the Lesser Peace, consisting of an assembly of governments to bring an end to war and a beginning to cooperation between all peoples. This is required for justice to be established. While we all know that the League of Nations made an attempt to bring this about after the First World War, and that the United Nations has likewise sought to establish such an institution since the Second World War, many wars have continued to violate this principle. Baha'u'llah predicted that this will continue until a calamity of stupendous destruction will finally convince the governments of the world to unite their forces in stopping the aggression of any nation state...perhaps also the aggression of every violent disruptor of peace within nations. However, He does not predict when this will occur. Indeed, all attempts to predict its realization have led to disappointment and for some to utter despair. As the Bible and the Qur'an state, this will happen at a time known to God alone. Regardless of how long it takes, it is the one solution to global conflict. Only the unity of nations can bring about peace.

[11]the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship;

The Bhagavad-Gita, much treasured by the people of India for many centuries and perhaps millennia, called upon those who sought unity with God to consecrate their actions, their works to Him. Baha'u'llah has called this the exaltation of work as worship, and indicated that it is the highest path for the believer to take, far excelling prayer and meditation, good thoughts and good feelings. It is not pilgrimages and sacrifices, feats of self denial, memorization of scriptures, ecstasies and miracles that will best serve humanity and the individual soul. It is service to humanity, it is doing the best for one's fellow creatures. While there are many people who are aware of the power of this principle, it is not the path chosen by more than a fraction of humanity, and we won't know the meaning of heaven on earth until it is.

[12]the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society,

While Jews have understood the value of divine legislation, Christians the power of unselfish love, Muslims the need for submission to God, this has not led humanity to justice except in rare cases. Baha'u'llah calls for universal justice, not justice for the believers of one religion, not justice for one race or one class or one profession or any other fragment of humanity. True justice is justice for all, and not on human terms but

on God's terms. We think we know what justice entails, but our words and our actions prove that we are deprived of understanding this principle in the manner Baha'u'llah has proclaimed it. True justice is to see through our own eyes rather than the eyes of others, and to do the Will of our Creator, for He knows us infinitely better than we know ourselves.

[13]and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations;

Critics of religion believe that it is, to use the words of one of its most erudite and influential writers, "the opium of the people", the very opposite of "**a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations**". Most followers of the various religions believe that their particular belief system is the best "bulwark" and that those who do not embrace it are doomed. Baha'u'llah speaks about all religions as one religion, and all nations as one people. Without religion there will be no establishment of peace and justice in the world...but as long as religious communities battle for winning over the souls of humanity, as long as believers are enemies of one another, this will not happen. Baha'u'llah calls for a unity that transcends every religion and embraces those essential teachings that all religions seek to promulgate. He warned all of us that the most dangerous of conflicts are those that are engendered by religious fanaticism, exclusivism and division. That is as true today as it ever was in the past.

[14]and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind

This goal is the objective of humanity as a whole...and yet we are far from realizing it. Every person of faith knows from experience many of the antipathies, the divisions, the disappointments...his failures and the failures of his fellow believers, of his fellow inhabitants of every land. And few have discovered the truth of Baha'u'llah's teaching, which is that we will establish this "**permanent and universal peace**" together, all of us. This requires of us a tremendous change of attitude. We cannot continue to blame and condemn either ourselves or others for what we have not achieved, not if we want to attain to the kingdom of God on earth. We have to build that kingdom through acts of godliness, every day, every night. And we must recognize and appreciate the acts of

godliness of others. For, to quote the Bab, **“all are His servants, and all abide by His bidding.”**

In a letter dated 11 March 1936, the Guardian wrote the following description of the Faith of Baha'u'llah:

...refusing to be labeled as a mere philosophy of life, or as an eclectic code of ethical conduct, or even as a new religion, the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is now visibly succeeding in demonstrating its claim and title to be regarded as a World Religion, destined to attain, in the fullness of time, the status of a world-embracing Commonwealth, which would be at once the instrument and the guardian of the Most Great Peace announced by its Author. Far from wishing to add to the number of the religious systems, whose conflicting loyalties have for so many generations disturbed the peace of mankind, this Faith is instilling into each of its adherents a new love for, and a genuine appreciation of the unity underlying, the various religions represented within its pale.

May each of us continue to attain to “a new love for, and a genuine appreciation of the unity underlying, the various religions represented within” the World Faith of Baha'u'llah.