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BAHA'I FAITH AND CHRISTIANITY CLUSTER

Baha'i Faith and Christianity: Baha'i Perspectives

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Baha'i Faith and Christianity: Baha'i Perspectives. The approximately 5 million adherents (in 2000) of the Baha'i Faith affirm, together with their primary texts, a number of core Christian beliefs, including the divinity and sonship of Jesus Christ, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and the significance of the Crucifixion and subsequent impact on human progress. Baha'is hold to a nonliteral interpretation of the resurrection* and future apocalyptic

events predicted in the Gospels and Revelation. Although the bodily incarnation* of God's essence in Jesus Christ is not part of Baha'i teaching, Jesus is viewed as the incarnation of God's virtues and attributes and as a sinless being whose soul was pre-existent. Baha'i theology describes Jesus as the "manifestation of God" (cf. "image," Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Although they do not affirm the inerrancy* of the Bible, Baha'is reject the view of mainstream Islam* that the NT has been corrupted.

Baha'i literature on Christianity is predominantly apologetic, arguing that the founder of the Baha'i Faith, Mirza Husayn Ali Baha'u'llah, fulfilled NT prophecies on the "Second* Coming." Recent scholarly analyses of Baha'i texts on the Bible and comparative theological studies have argued that, rather than denying the uniqueness* of Jesus Christ, Baha'i texts question the exclusivity of Christianity. Christian literature on the Baha'i religion has been mostly polemical – much of it written by former Protestant missionaries in Iran* who seemingly resented the relative success of Baha'is in converting Muslims, and more recently by individuals with no knowledge of the primary languages of Baha'i texts who tried to dismiss the religion as a cult or sect. In academic works related to interreligious dialogue, Christian theologians have placed the Baha'i Faith within a theology of religious pluralism.

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Baha'i Faith and Christianity: Christian Perspectives. Many Christians remain ignorant of the Baha'i Faith, introduced to the Western world at the World Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893) by a Christian missionary working in Syria. He enthusiastically quoted the prediction of Baha'u'llah (Baha'Allah; 1817–92), the founder of the Baha'i religion (in Iran*), "that all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers and that diversity of religion should cease."

Some liberal Christians greeted his son and successor, Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), with similar enthusiasm in London (1911). The minister of the City Temple (the historic Nonconformist Congregation where Abdu'l-Baha preached) declared, "The Baha'i movement is almost identical with the spiritual purpose of Christianity." At St. John's Church, Westminster, the archdeacon knelt with his congregation to receive Abdu'l-Baha's blessing. Pioneers of the interfaith movement welcomed the Baha'i emphasis on the unity of religions, but other Christians suspected the Baha'i Faith of "syncretism*."

Many Christians, especially Evangelicals*, have criticized Baha'is for denying the uniqueness* of Jesus and questioning Baha'u'llah's symbolic interpretation of the Bible in his *Tablet to the Christians (Lawh-i-Aqdas)*. Baha'u'llah taught that God, though unknowable, is revealed through manifestations, including Jesus, along with Moses, Muhammad, and others. The essential message of these manifestations is the same, although each messenger has a distinct individuality and mission. Revelation is progressive. Baha'u'llah claimed to be the promised one of all religions and compared his own suffering in prison to Jesus' atoning* death. These claims are incompatible with traditional Christian belief.

Baha'u'llah's teachings anticipated many 20th-c. creative developments: the peace* movement, interfaith fellowship, equal rights for women, the International Court of Justice, and the United Nations. Christian advocates of these causes have often been happy to work with Baha'is.

MARCUS BRAYBROOKE

Baius, Michel (1513–89), Flemish theologian, teacher at the University of Louvain, participant in the Council of Trent*. Adopting an idiosyncratic interpretation of Augustine*, he held that original righteousness was natural and that redemption is a restoration of this natural state. Condemnation of his views (1567, 1579) gave impetus to post-Tridentine controversies over nature* and grace* in the Catholic Church.

Baker, Ella Josephine (1903–86). Born in Norfolk, Virginia, nurtured by a strong extended family and Baptist Church tradition, and