

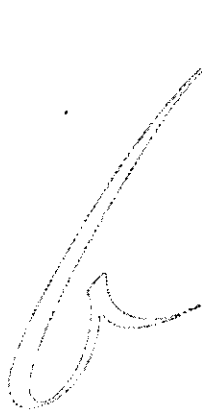
*The*  
ENCYCLOPEDIA  
*of* RELIGION  
IN AUSTRALIA

Edited by James Jupp



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# B



claim is that their beliefs and practices – broadly categorised into those that address the life of the soul and those that address the life of society – address the needs of an emerging global society in ways that the historic religions no longer can.

## THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

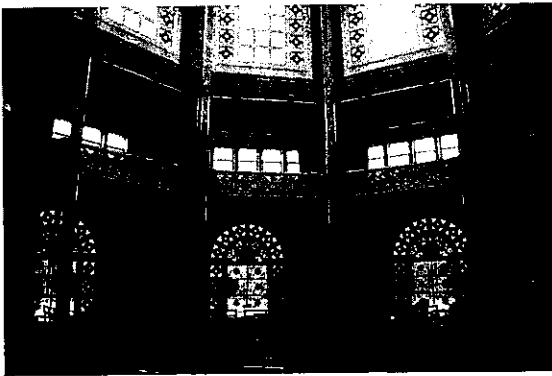
By the end of the 20th century, the presence of Bahá'í communities in cities and towns across the continent had become an established feature of Australia's religious landscape. In 2006, there were some 17 000 members, organised in approximately 400 local communities. The principal teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), the religion's prophet-founder, focusing as they do on the unity of God, the common origin of all races and societies, and the 'progressive revelation' of divine teachings throughout human history, have provided a systematic theological foundation for Bahá'í thought and action. Belief in the unity of God and in the continuity of religious revelation through a series of prophets, for instance, prevents Bahá'ís from claiming for their faith any inherent superiority over that of others. Adherence to a value of racial equality is linked to a receptivity to people of all racial and cultural backgrounds, and consequent celebration of diversity rather than concern for preservation of one or other racial heritage. Bahá'ís see this belief in the oneness of humanity as the starting point for resolving the world's social and other problems – rather than the end point from which those problems will be resolved. What Bahá'ís do

### ORGANISATION AND VALUES

A brief survey of Bahá'í social teachings and consequent organisational principles assists in explaining the character of Bahá'í engagement with Australian society. Bahá'ís believe that the purpose of life for each individual is to help carry forward an 'ever-advancing civilisation' and to be of service to humanity. Spiritual discipline focuses on daily prayer and an effort to adhere to high moral standards (these are set out in Bahá'u'lláh's 'book of laws' – the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, but additionally spread throughout his writings and those of his son, Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921)). Social laws that characterise this pathway range from a prohibition on consumption of alcohol to an exhortation to mix with followers of all religions in a 'spirit of amity'. The purposeful absence of a clerical order, together with an emphasis on consultation and democratic decision making, has produced a form of government in which Bahá'ís elect their leadership at local and national levels on an annual basis, and elect their leadership at global level at 5-year intervals. These bodies are called 'Spiritual Assemblies' at local and national levels, while the global body, seated in Haifa, Israel, is known as the Universal House of Justice. The first Local Assemblies were formed in Australia and New Zealand in 1923–26, and a National Assembly was established in 1934. There are now 182 National Assemblies worldwide, with the Australian Assembly among the first 12 to be formed.

Bahá'í administration implements a unique calendar, in which each year is divided into 19 months of 19 days (361 days being the most even division of the solar year into months, leaving over 4 or 5 days each year for a festive season), and Bahá'í community life focuses on a 'Feast' held on the first day of each of these months. The Feast has a spiritual component, based on reading of prayer and scripture; an

administrative component, which brings community members and their Local Assembly into dialogue; and a social component, which allows for expression of the cultural life and energy of each community. Grassroots activities, such as devotional meetings, children's classes and junior youth groups, which are open to everyone regardless of their religion, are another major part of community life. With few people employed on a full-time basis, community administration is undertaken by those who are either elected to Assemblies or appointed onto committees, or who are appointed to advisory roles.



Bahá'í temple interior, French's Forest, New South Wales.

PHOTO: ELIZABETH GILLIAM.

A House of Worship (*Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, 'Dawning place of the mention of God') completed at Ingleside on Sydney's North Shore in 1961, and adjacent to the seat of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, is dedicated to spiritual reflection (the human voice is the only instrument used within them, and they cannot become the site of lectures, sermons, fundraising, ritual or ceremony). Because the elaboration of ritual in matters of religion is consciously resisted in Bahá'í culture, Bahá'í Houses of Worship are not used for purposes other than prayer and meditation. As the Bahá'í community expands, the House of Worship is to spawn additional adjacent institutions of a humanitarian nature, notably for provision of educational and welfare facilities. Administrative consolidation of the Bahá'í community has included the legal establishment of Bahá'í centres and Local Assemblies, and

legal recognition of Bahá'í holy days and marriage certificates.

Bahá'í communities are defined by the boundaries of municipalities – and change when such boundaries are altered (thus, the extensive redefinition of boundaries in Victoria in the mid-1990s and, more recently, in Queensland, for instance, had a considerable effect on the boundaries of local Bahá'í communities). Whereas small communities meet in individual homes, those that are larger face the choice of hiring or acquiring facilities. Such community centres are now established in most metropolitan centres – notably Adelaide, Sydney, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. While the local governing councils (Local Spiritual Assemblies) retain a fundamental role in the handling of community affairs, much of the educational Bahá'í activities take place in the context of larger 'cluster areas', most of which are by default open to the general public.

Nationally, the community includes many cultural and religious backgrounds. There have been Aboriginal Bahá'í communities since the 1950s, although it is not widely known that one of the most prominent Indigenous Australians of recent times, Burnum Burnum (aka Harry Penrith), had become a Bahá'í in about 1960. Olympian Catherine Freeman's Bahá'í upbringing is more widely known. A recent biography of Ursula Hall presents a poignant portrait of a Bahá'í family of Jewish background. Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, and persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís in their homeland, several thousand members made their way to Australia, and now constitute approximately 50 per cent of the Australian Bahá'í community. Although immigration policy made entry into Australia difficult into the 1960s, some Persian Bahá'í families had arrived in the 1950s. The post-Islamic revolution persecution prompted extensive contact with government officials and the mass media in Australia, and many Iranian Bahá'í refugees gained entry to Australia after the government established a special humanitarian assistance program in 1982. Whereas their integration into Australian society has attracted

some scholarly attention, the question as to whether the Australian Bahá'ís comprise a 'cultural group' or an 'ethnic community' has not been adequately examined: whereas a significant proportion of the Australian Bahá'í community is now Persian in origin, not all Bahá'ís are Persian, and the community is itself multicultural in a manner that reflects the diversity of the broader Australian society. There are, for instance, many Bahá'ís of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island origin living in Bahá'í communities across the country (just as, conversely, there are Bahá'ís of Australian origin living throughout the Asia Pacific region).

Over the past 10 years, the Australian Bahá'í community has experienced a shift in its approach to internal growth, consolidation and spread of its message in Australian society, and can now be said to be developing a grassroots educational model, which aims to develop an integrated set of capabilities – technical, artistic, social, moral and spiritual – that helps individuals become agents of positive social change. The model is based on the view that communities that thrive and prosper do so because they acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human nature and make the moral, emotional, physical and intellectual development of the individual a central priority.

Tutors act as facilitators of study circles, and much of the dynamics of such a group relies on the collective wisdom and interaction of its members with the sacred texts and among members. The new understandings in the 'learning community' are constantly fed back and, as a result, further refinements are introduced. The learning thus acquired is given further impetus by the encouragement of acts of related 'acts of service'. In addition to the above, considerable emphasis is given to individual initiative, the fostering of child-centric communities, the nurturing of the arts, the refinement of community life, and the equality between men and women. The process is highly cost effective as it allows more experienced people to assist others in their community to learn together in small groups, with minimal infrastructure and material resources.

Education is given high value by the Bahá'í community, and thus the focus is not only on the community as a whole, but also on individuals and families. Attendance at summer and winter schools, or camps for children or young people, has been a popular element of Bahá'í culture. A facility at Yerrinbool, near Mittagong to the south of Sydney, has been in continuous operation since 1938 (Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning). In the 1970s, the Yerrinbool site styled itself a 'deepening, regenerating and teacher-training centre', and from the 1980s has offered programs for children and young people, as well as the emerging field of Bahá'í scholarship. The Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning now conducts such specialist courses as an Education for Peace Certificate for young people and, commencing in 1995, a three-year distance education Certificate in Bahá'í Studies. More broadly, Bahá'í communities have focused their activities on a global scale since 2000 on four core activities: devotional meetings (for prayer and meditation), study circles, junior youth activities and children's education. This agenda, which is not intended for the exclusive benefit of the Bahá'í community, emerged from observation of communities worldwide that effective social organisation at local level requires an attitude of learning and an attitude of service to humanity.

In the public school system, approximately 2000 children – most from religious backgrounds other than Bahá'í – attend Bahá'í scripture classes at state schools across the country. In addition to what might be called religious education, Bahá'ís also emphasise the need for 'material' education, and Bahá'í scriptures call for education of girls to match or even better the education given to boys, given that in their roles as mothers they become the first educators of the young. With the Bahá'í community entering a sixth and seventh generation in Australia, the younger generation of Bahá'ís appears to include a substantial element of successful professionals across a variety of fields, from the sciences, to engineering, law, medicine, academia and the creative arts. In Sydney in 2004, for instance, a group of such professionals initiated the Harmony Film Festival, a short

film festival dedicated to promoting the principles of peace and harmony. Bahá'í student clubs are to be found on most tertiary campuses, with the oldest, such as at the University of Sydney, dating to the 1950s.



Students at Bahá'í stall, Melbourne University Open Day, 2007. PHOTO: ELIZABETH GILLIAM.

Emphasis in Bahá'í spiritual and moral codes on consolidating unity among people, rather than stirring contention, is given practical expression through – to cite just two examples – making both ‘back-biting’ and engagement in partisan political activities sanctionable offences. Whereas the non-involvement of Bahá'ís in political affairs may be mistaken for lack of interest in public life, a close examination of Bahá'í community activities shows constant engagement, but in ways that fastidiously avoid participation in contention and conflict. Areas of focus have included peace, gender equality, human rights, religious harmony and multiculturalism.

Bahá'í communities have a strong commitment to the establishment of world peace, and this is expressed through involvement in activities from global to local levels that promote peace values. Many individual Bahá'ís participate in the administration and activities of state branches of the United Nations (UN) Association. In the lead-up to the UN's 1986 International Year of Peace, the National Assembly submitted a statement on peace to a Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Australian Federal Parliament in 1984, and in October 1985 a statement by the Universal House of Justice, entitled *The Promise of World*

*Peace*, was presented to the then-Governor-General, Sir Ninian Stephen. The Australian Bahá'í community subsequently received one of just two Peace Messenger awards given by the UN for Year of Peace activities in Australia.

Bahá'í commitment to religious harmony has resulted in widespread support for inter-faith activities at both local and nation levels. Bahá'í engagement in interfaith dialogue with Christian and Jewish clergy dates to the 1940s. Since the 1990s, Bahá'ís have joined the activities of the Australian section of World Conference on Religion and Peace. They have contributed to the establishment and operation of the Multi-faith centre at Griffith University, and have participated in such exercises as the Australian Multicultural Foundation's 2002 dialogue on religion, diversity and social cohesion in contemporary Australia. Projects to reinsert a devotional attitude into busy modern lifestyles have included the establishment of tranquillity zones – silent spaces into which members of the public can withdraw for a period of reflection.

GRAHAM HASSALL

## BAPTISTS

One of the historic dissenting or Nonconformist churches of Britain, Baptists emerged from the radical Puritan–Separatist movement, and were founded within a small emigrant group of English believers in Amsterdam in 1609. Baptists hold traditional Protestant doctrines but with a distinctive belief that only confessing believers (and hence not children) should be baptised, and that baptism should be by full immersion. Baptists are a part of the voluntarist or believers' church tradition.

Baptists were not involved in the beginnings of European settlement in Australia, and have always been a minority denomination, reaching a peak of 2.3 per cent of the population in 1881 and in recent decades have hovered around 1.6 per cent of the population, according to Census data. A late emergence as a denomination in the colony – the first service was in Sydney in 1831 – and their small