

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Baha''i

Second Subtitle: Baha'i

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Numbers: About 6 million people claim affiliation with Baha'i and its predecessor, Babism. Main tenets: Baha'i believe in the unity of all humankind, and therefore the unity of all religions. This means that Baha'i adherents believe that all religions teach the same truth. They therefore reject all prejudice--racial, political, or otherwise--and stress ethical teachings such as world peace, education, and sexual equality. Although they believe that God is completely unknowable, they hold that God's presence and works are evident in the creation of the world and the existence of the prophets, among other things. Important Baha'i prophets include Adam, the Jewish prophets, Jesus, and Muhammed, all of whom have been succeeded by Baha'ullah, the founder of Baha'i.

Founder: Baha'i was founded in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century by Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-1892). Better known as Baha'ullah, he believed that he was the prophet foretold by the Bab, a religious leader who was a direct descendent of the prophet Muhammad. Baha'ullah was persecuted and banished several times during his life, and he died as a prisoner in Palestine. After his death, one of his two sons set out on missionary journeys to Egypt, Europe, and America, establishing branches of the community.

Main sacred text: Among his many writings, Baha'ullah's Kitab al-Aqdas ("The Most Holy Book"), which contains detailed instructions for Baha'i life, is perhaps the closest to scriptures for Baha'is. However, there is no formal public ritual or priesthood. Local congregations hold informal devotional sessions.

Historical roots: Baha'i is an outgrowth of a religious movement known as Babism. Babism stemmed from the Twelver Shi'a sect of Islam, which holds that the twelfth of a series of great imams vanished from sight but is still alive and will return to institute an era of justice and peace.

Headquarters: The headquarters of Baha'i is currently in Haifa, Israel, near the graves of Baha'ullah and his predecessor, the Bab.