

## **FIRST-PERSON: Bahá'í-ism: nudging toward becoming America's religion**

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EVANSTON, Ill. (BP)--One of the best-known Christmas movies, "Home Alone," features Trinity United Methodist Church in Wilmette, Ill. It's there that young "Kevin McCallister" hides in the Nativity scene and later, at a Christmas Eve service, meets and commiserates with the scary old man from next door. The look is traditional, Judeo-Christian Americana, so what is a 150-foot-tall Persian temple doing less than a mile down the street?

I'm talking about the Bahá'í House of Worship, the North American center for this Middle-Eastern faith. Rising above Lake Michigan, the ornate dome is a genuine curiosity in the North Shore suburbs that produced the likes of Donald Rumsfeld and Charleton Heston. This seems a bad fit for the Bahá'ís, but I'm not so sure. I'm starting to think that Bahá'ísm is becoming America's religion after all.

It began in the 1840s when a Persian visionary called "the Bab" predicted a "messiah" who would fulfill all religions. This promised one turned out to be Husayn-Ali, who having seen himself completing the line of Moses, Christ, Krishna, Zoroaster and Muhammad, assumed the name Bahá'u'lláh ("The Glory of God" in Arabic). This didn't please the resident Shi'ite Muslims, and he [was exiled<sup>1</sup>] to Baghdad, Constantinople and finally Ottoman Palestine, where he died in 1892. His son, then his grandson and finally the Universal House of Justice have led the faithful through the years. Today, they're based on Mt. Carmel, near Haifa, Israel.

But what's American about that? Just consider the following, popular Bahá'í perspectives. Of course, there is some overlap with genuinely Christian concerns, but the total package is decidedly non-Christian:

1. There are many ways to God. Bahá'ís affirm Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and aspects of animism<sup>2</sup>. This is normal for a nation where Oprah leads post-9/11 spiritual rallies and PBS' Bill Moyers hangs on the late syncretist Joseph Campbell's every word.
2. World peace is within our grasp. Bahá'ís are strangers to the doctrine of original sin. By their account, "national rivalries, hatreds and intrigues will cease and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation ... . World peace is not only possible but inevitable." And yes, they're very keen on the Palestinian/Israeli "peace process."

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<sup>1</sup> The author said the Bahá'u'lláh fled to `Iraq. This is incorrect. He was offered the protection of the Russian government but refused it. The Persian government exiled Him to `Iraq. He never avoided any punishments that the authorities imposed on Him.

<sup>2</sup> There is no sense of animism in the Bahá'í Faith. The author may be referring to our respect for nature and the environment. For Bahá'ís this is a stewardship issue, not a religious relationship with nature.

3. In the local congregation, patriarchy (indeed, all "archy") is shunned. God has no gender, and neither husband nor wife has a dominant role in the marriage. The congregation has no pastor; they just work by consultation -- a beautiful fit with our cultural enthusiasm for shared governance, enablement, facilitation and group ownership.
4. Religion must defer to science. Embarrassed by creationists? The Bahai's are for you. As one Bahá'í divine put it, "If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations."
5. The afterlife isn't particularly frightening. Bahá'ís don't say much about the hereafter. Heaven is some sort of spiritual progression in close proximity to God. Hell is remoteness from God (not a very scary prospect for folks who've worked hard all their lives at staying remote from God). Universalism and a "wider hope" are pretty popular in America, and Bahá'ísm makes room for some very wide hope.
6. Good religion does good works. With over a thousand development projects worldwide, Bahá'ís are a pleasing sight to the lost. Literacy training, tree planting and other social ministries are so much more fetching than evangelism and prophetic preaching. The Jimmy Carters, and not the Billy Grahams, get the Nobel Prizes.
7. A New World Order is desirable and possible. Bahá'ís were pushing for a League of Nations and a United Nations long before Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt got on board. By their account, we need one worldwide nation, a world language, a world script, world currency and an international police force. If you resent President Bush's unilateralism, his distance from the Kyoto Accord and the World Court, you may have Bahá'í tendencies.
8. Racial diversity is a major goal. Bahai's encourage interracial marriage, and their youth Diversity Dance Workshop is well known for its convicting "Racism Dance." They perfectly capture the spirit of a day when Betty Crocker has evolved through eight images from a unambiguously Anglo look in 1936 to an olive-skinned, computer-morphed young woman of today, as likely Italian as Iranian as Hispanic.
9. The environment is a high priority. The founder said all men should feel abashed as they walk upon the earth, aware that it is the source of their strength under God. Bahá'ís were the only religious non-governmental group to address the plenary session of the Rio Conference in 1992. Many groups, from the Sierra Club to the Christian Society of the Green Cross, join the Bahá'ís in opposing such projects as Arctic National Wildlife Refuge drilling.
10. Traditional sexual morality is essential. The homosexual agenda, abortion advocacy and sexual license hang like albatrosses around the necks of liberal denominations and the political left, and both groups are having serious difficulties. Because Bahá'ís avoid all three, they stand on firmer ground, even though they share some theological perspectives with the National Council of Churches.

If so many Americans are virtual Bahá'ís, why aren't there more actual Bahá'ís? Well, first, their faith needs a public relations makeover, downplaying images of the founders, what with their fezzes, turbans and long beards. They need to swap the weird name for something like "Consultation of Glory." And it wouldn't hurt to showcase a celebrity Bahá'í or two, the sort of thing the Scientologists do with John Travolta and Tom Cruise.

It shouldn't take much. After all, many Americans are already on board. (God help us.)

What better time than Christmas to reassert the divinity, uniqueness, exclusivity and necessity of Christ, to rehearse the fact that the Jesus in the manger will not share his glory with Zoroaster, Mohammed or Buddha. Bahá'ís are sensitive folks in a nation obsessed with sensitivity. Unfortunately, they promote insensitivity to the plain teaching of the Bible, that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Lacking this knowledge, they may have a sensitive Christmas, but they won't have a merry one.

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