

Pilgrimage and New Religious Movements: Bahá'í Faith Case Study

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Abstract

Bahá'í Faith is the youngest monotheistic religion (as adherents claim it), the beginnings of which date back to the mid-nineteenth century. In religious practice, believers of this system are particularly emphasized by prayer and pilgrimage.

Nothing so enriches the spiritual and social experience of a believer, as a Bahá'í pilgrimage. Bahá'u'lláh encouraged each of his followers to make a nine-day pilgrimage to the World Center for the Bahá'í Faith in Haifa (Israel) at least once in their lives. The pilgrimage is considered the high point of the Bahá'í way of life. Pilgrims arrive in Haifa by a group of about two hundred to four hundred people from different parts of the globe. For nine days, the group examines holy sites in Haifa, Akka and the surrounding area.

Alone or in small groups, pilgrims visit the tombs of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and Abdu'l-Bahá. You can visit the houses where the founder of the faith lived during the exile and imprisonment in the Holy Land, spend part of the day visiting the Archive and inspect the manuscripts that represent the written heritage of the Bahá'í Faith, memorabilia belonging to the faith teachers, heroes and martyrs of the early years of the history of faith.

Visit the Shrine, evening performances of members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Training Center, which revealed the essence of the pilgrimage, and conversations with other pilgrims helped orient souls.

In my speech, I plan to analyze the development of the pilgrimage movement of the Bahá'í faithful, the accompanying event and the theological message behind it.

Keywords: Akka, Bahá'í Faith, Haifa, new religious movement, pilgrimage, prayer, the Holy Land, the tombs , Bahá'í pilgrimage , Eastern pilgrims

Pilgrimage, in its highest form, is an experience of profound significance, which may fulfill the longings of a lifetime or mark a major turning point in the life of an individual or a family.

The Obligation to Perform the Pilgrimage

For Bahá'ís, making a pilgrimage represents the fulfillment of a religious duty prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of their Faith, in his book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. This duty is to be performed once in a lifetime by all believers who are financially able to make the journey, but the timing is left to the individual.

The Evolution of Bahá'í Pilgrimage Over Time

1. Acre/Akká

In the late 1860s, Bahá'í pilgrims walked hundreds of kilometers from Persia through treacherous deserts to this ancient Mediterranean city in what is now northern Israel.

Their goal was to visit Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of their Faith, who was being held in a prison citadel after his banishment to Acre by the Ottoman authorities. Bahá'u'lláh, who was a victim of patently false charges, was incarcerated there with his family and some of his followers on 31 August 1868.

While Bahá'u'lláh was alive, pilgrims came to the Acre area from Iran and other countries of the Middle East with the purpose of attaining his presence. From the period of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the Acre Citadel, there are accounts of pilgrims who, after traveling on foot from Iran, were obliged to return home in the same way without even being allowed to enter the walled city, contenting themselves with a glimpse of his hand as he waved to them from a window of the citadel. The more fortunate ones had the experience of being in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, and some received the special gift of having prayers and writings revealed in their honor.

These encounters, which nearly always took place at one of the sites included in the nomination, left an indelible mark upon the pilgrims, becoming a memory treasured by their descendants to the present day. It was during this time that the pilgrims began the practice of circumambulation, which involved walking around the abode of Bahá'u'lláh as a symbolic gesture of love and reverence.

It was customary for pilgrims at that time to seek permission before embarking on pilgrimage, although some apparently did not wait for a response. A typical pilgrim would arrive in Acre and be welcomed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who would make arrangements for his or her lodging and prepare them for the experience of meeting the object of their journey, Bahá'u'lláh himself. The pilgrims generally stayed until Bahá'u'lláh gave them leave to depart, and as a result, the duration of the pilgrimage varied from a few days to several months.

Following the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892, the focal point of the pilgrimage experience was his shrine in Bahjí. Following many years of exile in

the prison city of Akká, Bahá'u'lláh spent the last twelve years of his life at the mansion of Bahjí, a few kilometers outside of Akká's city walls. Here, in relative freedom and peace, he could devote himself to writing, and his followers were able to meet with him.

Bahá'u'lláh passed away on 29 May 1892. His mortal remains were buried in a house adjacent to the mansion. For Bahá'ís, the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is the holiest spot on earth and the point towards which they turn in prayer each day. A visit to the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh is the high point of the nine-day Bahá'í pilgrimage.

2. Haifa

In Bahá'u'lláh's time, Haifa, 15 kilometers south of Bahjí, was just a small port town. Towards the end of his life, Bahá'u'lláh visited Haifa a few times. On one such visit, he indicated the place where he wished the shrine of his forerunner, the Báb, to be built.

The shrine of the Báb forms the centerpiece of the gardens in Haifa. For Bahá'ís, it is one of the holiest places on earth. The shrine was built under the supervision of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh. Here, sixty years after the Báb's execution, the holy remains of the Báb were finally laid to rest. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away in 1921, he also was interred in this shrine. In 1949, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi, had the shrine of the Báb embellished with a magnificent golden dome.

After the interment of the remains of the Báb on Mt. Carmel in 1909, the focus was enlarged to include his shrine. 'Abdu'l-Baha designated it as *maqam-i a'la* – the most exalted shrine. Visitation to these two shrines included:

- the practice of circumambulation
- the removal of footwear upon entry
- the recitation of a particular text from the Tablet of Visitation.

The pilgrims were received by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who met with them personally on a daily basis, rejoicing their hearts with affectionate words of advice and encouragement, answering their questions, and illuminating their understanding with his explanations of the teachings of the Faith.

Starting in 1898, pilgrims began arriving from Western Europe and North America, usually by steamship. Many of them have left published accounts of their experience including the hospitality offered to them by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá in Acre or one of the houses of the Persian Quarter in Haifa.

During the latter part of this period, the pilgrims from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries were lodged in the pilgrim house next to the shrine of the Báb. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá usually met with the eastern and western pilgrims separately, and the men and women had different programs out of deference for local customs.

The area around the shrine itself is termed, in an echo of the sacred enclosure of Mecca, the *haram* or the *haram-i aqdas*. As in the time of Bahá’u’lláh, pilgrims sought the permission of the head of the Faith before arriving or leaving, resulting in stays of variable duration.

In a *Tablet* to an individual believer, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commented on the general subject of visits to holy places:

You have asked about visiting holy places and the observance of marked reverence toward these resplendent spots. Holy places are undoubtedly centers of the outpouring of Divine grace because in entering the illumined sites associated with martyrs and holy souls, and by observing reverence, both physical and spiritual, one’s heart is moved with great tenderness. But, there is no obligation for everyone to visit such places, other than the three, namely:

- the Most Holy Shrine
- the Blessed House in Baghdad
- the venerated House of the Báb in Shiraz

To visit these is obligatory if one can afford it and is able to do so, and if no obstacle stands in one’s way. Details are given in the *Tablets*. These three Holy Places are consecrated to pilgrimage. But as to the other resting places of martyrs and holy souls, it is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God if a person desires to draw nigh unto Him by visiting them; this, however, is not a binding obligation.

Like his grandfather and great-grandfather, Shoghi Effendi followed the practice of personal meetings with the pilgrims. When accompanying the pilgrims on their visits, he would invariably recite the *Tablet of Visitation*, which was also used by the pilgrims themselves when visiting the shrines alone or in groups. By now, the practice of group circumambulation of the two shrines had become a well-established tradition and an integral part of the observance of Holy Days by local believers and pilgrims alike.

Shoghi Effendi instituted visits to the archives, during which the pilgrims were shown portraits of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, original manuscripts of the

scriptures, sacred relics and other historical artifacts, as well as trips to Acre to visit the Citadel, the House of ‘Abbúd, the Ridván Garden, and other sites.

In 1929, Shoghi Effendi completed the construction of the building at 10 Haparsim Street, which was designed as a hostel for western pilgrims, and adopted the custom of taking the evening meal with them in the dining room on the lower level. He usually met with the eastern pilgrims in the pilgrim house next to the shrine of the Báb. These gatherings offered the pilgrims the opportunity to converse with the head of their Faith, ask clarifications of the teachings, and understand his vision of the needs of the community in the current stage of its development. Shoghi Effendi continued to approve all requests by the believers to make the pilgrimage, but **in 1951**, he announced that the duration of pilgrimage would henceforth be fixed at nine days.

Pilgrimage continued without interruption after the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, through the interregnum and under the Universal House of Justice (UHJ) when it was first elected in 1963, with most of the traditional elements described above. In the early days, the members of the UHJ shared meals with the pilgrims and took turns in accompanying them to the shrines and reciting the *Tablet of Visitation*, as Shoghi Effendi had done.

While the shrine of Baha’u’llah is qiblih of the Baha’i world, Shoghi Effendi designated the shrine of the Bab as the center of the world.

The growth of the community, however, made it necessary to accommodate ever-increasing numbers, which in turn, dictated significant organizational changes. **In 1969**, the UHJ asked all pilgrims to arrange their own accommodations in local hotels, abolishing the distinctions between eastern and western believers. A system was instituted for processing requests and scheduling group pilgrimages.

The shared evening meals were replaced by an afternoon tea, during which the pilgrims could mingle with the members of the UHJ, who now took turns giving evening talks to the pilgrims.

Members of the International Teaching Centre assumed the responsibility of accompanying the pilgrims and reciting the *Tablet of Visitation* during their initial visit to the shrine of the Báb, which now involves a group circumambulation since the space inside is insufficient to accommodate an entire group.

Current Practice

The annual number of pilgrims visiting the Bahá’í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee has grown from a few score to over five thousand, with groups of up to 400 coming at once. The central focus continues to be the visits to the shrines of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb and meetings with the elected

leadership of the Faith.

In accordance with Baha'u'llah's instructions in *Tablet of Carmel*, an Arc comprising of majestic buildings that will administer the worldwide affairs of the Faith was built under the shadow of the shrine of the Báb. So, the standard nine-day program also includes virtual visits to all the sites included in the nomination, which are conducted by special pilgrim guides chosen from among the volunteer staff of the Bahá'í World Centre.

In the Writings of the Faith, special encouragement has been placed on visiting such graves when opportunity is available. In some instances, specific instructions have been given.

Conclusion

As they visit these sites, today's pilgrims understand that they are continuing a long-standing tradition, walking in the footsteps of earlier generations while eagerly learning about the historical events that shaped the community, its culture and its identity, and drawing closer to the spirit of its founding figures.

The practice of pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee is an integral part of the belief system and community life of Bahá'ís. It has acquired a traditional character that is comparable to that of pilgrimage in other religions.

Circumambulation, removal of footwear and the recitation of the specially designated *Tablet of Visitation* in connection with visits to the shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, and the receipt of guidance and spiritual nourishment through direct meetings with the leadership of the community are among the traditional practices that have characterized the Bahá'í pilgrimage throughout the years, and provide a sense of continuity that will project into the future.