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The Bahá'í Faith: A World Religion, Not a Sect

The Bahá'í Faith, a religion that originated in Iran in the 1840s, is sometimes mistakenly referred to as a “sect.”

Although many Americans may regard “sect” as synonymous with “religion” or “faith,” the differences in meaning are significant. “Sect” literally means a group within a religion—a group that is considered schismatic or heretical by the main body of believers in the same religion.

This distinction is especially important to the Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í Faith emerged from Shiite Islam in mid-19th century Iran, and Islamic fundamentalists regard Bahá'ís as apostates for whom Islamic law prescribes the death penalty. They also reject many aspects of Bahá'í teachings and practices, such as the equality of men and women and the administration of the faith by elected groups (including women) rather than by a clergy.

Thus the use of the term “sect” plays into the hands of Iranian authorities, who usually refer to Bahá'ís as “the misguided and misleading sect” or “the hated sect.”

While it may have been considered a Muslim sect in the first decades of its history, the Bahá'í Faith has its own prophet-founder and its separate scripture and teachings, which are quite different from those of Islam. In fact, a Muslim religious court in Egypt officially ruled more than fifty years ago that the Bahá'í Faith was not part of Islam.

The Bahá'í Faith sprang from Islam as Christianity sprang from Judaism and Buddhism from Hinduism. Just as Christianity is not considered a “sect” of Judaism or Buddhism a “sect” of Hinduism, it is not accurate to term the Bahá'í Faith a “sect” of Islam.

Today, the Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion, with more than 5 million adherents and elected governing bodies in more than 120,000 localities in 235 countries and territories. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Bahá'í Faith is second only to Christianity in its geographic spread.

The prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, was born in Persia in 1817 and passed away in exile in Ottoman Palestine in 1892, near the modern-day city of Haifa, Israel. The affairs of the worldwide Bahá'í community are administered by an elected council, the Universal House of Justice, with its seat at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, which is both the administrative and spiritual center of the Bahá'í Faith.