

The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

RELIGION

Symon Hill

'Takes the debate to a higher, more
rewarding and insightful level'

Ziauddin Sardar

New Internationalist



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'Publishers have created lists of short books that discuss the questions that your average [electoral] candidate will only ever touch if armed with a slogan and a soundbite. Together [such books] hint at a resurgence of the grand educational tradition... Closest to the hot headline issues are *The No-Nonsense Guides*. These target those topics that a large army of voters care about, but that politicians evade. Arguments, figures and documents combine to prove that good journalism is far too important to be left to (most) journalists.'

Boyd Tonkin,
The Independent,
London

About the author

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Foreword

IN THIS AGE of secularism, religion gets a bad press. Open your newspapers on a typical day of the week and discover a worldview that says virtually all the wars that have ever been fought are because of religion. According to this view, faith communities are a byword for not much more than backwardness, bigotry and misogyny. The rise of fundamentalism has further linked religion to blind dogmatism and fanaticism. Yet, as Symon Hill points out, ‘for every example of a link between religion and oppression, there is a link between religion and liberation’. To look at religion through a monochromatic lens is to belie history, to overlook the diversity of religions and religious experiences, and to do an injustice to one of humanity’s greatest institutions.

But if we open our eyes to the true diversity, profound contributions and transcendent contents of religion, we can have a glimpse of another universe. Religion is the basis of most of our values; it is the yardstick by which virtue is defined, and is a major inspiration for charitable works and selfless service to humanity. It has shaped most of our culture; and given birth to numerous civilizations. It is a foundation for much that we regard as sublime in art and architecture, thought and philosophy, and it is a defining characteristic in the biographies of great individuals. The most open and pluralistic societies in history were the product of religion. The struggles for freedom of thought and inquiry, as well as human rights, were often led by religiously inspired individuals. In many cultures, religion provides the main motivation in the quest for social justice, poverty eradication, and universal education – and often it is the only force that stands up to naked greed and ruthless capitalism.

It is not widely recognized that implicit in the very idea of religion is the capacity to stimulate our sense of wonder. It is this faculty of wonder which generates the inquisitive, creative, imaginative, constructive character

of humanity. It produces our drive to question, to know and understand, to harness and comprehend the physical world in which we exist, as well as ourselves as human beings within this physical existence. The religious consciousness and capabilities of human beings are driven by wonder at the complexity, majesty, power as well as the contradictions and perversity we find in all that exists – and what lies behind existence.

The positive aspects and benefits of religion, as Hill shows so brilliantly, cannot be ignored or written off easily. The suggestion that religion is about to disappear, that we are heading towards some sort of Godless nirvana, is both naïve and dangerous. The need for meaning is innate to us humans. We all want to live a life of significance, with some sort of content, and sense of direction. Life without meaning is boring, banal and alienating. But the quest for meaning, to be truly meaningful, has to be something more than a selfish desire for material abundance or individual spirituality. Individualism too is boring and banal. The only arena where the quest for meaning acquires fathomless depth and discipline is religion.

This why we need to rise above and go beyond the seductively simple and binary opposition between ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ or ‘reason’ and ‘faith’, which undermines our understanding of the complex and positive role of faith in society and promotes only intolerance. The *No-Nonsense Guide to Religion* takes the debate to a higher, more rewarding and insightful level. It provides a balanced and astute account of the major religions of the world and their role in the daily lives of believers – who constitute most of the globe’s inhabitants. It’s an invitation for progressive politics to work hand in hand with religion to shape a better and more viable future for the whole of humanity.

Ziauddin Sardar
Writer and Broadcaster, London

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Introduction

It has been both challenging and enormously exciting to write a *No-Nonsense Guide to Religion*. To produce an introduction to such a vast subject in fewer than 130 pages was a daunting task, but it has been a joy as well as a privilege to explore and explain so many dimensions of such an enthralling subject.

Religion seems never to be out of the news these days and in many countries there is an impression that 'religion is back' – although of course it never really went away. As a result, there is a sense of renewed curiosity, as many people seek to understand the background behind the headlines.

My aim has therefore been to shed some light on aspects of religion which appear most frequently in the news and in discussion of major issues facing the world today. With a subject so broad, it has been necessary to make tough decisions about which issues to mention, which to explore in depth and which to leave out altogether. While I appreciate that other authors may have made different selections from my own, I trust that my book addresses at least some of the key questions about the nature of religion and its role in the world. I hope that it will point you in the right direction if you want to explore any of these issues in greater depth.

When I tell people that I'm writing a book about religion, I can never be quite sure of the reaction – especially with people I've only just met. I've been both challenged and inspired by the variety of questions I have faced in response. I've been asked about subjects as varied as terrorism, meditation, education and sexuality. There seems to be an almost infinite variety to the thoughts that can be triggered by a reference to religion.

This range of responses reveals that religion is a topic which more or less everybody has thought about to some degree. In my experience, people who

emphasize that they don't know much about religion, or don't have strong views on it, have usually thought about it more than they realize – or at least about certain aspects of it. Everyone has something valid to say about religion. This is why it is such an exciting subject. It relates to so many areas of human life, culture and behavior, and to every human society – while usually aiming to go beyond the human.

While writing *The No-Nonsense Guide to Religion*, there were days when I shut myself away to work on it and spoke with hardly anyone. However, it would be a considerably weaker book if that were all I had done, for many people contributed hugely with helpful information, practical advice or enthusiastic encouragement. Nonetheless, any errors or inaccuracies are of course my own responsibility.

While there is sadly not space to mention by name everyone who has helped, particular thanks go to my editor, Chris Brazier, and his colleagues at New Internationalist, especially Troth Wells who commissioned the book. Thanks also to my expert reader, Louise Mitchell, to Ziauddin Sardar for the foreword and to my chapter readers, Philippa Newis and Emily Hunka, who faithfully gave vast amounts of their own time to reading and commenting on the chapters as I wrote them. I must also thank the Toad's Mouth café in Brockley for providing such an excellent atmosphere for writing, and my colleagues at Ekklesia and the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre for their patience and support when I was preoccupied with the book.

I would like to dedicate *The No-Nonsense Guide to Religion* to the memory of my father, Ted Hill, who gave me courage to think for myself and question what I am told.

Symon Hill
London

1 Talking about religion

Talk of religion is everywhere. Turn on the television or open the newspaper and there will be stories of conflict between religions, disputes within religions and debates over the role of religion. There will be news of power, poverty and prejudice, of revival, revolution and revulsion, all with reference to religion.

‘RELIGION’ IS A word that triggers strong and varied reactions. For some, it conjures up a purely negative image, as the cause of war, as an excuse for bigotry or as a crutch for the emotionally weak. For others, it is a central pillar of life, the response to a power that sustains them and the motivation for compassion. All attempts at balanced definitions throw up enormous problems.

What exactly *is* religion? In many Asian cultures, the boundaries between religion and philosophy are far less clear than in traditions deriving from Europe. Practitioners of various indigenous religions often say that their spirituality is such a natural and integrated part of their lives that there is little sense in classifying it as something separate. And what of those beliefs and practices that display many of the characteristics of religion but are clearly not intended to? Fans of football or baseball, along with the most avid followers of celebrity culture, often appear as committed and ritualistic as the most devout religious believer.

A common response to this ambiguity is to seek precise terms. Some choose to talk only of individual religions rather than religion as a whole, but this produces more problems than it solves. Writers who take this approach tend to speak in terms of ‘world religions’, emphasizing only popular and well-established traditions. Smaller or newer movements may be marginalized or dismissed as ‘cults’. This can

lead to an over-emphasis on the pronouncements of powerful figures, ignoring the diversity within religions as well as the similarities between them. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, global demonstrations saw Christian peace campaigners marching alongside Muslims in solidarity and protest. They may well have felt that their Christianity had more in common with the Islam of their neighbors than it did with the Christianity of George W Bush, the US President much given to religious rhetoric to justify his policies. Boundaries cut across and within religious groups as well as between them.

In academic circles, scholars have sought a way through the confusion by defining religion in terms of its various aspects. The most influential of these was Ninian Smart, who outlined seven 'dimensions' of religion.¹ However, we must not lose sight of the reality that in everyday life the word 'religion' is used confidently and without clarification by both media and public. Differences over language complicate discussion of religion, but the challenges of language cannot be avoided. We should not be afraid of using a word that has several meanings.

As unsatisfying as this can be, we are obliged to deal in approximations and starting-points. The most obvious starting-point is that religion is a human activity. However, unlike many activities, it generally seeks to point to something that is beyond the human. It operates in various types of communities. To consider one of these elements without the others is to miss out on a rounded understanding of religion.

Culture

Religion is something that people do. In this sense at least, it is strongly related to culture. There is a powerful two-way influence between culture and religion. The form that religion takes is usually closely related to the culture and context in which it exists.

A visit to a synagogue in Los Angeles is likely to be a different experience from a visit to a synagogue in Rabat, although of course there will be similarities.

In a comparable way, religion is influenced by its political context. In medieval Europe, Christians often explained the lordship of Christ in terms of feudalism, with Christ above the kings and lords whom he had set over the people. In contrast, the liberation theologians of Latin America see Christ as a liberator, standing alongside them in their struggle against poverty and oppression.

Just as culture influences religion, it influences attacks on religion. One of the most well-known critics of religion was Sigmund Freud, who argued that it involves the creation of a perfect father-figure in God. People create such a figure, he argued, to make up for deficiencies in their own fathers. Freud's analysis shows his immersion in European culture. He was familiar with Christianity and Judaism, which involve a God often presented as a father, but he tended to ignore other religions in which this is not the case.²

Culture and politics are of course extremely complex and their relationship with religion even more so. No society has only a single culture, but in every society certain cultural norms are dominant. Changing cultural trends may both influence religion and be influenced by it. For example, the renewed popularity of rationalistic Greek philosophy at the end of the first millennium led to the growth of influential rationalistic movements within Islam and Judaism. On most occasions when rationalism has become popular in religion, a backlash against it has sooner or later led to a renewed interest in mysticism or spiritual experience.

Such a backlash can be an example of the *inverse* influence that culture and politics can have on religion. That is to say, religious groups can arise out of rebellion against existing cultural and political situations. British imperialism in India led to a renewed

interest in Hindu, Muslim and Sikh identity, as people emphasized their differences with their Christian rulers. In the West today, several religious groups promote their opposition to commercialism, defining themselves against what they see as the dominant cultural and economic norms around them.

Indeed, a glance at the origins of particular religions shows that many were clearly counter-cultural in their earliest days – sometimes radically so. This is not surprising; almost by definition, a ‘new religion’ is going against dominant perceptions. Of course, it may well be influenced by subtle cultural changes which assist its growth. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that most religions were founded by people who initially had little cultural or political influence, however powerful their religions later became.

Transcendence

While religion is a human activity, it generally seeks to point to a higher reality that goes beyond the human. This may take the form of God, gods, Nirvana, the spirit world, the ground of existence, natural law,

Dimensions of religion

Ninian Smart (1927-2001) had a huge impact on the academic study of religion. He identified seven ‘dimensions’ by which religion may be recognized.

- Practical/ ritual
- Experiential/ emotional
- Narrative/ mythic
- Doctrinal/ philosophical
- Ethical/ legal
- Social/ institutional
- Material

This model, and similar systems developed by other scholars, can be very helpful. At the same time, ‘religion’ is spoken of in a wide variety of ways and no single definition can ever be entirely sufficient. ■

Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

ultimate reality, a combination of these or a concept different from them all. The terms 'transcendence' or 'the sacred' are sometimes used as umbrella descriptions for these concepts. Those academics who insist on studying religion *solely* as a human activity are missing a crucial part of the picture. As the scholar Martin Forward puts it, to discuss religion without considering transcendence is 'like trying to understand cricket as though it is not a sport'.³

Does this mean religion is about truth? Questions of truth are often a vital part of religion, although the word 'truth' opens the way to a potential minefield of misunderstandings. At one extreme are those exclusivists who believe that only their own religion can be in any sense true and all others must therefore be untrue in their entirety. For many people, however, truth is something to be explored, experienced or lived out rather than simply believed. Several scholars argue that the equation of religion with belief derives from a Western cultural mindset. Even when we look at religious groups that emphasize belief, their beliefs are not necessarily about facts that can be proved or disproved. One religious group may believe that war is never acceptable while another may argue that there are certain situations in which it is permitted. They may both put forward persuasive arguments. What neither of them can do is to conduct a scientific experiment to demonstrate that they are right.

This is not to say that neither group *can* be right. A question of truth may well be involved, but truth is not confined to provable facts. In the West today, we tend to use the words 'truth' and 'fact' almost interchangeably. The alternative is an appreciation of non-factual truth, which is not a modern trick but a return to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of reality that has characterized most societies until recent times and continues to be important in many parts of the world.

This can include mythical truth, in which a story points to a higher meaning than can be found in a literal reading. It can also involve the truth of experience, which is a starting point for many religions. Muhammad began reciting the Qur'an because he experienced a revelation in which he was given the words, not because he engaged in a purely rational process to decide what was true. Likewise, Jesus' disciples experienced his resurrection. It was not until later that they sought to explain what this experience meant.

The notion of experiential truth clearly throws up its own problems, which we shall explore in Chapter 3. However, this emphasis on experience is very appealing to many people today as it sits easily with current cultural trends that focus on the individual.

This cultural emphasis has popularized the idea of a personal spiritual journey in which an individual can engage, learning from various traditions and methods along the way. This is not a new idea; the notion of a religious journey has a long pedigree. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to 'believe nothing on the sole authority of your masters... believe what you yourself have tested'.⁴ The 13th-century Jewish writer Abraham Abulafia spoke of a mystical journey into the mind that modern writers have compared to psychotherapy.⁵

But personal quests for meaning do not in themselves make religions. A religion differs from a purely individual spirituality in the vital element of community, whether this is a community of people seeking meaning together or a group whose members are sure they have already found it.

Community

Commitment to a community may vary from a vague desire to worship with the same people once a week to a willingness to be martyred. A religious

community may be local, perhaps consisting of the people who attend the same temple. It may be global, as with the Muslim concept of the Umma, the worldwide community of Muslims. It may include all members of society, such as in much of medieval Europe, where everyone was expected to belong to the Christian Church. Or it may comprise scattered individuals around the world, as with certain monastic communities. A person may belong to several distinct or overlapping religious communities at once.

The issues of community and belonging mean that religion is often a key factor in defining the identity of a person or group. A person may name his/her religion as a way of showing either commonality or difference with the rest of his/her country, community or family. For many people, a religious identity will have implications in terms of social standing and political power and there may be clear advantages in choosing one identity over another. In the Soviet Union, for example, the authorities were suspicious of religious affiliation and people seeking political advancement were likely to choose a public allegiance to atheism.

The issue of choice is complex. Many people have grown up in a particular religion and most choose to stay in it out of either habit or conviction. In many societies, they risk persecution or stigma if they try to leave it. However, the globalization of communication has made more people aware of the religious options in the world. In many places, this has led to an increase in religious conversions, with more people than ever before belonging to a different religious community from their parents.

In the light of this fluidity, it would be naive to see religion as nothing more than a two-dimensional reflection of the society in which it exists. While the culture in which a person grows up will undoubtedly have a huge influence on his or her religion, it would be inaccurate to suggest that he or she has no choice

in the matter at all.

Such perceptions underestimate the complexity of religion, as something that relates to so many spheres of human activity but goes beyond them. In the light of such complexity, to ask simply whether religion is 'good' or 'bad' is to miss the point. Religion serves as a reason for war and peace, love and hatred, dialogue and narrow-mindedness. Religion can be used for many purposes, just as science can be used to develop life-saving vaccines or to build sophisticated weaponry. We may as well ask whether science is a good or bad thing, or cookery, poetry or politics. The 'goodness' or 'badness' of religion depends on the ways in which it is used, applied and lived out. It is to these practicalities that we now turn.

1 Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). **2** Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (Penguin, 1919). **3** Martin Forward, *Religion* (Oneworld Publications, 2001). **4** Cited by Karen Armstrong, *Buddha* (Penguin, 2004). **5** Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (Vintage, 1993).

2 A religious world

It is a daunting task to give an overview of the forms religion takes in the world. Varied over time and space, sometimes overlapping with each other and often encompassing a range of approaches amongst their own adherents, religions cannot easily be summarized.

EVIDENCE FROM ARCHEOLOGY suggests that religion has been a central feature of human life for at least 30,000 years. Religion appears in virtually every human society, so it is vital to remember that we cannot discuss religion without generalizing, as we begin a whistlestop tour through the world's largest religious groupings.

Abrahamic and related religions

The Abrahamic group includes some of the world's largest religions as well as several smaller ones. They are characterized by their monotheism, believing strongly in a single God (although there are also several monotheistic faiths that are not Abrahamic). Abrahamic faiths are sometimes described as 'narrative' religions, because they tend to emphasize stories and histories that explain their origins or convey their convictions. Unlike religions that see history as cyclical, an Abrahamic worldview regards it as linear. Written scriptures are very important in most Abrahamic religions and many have a special regard to particular historical individuals. These faiths trace their roots to Abraham, a Middle Eastern figure thought to have lived in the early second millennium BCE.

Judaism is the oldest religion in this group. Jews trace their ancestry to Abraham and later to Moses, said to have led the Israelites (or Jews) out of slavery in Egypt in around the 13th century BCE. Jews are described as

God's 'chosen people', but they have always differed in their interpretation of this idea.

The central authority in Judaism is the Torah, or Law. The Torah includes 613 laws, ranging from basic principles such as 'you shall not kill' to precise regulations about what may and may not be eaten. Jews vary in how literally they interpret and apply the Torah, which forms part of the Hebrew Bible. Also important is the Talmud, which consists of early commentary on the Law.

Jews tend to emphasize practice more strongly than belief; some describe it as a 'doing' religion. At the centre of Jewish ritual is the Sabbath, running from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday, a time during which Jews rest from work. Historically, this principle has been important in preventing exploitation of workers. The Jewish calendar includes a range of festivals as well as days of fasting. The home and family are traditionally the focus, although in some areas more activity takes place around synagogues. Rabbis provide spiritual guidance and pastoral care.

Most Jews left Palestine after the first century CE, and the Jewish diaspora spread throughout the world. For much of European history, Jews were the only explicitly non-Christian group in many Christian countries, and thus faced severe persecution from regimes looking for scapegoats. Not until the 19th century was there a serious movement for Jews to return to Palestine, and most Jews did not support this until the middle of the 20th century. About a third of the world's 15 million Jews live in Israel, about another third in North America and the rest throughout the world.

Christianity is based around the figure of Jesus of Nazareth (c.4 BCE–c.30 CE), known as Christ (which means Messiah or Anointed One). Jesus' existence is accepted almost universally by historians and other

scholars, although the nature and content of his life are hotly disputed. He came from Galilee in the Middle East, taught values of compassion and social inclusiveness, is said to have performed healings and miracles, protested against the misuse of the Jerusalem temple and was crucified by the Roman authorities then governing Palestine. After Jesus' death, his disciples experienced his resurrection.

Jesus' first followers still saw themselves as Jews, but the faith soon spread into Europe, southwest Asia and north Africa, and Christians came to believe that they were not required to follow the Jewish Law. Most Christians believe that Jesus' death had cosmic significance, making it possible for human beings to be saved from sin. They vary in how they understand this idea. While the majority of Christians believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave, others interpret the resurrection as basically a spiritual or experiential event.

Christianity is generally seen as the world's largest religion, with about two billion adherents. The word 'Church' is used to describe the whole community of Christian believers. Somewhat confusingly, it is also used to mean a local group of Christians meeting together or the building in which they meet. Some branches of Christianity also use the word to mean their own branch. There is a variety of different Christian groups but most fit broadly into the three categories of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. While many Christian groups are very hierarchical, others are more egalitarian and they vary considerably in the level of openness or equality they offer to female or gay members.

Nearly all Christians regard Jesus as divine and the phrase 'Son of God' is often used. The largest branches of Christianity all officially view Jesus as literally God. They use the concept of 'trinity' to describe how God can be simultaneously Father,

Son and Holy Spirit. However, many people find this doctrine confusing and it is debatable whether most Christians 'on the ground' think of the divine primarily in this way. Several smaller Christian groups reject the doctrine of the trinity outright and see Jesus as a great teacher or someone in whom God's power was especially present.

The Christian Bible brings together the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament) with a collection of early writings about Jesus and the first Christians, known as the New Testament. For some Christians (mostly Protestants), the Bible is their supreme authority, while others place greater emphasis on the teachings of Church Councils and leaders. Many Christians emphasize the sacraments, meaning rites performed by the Church and focused on Christ, which are believed to have been instituted by God.

Christian faith has inspired a diversity of political views. Even within the last century, it has been used to justify far-right dictatorships, such as those of Franco in Spain and Pinochet in Chile. It has also inspired armed revolutionary movements in Latin America and left-wing pacifism in Europe and India. In its very early years Christianity was socially radical and predominantly pacifist. Over time, its radicalism softened and in the fourth century it was 'domesticated' when the Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity as the imperial religion. Over subsequent centuries, marginal groups both within and outside the main branches of Christianity sought a return to this early radicalism.

Islam is the world's second largest religion, with about 1.3 billion adherents. The word derives from the Arabic word for peaceful acceptance and submission. Muslims refer to God as Allah (literally, Arabic for 'The God').

The starting-point for authority is the Qur'an,

a scripture believed to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (c.570–c.632), whose preaching of Islam in the area around Mecca attracted persecution from Pagan authorities. As a result, Muhammad and his followers left Mecca in 622 and founded a Muslim government in Medina.

Muslims regard Muhammad as the ‘Seal of the Prophets’, the last in a long line of prophets sent to every society. Prophets mentioned in the Qur’an include Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muslims have therefore traditionally seen Jews and Christians as ‘People of the Book’ who have responded to earlier revelations from Allah. When Islam spread to India from the eighth century, several Muslim teachers regarded the great Hindu sages of the past as prophets sent to the Indian people.

As God’s sovereignty is very important in Islam, Muslims emphasize the need for all parts of human life to be governed by God. They generally believe that each individual will be held accountable for his/her deeds at the Day of Judgment, resulting in eternity in either paradise or hell.

There are five ‘pillars’ to Muslim life. First, *shahadah*, the sincere declaration that ‘there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet’; second, prayer five times per day; third, *zakat*, meaning donations to people in poverty and need; fourth, fasting during the month of Ramadan; and fifth, *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, which each Muslim should make at least once in life if able to do so.

The main division within Islam is between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, who differ on issues including the location of authority within the Muslim community. There are many different tendencies within both these groups. For example, Sufis practice a mystical approach to faith and Wahhabis believe in a ‘return’ to strict practices they regard as basic to Islam.

Islam is sometimes associated with sharia law,

formulated in Muslim societies around the end of the first millennium. The introduction of sharia law is often backed by conservative Muslims. For the most extreme this means the use of certain harsh punishments with no regard to their original context. Other Muslims have a more sophisticated interpretation of sharia, while a small number reject it as contrary to the Qur'an.

Today, most countries with Muslim majorities are ruled by undemocratic regimes, sometimes justifying oppression in the name of Islam. However, they all face criticism from other Muslims for doing so. In many countries, Muslims experience persecution or at least stigma. This situation is exacerbated by the tendency of both Islamic fundamentalists and right-wing Western politicians to define the world in terms of an epic battle between Islam and the West.

Baha'ism is smaller than the three biggest Abrahamic religions, having around six million adherents, although they are spread throughout the world. Baha'is emphasize both the oneness of God and the unity of humanity. This involves a commitment to human equality, including gender equality. They also believe in the unity of all faiths, suggesting that they are all pointing towards God.

As God is regarded as ultimately unknowable, he is seen to have manifested himself through prophets and religious founders such as Abraham, the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. For Baha'is, the last prophet was Baha'u'llah (1819-72), a Persian who had originally been a Shi'a Muslim and who taught that humanity would eventually be reunited. He criticized prejudice and, in the context of his time, was remarkably progressive in terms of women's rights.

Baha'is emphasize care for the body and moderate living; this involves rejection of alcohol and unprescribed drugs. The Baha'i calendar includes an annual 19-day fast to focus on God. Social action is

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