

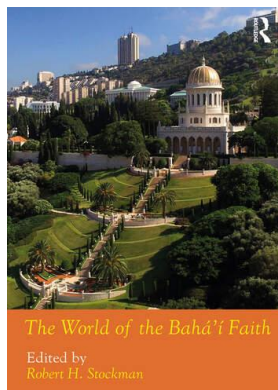
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DEVOTIONAL LIFE

Elham Afnan

Devotions are an essential part of religious life, although they may take different forms in different religious traditions. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers to occupy themselves 'in remembrance of the Beauty of Him Who is the Unconstrained' ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 17) and 'enter the heaven of communion' with God (Bahá'u'lláh 1932, *The Hidden Words* no. 8). Devotions are, first and foremost, the means of communing with God. At the same time, the Bahá'í concept of worship is inextricably bound to that of service to God and to humanity. This chapter examines devotional life as it relates to individuals, the community, and the institutions within the Bahá'í Faith. The following discussion considers the nature of worship; the purpose and characteristics of acts of devotion; the relationship between devotional gatherings and other communal and administrative activities; the role of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* (House of Worship); and the rhythm of Bahá'í devotional life. The interplay between worship and service is a thread that weaves together these various aspects of the devotional life. This interplay may also be expressed in terms of the essential relationship between prayer and action, and between devotion to God and devotion to the betterment of the world.

Devotional life of the individual

At the core of religious faith is that state of spiritual communion that exists between human beings and God, and which can be brought about and maintained through prayer and meditation. Devotional life begins at the personal level and extends to the life of the community. At the personal level, prayer and meditation provide for the spiritual sustenance and growth of the individual and strengthen the bond that exists between the individual and God. At the collective level, devotional gatherings vitalize the relationships among individuals and enhance different elements of community life. Other acts of devotion, such as fasting, pilgrimage, and work performed in the spirit of service, contribute to the further development of individuals and communities, and are discussed in the chapter in this book on spirituality and spiritual practices.

Communion with God

Prayer and meditation are at the heart of the devotional life of a Bahá'í. Prayer is a spiritual conversation between a human soul and its Maker. Living in a state of prayer means not only reciting

prayers during times of devotion, but turning one's heart towards God throughout the day. One can pray directly to God or direct one's prayers to Him through His Manifestations, the Divine Messengers who have founded the succession of world religions.

When we pray with a pure and sincere heart, we draw nearer to God, develop the capacities of our souls, touch the hearts of those around us, and receive divine assistance and confirmations. The Bahá'í Writings liken prayer to a dew that revives the soul ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 23), a fire that burns away the veils separating it from God, and a light that leads to the ocean of reunion with Him (Bahá'u'lláh n.d.b, 'Long Obligatory Prayer'). They also describe prayer as food for the spirit. Just as our bodies need nourishment to develop properly, so too our souls need regular prayer to ensure their sustenance and health.

Prayer in its purest form is an expression of praise for God. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains that

The true worshipper, while praying, should endeavour not so much to ask God to fulfil his wishes and desires, but rather to adjust these and make them conform to the Divine Will. Only through such an attitude can one derive that feeling of inner peace and contentment which the power of prayer alone can confer.

(‘Importance of Prayer’ no. 46)

‘Remembrance of God’, writes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘is like the rain and dew which bestow freshness and grace on flowers and hyacinths, revive them and cause them to acquire fragrance, redolence and renewed charm’. Thus, pure and selfless prayers help the soul to grow and ‘attain infinite freshness and beauty’ (‘Prayer and Devotional Life’ no. 24).

It is also natural to pray for one's loved ones and to turn to God in prayer in times of need. This too is fitting if it is done in the spirit of trust and reliance in God. When one asks God for His help, one must have faith that He will answer that prayer and grant that which is best for the one who prays. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: ‘It behoveth the servant to pray to and seek assistance from God, and to supplicate and implore His aid. Such becometh the rank of servitude, and the Lord will decree whatsoever He desireth, in accordance with His consummate wisdom’ (‘The Importance of Prayer’ no. 24).

While individuals are free to use their own words to commune with their Creator, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contain numerous prayers which may be used in personal devotions as well as in gatherings. Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* LXXIV) states that every word revealed by God ‘is endowed with such potency as can instil new life into every human frame’. There are prayers revealed by the Central Figures of the Faith on a wide range of themes: assistance, protection, and healing; spiritual growth and forgiveness; for families, the departed, and humanity. These prayers give direction to our feelings and thoughts and help us find true expression for them. They help us understand the will of God and to align our own wishes with what He desires for us.

Obligatory prayers

Bahá'u'lláh has, moreover, invested a few of His prayers with special significance. These include three obligatory prayers: a short prayer, which is to be said between noon and sunset; a medium prayer, which is to be recited in the morning, at noon, and in the evening; and a long prayer, which is to be recited once in twenty-four hours. Certain instructions accompany the long and the medium obligatory prayers, such as the washing of hands and face, bowing down, and raising one's hands. Each Bahá'í is free to choose any one of these three prayers but must recite one of

them each day, in accordance with any specific directions with which it may be accompanied. Bahá'u'lláh has reduced ritual and form to an absolute minimum, and the few forms He has ordained—like those associated with the obligatory prayers—are symbols of the inner qualities of purity, submission to the will of God, and supplication toward Him.

The obligatory prayers are to be said privately. Congregational prayer, in the sense of a formal obligatory prayer recited according to a prescribed ritual and led by a religious leader, has been annulled in the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that the 'obligatory prayers are binding inasmuch as they are conducive to humility and submissiveness, to setting one's face towards God and expressing devotion to Him' ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 57). Through them one communes with God, draws nearer to Him, and attains spiritual nourishment. The daily recital of one of the Obligatory Prayers 'with pure-hearted devotion' is one of the essential requisites for spiritual growth (Universal House of Justice 1983).

In accordance with the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the book of laws, Bahá'ís turn towards the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh—the Qiblih or Point of Adoration—when reciting their obligatory prayers (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas para. 6). Shoghi Effendi uses the analogy of a plant turning in direction of the sun to explain the spiritual significance of this act:

just as the plant stretches out to the sunlight—from which it receives life and growth—
so we turn our hearts to the Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh, when we pray; . . .
we turn our faces . . . to where His dust lies on this earth as a symbol of the inner act.
(Kitáb-i-Aqdas note 8)

Spirit and form of prayer

Apart from the obligatory prayers, which, as mentioned earlier, have a distinct form that must be observed when performing them, there are no rituals or formulas associated with Bahá'í prayers. Offering them is characterized by simplicity. They can be said privately or in the company of others, and in any setting, whether at home or in a place of worship. It is, however, the spirit of the prayers that is paramount. They must be offered in a state of reverence, detachment from all else save God, and submission to His will. Bahá'u'lláh writes: 'As for thy mention of the Obligatory Prayer: in truth, anyone who readeth this with absolute sincerity will attract all created things, and confer new life upon the world of being' ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 56).

Indeed, sincerity and purity of heart are essential to all prayer. As the Báb says,

The most acceptable prayer is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved by God. The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable is it in the presence of God.

(*Selections* no. 3:2)

This is why Bahá'u'lláh cautions against reading sacred verses in a way that may lead to weariness or priding oneself on the length of one's devotions: 'were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God' (Kitáb-i-Aqdas para. 149).

Role of meditation

Prayer must be accompanied by reflection and action. Having prayed for something, one must meditate upon the issue at hand, act in what appears to be the best way forward, and see whether

one's effort are confirmed or must be adjusted. The capacity to reflect and meditate is a distinguishing characteristic of human beings. Bahá'u'lláh states: 'The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection'. The Bahá'í Writings explain that the meditative faculty is like a mirror. When it is turned toward God and the world of the spirit, it will mirror spiritual realities and will open to us the doors of deeper knowledge and inspiration.

No specific method or set form of meditation is prescribed in the Bahá'í Faith, but we are urged to meditate on the words of God, so as to discover the purpose of God for us. As stated in one of the letters of the Universal House of Justice, believers 'may wish to use for their private meditations the repetition of the Greatest Name, Alláh-u-Abhá, ninety-five times a day which . . . is among the prescriptions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas' (Universal House of Justice 1983). 'Alláh-u-Abhá' is an Arabic phrase meaning 'God is the All-Glorious', and in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh has ordained that every believer should 'each day, having washed his hands and then his face, seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat 'Alláh-u-Abhá' ninety-five times' (para. 180). This simple act of worshipful meditation, performed on a daily basis, brings spiritual enrichment to the soul.

In that same book, He also counsels His followers to recite 'the verses of God every morn and eventide' so that their souls 'may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs' (para. 149). The daily practice of reading the sacred writings gives one the opportunity to meditate on the concepts enshrined in them and to reflect on how to translate them into action. Prayer, reading the verses of God, and meditation go hand in hand with action.

Worship and service

In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, it is written: 'Prayer and meditation, and study, without action, are of no value, and action must be reinforced by these other things, which strengthen the soul and nourish the mind' ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 53). On a personal level, if we wish to receive guidance or realize our desires, prayer alone is not enough. We receive the answer to our prayer by taking action and making effort. If a person prays and asks to do God's will, meditates on the best methods of action, takes steps in a particular direction, tries hard, and perseveres, he or she will find whether that course of action or a change of course is required. At the same time, prayer and meditation give one the strength to withstand tests and the power and creativity to overcome obstacles along the path.

However, the purpose of prayer is not only to obtain guidance and help or to achieve spiritual development for oneself. Prayer is also closely linked to rendering service to humanity, and this is a theme that runs through the writings of all the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith. In words addressed by the Báb to His first eighteen followers, the Letters of the Living, He said:

The days when idle worship was deemed sufficient are ended. The time is come when naught but the purest motive, supported by deeds of stainless purity, can ascend to the throne of the Most High and be acceptable unto Him.

(Zarandi 1932: 92)

Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a talk delivered in the course of His travels to the West, addressed His audience in the following words:

Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the poor, raise the

fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute!

(*Paris Talks* no. 26)

Prayer must lead to acts of service, while works done in the spirit of service are themselves accounted as a form of prayer. Bahá'u'lláh even enjoined His followers 'to engage in some form of occupation, such as crafts, trades and the like' and elevated 'engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God, the True One' (n.d.a, 'Bishárát').

Devotional character of the community

While devotional life begins with the individual, it is also an essential element of Bahá'í community life. The purpose of coming together in prayer is to bring joy and strength to the participants and to promote unity and affection among them. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers in these words:

Gather ye together with the utmost joy and fellowship and recite the verses revealed by the merciful Lord. By so doing the doors to true knowledge will be opened to your inner beings, and ye will then feel your souls endowed with steadfastness and your hearts filled with radiant joy.

(*'Prayer and Devotional Life'* no. 68)

'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections* no. 58) further explains that as a result of such coming together, 'unity and affection shall grow and flourish in the human heart'.

The practice of collective worship is thus essential to the flourishing of the community, particularly at the local level. Devotional meetings have always been part of Bahá'í community life, and the Universal House of Justice has attached particular importance to their further development by stating that 'it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings' (*'Prayer and Devotional Life'* no. 72). Devotional meetings are one of the core activities of the community and help generate a spirit of communal worship that gradually permeates other collective endeavours.

Devotional meetings

It is a common practice for Bahá'ís in localities throughout the world to gather together with their friends and neighbours, whether in local centres or in their homes, to pray. Devotional meetings provide opportunities for the participants to read aloud and listen to prayers and extracts from holy scriptures in an informal but respectful atmosphere; in addition, they often include uplifting music and song. There are no rituals, and no one individual has any special role. The diverse ways in which devotional meetings are held across the globe are reflections of the diversity of the human family. Such meetings serve to awaken spiritual susceptibilities within the participants and promote patterns of community life distinguished for their devotional character. Collective worship, together with loving association among people in the locality and service to the community, reinforces the spiritual growth generated by individual devotions.

Bahá'ís see in their endeavours of community building the creation of a new pattern of how society can be. The devotional meeting is essential to this pattern, for it allows those who partake in it the opportunity not only to seek God's blessings in their own lives, but to extend to others 'the spiritual energies of prayer, to restore for them the purity of worship, to kindle in their

hearts faith in the confirmations of God, and to strengthen in them . . . eagerness to serve the nation and humanity' ('Prayer and Devotional Life' no. 75).

Devotions as part of community life

Devotions also have an important place in other types of Bahá'í gatherings. Children's classes, junior youth groups, study circles, meetings of Spiritual Assemblies and other consultative gatherings, Nineteen Day Feasts, holy day celebrations, weddings, funerals—indeed, community gatherings of all types—have a devotional portion. At the very least, they open with one or more prayers, while in many instances a devotional program constitutes the heart of the event.

The Prayer for the Dead is the only congregational prayer prescribed by Bahá'í law. It is to be recited by one of those present before the burial, while the remainder of the party stands in silence; the reader has no special status. In addition to this prayer, other prayers and passages from the Bahá'í Writings about the life of the soul are generally recited at Bahá'í funerals, thus giving them a devotional character. Bahá'í wedding ceremonies are likewise distinguished by simplicity. Their only requirement is the recitation of a verse by the bride and groom in the presence of witnesses. The couple often choose also to have recited prayers and selections from the Writings about the institution of marriage and the importance of spiritual as well as physical union.

Other activities in the Bahá'í community also have a devotional component, even when their primary focus is on other goals, such as education. For example, from an early age, children learn to pray in a family setting. Later, they attend classes for their spiritual education, where they are taught about qualities such as truthfulness, purity of heart, kindness, and generosity—attributes of God that are reflected in the mirror of the human heart—through quotations from the Bahá'í Writings, stories, songs, and games. These qualities are further enhanced by the children learning prayers and developing attitudes of prayerfulness and reverence. As they reach adolescence, they can begin to tend to their own spiritual development and contribute to the well-being of society. The relationship between worship and service is explored in the next stage of the educational process as youth and adults take part in study circles. Indeed, the first book of the sequence of courses offered by Bahá'í training institutes around the world is called *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. It explores the idea that the reality of human existence is the soul, which passes through this world in order to acquire the qualities it needs on its eternal journey towards God and to contribute to the betterment of the world. Prayer is the daily nourishment the soul needs to achieve this twofold moral purpose.

Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast, which takes place once every Bahá'í month, is the cornerstone of Bahá'í community life. Although outwardly it may take different forms in different parts of the world to reflect local conditions, its program always includes three portions: a devotional portion where prayers and selections from the Writings are read, an administrative portion devoted to sharing news and consulting on community affairs, and a portion for socializing and fellowship. Thus, once a month in tens of thousands of localities around the world, groups of Bahá'ís gather to pray and reflect on their spiritual growth, consult about their efforts to improve the life of their communities, and strengthen the bonds of unity that will enable them to achieve their purpose. As the devotional life of the community is enhanced through gatherings devoted to prayer, the effect can be felt at the Nineteen Day Feast and other occasions when Bahá'ís and their friends come together. The strengthening of the devotional character of the Feast in turn

raises the level of consultation, increases the fellowship among the participants, and enables them to render acts of service more effectively.

Spiritual Assembly

The functioning of the administrative institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, whether elected bodies or appointed individuals, is also inextricably linked to devotional acts. The elections of local and national Spiritual Assemblies and of the Universal House of Justice take place in a prayerful atmosphere. Each elector is called upon to vote only for 'those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold' (Shoghi Effendi 1968, *Bahá'í Administration*). Furthermore, when the members of these institutions are called upon to arrive at a decision, they turn to God in prayer, engage in consultation, and then abide by the voice of the majority. Here, too, prayer and action go hand in hand.

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár

As mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, a fundamental aspect of devotional life in the Bahá'í community is the dynamic interaction between worship and service. This interplay finds full expression in the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár (i.e. House of Worship), which consists of a central edifice that is a place of worship and dependencies that are dedicated to service to humanity. Bahá'u'lláh ordained the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, 'the Dawning-place of the Praise of God', in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, His book of laws, in which He calls upon the people of the world to build 'houses of worship throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions' (para. 31). Elsewhere He writes, 'Blessed are they that occupy themselves in the House of Worship with the remembrance of Him Who is the Lord of the righteous!' ('The Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár' no. 6). There are at present eight continental Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world, while local and national ones are beginning to emerge in Bahá'í communities that have grown significantly in size and vitality and are actively engaged in social action.

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár embodies a distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í Faith—the principle of unity in diversity. It is open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religion, ethnicity, or gender. Rituals and elaborate ceremonies have no place in the House of Worship, and the services conducted within it are to be 'simple, dignified, and designed to uplift the soul and educate it through hearing the creative word' ('Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár' no. 53).

Among the themes related to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as a place of worship are the effects of communal worship and the nature of devotions within the central edifice itself. The vital connection between worship and service is progressively manifesting itself as a new pattern of social life is gradually created by the process of community building in which Bahá'ís are engaged. An essential element of this new pattern is 'the holding of regular meetings for worship open to all and the involvement of Bahá'í communities in projects of humanitarian service' ('The Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár' no. 62). When integrated into the core of community life in a locality, devotional gatherings in homes and other meeting places evoke the spirit of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in that place, until finally a stage is reached when the community can build the physical structure of a House of Worship.

The House of Worship is 'a haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the

betterment of society' ('Institution of the *Mashriq'l-Adhkár*' no. 67). Bahá'u'lláh ordained the *Mashriq'l-Adhkár* as the spiritual centre of every Bahá'í community, around which would be built dependencies dedicated to the social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific advancement of humanity, so as to achieve 'a dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth' ('The Institution of the *Mashriq'l-Adhkár*' no. 60). These dependencies may include a hospital, schools, a hostel for travellers, and homes for the infirm and the poor. While only a few such dependencies exist as yet, the correlation of worship and service is becoming more pronounced in those clusters and countries where local and national Houses of Worship are being raised.

The rhythm of Bahá'í devotional life

Devotions shape the lives of Bahá'í individuals and communities by bringing a rhythm to them. At the highest level, this rhythm is discernible in the Bahá'í calendar. The year is marked by nine holy days, the observance of each of which has a devotional character. On these days, which mark events associated with the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as well as the celebration of Naw-Rúz, the Bahá'í new year, Bahá'ís gather together—usually with friends and neighbours in the wider community—to commemorate the occasion with prayers, readings from the sacred text, music, and fellowship. The Bahá'í year is divided into nineteen months of nineteen days each, and each month begins with a Nineteen Day Feast consisting of devotional, administrative, and social portions. Devotional gatherings, though not bound by strict schedules, are regular and generally take place on a monthly or weekly basis. Personal devotions, including the obligatory prayers and the reading of the Words of God, are part of each individual's daily practice.

Thus, through regular individual worship on the one hand, and communal devotions on the other, the Word of God exerts its influence on all who participate in Bahá'í devotional life, instilling 'new life into every human frame' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* LXXIV), and enabling them to be 'harmoniously attuned one to another . . . with the result that out of this coming together, unity and affection shall grow and flourish in the human heart' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 58).

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