

Baha'i faith attracts converts members espouse quiet beliefs

By Dan O'Reilly

Life in the latter part of the 20th Century is becoming more complex. High rise developments and urban expansion programs wipe out old city neighborhoods and break up life-long friendships. New attitudes on drugs and sex delight some and scare others.

Sometimes it seems the frightening predictions of the future, as outlined in Alvin Toffler's "Future Shock", are already upon us.

The realities of 20th Century living have forced many people to question age-old clichés such as "make sure to get a good education so you can get a good job—and make lots of money—so you'll be happy". People know it doesn't work out that way.

In an attempt to find some sort of meaning or worth to their lives, a growing number of people resort to liquor or drugs. Others use the more respectable method of burying themselves in their jobs in the belief the company is

"everything" to them.

A revival in the belief of a "God" by many young people and resurgence of this belief by older people is part of the search for some kind of happiness or meaning.

Jesus People

An example of this religious revival is the emergence of The Jesus People and The Children of God. These groups espouse the end-of-the-world lectures which older religious organizations have been delivering for years. However, The Jesus People are more vocally radical about their convictions than their counterparts.

One religious group which does not preach hellfire and damnation and is attracting an increasing number of converts is the Baha'i faith.

The Baha'is might be considered conservative. They are rather soft-spoken and quiet but are willing to explain their beliefs to anyone who indicates an interest. However they do not conduct street-corner evangelistic missions. Potential

converts don't have to worry that hard-to-understand religious sayings will be quoted by the Baha'is.

In Persia

The Baha'i faith was born in Persia (now Iran) in the mid-1800's and its beginnings might be considered similar to the Christian religion.

In May of 1844 a young man, known as the Bab (pronounced Bob) told of the coming of an educator who, among other deeds, would bring unity to mankind. Like many of the prophets who foretold of Christ's coming, the Bab became a victim of persecution and was publicly martyred in 1850.

The educator the Bab foretold of was a man by the name of Baha'u'llah who announced his mission in 1863. From Persia the messages of the Baha'u'llah have spread to all the parts of the globe.

Because of his teachings Baha'u'llah was forced to flee from one nation to another. In 1868, he was arrested in Palestine by Turkish authorities—who ruled the land at the time—and imprisoned. He remained a prisoner for the rest of his life; dying in 1892.

Here in 1912

The Baha'i Faith was brought to North America in 1912 by 'Abdul-Baha, the eldest son of Baha'u'llah. 'Abdul-Baha was persuaded to visit the U.S.A. by American friends. He spent six months in the country explaining his father's teachings to Church groups, women's organizations, race groups and university students. He died in 1921.

The Baha'is have been active in the Halton area for about 15 years. In 1958 Campbellville group, or assembly, was started by Don and Velma Ferrier. There are about 12 members active at present.

More recently—in the springtime—an Esquesing Baha'i assembly was formed. The group consists of a couple of families and has had held public Seminars in Acton.

One of the families belonging to the Esquesing group is the Weaver family of R.R. 5 Milton. In an attempt to find out more about the Baha'is, this newspaper interviewed Mrs. Don Weaver and friend, Mrs. Dale Sims of the Burlington Baha'is.

The two were extremely friendly and if they are representative of the Baha'i movement, then their religion makes more sense than the "repent or be damned" themes of old time Bible thumpers or the cosy high society religions as documented in Pierre Berton's book "The Comfortable Pew".

However the two ladies did not take any potshots at any other religion. They claim Baha'is look for the good qualities in a person, rather than seeking out the bad.

One of the ways the Baha'is try to do this is by not talking behind a person's back. "We try not to backbite because there's nothing worse than putting a person down when he's not present to defend himself. It's difficult not to backbite and to avoid it you must strive and work constantly", explains Mrs. Sims.

Anyone can become a Baha'i and there is no long conversion process involved. To start an assembly (Baha'i religious group) only nine people are needed. The Baha'i faith differs from other religions in that they do not have religious leaders.

It is a lay religion with no ordained priests or ministers. Except for few temples, there are no local churches. "Our homes are our meeting places," points out Mrs. Weaver.

Age plays somewhat of a factor in the religion. "We don't try to push our beliefs on our children. If they wish to take part in our meetings they can, but they are not obliged to do so."

When a youngster is 15 years old we feel he or she has enough maturity to decide whether or not they wish to join us, explains Mrs. Weaver.

While the order has several basic teachings, universal brotherhood seems to be its chief aim. One belief they have in common with other religions is that they predict the world is on the threshold of a new order, A New Day, as they call it.

"By the end of this century the world may have real peace," suggests Mrs. Weaver.

Hell, with its images of the Devil and dark pits of everlasting fire, does not fit into the concept of the Baha'i faith.

"At the end of life one will go through the agony and pain he has caused others and experience the harm he has done to others," explains Mrs. Sims. "However we do not believe in an everlasting Hell."

Young People

Both ladies claim their religion is becoming increasingly popular with young people. "Admittedly some express initial interest because of a desire to try something different. But many young adults are now confirmed believers," the women say in unison.

When asked what attraction the Baha'i religion had offered to these young adults, Mrs. Sims replied, "many of these kids have been into prostitution, alcohol, and drugs. They've been around, know the score and want something more meaningful."

"The kids who have been on drugs and who have kicked the habit are really beautiful," she added.

In 1961

Both ladies have been members of the Baha'i faith for several years. In 1961 Mrs. Weaver, who was living in Oakville, attended a meeting of the Baha'i assembly there. She was so impressed with the group she decided to join.

When Mrs. Sims joined the Baha'is her husband objected strenuously. "However he went

with me to a Baha'i meeting and was so overwhelmed he wanted

to join the group immediately." Like many other minorities, members of the Baha'i faith have suffered persecution. Although anti-Baha'i feeling exists in Canada, the two ladies say they have not personally encountered it. "Some people are somewhat puzzled when I tell them of my religious convictions," Mrs. Weaver observes.

Explain faith

While Baha'is are not street-roaming evangelists, they are

obliged to explain their faith to others, "if they ask".

"We don't attempt to impose our beliefs on anyone who would not want to listen," they stress.

There are 12 basic teachings or beliefs in the Baha'i Faith. They are the oneness of mankind; independent investigation of truth; the foundation of all religions is one; religion must be the cause of unity; religion must be in accord with science and reason; equality between men

and women; prejudice of all kinds must be forgotten, universal peace; universal education; spiritual solution of the economic problems; a universal language; and an international tribunal.

The two women could not estimate the number of Baha'is in the world, but did say there are Baha'is throughout the globe. There are about 80 to 100 members of the Baha'i faith in Halton County, they say.



THE BAHAI FAITH was introduced to North America in 1912 by Abdul-Baha, the eldest son of the religion's founder, Baha'u'llah. Abdul-Baha conducted a six month tour of the U.S.A. explaining the religion to peace groups, women's groups, university students and other organizations. His name means "Servant of God".



THE BAHAI FAITH is becoming increasingly popular throughout the globe says Mrs. Isabell Weaver of the recently formed Esquesing Baha'i Assembly. There are about 80 to 100 Baha'is in Halton, she estimates.

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