

## Memorandum

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 2 April 2012

From: Research Department

### **The Religion of the Sabaeans and African-based religions in the Americas**

The Research Department has studied a number of questions regarding the religion of the Sabaeans, and African-based religions in the Americas such as Yoruba, Santería and Brazilian Candomblé.

#### **Religion of the Sabaeans**

The Bahá'í Teachings contain few references to Sabaeism. Bahá'u'lláh, in His Tablets in the Persian language, describes two different groups as Sabaeans. They are:

1. the followers of an ancient religion who worship idols named after stars and who claim to have taken their religion from Seth and Idrís
2. the followers of John the Baptist who failed to recognize Jesus as the Manifestation of God. He further states that this group is known to some as the Sabaeans and that it continues to exist in the world.

Some scholars also refer to the followers of John the Baptist as the Mandaeans. Currently, there are small communities of Mandaeans living in Iraq and Iran.

As to the Sabaeans who claim to derive their religion from Seth and Idrís, the Research Department has, to date, been able to locate only one additional brief reference in the Bahá'í Writings to Seth. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2007), p. 516, the Master describes Seth as one of the “sons of Adam”.

There are, however, two very interesting references to Idrís contained in a footnote which appears on p. 148 of *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988). One is a quotation from the Qur'án 19:57–58, which states:

And commemorate Idrís in the Book; for he was a man of truth, a Prophet; And we uplifted him to a place on high.

The second is a statement by Bahá'u'lláh in which He identifies Idrís with Hermes:

The first person who devoted himself to philosophy was Idrís. Thus was he named. Some called him also Hermes. In every tongue he hath a special name. He it is who hath set forth in every branch of philosophy thorough and convincing statements. After him Balínús derived his knowledge and sciences from the Hermetic Tablets and most of the philosophers who followed him made their philosophical and scientific discoveries from his words and statements.

The connection between Idrís and Sabaeism is interesting because it confirms not only the extreme antiquity of this group of Sabaeans, but also the fact that knowledge of the religion has spread over the earth—Bahá'u'lláh affirms concerning Idrís, “In every tongue he hath a special name”. It should be noted, however, that Bahá'u'lláh does not specifically name Idrís as the Prophet of the Sabaeans.

## The Religion of the Sabaeans

In letters written on his behalf, cited below, Shoghi Effendi stresses the general lack of conclusive historical records concerning the origins of the Sabaeen religion:

Regarding Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl's statement in his book *The Bahá'í Proofs* to the effect that the great religions of the world, excluding the Dispensations of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, are seven in number: what the author meant by that statement is that there are only seven great religions of which there is some existing trace or record, and not that only seven religions have so far appeared in the world. These seven religions mentioned by Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl are the following: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the religion of the Sabaeans, which was originally monotheistic, and became gradually corrupted, and to which Abraham's forefathers are believed to have belonged. (letter dated 9 July 1939 to an individual believer)

As to the religion of the Sabaeans, very little is known about the origins of this religion, though we Bahá'ís are certain of one thing, that the founder of it has been a divinely-sent Messenger. The country where Sabaeenism became widespread and flourished was Chaldea, and Abraham is considered as having been a follower of that Faith. (letter dated 10 November 1939 to an individual believer)

With reference to your question concerning the Sabaeen and Hindu religions: there is nothing in the Teachings that could help us in ascertaining which one of these two Faiths is older. Neither history seems to be able to provide a definite answer to this question. The records concerning the origin of these religions are not sufficiently detailed and reliable to offer any conclusive evidence on this point. (letter dated 9 November 1940 to an individual believer)

The teachings throw no light on the Prophet of the Sabaeans. The followers of this religion lived in Ur of the Chaldees, where Abraham appeared. (letter dated 30 July 1941 to an individual believer)

For more information on this subject, Mr. ... is also referred to the writings of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, specifically, *The Bahá'í Proofs* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), and an article entitled "Explanation of Daniel's Interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's Dream" which is published in *Star of the West*, April 28, 1916, vol. VII, no. 3, pp. 17–24.

In relation to the second group, that is the followers of John the Baptist or the Mandeans, Bahá'u'lláh states that this group continues to exist in the world. Further historical and archaeological research will, no doubt, be required to corroborate the link between Sabaeism and traditional African beliefs.

#### **African-based religions in the Americas**

Mr. ... enquires whether the Bahá'í Writings comment on the immense popularity and current explosive growth of these Yoruba-based religions in the New World and he asks about the Bahá'í view of the "possession" that takes place during the ceremonies that invoke the Yoruba "Orishas" (spirits, "gods").

While we have not found any specific reference to these religious movements in the writings of the Faith, Mr. ... might well be interested in Shoghi Effendi's discussion of the "universal fermentation" that characterizes the "Age of Transition", one feature of which is the decline in recognized religions and the subsequent "emergence of an increasing number of obscure cults, of strange and new worships, of ineffective philosophies, whose sophisticated doctrines have intensified the confusion of a troubled age."<sup>1</sup>

As to the Bahá'í view of the "possession" that takes place during Yoruba ceremonies and other such "supernatural" phenomena, Mr. ... might find it useful to refer to *Some Answered Questions*, page 252. 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that, in general, the "converse, presence and communications of spirits is but imagination and fancy, which only appears to have reality". The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 30 August 1984 written on its behalf to an individual believer provides the following guidance concerning the attitude toward the "psychic arts" of other people:

The important thing for Bahá'ís to understand is that the influence of such "arts" is dependent on the conviction, even the sub-conscious conviction, of the person affected and, similarly, the power of the "priests" to overcome the influence is likewise an outcome of the sufferer's conviction that it is from the "priest" that he or she will be able to obtain help.

We wish to draw Mr. ...'s attention to the following extracts, drawn from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, which summarize the Bahá'í teachings on this topic:

We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahá'u'lláh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.

We must turn our faces away from these things, and toward the actual practice of His Teachings in our everyday life through our Bahá'í Administration, and in our contact

with other people and the examples we give. (From a letter dated 22 April 1954 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

While such accounts are interesting and provoke one's curiosity, we have no way of checking the veracity of such experiences. Shoghi Effendi has advised in his letters to the friends who asked him about psychic powers that we do not understand the nature of such phenomena, that we have no way of being sure of what is true and what is false, that very little is known about the mind and its workings, and that we should endeavour to avoid giving undue consideration to such matters. (From a letter dated 16 May 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

## The Religion of the Sabaeans

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### NOTES

- 1 See *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 170–186.