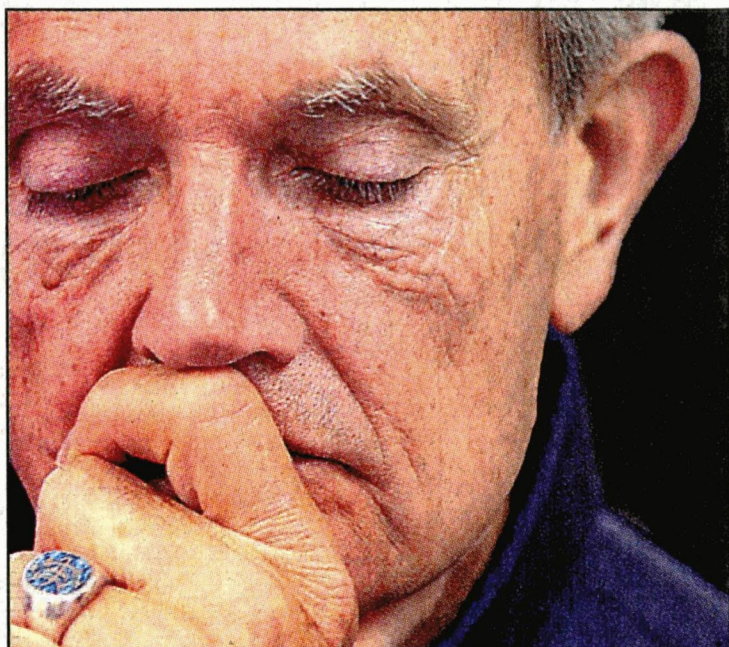


# Faith & Values

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## Faith, UNITY Baha'i

**Ernie Bruss prays during a worship service at the Baha'i Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.**

*Religion is a unique blend of liberal and conservative beliefs*

By **ERIC GORSKI**  
*The Gazette*

**C**OLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Like many converts to the Baha'i faith, Rafael Castillo was drawn to the religion's messages of racial and sexual equality and its acceptance of other faiths.

He wasn't prepared for the stricter elements of Baha'i life.

At 36, Castillo discovered he needed his parents' permission to marry.

He hadn't spoken to his father in 18 years. He didn't even know where he was. So Castillo started calling every Luis Castillo in the Brooklyn, N.Y., phone book. No luck.

An uncle finally told Castillo his father was recovering from being partially paralyzed in a car wreck. The next day, he drove with two siblings from Dallas to New York.

His father, once over the shock of seeing his estranged children, signed a card that allowed his son to take the first step toward starting his own family.

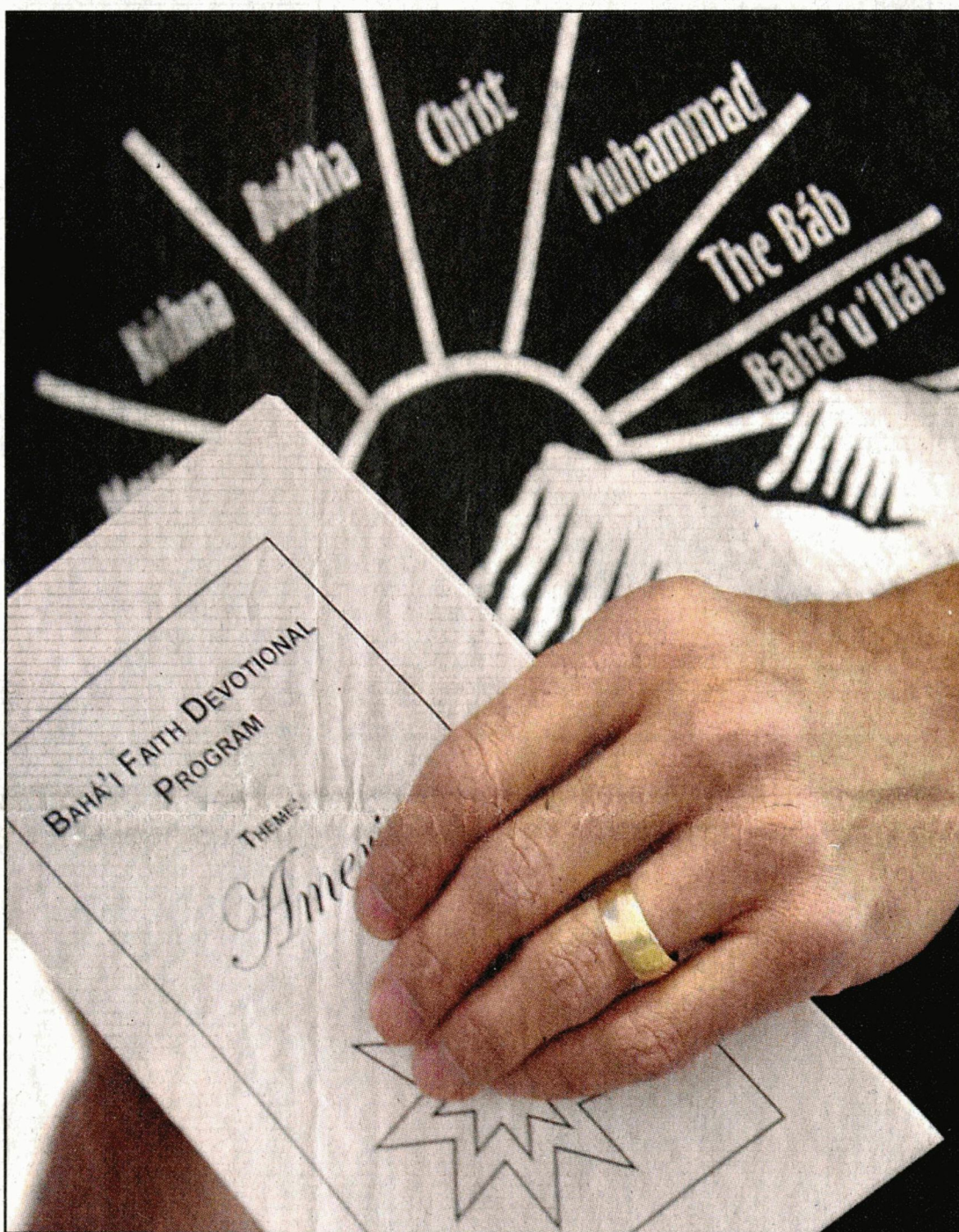
"At first, I couldn't see a reason for it," said Castillo, now 41, happily married and working as a Colorado Springs freelance photographer. "Afterward, it made sense."

It made sense because unity is central to the Baha'i faith. If all mankind is united, as Baha'is believe, then it stands to reason that a family should stand united on a wedding day.

Since its start in the mid-19th century in what is now Iran, the Baha'i religion's unique blend of liberal and conservative beliefs has attracted thousands of spiritual seekers such as Castillo, who was raised a Roman Catholic.

Nationally, experts say the religion's growth has leveled off since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when its stands on equality and peace resonated strongly. An estimated 133,709 Americans claim affiliation with the faith, and there are about 5 million adherents worldwide.

The 100-member Colorado Springs Baha'i community, building on a 70-year history, moved last month into a new,



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### A short course on the Baha'i faith

#### History

Founded in Persia, which is now Iran, in the 1860s by Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri (1817-92). Better known as Baha'u'llah ("Glory of God"), he believed he was the prophet foretold by the Bab, a religious leader who was a direct descendant of the prophet Mohammed. Baha'u'llah claimed to be the promised one of all religions. After Baha'u'llah's death as a prisoner in Palestine, one of his two sons set out on missionary journeys to Egypt, Europe and America.

#### Beliefs

Baha'is are monotheistic and believe in the unity of all religions. They believe humanity is one family created by God. Although Baha'is believe God is unknowable, they hold that God's presence and works are evident in the creation of the world and the existence of prophets. Among those whom Baha'is recognize as prophets are Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, all of whom were succeeded by Baha'u'llah. They believe God will continue to send prophets. Baha'is reject all prejudice — racial, sexual, political and otherwise. Baha'is also view scientific inquiry as essential to expand human knowledge and deepen their members' faith.

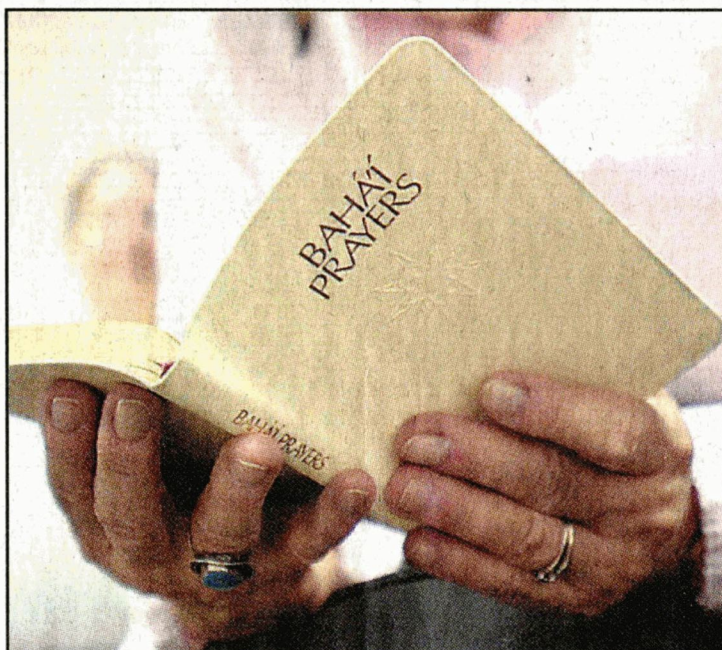
#### Living the Faith

Laws require daily prayer and an annual fast. Alcohol, drugs and premarital sex are prohibited. Divorce is discouraged; Baha'i law requires one year of trial separation. If differences can't be resolved, divorce is allowed. Baha'is may accept nonpartisan governmental posts but cannot be members of any political party.

#### Governing

There is no Baha'i clergy. Local and national centers are administered by elected officials. The international governing body is elected once every five years.

Sources: The Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions; beliefnet; the Baha'i Office of Public Information; the Colorado Springs Baha'i Spiritual Assembly.



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**Rafael Castillo wears a T-shirt showing the influences on Baha'i Faith during a worship service at the Baha'i Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.**

**"In a world that's changed rapidly, groups that provide clear moral guidelines for personal behavior tend to be the ones that are growing. When you combine that with the Baha'i's progressive, world-embracing perspective, that appeals."**

*Michael McMullen, a University of Houston sociology professor and author of a book on Baha'i*



## *The Baha'i faith remains a mystery to most outsiders*

# Baha'i

*Continued from page D1*

larger community center that members hope will be a catalyst for expansion.

This weekend, the group will gather to celebrate one of its holy days: the birth of the Bab, who prophesied the coming of the founder of the Baha'i faith, Baha'u'llah.

The Baha'i faith remains a mystery to most outsiders. To some, it evokes the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, where most Muslims view the religion as heretical.

Some texts refer to the faith as a Muslim sect. Most scholars, however, consider it a stand-alone religion with its own founding prophets and ideas.

As with most Baha'i assemblies, the Colorado Springs community is a combination of fourth- and fifth-generation believers from the Middle East and U.S.-born converts.

Ernie and Barbara Bruss first heard about the faith on a beach in Hawaii in 1969. Both had been raised as Methodists and later joined the Episcopal Church.

But Barbara Bruss, in particular, was searching spiritually.

"She was dragging me around," said Ernie Bruss, who is retired from the Air Force and Gates Rubber Co. in Denver. "Past-life regressions. UFOs. Fringe things."

The couple learned more about the religion during a "fireside," an informal gathering at the home of a Baha'i.

This soft-sell is typical of Baha'is, who don't proselytize and put great value on the individual search for truth.

As a Christian, Ernie Bruss said he had struggled with the idea that a universal God would send his son to only a

narrow segment of the world's population. He agreed with the Baha'i teaching that all religions come from the same spiritual source — and that Jesus was among a series of prophets who were manifestations of the same spirit.

Said Barbara Bruss: "I had believed these things inside myself all these years, and I didn't know there was a group that believed these things."

In Hawaii, the Brusses were considered "establishment" in a Baha'i community that was mostly hippies. They said it was hard at times to sell other members on some of the Baha'i rules: No alcohol. No drugs. No premarital sex.

In its strict moral codes, the Baha'i religion is similar to theologically conservative faiths such as Mormonism and evangelical Christianity, which are growing fast.

"In a world that's changed rapidly, groups that provide clear moral guidelines for personal behavior tend to be the ones that are growing," said Michael McMullen, a University of Houston sociology professor and author of a book on Baha'i. "When you combine that with the Baha'i's progressive, world-embracing perspective, that appeals."

McMullen said growth of the faith in the United States has slowed to 2 percent to 3 percent a year. Baha'is tend to be well educated and come from all U.S. regions and a variety of ethnic groups. About 70 percent of Baha'is worldwide are converts.

The faith has few rituals and no clergy. Living as a Baha'i means daily obligatory prayers, celebratory feasts and a 19-day fast each March, during which members abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset.

There is no baptism in the Baha'i faith. You just sign a card to convert.