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The Bahá'í Temple, Emptiness, and Richness: An Example of Cultural Sustainable Heritage

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine, from a historical–religious perspective, the significance of the Bahá'í Temple, how it was envisioned by the founder of the religion, Bahá'u'lláh, what it symbolizes for believers, and how it appears to followers of other religious traditions or simply visitors. Using academic sources, including those produced by the religion's founders, along with oral sources collected during fieldwork among various Bahá'í communities from 2020 to 2024, I intend to highlight the meaning of this place, framing the topic within the context of cultural sustainability: the temple can be seen as a vehicle for heritage and 'traditional' enhancement. The study reveals the importance of symbols—whether present or absent—in the Bahá'í worship space. While attending the temple may not be essential, its significant role as a place for gathering and meeting stands out. It encourages and nurtures a core principle of the faith: unity.

Keywords: Bahá'í; sustainability; culture; religion; shared religious places

1. Introduction

The main aim of this contribution is to examine, from a historical–religious perspective, the significance of the Bahá'í Temple, how it was envisioned by the founder of the religion, Bahá'u'lláh, what it symbolizes for believers, and how it appears to adherents of other religious traditions or simply visitors. The study, based on scientific theories concerning the 'individualistic' and communal approaches to religion (Jensen 2014, p. 27), highlights two main categories: the first, understood as religiosity, includes individual beliefs and practices; the second pertains to the psychology of religion, or what is more recently called the cognitive science of religion. According to Jensen, individual religiosity is a complex subject to analyze, methodologically challenging, and difficult to measure. Just as it is hard to quantify religious feelings, social conditioning can steer an individual toward a particular religious orientation; the person's personality influences their spiritual perception, or in some cases, the religion itself shapes it.

Regarding the methodology used in this study, it will include analyzing the academic literature, sources produced by the founders of the religion itself, and oral sources collected during my fieldwork among the community in Germany from 2020 to 2024. Considering these different sources, my goal is to highlight, as mentioned above, the meaning of this place and frame the topic within the context of cultural sustainability studies. The temple can be seen as a vehicle for heritage and 'traditional' enhancement, where traditional means—following Natale Spineto—a complex of elements 'linked to a past that has been preserved and handed down by generations' (Spineto 2015). In contrast, acknowledging that traditions can change over time and that what we often call 'authenticity' is more



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related to processes of re-traditionalization than to constant issues over time (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Studying the perceptions of the Bahá'í believers with whom I interacted evidently entailed the difficulties briefly discussed here. In this paper, I therefore intend to examine how Bahá'í believers perceive the temple: as a place of worship or gathering? Is it a religious element from the past that can help preserve 'rites and traditions' through cultural sustainability?

The sources I have used, as mentioned, are of various types: oral, biographical, autobiographical, bibliographical, historical, documentary, archival, online, social media, and social network. The available written sources, many of which were produced by Bahá'ís themselves, are scarce compared to oral sources, whose themes emerged from testimonies collected during fieldwork. A preliminary phase of the study was dedicated to conducting a bibliographic analysis of relevant theories and examining online archives related to the Bahá'í religion. The Bahá'í community, through the diligent effort of believers from various communities worldwide and under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, has built a vast collection of documentation and works created by the founder and his successors. This extensive collection of materials is now largely accessible through online platforms (Bahá'í.it; Bahá'í.org; bahaipedia.it). Emphasis was placed on oral sources with the goal of promoting oral tradition as a means of documenting history. The term 'oral history' refers to a research methodology that employs direct oral sources, such as interviews, to trace the lines of history (Lanzardo 1994, p. 188). In this context, life stories are intrinsic to the events of individuals, in relation to general history, but not as private, internal facts; rather, as elements that can outline a broader picture built on lived experiences and collective memory, influencing various aspects of life and, in some cases, leading to transformations of identity.

Using life stories to rebuild the collective memory of a social group not only involves accessing personal knowledge that enriches and connects with 'big history' through lived experience but also promotes democracy: involving people from different social classes, who are not always linked to cultural, political, and economic elites, allows them, through memory itself, to take 'possession of their collective history' (Lanzardo 1994, p. 183). The 'official sources' of the community, many of which are self-produced by the believers themselves, have proven to be valuable tools for information and in-depth analysis. The implementation of ethnographic interviews, following the life story approach, with religious leaders and believers, based on a semi-structured questionnaire, has enabled the collection of original data, obtained firsthand through audio and video recordings. Once the interview data had been collected, the interviews were transcribed, faithfully recording every word spoken by the witnesses. The responses were then divided into themes.

The second section traces the development and spread of the Bahá'í faith, starting with its origins in Persia during the second half of the 19th century. It was necessary to provide a historical background so the reader could better understand the context.

The central sections—the third, fourth, and fifth—focus on the temple, its significance from the believers' perspective, its harmony with the surrounding environment, and its practical use. It embodies a new concept of sacred spaces. While serving as a sanctuary for prayer and meditation, it is also the place where the harmony between worship and service to humanity is expressed in practical ways.

The concluding section of this work aims to interpret the temple through the lens of cultural sustainability, viewing its existence as a form of heritage inherited from the founders, the previous generation, which must be preserved and passed on to future generations—the believers—with the aim of continuing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and his successors. The origins and connections related to religion, as well as the challenges faced in seeking a universally accepted definition, have been briefly outlined.

2. Notes on the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia in the latter part of the 19th century and is one of the most recent monotheistic religions. It emphasizes the spiritual and genuine unity of all people. Three main principles form the foundation of Bahá'í teachings: the oneness of God, recognizing there is only one Creator known by different names throughout history; the oneness of religions, acknowledging that all faiths have the same spiritual origin and come from the same God; and the oneness of mankind, affirming that all humans are part of one family (Smith 1987).

The announcement of this teaching was groundbreaking during Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, the founder of the Bahá'í faith. He teaches that diversity is a valuable treasure and should not cause arrogance or conflict. On the contrary, diversity brings joy. Since there is only one God, there can be no real separation between different religions. According to the Bahá'í writings, it is better not to have faith at all than to follow one that causes discord and strife. Religion periodically needs renewal; therefore, God has continually revealed Himself throughout human history in the form of various prophets: Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, the last to date.

The belief that all people belong to one human family is therefore the foundation of the Bahá'í religion. Growing awareness of mutual interdependence helps people strive for unity in diversity. The Bahá'í writings assure believers that they are 'the flowers of one garden, the leaves of one branch' and share a common goal: to promote continuous progress in both material and spiritual culture (Momen 1997).

In 1844, the movement known as Bábism, or the Bábí religion, emerged from Shi'ism, with its leader, Siyyid Ali Muhammad Shirazi, recognized as the first prophet and the source of divine revelations. He proclaimed that he carried a message meant to transform humanity, the 'promised messianic leader expected by many Shaykhis.' He adopted the name Báb, which means Door in Arabic: a gateway to the knowledge of the occult imām, a key concept in Shiite doctrines. The mission of the Báb, which lasted only six years, was to prepare for the arrival of a future Manifestation of God, whom he called 'He Whom God will manifest,' the 'Glory of God.' His mission is seen as the start of the Bahá'í Age, beginning a new cycle in human history and social development. In less than 200 years, it has grown into a global faith with followers in every country and from nearly all nationalities, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds.

After the execution of the Báb, Mirza Husayn-'Alí Nuri, known as Bahá'u'lláh—the glory of God—assumed leadership of his community, transforming the Bábí heritage into a new religion, the Bahá'í faith. His divine revelation occurred through thousands of verses and countless missives addressed to all of humankind, paving the way for a new stage in the development of mankind, which encompasses the well-being of both individuals and humanity as a whole. Strenuously upheld principles include the importance and necessity of religious tolerance as a means to counteract the negative consequences of hatred and religious fanaticism, thereby serving as an essential element of peacebuilding. For believers, his coming would have established the Great Peace, the unity of mankind, and would have founded a new world order under the sign of justice (Amanat 1989).

Upon Bahá'u'lláh's death in 1892, the leadership role was passed to his eldest son, Abdu'l-Bahá. He dedicated his life to furthering his father's cause and promoting his ideals. Bahá'u'lláh called him the 'Centre of the Covenant,' named him as his successor, and appointed him as the sole authoritative interpreter in his written will, thus ensuring the unity of the faith after his death. Abdu'l-Bahá supported the creation of local Bahá'í institutions established by his father, guided social, educational, and economic efforts, and brought great honor to the growing Bahá'í community. In his will, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed

his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, to succeed him as the leader, or Guardian, of the Bahá'í faith, ending the chain of inheritance without any heirs. This appointment was an extension of the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh and gave him full authority to interpret and explain the faith's sacred writings and teachings.

Shoghi Effendi, who served as the Guardian of the faith since 1921, was also responsible for promoting the growth of the Bahá'í world community, which he achieved through a series of increasingly complex plans, each lasting several years. He effectively adapted the Bahá'í religion to a changing society. With the extensive guidance they received from Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'ís expanded their community to a global scale. Additionally, the local and national institutional structures of the faith had developed enough to allow the first election of the worldwide governing body of the faith to occur six years after his death.

In 1963, the Universal House of Justice was first elected as the international governing body of the Bahá'í faith, as established by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book and the repository of the laws and ordinances of the Bahá'í faith. This institution is unprecedented in religious history. Never before had a Manifestation of God explicitly ordained the creation of a governing body with the mandate to maintain the integrity and flexibility of his religion, safeguard unity, guide the activities of his followers, and exert a beneficial influence on society. It is composed of nine male members who are elected every five years by the members of the national assemblies, but none may claim a special station or authority. Authority is vested in the institution and its collective making, not in the individuals elected (Smith 1987). However, Bahá'u'lláh provided details on 'his' faith in the Most Holy Book. Still, he specified in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* (Ishráq-Khávarí, 4, p. 157) that 'the purpose of the Bahá'í religion is not to lay down a set of ordinances and prohibitions; rather, it aims to develop divine perfections in all human souls so that they can attain their true potential' (Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025, p. 7).

3. The Dawn of Remembrance of God: The House of Worship

One of the Bahá'í believers I interviewed in Germany described the Bahá'í Temple as a special place to go and sit, pray, meditate, or 'something else.' Many believers shared their love for walking around the building because this unique, circular path helps clear the mind of worries or distractions and prepares the believer's soul to connect with God. This view was common among the believers I interviewed between March and April 2024 in the small suburb of Langenhain, near Hofheim, just a few kilometers from Frankfurt am Main. The space is seen as a refuge and a place for reflection.

The temple, a quiet place for prayer, meditation, and reflection, symbolizes the heart of spiritual life for the local community and beyond. It functions as an expression of humanitarian principles and a spiritual guide that helps everyone learn and understand new ways of worship and religious practice. In a letter dated 18 December 2014, to the Bahá'ís in Iran, the Universal House of Justice explains that the temple, called *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*—dawn of remembrance of God—and the 'East of Praise of God', is a unique concept in the history of religion. It represents the teachings of the new Day of God (Bahá'u'lláh [1873] 1995, p. 179). The House of Justice also states that the House of Worship is a community center to encourage friendly feelings, a place of universal worship open to all people regardless of religious background or affiliation, and a refuge for deeper reflection on spiritual realities and fundamental questions: '[The House of Worship] stands as a universal place of worship open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religious affiliation, background, ethnicity, or gender and a haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the betterment of society. Men and women, children and

youth, are held in its embrace as equals' (Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 2017).

The term Mashriqu'l-Adhkár has multiple meanings that vary depending on the context. It may refer to a gathering of believers during worship, especially at dawn; any building dedicated to worship; the complex of buildings surrounding the main place of worship that Bahá'u'lláh identified as the 'heart' of every Bahá'í community; or the place of worship itself (Momen 2010). Temples, also called Bahá'í Houses of Worship, are dedicated to worshipping God and serving humanity. They function as a gathering place and reference point for believers, especially during important occasions like the Feast of the Nineteenth Day or other holy days. These sites are not only for prayer but also for reflection and meditation, where sermons are not allowed. They symbolize the existence of one God—hence, certain strict rules cannot be ignored—the truth shared among all religions, and the unity of humanity. These locations aim to unite the worship of God with the service of humanity, attracting millions of visitors each year. Currently, regional and continental Bahá'í Temples are located in the USA, Australia, South America, Germany, India, Panama, Samoa, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, Vanuatu, and other places that are under construction.

Bahá'u'lláh's instructions to build Bahá'í Temples 'as perfect as possible in the world of being' have inspired progress in architecture, design, and engineering. Each House of Worship has its own unique architecture influenced by the local environment and culture. Each also includes features that reflect Bahá'í beliefs: a circular shape and nine entrances welcoming people from all directions, a single dome covering all underneath the embrace of one God, and beautiful gardens symbolizing unity in diversity. Inside the dome, a pattern is always reproduced that shows a calligraphic arrangement of the invocation Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá (Figure 1). This Arabic phrase can be translated as 'O Thou the Glory of the Most Glorious!', the symbol of the 'Greatest Name'. Known as 'the Greatest Name', it refers to Bahá'u'lláh and is often displayed in Bahá'í centers and homes.

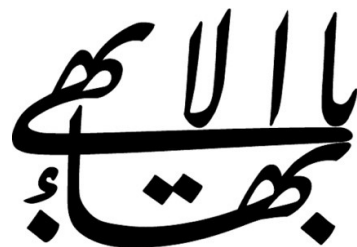


Figure 1. ¹ Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá.

Additionally, the ringstone symbol (Figure 2) can be found engraved on jewelry and may also appear on Bahá'í buildings. While the symbol as a whole is a calligraphic depiction of the word Bahá, its vertical line can be seen as representing the Holy Spirit proceeding from God through His Manifestations to humanity. The twin stars represent the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.



Figure 2. The ringstone symbol.

A simple nine-pointed star, as shown in Figure 3, is usually displayed on each temple door as a symbol of the Bahá'í faith. The number nine represents unity, perfection, and completeness.

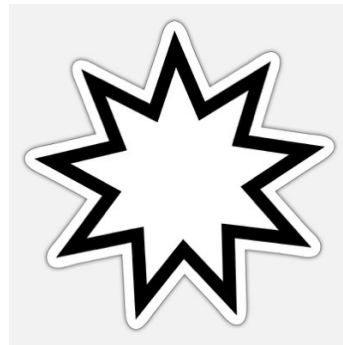


Figure 3. The nine-pointed star.

Temples usually meet three main criteria: they have a nine-sided base, a circular shape (often capped with a dome made of nine segments), and nine entrances encircled by gardens.

During my fieldwork, an Italian witness living near Frankfurt informally told me that the circular design of temples is essential because walking around the circumference leading to the temple entrance—usually only one entrance is open on regular days—helps the believer spiritually prepare to enter the worship space with a mindset ready for reflection, meditation, and prayer. This acts as an invitation for followers of all religions to enter and praise God; it aims to highlight humanity's unity and emphasize the oneness of the nine revealed religions. Of particular interest is the difference in interpretations of what these nine religions represent, presented in chronological order. These include Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í faith, all of which are widely recognized. The other three vary among the Sabaeen religion, Zoroastrianism, the Bábí religion, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Jainism. It is no coincidence that the symbol of the Bahá'í faith features a nine-pointed star, representing the number nine—its significance is central: it is the numerical value of the word Bahá'—God—calculated through the ancient Islamic method of abjad, which assigns numbers to the letters of the Arabic–Persian alphabet. In abjad, each word's value is the sum of the numerical values of its individual letters. The construction and upkeep of temples are funded through voluntary contributions from believers, with management entrusted to the local National Spiritual Assembly.

Currently, most Bahá'í worship activities take place in homes and local community centers. In response to the lively community-building efforts happening in different parts of the world, national and local Bahá'í Houses of Worship are now being built. Sites for future Houses of Worship have been designated in over 130 countries.

Specific prohibitions apply within the temples. No images or effigies of any kind may be displayed; no pulpits or altars may be built; and no musical instruments are allowed, only choral singing. According to Bahá'í teachings, the soul must be drawn to the melody and profound meaning of the revealed words rather than to instrumental sounds. Nevertheless, music is regarded as a vital art form that offers the soul an opportunity to elevate itself. The arrangement of benches and chairs aligns with the orientation toward the Qiblah (Rafati and Sahba 1989). Following the Bahá'í writings, when there is enough economic availability, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár will become the main center and focal point of a group of institutions, which will include a hospital, a canteen for the underprivileged, a hostel for travelers, a school for orphans, a facility for the sick and disabled, a university, and other charitable buildings. Next to each place of worship are the haziratu 'l-quds—

Holiness Enclosures—buildings that lack religious features but contain administrative offices.

As noted, each temple intentionally displays architecture inspired by its surrounding landscape. Throsby stated, ‘intangible cultural capital includes forms of culture such as ideas, practices, beliefs, traditions’ (Throsby 2008). Of particular interest is the idea of places of worship that do not impose a strict external structure but instead tend to absorb the characteristics of the spaces they occupy, blending with them. It is important to highlight the use of local materials, the stylistic replication of recognizable architecture, and the integration with the typical environment.

The inheritance of temples as cultural heritage, passed down to believers, symbolizes ‘intergenerational equity’ and provides individuals with a chance to connect to a place that reflects their identity, fostering a sense of belonging to the community. The preservation of heritage exemplifies what cultural sustainability is all about (Scammon 2021).

4. Temples and Their Harmonious ‘Grafting’ with the ‘Typical Landscape’

As mentioned earlier, the rhetorical necessity presented by the Bahá’í sources—used here to briefly outline some features of various temples around the world—insists that they must ‘graft’ onto an existing foundation, which must be respected. They should then harmonize with or blend into the surrounding environment, based on traits considered ‘typical.’ These statements are certainly not meant to mock such demands, which are, in fact, very relevant today: one only needs to consider the prevailing rhetoric in contemporary architecture, which often emphasizes minimizing environmental impact—whether ecologically, such as reducing pollution, or visually. Most of the information about the origin and architecture of each temple has been drawn from the study by Rafati and Sahba (1989).

It was originally planned that each continent should have a ‘mother temple’. The first was constructed and completed in 1908 in Ashgabat, the capital of present-day Turkmenistan. However, during the Soviet era, the temple was taken over by Russian authorities, and until 1938, the Bahá’í community was only allowed to use it by paying rent to the state. It was later converted into an art gallery—following a common fate of many places of worship in politically anti-religious regimes—and in 1948, an earthquake severely damaged it. Maintenance was almost nonexistent, to the point that demolition became unavoidable in 1963.

After Ashgabat, it was North America’s turn, where the community proved to be stable and strong. Located in Wilmette, just a few miles from Chicago, it is considered the most sacred temple because ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, son and successor of the founder and the only authorized interpreter of the sacred texts, was personally involved in its design and laid the foundation stone in 1912. In 1961, Australia saw the opening of its temple, known as the ‘Angel of Sydney,’ which overlooks the city’s coastline and the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by the forests of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. The building was designed by American architect Charles Mason Remey, a well-known Bahá’í appointed Hand of the Cause and President of the International Bahá’í Council, an administrative body established in 1951 (Smith 1999). It is surrounded by gardens filled with local plants, flowers, and various eucalyptus species.

Three years later, in 1964, Europe also had its mother temple; the 60th anniversary was celebrated in July 2024. It is located in Langenhain, a small suburb a few miles from Frankfurt am Main, surrounded by the Taunus Mountains. Its sleek lines are reminiscent of Bauhaus architecture, and the dome features 540 small diamond-shaped windows through which sunlight filters to illuminate the interior. The acoustics benefit from the dome and the resonance of the sills of the openings. Inside the dome, one can read the Arabic verse Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá, literally ‘O thou Glory of the Most Glorious.’

The opening of the Panama City Temple for Central America took place in 1972 with the presence of Ruhiyyih Khanum, wife of Shoghi Effendi; Ugo Giachery; and Dhikru'llah Khadem, Hands of the Cause representing the Universal House of Justice. Architect Tillotson designed the building on 'la montaña del Dulce Canto,' a hill overlooking the city, using local stone to create walls decorated with motifs reminiscent of the Mayan peoples of the Yucatan Peninsula. The architecture of the Tiappata Temple, located just a few kilometers from Apia, the capital of Samoa, on the island of Upolu, represents the 'mother temple' for the islands of the Pacific Ocean. Here too, the place of worship was built influenced by the area's 'lifestyle' and the nearby 'tropical forests.' A stylistic motif was deliberately chosen for its simplicity, helping it blend with the surroundings. It is the work of Iranian architect Hossein Amanat, who later became a Canadian citizen and designed the Universal House of Justice and other buildings in Haifa. The temple was inaugurated in 1984 by Malietoa Tanumafili II, King of Samoa, the first monarch to convert to the Bahá'í faith.

Since 1986, the Indian Subcontinent has been home to the Lotus Temple in New Delhi, featuring distinctive lines that symbolize the flower of the same name, according to the Bahá'í 'national symbol of India'. The designer was architect Fariborz Sahba, an Iranian who later became a Canadian citizen and a member of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly in Canada, as well as the designer of the terraces of the Bāb mausoleum. Before starting the Indian temple project, he extensively studied other sacred buildings and architecture in the area because he wanted to understand 'the spirit of the inhabitants.' He linked the concepts of purity, simplicity, and freshness inherent to the Bahá'í belief with the lotus flower. The temple consists of twenty-seven marble petals that unfold into three groups: the nine petals at the entrance welcome visitors, the outer petals create a roof for secondary spaces, and the final group of nine petals culminates in the central hall, which can hold up to 2500 people. The white marble structure appears to 'float' on nine small lakes surrounding it (Bolzan Mariotti Posocco 1988, pp. 4–6). Annually, it attracts tens of millions of visitors, surpassing the attendance at both the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal (Pearson 2022).

In 2016, the Santiago de Chile temple opened to the public. The winning project was designed by architect Hariri, who crafted an incredibly light structure where light is the primary element, both reflected and permeated throughout. Made of nine glass and marble panels shaped like wings, the structure outlines the prayer and meditation area, which can hold up to six hundred people. It looks like it rises directly from the ground, floating on large sheets of water. Each wing resembles a leaf, with veins that support the structures above.

Regarding Africa, the first temple was built in Kampala, Uganda, in 1961, near Lake Victoria. Designed by architect Charles Mason Remey, the building stands about 40 m tall, with an upper base diameter of 50 m and a dome measuring 13 m. The foundations are quite deep to handle frequent earthquakes, resulting in unstable ground. It features distinctive roof characteristics and bright colors: a green dome with tiles imported from Italy, sand-colored walls, and stained-glass windows. Over the years, due to a strong presence of believers who helped create solid communities, more temples were built: in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, inaugurated in March 2023, and in Kenya, inaugurated in Matunda Soy in May 2024. For the Matunda Soy project, a design by female architect Neda Samimi was chosen for the first time. She envisioned a structure with simple lines inspired by the traditional hut dwellings of the surrounding area. The interior, however, features a complex pattern of pathways shaped like diamonds, a familiar motif in the Kenyan environment, and can hold up to 250 guests.

The most recent temple opened was in Papua New Guinea, specifically in Port Moresby, also in May 2024. Built on the hills, it overlooks the Coral Sea. A team of architects worked

together to design it, reflecting the Bahá'í principle of unity in diversity by blending local textures found in village houses and urban centers into the structure.

Regarding the 'holy city' of Haifa, there is currently no temple. Still, the Universal House of Justice has identified a site for future construction, which Shoghi Effendi previously acquired on Mount Carmel. This location holds deep symbolism for Bahá'í believers, as it is where Bahá'u'lláh recited the Tablet of Carmel, and it is also near the Bahá'í Arch, or the mausoleum of the Báb. In 1971, an obelisk was placed to mark the designated area, which had been chosen in 1954 but was not built at that time due to security concerns, as evident structures could not be erected because of tensions between Israel and neighboring countries.

In May 2025, the Universal House of Justice called for a new Bahá'í House of Worship to be built in the Philippines, advancing the vision of temples that will radiate spiritual vitality and serve as the focal point of community life. This announcement follows updates from April 2023 and October 2024 that identified six additional sites for Houses of Worship: Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Malawi, Nepal, and Zambia. Collectively, these developments highlight the global Bahá'í community's effort to create spaces that promote deep reflection on humanity's higher purpose and inspire collective action for the common good. Around 120 plots worldwide have been purchased and set aside for future temple construction. Ultimately, each Bahá'í community will have its temple. Like the first one in Aşgabat, each will become a hub of community life and a center for social, scientific, educational, and humanitarian services.

5. The Emptiness of the Temple

The place of worship usually serves as the main site where each belief is visibly expressed through rituals and symbols. In Bahá'í tradition, however, representation is not significant because there are no symbols or objects. The temple is an empty interior space used for gatherings and meditation. Visitors are not distracted by objects inside, allowing them to focus deeply. The emphasis is on the personal connection between the believer and God.

Thus, the interiors of the temples seem sparse and lacking decorative elements. Can the absence of symbols suggest total neutrality? Symbols are objects, images, gestures, or actions that carry meaning. As [Eller \(2021, p. 55\)](#) notes, 'stands for something else'; that is, symbols represent or substitute for something else they refer to. He adds that the relationship between the symbol and its meaning is entirely 'arbitrary and conventional,' and the link between meaning and symbol is not necessary. The historian of religions [Charles J. Long \(1986, p. 2\)](#) states that 'religious symbols, precisely because of their intrinsic power, radiate and deploy meanings; the spread of these meanings creates an arena and field of power relationships'. In more general terms, by contrast, [Jensen \(2014, p. 6\)](#) notes that a religious symbol signifies 'the knowledge by which self/society/action are joined'. Symbols help guide believers' thoughts, inspire them, and influence their strategies of action. [Buck \(1999, p. 148\)](#) claims that symbols 'migrate,' moving from one 'tradition' to another. This suggests a process of 'symbolic transfer.' Historian [John Wansbrough \(1978, p. ix\)](#) discusses the 'migration of symbols,' asserting that it can be productive but also reductive; however, what matters most is assimilation. Wansbrough emphasizes how monotheistic religions tend to show more similarities than differences. As symbols move between religious traditions, they are reinterpreted and 'carried forward'—an idea that appears to mirror the development of Bahá'í revelations but can also be seen as a form of patrimonialization of an asset.

Since there are far fewer temples than Bahá'í believers worldwide, the latter often meet informally in community centers or private homes because, for them, their relationship

with God is more important than the place where they pray. In addition to celebrating various festivals, believers gather to read prayers and passages from the sacred texts and to discuss and consult. Musical interludes may also be organized during these meetings. Most gatherings happen in the privacy of one's home, making it the venue for both administrative and religious activities. It serves as a practical and familiar space where rituals occur, functioning as a space for both religious and intra-community socializing.

6. Culture and Heritage: The Bahá'í Temple as a Sustainable Legacy

Culture and heritage are two terms with broad and complex definitions. To understand their meaning, I will adopt an anthropological perspective. The definitions of culture proposed over the course of anthropological thought vary. Starting with [Tylor \(\[1871\] 1920\)](#), who emphasizes that culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and various capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society, the concept of culture has also been explored by other scholars, such as [Malinowski \(\[1944\] 2013\)](#), who stated that culture is an instrumental apparatus designed to provide humans with adequate responses to the necessities imposed by adaptation to the external environment, expressed in the form of material, social, and symbolic needs. Among the more recent definitions of culture, [Hannerz \(\[1980\] 1992\)](#) suggests that culture is a structure of meaning that travels through communication networks not confined to single territories, as he believes it is essential to deconstruct the link between culture and place, and culture and people, especially in the era of globalization: delocalized cultures in which global elements are received and reformulated locally. This perspective is particularly relevant today because it emphasizes the agency of individuals living in different contexts, who internally grasp these meanings.

Culture forms the basis for defining cultural sustainability, which relates to its connection with heritage. How can the latter be clearly defined? The meaning of 'heritage' has expanded over the past few decades. Originally limited to the arts, archaeology, and architecture, it now includes landscapes, engineering works, urban areas, and especially intangible elements like skills and lifestyles. Since the 1990s, UNESCO has also emphasized assets that are not physical or durable but instead consist of knowledge, performances, and expressive forms passed down orally, connected solely to the memory, practices, and language of living 'bearers' ([Dei 2012](#), p. 139). This expansion shows that heritage and 'culture' both play important roles in sustainability. A complex and often elusive concept ([Throsby 2008](#)), sustainability must cover a wide scope, such as cultural heritage. The category of intangible cultural heritage—recently incorporated into cultural policies—includes oral traditions and expressions (including language), social practices, rituals, festivals, and more ([Dei 2018](#), p. 138; [2012](#)). The definition of intangible heritage, which is a core part of cultural sustainability and relates to religious practices—making it particularly relevant for the Bahá'ís case study—is rooted in traditional concepts like culture, identity, community, and tradition. Passing down cultural heritage involves maintaining its 'traditional' value. By 'tradition,' [Dei \(2012, p. 133\)](#) describes a process of actively shaping a meaningful past that connects with present needs. Cultural sustainability, in some views, involves protecting and transmitting intangible assets and memories; this can be explored through how religious groups do so. Religious heritage, especially in its spiritual and intangible form, functions differently from other heritage elements. Nonetheless, religious groups also rely on material items, including places of worship, artifacts, ritual objects, books, and vestments.

Regarding the sacred space, defining what it is does not seem simple; it is a topic on which historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion debate. The individuals who inhabit it are social actors who interact with both the space and each other,

making the space ‘practised,’ according to [de Certeau’s \(1990\)](#) definition. Émile Durkheim, in the early 20th century, discussed the ‘sacred’ as relating to aspects or objects separate from the profane, accessible only to those who are ‘consecrated’: the sacred also involves interdiction and holy symbols that evoke danger, reverential fear, and respect ([Fabietti 2010](#), p. 261). Since there is no sacrament or clergy of any kind, it becomes even more difficult for the Bahá’í religion to define what the temple represents and whether it can be considered a sacred space.

The sacred space is usually defined by activities, either individual or collective, in a religious sense: ‘it is the location of a ritual activity, it is where people come into contact with the divine because it is where the superhuman power capable of transforming existence resides’ ([Giorda and Hejazi 2013](#)). Building on these observations by Giorda and Hejazi, it can be said that the Bahá’í Temple undoubtedly functions as a welcoming space for believers, providing them with a place for meditation and prayer. It is not meant for performing religious rites or celebrations.

According to the Bahá’í faith, people can worship God directly in spirit and truth without needing an intermediary (the priestly class) or related material supports (the sacraments). It is the spirit, intentions, and inner conditions that give value to the acts and rules that must be followed. In this ‘universal’ faith, habits and traditions that can become ‘mechanical’ and repetitive have been eliminated; actions that distract the believer from the spirituality essential for a righteous life are avoided, as they trap individuals in movements, gestures, or rituals that are seen as unhelpful for this purpose.

Could all of this be considered a tradition? Could it be seen as a vital part of cultural inheritance to pass down to future generations? Culture is selective, meaning the patterns handed down may be fully adopted, partially adopted, or not at all. Some cultural traits may be discarded or rejected; the generations that inherit these patterns gradually readjust them based on their experiences and the needs of a changing world. While we can talk about ‘material culture,’ which includes works, artifacts, and objects—thus material heritage—culture also encompasses intangible elements like knowledge and ‘traditions.’ Additionally, every material object results from a series of cultural experiences related to its creation and use, making it a ‘spiritual’ product as well.

The Bahá’í Temple is a sustainable legacy because, even as each generation adopts and adapts patterns from those before them, it remains a steadfast and welcoming space for all religious beliefs. It is symbolically filled with spiritual and meditative significance that preserves its unique character.

7. Conclusions

Houses of Worship in different parts of the world are emerging due to the rapid growth of Bahá’í communities. In these communities, a strong devotional spirit and prayer gatherings foster social harmony and increase the ability to contribute to humanity’s well-being, creating a lively connection between worship and service to society. As this cycle of worship and service becomes part of community life, a deep transformation takes place: individuals who once passed each other as strangers start to walk together on a shared spiritual path, possibly sharing the same sacred space while practicing different religions or feeling separated from the divine.

Through collective prayer and reflection, visitors to the temple are brought together, forming genuine friendships that go beyond long-standing social barriers. What starts as a simple prayer gathering develops into a space where individuals connect in their shared search for meaning and purpose, making the community’s hopes and challenges a collective concern. Over time, as this ability to serve grows, a new stage is reached with the emergence of a House of Worship. These sacred buildings then become focal points

for increased activity that promotes social, humanitarian, and educational development, boosting the well-being of nearby populations.

This contribution aims to present the initial findings of an ongoing project that will be further explored shortly by connecting the Bahá'í Temple to the study of shared places of worship. What emerges from the preceding paragraphs emphasizes the importance of symbols, whether present or absent, within the Bahá'í worship space. At the same time, although the temple does not seem necessary for daily prayer practices, it holds significant potential for promoting social connection and the spirit of unity among believers. Notably, various communities of believers intend to build places that reflect the 'typical' characteristics of their respective locations. These aspects have led me to view the materiality of Bahá'í Temples as an example of cultural sustainability, a concept that encompasses multiple meanings.

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Note

¹ The images in this article were freely downloaded from www.google.com (accessed on 25 May 2025).

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