

Article

The Qiblih in Bahá'í Thought and Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

The adherents of various religions have during times of prayer and worship oriented themselves toward a fixed, sacred direction or location. Since ancient times, followers of Judaism have turned in prayer to Jerusalem. Traditionally, Zoroastrians have prayed facing a source of light—typically the sun or a fire—representing divine truth and presence. By the second and third centuries of the common era, many Christian communities prayed facing the east when offering the Lord's prayer and other supplications. Initially, Muḥammad and his followers prayed toward Jerusalem, called the "Qiblih" (a technical word first used in the Qur'án for the direction of *ṣalāt*, the Islamic obligatory prayer), but near the midpoint of Muḥammad's ministry, the Qiblih was changed to the Kaabah in Mecca. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Báb, founder of the Bábí religion, redefined the Qiblih as "Him Whom God shall make manifest," a figure whose imminent appearance the Báb anticipated. Years later, Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, confirmed the Báb's designation of the Qiblih and claimed to be the figure promised by the Báb—and, thus, the Qiblih. Since Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892, Bahá'ís have regarded the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh near 'Akká as their Qiblih. This paper considers three issues related to the concept of the Qiblih. First, it briefly surveys the concept in Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, and other traditions. Second, it examines the significance and implications of the Qiblih in Bahá'í texts and their antecedents in Bábí texts. In this regard, it argues that in Bahá'í theology, the Qiblih symbolizes the role, station, and authority of the Manifestation of God, the figure who, in Bahá'í thought, serves as the intermediary between God and humanity from age to age. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh's designation of a new Qiblih signaled the independence of the Bahá'í religion. Third, this study explores how from a Bahá'í perspective, Quranic verses concerning the Qiblih may be viewed. These include how Muḥammad's alteration of the Qiblih to the Kaabah reflected his authority as the Manifestation of God to change a prior law. Further, attention is given to Qur'án 2:143 ("And thus We have made you a middle community..."), which occurs in the midst of the only verses in the Qur'án that decree a change in the Qiblih. Whereas Quranic commentators and scholars of Islam, influenced by the doctrine of Islam's finality, interpreted the word "middle" (*vasaṭ*) in this verse as meaning just, moderate, or exemplary, Bahá'u'lláh affirmed the word's more basic meaning and regarded the Muslim community as a religious community between other communities that preceded it and that will come after it, thus anticipating the emergence of a new religious community, which could potentially have its own Qiblih.

Keywords: Bahá'u'lláh; Bahá'í; Qiblih; prayer; worship; sacred geography



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1. Introduction

The practice of orienting oneself toward a fixed direction during prayer is a feature common to many of the world's religions. From Jerusalem in Judaism to the east in Christianity, from a source of light in Zoroastrianism to the Kaabah in Islam, sacred direction has served as an expression of spiritual orientation, religious independence, and communal identity. In the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, this concept underwent a dramatic reinterpretation. The Báb abrogated the Islamic Qiblah and designated "Him Whom God shall make manifest," a promised figure, as the new Qiblah—a designation that Bahá'u'lláh later confirmed in identifying himself as fulfilling that expectation. Following Bahá'u'lláh's passing, the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh near 'Akká became for Bahá'ís the point toward which they turned, and still turn, in obligatory prayer. This paper examines the concept of the Qiblah in comparative religious perspective and analyzes its theological and symbolic significance in Bahá'í thought. It argues that in the Bahá'í Faith, the Qiblah is not merely a ritual orientation but a symbol of core theological principles: the recognition of, and orientation toward, the Manifestation of God and his authority; the continuity and progression of the Manifestations' divine revelations; and the independent identity of the Bahá'í religion. The paper also explores how Bahá'u'lláh's theological teachings shed new light on Quranic verses related to the Qiblah, particularly, his novel reading of Qur'án 2:143, which contrasts with the Islamic doctrine of finality of revelation.

2. Sacred Direction in Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Some Other Religious Traditions

In Judaism, the tradition of facing Jerusalem during prayer has ancient roots and remains a firmly established practice. The Hebrew Bible recounts how King Solomon, at the dedication of the Temple, implored God to hear the prayers of His people if they directed their hearts in prayer "toward the city which Thou hast chosen, and toward the house that I have built for Thy name" (1 Kings 8:44, 2 Chronicles 6:34). Further, according to the Hebrew Bible, after the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE, the prophet Daniel knelt three times daily and prayed "toward Jerusalem" (Daniel 6:10). Even after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish authorities maintained Jerusalem as the sacred direction for prayer, as a memorial and a sign of hope, codifying it in the Mishnah and Talmud and incorporating it into Jewish law. The rule established in the Mishnah and elucidated in the Talmud stated that "if one prays in the Diaspora, he shall direct himself toward Erez Israel; in Erez Israel, toward Jerusalem; in Jerusalem, toward the Temple; and in the Temple, toward the Holy of Holies" ([Encyclopaedia Judaica Editorial Staff 2007](#), p. 392). On the one hand, turning toward Jerusalem served to remind Jews of the centrality of the Temple to Jewish faith and instill hope in the promise of Israel's restoration. On the other, Jerusalem and, more specifically, the Holy of Holies, was believed to be the site of the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) ([Unterman 2007](#), pp. 440–41). Even after the Temple's destruction, facing Jerusalem in prayer signified an orientation toward God and an appeal for His mercy ([Habermann 2007](#), pp. 213–15). Over time, Jewish communities developed aids to maintain this focus: synagogue architecture was oriented toward Jerusalem whenever possible, and decorative plaques were hung on the walls of homes and places of worship to indicate the proper direction of prayer ([Encyclopaedia Judaica Editorial Staff 2007](#), pp. 392–93).

In Zoroastrianism, the idea of a sacred direction is closely tied to revering light. Zoroastrians follow the sun's movement, rather than fixating on one locale. Traditionally, Zoroastrians face the rising sun (east) at dawn, the noonday sun (south) at midday, and the setting sun (west) in the late afternoon. The changing prayer direction sanctifies each phase of daylight while continually affirming the worship of Ahura Mazda (God) as

the Lord of Light. After sunset, devotees may pray in any direction except north, often orienting toward another source of light, such as a fire or lamp, if available. Thus, during prayer, a Zoroastrian is always facing toward the sun or a symbol of light. The underlying theology is rooted in Zoroastrianism's emphasis on light as a manifestation of Ahura Mazda and its role in overcoming darkness as a manifestation of evil. Whether praying individually or in a Fire Temple collectively, Zoroastrians still observe these directional rules (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 2015).

Christianity, emerging from a Jewish milieu, also embraced a concept of sacred direction, though it developed differently over time. While the New Testament does not contain verses mandating that worshippers pray toward Jerusalem, many early Christians met and worshipped at the Second Temple (up to 70 CE) (Acts 2:46, 3:1) and likely faced it or Jerusalem during prayer. As the Christian movement spread and differentiated itself from Judaism, many Christian communities adopted the practice of facing the east (Latin *ad orientem*) when offering the Lord's Prayer and other supplications. For example, Syriac Christians in the second century placed a cross on the eastern wall of their homes so as to face God when they prayed. Early Church Fathers like Basil the Great (d. 379) stated that one of the unwritten apostolic traditions was to pray facing the east. This orientation was rich in symbolism. Christian writers explained that Eden, the birthplace of humanity, lay in the east (Genesis 2:8) and pointed to biblical verses anticipating the coming of "the glory of the God of Israel" and "the Son of Man" from the east (Ezekiel 43:2; Matthew 24:27). Praying eastward thus reflected a turning toward the source of light (both literal and spiritual), a reminder of Christ's resurrection as the "Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4:22), and an expression of hope in his second coming from the east (Lang 2009).

As to other religious traditions, while Hinduism and Buddhism do not center prayer on a single place or object in the way some of the above-mentioned religions do, directional practices are present in both. Some Hindu daily rituals, such as dawn prayers, are performed facing east to greet the sun. Many Hindu temples are constructed so that the first rays after sunrise fall upon the deity image (Rodrigues 2017). And some Buddhist traditions assert that the Buddha was facing the direction of sunrise at the moment of enlightenment. As a result, many monasteries and meditation halls place Buddha statues or altars in a place where practitioners may face the same direction as the Buddha (Penner 2009). Furthermore, central to many indigenous and tribal religions is the concept of an axis mundi or sacred center. In the concept, the world has a pivot or cosmic center, often represented by a great mountain, a tall tree or pole, a sacred fire, or a specially erected altar (Sullivan 2005, pp. 712–13).

3. The Qiblah in Islam

In Islam, the concept of a sacred direction is paramount to worship. Muslims offer their daily obligatory prayer (*aṣ-ṣalāh*) toward the Kaabah in Mecca, which the Qur'an identifies by the technical word "Qiblah" (Qiblah in Arabic pronunciation; Qiblah in Bahá'í transliteration)—derived from a root indicating, among other things, "to face," and denoting the place and direction to which the worshipper should turn in prayer. The establishment of the Kaabah as the Qiblah was a formative event in Islamic history. Initially, Muḥammad and his community prayed facing north toward Jerusalem, in line with Jewish practice. This choice fostered a bond with Medina's Jewish tribes and recent converts. It also acknowledged Jerusalem's holiness, with Islamic tradition holding that all prophets before Muḥammad prayed facing Jerusalem, and the Qur'an identifying Jerusalem by allusion as the site of Muḥammad's night journey (*isrá'*) (Qur'an 17:1 ("Lauded and glorified is He Who carried His servant at night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque,

the area around which We have blessed, in order that We show him some of Our signs...” [emphasis added]), from which he ascended into the heavens and came before God (*mi’rāj*).

Some months after Muḥammad’s 622 CE migration from Mecca to Medina, he, according to the Qur’án, received a revelation commanding him to turn away from Jerusalem and toward the Kaabah in Mecca when leading the faithful in prayer (Qur’án 2:144; Nasr et al. 2015, p. 63). The shift appears to have been partly a response to the Medinan Jewish tribes’ rejection of Muḥammad as a new prophet in the mold of Moses. The Qur’án frames the Qiblih’s shift from Jerusalem to Mecca as a test of faith and a sign of the burgeoning independent religion: “We decreed your former Qiblah only so that We might distinguish those who follow the Messenger [Muḥammad] from those who turn on their heels” (Qur’án 2:143).

Most of Muḥammad’s Jewish contemporaries and even some of his followers were confused and angered by the change. The shift ultimately united the nascent Muslim community around a distinct identity and center of its own. The orientation to a new Qiblih “asserted [Islam’s] independence as the one true religion from its Jewish and Christian antecedents” (Kimber 2004, p. 327). It “visibly symbolize[d] the shift from a religion confirming the scriptures of the ‘People of the Book’ (i.e., Jews and Christians) to an autonomous and newly directed religion” (Böwering 2004, p. 226). And it would inscribe a “sense of belonging to a single umma [religious community], an experience of collective identity that traversed political allegiances and schools of thought, unifying people of diverse lands, languages, and cultures” (Gordon 2022, pp. 410, 412). Historically, the Qiblih’s influence has extended beyond prayer into Islamic architecture and science. From the earliest days, mosques were constructed with a niche in the wall (known as the *miḥrāb*) to indicate the direction of the Kaabah, so that worshipers could easily align themselves. Determining the precise direction from far-flung locations became an important scholarly pursuit. Medieval Muslim astronomers and geographers developed elaborate methods to calculate the direction of the Qiblih. As early as the eighth century CE, treatises were written on finding the Qiblih via spherical trigonometry, and by the fourteenth century, tables were compiled listing the Qiblih angle for hundreds of cities (King 1986, pp. 83–88; Nasr et al. 2015, pp. 63–66).¹

4. The Qiblih in the Writings of the Báb

The Báb introduced a new Qiblih. In his Arabic Bayán, he wrote: “The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest” (The Báb n.d.a., #8:7, quoted in Bahá’u’lláh 2021, para. 137). This statement transmuted the Qiblih from a fixed location in Islam (the Kaabah) to a person (He Whom God will make manifest), a figure whom the Báb declared occupied a station greater than his own and whose imminent appearance the Báb promised. By adding that the Qiblih “moveth” with Him Whom God shall make manifest, the Báb signaled not only that Him Whom God shall make manifest was alive at the time of the Báb but that during his lifetime, wherever he resided, his location would be the Qiblih. In other words, as long as Him Whom God shall make manifest was alive, the position of the Qiblih was to remain unsettled. When Him Whom God shall make manifest came “to rest,” that is, on his passing, the Qiblih would be fixed at a spot associated with him. This statement of the Báb is reminiscent of his prescription that the Point of the Bayán’s (the Báb’s) residence is at all times the jewel of all lands until he is laid to rest, when that description would apply to his resting-place (The Báb n.d.b., #2:5). Elsewhere, the Báb states that whatever land or abode the Manifestation of God relates to himself becomes the center of adoration for the peoples of the earth and the angels of heaven (The Báb n.d.b., #4:16).

The new Qiblih of the Báb had profound implications. For his followers, it abrogated the Islamic Qiblih and suggested the imminent appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest. And it implied that the Manifestation of God (rather than an edifice or an object) is the locus of God's presence on earth and, thus, the proper direction of prayer. Since the Báb's religion was opposed by the Muslim clergy in Persia, and since the Báb did not provide the text of a new obligatory prayer, early Bábís likely offered the Islamic *ṣalāt* facing Mecca out of habit or prudence. After the Báb's execution in 1850, the Qiblih of his followers, in effect, became the ardent expectation of the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest.

5. The Qiblih in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings Before the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

In the years following the declaration of Bahá'u'lláh's mission in 1863, he gradually revealed to the Báb's followers his claim to be Him Whom God shall make manifest, through an interplay of concealment and disclosure—initially to some of his companions and eventually to the generality of the Báb's followers (Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025, pp. 20–21). In numerous letters written during the latter years of his exile in Edirne and the early years of his imprisonment in 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh implicitly or explicitly identified himself as the Qiblih, thereby disclosing his station as Him Whom God shall make manifest and anticipating the law of obligatory prayer that would later be laid down in his Kitáb-i-Aqdas (see below).² In his *Súriy-i-Haykal* (*Súrih of the Temple*), initially written circa 1866, Bahá'u'lláh proclaims about himself: "By the righteousness of God! He Who is the Best-Beloved of the worlds—He Who hath ever been the Desire of every perceiving heart, the Object of the adoration (*qiblih*) of all that are in heaven and on earth, and the Cynosure of the former and the latter generations—is now come!" (Bahá'u'lláh 2002, #1.100). Writing in this period about a follower who had formerly visited the ancient house (*bayta'l-'atíq*), a reference to the Kaabah (see Qur'án 22:29, 33), Bahá'u'lláh asserts that he is the Qiblih of all homes or places of worship (*qiblatu'l-buyút*) and directs that follower to turn his heart to the Most Great House (*bayti'l-a'ẓam*), a further reference to Bahá'u'lláh or his location (Bahá'u'lláh n.d., Or.15725, 497).³

6. The Qiblih in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh enjoins followers to observe an obligatory prayer. He then prescribes the direction the worshipper should face when reciting the prayer:

When ye desire to perform this prayer, turn ye towards the Court of My Most Holy Presence, this Hallowed Spot that God hath made the Center round which circle the Concourse on high, and which He hath decreed to be the Point of Adoration (*muqbal*) for the denizens of the Cities of Eternity, and the Source of Command unto all that are in heaven and on earth; and when the Sun of Truth and Utterance shall set, turn your faces towards the Spot that We have ordained for you. (Bahá'u'lláh 2021, para. 6)

In this passage, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas initially establishes the location of Bahá'u'lláh as the Qiblih: "turn ye towards the Court of My Most Holy Presence." That this instruction refers to the Qiblih is implied by the subsequent wording—that God has made Bahá'u'lláh's "Court" "the Point of Adoration (*muqbal*) for the denizens of the Cities of Eternity." The original Arabic term *muqbal* shares the same root, Q-B-L, as the term Qiblih. Additionally, the original Arabic text of this passage partly echoes the Quranic verse that decrees the change of the Qiblih from Jerusalem to Mecca. The phrase "turn ye towards the Court of My Most Holy Presence," addressed to followers of Bahá'u'lláh, translates *vallú vujúhakum shatríya'l-aqdas*, meaning, literally, "turn your faces towards me, the most holy." In Qur'án 2:144, the comparable phrases "turn thy face toward the Sacred Mosque," addressed to

Muḥammad, and “turn your faces towards it,” addressed to Muḥammad’s followers, translate *valli vajhaka shaṭra’l-masjidi’l-ḥarām* and *vallū vujúhakum shaṭrahu*, respectively.⁴

As the above-quoted verses of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas indicate, in addition to identifying himself with the Qiblih, Bahá’u’lláh alludes to the Qiblih after his passing: “when the Sun of Truth and Utterance shall set, turn your faces towards the Spot that We have ordained for you.” A subsequent verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas similarly analogizes to the setting of the sun in referring to Bahá’u’lláh’s passing: “Should differences arise amongst you over any matter, refer it to God while the Sun still shineth above the horizon of this Heaven and, when it hath set, refer ye to whatsoever hath been sent down by Him” (Bahá’u’lláh 2021, para. 53). The “Spot that We have ordained” to serve as the Qiblih is not explicit from the text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. When one of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers asked about this passage of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, he, identifying “the Spot that We have ordained for you” as the Qiblih, stated that its location had not yet been appointed, but that it would be revealed at a future date (Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání 1986, vol. 4, p. 97). As discussed below, after his passing, Bahá’u’lláh’s resting-place would come to be recognized as that “Spot,” and, thus, the Qiblih.

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh also addresses the Báb’s followers and quotes the Báb’s earlier-discussed words from the Arabic Bayán: “The Qiblih is indeed He Whom God will make manifest; whenever He moveth, it moveth, until He shall come to rest.” Then, with a rhetorical question, Bahá’u’lláh challenges those followers of the Báb who had not yet accepted his claim to be the promised figure of Him Whom God will make manifest: “If ye reject Him at the bidding of your idle fancies, where then is the Qiblih to which ye will turn, O assemblage of the heedless?” (Bahá’u’lláh 2021, para. 137). In other words, if the Báb’s followers continued to refuse to accept Bahá’u’lláh’s claim to be Him Whom God will make manifest, they were rejecting the Báb’s words defining the Qiblih.

7. Bahá’u’lláh’s Clarifications Regarding the Qiblih

Writings of Bahá’u’lláh composed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas continued to identify him as the Qiblih. For example, the exordium to his Lawḥ-i-Aqdas (the Most Holy Tablet, sometimes also called the Tablet to the Christians) proclaims that Bahá’u’lláh is the Qiblih of the world: “This is the Most Holy Tablet sent down from the holy kingdom unto the one who hath set his face towards the Object of the adoration (*qiblih*) of the world, He Who hath come from the heaven of eternity, invested with transcendent glory” (Bahá’u’lláh 1988b, #2).⁵

Bahá’u’lláh’s writings after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas also clarify the law of the Qiblih. In the instructions to the medium Obligatory Prayer, which Bahá’u’lláh wrote some years after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, he calls on the worshipper to face “the Qiblih” (Bahá’u’lláh 2014, #182). Likewise, in the long Obligatory Prayer, Bahá’u’lláh instructs: “Whoso wisheth to recite this prayer, let him stand up and turn unto God” (Bahá’u’lláh 2014, #183). When asked about the instruction in the long Obligatory Prayer to “turn unto God,” Bahá’u’lláh responds that it refers to the Qiblih (Bahá’u’lláh 2021, “Questions and Answers,” #67).

Bahá’u’lláh was also queried whether believers were required to face the Qiblih when offering prayers and devotions besides their obligatory prayers. He responds: “Facing in the direction of the Qiblih is a fixed requirement for the recitation of obligatory prayer, but for other prayers and devotions one may follow what the merciful Lord hath revealed in the Qur’án: ‘Whichever way ye turn, there is the face of God’” (Bahá’u’lláh 2021, “Questions and Answers,” #14 [quoting Qur’án 2:115]). He provides a similar response, again quoting Qur’án 2:115, when asked whether turning to the Qiblih was required when reciting the Prayer for the Dead (Bahá’u’lláh 2021, “Questions and Answers,” #85). Thus, under Bahá’í law, facing the Qiblih is required only for recital of the Bahá’í obligatory prayers.

The present authors are not aware of any Bahá'í texts that explain why Bahá'u'lláh required followers to face the Qiblih for the obligatory prayer but not for other prayers. Three hypotheses are suggested. First, Bahá'u'lláh may have wished to emphasize that obligatory prayer represents a distinctive category of prayers. Second, by limiting to the obligatory prayer the requirement for Bahá'ís to turn to the Qiblih, Bahá'u'lláh may have sought to prevent the act from becoming commonplace for the worshipper, thereby, diminishing its significance. Third, he may have wanted to avoid among his followers the emergence of excessive ritualistic practices, such as congregational prayer. Bahá'u'lláh has reduced ritual to a minimum in the Bahá'í religion (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in [Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 2019](#), #65). This is reflected in how the Kitáb-i-Aqdas limits congregational prayer—a mandatory prayer recited according to a prescribed ritual—to observance of the Prayer for the Dead. As noted above, even for that prayer, turning toward the Qiblih is not required. If Bahá'u'lláh had required that Bahá'ís turn toward the Qiblih for every prayer, then whenever such prayers were recited in a group, they would have taken on a ritualistic and, possibly, congregational, character.

8. Interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, whom Bahá'ís regard as authorized interpreters of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, further explain the concept of the Qiblih. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that one of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, now lost, specified that Bahá'u'lláh's shrine was the Qiblih. Echoing a concept appearing in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that the “luminous shrine” (*marqad-i-munavvar*) of Bahá'u'lláh is “the place around which circumambulate the Concourse on High” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in [Ishráq-Khávárí 122–9 B.E. 1965–1973](#), 2:82; partially translated in [Bahá'u'lláh 2021](#), Notes, #8; see [Bahá'u'lláh 2021](#), para. 6).⁶ Although some of Shoghi Effendi's communications generally refer to 'Akká as the “Qiblih of the Bahá'í world,” ([Shoghi Effendi 1965](#), p. 96; [1979](#), pp. 110, 348) others make clear that he intended the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, which is located in 'Akká ([Shoghi Effendi 1971](#), p. 32; [1979](#), p. 277).

'Abdu'l-Bahá also confirms that while praising and remembering God (*adh-dhikr*) is sanctified above any direction, the obligatory prayer has a Qiblih that is “fixed, specified, holy and blessed” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in [Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 2000](#), no. 2:XXI) ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in [Iranian National Bahá'í Archives \(INBA\) n.d.](#), vol. 85, p. 331). In 1903, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked by Thornton Chase (d. 1912), a prominent early American Bahá'í, where to turn in prayer. He responded: “There is an appointed center toward which one must direct himself in prayer, but at present this center is not unfolded because of wisdom (*hikmat*). In its time this shall be announced. At present, in those regions, you should direct yourself, as formerly, to the east. The appointed and certain center will be announced in its time” ('[Abdu'l-Bahá 1915](#), p. 337) (Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/546621571)). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reticence to explicitly identify the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh may have been due to the unsettled situation in the Holy Land at the time ([Shoghi Effendi 1979](#), p. 265 *et seq.*). When asked on another occasion how to determine the Qiblih's direction, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised the use of a map or an atlas ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in [Nakhjavání 1987](#)). In a 9 April 1945 letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi tasked the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran with consulting experts to determine the direction of the Qiblih and to communicate its decision to all the Bahá'ís in the country ([Shoghi Effendi 105 B.E. 1948–1949](#), p. 480).

While the texts of the medium and long Obligatory Prayers indicate the need to turn in the direction of the Qiblih, the short Obligatory Prayer does not explicitly specify this. However, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas contains the general instruction that the worshipper turn to the Qiblih when saying the obligatory prayer, so that guidance would apply to the short

Obligatory Prayer. Moreover, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi construes the requirement to turn to the Qiblih to also apply to the short Obligatory Prayer: “He [Shoghi Effendi] would advise you to only use the short midday Obligatory Prayer. This has no genuflections and only requires that when saying it the believer turn his face towards ‘Akka where Bahá’u’lláh is buried” (On behalf of [Shoghi Effendi 1991a](#), p. 242).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá interpreted Bahá’u’lláh’s burial laws to require that the dead be buried toward the Qiblih ([‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2005](#), no. 407; on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in [Hornby 2001](#), no. 646). As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not consider it timely to apply the practice—inasmuch it would cause alarm, likely referring to the opposition it would arouse toward Bahá’ís—he delayed its implementation until such time when there would be no impediment ([‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2005](#), no. 407; cf. [Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025](#), pp. 205–6). During his lifetime, Shoghi Effendi decided that in the Bahá’í cemetery located in the Holy Land, the bodies of deceased Bahá’ís should henceforward be buried facing the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh ([Shoghi Effendi 1979](#), p. 369).

9. Significance of the Qiblih in the Bahá’í Faith

Bahá’u’lláh’s claim to be the Qiblih—during his lifetime and after his passing, in the form of his shrine—constitutes a theological statement about the role, station, and authority of the Manifestation of God. He taught that human beings can acquire the knowledge of God, who is directly unknowable and inaccessible, only by acquiring the knowledge of the Manifestation of God, the historical figure—such as Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh—who serves from age to age as “the representative and mouthpiece of God” ([Bahá’u’lláh 2005](#), #28.2; see [Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025](#), pp. 101–4). The purpose of the Manifestations in every period of history is to “educate the souls” of people ([Bahá’u’lláh 2003](#), para. 103). This educational process is continuous, as the Manifestations “everlastingly succeed each other” ([Bahá’u’lláh 2005](#), #30); thus, there is no termination to the process of divine revelation. As the Manifestation of God is the locus of truth and knowledge, he provides the laws and teachings that “best meet the requirements of the age” in which he appears ([Bahá’u’lláh 2005](#), #34.5). Therefore, the Manifestation “doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth” ([Bahá’u’lláh 1988a](#), p. 67). In the Qur’án, this authority is attributed to God (Qur’án 3:40, 14:27, 22:18); Bahá’u’lláh defines it as an essential attribute of the Manifestation of God. Bahá’u’lláh affirms that the Manifestation of God has the authority to abrogate or change any previous law, teaching, or injunction, to inaugurate new ones in its stead, and to obligate those who have recognized his authority to adhere fully to his laws and teachings ([Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025](#), pp. 115–20 [Chapter 3. E. The Most Great Infallibility]).

Because the person of the Manifestation is the path to God and source of spiritual education, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas declares that “the first duty prescribed by God” for each person is “the recognition” of the Manifestation of God. Joined with such recognition is the inseparable duty to “observe” the Manifestation’s “every ordinance” ([Bahá’u’lláh 2021](#), para. 1). Referring to the recognition of the Manifestations of God, Bahá’u’lláh declares: “Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God.... Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God” ([Bahá’u’lláh 2005](#), #21.1). As Bahá’u’lláh claims to be God’s Manifestation in this age, he states in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, “Whoso hath known Me hath known the Goal of all desire, and whoso hath turned unto Me hath turned unto the Object of all adoration” ([Bahá’u’lláh 2021](#), para. 138). Given this theological foundation of their religion, the Bahá’ís’ physical act of daily turning toward Bahá’u’lláh during his lifetime and toward the Shrine of Bahá’u’lláh since his passing is for them a symbol and reminder of the centrality of the Manifestation of God for fulfilling life’s spiritual purpose.

Beyond the general sense of turning to the Qiblih as a token of recognizing and following the Manifestation of God, the worshipper's orientation toward the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh has a specific significance in the context of prayer. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies that when saying the obligatory prayer, "one must turn towards the Holy Reality of Bahá'u'lláh" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the [Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 2000](#), no. 2:XX). Further, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi elucidates the significance of the worshipper turning toward the Qiblih during the obligatory prayer: "This is a physical symbol of an inner reality, 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; and we turn our faces, during this short prayer, to where His dust lies on this earth as a symbol of the inner act" (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in [Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 2019](#), no. 65; see [Afnan 2022](#), p. 481; [Day 2023](#), p. 23). 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi encourage Bahá'ís to pray to Bahá'u'lláh, as the Manifestation of God continues to be the intermediary between humanity and God even after the Manifestation's passing (See sources cited in [Ghaemmaghani and Vafai 2025](#), p. 217).

In addition to the importance of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh as the Qiblih for the Bahá'í worshipper, it also has a significance for the Bahá'í religion as a whole: a claim to independence from prior religious traditions. As noted previously, the Quranic decree altering the Qiblih from Jerusalem to the Kaabah in Mecca affirmed Islam as a faith distinct from Judaism and Christianity. Similarly, that Bahá'u'lláh ordains a new Qiblih reflects the Bahá'í religion's assertion of independence from Islam and other faiths ([Walbridge 1996](#), p. 47).

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that he is the Qiblih may amplify his claim that he is the promised one foretold in prior religions. For example, his reference to himself as the "Living Temple," and his averment at the conclusion of his aforementioned Súriy-i-Haykal that he "built the Temple" by revealing this work and instructing that it be written in the form of a pentacle (symbolizing the human temple) associate him with certain prophecies of the Hebrew Bible ([Bahá'u'lláh 2002](#), #1.17, p. 276 ["Thus have We built the Temple with the hands of power and might, could ye but know it. This is the Temple promised unto you in the Book. Draw ye nigh unto it. This is that which profiteth you, could ye but comprehend it. Be fair, O peoples of the earth! Which is preferable, this, or a temple which is built of clay? Set your faces towards it."]); see [Ghaemmaghani and Vafai 2025](#), p. 393). Similarly, the many self-references to light, the sun, and fire in his writings may reflect his claim to be the promised figure of Zoroastrianism (e.g., [Bahá'u'lláh 2006](#), #1.12, 1.14, 5.2 ["This, verily, is that Light which hath been foretold in the heavenly scriptures I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way.... That primal Fire hath in this Day appeared with a new radiance and with immeasurable heat."]). Indeed, his title "Bahá" means (in addition to beauty, majesty, and goodness) splendor, brilliance, and glory—all of which connote light and luminosity.

10. Interpretation, from a Bahá'í Perspective, of Quranic Verses Related to the Qiblih

The Bahá'í theological teachings on the station of the Manifestation of God provide a lens for understanding Quranic verses related to the Qiblih (see Qur'án 2:141–145). In his primary doctrinal work, the Kitáb-i-Íqán (the Book of Certitude), written circa 1861/2, Bahá'u'lláh states that none of the Messengers of God in the Abrahamic line between Moses and Muḥammad "ever altered the law of the Qiblih." He recounts how Muḥammad initially turned toward Jerusalem in prayer. After Muḥammad's migration to Medina, Jewish tribes in the city disputed with him and refused to accept his prophetic claims.

Muḥammad then received revelation commanding him to face away from Jerusalem and toward the Kaabah in Mecca (Bahá'u'lláh 2003, para. 54–56; cf. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives (INBA) n.d., vol. 44, p. 59). From the perspective of the Bahá'í writings, Muḥammad—the Manifestation of God in his time—was invested with the authority to alter the Qiblih because the Manifestation “doeth what He willeth, and ordaineth what He pleaseth” (Bahá'u'lláh 1988a, p. 67). Indeed, the Qur'án refers to Muḥammad turning to a Qiblih “well-pleasing” to him and implies that it was because the new Qiblih was well-pleasing to him that all of his followers were to likewise turn to the new Qiblih (Qur'án 2:144; cf. Qur'án 3:31, 4:80, 33:21).

Bahá'u'lláh's theological teachings concerning the Manifestations of God, that they succeed one another, also bears on the reading of another Quranic verse related to the Qiblih. In the Súriy-i-Ṣabr (the Súrih of Patience)—which Bahá'u'lláh composed in 1863 during his twelve-day stay in Baghdad's Najíbíyyih Garden (designated the Garden of Ridván)—he presents, in countering the Islamic dogma of the finality of revelation, a novel interpretation of the first part of Qur'án 2:143: “And thus We have made you a middle community (*ummah wasaṭa*)....” As the 143rd verse of a Súrih comprising 286 verses, Qur'án 2:143 not only mentions the word “middle,” it is also the midmost verse of the Súrih. It occurs in a series of apologetic verses directed to the Jewish tribes and the few individual Christians who lived in or around Medina and who had rejected Muḥammad after his migration to the city. In this same set of verses, the Qur'án decrees the change of the Qiblih from Jerusalem to Mecca. It is thus instructive to consider Qur'án 2:143 in the context of what appears directly before and after it:

[Qur'án 2:141] That was a people that passed away. They will reap the fruit of what they did, and you will reap the fruit of what you do, and you will not be questioned about that which they used to do.

[Qur'án 2:142] The feeble-minded among the people will say, “What has turned them [Muḥammad and his followers] away from the Qiblih they had been following?” Say, “To God belong the East and the West. He guides whomsoever He will unto a straight path.”

[Qur'án 2:143] *And thus We have made you a middle community* [O followers in Muḥammad], that you may be witnesses for humankind and that the Messenger may be a witness for you. And We only appointed the Qiblih that thou [O Muḥammad] hadst been following to distinguish those who follow the Messenger [Muḥammad] from those who turn back on their heels, and it was indeed a difficult [test], save for those whom God guided....

[Qur'án 2:144] We have seen the turning of thy face [O Muḥammad] unto the heavens, and now We will turn thee toward a Qiblih that is well-pleasing to thee. So turn thy face toward the Sacred Mosque [the Kaabah], and wheresoever you all [O followers of Muḥammad] are, turn your faces towards it....

[Qur'án 2:145] And wert thou [O Muḥammad] to bring every sign to those who were given the Book [Jews and Christians], they would not follow thy Qiblih.... (Nasr et al. 2015, pp. 62–65, with minor changes).

Some Shí'ih Quranic commentators have interpreted the “middle community” in Qur'án 2:143 to refer not to the generality of Muslims but to the Imams of Shí'ih Islam (see Dakake 2022, pp. 261–62; Andani, 2022, p. 309). Most Quranic commentators, however, have understood the adjective “middle” as meaning just, moderate, or exemplary to describe the Muslim community. The influential proto-Salafi scholar Ibn-i-Taymíyyah (d. 1328), for example, argued that “middle community” means that Muslims are “‘the nation of the middle road’ or, perhaps rather, ‘the just, equitable nation’ ‘who care for the

material and spiritual affairs of the community and for the maintenance of religion” (Ibn-i-Taymiyyah, quoted in Rosenthal 1962, p. 56). Others have suggested that the “middle community” means that Islam occupies a middle position between Judaism and Christianity. Still others have proposed that it refers to the “geographical location of Islam in the middle belt of the world” (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 64).

Scholars of Islam have supported or restated primarily the interpretations that the “middle community” means the just/moderate/exemplary community or the community between the Jews and Christians. Regarding the former reading, Rahman interprets *ummah wasaʿta* as the “‘Median community’ ... over against the ‘tendentiousness’ of the others,” arguing that the verse established the Muslim community as the ideal and best community, and “the true descendant of the Abrahamic line” (Rahman 1994, p. 145). Sachedina understands Qurʾān 2:143 as summoning Muslims to become “exemplary by avoiding extremism of all sorts and following the path of moderation to earn the title of a ‘median community’ (*umma wasaʿta*) so that it can serve as God’s witness to other people” (Sachedina 2009, p. 82).⁷ Regarding the latter reading, *The Study Quran* states that “while Judaism emphasizes the law and Christianity emphasizes love and mercy, Islam creates a balance between the two or between emphasis on the exoteric and the esoteric ...” (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 64). And Neuwirth translates *ummah wasaʿta* as a middle-standing community or a community of the center to express the reconciliatory stance of Muḥammad’s teachings toward the exclusive claims made by Jews and Christians over Jerusalem (Neuwirth 2024, pp. 397–99; see Neuwirth 2022, pp. 282–83).

Neither Quranic commentators nor scholars of Islam, perhaps influenced by the doctrine of Islam’s finality, seem to have considered the possibility of the verse’s more basic meaning: The followers of Muḥammad are a religious community between communities that preceded it and will follow it. Cognates of *vasaʿt* in the Qurʾān are instructive to consider. Indeed, the same Sūrah of the Qurʾān in which Qurʾān 2:143 occurs also contains the following verse: “Be mindful of the prayers, especially the middle (*al-vuṣṭā*) prayer...” (Qurʾān 2:238), which innumerable ḥadīths quoted in Sunni and Shīʿiḥ Quranic commentaries identify as the *ṣalātu’l-ʿaṣr*, the third (and thus middlemost) of the five daily obligatory prayers in Islam. Further, the verb *vasaʿta* in Qurʾān 100:5 means to “charge into the middle.” (cf. Qurʾān 68:28) The Quranic commentator al-Bayḍāʿī (d. ca. 1286), author of one of the most popular Sunni Quranic commentaries, observed that the word “middle” (*vasaʿt*) originally (*fil-aṣl*) denoted an intermediate place or position. It then came to refer by analogy (*ustuʿira*) to praiseworthy attributes of character—because such attributes lie between the extremes of excess (*ifrāṭ*) and neglect (*tafrīt*)—and was applied to people who possess such characteristics (Bayḍāʿī 2000, vol. 1, p. 145). It would thus appear that the connotations of just, moderate, and exemplary are a later interpretative gloss of the word *vasaʿta* in Qurʾān 2:143.

Furthermore, neither Quranic commentators nor scholars of Islam appear to have taken full stock of the fact that Qurʾān 2:143 does not occur in isolation. The verse appears in the midst of a series of verses that call for the changing of the Qiblah, signifying the abrogation of the laws and teachings of previous religions and assertion of the independence of Islam. Some have sidestepped this context, without explanation (e.g., Dakake 2022, p. 261, “The verse [Qurʾān 2:143] goes on to refer to the momentous event in the history of the Muslim community in Medina when the direction of prayer (*qibla*) was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca by divine decree, *although we will not consider this part of the verse specifically*” [emphasis added].) The words “And thus” (*wa-kadhālika*)—which could also be translated as “and in the same way” or “and in like manner”—at the beginning of Qurʾān 2:143 (“And thus We have made you a middle community ...”) connect the verse to what precedes it. This implies: Just as religious communities came and went before you, and

just as God changed the Qiblih from Jerusalem to Mecca, so too has God made you, O followers of Muḥammad, a middle community, whereby you will be followed by other communities, and the Qiblih may again change.

In the *Súriy-i-Šabr*, Bahá'u'lláh challenges the traditional interpretation of Qur'án 2:143. He asks rhetorically: if revelation was sealed with Muḥammad's advent, how could the Qur'án refer to his followers as a “middle community”? (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in [Ishrâq-Khávarí 122–9 B.E. 1965–1973](#), vol. 4, p. 292). In other words, the Muslim community being a “middle community” means that religious communities have preceded it, and a religious community will emerge after it—one that could potentially have its own Qiblih abrogating the established Qiblih of Islam, just as the Qiblih of Islam abrogates a previous Qiblih. In the same work, Bahá'u'lláh affirms that “God hath sent down His Messengers to succeed to Moses and Jesus, and He will continue to do so till ‘the end that hath no end’; so that His grace may, from the heaven of Divine bounty, be continually vouchsafed to mankind” (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in [Shoghi Effendi 1991b](#), p. 116; see [Ghaemmaghami and Vafai 2025](#), pp. 120–31).

11. Conclusions

The concept of the Qiblih has appeared across time in various religious traditions. It has taken different forms, but these forms have shared the common characteristic of calling worshippers to turn toward a physical object—a place or thing—that had spiritual significance. The concept has undergone a change in the Bábí and Bahá'í religions where the Qiblih is the person who is the intermediary between God and humanity, and it is his resting-place after his passing. This shift serves as a profound theological affirmation of the authority of the Manifestations of God. As Bahá'u'lláh wrote, “The beginning of all utterance is the worship of God, and this followeth upon His recognition.... In this day the faces of the people of insight and understanding are turned in His direction; nay every direction inclineth itself towards Him” (Bahá'u'lláh 2006, #3.4).

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Notes

¹ Many *Shí'ih* ḥadīth identify the Imams as the Qiblih. See, e.g., [Majlisí \(1983\)](#), pp. 286–304, 303). Bahá'u'lláh quotes one such ḥadīth in one of his last major works, a letter addressed to a *Shí'ih* cleric: “He [the sixth Imam of *Shí'ih* Islam, Ja'far-i-Šádiq] replied: ‘O man! We are the Way mentioned in the Book of God,—exalted and glorified be He—and We are the Impost, and We are the Fast, and We are the Pilgrimage, and We are the Sacred Month, and We are the Sacred City, and We are the Kaaba of God, and We are the Qiblih of God, and We are the Face of God.’” (ḥadīth quoted in [Bahá'u'lláh 1988a](#), p. 112). In this section of his letter, Bahá'u'lláh quotes this and other ḥadīths (as well as a Quranic verse) that point to a station of divinity or the appearance of God, as he invites readers to interpret statements about divinity in his own writings in the “same manner” that they construe such statements in Islamic texts. See [Ghaemmaghami and Vafai \(2025\)](#), pp. 109–15).

² On 8 January 1867, as Bahá'u'lláh remained exiled in Edirne, one of his followers in Persia, Áqá Mírzá Muṣṭafá Naráqí, refused to turn towards Mecca at the time of his execution and instead turned towards Edirne, stating, “This is the true Qiblih (*qibliy-i-ḥaqíqí*).” [Samandarí \(2011\)](#), pp. 207–8); [Ishrâq-Khávarí \(2009\)](#), p. 328); [Taherzadeh \(1977\)](#), pp. 60–61).

- ³ Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/726578851) (alluding to Qur'án 5:97 ("God has made the Kaabah, the sacred house (*al-bayta'l-ḥarām*)" and identifying himself as the sacred house of God (*bayti'llāhi'l-ḥarām*)); Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in *Iranian National Bahá'í Archives (INBA)* (n.d., vol. 71, p. 329) (identifying, in a letter written to Bábís circa 1864, Bahá'u'lláh as the up-raised *ṣalāt*, meaning perhaps that he is the true purpose and meaning of obligatory prayer). Other writings of Bahá'u'lláh before the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that identify him as the Qiblih include Bahá'u'lláh (2002, #1.15, 76, 163); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/697777231) (Lawḥ-i-Ashraf); Bahá'u'lláh (2005, #115.11); Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthār-i-Qalam-i-A'lá*, 1:124, 272; Bahá'u'lláh (n.d., Or.15725, 186); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/766441491); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/572815111) (Lawḥ-i-Saḥáb); cf. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in *Iranian National Bahá'í Archives (INBA)* (n.d., vol. 83, p. 66) (Súriy-i-Damm) (urging, in a letter written from Edirne in early 1866, the people to hasten to the sanctuary of God (*ḥarami'lláh*) and the house of God (*bayti'lláh*)); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/697777238) (Súriy-i-Ism) (proclaiming, in a letter also written from Edirne circa 1866, that he is the sanctuary of God (*ḥaramu'lláh*) and exhorting the addressee to turn his face toward him, using a comparable phrase (*valli vajhaka ṣaḥṭra*) to that found in Qur'án 2:144 and in paragraph 6 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (see Section 6 titled "The Qiblih in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas"))).
- ⁴ The word *ṣaḥṭr* (meaning both direction and toward or in the direction of something or someone) appears in only three verses of the Qur'án (2:144, 149, 150)—all of which concern the Kaabah. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in numerous work written before and after it, Bahá'u'lláh uses the word *ṣaḥṭr* to refer to himself or his direction, e.g., Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/409395412) (Súriy-i-Amr, written circa early 1865); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/928132051); Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Reference Library (bahai.org/r/875104412).
- ⁵ See Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Rafati (2016, p. 156) (letter dated 1885); Bahá'u'lláh (n.d., Or.15719, 167); cf. Bahá'u'lláh 2005, #57.1 (referring to the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad as "the cynosure (*qiblih*) of an adoring world").
- ⁶ "The Concourse on High" is a frequently occurring phrase in the Bahá'í writings that refers to souls in a heavenly realm.
- ⁷ See also Esposito (1999, p. 96) ("The society that is made up of such God-fearing people (*muttaqín*) constitutes a 'middle nation' or 'axial community' (*ummah wasat* [sic]), whose collective responsibility is to bear witness to the truth and act as an example for the rest of humanity"); Sinai (2023, pp. 86, 526–27) ("This means probably not, or not merely, that their [the Muslim community's] beliefs and practices chart out an ideally moderate course ... but also that they are to function as a global focal point exemplifying the qualities of piety and righteousness that God intends other humans to emulate"); Habib and Lawrence (2024, pp. 18, 544) (translating *ummah vasaṭa* as "a community of moderation" and commenting, "literally, 'a community of the middle or the middle way,' stressing that God is the God of East and West"); Izutsu (1964, p. 81); Denny (1975, pp. 54–55); Nasr (2002, p. 162); Afsaruddin (2006, p. 222; 2007, p. 7); Lindstedt (2018, p. 220).

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