

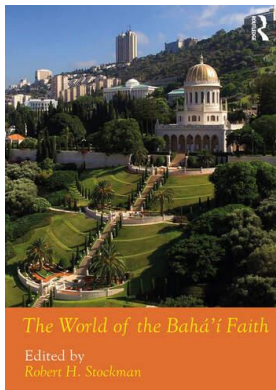
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## **The World of the Bahá'í Faith**

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### **Progress of the Soul**

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# PROGRESS OF THE SOUL

## Life after death

*Mikhail Sergeev*

### **Introduction**

One basic condition of human existence has remained essentially the same since the dawn of civilization: Human beings are fully aware of their own mortality but have no direct knowledge about what awaits them after death. This dramatic paradox produces anxiety and deep-seated psychological and emotional suffering. Various human endeavours, such as in the arts and sciences, have been searching for answers but were never able to exhaust or resolve this primordial and tragic vulnerability. Religion also addressed the problem of human mortality by building revelatory bridges between matter and spirit, the 'here and now' and the world to come.

As we know from religious history, spiritual traditions could survive, and even thrive, without the concept of a Supreme Being. Scholars believe that was the case in early Buddhism, Jainism, and late Taoism. No religion, however, whether Eastern or Western, ancient or modern, could dispense with the notion of salvation and the promise of eternal life. Different faiths promote this idea under various names, such as spiritual liberation, deliverance, awakening, self-realization, enlightenment, and so on. The common denominator to all these various approaches lies in our ever-present belief in the continuity of life after death and the final resting place of human soul in heaven. The concept of an afterlife plays a truly unique and indispensable role in religious traditions that no other idea or belief could ever match, substitute, or challenge.

### **Historical background**

The religions of the world offer to their adherents three kinds of beliefs about afterlife. Spiritual traditions that have been originated in India—namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—advocate the idea of reincarnation. According to the doctrine of reincarnation, at the moment of death, our spiritual self leaves the body and, based on the actions of past lives, returns to earth to inhabit another physical vessel. Some reincarnationists believe that humans can be reincarnated into lower or higher forms of life, while others limit the possibility of reincarnation only to the human body and existence. In addition, the doctrine of reincarnation posits that the wheel of birth and rebirth will be unescapable until a person achieves spiritual liberation and is no longer attached to it.

In contrast to Indian-born spiritual traditions, the monotheistic religions of Abrahamic root—Islam and Christianity—teach that after death, the human soul goes through divine judgement and, as a result, moves to its spiritual dwelling either in paradise or the inferno. Biblical Judaism portrays the dead waiting in Sheol, underneath the earth, but the later rabbinical tradition developed their own version of heaven and hell—Gan Eden and Gehinnom. Another important distinction regarding afterlife in those monotheistic religions refers to the doctrines of spiritual immortality and bodily resurrection.

The adherents of Christianity believe that the founder of their religion, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion and only after this miraculous event ascended into the spiritual realm. Traditional Christians believe that, following the example of Jesus, in due time they will also experience bodily resurrection, and after the Last Judgement, their transformed, spiritualized bodies will inhabit the Kingdom of Heaven.

The followers of Judaism and Islam, while believing in the bodily resurrection of the dead during the Messianic Age (for the Jews) or the Day of Judgement (for the Muslims), deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus and argue that after death, the human soul will lead a purely spiritual existence, either in the realm of eternal bliss or everlasting damnation.

## The Bahá'í notion of afterlife

### *Interrelationship between material and spiritual realms*

According to Bahá'í scriptures, the world of creation is unified and infinite, and it consists of two realms: material and spiritual. The material realm, which is known to us through sense perception as the world of nature, 'is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it never departs' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 1: 1). The material realm is paralleled and complemented by its spiritual counterpart, which the Bahá'í scriptures call the Abhá or Most Glorious Kingdom, which is as infinite and vast as the whole of material creation.

Both material and spiritual realms are based on the hierarchy of gradations. The lowest form of material existence is represented by minerals, followed by, in ascending order, the material compositions of plants, animals, and humans. Spiritual gradations or degrees that 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists include the spirit of vegetation and growth in plants, the power of the senses in animals, the rational spirit of human beings, the spirit of faith, and finally, the 'Holy Spirit, which is the mediator between God and His creation' (*Some Answered Questions* 36: 7). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, the vegetative and animal spirits result 'from the combination of elements that are brought together in a single composition' and after 'the separation and dissolution of these composed elements . . . will . . . naturally cease to exist'. As for the human condition, He continues, our physical 'body can be compared to a mirror, and the human spirit to the sun: If the glass is shattered or the mirror destroyed, no harm befalls the outpouring grace of the sun, which continues unabated' (*Some Answered Questions* chap. 3).

It is evident from this brief account that human beings are, in fact, unique creatures of God since they combine in their nature the fullness of both material and spiritual qualities. The complexity of their physical constitution represents the culmination of material life, and their immortal spirit, while standing at the threshold of spiritual life, has the potential of all the degrees of perfection inherent in its essence. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá put it:

Man is in the ultimate degree of materiality and the beginning of spirituality; that is, he is at the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the furthestmost

degree of darkness and the beginning of the light. That is why the station of man is said to be the end of night and the beginning of day, meaning that he encompasses all the degrees of imperfection and that he potentially possesses all the degrees of perfection.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 64: 2)

Philosophically, the most significant question here is about the connection between the human body and the spirit. How can a material frame be linked to a spiritual self? According to Bahá’í teachings, the human soul or spirit is not located ‘inside’ the body because the soul is not a material entity. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

the rational soul, or the human spirit, does not subsist through this body by inherence—that is to say, it does not enter it; for inherence and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is sanctified above this. It never entered this body to begin with, that it should require, upon leaving it, some other abode. No, the connection of the spirit with the body is even as the connection of this lamp with a mirror. If the mirror is polished and perfected, the light of the lamp appears therein, and if the mirror is broken or covered with dust, the light remains concealed.

(*Some Answered Questions* 66: 3)

There are two major implications of this position. First, the human mind, which, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, ‘is the power of the human spirit . . . the perfection of the spirit and a necessary attribute thereof, even as the rays of the sun are an essential requirement of the sun itself’ (*Some Answered Questions* 55: 6), serves as the interface between the spiritual and material elements in human beings. The human mind could be compared to that ‘light of the lamp’ that appears in the ‘mirror’ of the human body. When the ‘mirror breaks’ (i.e., the body dies), the ‘light’ disappears from the mirror of the body, but the mind itself does remain intact in the realm of spirit.

Hence, the second implication that refers to the concept of death. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thus explains:

Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by itself, and that the spirit is an accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—the spirit—remains.

(*Some Answered Questions* 66: 2)

In other words, the Bahá’í teachings affirm the supremacy of spirit over matter and view physical death as a prelude to the afterlife in the spiritual realm. Another metaphor used in Bahá’í texts is the comparison of death with the birth of a baby from the womb of her mother. Death is represented here as the birth of the maturing spirit from the bonds of its evolution in the ‘womb’ of mother nature.

Our transition from an earthly into a spiritual life, says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘may be likened to [us leaving] the matrix of the mother from which a child is to be born into the spacious outer world’. He continues:

At first the infant finds it very difficult to reconcile itself to its new existence. . . . It is reluctant to leave its home, but nature forces it into this world. [Then] it finds that . . . from gloomy and restricted surroundings it has been transferred to a spacious and delightful environment.

‘This analogy’, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, ‘expresses the relation of the temporal world to the life hereafter—the transition of the soul of man from darkness and uncertainty to the light and reality of the eternal Kingdom’. ‘At first it is very difficult to welcome death’, He concludes, ‘but after attaining its new condition the soul is grateful, for it . . . has been freed from a world of sorrow, grief and trials to live in a world of unending bliss and joy’ (*Promulgation* 19).

### ***Limitations of knowledge about spiritual realm and afterlife***

In His talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes four sources of human knowledge: sensory perception, reason, tradition, and intuition or inspiration. Each one of these ways to acquire knowledge is liable to error and cannot be fully relied upon. Our vision, which is the most powerful of the senses,

sees a mirage as water and reckons images reflected in mirrors as real and existing; it sees large bodies as small, perceives a whirling point as a circle, imagines the earth to be stationary and the sun to be in motion, and is subject to many other errors of a similar nature.

Human reason or intellect is also

imperfect, as proven by the disagreements existing between the ancient philosophers . . . and their propensity to change their own views. For if the criterion of intellect were perfect, all should have been united in their thoughts and agreed in their opinions.

Our sacred traditions, which are based on the truths of religions as established in their infallible scriptures, rely on the power of rational comprehension and interpretation and, as such, cannot necessarily deliver certitude for the ‘leaders of religion . . . comprehend from the text of the Book [only] that which their minds can understand and not necessarily the truth of the matter’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 83: 2, 5–6). Finally, our intuitive abilities, which we call inspiration or illumination, ‘are the promptings or susceptibilities of the human heart’. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cautions, the ‘promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?’ (*Promulgation* 89)

In addition to those general restrictions of human cognition ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also mentions two other limitations of human knowledge. The first one refers to the knowledge of the essences of things, whether material or spiritual. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, ‘there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its attributes. The essence of a thing is known only through its attributes; otherwise, that essence is unknown and unfathomed’. Hence, we cannot know the essence of nature, of our own selves, or of Divinity. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, since ‘created things can only be known through their attributes and not in their essence, the reality of the Divinity, too, must be unknown with regard to its essence and known only with respect to its attributes’ (*Some Answered Questions* 59: 3–4).

The second limitation of human knowledge involves the hierarchy of creation and the inability of lower forms of life to understand the higher ones. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, the ‘difference in degree is ever an obstacle to comprehension of the higher by the lower, the superior by the inferior’ (*Promulgation* 62). He also elaborates:

A lower degree cannot comprehend a higher although all are in the same world of creation—whether mineral, vegetable or animal. . . . In the human plane . . . we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product; but the vegetable has no knowledge or comprehension whatever of us.

(*Promulgation* 46)

Because of all these limitations of human knowledge, we cannot fully grasp the nature of the spiritual realm and the conditions of life after death since these realities are higher than our own.

### ***Symbolic descriptions of spiritual world and afterlife***

The founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, attests with unmistakable clarity to the survival of the human soul after the death of the physical body and to the continuation of the soul's existence in the spiritual realm. He writes:

Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure.

(*Gleanings* LXXXI)

However, as Bahá'u'lláh explains, '[t]he nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men' (*ibid.*). He clarifies the refusal by the prophets to divulge the 'mysteries of man's physical death and his return' by adding that

[w]ere they to be revealed, they would evoke such fear and sorrow that some would perish, while others would be so filled with gladness as to wish for death, and beseech, with unceasing longing, the one true God . . . to hasten their end.

(*Gleanings* CLXV)

More specifically, the 'Bahá'í teachings state that there is no such physical place as heaven or hell and emphasize the eternal journey of the soul towards perfection. They explain that references to 'heaven' and 'hell' in the holy scriptures of other religions are to be understood symbolically, describing states of nearness to and distance from God in this world and in the realms beyond' ('The Human Soul: Heaven and Hell'). Following this approach, Bahá'u'lláh argues that many philosophical and theological terms that in various religions refer to afterlife should also be reinterpreted rather as symbolic descriptions of spiritual realities. In the *Book of Certitude* (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*), He applies this strategy to such terms as 'death' and 'eternal life', 'divine judgment' and 'resurrection'. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

In every age and century, the purpose of the Prophets of God and their chosen ones hath been no other but to affirm the spiritual significance of the terms 'life', 'resurrection', and 'judgment'. If one will ponder [on the inner significance of scriptural sayings] one will surely discover all mysteries hidden in the terms 'grave', 'tomb' . . . 'paradise' and 'hell'.

(*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 119)

According to Bahá'u'lláh, those words and expressions allude to the coming of a new messenger of God and to those who decide either to follow or reject Him. As He explains, citing Jesus:

‘Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’. The purport of these words is that whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto ‘life’ and ‘resurrection’ and have entered into the ‘paradise’ of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to ‘death’ and ‘deprivation’, to the ‘fire’ of unbelief, and to the ‘wrath’ of God.

(Kitáb-i-Íqán 118)

Similarly, the Bahá'í teachings distinguish between resurrection, reincarnation, and immortality of the spirit. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the doctrines of resurrection and reincarnation should not be understood literally as the return of the essence of a person but should be interpreted as metaphors for the reappearance of the same qualities in different individuals. As he puts it: ‘In the Holy Books and Sacred Scriptures there is mention of a ‘return’, but . . . what the Prophets of God meant by ‘return’ is not the return of the essence but of the attributes’ (Some Answered Questions 81:15).

### ***Progress of the soul after the death of physical body***

‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that after the physical death of the body, the human soul ‘remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God’s Mercy’. He continues:

From the moment the soul leaves the body and arrives in the Heavenly World, its evolution is spiritual. . . . The soul does not evolve from degree to degree as a law—it only evolves nearer to God, by the Mercy and Bounty of God.

(Paris Talks 20)

Second, unlike material objects that can be transformed into one another, the human soul has an innate individuality and could never evolve into something other than itself. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it,

[T]he human spirit never transcends its own degree. . . . [N]o matter how far the spirit and reality of Peter may progress, it will never reach the degree of the reality of Christ but will progress only within its own inherent limits.

(Some Answered Questions 63: 2)

Third, since the human soul is not a material but a spiritual reality, it is not subject to material limitations, especially decline and death. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,

[M]ovement is essential to existence. . . . All creation, whether of the mineral, vegetable or animal kingdom . . . must either ascend or descend. But with the human soul, there is no decline. Its only movement is towards perfection.

(Paris Talks 29)

He also writes: 'the tests and trials of God take place in this world, not in the world of the Kingdom' (*Selections* 193). In another place, 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds that the

progress of the human spirit in the divine world . . . is either purely through the grace and bounty of the Lord, or through the intercession and prayers of other human souls, or through the significant contributions and charitable deeds which are offered in its name.  
(*Some Answered Questions* 66: 5)

An important implication of that view is that the sinners and good-hearted non-believers could progress in the spiritual world as well. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

It is even possible for those who have died in sin and unbelief to be transformed, that is, to become the object of divine forgiveness. This is through the grace of God and not through His justice, for grace is to bestow without desert, and justice is to give that which is deserved.  
(*Some Answered Questions* 62: 7)

Fourth, in the afterlife, human souls will acquire spiritual means of perception and will be able to recognize and communicate with their friends and loved ones:

And know thou for a certainty, that in the divine worlds, the spiritual beloved ones (believers) will recognize each other, and will seek union (with each other), but a spiritual union. Likewise, a love that one may have entertained for any one will not be forgotten in the world of the Kingdom. Likewise, thou wilt not forget (there) the life that thou hast had in the material world.  
(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets* 206)

And, finally, since the material and spiritual realms are not separated from each other, there is a connection and communication between the two. Regarding the intercession for those in the realm of spirit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that

those who enjoy near access to the divine threshold are permitted to intercede, and that this intercession is approved in the sight of God. But intercession in the next world . . . is an altogether different condition and reality, which cannot be expressed in words.  
(*Some Answered Questions* 64: 4)

He also points out that a departed soul may converse with someone who is physically alive, but this would not be

as our conversation. . . . The heart of man is open to inspiration; this is spiritual communication. As in a dream one talks with a friend while the mouth is silent, so is it in the conversation of the spirit.  
(*Paris Talks* 57)

And 'Abdu'l-Bahá cautions against premature development of those powers:

To tamper with psychic forces while in this world interferes with the condition of the soul in the world to come. These forces are real, but, normally, are not active on



this plane. . . . The whole purpose of life in the material world is the coming forth into the world of Reality, where those forces will become active. They belong to that world.

(quoted in Esslemont 193)

As for ‘evil souls’ and their influence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have said:

There are no earthbound souls. When the souls that are not good die, they go entirely away from this earth and so cannot influence anyone. . . . Their thoughts can have influence only while they are alive on the earth.

(quoted in Goodall and Cooper 1979: 35)

And again:

There is no power exercised over the people by those evil souls that have passed away. Good is stronger than evil, and even when alive they had very little power. How much less have they after they are dead, and besides they are nowhere near this planet.

(quoted in Goodall and Cooper 1979: 44)

## **Bahá’í philosophical proofs**

### ***‘Abdu’l-Baha’s critique of the doctrine of reincarnation***

‘Abdu’l-Bahá adduces a number of arguments against the possibility of reincarnation (see *Some Answered Questions* chap. 81). He begins by ruling out the possibility of reincarnation as it is usually understood on the grounds that ‘the repeated appearance of the same spirit with its former essence and condition in this same world of appearance, is impossible and unrealizable’ because, in the material world, ‘no being in any respect is identical with, nor the same as, another being’.

He goes on to explain in purely physical terms that

it cannot be proved that this body with all its particles has returned; that the former man has become the latter; and that, consequently, there has been repetition; that the spirit also, like the body, has returned; and that after death its essence has come back to this world.

Moreover, ‘it is evident that returning and coming back to the material world does not become the cause of perfection. This theory has no proofs nor evidences; it is simply an idea,’ and ‘this material world has not such value or such excellence that man, after having escaped from this cage, will desire a second time to fall into this snare’.

In addition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that ‘ascent,’ in the sense of spiritual progress upwards, is continuous, and therefore, ‘[t]he return of the soul after death is contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system’. Furthermore, ‘by returning, it is absolutely impossible to obtain existence; it is as if man, after being freed from the womb, should return to it a second time’.

Even in terms of a Manifestation of God, reincarnation is not as it is commonly understood; rather, ‘what the divine Prophets meant by “return” is not the return of the essence, but that of the qualities; it is not the return of the Manifestation, but that of the perfections’. He illustrates His meaning with a beautiful metaphor:

It is the same with the spring of last year, when blossoms, flowers and sweet-scented herbs bloomed, and delicious fruits were brought forth; next year we say that those delicious fruits have come back, and those blossoms, flowers and blooms have returned and come again. This does not mean that exactly the same particles composing the flowers of last year have, after decomposition, been again combined and have then come back and returned. On the contrary, the meaning is that the delicacy, freshness, delicious perfume and wonderful color of the flowers of last year are visible and apparent in exactly the same manner in the flowers of this year.

Here are some additional arguments that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers elsewhere:

ARGUMENT FROM DIVINE POWER: ‘The major argument of the reincarnationists was . . . that according to the justice of God, each must receive his due’ either in the present or future life. But this would make spiritual progress depend on humans themselves and not on God’s supreme and special influence. ‘If creation went forward according to only one rule, how could the all-encompassing Power make Itself felt? How could the Almighty be the One Who “doeth as He pleaseth and ordaineth as He willeth”?’

(*Selections* 156)

ARGUMENT FROM UNHAPPINESS: According to the views of reincarnationists, we come back to earthly life in order to reap our rewards and punishments. However, ‘on this dusty earth all humankind are suffering. Here no man is at rest as a reward for what he hath performed in former lives; nor is there anyone so blissful as seemingly to pluck the fruit of bygone anguish.’

(*Selections* 156)

ARGUMENT FROM UNLIMITED CREATION: Some reincarnationists believe that God’s creation is limited to our material universe. If this were so, ‘what would be the harvest of creation? Indeed, what would be the effects and the outcomes of Divinity Itself? Were such a notion true, then all created things, all contingent realities, and this whole world of being—all would be meaningless’. Since creation is unlimited, human afterlife consists not in earthly reincarnations but in spiritual progress and immortality.

(*Selections* 156)

### ***‘Abdu’l-Baha’s arguments for the immortality of the soul***

In His works and public addresses ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also discusses a series of rational proofs of the immortality of the soul. When presenting His arguments to His audiences, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes to the heart of the matter without mentioning His Greek or Roman predecessors—Plato (427 BC–347 BC) or Cicero (106 BC–43 BC), who wrote their own philosophical treatises on the issue of immortality. While some of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reasoning does echo classical thought on the subject, most of His arguments are unique and creative.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá begins by distinguishing between traditional and rational proofs, the first ones stemming from belief in God and holy scriptures. For a believer to imagine that human life does

not continue after death is tantamount to doubting God Himself. Furthermore, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asks:

The very fact that our spiritual instinct, surely never given in vain, prompts us to pray for the welfare of those, our loved ones, who have passed out of the material world: does it not bear witness to the continuance of their existence?

(*Paris Talks* 29)

Those self-evident truths, however, are valid only to the believer, and since ‘the materialistic philosophers deny the Books of God, scriptural demonstration is not evidence to them, and materialistic proofs are necessary’ (*Promulgation* 85).

As for the rational proofs of the immortality of the soul that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers to His readers, in their logical form they run as follows:

ARGUMENT FROM SPIRIT NOT BEING PART OF PHYSICAL BODY: 1) Material existence is subject to composition and decomposition; 2) Human spirit is not a material entity because a) its power persists while the person is asleep and the body is resting; b) changes in the body, including amputations of bodily organs, do not affect the spirit; c) it is not available to our senses; d) the body itself does not produce thought, which is the characteristic feature of human mind or spirit; e) man is not a captive of nature and can discover its secrets; 3) Therefore, human spirit is not subject to decomposition: i.e., it is immortal.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 60–61; *Promulgation* 89, 98, 100)

ARGUMENT FROM NATURE: 1) Human intelligence is nowhere to be found in the natural world; 2) What is present in parts should also exist in the whole; 3) Hence, human intelligence or spirit is not part of nature and, therefore, is not subject to decomposition: i.e., it is immortal.

(*Promulgation* 111)

ARGUMENT FROM UNCHANGING SPIRIT: 1) The spirit within oneself never changes and, therefore, is single and not composed of elements; 2) Non-composed entities are not subject to decomposition; 3) Therefore, the human spirit is indestructible and, hence, immortal.

(*Promulgation* 85)

ARGUMENT FROM FORMS: 1) Material entities cannot possess two forms simultaneously; 2) The spirit of man could conceive all geometrical forms simultaneously; 3) Therefore, spiritual reality is different from the limitations of matter and, hence, immortal.

(*Promulgation* 85)

ARGUMENT FROM THE INNER SIGHT: 1) Inner sight is greater than sensory perception, which uses the instrumentality of the body; 2) Should the mind be the extension of the body, its power should also be in the same proportion; 3) Therefore, human mind or spirit is different from the body and, hence, immortal.

(*Some Answered Questions* 61)

ARGUMENT FROM GRADATION OF THINGS: 1) Gradation of things presupposes the existence of the superlative degree; 2) The world of matter is the world of mortality; 3) Hence, immortality must exist as well.

*(Paris Talks 29)*

ARGUMENTS FROM CONSERVATION OF ENERGY: 1) There is no total annihilation in the world of creation; 2) Man is part of creation; 3) Therefore, man is immortal.

*(Promulgation 38)*

ARGUMENT FROM EFFECTS: 1) Non-existing entities do not leave traces or effects of their activity; 2) Human life produces a lasting impact on the world of nature and society; 3) Therefore, human spirit should be more than just a combination of material elements.

*(Some Answered Questions 60)*

ARGUMENT FROM SACRIFICE: 1) People would not sacrifice their lives if their spirits were not immortal; 2) Prophets of God suffered death for the benefit of humanity; 3) Therefore, human spirit is immortal.

*(Paris Talks 29)*

### **Bahá'í burial practices**

Bahá'í burial laws are established by Bahá'u'lláh in the central book of His revelation, Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book). Here the founder of the Bahá'í Faith writes:

The Lord hath decreed that the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable, and that graven rings should be placed upon their fingers. . . . If the following verse, which hath at this moment been sent down by God, be engraved upon the burial-rings of both men and women, it shall be better for them: 'I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate'. . . . The Lord hath decreed, moreover, that the deceased should be enfolded in five sheets of silk or cotton. For those whose means are limited a single sheet of either fabric will suffice. . . . It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.

*(Kitáb-i-Aqdas K128–130)*

Bahá'í funeral services also involve a recitation of special prayer for the deceased if that person was aged fifteen or over. The Prayer for the Dead

is the only Bahá'í obligatory prayer which is to be recited in congregation; it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand in silence. . . . [T]he recital should precede the interment of the deceased, and . . . there is no requirement to face the Qiblih [the burial place of Bahá'u'lláh] when saying this prayer.

*(Kitáb-i-Aqdas 169–170)*

Bahá'ís are allowed to leave their bodies to medical science, but they are not to be embalmed or cremated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the prohibition of cremation thus:

The body of man, which has been formed gradually, must similarly be decomposed gradually . . . so that according to the relations which exist in the world it may gradually combine and mix other elements . . . until it arrives in the vegetable kingdom, there turning into plants and flowers.

(quoted in Hornby 1988: 202)

The body of the deceased 'must be placed in the grave in such a position that the feet point towards 'Akká (the Qiblih)' (quoted in Hornby 1988: 200).

Overall, Bahá'í funeral services aren't supposed to be complicated and unbending. Shoghi Effendi advised Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies that they

should take great care lest any uniform procedure or ritual in this matter be adopted or imposed upon the friends. The danger in this . . . is that a definite system of rigid rituals and practices be developed among the believers. The utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed.

(quoted in Hornby 1988: 199)

## Conclusion

The Bahá'í teachings offer a unique synthesis and reinterpretation of some key concepts about the afterlife that are found in the world's religions. They reaffirm the validity of belief in the immortality of the soul but redefine the ideas of return, reincarnation, and resurrection symbolically. In support of this position, the Bahá'í scriptures present a series of rational arguments for the immortality of the soul and against reincarnation. At the same time, the scriptures refuse to describe the afterlife in detail due to the inherent limitations of human cognition. They reinterpret such terms as 'judgement', 'heaven', and 'hell' as metaphorical descriptions of what awaits humans after physical death and discuss spiritual realities on the basis of our present condition and experience.

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