



Life After Death From a Baha'i Perspective

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## Abstract

The question of whether there is life after death is a profound one. In order to do the Baha'i perspective justice, I have used direct quotations from the principle authors as much as possible. I have attempted to lay a solid foundation of the source of these writings and the Baha'i concept of God so that the journey of the soul is traced from the purpose of life; to the nature of the soul; to a description of the after-life; ending as to the query of the relevance of the belief in continuance.

## Life After Death From a Baha'i Perspective

The awareness of death is a reality humanity has struggled with since the beginning of time. Even the caveman pondered the demise of his companions and wondered what would happen to him when it was his turn to die. This quest for understanding in order to appease our misgivings and the answers arrived at, has molded history, driven persecutions, caused wars, and stirred the mind of most, to at least, consider the possibility.

### **The Baha'i Perspective**

The Baha'i Writings concerning life after death are prolific. They are detailed, philosophically complex and fascinating. The authors are the main figures of this Faith. The primary author is Baha'u'llah, the founding prophet, or *manifestation* as he is referred to in the Baha'i Writings. He revealed most of these Writings while a prisoner in Akka Israel. He would pace back and forth while the revelation poured from Him without interruption. According to the descriptions, there were a dozen or so men recording each word. These secretaries would often pass out due to the power of this revelation, which Baha'is consider the word of God. Once the Writings were complete, Baha'u'llah would inspect them and if correct, mark them with His seal and signature.

The other main source are from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah. Abdu'l-Baha was designated by his father as the Center of the Covenant and the only interpreter of his father's words. In some ways, the writings of Abdu'l-Baha' have more of an academic flair and go into greater detail whereas Baha'u'llah uses more of a poetic, mystical voice. Both of these styles are represented in the quotes used in this paper.

World religions generally have a "holy book" or sacred scripture emanating from the founder or prophet. It is in these writings that subjects like life after death, the soul, and immortality are defined or repudiated. The problem has been the subsequent interpretations and

loss of original meaning that happens as a religion succumbs to the passage of time. What is unique in the case of Baha'i scriptures is the claim that the original tablets are stored in a vault in Haifa at the world center of the Baha'i Faith and it is these that make up the core of Baha'i Scripture as described in the following quotation:

The original manuscripts of Baha'u'llah's writings, some written in His own hand and others meticulously transcribed by His personal secretaries, are today kept at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, in a vault equipped with state-of-the-art environmental control technology. Researchers at the Centre for the Study of the Texts are charged with organizing and indexing the thousands of documents in the collection and producing translations, compilations and commentaries. Baha'i Faith (n.d., para. 11)

### **Who is God?**

By the mere fact that we exist as creatures presupposes that there must be a creator. This is a core assumption in Baha'i belief as reflected below:

It is perfectly evident that man did not create himself and that he cannot do so. How could man of his own weakness create such a mighty being? Therefore, the Creator of man must be more perfect and powerful than man. If the creative cause of man be simply on the same level with man, then man himself should be able to create, whereas we know very well that we cannot create even our own likeness. Therefore, the Creator of man must be endowed with superlative intelligence and power in all points that creation involves and implies. We are weak; He is mighty, because, were He not mighty, He could not have created us. We are ignorant; He is wise. We are poor; He is rich. Otherwise, He would have been incapable of our creation. `Abdul'Baha (1982, p. 470)

However, it is clearly stated in the following that humans are incapable of understanding the nature of God.

Now concerning the essence of Divinity: in truth it is on no account determined by anything apart from its own nature, and can in no wise be comprehended. For whatsoever can be conceived by man is a reality that hath limitations and is not unlimited; it is circumscribed, not all-embracing. It can be comprehended by man, and is controlled by him. Similarly it is certain that all human conceptions are contingent, not absolute; that they have a mental existence, not a material one. Moreover, differentiation of stages in the contingent world is an obstacle to understanding. How then can the contingent conceive the Reality of the absolute? Abdu'l-Baha (1976, p. 341)

The importance of these beliefs lay the foundation for the relationship between the Creator and His creatures, namely us, which in turn is crucial in defining how Baha'is understand why we are here on earth and what happens when we die.

### **The Purpose of This Life**

“One must remember that the purpose of this life is to prepare the soul for the next.” Universal House of Justice (n.d., p. 119). This quotation from the supreme organizing body of the Faith summarizes the purpose and the destination presented by the Baha'i Teachings. Death is not viewed as a fearful event but rather one to be anticipated with happiness as explained in this statement by Baha'u'llah: “O Son of the Supreme: I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendor. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?” Baha'u'llah (1985, p. 52).

His son Abdul'Baha, claims the following: “Through his ignorance, man fears death; but the death he shrinks from is imaginary and absolutely unreal; it is only human imagination.” Abdul'Baha (1976, p. 449)

In order to appreciate the above quotations and their implication, a description of the nature of the soul and life after death, as described in the Baha'i scriptures must be made.

### **The Nature of the Soul**

The soul is described as consisting of one element whereas everything that is dissoluble is made up of a combination of elements as expressed by Abdul'Baha when he spoke in Paris in 1912.

The soul is not a combination of elements, it is not composed of many atoms, it is of one indivisible substance and therefore eternal. It is entirely out of the order of the physical creation; it is immortal! Scientific philosophy has demonstrated that a simple element ('simple' meaning 'not composed') is indestructible, eternal. The soul, not being a composition of elements, is, in character, as a simple element, and therefore cannot cease to exist. Abdu'l-Baha (1995, p.341)

There is a wealth of descriptions of the soul too lengthy for this paper however, the main point made is that it is eternal and travels on to the next dimension or 'spiritual world' with its consciousness, memory and ability to comprehend intact. The following quotes verify that there is recognition, communication and union:

As to thy question regarding discoveries made by the soul after it hath put off its human form: certainly, that world is a world of perceptions and discoveries, for the interposed veil will be lifted away and the human spirit will gaze upon souls that are above, below, and on a par with itself. .. Et al. Abdu'l-Baha (1982, p.162)

...The possibility of securing union with his beloved in the next world is one which the Bahá'í Teachings are quite clear about. According to Bahá'u'lláh the soul retains its individuality and consciousness after death, and is able to commune with other souls. This communion, however, is purely spiritual in character, and is conditioned upon the disinterested and selfless love of the individuals for each other. Effendi (1994, p.207)

Baha'u'llah's description of the soul in the following alludes to the station of the soul:

And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. Know thou of a truth that the soul, after it's 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. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. Baha'u'llah (1983, p. 356)

### **Description of the Afterlife**

Based on the previous writings, we see that the soul is progressive and not static. In fact, the Baha'i view is that there are many spiritual worlds of God. The soul's evolution propels the soul to be born to the next one similar to the way an infant dies to the womb world and is born into this one.

The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befiteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as

the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth. Baha'u'llah, et al.(1983, p. 346)

There are definite descriptions of recognition and connection with others in the afterlife as well as a recounting of one's life. This may be similar to the idea of a 'life review'. The following quotation describes the welcome given to a 'sanctified' soul.

Blessed is the soul which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. Such a soul liveth and moveth in accordance with the Will of its Creator, and entereth the all-highest Paradise. The Maids of Heaven, inmates of the loftiest mansions, will circle around it, and the Prophets of God and His chosen ones will seek its companionship. With them that soul will freely converse, and will recount unto them that which it hath been made to endure in the path of God, the Lord of all worlds. If any man be told that which hath been ordained for such a soul in the worlds of God, the Lord of the throne on high and of earth below, his whole being will instantly blaze out in his great longing to attain that most exalted, that sanctified and resplendent station... Baha'u'llah, et al.(1983, p. 346)

If a soul is 'not sanctified' or has lost its way does that mean it goes to hell? Does heaven exist in Baha'i theology? Yes, but the following description makes it clear that it is not a material place and therefore heaven and hell must be spiritual states and not places. "... 'Where is Paradise, and where is Hell?' Say: 'The one is reunion with Me; the other thine own self.'" Baha'u'llah (1988, p. 132)

### **Conclusion**

The descriptions of life after death in Baha'i Writings have some threads that run through many faiths of the past with its concepts of God and the journey of the soul toward God. It also offers a plethora of new ideas that science and current thought is now reflecting.

Regardless of how intriguing or charming these writings are, there is still no concrete proof. What is not clear for example is how the soul has experiences. In other words, without a body, without emotions as we know them, how does the soul experience? Is there a possibility that emotions have a spiritual component that is part of the soul? Investigation of this kind

simply stimulates more questions that lead one to contemplate the basic question of immortality. Whether to believe that there is life after death or not is a choice each person must make. The question then is how does this belief or lack thereof affect the quality of our lives? The idea of annihilation is not a comforting one and it cannot help but have a demoralizing affect. If a person believes that there is only this lifetime or this world then why not try to gain as much pleasure and material possessions as possible? It is understandable why many have this attitude that is driven by their aversion and fear of death.

The realization or belief of a continuance that one can affect or modify by the choices and behavior in this world, is uplifting and stimulates the desire for higher aspirations and virtues, or on the other hand, can cause remorse and trepidation. Either way, there is an amelioration of behavior causing a better outcome. Regardless of whether there is proof or not, it would seem that the belief in an afterlife is still a better option. In the past, the concepts of the soul and what happens to it after death were pretty grim; hanging around the grave, going to a half-life place like sheol, or being born as an insect. None of these options seem very inspiring. Having a more positive concept as in these quotations, would hopefully have a conducive effect on the psyche which is beneficial to the individual and to society.

When we examine the evolution of these beliefs throughout the ages, it is obvious that humans have woven together a tapestry of myth, imagination, horrific and angelic visions, and hopefully, a thread of inspiration. It makes sense that anyone with reason would understandably reject this tattered mess out of hand. However, the fact that humans seem to be hard-wired to wonder about matters like life after death and to have the imagination to picture it, however flawed, implies that there is a higher reality waiting to be discovered. Why would there be a key without a lock? Or a drop without an ocean somewhere? The mystery beckon to us: It longs for discovery and although it may never be solved, our journey to it is ultimately heroic and creative.



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