

Body, Mind, Soul and Spirit

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Abstract

This paper presents the Bahá'í view of human nature, which involves an interaction between spirit, soul and body. It argues that these same elements also exist in the Semitic line of religions as well as in the Far Eastern ones. The paper sets out to demonstrate that both the so-called Western dualist and Eastern monist traditions are in fact tripartite in character, where monism provides the underlying rationale and unity for dualism. Another theme addressed in this work is the conflict between traditional religious beliefs and modern science concerning the immortality of the soul. It presents the Bahá'í many-world approach to human beings and their place in the cosmos, and argues that such a view is perfectly consistent with both traditional religion and modern science.

1. Introduction

The belief in an afterlife is universal. In practically every culture since recorded history, human beings have looked upon death as a door separating us from another world, and people from all cultures offer up prayers for their departed. It is difficult to explain exactly how this belief arose and why it has persisted. Few things are as certain and yet so mysterious as death.

Most religions believe that the fruits of our actions and thoughts are in some way propagated on into another world. In one way or another, each of the world's religious traditions describes human nature and our place in the cosmos in terms of a spiritual journey. Although the end of each journey may be called by a different name, a "Heaven", a "Paradise" or a "Nirvana", they all bear remarkable resemblance to one another. Although the route to each religious heaven might vary, they are all at

the end of the day concerned about cosmological justice and the maintenance of universal moral balance.

In the Semitic line of religions, the Judaic-Christian-Islamic one, the traveller on the spiritual journey is described in terms of a "human spirit" or "soul", inherently different to the world of its body. "Wisdom" in these traditions frequently involves choosing the world of the "spirit" as opposed to the world of "matter", and striving to arrive at a situation where the "spirit" prevails.

In traditional Christian theology, human nature is described in terms of the well-known biblical image of a "half-angel" self, struggling to overcome a "half-animal" self¹. Historically, this Christian self-portrait intermingled with the Ancient Greek belief of the soul being immortal and fundamentally different to our perishable bodies. Both in terms of theology and philosophy, the distinction between an eternal "soul" and a transient "body" has dominated Western thought, and is usually referred to as "dualism". In theology, the 5th century priest, St. Augustine of Hippo is usually cited to be the most famous exponent of dualism, while in philosophy, apart from Plato and Socrates, reference is usually made to the 17th century pioneer of modern science, the French mathematician, René Descartes.

In Far Eastern religious traditions, the spiritual traveller might appear to describe his journey quite differently. In Buddhism and some strands of Hinduism, the purpose of the spiritual traveller is to rise above dualism. The goal of the journey is described in terms of the traveller reaching a selfless state of "Emptiness", or "Nothing". The mystical monism of the Eastern Religions involves the traveller becoming simultaneously united to the path and the world through which he traverses, and in so doing, he

¹ Man as a "little lower than angels" is described in Psalms 8: 3-6, "what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; and hast put all things under his feet". The apostle St Paul describes a conflict in human nature, "my inner being delights in the law of God. But I see a different law at work in my body - a law that fights against which my mind approves of" (Romans 7: 22-23). St Paul, in the same letter, refers to human nature being intrinsically bound by "sin" (Romans 7: 18-20).

reaches the goal.

Another difference between the Western dualist and Eastern monist spiritual traditions is apparent in how they describe the “self” of a human being. The Buddhist description is often taken by many to involve rejecting the existence of a personal “self” which survives death. Important qualities of the “soul” like human consciousness and its identity, according to many Buddhists is perishable. This belief not only seems to contradict prior Hindu beliefs concerning the existence of an individual “atman”, but seems at odds with orthodox Christian doctrine. Take for instance the view of the medieval scholastic philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas, which became official Catholic doctrine for many centuries. Aquinas presents reasons why the soul is not only immortal, but also why it is personal and unique².

There are many such differences between Western and Eastern religious traditions, but whether they really represent genuinely conflicting descriptions about human nature is an issue to be examined in this paper. Often the doctrines that divide religious people from one another are in fact not reflected in their own sacred scriptures. The argument advanced here is that the Buddhist description of the soul in all its major aspects shares much common ground with the concept of an immortal soul of other religions.

On a broader note, Western dualism and Eastern monism are still variations upon a common theme. Both Western and Eastern religious traditions share the common conviction that our life has meaning, that there is an afterlife and that the two are somehow related. They share the conviction that we are accountable for our actions, not only in this world but in the world beyond. In both cases, the universe maintains a moral balance, and human beings are essentially moral beings. This is of course, not only true about the world’s major religious traditions, but also arguably true of all religions.

There has however, been considerable opposition to traditional religious views on the afterlife and human nature in modern western secular societies. This opposition is often linked with modern science, and

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 76:2, chapter 5, p. 113.

whether this is altogether fair to science, is one of the themes that will be examined in this paper. Modern science is often invoked to suggest that we are mere fragments of matter in a world that is neither about us or for us. The influential philosopher of science, Bertrand Russell, writing early this century stated that the "world which Science presents for our belief", involves the notion that "man is a product of causes which had no provision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual beyond the grave"³.

The above citation from Russell, perhaps the most widely read modern Western philosopher, is diametrically opposite to his ancient counterpart, Socrates,

"Is not what we call death a freeing and separation of soul from body... and the desire to free the soul is found chiefly or rather only, in the true philosopher; in fact the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body... true philosophers make dying their profession."⁴

Death for Socrates is the culmination of wisdom and all true philosophers should seek to attain its liberation. Death for Russell, is a process of atoms dispersing, and nothing more. Russell is of course, one of the most famous spokesmen for the warfare thesis between science and religion this century. Because human beings are supposed to be nothing more than "accidental collocations of atoms", there is no life after death, no justice beyond the grave. Now the degree of sophistication may have changed since Russell wrote the above words, but the fundamental axioms behind it remain the same. In one way or another, a scientific description of human beings is associated with rejecting the belief in an immortal soul or an afterlife. In these modern times, it is more usual to find descriptions of the mind in terms of physical causes and physical causes alone, as opposed to say an immortal spiritual entity which has moral purposes. In the philosophy of mind,

³ Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship*, an essay in the book "Mysticism and Logic", p. 10.

⁴ Socrates, *Pheado*, 67a-68b.

Russell's approach is sometimes referred to as "physicalism".⁵

Just to what extent the modern western "physicalist" view has eroded belief in the afterlife is a complex question, and not one that will be pursued here. It certainly seems to have caused much doubt about it, but in the author's experience, most modern Western people still attend funerals and pray for their departed family members and friends. So perhaps the impact of physicalism has disturbed deeper traditional beliefs, but not eradicated them - even in the modern West. If this is the case, there is undoubtedly a large gap between theory and practice. Consider the modern philosophy of mind. Very few professional philosophers who work in the philosophy of mind write in defence of traditional religious views of mind. Most the literature in the modern philosophy of mind describes the mind in terms of physical causes, a kind of "physical monism" which is usually incompatible with the traditional dualism of the West, or the spiritual monism of the East.

Most traditional religious accounts of human beings involve the belief that they have freewill. Many theories in the modern philosophy of mind on the other hand, particularly those that align themselves to science, either directly or tacitly amount to rejecting free-will. Ironically, the philosophers who arrive at such conclusions would want to deny that they were in any way "forced" into them: they would want to maintain that they arrived at their innovative and creative theories by themselves - by their own free-will.

It should be noted that this contradiction between the theory and practice of modern philosophy is now a global one. Even in South Eastern Asia where religious traditions have a much stronger social profile than in the West, the university curriculum in the philosophy of mind is dominated by secular philosophies of mind, that is, they either directly reject or indirectly undermine traditional religious views of human nature. The

⁵ Various different forms of physicalism have appeared since Russell, these include behaviourism, central state materialism, the brain-mind identity theory, functionalism, connectionism, etc, see the book, *Body and Mind* by Keith Campbell. The latest forms of physicalism often use computers to model the mind. A whole new area of cognitive science has sprung up in the last few decades which attempts to describe and explain mental phenomena in terms of a set of complex interactive and adaptive software instructions, see *The Minds I* by Hofstadter and Dennet.

physicalist human self-portrait is diametrically opposed to the fundamental axioms of all religions. Whether it be the Buddhist journey to Nirvana, or the Christian journey to Heaven, the attempt to squeeze human experience into the narrow confines of physical causes and physical causes alone, naturally leads to the death of an afterlife and points towards a universe that has no moral balance.

The attack of physicalism on traditional religion has of course, occurred first within Western culture and largely takes the form of criticisms against Western dualism. Russell describes a process whereby the word "soul" was gradually replaced by "mind", and where the word "mind" was in time, replaced by "subject".⁶ Russell himself contrasted his physicalist view with Plato's dualism, Aristotle's "substance", and Aquinas's "embodied soul". He also pointed out the contradictions associated with Aquinas's thesis of bodily resurrection.

In all his criticisms of Western spiritual traditions, Russell took his own view to be representative of science. He stated for instance, that "Natural knowledge only enables us to recognise a thing by its attributes" and he takes a "substance" to denote the "sum of its attributes", and goes on to state that, "there is no need to suppose an unknowable core, in which his attributes inhere like pins in a pin-cushion. What is absolutely and essentially unknowable cannot even be known to exist, and there is no point in supposing that it does".⁷ He ascribes this latter view to some followers of the 17th century philosopher John Locke, but it is clearly also a view with which he agrees. Russell's philosophy is based on what he understood to be scientific facts. In connection with soul-body dualism, he states for instance, "The primary facts which we can observe have no such dualism, and give no reason for regarding either "things" or "persons" as anything but collections of phenomena"⁸. Russell's factual representation of science is however, questionable.⁹

Russell's detailed criticisms of the soul-body doctrine are many, but

⁶ B. Russell, *Religion and Science*, chapter Soul and Body.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 115-6.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 121-2.

⁹ see the author's paper in *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol.1, entitled "The Spiritual Foundations of Science" and also in the author's book, *The Universe Within*.

what is important here is to articulate something of the spirit behind them. His concern generally relates to preserving scientific objectivity, as he understood it. In particular, he spoke out against people holding beliefs that go beyond what the scientific facts show. This concern for scientific objectivity is of course commendable, but is it really fair to reject belief in an immortal soul on that basis? The Bahá'í Faith is an instance where a religion upholds the integrity of scientific objectivity, while at the same time adhering to the doctrine of an immortal soul. This article will attempt to show how these two beliefs need not be in conflict.

In his celebrated book, 'The Concept of Mind', the philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle writing around the middle of this century disparagingly referred to Cartesian Dualism, that is, Descartes' philosophy of mind, as "the dogma of the Ghost in a Machine".¹⁰ Without going into Ryle's detailed criticisms, the "ghost in a machine" metaphor epitomises many of the difficulties that religious dualism faces in the modern world.

Like a ghost, the soul is difficult to measure in empirical terms, and the natural question to ask is, where is it located? It is also difficult to understand how a ghost might be moved by or move anything physically. By implying that the soul is like a ghost, the same difficulties for the soul are suggested and the physicalist often asks the question of how exactly the soul interacts with the body. This question was not given a clear answer by Descartes, and it is often assumed to be an inherent weakness of dualism.

Another difficult question relates to identifying the exact moment when an immortal soul comes into being. On the individual level, this translates into asking when an immortal soul is co-joined to its body. Or on a collective level, the question translates into determining the point in human evolution at which souls appeared. Yet another question is what makes a human being unique, that is, how does one soul differ from another? These are only some of the objections that have been made against dualism. Many books which collect together important works in the philosophy mind, often start off with undermining dualism as a valid theory of mind based upon some of these criticisms¹¹.

¹⁰ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p. 17.

¹¹ see *Body and Mind*, by K. Campbell.

There is an additional element in the modern approach to human nature which goes beyond philosophy. This is the question of the difference between human beings and animals. Ever since the theory of evolution, the scientific approach has always been associated with the view that human beings are not in principle different to animals, and that both are best understood in terms of natural causes.

This paper will outline some Bahá'í responses to the above questions. The discussion will present the Bahá'í tripartite model of human nature which is founded on an interaction between body, soul and spirit, correlating it both to Western dualism and Eastern spiritual monism. This model of human nature will be related to the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In addition, the Bahá'í approach will be used to identify tripartite elements in the philosophies of Plato and Descartes, which are usually described to be dualist. Finally, the weaknesses and strengths of modern approaches to human nature will be discussed in the light of the Bahá'í principle that science should be in harmony with religion.

The first point to make about the Bahá'í belief in the existence of an immortal soul is that it is foundational, a cornerstone belief upon which many others depend. Understanding the soul is an integral part of the Bahá'í approach to topics as diverse as God, science, and world peace. In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, began a talk in Boston, America, in the following way:

“In the world of existence there is nothing so important as spirit, nothing so essential as the spirit of man. The spirit of man is the most noble of phenomena. The spirit of man is the meeting between man and God. The spirit of man is the animus of human life and the collective center of all human virtues. The spirit of man is the cause of the illumination of this world. The world may be likened to the body: man is the spirit of the body, because the light of the world is the human spirit. Man is the life of the world, and the life of man is the spirit. The happiness of the world depends upon man, and the happiness of man is dependent on the spirit”¹².

¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 239-240.

'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to present arguments in favour of the existence of a human soul and its immortality, and finishes the discourse by the following closing remarks: "As we have shown that there is a spirit and that this spirit is permanent and everlasting, we must strive to learn of it. May you become informed of its power, hasten to render it divine, to have it become sanctified and holy and make it the very light of the world illuminating the East and the West".

As the above quotations imply, the Bahá'í belief in an immortal soul is inextricably related to the spiritual nature of human beings. Its importance in Bahá'í eschatology cannot be over-emphasised.

Another point that needs to be made from the outset is that the human soul according to the Bahá'í Faith is a profound hidden mystery whose true nature lies beyond our grasp. Bahá'u'lláh declares that:

"Verily I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending."¹³

Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh states,

"Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him. If it be faithful to God, it will reflect His light, and will, eventually, return unto Him. If it fail, however, in its allegiance to its Creator, it will become a victim to self and passion, and will, in the end, sink in their depths".¹⁴

The above passage has important implications for the present discussion.

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 160.

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 158.

From the Bahá'í perspective, we cannot obtain objective knowledge of the soul, only personal glimpses of it. This means that discussion about the soul is inherently imprecise, and resembles more the language of poetry than the logic of a mathematical proof, or the empirical demonstrations of the applied sciences. Descriptions of the soul in the Bahá'í writings are often made in terms of analogies, and each analogy illustrates a different aspect of the soul. No single analogy however, describes the soul in objectively precise terms. Since notions about the soul are inherently subjective, we will inevitably have our own preferred analogies where the same words have different meanings to different people. What some call "soul", others have referred to as "mind" or "intellect", or "spirit". This is particularly true when comparing beliefs about the soul between various cultures. For instance, to the ancient Greeks, it was the "mind" or "intellect" (*Nous*) which formed the immortal part of man, while on the other hand, the soul was a generic term which applied to all forms of life. This is apparent in Aristotle's writings, who when using the soul in relation to human beings, always qualified it and used the term, "rational soul". On the other hand, in the Christian tradition, the soul is distinguished from the "spirit", and it is the "spirit" which is qualified in different instances, such as the "human spirit" in one context, or the "Holy Spirit" in another. In Buddhism, it is the mind which is eternal, as opposed to a perishable "self".

Often, ambiguities of terminology are created by different translations of the same text. Even in the Bahá'í writings there is the multiple use of the words "soul", "mind" and "spirit". Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, noted this problem:

"When studying at present¹⁵, in English, the available Bahá'í writings on the subject of body, soul and spirit, one is handicapped by a certain lack of clarity because not all were translated by the same person, and also there are, as you know, still many Bahá'í writings untranslated. But there is no doubt that spirit and soul seem to have been interchanged in meaning sometimes; soul and mind have, likewise, been interchanged in meaning, no doubt due to difficulties arising from different translations."¹⁶

¹⁵ 1946

¹⁶ *Unto Him Shall We Return*, p. 60.

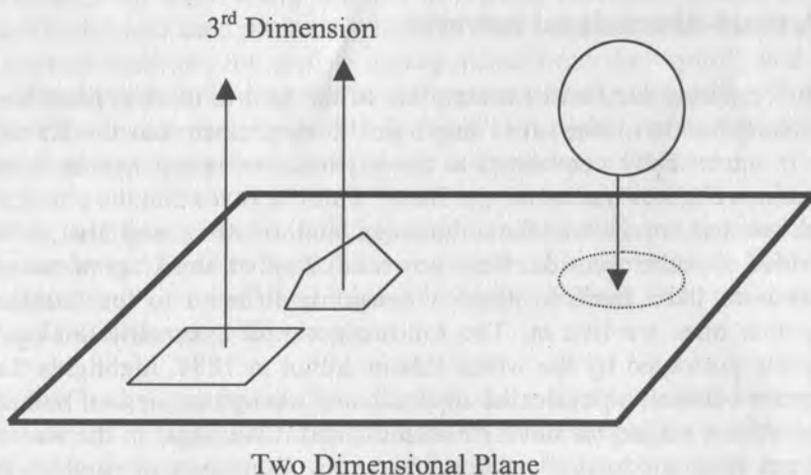
Since there are many sources of potential confusion, not only from cultural differences but also from personal preferences, the Bahá'í approach to the soul requires flexibility in the use of words and metaphors and discourages disputes about it. In the final analysis, we can have at best only partial glimpses of its inherent hidden mystery, and even then, this tiny glimmer of understanding will be irreducibly personal. For this reason, it should be stated from the outset that this paper does not attempt to give a rigorously complete account of the Bahá'í concept of the soul. It only presents some analogies which have been helpful to the author in correlating Bahá'í beliefs to a few issues of human nature that involve modern philosophy and various religious traditions. The following discussion reflects the author's background as a professional scientist, and might appear at times a little technical to the general reader, but in the light of the foregoing discussion, such bias is inevitable.

2. A multi-dimensional universe

When comparing the Bahá'í description of the soul to other approaches, particularly modern ones, it is important to emphasise that the Bahá'í Faith is intrinsically committed to the existence of many worlds. Like most other religious traditions, the Bahá'í Faith believes that the physical world we live in is somehow bounded and relative, and that it is embedded in other worlds. One powerful way of thinking of many worlds is to liken them to other dimensions, different to the familiar space-time ones we live in. The following simple geometric analogy, creatively portrayed by the writer Edwin Abbot in 1884, highlights the difference between a physicalist approach and a religious view of human nature. Abbot named his novel "Flatland", and it is unique in the way it combines religious imagery with mathematics. It consists of parables in the language of geometry. Much of the imagery evokes the timeless drama relating to the birth of a religion: the messenger coming from another realm, the conversion of the first disciple, the disbelief of the populace and persecution by the prevailing clergy, and so on. Here a variation of Abbot's Flatland is formulated to act as a metaphor for the soul.

Imagine geometric shapes are confined to move on a two-dimensional

plane, as illustrated in the figure below. Imagine further, that these shapes, a triangle, square, circle etc, are animated with life. They obviously see the world quite differently to us. As they move along the flat plane, they do not see shapes, but can only discern lines. The inhabitants of Flatland use touch to overcome the difficulty of shape recognition. Also, through the existence of a fog, the more sophisticated shapes deduce geometric information by sight: distances further away appear dim while those close to the observer appear bright, so depth information about objects can be extracted. Abbot describes a community of geometric shapes which are obsessively class conscious: the position of a shape in the social hierarchy rises in direct proportion to the number of sides it has. The square has more moral and intellectual standing than a triangle, but is inferior to pentagons, and so on. The highest class, the priestly class, are polygons which have hundreds of sides.



One night, on the eve of a new millennium, a square has a strange vision. He encounters a stranger who mysteriously appears in his sitting room without having entered the doors of his house. The stranger is somehow simultaneously able to be a point and a perfect circle, changing its size at will. In response to the square's questions demanding to know its identity, the stranger declares that "I am the circle of all circles" and says

that he is the bearer of an important message to the inhabitants of Flatland. He explains that he has chosen the square to be his first disciple, and the message he brings is the "Gospel of the 3rd dimension". The stranger of course, turns out to be a sphere crossing the surface of Flatland.

The act of religious conversion is paralleled by flat geometric figures coming to believe in the 3rd dimension. The spiritual perfections of a religious founder is creatively portrayed in terms of him being able to move in a higher dimension. The three dimensional stranger can look upon the two dimensional inhabitants of Flatland from a much more comprehensive perspective than they can ever see themselves. None of the inhabitants of Flatland can, for instance, see their "insides", but the fact that each shape must have an "inside" can be inferred from the rules of geometry. A point extended in a direction perpendicular to itself produces a line of say 3 inches. A line extended out perpendicularly to itself by 3 inches produces a square having an area of 3² inches. The more mathematically minded inhabitants of Flatland understood this. But earlier in the same evening, when one of the square's grandsons reasoned by analogy that there must also be geometrical meaning to the quantity 3³ produced by a square somehow moving in a direction perpendicular to itself, the square dismissed his speculations as nonsense, stating categorically that "Geometry has only two dimensions". But later that night, the stranger confirmed that the square's grandson had reasoned correctly. In order to overcome the square's scepticism about the existence of the 3rd dimension, he lifted the square out of Flatland's surface, enabling him to see for the first time, the "insides" of the houses and inhabitants of Flatland. In what he interpreted to be a mystical vision, the square saw Flatland from above, and viewed the objects of Flatland in a much more complete way than he had ever seen them before.

Abbot's simple but imaginative Flatland analogy can also be used to depict the relationship of the human soul to its body. The soul may be represented by a luminous object placed above Flatland, like the sun shining on a flat landscape. In this analogy, the sun represents an individual soul, and its brain/body is denoted by the landscape. The analogy of the sun representing the soul whose light is in some way

reflected in the body is given in the Bahá'í writings.¹⁷ The rays of the sun reaching Flatland models the way thoughts are communicated from the soul to the brain. If the question be asked, where is the soul located? Then according to this analogy, it is obvious that the soul cannot be located in the brain or body - no more than the sun can be located on the surface of the landscape. Just as the flat geometric figures of Flatland can never look out into the 3rd dimension directly, so we too, can never observe the soul directly. But just as the existence of the 3rd dimension can be reasoned by analogy from one and two dimensions, so too is the existence of a 4th dimension understandable to us by analogy. If we live in a multi-dimensional universe, the physicalist insistence that the soul be explained only in terms of physical causes in the brain is obviously similar to insisting that all objects in the universe lie on a Flatland-like surface, which is of course, unnecessarily restrictive.

In the Flatland novel, Abbot even hints that a 4th dimension does exist and refers to it as "Thoughtland". The square, destined to be the first disciple of the gospel of the 3rd dimension, reasons that there must be a dimension perpendicular to three dimensional space, and that someone out in the 4th dimension can somehow look upon the inhabitants of three dimensions and see their place in the universe in much greater perspective than they themselves could ever imagine.

There is in principal no conflict with a religious multi-dimensional view of human nature and modern science. It is true that if the soul lies in a realm outside space and time and is not located in the brain, a complete scientific description of it may not be possible. But this need not be cause for alarm, after all, if we do live in a multi-dimensional world, then one would expect science to have some inherent limitations, particularly with respect to those special human characteristics that make science possible in the first place. The main point here is that scepticism about the religious view of human nature should not be founded on modern science.

Abbot's intuition that we live in four-dimensional space was confirmed

¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh's sun/cloud/landscape analogy, *Gleanings*, LXXX, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sun/mirror analogy, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 239-40, will also be quoted later in the text.

by Einstein's special relativity theory which appeared only 21 years after Flatland was first published.¹⁸ In special relativity, time plays the role of a 4th dimension, and the space-time continuum forms the landscape upon which all events in our world are located. This theory showed that space and time are relative quantities which depend on our own frame of reference: if we use an object's motion to measure time intervals or measure its spatial dimensions, what we observe will depend upon our relative motion to that object. The more our relative speeds differ, the greater the space-time distortion. In the extreme case, if our relative speeds approach the speed of light, events that would ordinarily take one second in our frame of reference, seem to take eternity if viewed from the other frame of reference.

Einstein's theory of General Relativity, published around a decade after his special relativity appeared, also brought about a profound revolution in our notions of space and time. If the four-dimensional space-time continuum of special relativity is represented by Flatland, then the landscape implied by General Relativity is a realm of space-time warps and curves. Einstein related the contours of this landscape to gravitational mass, where the distortions of space-time are created by the action of the gravitational force. The motions of planets around stars are now explained in terms of space-time geometry instead of Newtonian forces acting at a distance. For instance, if we observe events close to a large star, the motion of objects around it reveal to us a space-time terrain where time is slowed down. In the extreme case, a second between events on earth becomes eternity at the centre of a space-time singularity such as a black hole. As is well known, the existence of black holes have been empirically verified in modern astronomy. In fact, the theory of General Relativity has received a considerable amount of experimental evidence in its favour, and is now well accepted amongst physicists.

The surface-land of General Relativity implies that events in our universe are trapped in a space-time fabric which folds and undulates. It

¹⁸ see the author's books, *Science and Religion*, and *The Universe Within* which discuss at length Einstein's theories and their harmony with philosophy and religion. A clear and concise description of special and general relativity for the non-scientist, is given by Einstein himself in his essays which are available in the book *Relativity, the Special and the General Theory*.

indicates we are creatures that dwell on a landscape that is in some sense bounded, relative, and in this respect, it is similar to Abbot's Flatland. Moreover, physicists since Einstein have been postulating the existence of many more than four dimensions. As is well known, in some of the Grand Unified Field theories (GUTs) of modern physics, seven extra dimensions to our ordinary three spatial ones are conjectured to exist. It turns out that these extra dimensions help create the framework in which the various forces of nature can be united - at least in theory¹⁹. Just as Abbot and many mathematicians have long recognised, there is nothing to exclude the existence of higher dimensions. In fact their existence is a logical extension of our mathematical experience. The argument by analogy is still quite plausible: instead of our universe being confined to a kind of Flatland where it is limited to what science can discover, it is more likely that we live in a multi-dimensional terrain. We cannot directly look into the other dimensions, no more than the creatures of Flatland can look into the 3rd dimension. But that does not mean that there are no indicators that the other dimensions exist.

The results of modern physics present us with many indirect signs that we live in a multi-dimensional world. Imagine the movements of an ant on the surface of an apple. There are various reasons for it to suspect that there are dimensions beyond its two dimensional surface-world. When it completes an entire revolution of the apple and returns to its initial position, or when it adds up the angles of a triangle and finds them to be greater than 180 degrees, it might suspect that higher dimensions actually exist, although it will not be able to look up into the 3rd dimension directly. The results of General Relativity give us similar results: we deduce that light bends in space-time, and a beam of light which we transmit might even return to us - if we could wait that long. If we send out beams of light between three distant points and measure the angles between them, they too would not add up to 180 degrees. Our world no more obeys the laws of a Euclidean like Flatland than does the surface of an apple. So just as there are reasons for the ant to believe that there is more to its world than the surface of the apple, so too for us, there are many indicators to think that our world is not limited to our space-time world. There is however, an important difference: to the best

¹⁹ see for instance, *Superforce* by Paul Davies, written on a level the general reader can understand.

of our knowledge, the ant is no mathematician.

It should be noted that General and Special Relativity are only two theories of modern physics which imply that we live in a multi-dimensional universe, there are of course, more such theories. For instance, Quantum Mechanics, also developed in the early part of this century, revises our notions of matter. The apparent incompatibility of a ghost and a machine in Ryle's metaphor derives much from our "classical" view of matter. In classical physics, matter consists of objects which move like billiard balls, bouncing and colliding off one another. But quantum mechanics reveals that what we see as matter actually consists of scattering and reflecting waves of energy. Atoms are clouds of energy, vibrating and constantly transforming into different forms. Modern physics replaces the classical notion of matter moving in absolute space and time with the more fundamental concept of waves of energy vibrating in space-time. The seeming permanence of matter, on the subatomic scale, turns out to be an illusion. At this level, copper can be turned into gold and vice-versa. Matter appears to be pockets of energy trapped in a crinkled space-time fabric. Even what we conceive of as a vacuum is actually filled with the continual generation and annihilation of ghostly "virtual" particles and their anti-particles. All of this is now quite well known and widely accepted.²⁰

In the Bahá'í writings, the belief in many worlds is often illustrated in terms of parallels drawn between the mineral, vegetable, animal and human realms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the following description of the afterlife, explaining that although it is very close to our world, we are nevertheless, unaware of it,

"the souls of the children of the Kingdom, after their separation from the body, ascend unto the realm of everlasting life. But if ye ask as to the place, know ye that the world of existence is a single world, although its stations are various and distinct. For example, the mineral life occupieth its own plane, but a mineral entity is without any awareness at all of the vegetable kingdom, and indeed, with its inner tongue denieth that there is any such kingdom. In the same way, a vegetable entity knoweth nothing

²⁰ for more on the philosophical implications of Quantum Mechanics see *Quantum Reality, Beyond the New Physics*, by Nick Herbert.

of the animal world, remaining completely heedless and ignorant thereof, for the stage of the animal is higher than that of the vegetable, and the vegetable is veiled from the animal world and inwardly denieth the existence of that world - all this while animal, vegetable and mineral dwell together in the one world. In the same way the animal remaineth totally unaware of that power of the human mind which graspeth universal ideas and layeth bare the secrets of creation - so that a man who liveth in the east can make plans and arrangements for the west; can unravel mysteries; although located on the continent of Europe can discover America; although sited on the earth can lay hold of the inner realities of the stars of heaven. Of this power of discovery which belongeth to the human mind, this power which can grasp abstract and universal ideas, the animal remaineth totally ignorant, and indeed denieth its existence. In the same way, the denizens of this earth are completely unaware of the world of the Kingdom and deny the existence thereof. They ask, for example: 'Where is the Kingdom? Where is the Lord of the Kingdom?' These people are even as the mineral and the vegetable, who know nothing whatever of the animal and the human realm; they see it not; they find it not. Yet the mineral and vegetable, the animal and man, are all living here together in this world of existence".²¹

According to the Bahá'í Faith, there is no real separation between this world and the next, they are both part of a "single world". Just as the mineral and vegetable live in the same world as the animal or human being, they are not aware of them in any meaningful way. This lack of awareness is obviously related to a difference in consciousness. In the same way, is it not possible, indeed, is it not perfectly logical, that beyond what we see of the world, there should exist higher states of consciousness?

If we take ourselves in analogy to other forms of life, everything in our experience points to there being worlds beyond ours. Take for instance, a caterpillar. It might seem that the world of the caterpillar is limited to an existence of twigs and branches, a leafy surface world. What would a caterpillar's awareness of the 3rd dimension be like? In what way could the caterpillar be aware of the sky, or the birds that fly through the air? Yet, after it undergoes chrysalis and emerges in the form of a butterfly,

²¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 193-194.

the same creature is able to flutter through the atmosphere, which when compared to its former life, might be described as a celestial realm, a world which it had formerly been unaware of. Could the afterlife not in the same way lie beyond our grasp? This argument does not prove that the afterlife exists, but it does make it more plausible than the opposite alternative, which is to believe that there are no more worlds other than the ones we can understand or perceive. We cannot and should not use science to exclude the possibility of there being an immortal soul. Science and religion are not combatants in a true contest, both can be united in their search for universal truths.

Imagine a world without relative motion, where all objects appear stationary and even movement inside your body ceases. If somehow you could retain consciousness, would you be aware of time? From moment to moment, if there is no observable change in your world, would time exist? Would you not be in eternity? Or imagine that after sleeping, everything appears exactly the same to you as it was before you fell asleep, would you have any way of knowing how long you had been sleeping? Obviously time is applicable to the decay and growth of bodies, to the change and relative motion of objects. When however we are in a state of sleep, that is, when the senses are dormant, our minds seem to operate independently from time. Our conception of days and nights come from the earth's spinning motion with respect to the sun, but if we were able to live on the surface of the sun, days or nights would have no meaning. From the Bahá'í perspective, the world of the afterlife lies outside time and yet exists alongside it. It is comparable to the way our dreams coexist alongside our bodies when we sleep,

“Those who have passed on through death have a sphere of their own. It is not removed from ours; their work, the work of the Kingdom, is ours; but it is sanctified from what we call ‘time and place.’ Time with us is measured by the sun. When there is no more sunrise, and no more sunset, that kind of time does not exist for man. Those who have ascended have different attributes from those who are still on earth, yet there is no real separation”²².

That our world is embedded in higher worlds is poetically conveyed in

²² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 96.

the following passage by 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

“And as we reflect, we observe that man is like unto a tiny organism contained within a fruit; this fruit hath developed out of the blossom, the blossom hath grown out of the tree, the tree is sustained by the sap, and the sap formed out of earth and water. How then can this tiny organism comprehend the nature of the garden, conceive of the gardener and comprehend his being?”²³

To picture ourselves in terms of a tiny organism, with many worlds lying beyond our comprehension or perception is surely a humble, open-minded position to take of our position in the cosmos. To claim that there can be nothing more evolved than what science can discover, or to state, as Bertrand Russell stated, that “Whatever can be known, can be known by means of science”²⁴, is clearly closed-minded - a “Flatland” position to take. The irony is that most people today generally associate modernity with being open-minded, and usually think of traditional religion as being closed-minded.

The confusion here is created by dogmas in the name of both science and religion. Although a religion may be open-minded with respect to the existence of many worlds, its followers may be closed-minded about it. Mediocre scientists and dogmatic religious believers share a lot in common. Both reductionist science and puritanical religion de-emphasise the role of the individual in their pursuit to acquire objective truths. Both are based not so much on what they believe, but what they reject. “Positivist science” became infamous for relegating “non-science” to an inferior truth-status, while dogmatic religion is well known for denying salvation to believers who do not share exactly its own creed of confession. Positivist science often attempts to reduce intangible experiences to a series of empirical facts, while religious dogma translates faith into a set of rituals, rites and specific codes of practice. A parallel between closed-minded science and dogmatic religion is presented in detail elsewhere by the author.²⁵ On the other hand, there are many parallels one can draw between genuine scientists and truly

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Auguste Forel and the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 19.

²⁴ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 788.

²⁵ see the author's book, *The Universe Within*, chap. 12, *The Puritanical Mind*.

religious people. Both the scientific genius and genuine religious believer are people of great faith, humble before the great cosmological mysteries of our existence, and commitment to the many-worlds hypothesis is a natural part of their world-view.

3. Apparent Dualism

'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the soul or the "human spirit" often starts out by contrasting the intellectual qualities of the mind with the animal instincts of the body. From the Bahá'í point of view, the distinguishing feature of being human lies in the power of thought. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, "The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. The thought force and the animal force are partners. Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings".²⁶ This passage strongly echoes the Rationalist tradition in Western Philosophy. It is for instance, close to Descartes', "I think therefore I am" dictum.

The seventeenth century Rationalists, as with those in ancient and medieval times, took consciousness, the power of abstraction and ability to reason to be the primary qualities of being human. Descartes had come to this conclusion by a process of systematic doubt. He found that he could doubt the validity of things such as our perception of objects, the existence of the external world and the truth of mathematical theorems. He could doubt whether he had a body, but could not doubt the process of thinking, since this in itself involved thinking. He concluded that,

"From this I recognised that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is to be conscious and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing. Thus this self, that is to say the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and is even more easily known; and even if the body were not there at all, the soul would be just what it is."²⁷

²⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, p. 32.

Similar arguments exist in the Islamic philosophical tradition.²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá also follows these kinds of arguments to demonstrate the superiority of mind over body. He notes that even though parts of the body may be dismembered, the mind is not affected, the "whole body may be paralyzed; and yet the mind, spirit, remains ever the same".²⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá often refers to an animal as, "a captive of nature", that is, its behaviour is dominated by the demands of its senses and regulated directly by the laws of nature. He contrasts this with the minds of human beings, which, by discovering the laws of nature, put them to whatever use they wish. Animals are bound by biological constraints, whereas human minds are not. For instance, the fact that human beings can travel through the air or in the deep ocean comes from the mind's power of intellectual discovery, and not from any developments in biological evolution. We have in this sense broken the laws of nature. From the Bahá'í point of view, by being discoverers of the laws of nature and not passive subjects to it, human beings show that they have an active inner force which is not present in animals. In comparison to this human conscious active force, the body of man or the animal is unconscious and passive. This belief is of course, similar to Aristotle's Active Intellect, which communicates and animates a "passive sensory" brain, or Plato's self-moved soul³⁰. Plato made the distinction that human souls are active and cannot be understood in terms of a chain of prior physical causes, unlike the "souls" of other objects. Similarly, the ability of human beings to discover the laws of nature, from the Bahá'í perspective, shows that their minds are in some way independent from them. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also often used an argument that was presented by Plato and attributed to Socrates. This is the view that the human soul is a "simple" element, that is, it is not a combination of elements. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, like Plato, uses this concept of the soul to argue for its immortality.³¹

²⁸ Avicenna's "floating man", see pp. 201-2, *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol.2.

²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 243.

³⁰ see Aristotle's Active Intellect described in *De Anima*, III.5, and Plato's self-moved soul described in *Phaedrus*.

³¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 77c-78d, known as the 'Affinity argument'. 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the incomposite nature of the Soul, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 306.

The commonly used distinction in the Bahá'í Writings to classify all objects and living beings into various "Kingdoms": the mineral, vegetable, animal and human kingdoms, is similar to Aristotle's three grades of life. Aristotle categorises all living beings into the "souls" of vegetables, animals and human beings. Also, similar to Aristotle's schema, the Bahá'í writings state that the prime characteristic of the vegetable is growth, for the animal it is sense perception, and for human beings it is the power of thought.

Aristotle's designation of the human soul as the "rational soul" is used in the Bahá'í writings on several occasions, and is acknowledged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be the "terminology of the philosophers".³² Like Aristotle, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasises that the rational soul is the only grade of life which is immortal.³³ In many instances, the word "spirit" is substituted for "soul", and Aristotle's grades of life are widened to include elements of belief that clearly come from the Semitic religious tradition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states for instance that "spirit" is universally divided into five categories: the vegetable spirit, the animal spirit, the human spirit, the spirit of faith, and the Holy Spirit".³⁴ The first three "spirits" are described in a manner similar to the way Aristotle describes "souls" in his three grades of life.

The above discussion demonstrates that the Bahá'í Faith's conception of the soul has many points in common with Western philosophical dualism. Broadly speaking, the same is true for Western theological dualism. The following passage by 'Abdu'l-Bahá echoes the well known spirit-matter distinction of Christianity,

"Man is the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality - that is to say he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light; that is why it has been said that the condition of man is the end of the night and the beginning of day. He has an animal side as well as an

³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208, pp. 217-18, pp. 239-40.

³³ "It is, further, in its separate state that the Intellect is just that which it is, and it is this alone that is immortal and eternal", Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III, Chap. 5, Intellect II, Active and Passive, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*, chap.55, p. 208.

³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, chap. 36, "Five Aspects of Spirit".

angelic side... Not in any other of the species in the world of existence is there such a difference, contrast, contradiction and opposition as in the species of man."³⁵

Here, the uniqueness of human beings is described in terms of them standing on the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds. There are many such passages which refer to the essential dual nature of human beings.³⁶

In Christianity, the dual nature of human beings is often described in terms of a sinful nature being in opposition to an angelic one. In Islam, the dual nature of human beings is usually expressed in terms of a conflict between the wicked against the righteous. In the Bahá'í Faith, human dualism is usually portrayed as a tension between animal like qualities and spiritual ones. The animal qualities are those related to survival, such as aggression, while the spiritual qualities typically include our ability to reason, to be selfless, and our capacity to be of service to others.

There are various analogies given in the Bahá'í writings in support of mind/body dualism. Human nature is likened to a rider on a horse, a bird in a cage, or the sun shining on a mirror. They are all used to express the soul's inherent independence from the body. The rider for instance will leave the horse when the horse cannot travel any further; the bird will fly free when the cage is broken; and the sun continues to shine even if the mirror is shattered.³⁷ The bird in the cage analogy is of course reminiscent of similar beliefs in other spiritual traditions. Plato for instance, likened the soul to be a chariot with broken winged horses which is trapped on earth.³⁸

³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 235-6.

³⁶ see *Paris Talks*, chapter on 'The Two Natures in Man', pp. 60-62, also *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 60, p. 295, p. 464.

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, rider/horse analogy, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 416, bird in a cage, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 228, sun/mirror, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 242.

³⁸ "Let us adopt this method, and compare the soul to a winged charioteer and his team acting together. Now all the horses and charioteers of the gods are good and come of good stock, but in other beings there is a mixture of good and bad ... Now we must try to tell how it is that we speak of both mortal and immortal living beings. Soul taken as a whole is in charge of all that is inanimate, and traverses the entire universe, appearing at

4. The Bahá'í Tripartite approach and its underlying monism

Soul/body dualism is not the only way that human nature is described in the Bahá'í writings. Often a tripartite distinction is made, involving an interaction between body, soul and spirit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá on several occasions refers to this tripartite view of human nature explicitly, as in the following passage,

“There are in the world of humanity three degrees; those of the body, the soul, and spirit. The body is the physical or animal degree of man. From the bodily point of view man is a sharer of the animal kingdom. The bodies alike of men and animals are composed of elements held together by the law of attraction. Like the animal, man possesses the faculties of the senses, is subject to heat, cold, hunger, thirst, etc.; unlike the animal, man has a rational soul, the human intelligence. This intelligence of man is the intermediary between his body and his spirit. When man allows the spirit, through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all Creation; because man, being the culmination of all that went before and thus superior to all previous evolutions, contains all the lower world within himself. Illumined by the spirit through the instrumentality of the soul, man's radiant intelligence makes him the crowning-point of Creation.”³⁹

Another explicit reference is given in the following passage,

“When we ponder over the reality of the microcosm, we discover that in the microcosm there are three realities. Man is endowed with an outer or physical reality. It belongs to the material realm, the animal kingdom... The human body is like animals subject to nature's laws. But man is endowed with a second reality, the rational or intellectual reality; and the intellectual reality of man predominates over nature... Yet there is a third reality, the spiritual reality. Through its medium one discovers spiritual revelations, a celestial faculty which is infinite as regards the

different times in different forms. When it is perfect and winged it moves on high and governs all creation, but the soul that has shed its wings falls until it encounters solid matters. There it settles and puts on an earthly body, which appears to be self-moving because of the power of soul that is in it, and this combination of soul and body is given the name of a living being and is termed mortal.” Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 246.

³⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 96-97.

intellectual as well as physical realms. That power is conferred upon man through the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is an eternal reality, an indestructible reality, a reality belonging to the divine, a supernatural kingdom; a reality whereby the world is illumined... It is the ray of the Sun of Reality."⁴⁰

The world of the spirit is described in a manner that resembles the Christian Holy Spirit, or Hindu Atman. The soul is not able to function unless it is filled with the Holy Spirit. Both intellectually and spiritually, human souls depend on the spirit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "By the power of the Holy Spirit, working through his soul, man is able to perceive the divine reality of things. All great works of art and science are witnesses to this power of the Spirit. The same Spirit gives eternal life"⁴¹. The Holy Spirit is the animating spiritual force which gives life to both the world of the soul and body. It is the force which links God to His creation. In the Bahá'í writings, God and his Manifestations are often likened to the Sun, the Holy Spirit is represented by its rays, and all living beings are symbolised by the earth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it in the following way,

"The Divine Reality may be likened to the sun and the Holy Spirit to the rays of the sun. As the rays of the sun bring light and warmth of the sun to the earth, giving life to all created things, so do the 'Manifestations' bring the power of the Holy Spirit from the Divine Sun of Reality to give light and life to the souls of men"⁴² ...The Holy Spirit is the Light from the Sun of Truth bringing, by its infinite power, life and illumination to all mankind, flooding all souls with Divine Radiance, conveying the blessings of God's Mercy to the whole world. The earth, without the medium of the warmth and light of the rays of the sun, could not receive benefits from the sun. Likewise the Holy Spirit is the very cause of the life of man; without the Holy Spirit he would have no intellect, he would be unable to acquire his scientific knowledge by which his great influence over the rest of creation is gained. The illumination of the Holy Spirit gives to man the power of thought, and enables him to make discoveries by which he bends the laws of nature to his will. The Holy

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 51.

⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 85.

⁴² In the Bahá'í writings, the term 'Manifestations of God' refers to the founders of the world's major religions. The 'Divine Sun of Reality' refers to God.

Spirit it is which, through the mediation of the Prophets of God, teaches spiritual virtues to man and enables him to attain Eternal Life.”⁴³

In the Bahá'í Faith, the world of the spirit is the uniting principle for the soul and body. The relationship between the immortal realm of the soul and the perishable world of the body is best understood with reference to the world of the spirit, since it is at this higher level that they have a common origin. Just as the physical life of all living beings on earth depend on the rays of the sun, the intellectual and spiritual life of human beings depend on an invisible sun, the “Sun of Reality”, the “Divine Reality”, the “Sun of Truth”, names which in the Bahá'í writings translate to mean God and His Manifestations. The main point is that both souls and bodies have a common point of reference: both, to their own degree are ultimately signs of God. Their unity and relationship to each other can only be understood in relation to the world of God and His Manifestations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states,

“The worlds of God are in perfect harmony and correspondence one and another. Each world in this limitless universe is, as it were, a mirror reflecting the history and nature of all the rest. The physical universe is, likewise, in perfect correspondence with the spiritual or divine realm. The world of matter is an outer expression or facsimile of the inner kingdom of the spirit. The world of minds corresponds with the world of hearts.”⁴⁴

The human material, intellectual and spiritual realms are interconnected, and are but different projections of the same world of spirit. Our physical universe, although a “facsimile” of a more real world, is nevertheless, a natural part of it.

Dualism, as it appears in the Bahá'í writings, does so upon the background world of the spirit, or world of God. If taken out of this all-important context, it will inevitably be misrepresented. It is precisely the filtering out of this element from our various spiritual traditions that characterise many modern descriptions of traditional dualism. Since they have a secular bias, they tend to tacitly miss out the uniting link between

⁴³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 270.

soul and body which was always there in a more religious framework. The world of the spirit provides the transpersonal element to human nature. It makes up the selfless part which inspires and nurtures the progress of the soul.

The world of the spirit provides rationale to the very idea of the soul. Dualism, viewed from this perspective is only the starting point. The soul is not only different to the body, but it is a powerful sign of the existence of a world beyond it. It is not a suspended immortal substance to be defined only in terms of what the body is not, but it is an "image of God". From this perspective, the concepts of God and the soul are inextricably linked. The faculties and qualities of the soul are bound together with the attributes of God. In fact in many religious traditions, knowledge of the soul is equated with knowledge of God, not in an objective sense, but in spiritual terms, that is, in an inner sense.⁴⁵

The soul as it appears in this world is a mere shadow of how it will appear in the next world: "Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye".⁴⁶ The Bahá'í tripartite approach has its focus primarily on the world of the spirit. This is the monist side of the Bahá'í Faith, and the nature of both soul and body can only be understood in terms of this third element. While both dualism and monism co-exist in Bahá'í teachings, monism is the uniting principle that underlies its dualism.

Many Bahá'í analogies which describe the soul and the afterlife can be readily interpreted in a tripartite way and serve to illustrate the aforementioned points. Take the often-used analogy of the foetus in the womb. In Bahá'u'lláh's words, "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 the mother".⁴⁷ The foetus represents our soul and the uterine world symbolises this world. We can have no more conception of

⁴⁵ see article "The Hindu Concept of God: Unity in Diversity", by the author, *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol.2, section 3.2, pp. 17-31.

⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 157.

what the afterlife is like than a foetus can imagine the world into which it will be born. Death in this life is not an end, but a birth into a wider world. Just as the womb is a dark restricted place in comparison to the world in which the foetus is to be born, so too, is our life in this world limited when compared to the world to come. The world of the afterlife according to the Bahá'í writings, is not limited by space and time. Just as a baby develops its organs, eyes, ears, etc for use in this world, the purpose of our lives is to develop spiritual qualities which will be used in the next life. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words,

“Consider how a being, in the world of the womb, was deaf of ear and blind of eye, and mute of tongue; how he was bereft of any perceptions at all. But once, out of that world of darkness, he passed into this world of light, then his eye saw, his ear heard, his tongue spoke. In the same way, once he hath hastened away from this mortal place into the Kingdom of God, then he will be born in the spirit; then the eye of his perception will open, the ear of his soul will hearken, and all the truths of which he was ignorant before will be made plain and clear”.⁴⁸

An important message of the foetus/womb analogy is that the fruits of our actions in this life cannot be seen while we are still within it. The meaning and purpose of our lives here is defined only in relation to the afterlife. Also, just as it would be implausible for the foetus to think that its life were limited to the uterine world, so too, is it unlikely that our lives are restricted to this physical world,

“... just as the effects and the fruitage of the uterine life are not to be found in that dark and narrow place, and only when the child is transferred to this wide earth do the benefits and uses of growth and development in that previous world become revealed - so likewise reward and punishment, heaven and hell, requital and retribution for actions done in this present life, will stand revealed in that other world beyond. And just as, if human life in the womb were limited to that uterine world, existence there would be nonsensical, irrelevant - so too if the life of this world, the deeds here done and their fruitage, did not come forth in the world beyond, the whole process would be irrational

⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 177.

and foolish."⁴⁹

The world of the spirit is represented by the mother in this analogy. Just as the mother surrounds and sustains both the foetus and the womb, so too does the world of the spirit nourish our souls and bodies. Imagine you are the foetus, conscious in the same way as you are now. It is perfectly natural for you to make a distinction between the uterine world and yourself. After all, are you not growing in some sense, in a way that the world around you is not? Your first inclination might tend towards dualism. You and the uterine world, although interdependent, are yet quite different. You seem to possess a freedom in movement, an autonomy that the rest of the objects in the uterine world do not have. As time goes on, you begin to suspect that there is more to the uterine world than can be directly observed. Although you share much with your uterine world, you do not conclude that you are nothing but the product of forces acting within it. It would be more natural to be open to the possibility of worlds existing beyond your immediate world. You are a fish in the topsy-turvy world of an amniotic liquid, but a thin layer of skin is all that separates you from a world of air, space and light. If somehow you heard of the existence of the world of the mother, a world that nourishes and sustains both you and the uterine world, would you not believe in it? Would it not explain many aspects of your nature and your relationship to the uterine world? You may come to believe that the existence of this invisible third element is actually very important, and that it is the only reasonable way of accounting for the differences between you and the uterine world. Finally, when your nine-month incubation period comes to an end, when you depart from the womb world, you are in fact born into another world. There you are free from being a fish immersed in the amniotic liquid world, and for the first time, you breath the air of another world.

Another analogy frequently used in the Bahá'í writings is the image of the soul being like a plant and the body being like the earth or soil in which it grows. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in the following manner,

“the soul is the intermediary between the body and the spirit. In like manner is this tree the intermediary between the seed and the fruit. When

⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 185.

the fruit of the tree appears and becomes ripe, then we know the tree is perfect... when the soul has in it the life of the spirit, then does it bring forth good fruit and become a divine tree."⁵⁰

In this analogy the soul is nurtured by the world of the spirit, variously symbolised by the rays of the sun, the rain from clouds, and "springtime",

"When the phenomenal sun appears from the vernal point of dawning in the zodiac, a wondrous and vibrant commotion is set up in the body of the earthly world. The withered trees are quickened with animation, the black soil becomes verdant with new growth, fresh and fragrant flowers bloom, the world of dust is refreshed, renewed life forces surge through the veins of every animate being, and a new springtime carpets the meadows, plains, mountains and valleys with wondrous forms of life. That which was dead and desolate is revived and resuscitated; that which was withered, faded and stricken is transformed by the spirit of a new creation. In the same way the Sun of Reality, when it illumines the horizon of the inner world, animates, vivifies and quickens with a divine and wonderful power. The trees of human minds clothe themselves in new and verdant robes, putting on leaves and blossoms and bearing spiritual fruits of the heavenly glad tidings. Then fragrant flowers of inner significances appear from the soil of human souls, and the whole being of man awakens to a new and divine activity. This is the growth and development of the inner world through the effulgent light of divine guidance and the heat of the fire of the love of God."⁵¹

Although a seed is planted in the ground, the cause for its growth comes from beyond the world of the soil; that is, it comes from the influence of the sun and clouds. Gradually, green shoots emerge from the soil. Both the top part of the plant and the world above it is invisible to those who are confined to live underground. As the plant grows further, it may, or may not develop fruits. Likewise, the world of the spirit, although lying beyond this physical world, invisible from an empirical standpoint, is responsible for our soul's development. The tree's fruits represent spiritual qualities of the soul and symbolise our life's purpose. We in this

⁵⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 98.

⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 271.

life have roots which stretch down into the physical world, yet at the same time, a part of us reaches out into another realm, a world which is under the direct influence of the spirit.

Whether our souls develop spiritual qualities is dependent on us and the moral choices we make. Just as it is impossible to observe a tree and its fruits from a point below the ground, so too, is it impossible for us to observe the development of the soul and make judgements about it while we are in this physical world. In terms of this analogy, mind/body dualism recognises that there is a difference between the world of the soil and the growing plant, but this is only the starting point. It naturally leads us to conclude that there is another world, a world which both surrounds the plant and the soil in which it grows, but at the same time, extends beyond them. Just as it is difficult to imagine how and why the plant and soil interact unless the influence of the world above them be recognised, so too is it difficult to relate our bodies to our souls unless the influence of the world of the spirit is taken into account. The world of the spirit is the unifying world, the one reference point for both soul and body.

In the tree/soil analogy, the founders of the world's major religions are likened to "Gardeners" who nurture the plant's growth: their teachings and their lives are responsible for the spiritual growth of souls,

"It is evident, therefore, that man is in need of divine education and inspiration, that the spirit and bounties of God are essential to his development. That is to say, the teachings of Christ and the Prophets are necessary for his education and guidance. They are the divine Gardeners Who till the earth of human hearts and minds. They educate man, uproot the weeds, burn the thorns and remodel the waste places into gardens and orchards where fruitful trees grow".⁵²

Death has been likened to a kind gardener uprooting the plant and transferring it to a "wide open area". 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when writing about the death of a youth, stated the following,

"The inscrutable divine wisdom underlieth such heart-rending

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 295.

occurrences. It is as if a kind gardener transferreth a fresh and tender shrub from a confined place to a wide open area. This transfer is not the cause of the withering, the lessening or the destruction of that shrub; nay, on the contrary, it maketh it to grow and thrive, acquire freshness and delicacy, become green and bear fruit. This hidden secret is well known to the gardener, but those souls who are unaware of this bounty suppose that the gardener, in his anger and wrath, hath uprooted the shrub. Yet to those who are aware, this concealed fact is manifest, and this predestined decree is considered a bounty."⁵³

Like the foetus/womb analogy, the tree/soil analogy is based upon supposing that our physical world is but a finite world embedded in many worlds that extend beyond it, and that our souls are evolving through the influence of the invisible rays of the spirit. The journey analogy also conveys similar themes. The soul is likened to a traveller who passes through this physical world acquiring spiritual qualities. Here an individual human body is likened to be a vehicle for the soul, which, while moving about physically, enables the soul to make a parallel journey in another universe, a universe within. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes our inner journey and the need for it in the following way,

"The wisdom of the appearance of the spirit in the body is this: the human spirit is a Divine Trust, and it must traverse all conditions, for its passage and movement through the conditions of existence will be the means of its acquiring perfections. So when a man travels and passes through different regions and numerous countries with system and method, it is certainly a means of his acquiring perfection, for he will see places, scenes and countries, from which he will discover the conditions and states of other nations. He will thus become acquainted with the geography of countries and their wonders and arts; he will familiarize himself with the habits, customs and usages of peoples; he will see the civilization and progress of the epoch; he will become aware of the policy of governments and the power and capacity of each country. It is the same when the human spirit passes through the conditions of existence: it will become the possessor of each degree and station."⁵⁴

⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 199-200.

⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 198.

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "The pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment. Without training and guidance the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature"⁵⁵. From the Bahá'í perspective, the soul's purpose is to acquire spiritual wisdom. There is much more than soul/body dualism here. The soul is a "Divine Trust" in search of God. The appearance of the soul in the body is not the outcome of an accidental or random occurrence. Like all good travellers, the spiritually wise recognise the need for skilful guides. According to the Bahá'í writings, God, His Manifestations and His spirit provide the compass by which our souls navigate the inner landscape.

Bahá'u'lláh in his "Seven Valleys" describes some of the spiritual landmarks that must characterise our inner journey. The traveller journeys successively through the valleys of "search", "love", "knowledge", "unity", "contentment", "wonderment", and reaches the valley of "true poverty and absolute nothingness"⁵⁶. In the valley of search, Bahá'u'lláh describes some of the sacrifices the "true seeker" must be prepared to make if he or she is reach the final goal, referred to as "the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God". The object of the traveller's goal is also personified in terms of a journey to find a "trace of the traceless Friend",

"The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest, and the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved. Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifices all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught, that he may enter the realm of the spirit, which is the City of God...On this journey the traveller abideth in every land and dwelleth in every region. In every face, he seeketh the beauty of the Friend; in every country he looketh for the Beloved. He joineth every company, and seeketh fellowship with every soul, that haply in some mind he may uncover the secret of the Friend, or in some face he may behold the beauty of the Loved One."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá', *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 296.

⁵⁶ *The Seven Valleys* is a commentary on the famous mystical Sufi work: Faridu'l-Din 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds*.

⁵⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 7.

At each stage of the journey, the traveller is dependent on God's guidance. In the valley of "true poverty and absolute nothingness", Bahá'u'lláh states,

"These journeys have no visible ending in the world of time, but the severed wayfarer - if invisible confirmation descend upon him and the Guardian of the Cause assist him - may cross these seven stages in seven steps, nay rather in seven breaths, nay rather in a single breath, if God will and desire it... They who soar in the heaven of singleness and reach to the sea of the Absolute, reckon this city - which is the station of life in God - as the furthestmost state of mystic knowers..."⁵⁸

This last valley is the "dying from self and the living in God"⁵⁹, and is obviously similar to the end goal described in many of the world's other mystical traditions. The "absolute nothingness" for instance of this last valley, is similar to the "blow out" or "annihilation" of Nirvana in Buddhism. This journey involves the traveller becoming more and more selfless. The end goal of the journey is to arrive at a condition where no trace of ourselves exist, and where we become a perfect channel for the world of the spirit, "Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend"⁶⁰. This spiritual state is both a consequence and precondition of the soul being in complete harmony with the world of God. It does not mean of course that we become identical to God, but that God's light becomes perfectly reflected in us. From the Bahá'í perspective, our souls cannot be understood without reference to this ultimate goal. Perfect spiritual unity with the world of God is the highest aspiration of all souls. Once again, the starting point is mind/body dualism. The goal of our inner journey is however, unity, and it is this all-important third element, an underlying monism within us that is able to unify an immortal soul to its perishable body.

⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp. 40-41.

⁵⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 36.

5. The rays of the mind and its reflections

On some occasions the sun/landscape analogy is used to illustrate the link between the soul and the body and clarify ideas about the faculties of the mind. The sun is used to symbolise the human soul and the landscape is likened to the human body. Bahá'u'lláh gives this analogy in the context of describing how injuries which seem to change the mind, do not in fact affect the soul. He likens these injuries to be like clouds which obscure the sun's light,

“Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments...When it leaveth the body, however, it will evince such ascendancy, and reveal such influence as no force on earth can equal. Every pure, every refined and sanctified soul will be endowed with tremendous power, and shall rejoice with exceeding gladness. Consider the lamp which is hidden under a bushel. Though its light be shining, yet its radiance is concealed from men. Likewise, consider the sun which hath been obscured by the clouds. Observe how its splendor appeareth to have diminished, when in reality the source of that light hath remained unchanged. The soul of man should be likened unto this sun, and all things on earth should be regarded as his body. So long as no external impediment interveneth between them, the body will, in its entirety, continue to reflect the light of the soul, and to be sustained by its power. As soon as, however, a veil interposeth itself between them, the brightness of that light seemeth to lessen. Consider again the sun when it is completely hidden behind the clouds. Though the earth is still illumined with its light, yet the measure of light which it receiveth is considerably reduced. Not until the clouds have dispersed, can the sun shine again in the plenitude of its glory. Neither the presence of the cloud nor its absence can, in any way, affect the inherent splendor of the sun. The soul of man is the sun by which his body is illumined, and from which it draweth its sustenance, and should be so regarded.”⁶¹

In this analogy, it is the body that reflects the light of the soul, and the

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, LXXX.

“impediments” which may reduce its apparent brightness come from injury of the brain. Here Bahá’u’lláh makes an important point about the mind: the faculties of the mind, as we observe them, depend on the state of the body. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also uses the same analogy to clarify the relationship of the mind to the soul,

“Now regarding the question whether the faculties of the mind and the human soul are one and the same. These faculties are but the inherent properties of the soul, such as the power of imagination, of thought, of understanding; powers that are the essential requisites of the reality of man, even as the solar ray is the inherent property of the sun. The temple of man is like unto a mirror, his soul is as the sun, and his mental faculties even as the rays that emanate from that source of light. The ray may cease to fall upon the mirror, but it can in no wise be dissociated from the sun”.⁶²

The faculties of the mind are likened to the “rays” of the soul. This passage appears to suggest that the mind continues to exist, even when the soul is dissociated from the body. But this is only partially true, since what we observe of the mind will be signs of the soul’s power in this world, and unlike the sun, the intensity of its rays appear to change with time. Elsewhere ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates this point,

“Now concerning mental faculties, they are in truth of the inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun. The rays of the sun are being renewed, but the sun itself is ever the same and unchanged. Consider how the human intellect develops and weakens, and may at times come to naught, whereas the soul changeth not. For the mind to manifest itself, the human body must be whole; and a sound mind cannot be but in a sound body, whereas the soul dependeth not upon the body”.⁶³

Here a distinction is made between the sun and its rays: the sun is “unchanged”, while its rays are being “renewed”. It is perhaps more accurate to think of the Bahá’í view of the mind in terms of it emerging from an interaction between the soul and its body. In this way, the power

⁶² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *August Forel and the Bahá’í Faith*, pp. 24-25.

⁶³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *August Forel and the Bahá’í Faith*, p. 8.

behind the mind is the eternal part, emanating from the soul, while the faculties of the mind that we observe are temporal in character. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states for instance, that the "intelligence of man is the intermediary between his body and his spirit"⁶⁴, and Shoghi Effendi states that, "What the Bahá'ís do believe... is that we have three aspects of our humanness, so to speak, body, a mind and an immortal identity - soul or spirit. We believe the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact together"⁶⁵. Note that this picture is still essentially dualist, in that it makes the distinction between the temporal world of the body and the eternal realm of the soul. The mind however, being the interface between these two worlds, contains within it elements of both.

As to the question of when a soul comes into being, a question often posed in the philosophy of mind, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states the following:

"... these members, these elements, this composition, which are found in the organism of man, are an attraction and magnet for the spirit; it is certain that the spirit will appear in it. So a mirror which is clear will certainly attract the rays of the sun. It will become luminous, and wonderful images will appear in it - that is to say, when these existing elements are gathered together according to the natural order, and with perfect strength, they become a magnet for the spirit, and the spirit will become manifest in them with all its perfections. Under these conditions it cannot be said, "What is the necessity for the rays of the sun to descend upon the mirror?" - for the connection which exists between the reality of things, whether they be spiritual or material, requires that when the mirror is clear and faces the sun, the light of the sun must become apparent in it. In the same way, when the elements are arranged and combined in the most glorious system, organization and manner, the human spirit will appear and be manifest in them."⁶⁶

The belief in a soul does not mean that at conception an immortal substance is somehow created *ex-nihilo*. It means rather that when the special combination of elements that make up a human being come together, they are able to reflect the rays of the spirit. The soul being

⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 96.

⁶⁵ *Unto Him Shall We Return*, p. 60.

⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 201.

outside time is always there, but by being reflected in a body/brain, its personality is strengthened and it has the opportunity to grow spiritually. The Bahá'í seed/soil analogy helps to clarify this point. The soil, as already explained, represents our space-time world and the seed symbolises the soul. Before the seed is planted, it exists, but lies outside the world of the soil. Likewise, before conception, a soul exists outside our space-time world. Imagine that placing the seed into the ground corresponds to the events that accompany the conception of a human embryo. The seed once placed in the ground, begins to grow, sprouting above the soil. Likewise, the soul grows spiritually, reaching out beyond our space-time world. Just as the form and colour of a plant is latent within the seed from the outset, so too, is there an intrinsic part to each human being, which under the right conditions, develops and grows

“The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world...”⁶⁷

6. Engineering Analogies of the Soul

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the human body “develops through the animal spirit”⁶⁸. Note that this point is in agreement with Darwin’s theory of evolution. Man’s body is animal in nature and has a common origin with animals. On the other hand, the theory of evolution says nothing about human minds. That has of course not stopped many people from making a connection, but this kind of reductionism is completely unwarranted⁶⁹. The Bahá'í Faith affirms the phenomenon of human evolution, but maintains that the human species was always distinct from animal species. A common origin may exist for the bodies of human beings and animals, but that does not mean that they are identical. In fact, their obvious mental differences suggest that there are fundamental differences.

⁶⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ a detailed discussion about this subject can be found in chapter 6, *The Survival Machine*, in the author’s book, *The Universe Within*.

If one subscribes to the Bahá'í view of there being varying degrees of the spirit, it is natural to ask what it is about human beings that allows for an immortal soul? But to speak of the soul in "object" or physical terms is to misunderstand it, and the Bahá'í writings are very clear about avoiding such an approach. The soul, according to the Bahá'í Faith is best understood in its own spiritual terms, "the comprehension of that other life depends on our spiritual birth!"⁷⁰ Yet, the Bahá'í writings do give many analogies of how to think of the soul and some of them have already been mentioned in this paper. Since in our modern society, a scientific approach is almost always invariably associated with one which rejects the existence of the soul, the following analogies, inspired by the Bahá'í writings have been specially devised by the author to help clarify the spiritual difference between man and animal. These analogies are tentative in nature and were found helpful to the author. They are given here in that spirit. They are by no means definitive, and to the general reader, might appear technical in places.

The first analogy is based upon the capture of rain by a container or cup. The rain symbolises the world of the spirit, while the container denotes a human being in this physical world. The rain is essentially different from the container in that it does not have a specific shape or form. After it falls into the container, it is given apparent form. Likewise, the world of the spirit comes from outside space-time. Containers have different shapes and sizes and some collect more rain than others. In this analogy, imagine that we can only see the outside surface of containers and cannot observe their contents. The soul is like the collected rain, essentially formless, but given form by the container. Since we can only observe the surface of containers from their outside, we cannot see each other's souls. The soul is a form of energy which lies outside our space-time world, but rests alongside it. The spirit flows through everything, but in our space-time world, it is given form. A spiritual person is someone who is filled with the spirit. The goal of life is to capture the spirit. Each of us has a different spiritual capacity, just as containers come in different sizes. We all contaminate the water to some extent, that is, we all in some way leave our imprint on it - some leave less, others leave more. At death the container is broken and the collected water pours out into another dimension. Its task is eventually to flow back to the infinite

⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 94.

Ocean (God). Through each successive world, it makes its way closer and closer to the Ocean (God).

The difference between man and animal in this analogy may be thought of in terms of the varying degrees to which they are able to capture the spirit. Animals may for instance be modelled in terms of objects in which the spirit is not collected: the rain essentially flows through them. At death, when their elements disperse, no "spirit" is transferred into another dimension. They nevertheless, whilst alive, have the spirit in them.

The second analogy is that of a torch. Let the battery, the source of electrical energy, represent the spirit, and let the electrical wires in the circuit, as well as the thin wire filament in the bulb denote the human body. Furthermore, let the projected light of the torch symbolise the human soul. Initially, just after the torch is switched on, electrical energy from the battery supplies current in the circuit. As the current increases in magnitude, heat is dissipated in the thin-wire bulb filament and is given off in the form of light. This light is then projected forward by the mirror behind the bulb. Likewise, from the moment of conception, the spirit is empowering the spiritual life of human beings and the light of the soul is reflected in this world and the world beyond. Now the thin-wire bulb filament is in principle no different to any other wire. The only difference is that it is much thinner and can withstand a higher temperature than other wires. If the bulb filament is now replaced by a normal wire in the circuit, one that is much thicker, then no light is produced. This might model the difference between an animal and human being. The "circuit" for the animal in this analogy is similar to the torch, but it is one where the bulb filament is replaced by an ordinary piece of wire. The animal "circuit" is empowered by the source, and a current is produced, but no light is propagated. Strictly speaking an ordinary electrical circuit will emit a small amount of radiation, but it is very much smaller in magnitude to the light of the torch and it is not in the visible frequency range.

Man and animal in the torch analogy are similar. They are both modelled to be circuits which conduct spiritual energy. There is a small but crucial difference represented by the thin-wire bulb filament. This difference is enough to account for a kind of soul-light in the human case. Although

the animal does not emit this kind of light, it does have however, a "radiation" of its own.

There are many variations of the torch analogy which are possible. The analogy is based upon likening human beings and animals to electrical circuits which are powered by the spirit. The circuit model for human beings may employ a capacitor instead of a bulb. For those familiar with electrical circuits, they will know that the capacitor will charge up after the switch is closed (on position) and will subsequently store electrical energy. So when the switch is put in the off position, breaking the electric circuit, a voltage remains across the capacitor, representing the stored energy of the circuit. This might model how souls of human beings store and collect spiritual energy and how after death, spiritual qualities of the soul remain. In the case of the animal where the corresponding circuit has no capacitance but only resistance, the voltage across the resistor falls to zero almost immediately after the source is disconnected from the circuit. The animal equivalent circuit is obviously very similar to the human one, the only difference is that it does not have the capacity to store up spiritual qualities in the same way that human beings do.

The electric circuit model of human nature can even incorporate free will. Imagine that in the equivalent circuit there is a variable resistance. In the case of the torch, a variable resistor is used to control the intensity of light that is emitted, while in the case of the capacitor circuit, it controls the rate at which the capacitor charges up. In both cases, imagine that the ability to change the variable resistor value is something that lies within the control of human beings. The ideal value of the variable resistor is zero. In the case of the torch model, zero resistance will maximise the intensity of the soul-light propagated, while for the capacitor circuit, zero resistance will result in a greater store of spiritual energy in a given amount of time. Minimising the value of the variable resistor is obviously analogous to human beings becoming selfless, and providing less "resistance" to the spirit.

It should also be mentioned at this point that a technological analogy for the Bahá'í approach to the soul has already been provided by John

Hatcher⁷¹. Hatcher compares the connection between the soul and the brain to the way information is broadcast from a television transmitter and detected by a television receiver. The waves of electromagnetic energy traversing the earth's atmosphere are independent of the receiver. It is only by tuning our television set to the correct frequency, that is, by decoding the information in a certain way, that we can form images on our TV screen. Likewise, "thought waves" of the soul might traverse an "inner space", and be detected by the brain. Although Hatcher did not use this analogy to highlight the spiritual difference between man and animal, it can be used to do so. The animal equivalent electric circuit here would be one that can neither transmit or receive "soul waves". There is a similarity of the transmitter part of this analogy to the torch analogy. As in that case, the main difference between animal and man lies in the degree of sophistication of their respective equivalent circuits. To transmit and receive electromagnetic waves requires the use of special types of circuits called "tuned circuits". The animal equivalent circuit would not be of this type. The main point which emerges from these technological analogies is that from a bodily point of view, man and animal can be quite alike. Their important differences can only be explained when viewed from higher dimensions or other worlds.

The last analogy to be considered here models more than the difference between man and animal, and conveys also something of man's purpose in life. Consider a small dark room where the shutters at its only window are closed. Imagine that the room is occupied by a man who has a torch or lamp strapped to his forehead. The head torch is initially switched off and is fixed on so that it illuminates the direction in which the man looks. Being on his forehead, the man cannot observe the torch directly. Let there be enough food provisions in the room that the man can survive for a long period of time. Imagine that the only door in the room is locked and that there is no other exit to the outside world. Now consider the situation where the head torch is switched on. The man may look around and explore the room. He may notice the paintings on the wall which depict landscapes. The man may discover hidden mirrors which enable him to catch a glimpse of himself. He may wander over to the window and find a way of releasing the shutters and thereby catch a glimpse of the world outside the room. Imagine also that there is a large

⁷¹ W. Hatcher, *The Purpose of Physical Reality*, p. 151.

stainless mirror by the window. By the aid of this mirror the man is able to observe something of the outside world and obtain a clear reflection of himself. At some time later, the door opens, and the man is taken out of the room into the sunlight.

The room in this analogy symbolises this physical world. The head torch represents the soul, and its rays denote the light of human consciousness. The world outside the room represents the afterlife, and the opening of the door symbolises death. The mirrors in the room, the shutters, and paintings all represent the founders of religions and their teachings. By their aid, the man is able to catch glimpses of his true self, and understand how his limited dark world relates to the bright spacious world that lies beyond it. This analogy obviously combines elements of the Bahá'í foetus/womb and sun/mirror analogies together.

Now if the man were to ask himself where exactly the outside world is located, it would be a question that would be very difficult to answer in terms of what can be observed within the room. This is analogous to inquiring into the location of the afterlife. If the man were to ask exactly where the head-torch is located, he would not be able to locate it. In the same way, we cannot locate souls or fathom the intellectual light that comes from them.

The difference between man and animal can be depicted by switching off the head torch and providing the man with a box of matches. The man's perception of the room suddenly becomes much more fragmentary. The man effectively moves around the room by touching objects. He will not see the room as a whole, but can only see partial glimpses of it. His field of view will be limited to the small area illuminated by a match while it is lit. This fragmentary view of life might represent how an animal perceives our world. Animals in comparison to us, seem to perceive events in space and time in a much more separate and disjointed way. In time, they seem to live more from moment to moment. In space, their images are less correlated compared to ours, and they are easily misled by optical illusions. In the dark room analogy, all this is represented by the difference of seeing the room by the aid of a bright head-torch instead of by striking a series of matches.

7. The Semitic Religions

In the Semitic line of religions, the unifying element to human nature is either directly identified with God, or with those who come in God's name, or with God's spirit. In these religions, human beings are of course, "made in God's image". The unity of human nature naturally follows on from the unity of God. God's voice is heard both in the call of the "prophet" and in human conscience.

In Judaism, human nature and the physical world are directly dependent on God. It is the "breath of God" which gives man life, and it is the return of this breath to God which causes death,

"The Lord God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live." (Genesis 2: 7).

"Lord, you have made so many things! How wisely you made them all! The earth is filled with your creatures. There is ocean, large and wide, where countless creatures live, large and small alike... All of them depend on you to give them food when they need it. You give it to them, and they eat it; you provide food, and they are satisfied. When you turn away, they are afraid; when you take away your breath, they die and go back to the dust from which they came. But when you give them breath, they are created; you give new life to the earth." (Psalms 104: 24-30).

From the above Old Testament passages, it is clear that the breath of God overcomes the dualism between man and nature. The immortal soul in Judaism is virtually indistinguishable from God's breath, and the tripartite character of human nature is implicit. In terms of God's breath, the difference between man and the rest of creation is only a matter of degree. But so different is the spiritual station of man with respect to the world of nature, that he is Lord and master of it, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; and hast put all things under his feet" (Psalms 8: 3-6).

In Christianity, and subsequently Islam, a tripartite approach to human nature is articulated with greater clarity, and the belief that the soul is on a never-ending journey towards God gradually arose. Although historically, life after death in these religions has been interpreted in quite literal terms, there are many references within their source scriptures which suggest a different approach. In fact, a significant number of passages support the Bahá'í view of the soul advancing in different forms, where its state after death is so different to its existence in this world that it cannot be adequately understood in physical terms.

In Christianity, the afterlife is symbolised by the growth of an individual seed,

“Someone will ask. “How can the dead be raised to life? What kind of body will they have?” You fool! When you sow a seed in the ground, it does not sprout to life unless it dies. And what you sow is a bare seed, perhaps a grain, not the full-bodied plant that will later grow up. God provides that seed with the body he wishes; he gives each seed its own proper body... This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal... When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:35-44).

This analogy is obviously very similar to the one presented in the Bahá'í writings. It suggests that just as a seed must “die” so that a plant can grow, so too, must the physical body die, enabling the soul to take a new form. The seed remains in the soil, whereas the plant rises above the ground and grows into another realm. The meaning of the metaphor is obviously that although the atoms of the physical body disperse after it dies, the “spiritual body” which emerges from it continues to develop in another world. Also implied in this analogy is that the form of the soul in the afterlife will be superior to its former life in the physical world. This is made more explicit in another passage by St Paul,

“For we know that when this tent we live in - our body here on earth - is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in, a home he himself has made, which will last forever. And now we sigh, so great is our desire that our home which comes from heaven should be put on over us; by being clothed with it we shall not be without a body. While

we live in this earthly tent, we groan with a feeling of oppression; it is not that we want to get rid of our earthly body, but that we want to have the heavenly one put on over us, so that what is mortal will be transformed by life. God is the one who has prepared us for this change, and he gave us his Spirit as the guarantee of all that he has in store for us" (2 Corinthians 5:1-5)

Our physical bodies, being like tents, are only meant to be temporary, while the soul's future home, the "houses in heaven", are destined to "last forever". This is of course, only poetic language, but it does suggest that human souls in the afterlife will take a more complete and permanent form than the one they take in this life. That the "Spirit" provides an indication of what the afterlife will be like is also important. Just as in Judaism and Islam, the Spirit of God in Christianity bestows immortality on human beings, and all the conscious faculties of human nature are founded upon it,

"The Spirit gives one person a message full of wisdom, while to another person the same Spirit gives a message full of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one person, while to another person he gives the power to heal... But it is one and the same Spirit who does all this; as he wishes. He gives a different gift to each person" (1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

A common misconception about the Christian view of resurrection and afterlife is that it involves the physical resurrection of the body. For instance, Leslie Stevenson in his "Seven Theories of Human Nature", states that the Christian view of human nature does not entail belief in an immaterial soul surviving death. The scriptural reference which he takes to support this comes from St Paul's statement, "When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:35).⁷² This idea is often coupled with other statements by St Paul about the resurrection of believers the "trumpet blast", on the "Last Day" (1 Corinthians 15: 51-55). Resurrection, according to this interpretation of biblical text has come to mean the re-assembling of the actual physical constituents of human bodies as they were before death.

⁷² Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, pp. 45-6.

The belief in the physical resurrection of bodies was co-joined with Aristotle's notion of the soul being the form of the body by St Thomas Aquinas in the late medieval period. It subsequently made its way into official catholic doctrine and has remained there. According to Aquinas, the physical body after resurrection will be in harmony with the soul: "After resurrection of our bodies we will again have bodily organs with non-rational powers, and because they will be perfectly amenable to reason, there will be courage strengthening our capacity for aggressive emotion and moderation our capacity for affection. But before resurrection these capacities and virtues will not exist as such; only the root or seeds of them in the soul, together with justice in the will"⁷³. Aquinas conceives of the soul as an "embodied soul", that is, an immortal entity which is in some way bound to the body while on earth, but then survives death⁷⁴. After resurrection, this same soul will be reunited with its former body.

This belief involves an overly literal interpretation of biblical text. The seed analogy suggests that physically we perish, but what emerges is something different, a timeless entity which does not depend on the physical world. In the text already quoted, St Paul explicitly states that the "spiritual body" is fundamentally different to the physical body and cannot be compared to it (1 Corinthians 15:35-44). The image of "houses in heaven" in contrast to the "tent" of the body on earth also implies that the state of the soul in the afterlife is going to be quite different to its former existence in this world.

The literal interpretation of resurrection fails to take into account the metaphorical use of the terms "life" and "death" in the Bible. The early Christians had understood themselves to have "died", and believed that they had been spiritually resurrected by their faith in Christ,

"And we know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be the slaves of sin. For when a person dies, he is set free from the power of sin. Since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that Christ has been

⁷³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, p. 246.

⁷⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, p. 111.

raised from death and will never die again - death will no longer rule over him... In the same way you are to think of yourselves as dead, so far as sin is concerned, but living in fellowship with God through Christ Jesus." (Romans 6: 11)

"To be controlled by human nature results in death; to be controlled by the Spirit results in life and peace... But you do not live as your human nature tells you to; instead, you live as the Spirit tells you - if, in fact, God's Spirit lives in you... If the Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from death, lives in you, then he who raised Christ from death will also give life to your mortal bodies by the presence of his Spirit in you... God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children..." (Romans 8:16).

The Christian spiritual resurrection and its immortality is thus inextricably linked to the Spirit of God, which "joins itself" to human spirits. This clearly demonstrates a tripartite conception of human nature in Christianity, where the world of the spirit is the world which unites body and soul. Moreover, the Christian belief in this spiritual side to human nature is founded on faith, faith in the invisible world of the Spirit,

"Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day...For we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts for ever" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

In the Quran, the soul of man is also described in terms of God's breath, "Behold! Thy Lord said to the angels: I am about to create man, from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape. When I have fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him of my Spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him..." (S 15:28-29), or "He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself" (S 58:22). God is ever present in human beings, "We are nearer to him than his jugular vein" (S 50:16). This presence of God extends to signs which are also apparent in the physical world, "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves" (S 41:53). It is God who is the bridge between the physical world and human nature. Since the soul of man is

filled with the spirit and breath of God, the nature of the soul in Islam cannot be separated from God.

Resurrection and life after death in Islam are often described in very literal terms. But there are some passages in the Quran which explicitly clarify its symbolic meaning. Life after death is described in terms of a "new Creation" (S 50:15), or "Resurrection" (S 50:11). In response to the scepticism of "unbelievers" about this resurrection from the "dust" of human corpses, the Quran likens this rebirth to the growth of vegetation from the apparently dry and "dead" earth, "And We send down from the sky Rain charged with blessing, and We produce therewith gardens and grain for harvests; and tall and stately palm trees, with shoots of fruit stalks, piled one over another; - as sustenance for Allah's servants; - and We give new life therewith to land that is dead: thus will be the Resurrection" (S 50:9-11). This organic analogy of a new life, is obviously similar to the Bahá'í seed/landscape analogy, where spiritual growth emerges from the "soil" of human bodies. In both cases, the immortality of human beings is directly dependent on the "blessings" of God, "Do ye not see that Allah has subjected to your use all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure both seen and unseen" (S 31: 28).

The "resurrection" of life after death is an individual specific occurrence for each soul, "And your creation or your resurrection is in no wise but an individual soul: For Allah is He who hears and sees all things" (S 31:28). This is an important point, since elsewhere in the Quran, the term "Resurrection" is used in the collective sense to symbolise the spiritual rebirth of mankind (see for instance, S 50:41-44). The afterlife and the resurrection of the soul in a new form is directly dependent on God, "We have decreed Death to be your common lot... from changing your forms and creating you again in forms that ye know not. And ye certainly know already the first form of creation: why then do you not celebrate His praises? See ye the seed that ye sow in the ground? Is it ye that cause it to grow, or are We the cause?" (S 56:60-64). The nature of the human soul in Islam, its spiritual growth, immortality and unity are all directly dependent on the "bounties" of God and cannot be understood in terms of soul-body dualism. God is the all important transpersonal element in Islam. Quite contrary to many popular beliefs about an Islamic "Paradise", the soul's future journey is explicitly described to be in

“forms that ye know not”.

8. Far Eastern Spiritual Monism

In Buddhism, the tripartite character of human nature is presented in terms of a self, mind, and Truth. The self in Buddhism is approximately equivalent to the “sinful self” of Christianity⁷⁵, or the Bahá’í “animal self”.⁷⁶ The mind in Buddhism is roughly equivalent to the soul in the Semitic religious tradition or the “rational soul” of Aristotle⁷⁷. The immortal part of the mind, according to Buddhist writings, is the part that has the potential to be the receptacle of Truth. Truth is something akin to the Spirit of God in the Semitic religions or the world of spirit mentioned in the Bahá’í writings.

Just as everything in the universe, according to the Bahá’í Faith, is to its own degree a sign or reflection of God⁷⁸, Truth in Buddhism also reveals itself in a variety of different forms. The following summary of the Truth appearing in various ways is described as “Truth as Saviour” in Buddhist writings⁷⁹, and obviously bears many similarities to the various “Kingdoms” found in the Bahá’í writings or the grades of life described in the philosophy of Aristotle. It starts off by stating that since “Truth desires to appear; truth longs to become conscious; truth strives to know itself”, it manifests itself first in mineral form: “There is truth in the stone... but the stone has no consciousness”. Next it expresses itself in the form of a plant, which can grow and blossom, but states that “its beauty is marvellous, but it has no consciousness”. The next highest level of Truth, is the realm of the animal, and although this level of

⁷⁵ Romans 6: 6, also see the “natural self” mentioned in Romans 6: 12.

⁷⁶ “If man were to care for himself only he would be nothing but an animal for only the animals are thus egoistic”, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ Aristotle refers to the Intellect as “immortal and eternal” (Aristotle: De Anima, III.5).

⁷⁸ “Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of Gods, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light”, *Gleanings*, p. 176

⁷⁹ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 5.

existence has consciousness, it is a consciousness of "self" only: "There is Truth in the animal; it moves about and perceives its surroundings; it distinguishes and learns to choose. There is consciousness, but it is not yet the consciousness of Truth. It is a consciousness of self only". This last sentence concisely presents the difference between man and animal in Buddhism. The animal is conscious of "self" only, while human beings are capable of possessing "consciousness of Truth".

Liberation of "self" comes from immersing it in Truth: "If we liberate our souls from our petty selves, wish no ill to others, and become clear as a crystal diamond reflecting the light of truth, what a radiant picture will appear in us mirroring things as they are, without the admixture of burning desires, without the distortion of erroneous illusion, without the agitation of clinging and unrest...ye should learn to distinguish between the false self and the true self. The ego with all its egotism is the false self. It is an unreal illusion and a perishable combination. He only who identifies his self with the truth will attain Nirvana; and he who has entered Nirvana has attained Buddhahood; he has acquired the highest good; he has become eternal and immortal".⁸⁰ In much the same way as in the Semitic religions, the animal side to human nature is considered to be the "false self", in contrast to the "true self" which is the part of the self which can reflect Truth.

There is a common misconception that Buddhism rejects the existence of an individual human immortal soul, but this is not so. Buddhism states that the self, that is the animal self as defined above, is perishable. The self (animal self) is made up from a combination of elements, which in Buddhism is sometimes described in terms of the 5 Skandhas,⁸¹ which are constantly changing. At death, they will disperse and exist no more. This is similar to the Bahá'í view. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that, "The animal spirit is the power of all the senses, which is realised from the composition and mingling of elements; when this composition decomposes, the power also perishes and becomes annihilated".⁸² The

⁸⁰ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 4.

⁸¹ this term is used to denote the constituents of personality: (1) form=body, (2) feelings, (3) perceptions, (4) volitional impulses, (5) consciousness, *Buddhist Scriptures*, E. Conze, p. 248.

⁸² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chap. 55, p. 208.

Buddha states, "All compound things are transitory: they grow and decay. All compound things are subject to pain: they will be separated from what they love and be joined to what they abhor. All compound things lack a self, an atman, an ego".⁸³

In the famous "Questions of King Malinda", the Buddhist monk Nagasena likens the self to be a chariot. The designation of "chariot" only refers to a combination of component parts such as the pole, axle, wheels, framework, flagstaff, yoke etc, and declares that the same principle applies to the self. He states that the self is a "conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name. In ultimate reality, however, this person cannot be apprehended".⁸⁴ But this is quite different to the "incomposite soul" described by Socrates⁸⁵ or the immortal soul described in the Bahá'í writings, or indeed, the eternal atman (soul) of Hinduism. Indeed, one of the arguments for the immortality of the soul presented in the Bahá'í writings is that it is unitary, that it is not made up from a combination of elements and therefore cannot die.⁸⁶

The other point to remember is that "consciousness" in Buddhism also applies to animals, so when consciousness appears as one of the Skandas, or elements that make up human nature, it is not necessarily the type of consciousness which is related to the rational or spiritual faculties of human beings, and may in fact be the kind of consciousness that human beings share with animals. If it perishes with death then this is not "consciousness of Truth". The word "soul" is confusing in modern Buddhism. There are indications that it was always a source of controversy even at the time of Buddha, and that Buddha himself had to clarify it. He stated that if the soul is identified with "self", then he rejected its immortality, but on the other hand, if it is identified with that part of the mind which perceives the Truth, it is immortal. In the following citation the Buddha makes this point clear when responding to questions asked from an officer,⁸⁷

⁸³ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 158.

⁸⁴ E. Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 'Questions of King Malinda', pp. 146-148.

⁸⁵ *Phaedo* 77c-78d, *The Last Days of Socrates*, p. 129.

⁸⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 306.

⁸⁷ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 151.

“The Tathagata teaches that there is no self. He who says that the soul is his self and that the self is the thinker of our thoughts and the actor of our deeds, teaches a wrong doctrine which leads to confusion and darkness. On the other hand, the Tathagata teaches that there is mind. He who understands by soul mind, and says that mind exists, teaches the truth which leads to clearness and enlightenment”. The officer who was posing questions to the Buddha then went to ask, “Does, then, the Tathagata maintain that two things exist? That which we perceive with our senses and that which is mental?”. In response to this apparent dualism, the Buddha replied, “Verily, I say unto thee, thy mind is spiritual, but neither is the sense-perceived void of spirituality. The bodhi is eternal and it dominates all existence as the good law guiding all beings in their search for truth. It changes brute nature into mind, and there is no being that cannot be transformed into a vessel of truth”.

The power of the Truth to transform “brute nature” into “mind” is of course very similar to the process of the Christian Holy Spirit transforming a man’s animal nature into an angelic one.

Buddhism believes both that the self is perishable and that it endures after death. This is not a contradiction. It is the moral part of the self which passes into an afterlife, taking with it the fruit of good actions. On the other hand, human beings are evolving and have not reached a changeless state of perfection. so they are not “undying” in a spiritual sense. The confusion here is caused by some former Hindu doctrines which implied that souls had reached perfection and were identical to the Atman or Spirit of God. But Buddha rejects these notions. The soul in comparison to the Truth or Tathagata is limited, contingent and dependent. Instead, the Buddha emphasises the spiritual evolution of the soul and its dependence on the Truth,

“Some say that the self endures after death, some say it perishes. Both are wrong and their error is most grievous. For if they say the self is perishable, the fruit they strive for will perish too, and at some time there will be no hereafter. Good and evil would be indifferent. This salvation from selfishness is without merit. When some, on the other hand, say the self will not perish, then in the midst of all life and death there is but one identity unborn and undying. If such is their self, then it is perfect and

cannot be perfected by deeds. The lasting, imperishable self could never be changed. The self would be lord and master, and there would be no use in perfecting the perfect, moral aims and salvation would be unnecessary...Now attend and listen: The senses meet the object and from their contact sensation is born. Thence results recollection. Thus, as the sun's power through a burning-glass causes fire to appear, so through the cognizance born of sense and object, the mind originates and with it the ego, the thought of self, whom some Brahman teachers call the lord. The shoot springs from the seed; the seed is not the shoot; both are not one and the same, but successive phases in a continuous growth. Such is the birth of animated life"⁸⁸.

The spiritual growth of the soul as described by Buddha here is very similar to the Bahá'í concept of the soul forever progressing. Moreover, the rays of the sun, in the above analogy, are obviously closely akin to the Spirit of God in the Semitic religions. To speak of the existence of self in Buddhism is similar to putting oneself before God in the Semitic religions. When compared to God, we barely exist, likewise in Buddhism, when compared to the Truth or Nirvana, human beings are constantly changing and have no permanence.

Some commentators on Buddhism have also pointed out that it does not reject the existence of the soul, but instead, only states that it cannot be apprehended. For instance, Edward Conze quotes a Buddhist text in support of the existence of a true self, "Self-luminous through and through is thought, but usually it is defiled by adventitious taints which come from without"⁸⁹. Early Buddhist writings particularly carry this implication. In many instances, the Buddha discourages discussions on the nature of the soul in order to emphasise its inherent mystery. The Buddha concentrates on acquiring spiritual qualities as opposed to engaging in intellectual speculations. He states for instance, "There are some scholars who speculate that the soul is perfectly happy after death. But when I asked them if people in this world are perfectly happy they answered, No. And when I asked if they had been perfectly happy even for half a day they said, No. And when I asked if they knew a method for realizing a perfectly happy state they said, No. So the talk of these

⁸⁸ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 66.

⁸⁹ *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*, p. 162.

scholars is groundless".⁹⁰ Here the Buddha is rejecting the authority of these "scholars" to talk about the soul, since they themselves have not experienced true happiness. He is not rejecting the existence of the soul, but rejecting the authority of certain "scholars" to talk about it.

In another passage the Buddha states that "scholars speak in sixteen ways of the state of the soul after death... the Buddha knows that these are speculations and what the result will be... these things are profound and difficult, not to be grasped by mere logic. The Buddha has realised this and set it forth, and those who would rightly praise him should speak of this".⁹¹ There are many valuable insights here. The Buddha refers to the theories of these scholars as "speculations", and implies that their result is not a spiritually useful one. On the other hand, he states that "these things are profound and difficult, not to be grasped by mere logic", suggesting that the best way to approach the mysteries of the soul is to follow his teachings, rather than engage in logic. The main point is that Buddhism does not reject the existence of an individual immortal soul, but it distrusts intellectual speculations about it. The implication is that the soul is better understood in terms of acquiring spiritual qualities. This is very similar to the view of the soul as expressed in Bahá'í writings.⁹²

The terminology that the Buddha prefers to use for the soul is the "mind". The "immortal soul" of other religions has its counterpart in Buddhism with the "immortal mind", as made clear in the following passage,

"Bodies fall to dust, but the truths of the mind will not be destroyed. Truth knows neither birth nor death; it has no beginning and no end. Welcome the truth. The truth is the immortal part of the mind. Establish the truth in your mind, for the truth is the image of the eternal; it portrays the immutable; it reveals the everlasting the truth gives unto mortals the boon of immortality"⁹³. Once the interaction of self, mind and Truth has

⁹⁰ *The Wisdom of the Early Buddhists*, p. 47.

⁹¹ *The Wisdom of the Early Buddhists*, p. 32.

⁹² "The comprehension of that other life depends on our spiritual birth!", *Paris Talks*, p. 94.

⁹³ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 3.

been understood in Buddhism, a similar tripartite picture of human nature to that existing in other spiritual traditions emerges.

If attachment to the world of the body is denoted by “death” in Christianity, in Buddhism, almost exactly the same terminology is used for attachment to a “separate self”,

“Verily I say unto thee: The Blessed One has not come to teach death, but to teach life, and thou discernest not the nature of living and dying. This body will be dissolved and no amount of sacrifice will save it. Therefore, seek thou the life that is of the mind. Where self is, truth cannot be; yet when truth comes, self will disappear. Therefore, let thy mind rest in the truth; propagate the truth, put thy whole will in it, and let it spread. In the truth thou shalt live forever. Self is death and truth is life. The cleaving to self is a perpetual dying, while moving in the truth is partaking of Nirvana which is life everlasting”.⁹⁴

“There is self and there is truth. Where self is, truth is not. Where truth is, self is not. Self is the fleeting error of samara; it is individual separateness and that egotism which begets envy and hatred. Self is the yearning for pleasure and the lust after vanity. Truth is the correct comprehension of things; it is permanent and everlasting, the real in all existence, the bliss of righteousness. The existence of self is an illusion, and there is no wrong in this world, no vice, no evil, except what flows from the assertion of self”.⁹⁵

The annihilation of self has of course many parallels with various mystical traditions. In Bahá'u'lláh's “Seven Valleys”, as already mentioned, a similar theme is developed: the aim of the spiritual journey is to attain the condition of the valley of “True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness”. The conception of people being separate selves, independent of moral and spiritual truths, is arguably a collective modern myth.

Nirvana is related to the Truth, Buddha, or Tathagata in much the same way as being “born again” is related to the Holy Spirit in Christianity. A

⁹⁴ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 153.

⁹⁵ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 41.

Brahmin wanted to enquire into the location of Nirvana, and asked the Buddha, "Do I understand thee right aright, that Nirvana is not a place, and being nowhere it is without reality?", the Buddha in reply likened Nirvana to the wind, which although difficult to locate, made its presence felt, "As a great and mighty wind which passeth over the world in the heat of the day, so the Tathagata comes to blow over the minds of mankind with the breath of his love, so cool, so sweet, so calm, so delicate; and those tormented by fever assuage their suffering and rejoice at the refreshing breeze".⁹⁶ This is very similar to the way Christ describes the action of the Holy Spirit and how people must be "born again" in order to see the Kingdom of God, "Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again. The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8).

Nirvana is the spiritual condition that Tathagata or Truth brings, and is roughly equivalent to the influence of the Holy Spirit. In imagery that is strikingly similar to the landscape/seed analogy of the Bahá'í Faith, or the seed/rain metaphor used for resurrection in Islam, the Buddhist writings state that

"Nirvana comes to thee... when thou understandest thoroughly, and when thou livest according to thy understanding, that all things are of one essence and there is but one law. Hence, there is but one Nirvana as there is one truth, not two or three. The Tathagata recreates the whole world like a cloud shedding its waters without distinction. He has the same sentiments for the high as for the low, for the wise as for the ignorant, for the noble-minded as for the immoral. The great cloud full of rain comes up in this wide universe covering all countries and oceans to pour down its rain everywhere, over all grasses, shrubs, herbs, trees of various species, families of plants of different names growing on the earth, on the hills, on the mountains, or in the valleys... the grasses, shrubs, herbs, and wild trees suck the water emitted from that great cloud which is all of one essence and has been abundantly poured down; and they will, according to their nature, acquire a proportionate development, shooting up and producing blossoms and their fruits in season. Rooted in

⁹⁶ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 154.

one and the same soil, all those families of plants and germs are quickened by water of the same essence. The Tathagata... knows the law whose essence is salvation, and whose end is the peace of Nirvana. He is the same to all, and yet knowing the requirements of every single being, he does not reveal himself to all alike. He does not impart to them at once the fullness of omniscience, but pays attention to the disposition of various beings".⁹⁷

This passage illustrates the oneness of all things and their dependence on a single "Truth". It is sometimes referred to as a principle of "spiritual monism" and is usually contrasted with various forms of dualism. But from the forgoing discussion, it is clear they do not necessarily conflict, and that this kind of unifying element actually exists in other religions in much the same way as it does in Buddhism. Even the very same metaphors are used for it.

Another point of similarity is the "sun" metaphor. As already quoted, the world of the spirit in Bahá'í writings is likened to the rays of the "Sun of Truth" (God and His Manifestations) which gives understanding to human minds and provides spiritual life to their souls. This analogy of the sun has also close parallels to the "form of the good" mentioned by Plato. In Buddhism, the Tathagata is described in the following way, "The wisdom of the Tathagata is the sun of the mind. His radiancy is glorious by day and night, and he whose faith is strong will not lack light on the path to Nirvana where he will inherit bliss everlasting".⁹⁸ The Tathagata may be taken here to refer to Buddha himself as well as his teachings and also has many obvious similarities to Christ or Krishna describing themselves in terms of the "Light of the world": "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness", (John 8: 12), and "But those whose unwisdom is made pure by the wisdom of their inner Spirit, their wisdom is unto them a sun and its radiance they see the Supreme", (Gita 5:16).

The metaphor of the sun is also used in Buddhism to illustrate spiritual blindness. This is of course not unique to Buddhism, but the following Buddhist parable is particularly relevant to the modern world. It is an

⁹⁷ *The Gospel of Buddha*, pp. 164-5.

⁹⁸ *The Gospel of Buddha*, p. 188.

ancient poetic refutation of modern empiricism: that is, it rejects all efforts which seek to reduce the soul to measurable object terms,

“There was a man born blind, and he said: “I do not believe in the world of light and appearance. There are no colors, bright or sombre. There is no sun, no moon, no stars. No one has witnessed these things.” His friends remonstrated with him, but he clung to his opinion: “What you say that you see,” he objected, “are illusions. If colours existed I should be able to touch them. They have no substance and are not real. Everything real has weight, but I feel no weight where you see colours.” In those days there was a physician who was called to see the blind man. He mixed four simples, and when he applied them to the cataract of the blind man the grey film melted, and his eyes acquired the faculty of sight. The Tathagata is the physician, the cataract is the illusion of the thought “I am”, and the four simples are the four noble truths”.⁹⁹

The world of the soul or spirit like colours, cannot be weighed or touched, but they can nevertheless be seen in their own terms. Although in this parable, the Buddha and his message is the cure for spiritual blindness, a similar message exists in other religious traditions. Indeed, the founder of each religion is often likened to a physician.¹⁰⁰ The important lesson here for the modern world is that our physical world, like the grey world of the blind man, may not be the only world that there is. Just as it is closed minded of the blind man to dismiss the existence of a world of colours because it is invisible to him, so too, is it closed minded to reject the existence of the soul or spirit on the grounds that they resist scientific quantification.

In Hinduism, the tripartite character of human nature is expressed in several different ways. In the Upanishads, just as in Buddhism or in the philosophy of Plato, the chariot is used as a metaphor for human nature,

“Know the Atman as Lord of a chariot; and the body as the chariot itself. Know that reason is the charioteer; and the mind indeed is the reins. The horses, they say, are the senses; and their paths are the objects of sense. When the soul becomes one with the mind and the senses he is called

⁹⁹ *The Gospel of the Buddha*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁰ Bahá'ulláh as Divine Physician, Christ as a Healer.

‘one who has joys and sorrows’. He who has not right understanding and whose mind is never steady is not the ruler of his life, like a bad driver with wild horses. But he who has right understanding and whose mind is ever steady is the ruler of his life, like a good driver with well-trained horses. He who has not right understanding, is careless and never pure, reaches not the End of the journey; but wanders on from death to death. But he who has understanding, is careful and ever pure, reaches the End of the journey, from which he never returns”.¹⁰¹

This elaborate analogy clearly can be interpreted in a tripartite way. The body is the chariot, while reason, represented by the charioteer, roughly corresponds to the soul of the Semitic religions. The Atman, that is the “Lord of the chariot”, who is seated in the chariot, parallels the Holy Spirit. This Hindu chariot analogy corresponds particularly well to the Bahá’í metaphor of the soul being on a journey. The Lord of the chariot, that is the Atman, sets the direction for the charioteer of reason. The Atman is a guide for human reason, just as the Holy Spirit is the guide for the individual soul in Christianity. On the other hand, the mind, represented by the reins, is an intermediary between reason (the charioteer) and the body (the chariot). This is quite close to the Bahá’í description of the mind being the intermediary between the soul and body.

Reason in the Upanishads also plays a similar role to the “intellect” in the philosophy of Aristotle, in that it is referred to as the immortal part of human nature which survives death.¹⁰² In the Upanishads, reason is the central quality of the individual soul, just as it is in the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle and the above quoted passage in Katha Upanishad goes on to state, “The man whose chariot is driven by reason, who watches and holds the reins of his mind, reaches the End of the journey, the supreme everlasting Spirit.” But beyond reason, is the Atman, sometimes referred to as Spirit, and other times referred to as the Self. The same passage goes to state, “Beyond the senses are their objects, and beyond the objects is the mind. Beyond the mind is pure reason, and beyond reason is the Spirit in man... The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is

¹⁰¹ Katha Upanishad, Part 3, p. 60, The Upanishads, Penguin.

¹⁰² see Active/Passive Intellect distinction in *De Anima*, III.5, see also Nicomachean Ethics X.7.1177b26 as found on p. 139, Aristotle the Philosopher.

invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen and is clear. The wise should surrender speech in mind, mind in the knowing self, the knowing self in the Spirit of the universe”.

Here, reason is also called the “knowing self”, and the Atman is referred to as Spirit. This terminology is consistent with the Semitic religions and Greek philosophy. The tripartite approach to human nature in the Upanishads therefore consists of a body, a knowing self, and Spirit. The Spirit or Atman is the unifying element which links together mind, intellect and body, “There is something beyond our mind which abides in silence within our mind. It is the supreme mystery beyond thought. Let one’s mind and one’s subtle body rest upon that and not rest on anything else”.¹⁰³

The soul, according to the Upanishads exists in three states of consciousness: consciousness of this world, consciousness of the next world, and the state of dreaming which is a twilight zone between the two,

“Abiding among the senses there is a ‘person’ who consists of understanding, a light within the heart: this is he. Remaining ever the same, he skirts both worlds, seemingly thinking, seemingly moving. For, having fallen asleep, he transcends this world - the forms of death. This ‘person’, on being born and on being embodied, is conjoined with evil things. When he departs and dies he leaves evil things behind. This ‘person’ has two states of consciousness, that of this world and that of the other world. There is a third twilight state of consciousness, - that of sleep. Standing in this twilight state, he sees the other two, that of this world and that of the other world. Now, however, when he approaches the state of consciousness of the other world, he fares forth towards it and describes both evil and joyful things. When he falls asleep, he takes with him all the materials of this all-embracing world. Himself, he destroys them and himself builds them up again; and he dreams in a world lighted by his own brilliance, by his own light. Then is this ‘person’ light by his own light” (4: 3: 7- Brhadaranyaka Upanishad).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *Maitri Upanishad*, p. 102, The Upanishads.

¹⁰⁴ *Hindu Scriptures*, edited by D. Goodall, p. 88.

In the Bahá'í Faith also, dreams are a sign of a life beyond this world. Bahá'u'lláh states that during the state of sleep, the soul is "made to traverse a realm which lieth hidden in the innermost reality of this world".¹⁰⁵ Prayer also in the Bahá'í Faith occupies a state of straddling our present world and the next. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "Those who have ascended have different attributes from those who are still on earth, yet there is no real separation. In prayer there is a mingling of station, a mingling of condition. Pray for them as they pray for you!"¹⁰⁶ In fact, the spiritually aware already traverse a heavenly realm even while their "bodies linger on earth", 'Abdu'l-Bahá" states, "those souls that, in this day, enter the divine Kingdom and attain everlasting life, although materially dwelling on earth, yet in reality soar in the realm of heaven. Their bodies may linger on earth, but their spirits travel in the immensity of space. For as thoughts widen and become illumined, they acquire the power of flight and transport man into the Kingdom of God".¹⁰⁷

In the Upanishads, alongside statements of the individual "person" becoming aware of the afterlife, there are other passages that seem to negate them. Take for instance the following passage which seems to imply there will be no individual consciousness after death:

"As a lump of salt dropped into water dissolves in it and cannot be picked out again, yet from whatever part of the water you draw, there is still salt there, so too, I say, is this great Being - infinite, boundless, a mass of understanding. Out of these elements do all contingent beings arise and along with them are they destroyed. After death there is no consciousness: this is what I say'. Thus spake Yajnavalkya. But Maitreyi said: 'In this, good sir, you have thrown me into confusion in that you say that after death there is no consciousness.' And Yajnavalkya said: 'There is nothing confusing in what I say. This is surely as much as you can understand now. For where there is any semblance of duality, then does one smell another, then does one see another, then does one hear another, then does one speak to another, then does one think of another, then does one understand another. But when all has become one's very Self, then with what should one smell whom? With what should one see

¹⁰⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 152.

¹⁰⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 202.

whom? With what should one hear whom? With what should one speak to whom? With what should one think of whom? With what should one understand whom? With what should one understand Him by whom one understands this whole universe? With what indeed should one understand the Understander?"

(2: 4: 12-14 Brhadaranyaka Upanishad).¹⁰⁸

But when examined a little further, the above passage does not contradict the Hindu belief in consciousness of the soul in the afterlife. When compared to the Spirit, or Atman, individual human consciousness is almost non-existent. In the Semitic line of religions, man in relation to God, is a mere shadow. The emphasis of all monist statements in Hinduism, as in the above passage, is to focus on the Spirit. In relation to the Spirit, all else is contingent and relative. The Spirit, or Self gives the very power for the mind to understand, so how can the mind ever understand that which makes its thinking possible in the first place? Hinduism points to the limitations of human consciousness: there are spiritual states that transcend human thought. This is of course, similar to many other religions. It is ironic that Buddhism is often understood to have rejected the Hindu concept of personal immortality when many passages within Hindu scriptures themselves also parallel the Buddhist approach. Rather than there being a contradiction between Buddhism and Hinduism, there is a striking similarity between them. In Buddhism, human nature derives its spiritual life from the Tathagata or Truth. The self of human beings is non-existent in comparison to the Truth. In Hinduism, it is the "Atman", or "God's Spirit in man" that transcends the human mind. In the Semitic religions the same message is conveyed by comparing man's finite knowledge with God's infinite wisdom.

It should be noted that even within the Upanishads the terminology for the individual "knowing self" varies significantly from passage to passage and from translation to translation. At times, it is referred to as a "soul", "The soul dwells within us, a flame the size of a thumb, when it is known as the Lord of the past and future, then ceases all fear".¹⁰⁹ In another translation it is referred to as "person (prusha)".¹¹⁰ Although

¹⁰⁸ *Hindu Scriptures*, edited by D. Goodall, p. 66.

¹⁰⁹ *Katha Upanishad*, The Upanishads, p. 63.

¹¹⁰ *Sacred books of the East*, vol. 15, p. 16.

there is imprecision in the terminology for the soul, the tripartite picture of human nature is however, fairly straightforward to identify.

In the Bhagavad Gita, there is greater precision and consistency with respect to references to the body, soul and Spirit. In fact, they are virtually identical to the Semitic religions. The goal of human life is depicted in terms of an individual soul being filled with the Spirit:

“And he reaches the heights of Yoga when he surrenders his earthly will: when he is not bound by the work of his senses, and he is not bound by his earthly works. Arise therefore! And with the help of thy Spirit lift up thy soul: allow not thy soul to fall. For thy soul can be thy friend, and thy soul can be thy enemy. The soul of man is his friend when by the Spirit he has conquered his soul; but when a man is not lord of his soul then his soul then this becomes his own enemy.... Day after day, let the Yogi practise the harmony of soul: in a secret place, in deep solitude, master of his mind, hoping for nothing, desiring nothing. Let him find a place that is pure and a seat that is restful... On that seat let him rest and practise Yoga for the purification of the soul: with the life of his body and mind in peace; his soul in silence before the One” (Gita 6: 4-12).

Clearly, the “peace” and harmony of body and soul is dependent upon the Spirit, which emanates from the One (God). Elsewhere in the Bhagavad Gita, it states that “Brahman is the Supreme, the Eternal. Atman is his Spirit in man” (Gita 8:3). These passages suggest that the Bhagavad Gita also uses the tripartite approach to human nature, where Spirit is the unifying element between body and soul.

Death in Hinduism is symbolised by the human mind perceiving diversity, whereas unity signifies life, “Who sees the many and not the ONE, wanders on from death to death. Even by the mind this truth is to be learned: there are not many but only ONE. Who sees variety and not the unity wanders on from death to death” (Katha Upanishad, 4:10-15). Death here is used in the sense of spiritual death, and parallels a similar usage as “living in sin” does for Christianity or “attachment to a separate self” does for Buddhism. The search to acquire spiritual unity means that Hinduism, like Buddhism, is often type-cast as a form of spiritual monism. However, as the foregoing discussion demonstrates, Hinduism, like the Semitic religions, has a tripartite approach to human nature

where the unifying element between body and soul is an underlying Spirit.

9. Plato's Inner Sun

The Bahá'í tripartite approach to human nature has similarities to Plato's philosophy. For Plato, the uniting link between soul and body is the realm of the Forms, which is illumined by an inner invisible sun. His conviction that this physical world is only a shadowy reflection of a real world is an obvious point of agreement with the Bahá'í approach.

In Plato's book, the *Republic* (514-518), the world of the Forms is described as a perfect world, an eternal world. In comparison, the world perceived by our senses is a world of fleeting shadows. The physical world was believed by Plato to be an imperfect copy of the Forms. In the simile of the cave, the position of human beings in this life is compared to the predicament of prisoners in a cave, who are only able to look in one direction because they are bound by chains. They have a fire behind them and a wall in front. The fire projects shadows of both the prisoners and objects immediately behind them - shadows which they inevitably regard as real since they have no direct way of observing the objects which cause the shadows. Then finally, a man is able to break the chains that bind him and exits from the cave where he discovers the light of the sun. He is able to recognise the real nature of the world and understands that he had hitherto been deceived by the shadows in the cave. He will then return to the cave, and inform the other prisoners about the sunlight.

Plato thought that the sun's light came from the Form of the good, "the form of the good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the visible region light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself controlling source of truth and intelligence"¹¹¹. This process of finding the sunlight, the Form of the good, upon which truth and knowledge depend, is obviously similar to finding enlightenment in other spiritual traditions. It corresponds for example to "being born again" in Christianity, or attaining "Nirvana" in Buddhism.

¹¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 517c.

In Plato's simile of the sun, he explicitly refers to the sun and its light as a "third element", which is a realm beyond intelligence. At the same time it is something upon which the mind depends,

"the eyes have the power of sight, and its possessor tries to use this power, and if objects have colour, yet you know that he will see nothing and the colours will remain invisible unless a third element is present which is specifically and naturally adapted for the purpose... the sun is not identical with sight nor with what we call the eye in which sight resides... apply the analogy to the mind. When the mind's eye is fixed on objects illuminated by truth and reality, it understands and knows them, and its possession of intelligence is evident; but when it is fixed on the twilight world of change and decay, it can only form opinions, its vision is confused and its opinions shifting, and it seems to lack intelligence... Then what gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower's mind the power of knowing is the form of the good. It is the cause of knowledge and truth, and you will be right to think of it as being itself known, and yet as being something other than, and even more splendid than, knowledge and truth, splendid as they are. And just as it was right to think of light and sight as being like the sun itself, so here again it is right to think of knowledge and truth as being like the good, but wrong to think of either of them as being the good, whose position must be ranked still higher".¹¹²

Here Plato refers to the sun, the Form of the good, as something higher than knowledge and truth, and something upon which human intelligence depends. He describes it as a necessary condition to acquire knowledge and truth, and the "sun" of the Form of the good clearly has much in common with the Bahá'í "Sun of Truth". Like the Bahá'í approach to human nature, Plato's philosophy of mind is unmistakably tripartite in character. Plato's philosophy is often interpreted to mean that he advocated a form of soul-body dualism. But such a reading of Plato's philosophy misses out the all important Form of the good and its key role in illuminating the landscape of human intelligence.

¹¹² Plato, *Republic*, 507e-509a.

10. Descartes' Bridge between Mind and Body

Descartes' philosophy of mind can also be read in a tripartite way, as opposed to the usual dualist one. The clearest indication that Descartes conceived of a third element which transcends the immortal world of the soul and the perishable world of the body is the role he assigns to God. It is no exaggeration to say that for Descartes, God forms the bridge between the soul and the material world. After arriving at the conclusion of, "I think, therefore I am", Descartes searches further within himself to find another indubitable truth. Although he found that the act of thinking was an irrefutable truth, he realised that there is no guarantee that the mind's thoughts about the world are valid. In short, in his effort to find rock hard truths, Descartes had dug so deep that he was left no ground upon which the world of the senses or the material world could be trusted. But he finds that the idea of God is a singularly unique thought in his mind, and argues for God's existence,

"But now I have discerned that God exists, and have understood at the same time that everything else depends on him, and that he is not deceitful; and from this I have gathered that whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true."¹¹³

Whether Descartes really believed himself to have proved the existence of God is not clear, since elsewhere he states that the existence of God is a primary truth, a basic axiom upon which all others are derived.¹¹⁴ But the role he assigned God, of using God's good nature to guarantee the truth of his "clear and distinct" ideas is unmistakable. The natural conclusion to this is that true knowledge depends on God: "Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends entirely on my awareness of the true God; before knowing him I could have no perfect knowledge of anything. And now it becomes possible for countless things to be clearly known and certain to me..."¹¹⁵ Here Descartes uses the world of God as a bridge connecting the world of the

¹¹³ Descartes: *Philosophical Writings, Meditations*, p. 107.

¹¹⁴ "the first and principal intuitive truth ... is that there is a God upon whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immeasurable, whose decrees are unailing", pxxxv, *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*.

¹¹⁵ *Descartes: Philosophical Writings, "Meditations"*, p. 108.

mind to the world of the body. He believed that if he acted in good faith, that is, where he strove to arrive at clear and distinct ideas, where he recognised limitations to his understanding, and where he wholly trusted in God, God would help him acquire true knowledge.¹¹⁶ The role of God clearly brings out the tripartite character of Descartes' philosophy of mind. He believed that for the mind to reach any valid knowledge about the world or itself, it must rely on God. Descartes' philosophy of mind only appears to be dualist when the role played by God is omitted, and many modern commentaries of Descartes' philosophy do precisely this. By doing so, they tacitly reveal their secular bias. The result is that they impose a division on Descartes' philosophy that was never there.

It is interesting to note that there are similar arguments to Descartes' "systematic doubt" in the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary on the fallibility of "criteria of truth" rejects various well-known methods of acquiring knowledge. He doubts their ability to provide certain knowledge in a manner that is reminiscent of Descartes.¹¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá first doubts the validity of empirical knowledge and gave reasons that are similar to Descartes'. He cited for instance, the existence of optical illusions. He then went on to doubt the validity of knowledge derived from reason, such as knowledge uncovered by science, philosophy or mathematics: since philosophers invariably disagree with one another, and scientific knowledge changes and progresses with time, it is not indubitable. Descartes also found that he could doubt various scientific truths, including the validity of mathematical theorems. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also rejected the validity of tradition as the basis of discovering truth. Descartes had vowed not to rely on traditional wisdom at the very start of his *Meditations*. 'Abdu'l-Bahá next rejected inspiration as a reliable source of knowledge, arguing that there was no way of knowing where such impulses come from: they might equally come from selfish desires as well as good ones. Similarly, Descartes imagined that there was a malicious demon who might deceive all that he imagined, and so only accepted propositions which were beyond the demon's power to distort.

Finally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá concluded that all human avenues to finding

¹¹⁶ *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, "Meditations", p. 98-9.

¹¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, "The Criteria of Truth", p. 45-47.

indubitable truths are faulty. He concluded, just as Descartes had, that for human beings to arrive at indubitable truths, they require assistance from the world of God. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, "What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit which is light and knowledge itself. Through it the human mind is quickened and fortified into true conclusions and perfect knowledge... all available human criterions are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible. Therefore man is not justified in saying, "I know because I perceive through my senses"; or "I know because it is proved through my faculty of reason"; or "I know because it is according to tradition and interpretation of the holy book"; or "I know because I am inspired". All human standard of judgement is faulty, finite".¹¹⁸ Just as Descartes invoked the help of God to acquire truth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasised reliance on the Holy Spirit. Descartes' and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussions on criteria for truth bear striking resemblance to one another, both in terms of their methods and conclusions.

Descartes' philosophy of mind was far from being based upon a "ghost in a machine". In fact it would be more accurate to describe it in terms of a "god in a machine". Descartes' philosophy is tripartite in character, where mind and body find their natural union in the world of God.

11. Conclusion

This paper has argued in favour of the existence of many worlds beyond our physical one and has focussed its attention on one such world, namely the one that lives within our minds. It has given a variety of different reasons why there is in principle no conflict between modern science and the belief in an immortal human soul. The paper has presented the Bahá'í view on the body, soul and spirit, showing that this tripartite approach to human nature is consistent with traditional Western dualism and Eastern monism. The Bahá'í approach is correlated with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the philosophies of Plato and Descartes. Common elements to all these traditions are emphasised from the tripartite perspective, where dualism

¹¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 47.

is given unity and meaning by the presence of an underlying monism.

One common theme that emerges from the religions considered in this paper is that they all describe the goal of human life in terms of us becoming selfless. The Semitic line of religions enjoins their followers to be humble before God. Progress involves the sacrifice of an animal self, the death of an egotistical self, and the acquisition of a spiritual self, a self that is illumined by God's spirit. Jesus instructed his disciples in the following way, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16: 24-26). Likewise in the Quran, it is stated that Allah "guideth to Himself those who turn to Him in penitence..." (S 13:27). The same is true in Hinduism, where the goal of life is to illumine the self by the inner light of the Self (Atman). In Buddhism, the spiritual path transforms a perishable self into a mind that reflects the eternal Truth (Tathagata). The Bahá'í Faith, by explicitly describing a triad relationship between body, soul and spirit, helps to show that both our Western and Eastern spiritual traditions point towards the same goal, that of becoming truly selfless.

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