

The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review

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The Never-ending Journey of the Soul

Papers

The Soul in Chinese and Bahá'í Belief

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

An Introduction to the Doctrines of Soul and Enlightenment in
Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith

Yeo Yew Hock

Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife

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The Mystic Journey of the Soul

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Body, Mind, Soul and Spirit

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**Journal of the Association for Bahá'í Studies
Singapore**

The views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of the Association, nor are they authoritative renderings of Bahá'í belief.

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Note from editor

In an open letter addressed to the "Peoples of the World" in October 1985, the Universal House of Justice, the elected supreme assembly of the Bahá'í World, wrote of a "paralyzing contradiction" concerning human nature. While most people long for peace and harmony, "uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive"¹. In contrast to modern popular images of man being an aggressive animal, they indicated that man's true self is in fact fundamentally spiritual in character and that recognition of this fact is vital to the success of peace initiatives everywhere.

Whether human beings are essentially selfish animals or spiritual beings is of course, one of the central questions of religion. The myth of man being an aggressive animal, a "survival machine", is a familiar modern self-portrait. But just what do we mean by human nature being "spiritual"? Traditionally, being "spiritual" was grounded in a "Never-ending Journey of the Soul", and one possible approach to understanding our true selves is to start by exploring this concept. The 3rd Bahá'í Studies conference in Singapore, held on the 5th April 1998, set out to do precisely this.

The conference brought together Bahá'ís and their friends from a wide variety of different cultural backgrounds. The papers that appear in this volume started off as talks delivered at this conference. The views expressed at the conference, and which now appear in this volume, undoubtedly re-enforce the age-old belief that we are on a "Never-ending Journey of the Soul".

Anjam Khursheed, editor

December 1998

¹ The Promise of World Peace, A Statement by The Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1985, p. 3.

Note from editor

In an open letter addressed to the 'People of the World' in October 1982, the Universal House of Justice, the elected supreme assembly of the Bahá'í World, wrote of a 'perpetual conflict' existing between nations. While most people long for peace and harmony, 'unfathomable' is given to the proposition that human beings are 'inherently selfish and aggressive'. In contrast to modern people, leaders of past being an aggressive nature, they declared that man's soul is in fact fundamentally spiritual in character and that humanity's role is not in the sphere of peace initiatives everywhere.

Whether nations being the essentially selfish animals of spiritual beings is of course one of the central issues of religion. The myth of man being an aggressive animal, a 'wolf in a shepherd's' clothing, is a familiar notion self-proclaimed. But our wish to be seen by human nature being 'spiritual'. Additionally being 'spiritual' was founded in a 'leveling' journey to the soul, and our position towards understanding our true nature is to start by examining this concept. The 3rd Bahá'í Studies Conference in Singapore, held on the 2nd April 1983, set out to do precisely this.

The conference brought together Bahá'ís and their friends from a wide variety of different cultural backgrounds. The papers that appear in this volume stand out as clear evidence of the conference. The views expressed at the conference and which may appear in this volume are notably to enhance the spiritual realm that we are on a 'leveling' journey to the soul.

Editorial Board
November 1983

The Soul in Chinese and Bahá'í Belief

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

Abstract

This article is a preliminary investigation of the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith and their discourses in relation to their beliefs in the presence of a soul, the existence of an afterlife, and the phenomenon of death. In addition, it explores the ideas on the nature of the soul and the human being and relates these ideas to the human being's quest for happiness and meaning in life. Last but not least, the question of free will and its relation to justice is discussed.

Introduction

In all religions, the true nature of man is his soul. As is typical in religions, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that there is a Creator or God, that humanity is His creation and that humanity would ultimately return to the spiritual world. There is reference to the existence of a soul, a unique possession belonging only to the human being and an entity said to exist in a life after death, long after the decay of the physical body. There is, of course, no more difficult a theme to deal with than that of the soul since the soul is a spiritual metaphysical reality which cannot be perceived through the senses, and therefore eludes anyone who relies only upon sensory and intellectual perception.

While the Bahá'í Faith may be quite typical in what may be termed a "religion", the Chinese religion, however, is not so clearly definable. It represents a much older and complex whole, comprising a vast corpus of scriptures and divergent traditions. In the first instance, the Chinese religion is a mixture of shamanism, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These not only co-existed but also were believed and

practised in a variety of combinations. The average Chinese person, as the saying goes, wears "a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals. I have therefore called it "Chinese religion" rather than "Chinese religions". It is a distinctive religion because of its non-exclusivity; groups and individuals embraced aspects of more than one "religion without necessarily reconciling them. In other words, a Chinese man can claim that he is both a Taoist (a lover of nature), a Confucian (who is serious in his duties), and a Buddhist (deeply aware of the transience of life). Its eclectic nature can be seen in the Chinese temples in Southeast Asia where statues of Confucius, Lao-tzu and the Buddha are set up alongside those of traditional Chinese immortals as objects of veneration. To further complicate the picture, the Chinese religion is actually a little more than this simple trilogy because within each of the three, there are many schools, each a little different from the other. For example, in Singapore, a recent survey found that besides Taoism and Confucianism, there were seven schools of Buddhism (including *Mahayana*, *Theravada*, *Pure Land*, *Ch'an* and the *Japanese Nichiren* school), at least nine syncretic religions including the *Great Way of Former Heaven*, the *P'u T'u Men* or salvation sect, the *Kuei Ken Men* or way of reverting-to-the-first-principle sect and the well known *Red Swastika Society*, and many spiritual medium cults, pure Chinese ones, sino-Malay ones and sino-Indian ones.¹ The historical pattern is one of confluence and overlapping of various strands and religion is held together by patterns of participation rather than any rational overview.

Another "problem with regard to the Chinese religion is that although we may refer to a "Chinese religion", we should note here that there is no Chinese word that corresponds exactly to the word "religion". To the Chinese, there is no difference between religion and education. The Chinese word *jiao* (教), meaning teaching, includes all religions. Both "teaching" and "learning" have the purpose of bringing enlightenment. A great teacher teaches one to understand the great principle of life and the universe, how to reach the good and to appreciate the beautiful. Similarly, Confucian scholars themselves did not consider whether their system of values was a philosophy of religion as it was not a relevant question in their culture. The question of dualistic terminology which plays a large part in Western philosophical consciousness (e.g. "sacred"

¹ Chew, *Life Death and Immortality*, p. 70.

vs "secular", "salvific" vs "pedagogic", "spiritual" vs "practical" etc.) is quite alien to the Chinese mind. In the same way philosophy and religion are neither separable nor clearly distinguishable in Chinese civilisation.²

Although the Chinese notion of "teaching" does not indicate an explicit belief in God, it is incorrect to say that the Chinese do not believe in God, or what in their own literature has been referred to as *the Absolute Truth, the Ultimate Reality or the Eternal Ground of Being*. Indeed, sprinkled throughout the *Tao-te ching* and the other major Chinese classical texts are references to the presence of the Great Tao. We know too that there are an abundance of temples and shrines whenever Chinese people are found and what are temples and shrines if they are not the earthly palaces of deities and spirits? How could the Chinese have been described as irreligious people when there were many temples, even in Communist China? Indeed, the study of archaeology and textual philology has yielded us a hierarchy of gods and spirits worshipped in Chinese antiquity, which rivals that of the ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world. Even Confucianism, in what is known as the "Chinese Great Tradition", has a certain openness to the transcendent. The fact that Confucius stressed his love for the ancients and the fact that he was a "transmitter" rather than a "maker" of values symbolises his conscious attempt to provide a transcendental anchorage for human civilisation.

A third "problem" that differentiates the Chinese religion from the other major religions is the lack of a Holy Book or a proclaimed prophet-figure. Instead, part of the essence of traditional Chinese belief is that wise sages (great teachers) from time to time will come to show the path to enlightenment. In a broad sense, the Sage or the *junzi* (君子) in Chinese philosophy can be compared to what is known in Bahá'í theology as "the Perfect man", or "the Manifestation of God", who will come to reaffirm what the Chinese have called, *the way*. Throughout the *Mencius*, ancient sage kings are extolled precisely because it was recognised that the sage achieved complete unity and harmony with a higher realm. On the other hand, imperfect man, in his almost total ignorance of reality, realises disharmony and conflict and creates difficulties for himself and for others. In this article, I will therefore

² Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 17.

quote and narrate from the sayings of China's most influential sages since it is only in China that we have the unique case of a religion without a prophet, a religion not quite divine in origin but to all intents and purposes a religion in terms of its aims and depth of spiritual insights. As Chew puts it, "It is a religion without revelation."³

Where the multifaceted Chinese religion is concerned, there is of course a broad range of beliefs and approaches to the nexus of fundamental questions related to the soul, death and the afterlife. This article is a preliminary investigation of the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith and their beliefs in relation to a soul, the existence of an afterlife, and the phenomenon of death. In addition, it explores the ideas on the nature of the soul and the human being and relates these ideas to the human being's quest for happiness and meaning in life. Last but not least, the question of free will and its relation to justice is discussed.

The existence of the soul

All religions teach that the invisible but essential part of man, the soul, will live on long after the body decays. Indeed, the *raison d'être* of the divine religions has been the promise of immortality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith and the interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings, calls the soul "the inner reality of man."⁴ He also describes it as "a pure and unknown substance."⁵ Everywhere the Bahá'í Writings suggest that the "true man" is the soul and therefore the body is of minor importance. It is said: "...the body has to die when its light has come to an end. Therefore of what importance is it?"⁶

In Chinese religion, one of the clearest expositions of the existence of the soul is in the writings of Mencius (371-289 BC), the greatest successor

³ Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 51.

⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 464.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

of Confucian thought. Mencius refers to the soul, as the "essential nature" of man and calls it the "vital spirit":⁷

I know how to nourish my vast vital spirit... it is not easy to describe it in words. For it is a spirit extremely great and extremely strong. When nourished by rectitude and kept integral, it fills up all between heaven and earth. It is a spirit that must be mated to justice and natural law. Without these it would be starved. In fact, it is born of an accumulation of justice, not something which justice invades from outside and takes to itself. Its very life depends upon justice. For whenever your conduct does not satisfy your conscience, the vital spirit suffers starvation.⁸

This "vital spirit", a term reminiscent of the work of Plato, is seen here as a necessary ally of the rational principle (the materialistic rules which human beings operate by) if their unruly desires are to be kept in order. According to Mencius, without the help of the vital spirit, the human being would be like a "powerless monarch", in terms of his true mission in life.⁹ The vital spirit is one which cannot be perceived by the material senses of the physical body but can only be expressed in outward signs and works. The vital spirit is also placeless since placement is characteristic of bodies and not of spirit. As the above extract recounts, the important thing is to inform the vital spirit with the spirit of justice. When one's conduct is bad, the vital spirit suffers starvation. On the other hand, when the vital spirit is nourished by the spirit of justice, it is lifted up to a higher plane, and instead of weakening, will grow immensely.

Another Chinese mystic, Chuang-tzu (c.300 BC), a contemporary of Mencius and the greatest successor of Taoist thought after Lao-tzu,¹⁰ spoke of the spirit or soul of man as the "true man" which could never be destroyed.¹¹ Chuang-tzu explains that this spirit, the "true man", has

⁷ Mencius, Bk 2, pt. 1, ch. 2. Art. 11.

⁸ Mencius, Bk 2, pt. 1, ch. 2, arts. 12-14.

⁹ Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 90.

¹⁰ It has been said that Chuang-tzu is to Lao-tzu what Mencius is to Confucius.

¹¹ See Berling, *Death and Afterlife*.

existed before man's birth as a human being. When a human being dies, his true self returns home, as it were, to its original state. It continues to exist although its existence is beyond time and space. In addition, another Chinese philosopher, Mo-tzu (c 468-376 BC) upheld the belief that the vital spirit or the true man would continue to live on. He defended the belief of its existence on the grounds that people had actually heard the voices of spiritual beings and that beliefs in spiritual beings was helpful to personal conduct and national peace.¹²

Although proclaiming the existence of the soul, these influential Chinese philosophers are, however, relatively silent as to the origins of the soul or its originator and it is this very silence and impreciseness that has led many Western observers and scholars to believe that the Chinese temperament is more suited to a philosophy rather than a religion.¹³ Here, it is true, however, that the Chinese religion is concerned more with the celebration of life rather than with the clarification of doctrines. Whether there is a soul or many souls, a god or many gods is not a matter of philosophical interest. Two reasons may be postulated at this juncture as to why although there have been mystical experiences, there has been very little talk about the soul. Firstly, for the Chinese to expound on a topic outside space and time would be a transgression of "the mean", which Confucius had warned about.¹⁴ Confucius said: "till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead" (*Analects* 11:11). The Tao ("omnipotent"), the closest concept in Chinese thought to "God" is not explicitly expounded on, either in the *Tao-te ching* or the Confucian *Analects*. This silence is consistent with Chinese thought for the Tao cannot be described since language is a product of the world and the Tao, logically, is beyond it. The Tao, described as the organic order underlying the world, cannot be named or known, only intuited.¹⁵ The religious autobiography or treatise has not been a popular genre in China literature.

¹² Mei, *Ethical and Political Thoughts of Mo-tzu*, vol. III.

¹³ The writings of Western Sinologues such as Legge and Giles in the 19th and 20th Century helped mould such beliefs. Their students e.g. Derk Bodde also writes in this tradition.

¹⁴ See the *Chung Yung (The Doctrine of the Mean)* which represents the mature thought of Confucius.

¹⁵ See Chew, *The Great Tao*.

The second, and perhaps more important reason, is that while phonetic language leads easily to conceptual abstractions and a separation of the sensible from the non-sensible, (e.g. the Greek language presents a world of meanings in separation from a world of concrete things); an image-language, such as the Chinese language tends to lead to the cohesion of the sensible and non-sensible, for example, religion and philosophy is denoted by the same symbol, *jiao* (教). The languages of revelation in the Bahá'í Faith, ie Arabic and Persian are also phonetic rather than image languages. This has enabled the Bahá'í Faith to be more explicit in its references to the soul. The use of image language explains why the Chinese tradition is less metaphysical than Western traditions. Metaphysics in the Western sense is predicated upon the separation of the sensible from the abstract, the practical from the transcendental.¹⁶

However, this silence or indirectness on metaphysical subjects did not mean that the Chinese do not believe in an ultimate power. Although the Creator and its creation, the soul, is seldom mentioned in Chinese literature, it is always assumed. It is the indispensable backdrop for Confucian and Taoist discourse. In discourses on the *Tao*, there is a worldview that seeks the perfection of an individual through union with an absolute agent or force. In the *Tao-te ching*, the *Tao* is referred to as "the mother of the world" and "the root of all returns".¹⁷ The ultimate is seen in the *Tao*, a divine force so immanent that it is even in the soil and tiles, so much a part of the world that it cannot be separated from its Oneness. Union with the *Tao* is believed to be the birthright of every being, and is closely associated with the belief with a mystical Creator.

While both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith acknowledge the existence of the soul as "a pure and unknown substance", "an inner reality", "a vital spirit", and "the true man", the Bahá'í Faith provides more details on this "essential nature" of Man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the soul "... is sent forth by the Word of God" and that the soul is "a spirit with which God had endowed him (man) at creation".¹⁸ The soul is "the intermediary between the Supreme Concourse and the lower concourse" suggesting that the soul is the link between the Creator and

¹⁶ Cheng, *Chinese Metaphysics*, p. 167.

¹⁷ See *Tao-te ching*, chapters 25 and 16.

¹⁸ Chew, *The Great Tao*.

the world of creation.¹⁹ For Bahá'ís, the spirit or the soul is the rider, the body is only the steed. The soul acts in the physical world with the help of the body. The soul utilises the body as an instrument through which its qualities may be developed. As the co-ordinator of the physical functions of the body, the soul enables it to function in perfect harmony and with absolute regularity. It is from the Bahá'í Writings that we are able to understand more clearly what Mencius has previously termed as "not easily described in words."

The Existence of life after death.

The scarcity of discourse on the afterlife in Chinese tradition can be attributed to the influence of Confucius. For him, the afterlife is not within one's control and therefore should not be the focus of attention. Once, when he was asked whether men have consciousness after death he replied:

If I say that the dead have consciousness, I am afraid that the pious sons and obedient grandsons will harm their own lives for the dead; if I say that the dead have no consciousness, I am afraid that the unfilial and impious children will abandon the cadavers of their deceased parents and not even bury them. Why are you so eager to know if the dead have consciousness? It is not important now. We will know it naturally later (when we die)²⁰

Despite this stoic detachment on the part of the great Chinese philosophical texts from the belief in a soul, most Chinese, through their daily lives and practices, assume that there is one. They take great care to maintain personal contact with their ancestors not only through ancestral tables in an altar placed in a spirit hall or in their homes, but also by regular visits to the cemetery. There has also been a strong interest in the care of the corpse, both immediately after death and in the grave. From early in Chinese history, those with resources seem to have spent

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Ibid.*

²⁰ The Home Sayings of Confucius, quoted in Chih, *Chinese Humanism*, p. 415.

lavishly on elixirs and other treatments that would prevent or slow down the process of decay. Families of means invested in watertight and strong coffins to preserve the body as long as possible. Records found in oracle bones dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1751-111 BC) contain numerous references to sacrifices to ancestors, with offerings of food and other daily necessities and luxuries. Daily utensils and, in extreme cases, their bodyguard or even concubines were buried with them so that they could be served. Certainly, a civilisation or culture that focuses so much on ancestor-worship must presuppose some belief in the soul and hereafter.

The Chinese words *gui* (鬼) and *shen* (神) also show a belief in the existence of spiritual beings. Etymologically, *gui* means "to return to the source" and *shen* means "to expand", but in ancient times, and for the masses, *gui-shen* (鬼神) means merely spiritual beings. Intercessions are offered for the beloved dead. Prayers are said for the forgiveness of sins. The ancestor cult was expressed as a memorial service, held previously at ancestral temples, and after that at gravesides or at home²¹ Wine and food were usually offered with silent prostration in front of tables. Ancestors were alleged to have tasted the food before the whole family partook of the meal. Ancient Chinese literature, especially that of the fourth and fifth centuries BC is fairly rich in essays and poems devoted to recalling the soul. The practice of recalling the soul was widely practised until the Second World War. What is certain is that the soul, *hun-p'o*, survives after death. It is believed that at death the upper soul, *hun*, rises up to heaven while the lower soul, *po*, descends to earth. This is in harmony with the Confucian belief that the human being is compounded of two souls – an upper or intellectual soul called the *hun*, which becomes the spirit (*shen*) and ascends to the world above, and a lower or animal soul, called the *po/po*, which becomes the ghost (*gui*) and descends with the body into the grave.²²

Interestingly, in the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the soul as "... the intermediary between the Supreme Concourse and the lower concourse. It (the soul) hath two phases – "the higher aspireth to the

²¹ Yeo, Chinese Family Religion *Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review Vol. 2*, p. 111.

²² These ideas are found in the *Tso Commentary (Tso-chuan)* in a recording of a conversation dated 534 BC.

kingdom of El-Abhá and the lights of the mind shine forth from that horizon upon its higher sphere. The other side inclineth to the lower course of the material world, and its lowest phase is enveloped in the darkness of ignorance." 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues: "There is a human spirit and a divine spirit, the latter arising through knowledge and belief in God. The human spirit is superior to the body and struggles with it for control of the soul: when it succeeds, the soul becomes heavenly; when the body obtains control, the soul becomes degraded."²³ Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "... the human personality appears in two aspects: the image or likeness of God and the aspect of Satan. The human reality stands between these two: the divine and the Satanic."²⁴ In short, "... man, is endowed with two natures: one tendeth towards moral sublimity and intellectual perfection, while the other turneth to bestial degradation and carnal imperfection."²⁵

Chuang-tzu believed that the only way to salvation was to identify oneself with "the orderly process of all being, the *Tao*." For Chuang-tzu, death is nothing to fear, for man lives as long as his essence, the *Tao*, lives; and the *Tao* is eternal. One of his most well known stories, often referred to as the "most fantastic" story of "a happy excursion" has been variously interpreted by different thinkers. The following interpretation by Fang is relevant to our discussion on the immortality of the soul:

Here, Chuang-tzu asserts that "the supreme man could lead his own spirit up to the primordial reposing blissfully in the realm of Nowhere, doing away with all the petty knowledge and getting free of the bother of lowly things...the spirit can abide with the eternal *Tao*, estranged from the physical world and disencumbered of all material allurings, independent and free from all restraints. Upon entering the gate of infinitude, he experiences supreme bliss and immerses his unique spirit in the light of the celestial. At the attainment of sagehood, he would abandon himself to the vast concord of all perfection. He is now

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets*, p. 611.

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 288.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the archetype of man in the full capacity of the omnipotent (*dao*).²⁶

It must be noted here, that not all Chinese people believe that immortality was only possible in "the realm of Nowhere". A sizeable number believed that it could also be sought in the material world. In Chinese thought, there has not been a strict separation of spirit and matter, (just as there has not been the strict separation of the spiritual from the practical and the sacred vs the secular). Thus, many Chinese look forward to the survival of the whole person, including the body. The belief that humans could become Immortals led historically to the practice of alchemical experiments. The popular Taoist tradition is embellished with stories of wondrous drugs and wonder-working immortals, of levitations and bodily ascensions. This is especially described in early treatises such as the well-known *Ts'an-t'ung-ch'i* of Wei Po-yang (2nd century AD) and the *Pao-p'u-tzu*, written by Ko Hung. As Confucianism and Taoism became increasingly institutionalised, we also hear of the "heavenly immortals" that have ascended to celestial regions and of "earthly immortals" that roam about in sacred forests and mountains. After them come those human beings that appear to die, but actually only leave behind their physical frames.²⁷ It must be noted that although there is a pursuit of deathlessness in the popular imagination of the masses, this does not mean that there was no belief in the existence of a soul and in spiritual immortality.

Many Chinese also believe in reincarnation, especially those directly influenced by Buddhist doctrines. There is also a strong belief that the physical and spiritual worlds are interconnected. In Chinese mythology, the journey imagery is seen through the cline of existence. Immortality

²⁶ *The World and the Individual*, p. 247.

²⁷ There is a different story with the intellectuals. In the first century A.D., Wang Ch'ung, one of the more critical and influential philosophers in Chinese history, wrote a treatise to disprove the existence of spiritual beings. Fan chen (b. 450) attacked the Buddhist belief. Later Neo-Confucianists, from the 12th Century on, have unanimously attacked both the Taoist and the Buddhist belief in everlasting life. They believed that "the best course is to establish virtue, the next best is to establish achievement, and still the next best is to establish words. When these are abandoned with time, this may be called immortality."

and mortality is often blurred, and there are degrees of both states.²⁸ A popular belief is the notion that the living being could lighten the suffering of the dead ancestors and lead them to an early and pleasant rebirth – either on earth (as in Mahayana Buddhism) or in heaven (as in philosophical Taoism). In Buddhist terms, this was due to the notion of “transfer of merit” according to which one could do religious deeds for the sake of another. One can do charitable acts, perform religious services or undertake some religious discipline, and intentionally transfer the merit of that act into an account, as it were, for one’s relatives, or for all suffering beings. This corresponds to the Bahá’í belief that once a soul has departed from this physical world, it will behold in that next world whatever was hidden from it here. It will be able to “gaze on his fellows and peers, and those in the ranks above him, and those below”.²⁹ Bahá’ís are encouraged to pray for those who have died in order to assist their spiritual progress. Similarly, souls which have passed into the next world are believed to be able to assist people in the physical world. Thus, both the Chinese religion and the Bahá’í Faith possess a strong belief in the existence of an afterlife and the idea that the dead can help the living and vice versa.³⁰

The Phenomenon of Death

It is important to consider the phenomenon of death since it is the beginning or the end of one’s life, depending on one’s point of perspective. Its inevitability is the essential key to the understanding of human interest in the soul and the life hereafter. It evokes the master emotion of the human race and its occurrence forces us to reflect on the

²⁸ The great pre-mieval gods are presumed to be immortal yet the Flame Emperor, brother of the Yellow Emperor, are all killed and died at death, though parts of them live on in a metamorphosed state. Metamorphosis is also the final destiny of other mythical figures who have died by execution or drowning such as Kun, who became a bear (some other variants are turtle and dragon), Kang-hsiang, who becomes a river god and Chig Wei, who turns into a bird. P’an Ku is transformed into the universe at the moment of death. Some mystical figures exist on the border of life and death, such as woman Ch’ou, who was born a corpse, and the hero Hsing T’ien, who continues to fight after his head has been lopped off (Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 181).

²⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 171.

³⁰ Yeo, *Chinese Family Religion, Singapore Bahá’í Studies Review, Vol. 2*, p. 112.

meaning of life. In the writings of Chuang-tzu, death has been portrayed as the "great awakening", the ultimate end of man which is the unity with the Tao:

When a man is dreaming, he does not realise he is dreaming. Sometimes he even dreams that he is awake and goes on to interpret the dream he has just had. Only when he awakes does he realise that it was all a dream. So, when the Great Awakening comes, one will realise that his life is a Big Dream. Yet fools consider themselves as awake, knowing for sure that "this is the prince and that is the shepard." Oh, what cocksureness! Confucius and yourself are both dreams; and I who say that you are dreams am likewise a dream.³¹

This dream imagery is strikingly similar to the way the Bahá'í scriptures to connote the value of life on the physical plane:

As to material happiness, it never exists; nay, it is but imagination, an image reflected in mirrors, a spectre and a shadow... It is something, which but slightly removes one's affliction... All the material blessings... bestow no delight on the mind, nor pleasure to the soul: nay, they furnish only the bodily wants...³²

For Chuang-tzu and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, life on the material plane is metaphorically only a dream. Therefore, they taught that the human being should value spiritual happiness more than material happiness, since they regard it to be the true basis of all human endeavour.

On another occasion and further on the subject of death, Chuang-tzu described death as the Great return to its creator and suggests that the destiny and well-being of the human being is to cultivate a relationship with the Source of Being. This is an idea not unfamiliar to the other religions, including the Bahá'í Faith:

³¹ Chuang-tzu, ch. 2, p.16 Quoted in Sih, *Chinese Humanism*, p. 76.

³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in McLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 177.

Man's life in this world is like the flitting shadow of a white pony on its run as seen through a crack on the wall. A momentary flash, and it disappears! Like jets of water from the bubbling fountain, men spring out and return to their source. By one transformation they are born, by another transformation they die. At the point of dying, all living beings become miserable and men feel sad. But it is only the removal of the bow from the sheath, or the shedding off of a shell. There may be some confusion amidst the yielding to the change, but the spiritual soul and animal soul are taking their leave, and the body will follow them. This is the Great Return!³³

Another favoured metaphor in both Chinese and Bahá'í beliefs is that life is a journey and death a point of transition on that path. Death is only a transformation from one form of existence to another. This suggests to their followers that if human existence is a source of joy, why should death, another form of existence be the source of sorrow? In Taoist belief, human life is depicted as a "journey", a "pilgrimage" of the soul, the journey back to God. In the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to "the pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment."³⁴ In his writings, Chung-tzu also offers a vision of the soul as well as the body traversing different states of existence. His grief is captured in the famous story of the death of his wife.

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing - this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not

³³ Chuang-tzu. Quoted in Sih, *Chinese Humanism*. pp. 75-76.

³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp. 294, 336.

only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change took place and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.³⁵

Chuang-tzu views the death of his wife as simply another phase of her journey. He recalls that there was a time in the womb and before, a time in this world and after. His reverence is more for the natural processes (the *Tao*) from which she had come and to which she had returned rather than a wish to be physically attached to her. A Bahá'í saying which recalls this viewpoint is the advice: "O Son of the Supreme! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I have made the light to shed on thee its splendour. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom."³⁶ Death is simply another natural phase of one's journey and excessive grief is uncalled for in light of this perspective.

The Soul and the Nature of Man

Both Chinese and Bahá'í beliefs concur that the human being is the only being with self-consciousness, perception and intelligence, and hence endowed with the capacity for self-improvement and perfection. "All men", says Confucius, "are born righteous" (*Analects* 6:17). Similarly, in the Bahá'í scriptures: "man is the noblest of all beings, the sum of all perfection...."³⁷ For the Chinese, the human being is a species in his own right. He may share many similarities with animals but there is an essential difference between him and the wild beasts of the field. In other words, there is a difference in *kind* between man and animals, not just of *degree*. In the same way, the Chinese also believe that there is a difference in kind and not just in degree between man and God. In addition, some people may be "godlike" but they are not God or "divine man". As Confucius puts it, some men "are divine to man, but ordinary

³⁵ Quoted in Berling, *Death and Afterlife*, p. 184.

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words, Arabic*, p. 32.

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 195.

to God.”³⁸ Chuang-tzu develops this idea by adding that “the meanest being in heaven would be the best on earth; and the best on earth, the meanest in heaven.”³⁹ Both religions, although separated by a time of over 2,000 years have a sophisticated understanding of spiritual relativity.

Both Chinese and Bahá'í views concur that Man is different from animals for man is able to intellectualise and to understand abstractions. He is the only creature which can resist nature. For example, man can defy gravity through the invention of the aeroplane. Most important of all, in man can also be found the gift of self-consciousness. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the soul bestows upon man “conscious reflection” and “conscious intelligence.” 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: “God has created such a conscious spirit within him (man) that he is the most wonderful of all contingent beings.”⁴⁰ Animals do not have the self-image that human beings have. It is well known that when a chimpanzee, the most evolved of human primates, sees its own image reflected in a mirror, it often does not recognise itself. In fact the chimpanzee often thinks that it is another animal and tries to look behind the mirror for it. Animals are often incapable of recognising the image of its own body and therefore cannot come to know of itself as an animal. According to the Bahá'í texts, the gift of consciousness has been bestowed on man so that he can investigate the truth for himself, arrive at the choice of good and evil, apprehend the divine teachings, acquire and manifest the bounties of God.⁴¹

The main concern for Confucius was not therefore whether man had a soul or a certain human uniqueness, that was not found in other creatures on this material world, since this was already implicit in their overall understanding of the cosmos. Rather, the emphasis was on a practical focus, that is, how to put this distinctively human quality to good use. Chinese scholars such as Confucius and Mencius felt that since man is essentially noble, law and punishment should not be the main instrument

³⁸ See Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 85.

³⁹ See Chew, *The Chinese Religion*, p. 85. These beliefs are also found in the Bahá'í Faith. See chapters 46, 48, 48 of *Some Answered Questions* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 258, 17, 58, 51.

⁴¹ cf. MacLean, *Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 160.

in controlling man's behaviour and actions. What should be emphasised was rather his sense of shame, something which must come from the inner self, the conscience. This sense of shame is probably emphasised more in China than in any other cultural tradition of the world. To label a man "without shame" is to degrade him to the level of animals. Confucius himself said that a sense of shame is more powerful than the fear of punishment. (*Analects* 2:3). Interestingly, the Bahá'í Faith states that the presence of shame prevents man from doing what is unworthy and unseemly but warns that this sense of shame, effective as a deterrent, is confined to only to a few people. By itself, shame is not sufficient to prevent the occurrence of immoral deeds and the Bahá'í Faith advocates that the offender should, in addition, be punished by the relevant authorities.⁴²

A related question at this point is how one may reconcile the intrinsic nobility of man, proclaimed by both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, with the occurrence of evil deeds? In the Bahá'í Faith, evil results when the soul, originally pure, becomes corrupted. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "It is like the nose, which at first smells any odour, but after a prolonged exposition to an odour, it no longer perceives it,"⁴³ and moreover, "... every individual is born holy and pure, and only thereafter may before defiled."⁴⁴ "As the soul progresses, they will begin to differ one from the other, some achieving the highest stations, some a middle one, others remaining at the lowest stage of being."⁴⁵ This explanation bears similarity to the ideas of Mencius who explained that the occurrence of bad deeds are chiefly a result of environmental influences.

In good years the young people often acquire a habit of dependence. In bad years, the young people often take to violence. This is not due to the difference in their natural endowments as conferred by heaven. It is due to the different

⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chapter 74.

⁴³ Consider the words of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith: "In this day the tastes of man have changed, and their power of perception hath altered. The contrary winds of the world, and its colours, have provoked a cold, and deprived men's nostrils of the sweet savours of Revelation" (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 119).

⁴⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 190.

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 171.

things by which they allow their minds to be ensnared and engulfed.

Take for instance, the barley. Let the seed be sown and covered up. The ground being the same, and the time of planting again the same, it will grow luxuriantly and ripen in the fullness of time. If there be inequalities of produce, it must be due to the thickness and thinness of the soil, to the sufficiency and insufficiency of rain and dew, and to the different ways of farming.

In fact, all things which belong to the same kind of species are similar to each other. Why should we doubt in regard to man, as if he were a solitary exception to the rule?⁴⁶

To summarise, the soul or vital spirit which man possesses, distinguishes him from the other animals in the world. He is a species in his own right. The Chinese view of man as the noblest being in the universe parallels the Bahá'í view. Man is different from the animals for he is able to intellectualise, to understand abstractions and to create something which had not existed before. He is a special being in the cosmos, intrinsically noble. The evil deeds that occur are explained away as a result of habitual addiction or more precisely to the lack of a spiritual education.

The Education of the Soul

There is a perception in the Chinese tradition that life is a journey to the ultimate and that many things will occur along the journey which will alter the end result of the journey for the better or worse. As a result of this perception, moral education becomes a very important enterprise. True education is moral education because it teaches man to differentiate good from bad, the beneficial from the harmful and right from wrong. In the *Book of Great Learning* by Confucius, a man has to be cultivated, "cut and then filed, chiselled and then ground." This makes it, once again, aligned with the Bahá'í Faith. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "Were

⁴⁶ Mencius, bk 6, pt 1, ch 6 arts. 1-7.

there no educator, all souls would remain savage, and were it not for the teachers, the children would be ignorant creatures.⁴⁷ "The essence of man" writes Bahá'u'lláh "is hidden in his individuality which must appear though the polish of education. This is man's glory, and all else which depends upon other things is not a part of man himself."⁴⁸

The Chinese sages have taught that the moron who is fond of learning is better than an intelligent man who does not exert himself.⁴⁹ In the Bahá'í writings, education is greatly emphasised and encouraged. In the Bahá'í Faith, the fundamental importance and limitless possibilities of education are announced in the clearest terms: "Every child is potentially the light of the world - and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance."⁵⁰ As Bahá'u'lláh puts it, "knowledge is as wings to man's life and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."⁵¹ We may conclude here then that the erstwhile Chinese sage, just like the prophets of the great religions, reveals to man how he should behave on the material plane. Indeed, the whole Confucian enterprise is directed toward the development of the moral individual. The pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the quest for moral perfection. The ancient Chinese always believed that morality should be the goal of education because it was morality that moved the universe. This stress on moral education by the great Chinese sages, and which comprises what has been called the "Great Chinese Tradition", is in keeping with the supreme aim of all the founders of the great religions.

However, it must be noted that, while both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith stress education as a means of bringing out true human qualities, there is a distinctive difference. For the Bahá'ís, the prevention of immoral acts will not come just from moral education per se but only through a moral education which begins with the recognition of the existence of God. Bahá'ís believe that man is more self-centred than other-centred. Thus, education is not enough if it is not sustained by the

⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 126.

⁴⁸ "The Federation of the World" In *Star of the West*, xiv, 297.

⁴⁹ cf. Chew, *Chinese Religion*, p. 130.

⁵⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 130.

⁵¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 51.

fear of God. In other words, man's sense of shame can only be effective when it is sustained and inspired by the school of religion. In the Chinese religion, while education and the cultivation of shame are emphasised, the question of the existence of God takes a back seat. It is always assumed as part of the universe of existence but not explicitly in the foreground as a means of moulding characters.

The Tao of Happiness

If the true man is the soul, how is this related to the perennial quest for happiness in life? In the Great Chinese Tradition, the way to attain true happiness is to follow the way of the Tao. In the *Tao-te ching*:

If I have a grain of wisdom,
I will walk along the great Tao
And only fear to stray (ch 53).

The nature of great virtue is to follow Tao along (ch. 21). In being in harmony with Tao, everything is made whole. This is echoed in Confucius, "A resolute scholar and a man of humanity will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life in order to realise humanity (*Analects* 15:8). For Mencius, the way to attain happiness is "For a man to give full realisation to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature, he is serving Heaven. (*Mencius* 8A:1).

Such injunctions are very familiar to the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Whoso keepeth the commandments of God shall attain everlasting felicity."⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds, "... human happiness consists only in drawing closer to the threshold of the almighty God, in securing the peace and well-being of every individual member, high and low alike, of the human race..."⁵³ Bahá'ís also believe that if the human spirit is attracted to the Kingdom of God, if the inner sight becomes opened

⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 289.

⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 60.

and the spiritual feelings dominate, he will see the immortality of the spirit as clearly as he sees the sun.

For the Chinese mystics, simply keeping in harmony with the Tao is not enough. Many have longed for spontaneous oneness with Tao, "to become one with the great thoroughfare."⁵⁴ This mystic attraction may be referred to as the attraction between the lover and his beloved. Bahá'u'lláh writes; "... the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved."⁵⁵ The Bahá'í texts very often describe love through metaphors drawn from the experience of human love between a man and a woman. In the path of the spiritual search, the lover is ready to give up the attributes of his natal self that he may take on divine qualities.⁵⁶

How then does one achieve the Tao of happiness? For the religious Taoist, the main obstacle to this end are the senses and the intellect which continuously support a separate notion of ego through the presence of emotions and desires. Mystics therefore apply techniques e.g. fasting, purification and meditation to empty themselves so as to be one with the Tao.⁵⁷ The following shamanic passages in the *Chuang-tzu* include the lyrical description of the holy or perfect man, and gives some mystical advice on how to cultivate the soul:

There is a Holy Man living on the distant Ku-she Mountain, with skin like ice or snow... He does not eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, mounts the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful (Watson, *Complete works of Chuang Tzu* 33).

(Yen Hui said) "May I ask what the fasting of the mind is?" Confucius said: "Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind

⁵⁴ *Chuang-tzu*, 6.

⁵⁵ See Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, Chapter 1.

⁵⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*.

stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind (Watson, *Complete Works of Chuang-tzu* 57-58).

For the philosophical Taoist, absolute happiness comes with transcending the distinctions between the physical self (the ego) and the universe, by perfect union with the Tao.⁵⁸ In the *Chuang-tzu*, it involves a higher level of knowledge, that of wisdom, which goes beyond the distinction of things, including that of life and death. This may be called mystical knowledge, since it is not acquired by ordinary means. Indeed, it comes only with “forgetting” the knowledge of all things – especially that of the self. The *Chuang-tzu* mentions a requirement of the emptying of the senses and of the mind itself, a preparatory state leading to the presence of the superhuman and divine.⁵⁹

In the Bahá'í Faith, there is an acknowledgement of inner perception or intuitive knowledge. The Bahá'í texts very often refer to an “inner eye and vision”, an “inner ear and hearing”, as well as “inner mind” and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá always mentioned two instruments – mind and heart – as factors of spiritual progress.⁶⁰ The soul can know “through instruments and organs” and without them.⁶¹ The heart might be viewed as the instrument by which the soul perceives spiritual knowledge. This kind of knowledge is immediate, independent of any physical instrument, reflection or reasoning and leads man directly to the “knowledge of being”. It is insight or intuition and is a power shared by all mankind. However, because it is seldom used, it has atrophied, “... if the spiritual qualities of the soul, open to the breath of the Divine spirit, are never used, they become atrophied, enfeebled, and at last incapable.”⁶² Very few people make a deliberate, conscious and methodical use of their insight.

⁵⁸ Watson, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ See Chew, *Life Death and Immortality*, for an account of Taoist attempts to surmount the physical plane through a variety of practices.

⁶⁰ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 187-270.

⁶¹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 227.

⁶² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 227.

The Taoist religion has always acknowledged the power of intuition and much of the history of religious Taoism are actually endeavours to tap this power so as to achieve a mystical unification with Tao. Taoist practice often consists of attempts to empty the ordinary ego-centred mind, a cleansing of sensually-based thoughts and replacing them with doctrines and concepts of its mystical tradition. While the Bahá'í Faith does not encourage such a single-minded preoccupation in the pursuit of the spiritual path, it does prescribe a systematic use of this extraordinary cognitive power, and points to meditation as the specific practice through which this power may be both used and developed.⁶³ "I now assure thee... that if thy mind become empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the kingdom of God, forget all else besides God and come in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heaven, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe and of the divine doctrine".⁶⁴ For Bahá'ís, this "emptiness" and "fasting of the mind" mentioned in the *Chuang-tzu* is primarily the choice of the soul in shutting itself off from the world of material attachment and turning towards the world of the spirit. It is primarily the spiritual progress resulting from the soul's endeavours in making the necessary sacrifices in the material world that will help it grow in the spiritual world.

Free will and the Question of Justice

Spiritual happiness is the path which the human being may choose by the exercise of his free will. For Mencius, "the will is the leader of the vital spirit; and the vital spirit pervades and animates the body. The will is the ruler, and the vital spirit is subordinate to it." His advice therefore is "Maintain firm the will, and do not let the vital spirit grow beyond its control." For as he explains, "when the will is concentrated, it moves the vital spirit. But when the vital spirit is concentrated, it would move the will. The important thing is to inform the vital spirit with the spirit of

⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "You cannot apply the name "man" to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts."

⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets*, p. 706.

justice, thus keeping it in the service of will." Mencius taught that when the vital spirit is nourished by the spirit of justice, it is lifted up to a higher plane, and, instead of weakening, it grows immensely.⁶⁵

Mencius' "will" and "vital spirit" may be compared to the concept of free will and the soul in the Bahá'í Faith. In the Bahá'í Faith, the choice of good and evil belongs to man and is called "free will". 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that God himself cannot compel the soul to become spiritual, and that the exercise of human will is necessary.⁶⁶ In explaining this human condition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the analogy of a ship. "... this condition is like that of a ship which is moved by the power of the wind or steam; if this power ceases, the ship cannot move at all. Nevertheless the rudder of the ship turns it to either side and the power of the steam moves it in the desired direction... in all the action or inaction of man, he receives power from the help of God; but the choice of good or evil belongs to the man himself."⁶⁷

The exercise of free will and choice implies also the consequences that must result from one's decision. All religions have taught that reward and punishment are associated with good and bad choices. Since each individual soul will bear the consequences of the actions deriving from free will, the Chinese sages advise the cultivation of qualities which are in harmony with *Tao*. They warned of the soul's journey to either heaven or hell at the point of death.

The basic thrust of the *T'ai-shang kan-ying p'ien* (the Treatise of the Great Exalted One on Response and Retribution), which is part of the Taoist Canon, has exercised widespread influence over the centuries.⁶⁸ It tells of the existence of a superior power who watches over the behaviour of all, to reward good and evil. Accordingly, all human beings are responsible for their own good or bad fortune, as each deed, good or bad will have its retribution, which comes with the judgement of the superior power, the *shen* (diety) in charge of life-span. Taoist texts

⁶⁵ Chew, *Chinese Religion*. p. 90.

⁶⁶ J. M. Grundy quoted in *Ten days in the Light of Akka*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 249-50.

⁶⁸ See the translation by Teitaro Suzuki and Dr Paul Carus, *T'ai-shang Kan-ying P'ien* Chicago: Open Court 1906.

are explicit with how records of one's deeds are kept. Taoist scripture speaks of Gods that reside in the human body, especially of astral deities, in particular one who resides in the human head and keeps a record of good and bad deeds. There are also others, such as those residing in the abdomen, who control the human life span. And, external to the human body, there is the stove god, always keeping silent watch over the household.

What may be the equivalent of heaven is found in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a chapter dating from the first century BC. It presents one of the earliest and most elaborate descriptions of the earthly paradise of *Kuun-lun*. The highest mountains of *Kuun-lun* in the west were believed to form an epicenter of the universe, where Heaven and Earth meet in perfect equipoise. Like Mount Olympus, it is the place where the gods descend from the sky to that part of the human world, which most nearly replicates the paradisiacal state of Heaven. This earthly paradise is guarded from intrusion by a fierce array of mythical beasts, such as the *K'ai-ming*, which, with its nine heads and feline body, recalls the fabled nine-tailed fox and the nine-headed *Hsiang Liu* monster slaughtered by *Yü*.⁶⁹

Heaven has also become a bureaucracy similar to the imperial bureaucracy on earth. It had a number of bureaus where worthy people could get an "appointment" with immortals who hold official posts in the bureaus.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Taoist descriptions of hell, just as those of heaven, are heavily influenced by Buddhist beliefs. Chinese hells are usually said to be ten in number. Each is ruled by a judge, surrounded by ministers and attendants, who implement his decisions. In these hells, reminiscent of the judicial and prison system of China, justice is impartially meted out and punishments are usually described as corporal, doled out with the assistance of torture instruments. Reminiscent of the

⁶⁹ A different paradise from mountainous K'un-lun is found in the text *Lieh Tzu*, (4th century AD) Here the paradise is in the east and consists of islands inhabited by immortals known as *hsien* and *sheng*, or transcendent beings. These terms emerged in the post-Han era, and a considerable literature, part mythological, part legendary, part lore and part fiction – grew up around the concept of the *hsien*-immortal (See Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, p. 183).

⁷⁰ Berling, *Death and Afterlife*

Catholic purgatory, the soul of the deceased goes through the series of hells until it is ready for rebirth.

Pure Land Buddhists, a popular Buddhist sect with the Chinese, also introduced the notion of rebirth not into heaven or hell, but directly in the Pure Land of Bliss established by Amitabha Buddha. This is not a permanent paradise but a realm devoted to the nurturance of the Buddhist Faith. It was the ideal environment in which to achieve Buddhist enlightenment, and eventually, Nirvana. Although this is quite a sophisticated belief, millions of Chinese believed in the Pure Land as a kind of paradise and fervently hoped for rebirth there.

For the literati, rewards are viewed in a more sophisticated fashion. The question of whether life exists after death is always carefully left out of the discussion. Confucian scholars believe that the sage can organise the various elements in himself to be in perfect harmony with the environment and thus achieve immortality. Immortality here is not a physical one, but in the sense of the influence of the individual. Chinese thinkers do not live for themselves, but as fathers to their children or as sons. Although their bodies may perish at death, many parts of their lives will continue like blood and flesh in their children. Their children will continue their interest, their words and their contributions to society.

It is interesting to note that both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith emphasize that the human being will be judged for their deeds, not beliefs. Both agree that if a human being strays from the path of Heaven, cruelty, deceitfulness, selfishness, fear, anguish will emerge. In short, anarchy will prevail both on a personal and societal basis. Of such souls, Bahá'u'lláh said that they abide in "the abode of dust" or in the "plane of heedlessness".⁷¹ While hell and heaven take on rather concrete forms in the Chinese religion, in the Bahá'í Faith (as with the Chinese literati), it is possible to view Heaven and Hell conceptually rather than literally. Here, hell and heaven are points denoting "nearness" to or "farness" from the Creator when the soul passes the boundary of death.⁷²

⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp. 4-5.

⁷² In the Bahá'í Faith, Hell and Heaven can also be metaphorically experienced on the physical plane.

Conclusion

What we have seen is a brief overview of the rich panoply of Chinese beliefs and practices regarding the soul and how they compare or contrast with Bahá'í beliefs. We have seen how Chinese practices and beliefs are not always easily reconciled. In the Chinese religion there is no discourse on the nature of Heaven (*Tian* 天) or God but Heaven or God is often in the background. It is Heaven that frames everything that man does. Although there is a belief in the survival of the soul and a life after death, many Chinese people also attempt to seek immortality on the material plane. But while stressing the nobility of man and the kindling of conscience as a deterrent, China's history is full of torture and cruelty. The Confucian scholar will say keep away from spirits but each succeeding Confucian century sees the elaboration of rites connected with ancestor worship. While the Chinese long for the hope of a mystical union with Tao and of journeying to the Western mountains, they also love the good life on earth and will do everything to preserve their life on the material plane. While death is not a favourite topic of discussion either in private or public life, the Chinese makes extensive preparations for their death and the extension of their influence through their progeny. It is this paradoxical diversity that reflects the eclectic nature of the Chinese religion.

On the other hand, there are also consistencies that one can expect in a religion, for example, the concern for well-being, the strong sense of moral justice, the responsibility of the living not just for themselves but for their ancestors, the stress on moral education, the importance of living a life in harmony in Tao for fear of punishment in the next world, and so forth.

To conclude, it is clear that in both the Chinese religion and the Bahá'í Faith, a "vital spirit" or a soul exists and it is an unknowable but immortal entity. There is an awareness that death heralds a gateway to something far more significant. The quest for happiness is somehow linked to a devotion to God or related to its proximity with the Tao. Whatever man chooses to do in this world, will affect the progress of his soul in the next world. While man may be born noble, he is apt to stray if he is not guided from birth and both religions have arrived at the conclusion that education is of the utmost importance if the soul is to

progress spiritually. Last but not least, both religions believe in the interconnectedness of souls. The living are surrounded by and connected to the dead; while the dead influence and continue to connect to the living.

There are, of course, differences in the two religions. The Bahá'í Faith has much more explicit references to the soul than the Chinese religion since it has a Holy Book and a prophet figure who has expounded at greater length on the subject. Many of the differences are literal rather than conceptual, for example, they lie in a different terminology such as the "vital spirit" and "the soul". Both believe in the notions of immortality, of the link between a material and non-material world, of a "heaven" and a "hell" although both have embellished their beliefs in distinctively different ways.

The nature of the soul and the life beyond are elusive and exploring the subject on a philosophical or intellectual level is to some degree futile. As Bahá'u'lláh exclaims, "how can a spider snare a phoenix in his web?"⁷³ This reminds us of another saying 2,500 years earlier by Lao-tzu: "If Tao can be taoed, it is not Tao. If its name can be named, it's not its name."⁷⁴ Perhaps that is why in China's rich and long history, few have ventured into this area. All we can say with confidence is the striking fact that there is in both religions a cosmic hunger, a need to be related to all things, including the infinitude of the universe. There is an awareness of the supernatural, the existence of a great overarching power, and the perennial wish to reach and communicate with the Great Unknown despite its remoteness:

O my Master, O my master!
 You mingle and blend all things without being
 harsh;
 You bestow blessings upon endless generations
 without being charitable;
 You are older than the highest antiquity without
 being aged;

⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 33.

⁷⁴ *Tao-te ching*, ch. 1.

You brood and sustain the whole universe and carve
all things into an infinite variety of forms without
resorting to artificial skill.

This is what I call the Joy of Heaven.

*(Chuang-Tzu)*⁷⁵

O Lord! Thou Whose bounty granteth wishes

I stand before Thee, all save Thee forgetting

Grant that the mote of knowledge in my spirit

Escape desire and the lowly clay;

Grant that Thine ancient gift, this drop of wisdom,

Merge with Thy mighty sea.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Chuang-tzu ch. 6 p. 44, ch 13.

⁷⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys, p. 54.

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An Introduction to the Doctrines of Soul and Enlightenment in Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith

Yeo Yew Hock

Abstract

This article examines the development of Mahayana Buddhism, its spread to China and how the Chinese people adopted and adapted it. The Buddhist teachings on “*nonsel*” and the “*Enlightenment*” are correlated with the Bahá'í teachings on the soul. In particular, the journey of the soul described in Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*, which culminates in a state of “True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness” is likened to the Mahayana *Sunyata* (Emptiness) of *Nirvana*. Parallels are drawn between the Bahá'í “Valley of Unity” and Buddhist monism, both of which seek to go beyond all notions of duality.

The central role played by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith and Mahayana Buddhism on unlocking the spiritual potential of their respective followers is also compared. In both cases their teachings are best understood in terms of a way by which their followers can explore the expanses of their own hearts. Also, both in Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith, there is an injunction to attain a balance between Wisdom and Compassion, between individual self-enlightenment and universal salvation.

1. Introduction

Buddhism was founded by Sidharta Gotama¹, an Indian prince who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries, BC. His father was the king of a small state in the foothills of the Himalayas. He was brought up amidst the luxuries and pleasures befitting a prince. Unlike other princes, Sidharta was disenchanted, and left the sheltered life of his home to become a religious mendicant. After years of religious striving He attained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and was henceforth known as The Buddha, or The Enlightened One. He spent the next forty-five years of His life preaching His message to His fellow men. At the age of eighty He died.

The religion in India during the Buddha's time was Brahminical Hinduism. Its priests the Brahmins claimed to be able to mediate between the people and the gods of Hinduism using special rites and rituals laid down in the Vedas, and which together with the Upanishads constitute the sacred lore of Hinduism. The Hindu quest was for one's rational soul (*atman*) to be united with the Eternal (*Paramatma*) and by so doing pass beyond the ephemeral and enter the permanent, the bliss of *Nirvana*. Recognising that living the moral life and not the rituals can free oneself from worldly entanglements, the Buddha rejected the Vedic concept of salvation and instead taught His famous *Eightfold Noble Path* (see below) as the panacea to overcome suffering and unhappiness.

The Buddha's doctrine of salvation² was given in his first sermon, when he enunciated *The Four Noble Truths*³ and *The Eightfold Noble Path*.⁴

¹ Sakyamuni is a title given to Sidharta by others. The title He gave Himself is "Buddha".

² The Hindus too had their doctrines of salvation.

³ life is suffering;
this suffering has a cause, which is craving for existence and sensual pleasures;
this suffering can be suppressed;
the way to suppress is the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path.

From Samyutta Nikaya, PTS edition, 5.421 ff.

⁴ The Eightfold Noble Path, which is right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. See Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, pp. 158 - 161.

The Eightfold Noble Path has three categories comprising the whole range of moral discipline:

moral conduct (right speech, right action, and right livelihood);
mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration);
intuitive insight or wisdom (right views, right intentions).

For the first category, moral conduct, He said that any act that is harmful to oneself or to another is evil. The gist of moral discipline is as follows:

*"Not to commit any evil, to do good, and to purify one's mind.
When you wish to perform an action, consider whether it is going to be harmful to others, harmful to yourself, harmful to yourself and others; if it is, do not perform it, for it is an evil action whose fruit will be suffering."*⁵

The second category, mental discipline, requires control of the mind. The root of all evil is delusional ignorance and not craving for sensual pleasures and material possessions. Cravings are generated by the senses and external objects. External objects affect our senses. The Buddha forbids the torturing of the senses. He said we can control the mind and discipline it so we will not mistake the unpleasant for the pleasant, the impure for the pure, and impermanent things as permanent. He said whoever has mental discipline will see things as they really are.

The third category, intuitive insight or wisdom relates to there being a surface and a depth to things. It is necessary to see beyond external appearances to get at the true reality. Intuitive wisdom requires taking the right view of things and to hold to the truths that all existence is suffering, that all existence is impermanent. The Buddha said that the tears shed by man over the loss of his beloved ones during the course of existence are more than the waters of the ocean. Once a woman came to the Buddha and asked him to restore to life her child who had just died. The Buddha consented, on condition that she first obtain a mustard seed from a family which had not endured the suffering of death. The woman went out feeling

⁵ Digha Nikaya, PTS edition, 1.4 ff.

hopeful, but as she went from family to family, she found that they all had experienced such suffering at one time or another. The universality of suffering now dawned on her, whereupon she returned to the Blessed One and asked to be taken into the order of nuns.

Right Views also include an understanding of *The Chain of Causation*.⁶ This formula recognises that events are not caused by the arbitrary will of some outside power, but that each event arises out of some previous cause.

The Buddhist who practises *The Eightfold Noble Path* will achieve salvation by escaping the cycle of rebirth and the realisation of *Nirvana*. As the main characteristic of the round of existence is suffering, then *Nirvana* would be the cessation of suffering. By practising the prescribed moral discipline, the individual puts an end to craving. Many Buddhists believe that when craving is extinguished, no more *Karma* is generated and there is no further rebirth. When rebirth is terminated, the individual realises *Nirvana*.

The Buddha's Message, which He termed *Dharma*, advocated a middle course between austerities and gratification of the senses and was known as The Middle Path. The Buddha incorporated in His teachings the Hindu doctrine of *Karma*. "*Karma*" means deed or act. Every act produces a result or fruit; a good deed produces a good fruit; an evil deed, an evil fruit. "*Karma*" means a deed performed and the results that arise from it.

⁶ with ignorance as cause, predisposition arises;
 with predisposition as cause, consciousness arises;
 with consciousness as cause, name and form arise;
 with name and form as cause, the six senses arise;
 with the six senses as cause, sensation arises;
 with sensation as cause, contact arises;
 with contact as cause, craving arises;
 with craving as cause, grasping arises;
 with grasping as cause, becoming arises;
 with becoming as cause, birth arises;
 with birth as cause, old age and death arise.

From Majjhima Nikaya, PTS edition, 1.256 ff.

To this conception of *Karma* the Buddha further taught that *Karma* involved not just the deed and reward but also the intention behind the deed. For *Karma* to be generated there must be intention, and he considered this intention to be more important than the deed.

In Theravada Buddhism, when a person dies, the *Karma* that one has accumulated in life will determine the nature of one's future life. There are 5 states of existence, namely deity, man, animal, hungry ghost, and denizens of hell. The first two states are considered good states, but the last three are evil and painful.⁷

As long as one is in *Samsara*, one will continually be subject to suffering. The Buddha preached that birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, separation from loved ones is suffering, not getting what one wishes is suffering. If we wish to rid ourselves of suffering, we must go outside the cycle of craving associated with physical existence. The aim of Buddhism is to break the cycle of suffering and attain salvation. Many Buddhists believe in reincarnation, where the soul transmigrates into different existences in this physical world, but this is not the only possible interpretation of the Buddha's words on this subject. Others have set out to demonstrate that reincarnation does not imply physical rebirth, and that it has been interpreted in an overly literal and anthropomorphic way.⁸

Many Buddhists believe that the Buddha rejected the Hindu belief in the existence of a permanent self, but this view is questionable. For instance, the author of *The God of Buddha*, states that: "The Sanskrit word "*atman*" which translates the "self" of man has been used and understood in the Buddhist texts in a manner compatible with the Buddha's own concepts of "self". While the Buddha rejected the commonly accepted concept of "self" which was understood by His contemporaries as some kind of a soul monad, an inexplicable ego-being individually residing in the human physique as a separate entity divorced from the mind and thoughts, He did

⁷ William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, Vintage Books, New York, 1969, pp. 9 - 12.

⁸ Jamshed Fozdar for instance, challenges this common interpretation, see Ch. 5, "Karma and the Fallacy of Reincarnation," of his book *Buddha Maitreya-Amitabha Has Appeared*, pp. 74 - 117.

not deny man's mentality, his spiritual constitution, his thoughts, his mind or manas, in brief, his soul. However, we must understand that there is no dualism involved here since, to the Buddha, man's soul does not consist of two things, an atman (self) and a manas (mind or thoughts), but of only one reality. Our thoughts are our self, our soul or atman, and hence it would be completely erroneous to assert that the Buddha denied the soul or self. This premise is also corroborated by Buddhist scholars of different schools and countries, including the Theravadin Buddhists, who claim for themselves greater precision and faithfulness concerning the Buddha's doctrine. We should also recognise here that the Buddha, above all, was cognizant of the impossibility of attributing definitions and form to such inherently "indefinables" as self, soul, mind etc. and, hence, once again took the middle course, between the two extremes. This middle way placed no demands on the Buddha to prove or disprove either of the contending concepts, both being by their very nature outside the realm of empirical verification. The way He chose provided Him with the flexibility of being able to contain both views, and also enabled Him to endow His own concept of the "self" with just that correct measure of reality necessary to incorporate it into His message as the "motive" for self-improvement and righteous living."⁹

These are the main tenets of Theravada Buddhism, which is essentially a discipline for personal salvation by the individual for himself. Salvation, however, is possible only for those who join the monastic order, the *Sangha*. The monk is intent on the accumulation of meritorious *Karma* for his own salvation and these merits cannot be transferred to others. After entry into the *Sangha*, he strives to become an *Arahat* or perfect saint. This *Arahat* is traditionally indifferent to social and family concerns. Historically, Theravada doctrine was viewed by some to be spiritually restrictive, because it dealt mainly with the individual's salvation. It was criticised as conservative, following the letter rather than the spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

⁹ See Jamshed Fozdar, *The God of Buddha*, pp. 63 - 64.

2. Mahayana Buddhism

From the 1st Century AD (approximately 700 years after the death of the Buddha) onwards a new and different Buddhist doctrine arose in India. This doctrine is called Mahayana (or the Greater Vehicle to salvation). In Theravada, suffering is something to be escaped from, but the Mahayana teaches that in suffering there is meaning and that is the very principle of religion and is the way to salvation. The Mahayana offers salvation not only to those in the *Sangha*¹⁰ but also to all sentient beings. It teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature in them and hence all have the potential to achieve enlightenment. Instead of adherence to the strict discipline advocated in Theravada, Mahayana teaches that enlightenment can be achieved by faith, love and devotion to the Buddha. These are manifested by compassion, charity and altruism.¹¹

*Dharma*¹² is a central concept in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. *Dharma* means "Religion" or "rta" (righteousness). *Dharma* is interpreted as signifying the teachings of also the Buddha. Both meanings are implied in the word "*Dharma*". For example, a passage in the Theravada scriptures describes *Dharma* as being "eternal, verifiable, and onward leading - to be known individually by the wise."¹³ Another passage states that "whether or not Tathagatas¹⁴ arise, this world remains the same, with constancy of *Dharma*, normativeness of *Dharma*."¹⁵ According to Theravada teachings, the realisation of *Nirvana* and *Dharma* - both as "righteousness" and as "teachings" - occur together. In contrast, Mahayana stresses *Dharma* and de-emphasises *Nirvana*. Mahayana regards the Buddha not as a human being, but as the omnipresent Universal Truth (*Dharma*), which is manifest in all things. This is

¹⁰ The Order of Monks.

¹¹ William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, Vintage Books, New York, 1969, p. 76.

¹² It is also used by the Hindus with the same meaning. To the Hindus, *Dharma* also means the same as regards Krishna.

¹³ *Majjhima Nikaya*, PTS (Pali Text Society) edition, vol. 1, p. 265.

¹⁴ Another name for The Buddha.

¹⁵ *Samyutta Nikaya*, PTS edition, vol. 2, pp. 25 - 26.

illustrated in the story of the monk, Vakkali who was on his death-bed. He said he desired to glimpse the Buddha before he passed away. The Buddha consented but regretted His disciple's behaviour saying, "Enough, Vakkali. What is the use of seeing this vile body? Whoever, Vakkali, sees *Dharma*, he sees me. Whoever sees me, he sees *Dharma*."¹⁶ This implies that it is more important to practise the Buddha's teachings (*Dharma*) and thereby see the Universal Truth than it is to see the Buddha in person.

Nirvana and Samsara

In Mahayana, *Nirvana* and *Samsara* are considered two different aspects of the same Reality, the same *Dharma*. If one looks at the universe and sees the truth, that is *Nirvana*. If one fails to see the truth, then it is *Samsara*. The final passing of the historical Buddha is similar. If one is capable only of seeing the physical body of the Buddha, one may believe the Buddha has abandoned *Samsara*. From the *Lotus Sutra* it is stated that:¹⁷

*"The life of the Tathagata so long ago enlightened is unlimited;
he is everlasting.
Without becoming extinct, the Tathagata makes a show of
Nirvana,
on behalf of those needing guidance."*¹⁸

The Triple Bodies of the Buddha

Mahayana doctrine has a number of distinct concepts from Theravada. These relate to *The Three Bodies of the Buddha*, the *Bodhisattva*, and the concepts of *Prajna* (Wisdom) and *Karuna* (Compassion).

The Buddha in Mahayana is considered not an ordinary human teacher who lived on earth, carried out his spiritual mission and then passed into *Nirvana*. The Buddha is regarded as an eternal being who embodies the

¹⁶ Samyutta Nikaya, PTS edition, vol. 3, p. 120.

¹⁷ *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law (Saddharmapundarika Sutra)*. This is a translated work from North India or Central Asia. It is the basic scripture of the T'ian-T'ai School of China.

¹⁸ *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, Section 15.

universal Truth, who is neither born nor dies, but lives from eternity to eternity. The eternal Buddha has made appearances on earth countless times in the past and will continue to do so in the future. He is believed to be the manifestation of a great spiritual being. *The Triple Bodies of the Buddha*¹⁹ interprets the Buddha as follows:

The Dharmakaya (The Body of Essence)

The Sambhogakaya (The Body of Bliss)

The Nirmanakaya (The Body of Transformation)

The Dharmakaya - The Body of Essence

The *Dharmakaya* is the "Truth-body" of the Buddha. It is not limited in time and space. The *Dharmakaya* Buddha is omnipresent, eternal and the ultimate Buddha. The Body of Essence is the only real body of the Buddha; this body connects and unites all the Buddhas of the past with those of the future. Although there are many Buddhas, there is only one Body of Essence.

The Sambhogakaya - The Body of Bliss

When the Body of Essence is called upon to fulfil the spiritual needs of the bodhisattvas, it then appears in the second form, the Body of Bliss, which is akin to the Holy Spirit. It is the privilege of the bodhisattvas to perceive this body which is the emanation of the Body of Essence. The Body of Bliss dwells forever in the heavens like a supreme god. From the Body of Bliss emanates the Body of Transformation.

The Nirmanakaya - The Body of Transformation

The Body of Transformation is the physical body of the historical Buddha who lived on earth. It is limited in time and space. It helps to explain the appearance of a Buddha among mankind. The eternal Body of Essence creates a fictitious phantom of himself and causes this to appear among ignorant and wicked mankind in order to convert it. The historical Buddha was such a phantom. He took on the characteristics of man. He lived and followed the ways of the world. He lived, preached, and then

¹⁹ Mahayanasutralankara, verses 9.60 - 66, Asanga's Ornament of Mahayana Sutras, quoted in William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Traditions of India, China and Japan*, pp. 94 - 95.

entered into *Nirvana*. The eternal Buddha has done this not once but countless times, but these creations are believed to be illusions and appearances.

The Mahayana Bodhisattva

The bodhisattva is a human being destined for enlightenment. He is the epitome of Mahayana virtues. Though qualified to enter *Nirvana* as a result of merits accumulated in the past, the bodhisattva delays his final entry and chooses to remain in the world until he has brought every sentient being to enlightenment. He does this by transferring some of his inexhaustible stock of merits to less fortunate creatures so that they too may share in the rewards of those merits. He will sacrifice himself, if this is of assistance to others. Universal compassion, through perfect self-sacrifice, is the main characteristic of the bodhisattva.²⁰

The bodhisattva is the personification of a trait of the Buddha's personality. As there are many such traits, so there are different bodhisattvas. Manjusri represents wisdom, while Avalokitesvara represents the compassion of the Buddha. The master is often described as being excellent in all ways, and this is symbolised by the bodhisattva Samantabhadra. Of these, Avalokitesvara occupies pre-eminent position. He is able to abrogate *The Law of Karma* and he visits the numerous hells to lighten the miseries of unfortunate creatures. He is especially on the lookout for people facing the dangers of water, fire, demons, sword and enemies. He is depicted pictorially as a person with a thousand eyes and arms to enable him better to see and help the suffering.

The Two Mahayana Philosophies - Madhyamika and Vijnanavada

The two chief Mahayana philosophies (both founded in India) are Madhyámika and Vijnanavada. Madhyamika was founded by Nagarjuna in 2nd century AD, and Vijnanavada by Asanga and Vasubandhu in 4th century AD.

²⁰ Tathgathguhya Sutra, Siksasamuccaya, p. 274, From William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 91.

The Madhyamika Philosophy (The Doctrine of Middle Position)

Nagarjuna described the Supreme Reality as *Sunyata* (Emptiness). His School is called Madhyamika because it teaches a Middle Doctrine where existence and non-existence have only relative truth. True wisdom is the knowledge of the real meaning of Emptiness. Upon the true meaning of Emptiness depends the understanding of Madhyamika. Emptiness is empty only in the sense that it is free from the limitations of relative knowledge. Enlightenment alone will reveal what it really is. To seek and find nothing is to find the true Buddha.

“Those who describe in detail the Buddha --- who is unchanging and beyond all description --- are defeated by description, and do not perceive the Tathagata.

The self-existence of the Tathagata is the self existence of the world.

The Tathagata is without self-existence, and the world is without self-existence.’²¹

The Madhyamika doctrine of metaphysical emptiness is explained by the example of the chair. We say and think that a chair has a back, a seat and legs. Actually there is no such thing as a chair apart from an assemblage of these components. There is no “chair” that could possess a back, seat or legs. Take away the back, and the “chair” becomes a stool. Take away the legs, and the “stool” becomes a slab of wood. The assembled components are the condition for the “existence” of the chair.

The Vijñānavāda Philosophy (The Doctrine of Consciousness)

The two philosophers of Vijñānavāda are Asanga and Vasubandhu. The Vijñānavāda agrees in many areas with the Madhyamika. According to this philosophy, all phenomena originate in the Mind (the Absolute Reality, which is like an impersonal God) and nothing exists but the Mind. It proceeds with the analytical division of the 5 *Skandhas* and the *Dharmas*. It insists that not only are objects transitory, but that the substances also are impermanent. According to this system of thought, spirit and matter are one, and all external objects are the outcome of the one Mind.

²¹ *Madhyamaka Karika* 24.15-6

The seeds of all phenomena and objects are comprehended in the *alayavijnana*.²² When not in action it lies latent. It is like a fine perfume, whose scent penetrates into the innermost part and then extends to the outer deeds, both good and bad. It is like the projections of the Mind.

In the Vijnanavada philosophy the world is produced from the Mind, and the condition needed for the manifestation of seeds is *The Law of Cause and Effect*. The *Alaya*²³ is the substance and causation the means. They combine to create the world and show forth all phenomenal objects. The origin of *The Law of Causation* cannot be known, nor can the beginning of the storing of seeds, and their manifestation. Theravada's basis is *The Law of Cause and Effect*, and so did not define a personal Creator. But in Mahayana there is an Absolute Reality (the Mind), which is birthless, deathless and permanently existing. It is the substance of all phenomenal objects and the basis of the relative *Alaya*. The Middle Path doctrine asserts the oneness of this world with this Absolute Reality, and urges us to exert ourselves in this world, even though it is full of sorrow. Bliss is not just to achieve deliverance from this world, but in working for salvation one realises our Oneness with it. Vasubandhu wrote:

"As long as one places something before oneself, taking it as an object and saying:

"This is only a mental image," so long does one dwell in that (mental image) alone.

But when cognition no longer apprehends an object, then it stands firmly

in consciousness only, because where there is nothing to grasp, there is no more grasping.

It is without thought, without bias, and is the supra-mundane cognition....

This is the element without defilements, inconceivable, wholesome and stable, the blissful body of liberation,

²² An underlying store of perceptions and which was formed from an accumulation of traces of earlier sense-impressions. From William Theodore de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 79.

²³ Storehouse Consciousness.

the Dharmakaya of the Great Sage."²⁴

3. Mahayana Buddhism in China

During its first two centuries of development, Buddhism was confined to India. When Emperor Asoka (274 to 236 BC) converted to Buddhism, he used it to unify India and the faith spread rapidly throughout the region. Asoka sent missionaries to many countries, including Central Asia, Greece, Iran, China and Japan. By the first century BC, Buddhism had spread to China via the Silk Road. During that time, the Han empire (206 BC to 220 AD) was ruling China.

By 410 AD, Buddhism had spread to most of China. Buddhism brought to the Chinese many deities in the form of ever-compassionate and merciful bodhisattvas, who are always ready to help those who sought their assistance. It appealed to them with its hierarchy of heavens. Rebirth was considered a reward for meritorious living on earth. At the same time it depicted hells where the tortures became progressively more tormenting and terrifying. These serve as a deterrent to perpetrators of evil deeds. The doctrine of *Karma* appealed to those sunk in hardship and misery during the era and it offered them a rational explanation of the adverse social conditions. Their sufferings were looked upon as the retribution for past misdeeds. If they did meritorious work they would be reborn into happier lives in the future. Meanwhile, the arrogant tyrannical officials who were living in luxury now, would in their next rebirth be tormented by misery. Such a "rational" explanation of divine justice won many converts for Buddhism during the early period.

The Mahayana teaching that all human beings have the Buddha-nature in them and so are capable of attaining Buddhahood and salvation, is an inspiring spiritual ideal. This concept had never been put forth to the Chinese people before. The path leading to this salvation was also made easy: just the repetition of the formula *Namo Amitabha*²⁵ or the creation

²⁴ *Trimsika*, verses 27-30, A poem by Vasubandhu. From Noble Ross Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, California, 1951, p. 60.

²⁵ Invocation of the Buddha's name.

of an image of Buddha, even in the mud or sand, was sufficient to merit deliverance. The religion was adapted to make it more acceptable to the people. An example was the use of the Confucian virtue of filial piety. When a person joined the *Sangha*, he severed all relations with his family and society and he no longer needed to honour his parents and ancestors. Yet statues of the Buddha were often erected in China to perpetuate the memory of dead parents.

To the Chinese, Mahayana was spiritually and intellectually more stimulating than Confucianism and Taoism. The life of the Buddha was taught and it rejuvenated China. Mahayana did not take off in India, but it had a wholesome effect on the cultural life of the Chinese people. It stimulated their mind and made it work out many things original to it. A school of Mahayana Buddhism from India known as Dhyani Buddhism became Chan (Zen in Japan) Buddhism. Other well known Mahayana schools were the T'ian T'ai and the Pure Land. The Chan philosophy appealed to the practical and intellectual sides of the Chinese, whereas The Pure Land met its spiritual cravings.

The desire to be born in a land of purity and happiness is the desire for immortality. Whatever form it may take with different individuals, they all have a longing for an after-life. Before Mahayana came to China, the people did not have a very definite idea about their future; their religious horizon was very much limited to the earthly life. The Chinese people have been pursuers from the beginning of their history of The Three Desires: Bliss, Prosperity, and Longevity. Bliss means perpetuation of the family life, while Prosperity and Longevity are matters concerning the individual. Buddhism did not oppose this outright, but taught the moral law of causation to attain this end. There is no doubt that this is an important contribution that Buddhism made among the Chinese people.

Mahayana Schools in China

From the Han to the Tang Dynasties (200 BC - 900 AD) eight Mahayana schools emerged. They developed out of the intense intellectual ferment caused by Buddhism. The eight schools were:

1. The San Lun School
2. The Wei Shi (Vijnanavada) School
3. The Zhen Yan (or Tantric) School
4. The San Jie Jiao (or Three Ages) School
5. The T'ian T'ai School
6. The Hua Yen School
7. The Pure Land School
8. The Chan School (from Dhyani or "Mental" Buddhism)

1. The San Lun School - This School was also known as The Three Treatises School. It was founded by the Han translator Lokashema (170 AD). The three works translated by Kumarajiva (344 - 413 AD) were Nagarjuna's *Madhyamika* and two other works by unknown authors. Kumarajiva never went to China but spent his life in Nalanda translating Buddhist texts into Chinese. He met the Chinese monk-to-be Fa Hsien in 400 AD. Mahayana Buddhism came to China in AD 410. It was brought by Gunavarman (a Kashmiri prince monk) who reached China from Ceylon. Before that he taught Buddhism in Southeast Asia (now Indonesia). The San Lun School attained its greatest influence during the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries AD. During this time there was a close relationship between Buddhism and Taoism on the basis of the similarities between the concept of *Sunyata* (emptiness) and *wu-wei* (non-being).

2. The Wei Shi School - This School (or Vijnanavada School) was established in 563 AD with the translation of Asanga's *Mahayana Samgraha*.²⁶ It was boosted by the pilgrim Hsuan Tsang's (596 - 664 AD) return from India. He studied directly under Vasubandhu and Asanga, the founders of Vijnanavada Buddhism. It did not remain a separate school as it became absorbed into the School of Hsuan Tsang (called The *Dharma Character School*). It declined in the 9th Century AD and disappeared a few hundred years after that.

3. The Zhen Yan School - This School (or The Tantric School) is opposed to The San Lun and Wei Shi Schools. This school impressed greatly the foreign rulers of northern China. Buddhist monks reportedly impressed the new and unsophisticated northern rulers with magic feats.

²⁶ Noble Ross Reat, *Buddhism: A History*, Berkeley, California, 1951, p. 150.

Similar feats were used when Buddhism was established with the peoples of Tibet and Mongolia. This school was most developed in the Tang Dynasty (618 - 906 AD) with the Three Indian Masters, Subhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajira. They were recognised by the Tang Emperors and it flourished during the 8th century AD. Eventually this school had a greater impact in Japan than in China.

4. The San Jiao School - The San Jiao School (or The Three Ages) was the only school that developed in China but did not take root in Japan. Founded in the 6th century AD by Xin Xin, it was the first Buddhist school to incur the disfavour of the Tang dynasty and as a result suffered suppression. The Three Ages refer to the Hindu and Buddhist notion that after a great teacher establishes *Dharma* on earth, there will be a succession of three ages in which the *Dharma* deteriorates progressively. This school stated that they were in the Third Age and that the *Dharma* had degenerated, where people were blinded by greed, hatred and delusion. They said that the appropriate beneficiary should be the *Sangha*. As a result, the monasteries accumulated great wealth. The school drew the wrath of the Emperor when it said in the Third Age no government could administer justice and prosperity and that they were not worthy of allegiance and respect. The Emperor declared this sect heretical and in 713 AD the wealth of the San Jiao School was confiscated by the empire. Subsequently, the sect did not survive the Tang dynasty's suppression of Buddhism.

5. The T'ian T'ai School - The T'ian T'ai School was established by the monk Zhi Yi (538 to 597 AD). He systematised the Buddhist doctrines and classified, integrated and harmonised the vast collection of scriptures. It is the first truly Chinese school of Buddhism. Zhi Yi wrote very little, but his lectures were recorded by his faithful disciple Chang An (561 to 632 AD). These lectures were concerned primarily with the basic tenet of the school, *The Lotus Sutra*, which teaches that the historical Sakyamuni was but an earthly manifestation of the eternal Buddha. The most important of these lectures comprise the three great works of the school:

- a. *The Profound Meaning of The Lotus Sutra.* This was a systematic survey of the Buddha's teachings, with *The Lotus Sutra* as the nucleus.
- b. *The Textual Commentary on The Lotus Sutra.*
- c. *The Great Concentration and Insight.*²⁷

The early believers were puzzled by the large volume of literature, with its many diverse doctrines and ideas. They questioned how one individual could preach so many sermons during one lifetime, or how could one explain the numerous contradictions and doctrinal differences taught in the scriptures. Zhi Yi divided the teachings into chronological periods and with a systematic arrangement. He divided the periods of teachings and his system is filled with encyclopaedic details and scholarship.

6. The Hua Yen School The Hua Yen School (or The Avatamsaka School) comes from *The Avatamsaka Sutra* (The Flower Garland Sutra).²⁸ It was translated by Buddhahadra in 420 AD. This school was initiated by Fa Shun (557 to 640 AD) and finally systematised by Fa Tsang (643 to 712 AD). Hua Yen uses a classification of sutras and doctrines similar to the 5 periods and 8 teachings of the T'ian T'ai school. However, it regards *The Avatamsaka Sutra* rather than *The Lotus Sutra* as supreme. There is no Indian counterpart of the T'ian T'ai or Hua Yen Schools. Both schools are Vijnanavada in orientation. They assert that mundane phenomena are impure aspects of the one, all-encompassing, absolute mind, of which *The Dharmakaya Buddha* is the pure aspect. All phenomena thus originate from and resolve into the Buddha as the ultimate metaphysical principle, just as all thoughts originate from and resolve into the mind. To illustrate the basic concept of both schools: just as the fish in my mind and the tree in my mind are not really different - both are merely manifestations of my

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 155 to 160.

²⁸ The Avatamsaka Sutra broadened the concept of the Six Perfections by relating them to the ten stages of bodhisattva practice. A list of ten perfections was given, the original six and a further four: skilful means, vows, force of purpose, and transcendental knowledge. The Avatamsaka Sutra expounded the ten stages of bodhisattva practice and is accepted by Mahayana Buddhism as a whole. The ten stages are:

mind in thought - so a "real" fish and a "real" tree are but manifestations of the absolute mind, and are therefore fundamentally not different.

The significance of *The Avatamsaka Sutra* lies in the experience of *abhishyanditakayacitta*. *Abhishyandita* means "dissolution", *kaya* means "the body", and *citta* the "mind". It is a state in which one is no more conscious of the distinction between mind and body. This state of complete dissolution, where there is no more distinction between subject and object (that is *noesis* and *noema*), is known as the realisation of absolute *Sunyata* ("Emptiness"), that is, Reality or Mind. Sitting at this centre, one looks around and perceives that this is a world of *Hsiang-chi* and *Hsiang-ju* (meaning "inter-relationship" and "inter-penetration" respectively). This is described in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* and explained by Fa Tsang and his School.

An analogy to illustrate the state of inter-relation and inter-penetration is that of Indra's Net.²⁹ This net is made of precious gems and it hangs over Indra's palace. In each of these gems are found reflected all the other gems in the net. When the net is picked up, we see in it not only the entire net but everyone of the gems within it. In a similar manner, every object in this world is related to every other object and penetrated by it not only spatially but temporally. For this reason, every minute we live contains eternity. Eternal Now is our life. We do not have to seek eternity anywhere else but in ourselves. It is the same with space. The point I

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1. The stage of joyfulness.
 2. The stage of purity.
 3. The stage of light giving.
 4. The stage of radiant wisdom.
 5. The stage of conquering difficulties.
 6. The stage of being face to face.
 7. The stage of bring far reaching.
 8. The stage of being immovable.
 9. The stage of meritorious wisdom.
 10. The stage of the *Dharma* cloud.

Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism*, Kosei Publishing CO, Tokyo, 1996, p. 29 and p.201.

²⁹ Indra is a Hindu deity. From Beatrice Lane Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism*, London, 1938, p. 11.

occupy is the centre of the universe, and it is in me and with me that it subsists. As a fact of pure experience, however, there is no space without time, and no time without space. Both are also inter-penetrating.

The Hua Yen philosophy appealed to the Chinese Emperors. By asserting the unity of all phenomena in the Buddha, it implied the unity of all subjects in the emperor. Moreover, by identifying all phenomena with one another, it implied the identity of all subjects of the empire with all others. It therefore provided an ideological basis for harmony in the empire and allegiance to the emperor.

7. The Pure Land School - The Pure Land School is based on *The three Pure Land Sutras*, the first of which appeared in Chinese from the 2nd century AD. Like the Three Ages School it held that the spiritual quality of the world had been in decline since its zenith at the time of Buddha. It thus considers the current period as the utterly degenerate third age. It encouraged its followers to cultivate through prayers a sincere intent to be reborn after death in the heavenly paradise of the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Radiance. The Pure Land school was not critical of the government and thus did not incur the disfavour of China's emperors.

8. The Chan School - The Chan School (or Meditational School) is better known as The Zen School. It came into prominence in the Tang dynasty (618 - 906 AD). The School emphasises meditation as the only means to a spiritual awakening beyond words or thought, dispensing with the doctrines and other practices of Buddhism. It has the most ancient roots in China and the most colourful history.³⁰ It was brought to China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma in 500 AD. He appeared first in southern China. He was summoned to Emperor Liang Wu Ti who asked him how much merit he had gained with the building of numerous Buddhist temples. Bodhidharma said that he had gained none at all and promptly departed.

Chan developed in China along with the Buddhist mysticism of *Sunyata*. It was partly influenced by the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, and partly in

³⁰ *The Buddhist Tradition*, p. 207 to 240.

accommodation with the Confucian emphasis on practical life. In Chan we find the efflorescence of this mind.

In this School the most important tenet is the belief that Buddha-nature is inherent in one's own mind and that the best means to salvation is to look into one's mind to see Buddha-nature there. This is what later Buddhists called "directly pointing to the human mind and becoming a Buddha by seeing one's own nature."³¹ The result is the doctrine of salvation by oneself. What is more interesting, salvation is to be achieved here and now. And most interestingly it is to be achieved "in this very body."

Chinese Humanisation of Buddhism

From the beginning, Buddhism in China was understood in human terms. The Pure Land and the Chan Schools have provided Chinese Buddhism with a general pattern of practice. In both schools, Buddhism has been humanised. The Chinese translation of the Buddha's title, *Sakyamuni*, was "*Neng-jen*," which means "the ability to be good." To pray to be reborn in paradise means to escape from the human world. But man occupies a central position in this movement. The school is not indigenous to China, for the doctrine was taught in India and the basic texts are Indian. But in spirit and character it is truly Chinese, and it now exists only in China and Japan. While in India, rebirth in the Pure Land meant a complete break with our earthly life, which was considered a life of suffering. However, in China it means an extension of earthly living. There is no deprecation of mundane life. Human relations are continued in the Pure Land. This is why one is encouraged to transfer his merits to his ancestors. As in Confucianism, this act is considered one of the most meritorious.

The Buddha is worshipped as a deity by the Chinese. The most popular Buddhist deity is *Avalokitesvara* or *Kuan Yin*. *Kuan Yin* is almost humanised. In India (3rd to 12th century AD) and in Japan, he retains his transcendental and heavenly features. In China he became a human figure. From the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD), *Kuan Yin* changed into a woman, or *The Goddess of Mercy*, "mother" to millions of devotees. In pictorial interpretations, the Indian rosaries are still present, but they are

³¹ *The Buddhist Tradition*, p.208.

carried by a crane, a symbol of longevity. *Kuan Yin* holds a flower vase from which all kinds of blessings are poured over humanity. These blessings are not *Nirvana*, a world transcending our own, but human blessings such as health, wealth, long life, and most important of all, children. Instead of sitting in the heavens looking upon us with compassion, she is likely to sit by a bamboo grove, carrying a baby or holding a fish basket. She is spiritually close to mankind and is almost human.

Man is central, not only in Chinese government and the arts, but also in religion, which is other-worldly and transcendental. Most Chinese Buddhists aspire to go to paradise, the "Pure Land." But, significantly, what is more attractive to the Chinese is the Mahayana transformation of Buddhism from the doctrine of salvation in *Nirvana* after death to the doctrine of salvation on earth and that he can achieve it "in this very body." In the Mahayana, *Nirvana* is described in terms of permanence, joy, the self, and purity.

4. The Bahá'í Faith and Mahayana Buddhism

Although they come very different backgrounds and with their histories separated by a lapse of 2,500 years, there are many similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith. The comparison and contrasting differences will lead us to a better understanding of both religions.

The Three Stations of the Manifestation of God

As in Mahayana, where there is the concept of *The Triple Bodies of the Buddha*, Bahá'í writings also refer to the three stations of the Manifestation of God. From the chapter on "*The Three Stations of the Divine Manifestations*" in *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

"Know that the Holy Manifestations, though They have the degrees of endless perfections, yet, speaking generally, have only

three stations. The first station is the physical; the second station is the human, which is that of the rational soul; the third is that of the divine appearance and the heavenly splendour.

The physical station is phenomenal; it is composed of elements, and necessarily everything that is composed is subject to decomposition. It is not possible that a composition should not be disintegrated.

The second is the station of the rational soul, which is the human reality. This also is phenomenal, and the Holy Manifestations share it with all mankind.

Know that, although the human soul has existed on the earth for prolonged times and ages, yet it is phenomenal. As it is a divine sign, when once it has come into existence, it is eternal. The spirit of man has a beginning, but it has no end; it continues eternally...

The third station is that of the divine appearance and heavenly splendour: it is the Word of God, the Eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit. It has neither beginning nor end, for these things are related to the world of contingencies and not to the divine world. For God the end is the same thing as the beginning. So the reckoning of days, weeks, months and years, of yesterday and today, is connected to the terrestrial globe; but in the sun there is no such thing - there is neither yesterday, today nor tomorrow, neither months nor years: all are equal. In the same way the Word of God is purified from all these conditions and is exempt from the boundaries, the laws and the limits of the world of contingency. Therefore, the reality of prophethood, which is the Word of God and the perfect state of manifestation, did not have any beginning and will not have any end; its rising is different from all others and is like that of the sun..."³²

Bahá'u'lláh also wrote in *Gleanings* as follows:

³² 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 151.

"These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity. In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attributes, thou hast not erred from the truth. Even as He hath revealed: 'No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers.' ...

The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterised by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation...

It is because of this difference in their station and mission that the words and utterances flowing from these Well Springs of Divine knowledge appear to divulge and differ. Otherwise, in the eyes of them that are initiated into the mysteries of Divine wisdom, all their utterances are, in reality but the expressions of one Truth...

Even as He saith: "I am the servant of God. I am but a man³³ like you." ... Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: "I am God," He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto.³⁴

The "three stations" mentioned by Abdu'l Baha do not directly correlate with the Triple Bodies of Mahayana Buddhism, but are very similar. The Body of Essence roughly corresponds to the "Word of God", the third station. The Body of Transformation is obviously similar to the "physical" station. The Body of Bliss however, more accurately corresponds to the Holy Spirit, rather than the "rational soul". The Holy Spirit in the Bahá'í writings is described to be an emanation of the Word of God (The Body of

³³ Here Bahá'u'lláh was also referring to the Prophet Mohammad.

³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XXII, p 50 - 55.

Essence). It is likened to the rays of the Sun, where the Sun represents God or His Manifestations.

Salvation of the Individual

In the Bahá'í Faith, the individual's salvation is a personal journey from him to God that covers both this physical world and the next (that is the spiritual world). He has to develop his spiritual faculties to the fullest in this earthly life. In the next life, he will then be able to attain a higher spiritual station and his soul can move closer to God.

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. All believers are required to work towards salvation and this privilege is not restricted to the clergy, as in the case of *The Sangha* of Theravada Buddhism. Similar to the Bahá'í Faith, Mahayana offers salvation to all sentient beings besides those in *The Sangha*. It teaches that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature in them and the potential to achieve enlightenment is inherent in everyone. In this respect, both Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith are more accessible and acceptable to the peoples of the world and less elitist in orientation.

The Differing Views on Suffering

In Theravada, suffering is something to be escaped from. However, in Mahayana suffering is considered to be necessary in the journey to deliverance for the believer. If we recall, the bodhisattva's primary concern is to bring others to enlightenment even if his or her practice remains unperfected. This concern is inherent in the first universal vow³⁵ of the bodhisattva, "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to bring about their release." He is not preoccupied with concern over suffering but volunteers to share the suffering of the masses.

³⁵ The other three of the four universal vows of the bodhisattva (*pranidhana*) are:

- (2) However limitless my defilements are, I vow to extinguish them;
- (3) However immeasurable the Buddha's teachings are, I vow to learn them;
- (4) However infinite enlightenment is, I vow to attain Buddhahood.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that suffering is not just the consequence of being cut off from God's love. Suffering tempers the individual and makes him realise his vulnerability and spiritual need. It renders him accessible to God's love. From Bahá'u'lláh:

*"The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebel for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy."*³⁶

The Need to Serve Humanity

For the Bahá'í, to serve humanity means to be active in attaining individual spiritual progress and to be of service to society. He has to participate fully in the life of society and to help build a new World Order, based on the blueprint drawn up by the Central Figures of the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh stipulates that:

*"all men have been created to carry forth an ever-advancing civilisation."*³⁷

The Bahá'í's mission in life has some similarities to the bodhisattva. A good Buddhist is a bodhisattva in the making. The latter is the foundation of the morality of Mahayana. He postpones his entry to *Nirvana* to remain in this earthly abode to help all sentient beings in *Samsara* attain salvation. Bahá'u'lláh states, "The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two illuminaries of consultation and compassion."³⁸ Similarly, for the bodhisattva it is Compassion and Wisdom.

In Mahayana, the believer is exhorted to follow the example of the bodhisattva who is motivated by a desire to serve all sentient beings and lead them to salvation. The Bahá'í writings exhort the individual to develop his innate spiritual potential:

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, p.15.

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p 215.

³⁸ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 126-7.

*"How lofty is the station which man, if he but choose to fulfil his high destiny, can attain! To what depths of degradation he can sink, depths which the meanest of creatures have never reached."*³⁹

The Concepts of the Soul

In Theravada Buddhism there is the notion of a composite or compounded soul – this does not survive death and is similar to the animal self of human nature in other spiritual traditions. On the other hand, there is a non-composite or uncompounded entity, usually referred to as a stainless or perfect Mind (see quotations below). The Mind and its purification is similar to the soul of other spiritual traditions. Buddhism does not reject the existence of the soul, it prefers to speak of the mind and its purification.

*"Instructing all the world I will show to it Nirvana; those Four Noble Truths must be heard first and comprehended by the soul."*⁴⁰

*"This body composed of the five Skandhas, and produced from the five elements, is all empty and without soul, and arises from the action of The Chain of Causation."*⁴¹

*"Listen all of you for your happiness, with your minds free from stain, -- I will declare to you step by step this Chain of Causation."*⁴²

*"and in the end he shall even become a Buddha, -- he, possessing a thoroughly pure intelligence, shall obtain these eight sublime rewards of merit."*⁴³

³⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 206.

⁴⁰ *The Buddha-Kanta of Asvaghosha*, verse 11, From F M Muller, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 49: Buddhist Mahayana texts, p. 175.

⁴¹ F M Muller, Verse 28, p. 177.

⁴² *Ibid*, Verse 35, p. 178.

*"He, having his soul pure, will attain these eight forms of absolute spotlessness; yea, wherever this method of the Law will prevail universally."*⁴⁴

Although the Buddha's emphasis is on the mode of conduct of sentient beings, He has referred to the existence of the universal Mind or the "Element":

*"The Element (Cause) is without beginning in time. It is the common foundation of all dharmas. Because it exists there also exist all places of rebirth and the full attainment of Nirvana."*⁴⁵

Bahá'u'lláh writes that in the next world, the soul "... will assume the form that best befiteth its immortality".⁴⁶ And 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that:

*"... in the other world the human reality doth not assume a physical form, rather doth it take on a heavenly form, made up of elements of that heavenly realm,"*⁴⁷ and it remains "in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body."⁴⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá, referring to the condition of the soul after death, said that at the physical death when the body is decomposed:

"... only consciousness ... is left ... After death the condition is one which cannot be clearly explained in words. It is one of comprehension, understanding, which involves all other things --- feeling, etc.

⁴³ *Ibid*, Verse 112, p. 187.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, Verse 117, p. 188.

⁴⁵ *Ratnagotravibhaga*, p. 72 - 73. *Abhidhamma Mahayanasutra*, See *The God of Buddha*, p. 131.

⁴⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p 157.

⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l Bahá, p 194.

⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66.

You will retain your individuality and will not be swallowed up in one vast spirit. Concerning the condition of the human soul after its ascension from the material world: the essence of the human soul is clarified from material substances and purified from the embodiment of physical things. It is exclusively luminous; it has no body; it is a dazzling pencil of light; it is a celestial orb of brightness."⁴⁹

The Bahá'í Faith explains that for man as an individual, his earthly life is only a preparation for the life beyond. The soul will take the consequences or reap the fruits of its life in this world. This view is close to Buddhism. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*"Every pure, every refined and sanctified soul will be endowed with tremendous power, and shall rejoice with exceeding gladness"; "... all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realise all that their hands have wrought", "... the souls of the infidels ... shall ... be made aware of the good things that have escaped them"*⁵⁰

It is evident that the souls occupy different stages in the world beyond according to "what they acquire of virtues or vices in this world".⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*"Know that immortality belongs to such souls as have been imbued with the spirit of life. Beside them all the others are lifeless -- they are dead,⁵² as Christ explained the Gospel."*⁵³

⁴⁹ Quoted in "Studies in Immortality," in *Star of the West*, xiv, pp. 37 - 38.

⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 154, 171, 170.

⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.

⁵² "Spiritually dead" as in the Christian tradition.

⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 189.

The Journey of the Soul

When the body disappears, the mind, which is linked to the body,⁵⁴ disappears. When the mind disappears, animal and human nature will disappear too. There is no longer any tension between the physical and spiritual nature typical of man's earthly life. This is called the dual nature of the soul. The unremitting necessity of choosing between material and spiritual attraction, typical of this earthly life, disappears. The soul's journey will be a progressive and continuous "approaching unto God,"⁵⁵ through the bounties of the Manifestation of God. Whoever has learnt during his earthly life how to profit from His bounties, will profit from them all the more in the next world.

The condition of the soul after the death of the body is not stationary as it proceeds in its never-ending journey back to God. In the next world, the soul's progress is influenced by the bounties of the Manifestations of God and by the intercession of other souls. These are those souls who are still in this world and those souls who have ascended into the Abha Kingdom. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*"... it is certain that those who are near the Divine Court are allowed to intercede, and this intercession is approved by God. But intercession in the other world is not like the intercession in this world. It is another thing, another reality, which cannot be expressed in words."*⁵⁶

This condition of the soul is not a static one. It is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

⁵⁴ In the Bahá'í texts the mind is described as the manifestation of the mental faculties of the soul through the agency of the brain. Since mind is not the only cognitive means at man's disposal, it follows that though man's intelligence (or reason, or intellect) is conditioned by his mind, yet it is not identical with it.

⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 66.

⁵⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 231.

*"... nothing which exists remains in a state of repose, ... as the spirit continues to develop after death, it necessarily progresses or declines; and in the other world to cease to progress is the same as to decline; but it never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop."*⁵⁷

In Bahá'u'lláh's *Seven Valleys*, the individual's search for Truth is written in mystical language. These valleys represent different stages in the progress of the soul and are described in the following way:

*"the seven stages which the soul of the seeker must needs traverse ere it can attain the object of its existence."*⁵⁸

The soul's journey involves going through seven stages before it reaches the object of its existence, which is unification with its Creator. In the first valley, called the Valley of Search, Bahá'u'lláh uses passionate terms. The soul longs to be reunited with its beloved. The searcher is anguished as he does not know which path to take. The subsequent valleys show him the way. Bahá'u'lláh says the search is one of burning intensity. It is the fire a true lover feels when he is separated from his beloved.

Whoever has entered into the Seventh Valley, called *The Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness*, has reached a climax in his spiritual life: he has transcended his own personal self, so that he becomes "nothing", "empty", and perfectly mirrors the light of God. The spiritual condition of *The Seven Valleys* is similar to the *Sunyata* (Emptiness) of Mahayana and the *Nirvana* (Nothingness) of Theravada.

*"Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend."*⁵⁹

Bahá'u'lláh says that:

⁵⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.

⁵⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 140.

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

*"O My Servant, Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer's knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world."*⁶⁰

We have to free ourselves from our intellectual baggage and stand simple and naked before God, like a humble little child. We have to "empty" the self completely of what we imagine ourselves to be until we find the Manifestation of God residing within our heart.

*"O Son of Spirit!.... Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting."*⁶¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*" ... the human spirit is a Divine Trust, and it must traverse all conditions, for its passage and movements through the conditions of existence will be the means of its acquiring perfections ... when the human spirit passes through the conditions of existence, it will become the possessor of each degree and station."*⁶²

Human life is thus a "journey of the soul back to God," and "the pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment"⁶³. "Every atom in existence and the essence of all created things" declares Bahá'u'lláh, "is for our training."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, No 72, translated from the Persian, Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 45.

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, no. 13.

⁶² 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 200.

⁶³ 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp. 294, 336, 294.

⁶⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian, no 29.

5. Conclusion

This paper has given a brief introduction of Mahayana Buddhism and compared some of its doctrines to the Bahá'í Faith. There is common ground between them in terms of their ultimate goal for individual spiritual development, and the Mahayana concept of *Sunyata* (Emptiness) is similar to Bahá'u'lláh's 'Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness'. There is also convergence in the way Mahayana Buddhists and Bahá'ís attempt to describe the nature of their respective founders. The Mahayana doctrine of the "Triple Bodies of the Buddha" has points of similarity with the Bahá'í "Three stations of the Manifestations". Common also to both Faiths is the injunction to strike a balance between individual self-enlightenment and universal salvation.

Within the constraints of time and space this paper has only made a provisional attempt at finding and highlighting the common ground between Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith. The author hopes that it will inspire more detailed studies in the future.

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Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife

Lynette Thomas

Abstract

Traditionally, Judeo-Christian and Muslim views of life after death have been given a literal interpretation: bodily resurrection, a day of judgement and the physical reality of heaven and hell. This paper seeks to interpret these beliefs in heaven, hell and the afterlife from a spiritual viewpoint as enunciated in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í perspective of the nature of the soul and its continued existence after the death of the physical body will become apparent in the course of this examination.

Introduction

The writings of the Bahá'í Faith offer an interpretation of the writings of many other holy scriptures on the subject of life after death. These interpretations are often, though not always, at variance with the so-called traditional or literal interpretations espoused by the followers of the other monotheistic religions.

The basis of belief in these interpretations is, for a Bahá'í, fundamental to one's belief in Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age. As Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained:

"Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time

immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books.”¹

Thus, the use of figurative language to explain spiritual truths, especially events associated with the appearance of a new prophet, have been used by past prophets so that their followers would understand these truths. Hence, such terms as “birth”, “death”, “resurrection” and so on are not meant to be taken literally, but are used as symbols.

An examination of the references made to heaven, hell and the afterlife in Judaism, Christianity and Islam will reveal the respective escatologies of these religions, while a comparison with the Bahá'í perspective of such issues will offer a new interpretation of their literal meaning.

1. Judaism

As with many of the earlier religions, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Jewish belief regarding various issues was at a particular time in history. All we really have to go on are the texts that have survived. It seems that views about the afterlife and concepts such as heaven and hell did alter and evolve over time, and became mixed with the cultures associated with the Jewish diaspora. Even today there are many schools of thought including the Orthodox, Conservative and the Reform movement as well as others.

Up to the 2nd century BC, Jews believed that nothing remained after the physical death of the body except a “*shade*”. This entity descended into a deep pit called *Sheol* which is located beneath the earth - a place of gloom and dust inhabited by the just and the unjust alike.

“When I shall bring thee down with them that descend into the pit, with the people of old time, and shall set thee in the low parts of the earth, in places desolate of old, with them that go down to the

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, pp. 49-50.

pit, that thou be not inhabited; and I shall set glory in the land of the living.” (Ezekiel 26,20)

There is no mention of judgement or resurrection and all seem to exist there in a state of sleep.

“So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep.” (Job 14, 12)

Other characteristics ascribed to Sheol are silence, destruction, an absence of knowledge of one’s former life or of life in the material plane, lack of material possessions, and complete inactivity.

“... there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, no wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” (Ecclesiastes 9, 10)

Heaven and hell as distinct destinations of the soul after death did not exist in Jewish eschatology at that time. Heaven was simply the dwelling place of God, and when paradise is mentioned it is only in the context of the Garden of Eden rather than the final resting place for righteous souls. Hell or *Gehenna* is a physical place - a valley outside Jerusalem which served as a general rubbish dump and a burial place for criminals. It was only later that it became associated with a place of torment for wicked souls. These views reflect both the Hebrew Bible and the so-called pseudepigraphic literature (non-official scriptures whose origin and authorship are in doubt). Only Enoch (written between the third and first centuries BC by several different authors) mentions Sheol as a kind of holding place, divided into three separate compartments, for souls awaiting a final judgement. Only those who were punished for their sins while on earth would remain in Sheol. The others are resurrected: sinners who died without being punished would be despatched to the horrors of *Gehenna*, while those who lived a righteous life would find themselves in paradise, having achieved bodily resurrection.

A conceptual change in Jewish belief is apparent in the second and first centuries BC, when resurrection is associated with the coming of a

redemptive figure and the establishment of a messianic kingdom on earth. This is very similar to the Christian concept of the Last Judgement. Among other events that will come to pass is the gathering together of the scattered tribes of Israel into one place when all will be renewed by the breath of God.

“For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers: and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers: and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36, 24-28)

The Judgement will see sinners destroyed and only the righteous resurrected to live eternally in God's kingdom on earth. The pseudepigraphic literature of the 1st century BC mentions a temporary earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah before the final judgement takes place at which time the righteous will be spiritually resurrected while the wicked will remain in Gehenna or Sheol for eternity.

There is a possibility of the Jews having adopted the belief in resurrection from the Zoroastrians whom they encountered in the Persian Empire during the Babylonian Exile since it was only after the Babylonian Exile that the idea of resurrection appeared in Old Testament apocalyptic literature.

Bowker² comments, “at the time when Jesus was alive, there were many competing views of how Jews should live as the true children of the covenant ... what we find in practice is a coalition of traditions and, even

² In *The Meanings of Death*, CUP, Cambridge, 1991, p. 76.

more, a coalition of dreams - dreams based on Biblical promises, and, not least, in those days, dreams of a coming Messiah.”

Contemporary Jewish belief in general seems to indicate that death is not considered a tragedy even when it occurs before old age. Belief in the afterlife, where those who have lived a worthy life are rewarded is the main reason for this view. As to what happens after death, the dominant view is that when the body dies the soul still exists in different places. While part of the soul remains with the body in anticipation of the revival of the dead at the Resurrection, other parts go elsewhere - perhaps to Paradise, or to Gehenna, or even to join another soul in an existing person to assist with its development. This continues until the time that God decrees.

Beliefs originating from the kabbala, the Jewish mystical teachings, which can be traced back to the Biblical prophets indicate the belief in a kind of purgatory called *chibut hakever* or *kaf hakeleh* (also known as Sling Shot) in which the soul is beaten or scrubbed to purge it of its impurities. This is the lot of those who have not merited connection with the All-Mighty. Once this purging (described as being chased by destroying angels from one end of the spiritual world to the other) is complete, one of two things occur: suitably purged, the soul may attain *Shekina* (God's presence) or it may be reincarnated. Some souls return to earth not because they need improvement, but simply out of a desire to help others.

2. Christianity

Christianity did not become recognizably different from Judaism, of which it was seen as a movement, until around 64 AD/CE. It shares with Judaism the books of the Old Testament as part of its holy scripture. Much of what Christians believe about the afterlife is associated with their belief in the resurrection of Christ.

In the New Testament, *Hades* or hell as the place between death and resurrection is mentioned several times, but most descriptively in the parable of Lazarus. (Luke 16, 19-26):

'There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,

And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was caried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died and was buried;

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."

Elsewhere Hell is described as a "furnace of fire" (Matthew 13, 42,50), "everlasting fire" (Matthew 25, 41) and a place where the wicked shall "go away into everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25, 46). Revelation also provides a graphic description of what awaits those who have sinned: (Revelation 20, 10-13):

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

This however, in contrast to the parable of Lazarus, refers to the final judgement. So while Hades is the intermediate stage between death and resurrection, Hell as described in Revelation is the final and everlasting abode for those whose deeds have been judged to be wicked.

References to humanity's final reckoning are prolific in the New Testament compared with descriptions of what is in store for us individually. Paul asserts that it is only those "*in Christ*" who will be resurrected, although in Acts he is reported to have said that both the righteous and the wicked will be raised. But in any case the general resurrection is linked to that of Jesus ("*the first-born of the dead*" - Colossians 1, 18) which is thought to be instrumental to our "*saving*". As Paul says in Romans 5, 24-5:

"If we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification."

Indeed, the notion of Jesus as saviour is pivotal to Christian belief in the afterlife - if one accepts him one will enter paradise, if not one's lot is hell-fire and damnation with no possibility of resurrection. It is belief more than deeds that will decide one's lot. Even then, according to some Christians, God's grace and mercy are so all-encompassing that even those who have not lived in Christ, so to speak, may be accepted into God's kingdom upon death. As one Christian minister³ said, "*Who am I to judge? God is the final judge and it is not my place to deny a man or his family a Christian burial.*"

Whether resurrection will be a bodily or a spiritual one depends on the particular "brand" of Christianity subscribed to. Many contemporary Christians reject the literal interpretation of biblical references to Hell,

³ Reverend Gareth Huw Thomas, Uniting Church of Australia, in a telephone conversation with the author in April 1998.

preferring to view it as "*isolation from God*". Roman Catholics believe that Hell exists as a place where the wicked will be punished in accordance with the gravity of their sins. This may take the form of permanent isolation from God and the administration of some kind of "fire" that will cause pain to the soul. Even those who die in a state of grace will need to spend some time being cleansed of their imperfections and (venial or minor) sins in Purgatory. The duration and intensity of this punishment may be lessened by people offering prayers and other acts of piety and devotion. In "Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions" Farnaz Ma'sumian states:

"It would seem inappropriate to ascribe physical attributes to this celestial heaven or kingdom of spirits, and neither would it make sense to expect material pleasures or rewards for souls in such a celestial environment." (p. 60)

Likewise the bodily resurrection of Christ after his crucifixion is often disputed. It is Paul who emphasises the spiritual resurrection: "*And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.*" (I Corinthians 15, 45) and later "*Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God;*" (I Corinthians, 15, 50). He speaks of our having both a terrestrial and a celestial body and that it is the latter that is resurrected. His own conversion was the result of his vision of Christ not in the flesh but in the spirit, and he also imputes that the disciples also saw Jesus' celestial rather than his physical body in 1 Corinthians 15, 44:

"It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

The Final Judgement and the second coming of Christ (often known as the Parousia) are mentioned extensively throughout the New Testament and are even considered as imminent. Humankind will be judged by or through Christ and the dead will be resurrected with spiritual bodies. The Book of Revelation describes two stages during which different categories of the departed are raised. The first to be raised will be the martyrs:

"I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in the hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead live not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection."
(Revelation 20, 4-5)

The second resurrection takes place after Satan, previously imprisoned for one thousand years in a bottomless pit, is released and his army consequently defeated and he himself thrown into a lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented night and day for ever and ever. (Revelation 20, 7-10):

"And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison,

And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.

And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them."

The righteous, however, will be saved:

"...the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."
(Revelation 21, 3-4)

3. Islam

For Islamic beliefs we turn to the Qu'ran, considered by Muslims to be the word of God as revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. It summons man to submit to God and do His Will or suffer the consequences in the afterlife. Thus, those who submit will enter the garden of paradise, while those who do not undergo severe punishment. In addition to the Qu'ran, Muslims refer to the stories and sayings of the prophet (the Hadith or the Tradition) and other customs to determine their understanding of death, although not in a way that would be contrary to the authority of the Qu'ran.

Hell is reserved for those who commit sacrilege and blasphemy, hypocrites, polytheists, those who go astray, those who deny God's signs, transgressors, sinners and the arrogant. Their destiny is the "*scourge of Hell*" (S32;20). The wrongdoers "*shall be left to endure its torments on their knees.*" (S19; 68), and those damned by their sins shall "*drink boiling water and be sternly punished for their unbelief*" (S6; 70). There is no respite from the torture, for once one's skin has burned, it will be renewed to be burned anew! (S4;55). Hell also goes by the name of Jahannam or Al-Gehennam (similar to the Hebrew Gehenna).

It is interesting how descriptions for Paradise centre on the metaphor of luxuriant "*Gardens under which rivers flow*". This undoubtedly has to do with the arid desert climate of the country where Muhammad preached. Paradise is also known in Arabic as Al-Jannah and translated as the Garden of Reward. Those who qualify are those who turn to Islam, and the rewards are not just metaphorical. The majority of Muslims believe these descriptions to be literal - in other words, as actual places in another part of God's creation. Again, only those with true faith and good works shall inhabit this exalted creation:

"He shall abide for ever in the gardens of Eden, in gardens watered by running streams. Such shall be the recompense of those that purify themselves." (S20; 76)

“Allah ... will reward them for their steadfastness with robes of silk and the delights of Paradise. Reclining there upon soft couches, they shall feel neither the scorching heat nor the biting cold. Trees will spread their shade around them, and fruits will hang in clusters over them. They shall be served with silver dishes, and beakers as large as goblets; silver goblets which they themselves shall measure: and cups brim-full with ginger-flavoured water from the Fount of Selsabil. They shall be attended by boys graced with eternal youth, who to the beholder's eyes will seem like sprinkled pearls. When you gaze upon that scene you will behold a kingdom blissful and glorious. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade, and adorned with bracelets of silver. Their Lord will give them pure beverage to drink. Thus you shall be rewarded;” (S76; 12-22)

Paradise is also described as a place of peace where the righteous “will dwell in peace with Allah.” (S6; 127). In addition to all these material delights the faithful will experience the sublime joy of beholding Allah: “On that day there shall be joyous faces, looking towards their Lord.” (S75; 22)

Both Hell and Paradise are seen as real. This comment by Bowker⁴ explains:

“Whereas Jews and Christians may (some do not) regard particular imaginations of heaven and hell as conceptual episodes, whose rise and fall can be traced, Muslims cannot do so: the descriptions of the Garden and the Fire are not conceptual episodes - they are not even concepts: they are places and circumstances, the reality of which will be eschatologically verified, as the Qu'ran frequently reminds us, though it does not use that language!”.

The Day of Judgement, the day when the dead will be revived, is another literal event:

⁴ Bowker, John, *The Meanings of Death*, CUP, Cambridge, 1991, p. 127.

"I swear by the Day of Resurrection, and the self-reproaching soul! Does man think We shall never put his bones together again? Indeed, We can remould his very fingers!" (S75; 1-4)

The sequence of events will be as follows: first the raising up of the dead, second the delivery of each man's record into his hand (either right - for the righteous or left - for the wicked, according to his deeds), third the judgement of the virtuous and the sinners, and finally the admittance of the righteous into Paradise and the despatch of the wicked to the eternal torments of Hell. Immediately preceding the raising of the dead will occur two (or three) trumpet blasts. None except God knows when the Day of Judgement will take place, not even Muhammad whose duty is to "*warn those that fear it*" (S75, 44).

However there are many signs recorded in the Hadith as to when this will occur. Some of these are the sun rising in the west, the eclipse of the Moon, the coming of the Antichrist, the eruption of Gog and Magog, the appearance of the Beast or the Anti-Christ, the return of Christ and the appearance of the Al-Mahdi (the Rightly Guided One) as well as various cataclysmic events. Many of these signs are similar to those depicted in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. After the Judgement time will come to an end, the universe will disappear and nothing shall remain except Allah, paradise for the blessed and Hell for the doomed.⁵

4. Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Writings offer an interpretation of the writings of some holy scriptures other than its own, particularly on the subject of the life hereafter, as well as the Bahá'í view of the origin, nature and progress of the soul once it has become separated from the body.

The soul, as distinct from the body albeit related to it, comes into being at the moment of conception and endures forever.

⁵ Sherif, Faruq, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*, Garnet Publishing, Reading, 1995.

“Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure.”⁶

When freed from the confines of its physical body upon death, the soul continues its unending progress through the spiritual worlds - worlds beyond time and space. That is all we are permitted to know as

“The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men.”⁷

We are told, however, that the soul can be assisted to progress, not through our conscious effort (we can only do that here) but through God’s grace (the main means) or by others saying prayers on our behalf and good deeds performed by others in our name.

There is much in the Writings that we are told about the soul in general and this helps us understand the purpose of our physical existence. Our material existence is necessary, it is said, so that our souls may acquire the spiritual capacities necessary for existence in the realm of the spirit. This workshop of life requires a teacher to enable us to learn and develop those qualities that will equip us for the next life. Such a teacher must exemplify all the virtues in their conduct and provide us with the laws that will provide for our development. The divine teachers are of course the prophets of God.

This world is seen as

“but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality ... a vapour in a desert, which the thirsty

⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 155-6.

⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 156-7.

*dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion."*⁸

*"The meaning of eternal life is the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the flower receives the gift of the season, the air, and the breezes of spring. Consider: this flower had life in the beginning like the life of the mineral; but by the coming of the season of spring, of the bounty and the clouds of the springtime, and of the heat of the glowing sun, it attained to another life of the utmost freshness, delicacy and fragrance. The first life of the flower, in comparison to the second life, is death."*⁹

Life in this world is compared to the unborn child in the womb of its mother - during its preparation for life in this world the foetus develops organs, limbs, and so on that are necessary for its survival. So it is with our preparation for the spiritual world to come - we must (but consciously) develop the spiritual capacities needed for our souls to progress. Our principal duty in this world is to know God and to worship Him. We do this by recognizing His Manifestation for this Day and by obedience to His Laws.

Paradise as a place of material delights is regarded as a symbol of the spiritual condition of the soul when it attains God's good pleasure.

*"As to Paradise: It is a reality and there can be no doubt about it, and now in this world it is realized through love of Me and My good-pleasure. Whosoever attaineth unto it God will aid him in this world below, and after death He will enable him to gain admittance into Paradise whose vastness is as that of heaven and earth ..."*¹⁰

This is the case whether the soul is still in contact with the physical body or in the spiritual plane. Thus, heaven can be regarded as the joy of loving

⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 56.

⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-I-Iqan*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 70-71.

God and drawing closer to Him by following the teachings of God's messenger and by acquiring virtues.

Elsewhere in the Bahá'í Writings paradise has been described as:

*"to be exposed to God's Manifestation in His Day, to hear His verses and believe in them, to sail upon the sea of the heavenly kingdom of His good-pleasure, and to partake of the choice fruits of the paradise of His divine Oneness."*¹¹

and also *"to obey God's commandments"*¹².

The rewards of the next world are *"peace, the spiritual graces, the various spiritual gifts in the Kingdom of God, the gaining of the desires of the heart and the soul, and the meeting of God in the world of eternity."*¹³

We are told that the soul will retain its consciousness and individuality and remember its physical life on earth including recognizing other souls and communing spiritually with them. In addition, if marriage bonds have been spiritual they will also survive into the next world. The soul will also be able to converse with the prophets of God and His chosen ones, and we will become aware of all the mysteries of the universe.

Hell can also be experienced while we are still alive - it is interpreted as being far from God, and being deprived of His good pleasure. Exclusive focus on one's material nature and desires are obvious examples of a soul's torture in this life. The soul in this condition can be described as being condemned to the "fire" of unbelief and to the "wrath" of God. Punishment for such souls in the next life is likely to *"consist in being deprived of the special divine blessings and the absolute bounties, and falling into the lowest degree of existence."*¹⁴

¹¹ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 88-89.

¹² Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 77.

¹³ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, pp. 98-99.

Concerning judgement of our lives after death, Bahá'ís believe that we become aware of our past good and bad deeds immediately after death, so that we may actually experience a state of bliss or loss accordingly. This corresponds with the literal references to heaven and hell in other scriptures. The rewards of heaven would thus be nearness to God and everlasting joy, whereas the punishments of hell would be remoteness from God and being deprived of His blessings¹⁵. The rewards of heaven are not restricted to Bahá'ís, incidentally, but are extended to "every pure, every refined and sanctified soul".¹⁶

With reference to the resurrection of Christ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "*The resurrections of the Divine Manifestations are not of the body*" and that their teachings have a spiritual and divine signification. Christ's resurrection is given a completely spiritual interpretation:

*"the disciples were troubled and agitated after the martyrdom of Christ. The Reality of Christ, which signifies His teachings, His bounties, His perfections and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom, and was not resplendent and manifest. No, rather it was lost, for the believers were few in number and were troubled and agitated. The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body; and when after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible. In other words, the Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body until the life and the bounty of the Holy Spirit surrounded it."*¹⁷

The events predicted in the scriptures of other religions as characterising the Last Days are explained by Bahá'u'lláh in his Book of Certitude

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224.

¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 154.

¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Question*, pp. 103-105.

(Kitab-i-Iqan) as being symbolic. The events were described in this way so that people could, in their own capacity, understand them. The Day of Resurrection is the day when a new messenger appears to guide the people back to spiritual truth. The spiritually dead, if they are able to accept the new messenger, are thus brought out of the graves of disbelief.

Conclusion

While literal interpretations of scriptural references to heaven, hell and the Day of Judgement continue to be upheld in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Bahá'í Faith offers a new, spiritual, interpretation of these beliefs.

Bahá'u'lláh, as the latest in a line of prophets who have appeared throughout history to guide humanity, re-affirms the spiritual teachings of all religions and at the same time opens our eyes to the allusions of the holy scriptures of the past – explaining them and revealing their spiritual meaning:

“whosoever in every dispensation is born of the Spirit and is quickened by the breath of the Manifestation of Holiness, he verily is of those that have attained unto ‘life’ and ‘resurrection’ and have entered into the ‘paradise’ of the love of God. And whosoever is not of them, is condemned to ‘death’ and ‘deprivation’, to the ‘fire of unbelief, and to the ‘wrath’ of God. In all the scriptures, the books and chronicles, the sentence of death, of fire, of blindness, of want of understanding and hearing, hath been pronounced against those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day.”¹⁸

For those who ascribe to these new interpretations,

¹⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, pp. 76-7.

*"The flames of hell have been made to blaze, and heaven hath been brought nigh; the celestial gardens are in flower, and fresh pools are brimming over, and paradise gleameth in beauty ... the veil hath fallen away, the curtain is lifted, the clouds have parted, the Lord of Lords is in plain sight,"*¹⁹

while the unaware are *"are still mired down in their empty dreams."*²⁰

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 14-15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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The Mystic Journey of the Soul

Gul Afroz Zaman

Abstract

This article briefly outlines the journey a soul is required to make if it wants to attain a state of union with the Eternal from the confines of its material life on earth. Some basic concepts of the Christian and Sufi esoteric traditions as well as Bahá'í mysticism are reviewed. The ultimate goal of these spiritual teachings is the same; the need to come as close to the Source or Creator as possible. The paths may differ slightly, but the need to attain to the "Heavenly Homeland", is the central theme that links them together.

Introduction

As there are many esoteric traditions within each religion, it is not possible, in this short article, to describe them all so only some basic concepts of the Christian, Sufic and Bahá'í teachings are reviewed.

One overriding question which has always confronted man is how to undertake this journey, so as to transcend human limitations and to achieve enlightenment, or union with God. Most religions of the world have an exoteric (outer) meaning and an esoteric (inner) meaning. We start with the outer and gradually move to the inner world as and when our spirit longs for a nearness to our creator. This is usually done with short periods of meditation and prayer. The meditation can be based on a word, a sentence, a short prayer or silence. This enables us to reduce and ultimately stop the constant mental dialogue and chatter. This process takes time and effort, and most of all, persistence. As we became more and more proficient with our meditations, our contemplations, our prayers, our solitude, we find our inner growth is accelerated and we get closer and closer to our goal. This inner growth has a flavour and

momentum of its own and takes us into yet deeper levels of meditation and quietude. As the soul moves into higher and more subtle regions it experiences feelings of bliss and selflessness; at the same time one is more aware of the pain and suffering of other human beings. The soul has reached a point where it is less concerned with self and more concerned with helping humanity. More effort and faith is required of the seeker if he is to reach yet higher states. In the final state of growth, self is finally forgotten or transcended. The self is thus consumed and burnt to nothingness in the unity of love; life after this will be completely God centered.

“My servant draws near to me through works of supererogation, until I love him. And when I love him, I am his ear, so he hears by Me, and his eye, so he sees by Me, and his tongue, so he speaks by me, and his hand, so that he takes by Me.”¹

This passing away in God, then, is the goal of the mystic journey of the soul. It is the moksha or liberation of Hinduism, the Nirvana of Buddhism, the Fana of Sufis, the passing away from duality to oneness. There is nothing better, nothing safer, nothing sweeter than this; this is the kingdom of the soul. It has finally found its resting place and can now rest peacefully and eternally in God.

As mentioned earlier, each religion has its esoteric side. The foundation of this journey to God is faith and hope which makes us take the first faltering steps and so the journey starts with courage, fortitude, intense longing, determination and perhaps most important of all, love. As Julian of Norwich a 14th century mystic beautifully and humbly prays:

“God, of your goodness, give me yourself, for you are enough for me and I can ask for nothing else than full worship of you. And if I ask for anything that is less, I shall always want; for only in you have I everything”.²

In the words of the early Church Father, St. Augustine,

¹ Hadith quoted by A.J. Arberry in 'Sufism', p. 27

² quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p 51

“Love and do what you will” Knowing full well that if you truly love you will only do what is right.”³

Let us start with the Christian mystical tradition. One of the central themes of the Christian mystics is the tragedy and suffering of Jesus. The other central theme is service to mankind in the name of God. Some of the well known mystics were St John of the cross, St Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Francis of Assisi, Richard Rolle, Meister Eckhart and the anonymous author of the wonderfully written, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Most of the above mentioned mystics were connected to the church in some way or the other and their practice was coloured by the beliefs of their particular church. However, they all agreed that any real practice demands the purification of oneself at the beginning – and by purification is meant a heightened awareness of the nature of one’s own self and the results of one’s thoughts and actions. As the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* says “When you go apart by yourself in solitude, do not think about what you will be doing afterwards, put away all good thoughts as well as evil ones; and do not pray with words unless you feel you really must. Or if you do have something to say, do not look at how much or how little it is, nor what it means, whether it is orison or psalm, hymn, anthem or any other prayer, general or special, silently formed within or spoken out loud. And look that nothing remains in your conscious mind but a naked intent stretching unto God – what he is like himself or in any of his works, – but only that he is as he is. Let him be so, I pray you, and do not make him other wise”.⁴ Again he stresses, “Although I bid you plainly and boldly to set out in this contemplative work, nevertheless I feel certain, without error or doubt, that the grace of God is always the chief stirrer and worker”.⁵

As the grace of God descends upon the pilgrim he seeks solitude more and more. His need now is to be in communion with God and he moves further and further from the world of illusion and desire. As Evelyn Underhill, a well known writer of Mysticism says, “It is the last painful break with the life of illusion. The tearing away of the self from the

³ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 56

⁴ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 165-166

⁵ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision* p. 178

world of becoming, in which all its natural affections and desires are rooted, and thrusting it into the world of being".⁶ We are responding to the insistent dimension of God – ground within us and once the awakening process has begun it is almost impossible to close one's eyes again Master Eckhart a 13th century mystic said, "Begin with yourself and abandon yourself! In truth if you do not flee from yourself, wherever else you may flee you will find hindrance and trouble".⁷

Again he says "God expects but one thing from you and that is that you should come out of yourself in so far as you are a created being and let God be God in you".⁸

The contemplation of these mystics revolved around intense prayer, vigil and solitude. A favorite prayer was "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me"⁹. This or any other prayer was repeated over and over for hours on end, sometimes long into the night, accompanied by fasting. This continued for some months or perhaps years and then the grace of God descended upon the seeker and with this grace came bliss and a need to move closer and closer to the God-ground. The closer we get the surer we are that we are on the right path and that God is our guide, our protector and our preserver. So long as we keep travelling towards this unlimited light we will not go astray and will ultimately be united with the source of all light. There is much pleasure and satisfaction in this journey, as St Teresa of Avila has so aptly put it "One feels a great bodily comfort, a great satisfaction of soul: such is the happiness of the soul in seeing herself close to the spring, that even without drinking of the waters she feels herself refreshed".¹⁰

All this time we are or should be, seriously cleansing our bodies, minds and thoughts. Much of spiritual spring cleaning consists of cutting or pruning and discarding all that is unnecessary in our lives. We start by limiting our involvement in activities which are wasteful and frivolous

⁶ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 180

⁷ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 159

⁸ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 159

⁹ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 171

¹⁰ St. Teresa Avila, quoted by Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* p 32. Unwin Brothers Ltd, UK, 1960

and spend more time on things which are important and necessary for our spiritual growth. As Master Eckhart says "God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction" This is also one of the approaches to God in Hinduism "Not this, not that" (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 4:5: 15) and in Buddhism's 'Neti Neti' and the "God who hidest thyself" of Judaism (Isaiah 45: 15).

Similarly according to Tao Te Ching:

To attain knowledge
Add things every day,
To attain wisdom
Remove things everyday.

Eckhart also says "That man is free who clings to nothing and to whom nothing clings".¹¹

Knowing or sensing what to remove – this is courage, knowing when to remove – this is wisdom; gradually, we must make use of wisdom, faith and courage to clarify our minds and simplify our lives. Our goal is God and how soon we reach our goal depends on whether we take a short cut or whether we take a long lingering scenic route.

The Christian mystic's code also demanded utmost sacrifice in serving mankind as his saviour Jesus Christ had done. Service had to be rendered with utmost humility and life had to be lived in utter simplicity; giving ungrudgingly of one's time and of one's possessions was of supreme importance. True kindness is rooted in a deep sense of abundance out of which flows the conviction that even as we give, it is being given back to us. As we give – so shall we receive; we will always be given enough and we will always have enough to give. We must give with a conviction that there is enough for all and more. This need to give becomes more and more profound until we sense the need to give ourselves up totally to God. This journey which starts with an outer giving to God of our energy, our attention, our time, our effort and of our possessions, ends with our final offering to God; an offering of ourselves – to be burnt in the fire of love and to rejoice in this burning; for when all traces of our

¹¹ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 149

self-ness and our ego are finally stripped away from us, then and only then – we step into the state of unity and into the bliss beyond description – The source of all, as Evelyn Underhill puts it, “That immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God”.¹²

Finally the stage is reached when, according to Eckhart,

“The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which he sees me. My eye and the eye of God are one eye, one vision, one knowledge and one love”¹³

Let us now turn to the mystical traditions of the Sufis. One of the best descriptions of Sufism is,

“Be in the world, but not of it”¹⁴

This would describe the Sufi way of life and teachings perfectly. Why were they called Sufis? It seems that at some point the early Muslim seekers of God had taken a liking to wearing an outer garment or cloak of wool. The Arabic name for wool is ‘Suf’ and so it was only a matter of time before they came to be known as Sufis i.e. ‘the wearers of wool’. There is, however, another school of thought. They hold the belief that the word Sufi was derived from ‘tassuwuf’ which means meditation or contemplation.

The goal of the Sufi is to attain to the presence of God through meditation and prayer. He must follow a regimen of strict discipline and watch his every thought and action with vigilance. The journey generally starts when all the outer requirements of religion have been completed. Then and only then does he embark on the inner journey to meet the Supreme Reality.

The doctrine that the Sufis practice and preach is of evolution; however, it is not Darwinian evolution. This evolution is from the materially

¹² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 4

¹³ quoted by Ann Bancroft, *The Luminous Vision*, p. 159

¹⁴ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 59

inclined man to a spiritually refined one and then on and on until finally he can be called 'the man of God'. A seeker must crawl before he can walk, and walk, before he can run, and later, much, much later, he may be able to fly. Five centuries before Darwin, the Sufi Saint Jalaludin Rumi wrote:

I have again and again grown like grass; I have experienced seven hundred and seventy moulds. I died from minerality and became vegetable; And from vegetativeness I died and became animal. I died from animality and became man. Then why fear disappearance through death? Next time I shall die bringing forth wings and feathers like angels; After that, soaring higher than angels-what you cannot imagine, I shall be that.¹⁵

Stuart Litvak also states

"So evolution was known to Sufis centuries ago, and the transformative process was familiar to them because of direct experience, not speculative theory".¹⁶

Again he emphasizes,

"Sufis contend that evolution continues in infinite stages after clinical death and that it is a universal phenomena".¹⁷

The Sufi seeker is therefore taught only when he is ready to imbibe spiritual teachings and is taught in several stages. After he has mastered a particular teaching he is taught what comes next and so on and so forth. The appropriate growth must be one that matches the current stage of development. According to Sufis, only a teacher can achieve this because he has traversed this path himself and so is in a position to guide the seeker in his quest for truth. A great deal of importance is attached to the teacher in the Sufic tradition and, once accepted into pupilship, the aspirant comes into the spiritual guardianship of his Pir. Sufic knowledge

¹⁵ quoted by Idries Shah, *The way of the Sufi*, p. 107

¹⁶ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 88

¹⁷ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 61

is non-verbal and is essentially intuitive or innate wisdom which can be released by certain practices.

"The premises that one can directly experience God while alive on this earth and can survive one's bodily death are central if not over-verbalized".¹⁸

One of the ways of coming closer to God and creating a state of ecstasy is the practice of Ziker. "Remember God often" is a phrase, which constantly recurs in the Koran: The Sufis interpret this in a special way, and the word 'remembrance' (Ziker) has acquired in time a very particular connotation.¹⁹

"Everything on earth passeth away, save His face" (Koran 55: 26). This is taken by the Sufis as the peg upon which to hang their characteristic doctrine of the passing away (Fana) of human attributes through union with God, whereby the mystic achieves the eternal continuance (Baqa) of spiritual life in Him.²⁰

The goal of these mystics is the same as the Christian mystics and union with God is of paramount importance. It is the *raison d'être* for which the seeker of any mystic tradition enters the path. It is the 'Pearl of all wisdom' for which he is willing to sacrifice all, including his life, if need be.

The search for God is his passion and he sees his life as a vehicle only for this purpose, this search for him is his sole reason for living: As Rabia Basri, an outstanding woman Sufi saint has so eloquently put it "O God, if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty".²¹

Such was the zeal of the seeker of God, and in many of the Sufic writings examples of this are given in allegoric form; the moth that

¹⁸ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 63

¹⁹ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 22

²⁰ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 22

²¹ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 42

immolates itself joyously in the flame, the shining dew drop that slides silently into the sea; the river that in ecstasy joins with and merges with the oceans. As we can see, love of the Divine or 'mahabba' is the driving force and great emphasis is placed on this love "He loveth them and they love him". (Koran 2:152). An aspect of great importance in the Sufi tradition is the nearness of God. You do not have to search anywhere outside of yourself – God resides in your heart. The seeker has to cleanse his heart and mind, his body and soul and then he will discover his Beloved in the deepest recesses of his being. 'He is nearer to him than his own jugular vein (Koran 50:16) and again 'wither so ever ye turn, there is the Face of God' (Koran 2:115).

What the Sufi is trying to achieve is to leave this dimension of the physical world and its imperfections, its sorrows, its trials and tribulations, and reach a spiritual dimension. The Sufis claim that reality as we know it is shaped by our expectations, coloured by our culture and designed to keep us earth-bound and barely aware of our spiritual heritage.

Rumi says in his short poem, called "Another Dimension"

The hidden world has its clouds and rain,
But of a different kind
Its sky and sunshine are of a different kind,
This is made apparent to the refined ones-
Those not deceived by the seeming completeness of the ordinary world.²²

The Sufi then, is searching precisely for this dimension; to escape from the boundaries of this earth-plane and to free ourselves once and for all from the shackles that bind us to this world of space time.

How we long to somehow transcend this limited existence and live in the freedom of an unlimited and unfettered existence, 'Love becomes perfect only when it transcends itself, becomes one with its object; producing Unity of Being'.²³

²² quoted by Idries Shah, *The way of the Sufi*, p. 104

²³ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 45

The perfected man or woman is capable of functioning at several levels simultaneously, and is in direct contact with Cosmic Reality.²⁴

The Sufi idea of evolution is on two levels, one at a subconscious level, which is a natural process involving all forms of life – the other is a conscious level which is dependent on one's own efforts. The first thing a would-be *murid* (aspirant) is advised to do is look for a *Pir* (Teacher) who will initiate him into the order that the *Pir* belongs to. There are many orders i.e. Chistia, Nakshbandi, Shadilia, Suhrawardia, Qadiriya etc. Different schools have their own rules and rituals – some schools are quite secretive and will not divulge any information unless you are initiated into their order. "The essence of Sufism is the Teacher, the teaching and the Taught"²⁵

An interesting facet of Sufism is the concept of *Nafs* or ego. This egoistic state has to be transcended or negated at some stage along the way if the aspirant is to reach the goal he desires. Another interesting aspect to Sufism is the concept of 'Baraka' or grace; this is a quality which probably is not present in the aspirant until he is well into the path. It is a gift, and is given when the aspirant is deemed ready to receive it. However, there are recorded instances where this 'grace' is bestowed freely to a person who has not yet embarked on this journey. Once this grace is received the person is so enamoured by the sense of the new dimension which is presented to his senses that it is only a matter of time before he starts his search to look for the Higher Reality, and begins to look for a Teacher to guide him towards the correct path to salvation. "Every part of your development as a human being needs correct time, right place, a suitable company. Without these you will be as complete as anything else which lacks three desirable elements in due concert, like a plant, say, without water, sun and earth."²⁶

Here Idries Shah again stresses the need for a *Pir*. The need for a spiritual guide is stressed again and again in almost all Sufi literature as being of primary importance. Without a guide the seeker is always warned of losing his way and going astray.

²⁴ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 88

²⁵ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 24.

²⁶ Idries Shah, *Caravan of Dreams*, p. 201.

Once a *Pir* is found and the *murid* has been initiated he is required to prepare himself to receive the Sufic teachings. Each order has its different exercises. The following are the Sufic preparatory exercises (Adab) according to the Naqshbandi Order.²⁷

1. Ritual Purification
2. Prayer
3. Face Qibla (Mecca) in a deserted place
4. Squat with folded legs, as at prayer
5. Ask forgiveness for all sins
6. Recite the Fatiha (Dedication) and offer them to Prophet Mohammad P.B.U.H. and the spirits of the Nakshbandi Shaikhs.
7. Close eyes and keep lips sealed tightly. Press tongue against the roof of your mouth.
8. Perform grave exercise i.e. imagine you are dead, washed and wrapped in white and laid in your tomb and all the mourners have departed, leaving you alone to face the judgement.
9. Perform guide exercise i.e. seeker's heart confronts the heart of the sheikh and seeks the sheikh's blessings.
10. Concentrate all your bodily senses, expel all preoccupations and wayward impulses of the heart, and direct all your perception towards God. Then say " O God, Thou art my Quest, and Thy pleasure is my desire". Then commemorate the name of the Essence within the heart, recalling that God is present, watching and encompassing you.
11. Await the "Visitation" (Warid) i.e. spiritual epiphenomenon .

These were the recommended exercises for the benefit of the aspirant to prepare him for the next stage of development. Let us now look at the qualities needed for salvation according to Al-Ghazali²⁸

- | | | |
|----------|---|---------------------------|
| 1. Tauba | - | Repentance or forgiveness |
| 2. Sabr | - | Fortitude |
| 3. Shukr | - | Gratitude |
| 4. Khauf | - | Fear |
| 5. Raja | - | Hope |

²⁷ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 130

²⁸ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 130

6. Faqr - Poverty
7. Zuhd - Self denial
8. Tauhid - Belief
9. Tawakkul - Trust in God
10. Mahabba - Love
11. Shauk - Yearning
12. Uns - Intimacy
13. Rida - Satisfaction
14. Niya - Resolve
15. Sidq - Truthfulness
16. Ikhlas - Sincerity
17. Muraqaba - Contemplation
18. Muhasaba - Self Examination
19. Tafakkhur - Meditation
20. The recollection of Death

These are some of the stages that a *murid* must traverse before he passes on to higher and higher realms until finally he reaches the stages of *fana* and *baqa* which defy description as they belong to a dimension beyond time and space.

“To summarize, the way of the Sufi is a direct path to illumination and intuitive knowledge; it is a path that is hidden from view of the conventional eye. In order to see the path, we must be willing to break with conventionality, that is, our conditioning, our familiar pattern of thinking and open our minds to the unfamiliar, the unexpected and the unknown”.²⁹

Let us now turn to the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'u'lláh the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, has presented this teaching in a beautifully written book called, “The Seven Valleys”, which may be regarded as a very important writing in the realm of mystical composition. This was written in response to the question of Shaykh Muhyi'd-Din, by profession a judge and a keen student of Sufi philosophy. Bahá'u'lláh used a pattern similar to, though not identical, to the one previously used by Faridu'd-Din Attar in his most famous work ‘Language of the Birds’.

²⁹ Stuart Litvak, *Sufism*, p. 65

The theme followed is of Progressive revelation, the doctrine that Prophets reveal teachings according to the needs and capacity of the people'.³⁰

Before the seeker starts on this mystical quest he is expected to follow very strictly the Bahá'í virtues of spotless cleanliness, chastity, trustworthiness, hospitality, courtesy and justice. Once he has mastered these he may then proceed on his journey to God, who is "the First and the Last, the Seen and the Hidden, and He knoweth all things" (Koran 57: 3).

The seeker must pass through various states or levels; each level prepares him and fortifies his faith to step into the next level.

"The stages that mark the way-farer's journey from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland are said to be seven. Some have called these seven valleys, and others, Seven Cities. And they say that until the way-farer taketh leave of self, and traverseth these stages, he shall never reach to the ocean of nearness and union, nor drink of the peerless wine".³¹

The first stage is,

The Valley of Search

In this valley, the aspirant is advised to cleanse the heart from all forms of imitation, which is following the traces of their forefathers. He must further cleanse his heart from enmity against all people of the earth. He must also have patience and not be downhearted if the journey seems tedious and long. He must remember, "whoso seeketh out a thing with zeal shall find it"³²

"The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest, and the lover hath no desire save union with the Beloved. Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things. That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must be set at naught, that he may enter the

³⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. x

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh. *The Seven Valleys*, p. 4

³² Arabian proverb, quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 7

realm of the spirit, which is the City of God. Labor is needed, if we are to seek Him; order is needed, if we are to drink of the honey of reunion with Him; and if we taste of this cup, we shall cast away the world".³³

The seeker then asks for the grace and guidance of God to step into

The Valley of Love

In this valley he is dissolved in the fire of love. Here he seeks neither ignorance, nor knowledge, neither doubt nor certitude. He flees from both unbelief and faith. He searches only for his Beloved for whom at every moment he is ready to offer a hundred lives. Here all the traces of ego and self must "Be burned away at the fire of love, that the spirit may be purified and cleansed and thus may know the station of the Lord of the Worlds".³⁴

Kindle the fire of love and burn away all things,
Then set thy foot into the land of the lovers.³⁵

The seeker must now enter into

The Valley of Knowledge

"And come out of doubt into certitude, and from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God. His inner eyes will open and he will privily converse with his Beloved".³⁶

In this valley he is content to be with God and delight in the nearness of his Beloved. He witnesses the mysteries of life, death and resurrection; he sees the realms of creation and with a pure heart is able to look into the souls of man and sees the divine wisdom in the endless Manifestations of God.

³³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 7

³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh *The Seven Valleys*, p. 11

³⁵ An ode by Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 11

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh *The Seven Valleys*, p. 11

“In the ocean he findeth a drop in a drop he beholdeth the secrets of the sea”³⁷

In this valley he meets injustice with patience and anger with love; his only concern is with the ripening of his heart which is heavy with the repeated remembering of the Lord.

‘He breaks the cage of the body and the passions and consorts with the people of the immortal realm. He climbs on the ladders of inner truth and hastens to the heaven of inner significance’.³⁸

After passing through this valley, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer has passed beyond the worlds of names, of forms and the worlds of attributes.

There is a saying attributed to Ali
“Absolute Unity excludeth all attributes”³⁹

He now steps into

The Valley of Unity

Here, he “Drinketh from the cup of the Absolute, and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness. In this station he pierceth the veils of plurality, fleeth from the worlds of the flesh, and ascendeth into the heaven of singleness. With the ear of God he heareth, with the eye of God he beholdeth the mysteries of divine creation. He steppeth into the sanctuary of the Friend and shareth as an intimate the pavilion of the Loved One.”⁴⁰

At this stage the seeker has lost all sense of ‘me’ and ‘I’ and seeks for himself neither name nor fame nor rank. He sees everything as God ‘Say, all is from God’. (Koran 4:80.)

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh *The Seven Valleys*, p. 12

³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh *The Seven Valleys*, p. 12

³⁹ quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 15

⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh *The Seven Valleys*, p. 17

And again,

“There is no power or might other than God”. (Koran 18:37.)⁴¹

Certain souls have strayed far from God and clouded themselves with ignorance and blindness and confined themselves in walls of self and passion. They dwell in the realm of limitation and so are completely veiled and have no portion of the Divine Beauty. But some advanced souls have drunk of the wine of oneness and so see nothing but the glory and splendour of the One and dwell on the plane of Oneness. Those souls who have passed the relative and the limited spheres and dwell on the plane of the Absolute, have burned away all relativities.

“In thy soul of love build then a fire. And burn all thoughts and words entire.”⁴²

The seeker is now ready to enter

The Valley of Contentment

Here he feels the gentle breeze of divine contentment. His sadness and grief is turned into delight and rapture.

“This is the realm of full awareness, of utter self-effacement. Even love is no pathway to this region, and longing hath no dwelling here; wherefore it is said, ‘Love is a veil betwixt the lover and the beloved.’ Here love becometh an obstruction and a barrier and all else save Him is but a curtain.”⁴³

Here the mystic dwells in inner peace and drinks the delicate wines of the spirit. Here one sees only the Divine.

“There was God and there was naught beside Him”.⁴⁴

⁴¹ quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 18

⁴² Jalal'u'din Rumi's Masnavi, quoted by Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 28

⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 60

⁴⁴ Hadith quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 31

In this valley the traveller will witness the beauty of the Friend in everything. After journeying through the planes of pure contentment the traveller comes to

The Valley of Wonderment

Here he is stunned by the beauty of the All-glorious. Every moment his wonder grows and every moment he witnesses a new creation and is lost in awe at the works of the Lord, "O friend, the heart is the dwelling of eternal mysteries, make it not the home of fleeting fancies; waste not the treasure of thy precious life in employment with this swiftly passing world. Thou comest from the world of holiness – bind not thine heart to the earth; thou art a dweller in the court of nearness – choose not the homeland of the dust."⁴⁵

No words can accurately describe this state – As Jalal'u'din Rumi says in his Masnavi,

"If I speak forth many a mind will shatter;
And if I write many a pen will break."⁴⁶

Also Hafiz of Shiraz, one of the greatest of Persian poets, writes

"Only heart to heart can speak the bliss of mystic knowers
No messenger can tell it and no missive bear it."⁴⁷

In this valley words cannot convey the majesty and the magnitude and poet after poet and mystic after mystic have fallen silent. Jalal'u'din Rumi in his Masnavi says

"The tale is still unfinished and I have no heart for it – then pray forgive me."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 35

⁴⁶ quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 29

⁴⁷ quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 30

⁴⁸ quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 35

The greatest of Persian Sufi poets fell silent as he could not find words to describe the magnificence and the grandeur of this awesome dimension. The wayfarer now reaches, the valley of

True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness

Here is experienced the dying from self and the living in God. Here all worldly attachments are burned away and nothing whatsoever remains of the limited things of this perishable world. More than this cannot be revealed as there are no adequate words to describe this state. The ardent seeker is urged to reach this stage and not let opportunities go to waste. He must make haste to attain this station no matter what the personal cost may be,

“Radiant as the sun, bright hath He shined,
But Alas, He hath come to the town of the blind.”⁴⁹

So be not like the blind but open your eyes and see the splendour which is your birthright. Make this light and this knowledge your goal and your destiny.

As Sa’adi says,

“I seek thy nearness,
Dearer than sweet heaven
I see thy visage,
Fairer than Paradise bowers.”⁵⁰

Ecstasy alone can encompass this theme, not utterance nor argument; only those who have reached this stage know, and when this highest plane is reached, then shall you gaze on the Beloved, and forget all else – for you have reached the court of the Life-Bestower. This is the realm of Absolute Command – it is beyond what any tongue can utter and any mind comprehend.

The Koran says,

⁴⁹ Jalal’u’din Rumi’s *Masnavi* quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 39

⁵⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 64

“Far be the glory of thy lord, the Lord of all greatness, from what they affirm of Him”. (Koran 37: 180 quoted in *The Seven Valleys*, p. 65)

Finally, the stage is reached when God promises the seeker who has given up everything for him “O my servant, Obey me and I will make thee like unto myself. I say ‘BE’ and it is and thou shalt say ‘Be’ and it shall be”⁵¹.

This, then is the fruit, the goal, of this wondrous mystical journey of the soul – a journey which began from the abode of dust to the heavenly homeland; a journey where self is transcended and only the Omniscient One remains.

Conclusion

In summation, love of God, love of human-kind and love of nature is taught by all mystics and these are the universal threads that link the mystics of the world together in a web. At the centre is the Divine Reality and the different religions have woven a beautiful tapestry of poetry, prose and love around it. All ardent seekers have arrived at the centre of this divine mystery, no matter from which point they started and all have poured out their very best; all the praise they were capable of, with words and feelings that at times reached sublime heights of beauty and tenderness for this unfathomable source of love so gently and silently hidden in the deepest recesses of one’s heart.

⁵¹ Hadith quoted by Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p. 63

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Body, Mind, Soul and Spirit

Anjam Khursheed

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, *Phaedo*, 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.

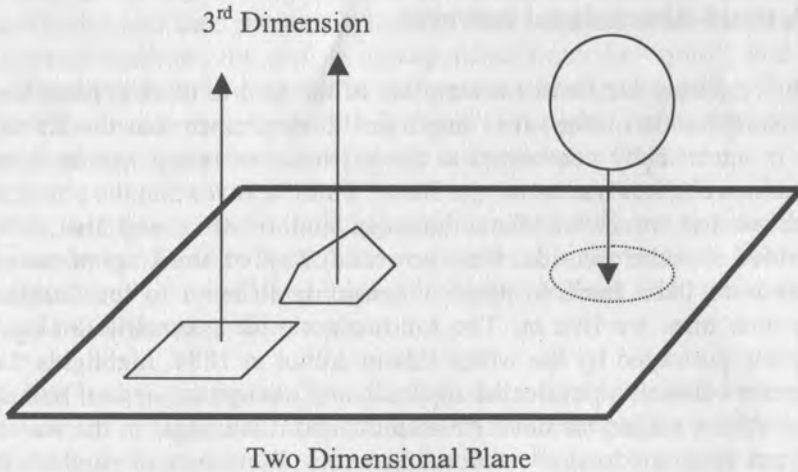
Since there are many sources of potential confusion, not only from cultural differences but also from personal preferences, the Bahá'í approach to the soul requires flexibility in the use of words and metaphors and discourages disputes about it. In the final analysis, we can have at best only partial 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 men⁴² ...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?"¹⁰⁸

(2: 4: 12-14 Bhadaranyaka 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 unfailing", 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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