

soul is freed from ties with the physical body and the surrounding physical world and begins its progress through the spiritual world. Bahá'ís understand the spiritual world to be a timeless and placeless extension of our own universe—and not some physically remote or removed place.

Entry into the next life has the potential to bring great joy. Bahá'u'lláh likened death to the process of birth. He explains: "*The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother.*"

The analogy to the womb in many ways summarizes the Bahá'í view of earthly existence. Just as the womb constitutes an important place for a person's initial physical development, the physical world provides the matrix for the development of the individual soul. Accordingly, Bahá'ís view life as a sort of workshop, where one can develop and perfect those qualities which will be needed in the next life.

*"Know thou, of a truth, that if the soul of man hath walked in the ways of God, it will, assuredly return and be gathered to the glory of the Beloved," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. "By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue can describe."*

In the final analysis, heaven can be seen partly as a state of nearness to God; hell is a state of remoteness from God. Each state follows as a natural consequence of individual efforts, or the lack thereof, to develop spiritually. The key to spiritual progress is to follow the path outlined by the Manifestations of God.

Beyond this, the exact nature of the afterlife remains a mystery. "*The nature of the soul after death can*



*never be described," Bahá'u'lláh writes.*

## Life, Death, and the Soul

According to Bahá'í teachings human nature is fundamentally spiritual. Although human beings exist on earth in physical bodies, the essential identity of each person is defined by an invisible, rational, and everlasting soul.

The soul animates the body and distinguishes human beings from the animals. It grows and develops only through the individual's relationship with God, as mediated by His Messengers. The relationship is fostered through prayer, knowledge of the scriptures revealed by these Teachers, love for God, moral self-discipline, and service to humanity. This process is what gives meaning to life.

Cultivation of life's spiritual side has several benefits. First, the individual increasingly develops those innate qualities that lie at the foundation of human happiness and social progress. Such qualities include faith, courage, love, compassion, trustworthiness and humility. As these qualities are increasingly manifest, society as a whole advances.

Another effect of spiritual development is alignment with God's will. This growing closer to God prepares the individual for the afterlife. The soul lives on after the body's death, embarking on a spiritual journey towards God through many "worlds" or planes of existence. Progress on this journey, in traditional terms, is likened to "heaven." If the soul fails to develop, one remains distant from God. This condition of remoteness from God can in some sense be understood as "hell." Thus, heaven and hell are



regarded not as literal places but descriptions of one's spiritual progress toward the light of God.

## Morality and Spiritual Growth

The ultimate aim in the life of every human soul, the Bahá'í writings state, should be to attain moral and spiritual excellence—to align one's inner being and outward behavior with the will of an all-loving Creator. That each individual has been bestowed with a unique destiny by God—a destiny which unfolds in accordance with the free exercise of the choices and opportunities presented in life—lies at the center of Bahá'í belief. In particular, it is through the moral exercise of our divinely conferred free will that opportunities are provided for spiritual advancement. "*All that which ye potentially possess,*" Bahá'u'lláh confirms, "*can...be manifested only as a result of your own volition.*"

In a poetic passage, Bahá'u'lláh described the actions of the moral individual and urged His followers to live accordingly:

*Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown*



*to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.*

Bahá'u'lláh, like Abraham, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and the other Divine Messengers who preceded Him, sought to awaken the moral and creative capacities latent in human nature. "Noble have I created thee," is the Divine assurance, "Rise then unto that for which thou wast created." He states that "the purpose for which mortal men have...stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony." "Let each morn," He urges, "be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion. Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavors be spent in promoting your personal interest... Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low."

From the Bahá'í perspective, religion has been the chief civilizing force in human history. Moral maturity thus comes from spiritual awareness. As stressed throughout the Bahá'í writings, the primary purpose of God in revealing His will through His Messengers is to effect a transformation in the moral and material conditions of human existence. The transformation called for by Bahá'u'lláh is directed to the inner character of every human being and to the organization of society—a transformation that engenders cooperation, compassion, rectitude of conduct, and justice.

In linking spiritual development to personal behavior, Bahá'u'lláh wrote "that the citadels of men's hearts should be subdued through the hosts of a noble character and praiseworthy deeds." He exhorts the world's peoples to "illumine their beings with the light of trustworthiness," "the ornament of honesty," and the "emblems" of "generosity." Service to humankind is the purpose of both individual life and all social arrangements: "Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men."

Bahá'u'lláh sets before us the highest standard of morality and urges us to strive to attain it. To do so is the only path to true happiness and fulfillment. Our moral and spiritual advancement is therefore crucial to our well-being in both this life and the next. As Bahá'u'lláh counsels: "Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting."

#### Bahá'í Prayer for the Departed

O my God! O Thou forgiver of sins,  
bestower of gifts, dispeller of afflictions!

Verily, I beseech Thee to forgive the sins of  
such as have abandoned the physical garment  
and have ascended to the spiritual world.

O my Lord! Purify them from trespasses,  
dispel their sorrows, and change their darkness  
into light. Cause them to enter the garden of  
happiness, cleanse them with the most pure  
water, and grant them to behold Thy splendors  
on the loftiest mount.

—'Abdu'l-Bahá

FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
1-800-2-UNITE  
<http://www.bahai.org/>

SOURCE: <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-4-0-8.html> J. Warner



# Bahá'í Faith

## Life after Death

As in the world's other religions, the Bahá'í concept of life after death is deeply integrated into teachings about the nature of the soul and the purpose of this earthly life.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, confirmed the existence of a separate, rational soul for every human. In this life, He said, the soul is related to the physical body. It provides the underlying animation for the body and is our real self.

Although undetectable by physical instruments, the soul shows itself through the qualities of character that we associate with each person. The soul is the focal point for love and compassion, for faith and courage, and for other such "human" qualities that cannot be explained solely by thinking of a human being as an animal or as a sophisticated organic machine.

The soul does not die; it endures everlastingly. When the human body dies, the