

# A Bahá'í Understanding of Reincarnation in Relation to the World's Faiths

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## Abstract

Belief in reincarnation, that is, the return of man's spirit or some aspect of his reality to the material world after death, has risen from 21 to 25% in the U.S. over the past decade. (Gallup 2001) Believers in this concept are now found amongst the adherents of most religions and even among non-religionists.

Given the overwhelming impact that this ideology can have on the lives and beliefs of people and society, we will briefly explore this concept in various Sacred Texts and then offer the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings.

We will show in this essay that the Bahá'í Faith does not uphold reincarnationist belief as literally understood. It accepts the return of attributes and qualities, yet maintains that the essence or the reality of things cannot be made to return. This essay seeks to see meaning and purpose coming from all those who have adopted reincarnationism and will demonstrate a far-reaching belief system that acknowledges God's love for man and his companionship as the purpose behind his creation. Man's physical birth along with the creation of his spirit are the first steps in his spiritual progress towards the acquisition of virtues and noble qualities. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith also changes man's age-long motivation for doing good from anticipation of heaven vs. hell to continuous, uplifting spiritual progress. It describes man's soul and its relationship to the physical body. It further describes man's spirit as being God's supreme talisman, traversing the innumerable spiritual worlds, each full of unconditional love and boundless grace, towards the court of His Presence. He leaves behind the world of dust, limitations, weaknesses, and darkness for the world of light, freedom and perfection, just as he left the embryonic womb of limitations for the material world of colors, sounds and fragrances.

Thus, there remains no reason for man's spirit to return to this netherworld and become attached to something else, be it plant, animal or even another human body. After its severance from the human body, the human spirit, with its acquired virtues and God's

unique gift of free will, will soar and journey through the expanse of never-ending spiritual worlds, gaining an ever-greater measure of bounties and grace, and becoming ever worthier of His companionship.

## Introduction

There is one God, and He has been guiding mankind since his inception through Divine Messengers including Zoroaster, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Christ, Muḥammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today is the day of a new Revelation, which brings for the first time in history all of the world's people together, a Message brought by His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh. He taught that the Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens, and that we should consort with the world's peoples in the utmost amity and understanding, and seek to remove the barriers between them, so that the Earth will become like Heaven.

As members of this human family, we should not force our views on anyone; in fact, unless we have an audience, we shouldn't even express our views. In our dealings with others, we must not deride, criticize, or oppose anyone's view, but must, if they are interested, explain our understanding in a loving manner. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we read:

*O friends, consort with all the people of the world with joy and fragrance. If there be to you a word or essence whereof others than you are devoid, communicate it and show it forth in the language of affection and kindness: if it be received and be effective the object is attained, and if not leave it to him, and with regard to him deal not harshly but pray. The language of kindness is the lodestone of hearts and the food of the soul; it stands in the relation of ideas to words, and is as a horizon for the shining of the Sun of Wisdom and Knowledge. (TN 43)*

Nevertheless, our world-encompassing beliefs that solve the long-held dilemmas, cure the world's ailments, and re-awaken mankind's spirituality and hope are immensely valuable and pertinent and as they come to the attention of the masses, have already begun to shake the world. One of those world-shaking truths that Bahá'u'lláh has revealed is His unveiling and clarification of the nature of life and the soul itself and the progress of our souls through the worlds of God after our physical death, ever advancing and ever progressing. In relation to this subject, in recent years, we have witnessed a great deal of interest, especially in the West, in the principle of reincarnation. Belief in reincarnation, that is, the return of man's spirit or some aspects of his reality to the material world

after death, is estimated to be as high as 25% or higher in the United States, with another 20% unsure. (Gallup 2001) Believers in this concept are now found amongst the adherents of most religions and even among non-religionists. We will attempt to describe this belief system and how it originated, as well as discuss it in relation to what the Bahá'í Writings say about it.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, “reincarnation” or “samsara”, as it is also known, is defined as “the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth”, in which every time someone dies, their soul returns clothed with a new body. Another related idea is that of “transmigration” or “metempsychosis”, in which the soul passes into another body, be it human or animal, at the time of death. The vast majority of believers in these ideas come from the Hindu and Buddhist Faiths. Hindus believe that the soul progresses through a cycle of successive lives, in which each reincarnation is determined by how the previous life was lived, i.e., if one's previous life was a dishonest and dishonorable one, one's present incarnation will be far more unpleasant — you reap what you sow. Fate, then, is a direct result of one's previous actions, and this doctrine is known as karma. Once these karmas have been resolved, one reaches the stage of Nirvana or Moksha, in which a state of freedom from samsara is attained, and one is then absorbed into the divine. Later we will discuss why these ideas have so much appeal to people, and also discover that the actual statements and Teachings of Krishna and all of the other Great Teachers are in perfect accord with the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, as they should be since Bahá'u'lláh is the return of their Divine Essences, and discuss the soul in what can only be a symbolic way — to describe the existence of life after this physical life. It is only much later that Hindu beliefs began to diverge from this spiritual understanding of the afterlife to one in which people are reincarnated on Earth into different bodies.

In order to proceed, we should first summarize the two major “reincarnation” belief systems. The first has only a belief in the existence of this Earth — it has no conception of future worlds of God, so to speak. Through reincarnation, we continue returning to this world and paying for our former misdeeds or being rewarded for good behavior. Hell and heaven therefore exist on and solely on this earthly plane. The second includes an affirmation in the existence of other worlds, and reincarnation in this one is simply a means to refine and perfect our soul until it has acquired enough perfections to continue to the next world. Man is thus composed of both matter and spirit, or “atman”. To most Hindus, Atman is considered as an entity without any attributes including memory, however somehow it manages to keep an account of Karma for an individual. This makes

atman an impersonal spirit of an individual that some Hindus believe to be involved in the process of re-incarnation.

## I. Reincarnation and Hinduism

Belief in “Hinduism”, literally meaning the “Hind” or “Indian” Faith and introduced into the world’s vocabulary by the British in about 1829, is held by almost a sixth of the world’s population. It is estimated to have originated 3000 or more years ago, and indications are that part of it may have been introduced to India over many centuries by the Aryan people, tribes of whom settled in places as far apart as India, Iran, and Europe. Hinduism is a vast collection of beliefs and ideas, stories, traditions, and practices that have developed and evolved over several millennia by innumerable and sometimes well-separated people, and thus cannot easily be understood in its entirety, but certain of its texts and teachings are fairly universally accepted, and we will now examine them in relation to the subject of “reincarnation”. Hindus believe in a Universal Soul they call “Brahman”, Who is the Creator, Preserver and Transformer of everything. They also recognize different aspects of Brahman in the form of numerous deities including, for instance, Rama Vishnu, Shiva and Krishna.

Although transmigration, or the migration of the soul from one body to another at death, is a fundamental teaching of Hinduism and has a firm hold on the mind of others in India including Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, the origin of the doctrine of transmigration is one of the most difficult problems of Indian philosophy, for the theory of reincarnation (rebirth) does not appear in the Vedas. The Rig Veda, the first book of the Vedas (1200 BC), speaks of death and immortality, rather than rebirth. Speaking of the Creator, the poet says,

*Whose shadow is immortality and death. (10.121.2)*

and prays:

*As from its stem the cucumber, so may I be released from death, not reft of immortality. (7.59.12)*

The Rig Veda offers various images of a vague but pleasant life after death. A funeral hymn addresses the dead man:

*Go forth, go forth upon the ancient pathways whereon our sires of old have gone before us. ‘Mere shalt thou look on both the Kings enjoying their sacred food, God Varuna and Yama. Meet Yama, meet the Fathers, meet the merit of free or ordered acts, in highest heaven. Leave sin and evil, seek*

*anew thy dwelling, and bright with glory wear another body.* (10.14.7-8)

Life in the reign of Yama, together with the fathers with a glorious body, is the desire and hope of the Vedic man. Another hymn is addressed to the funeral fire, Agni:

*Burn him not up, nor quite consume him, Agni: let not his body or his skin be scattered. O Jatavedas, when thou hast matured him, then send him on his way unto the Fathers.* (10.16.1)

This hymn expresses the desire and hope that, after the purification through fire, Agni, the dead person receives his body back, made perfect, so as to enjoy the life of the fathers. Other hymns speak to the dead man, of the final dispersal of his old body:

*The Sun receive thine eye, the Wind thy spirit; go, as thy merit is, to earth or heaven. Go, if it be thy lot, unto the waters; go, make thine home in plants with all thy members.* (10.18.10-1 1)

And in a hymn addressed to the Earth, we read:

*Betake thee to the lap of Earth the Mother, of Earth far-spreading, very kind and gracious. Young Dame, wool-soft unto the guerdon giver, may she preserve thee from Destruction's bosom. Heave thyself, Earth, nor press thee downward heavily: afford him easy access, gently tending him. Cover him, as a mother wraps her skirt about her child, O Earth.* (10.18.10-1 1)

From these and other texts of the Rig Veda, it can be concluded that the original texts discuss death and immortality, and do not mention the idea of one's soul entering another body after death. We find various and diverse ways of considering death and the fate of man after his death, which seem to represent some sort of rebirth, consisting of the "putting on of a glorious body", receiving a purified body made perfect by Agni and living happily with the ancestors in the reign of the death, in the dispersion of the old body in cosmic elements, or in returning to the loving womb of Mother Earth. However, none of these texts speak explicitly that the dead man has to be reborn on the Earth in any form.

The texts of the Brahmanas (900 BC) also do not contain the doctrine of transmigration. In these texts too, the soul longs for the world of the fathers – for immortality, as in the Rig Veda. The problem here too is not that of reincarnation or rebirth, but that of death, which is far more explicitly feared: Death is evil, and the essence of evil is death. The central preoccupation of the Brahmanas,

is therefore, the fear of death and the obsessive search for rituals that can overcome it. Not only can the gods become immortal, but also the sacrificer, in fact, becomes immortal. As we are beginning to see, the addition of the idea of transmigration was a much later idea, not found anywhere in the original texts, and was created to remove people's great fear of death, for similar to those in the Middle East, it was yet too early in mankind's spiritual history to comprehend the existence of a spiritual world completely removed from this physical world, and so analogies similar to those used there of rivers of milk and honey, etc., were used to describe it.

Perhaps the earliest foreshadowing of the doctrine of transmigration is to be found in the Sathapatha Brahmana. This text, however, does not explicitly refer to transmigration. What the authors of the Brahmanas were searching for was not rebirth, but liberation from the inevitable problem of death, which is the greatest of all evils. What they feared was not life but death, "old age and death" (*janamrtyu*), and more precisely "recurring death" or "re-death" (*punarmrtyu*). They feared that in place of the desired immortality in the next world (of the Fathers), there would be renewed death, and, as a consequence, turned to many rites and ceremonies, including the Agnihotra, the Visuvant, the Naciketas fire, the piling of the fire, etc., in order to save them from suffering repeated deaths. What people could have perhaps realized was that the repeated death mentioned in their Holy Books referred to death in the next world, not in this – it applied to the Fathers. The idea that death is a birth (a passage to the next world) is not at all rare and the conception that death might there be repeated is a very natural one, i.e., a continuing progression from one spiritual world to another, as Bahá'u'lláh tells us occurs. This was misunderstood, unfortunately, and the idea of rebirth (transmigration) on the Earth was thus subsequently created in the Upanishads.

According to the Upanishads, rebirth or reincarnation of the souls can take place in a series of physical bodies (normally in human bodies but also in animals and even plants) or in a series of astral and preternatural bodies (sun, moon, planets, stars, angels or demons), depending on one's karma. The Kaushitaki Upanishad expresses it more clearly: "he is born again here as a worm, or as an insect, or as a fish, or as a bird, or as a lion, or as a boar, or as a serpent, or as a tiger, or as a man, or as something else in different places". (Kaushitaki Upanishad 1.2)

It is important to reiterate that nowhere in the Vedic Hymns can be found any mention of reincarnation – it was four hundred years later that the doctrine was possibly alluded to in the Brahmana writings, and two hundred years after that, beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC, that the concept was actually stated in the Upanishads.

It should be noted however, that to some of the followers of the Hindu Faith some of the books of Upanishads that are actually explanations of the Vedic Hymns and are usually placed at the end of each Hymn are as old and/or as authentic as the Rig Veda Hymns themselves.

The Bhagavad-Gita, or “Song of the Lord”, is part of the sixth book of the Mahabharata, the world’s longest poem. Composed between 500 BC and 100 AD, the Mahabharata is an account of the wars of the house of Bharata. It is one of the most popular Hindu texts and has an important place within the Hindu tradition.

The Bhagavad-Gita in part consists of a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Krishna, his charioteer, an incarnation of the supreme God, Vishnu. Topics such as the meaning of true self, renunciation of work, the true nature of karma, the true nature of God, and the definition of a true devotee are discussed. He explains that:

*Just as the embodied soul passes from childhood to youth to old age, it also passes from one body to another. The undaunted person therefore is not deluded.* (Bhagavad-Gita 2:13)

How very unfortunate that beautiful statements like this one by Krishna have been misunderstood and misinterpreted to support the idea of returning to this world.

At the time the Vedic Hymns were written, it was a widespread belief that man continues to exist after death as a whole person. There was an absolute distinction between man and deities that could not be traversed. Much can be understood of their beliefs on this subject through their funeral rites, in which the deceased were buried with food and clothes necessary in the afterlife. Since they believed in the preservation of personal identity, they would also incinerate the dead body along with that of the (living) wife and ox so that they could accompany them in the next life, a ritual that continued in parts of India until the British outlawed it.

In the Vedas, we read about how the deity Yama, the sovereign of the souls of the dead and the recipient of the offerings made by their families, provided divine justice, casting the wicked into an eternal dark prison that they could not escape from. It is valuable here to note how we as Bahá’ís may look at this idea. Bahá’u’lláh gives us innumerable titles for God, exemplified by the Merciful, the Judge, the Sovereign Ruler, the Lawgiver, the All-Knowing, and gives us prayers to read on behalf of our departed loved ones. He also tells us that should we lead wicked lives, when we die, we will be far separated from our Beloved; it will be as if we were in darkness, far away from the Light.

*What death is more wretched than to flee from the Source of everlasting life? What fire is fiercer on the Day of Reckoning than that of remoteness from the divine Beauty and the celestial Glory?* (GDM 35)

So, though at first glance, the story of Yama might seem foreign to us, we quickly realize in light of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that it is simply another name for God. Contrast this however with the concept of reincarnation – designed to give hope that one can escape hell. In this type of order, one realizes how far removed the Divine becomes – in fact, we become obsessed with each of our lives on Earth and seem to forget about God altogether. How beautifully and clearly does Bahá'u'lláh tell us that though in the future worlds of God we are rewarded and punished, progress is still possible if we are so inclined, and forgiveness is abundant. Thus, with one fell swoop, Bahá'u'lláh removes the fear of hell that people have had for so long that has caused them to accept the idea of reincarnation, with all of the shackles that that acceptance entails.

Again, in the Bhagavad-Gita, one finds words and statements on the nature of the soul, as exemplified by the following:

*Just as the sun illuminates the whole wide world, the Soul illuminates the whole body, O Bharata.* (Bhagavad-Gita 13:34)

We also read of Krishna telling Arjuna,

*The soul is never born nor does it die at any time. It has neither past nor future. It is unborn, ever existing, permanent and ancient. When the body is slain neither it is killed nor it kills.* (Bhagavad-Gita 2:20)

How beautifully does Bahá'u'lláh reiterate these when He says:

*Verily I say, the human soul is exalted above all egress and regress. It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end.* (GWB 161)

The soul, thus, transcends the physical body; it is merely associated with it for a short time, as it gains the faculties and qualities it needs for life in those future worlds of God.

The Upanishads added to the Teachings of Krishna the idea of reincarnation. They constitute the first writings to move the place of one's "second life" from the heavenly realm to the earthly realm, and say that resolution of this never-ending cycle will only take place after one knows one's self. Later, in the Puranas, a simpler and more down-to-Earth set of writings, one finds a vast elaboration of this

idea, where specific destinies are determined by the specific sin performed in the previous life.

## 2. Reincarnation and Buddhism

Like Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha taught that mankind has a soul and that in order to approach God's court, so to speak, one must purify oneself from such things as anger, greed, lust, jealousy, and ignorance. In Buddha's Dhammapada, one reads the following verses on the subject:

*Rouse thyself! Do not be idle! Follow the law of virtue! The virtuous rests in bliss in this world and in the next.*  
(Dhammapada 13:168)

*Impurity Thou art now like a sear leaf, the messengers of death (Yama) have come near to thee; thou standest at the door of thy departure, and thou hast no provision for thy journey.*

*Make thyself an island, work hard, be wise! When thy impurities are blown away, and thou art free from guilt, thou wilt enter into the heavenly world of the elect (Ariya).*

*Thy life has come to an end, thou art come near to death (Yama), there is no resting-place for thee on the road, and thou hast no provision for thy journey.*

*Make thyself an island, work hard, be wise! When thy impurities are blown away, and thou art free from guilt, thou wilt not enter again into birth and decay.<sup>1</sup>*

As one reads the last verse, one can begin to see how someone intent on their own belief in reincarnation might see this potentially as evidence for it, but simply switch the punctuation marks after "wise" and "stain" respectively, that could easily have been misinterpreted in the translation, and one gets a very different picture – one that involves purging oneself of taint and stain, for one will not have the chance to be born and die in this world again. No original Writings and statements made by any Messenger of God ever taught reincarnation, it is the creation of people only. The foundations of religious truth are one reality. All the holy Manifestations of God have proclaimed and promulgated the same reality. They have summoned mankind to reality itself and reality is one.

Now let us look at the concept itself and why it is so detrimental to society – so different from the intentions of the Prophets who people claim support it. According to the reincarnationist view, if

someone knows that the suffering they have experienced during the course of their lives is caused by previous lives' misdeeds, they will accept them as just and strive to improve themselves, as opposed to those who do not believe this, and therefore do not improve themselves, only increasingly feel resentment for life and society's injustices. As such, they will rebel against their fate, becoming ever more jealous of others and full of hate towards the more privileged, their situation only becoming more and more grave. This view is exemplified, for instance, by the following quote from a Swami:

If the virtuous man who has not done any evil act in this birth suffers, this is due to some wrong act that he may have committed in his previous birth. He will have his compensation in his next birth. If the wicked man who daily does many evil actions apparently enjoys in this birth, this is due to some good Karma he must have done in his previous birth. He will have compensation in his next birth. He will suffer in the next birth. The law of compensation is inexorable and relentless.<sup>2</sup>

Objections to this idea abound, and show how the holding of this idea can cause so much suffering in its adherents. For instance, as long as suffering (or the reward for good deeds) can be experienced only at a personal level, and man ceases to exist as a person at physical death, it implies that another person, generated in another physical body, will actually bear the consequences dictated by the karma of the deceased person. The new person, too, will have no recollection of previous transgressions, and will be forced to deal with his new lot in life. In other words, one person sows and another one reaps, since no personal characteristics can be preserved from one incarnation of the impersonal self to the next. Another objection one can raise relates to how, in practice, it would result in an ever-increasing karmic debt, for it is supposed that the person who is living out the consequences of his karma should do it in a spirit of resignation and submission, but this ideal is far from reality. Instead of adopting a passive attitude concerning the hardships that have to be endured, man almost always reacts with indignation. Indeed, experience shows us that evil always generates more evil, and without divine guidance, a balance will never be reached and a vicious cycle ensues. One can easily see this in the many troubled parts of the world, which will never become truly peaceful without that change of heart that adherence to Bahá'u'lláh's Message brings. Another sad, unjust, and clearly not divinely ordained outcome of adherence to the idea of reincarnation is that the suffering of others is simply "their own fault", and that they are being equitably punished. Indeed, anyone who interferes in the unrolling of someone else's karma is gathering bad karma for themselves. Thus, adherence

might even lead to complacency and a total loss of compassion for the welfare of others. Last but not least, according to this doctrine, people are the instruments for the punishment of those with bad karma. Unless one were to do this in the most “disinterested” and “detached” manner – highly rare for someone causing someone else intense suffering, the punisher in the process is gaining bad karma for themselves too, and will in a future life be punished in turn. A vicious cycle as such can be seen in regard to a butcher returning to this world as a pig to be slaughtered. The pig has to be slaughtered as punishment for being a butcher, and this will have to be done by the new butcher, who will then be punished in the same way. The cycle cannot be broken by anything, for it is the required punishment. It is therefore completely contrary to the teaching of “ahimsa”, or “non-violence”.

### 3. Reincarnation and Judaism

In Jewish Scriptures there is no mention of reincarnation, but this has not prevented some of its scholars and their books from supporting it. Throughout the Cabalists’ texts, for instance, in the Zohar, one finds statements referring to reincarnation.

The souls must reenter the absolute substance whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this, they must develop all the perfections, the germ of which is planted in them; and if they have not fulfilled this condition during one life, they must commence another, a third, and so forth, until they have acquired the condition which fits them for reunion with God. (Zohar, Vol. II:99)

In the Cabala one finds the story of Moses killing an Egyptian as the reincarnation of Abel avenging his slaying by his brother Cain. From a Bahá’í perspective, actions such as these by Messengers of God that at first glance seem like breaking the law, another example being the breaking of the Sabbath by His Holiness Jesus Christ, have nothing to do with reincarnation – They doeth what They willeth, and no one has the right to question Them. (cf. GDM 62) They made the Law, so They can break it. The idea of reincarnation appears again in the Jewish interpretation of God’s judgment, as found in the books Berachot and Rosh Hashannah.

Perhaps in answer to those Jews who believed in reincarnation, Job, in the clearest fashion possible, categorically rejects it in the following verses:

*As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away: so he that goeth down to the grave shall come up no more. He shall*

*return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more. (Job 7:9-10)*

*Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death. (Job 10:21)*

*But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up: 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 14:10-12)*

*When a few years are come, then I shall go the way whence I shall not return. (Job 16:22)*

#### 4. Reincarnation and Christianity

The early Christians were also strongly influenced by the prevailing Greek views on reincarnation. Indeed, some statements attributed to Christ even allude to such an idea, but it should be strongly considered by Bahá'ís that those words might require a different interpretation in the light of the totality of Christ's teaching on the subject. And that those passages should be understood symbolically, for "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life". (2 Corinthians 3:6) Examples include the following:

Matthew 26:52: *"all who draw the sword will die by the sword"*

John 3:3: *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again"*

John 9:2: *"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

James 3:6: *"the wheel of nature"*

Galatians 6:7: *"A man reaps what he sows"*

Revelation 13:10: *"If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed."*

As one would expect of a group of people who had only recently become Christians from a Greek reincarnationist background, some of the early Church leaders might have continued to support the idea. One, for instance, is believed by some to have been Origen (185-254 AD), the first leader of the early Orthodox Church, who was the first person after Paul to develop a set of teachings around the Teachings of Christ. According to some, Origen was one of the ardent defenders of pre-existence, the idea that the soul existed

before birth in heaven or in a previous life, is found in the Teachings of Moses and Christ.<sup>3</sup> How could this possibly be true? It is surprising to some how incredibly prevalent was the idea of reincarnation in the early Christian world. It was even taught until the Fifth Ecumenical Congress of Constantinople in 543 AD, at which time it was removed officially from church doctrine. It is remarkable how, until then, people had held a belief (and some still do) that was rejected in their own Sacred Texts. In the New Testament, we find, for instance:

*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.* (Hebrews 9:27-8)

Most Christians today do not accept the idea of reincarnation, correctly realizing that it completely undermines the Teachings of Christ. For instance, it renders God's sovereignty over creation futile, transforming Him into a helpless spectator of the human tragedy. Now one can see how this contrasts with our understanding of the omnipotence and sovereignty of God Who does as He wills when He wills. Additionally, as also stated earlier, an extreme application of reincarnationist convictions would lead to the adoption of a detached and complacent stand towards crime, theft, lying, and other similar plagues, very different from the intentions and Teachings of the Messengers of God, Whose spiritual Teachings about mankind's behavior in this world — honesty, humility, obedience, justice, forgiveness, and selflessness to name but a few, have always remained the same, only their social teachings have changed. Furthermore, if we were to pay for our own sins through being reincarnated in this world, the need for Christ's redemptive sacrifice for mankind's sins would become a useless, perhaps even absurd accident of history. If one reads the words of Christ carefully, one cannot become other than convinced in the nonexistence of reincarnation, exemplified by the following. In His story of Lazarus the beggar and the rich man, He indicates that the rich man was unable to do anything about his fate and would suffer eternal torment. Had reincarnation been possible, he would have had a second chance, wouldn't he?<sup>4</sup> These words are exemplary of this:

*Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.* (Matthew 18:8,)

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.* (Matthew 25:41)

*And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.* (Matthew 25:46)

*Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.* (Matthew 12:45)

## 5. Reincarnation and Islam

Even in Islam, one finds people who have misinterpreted the Words of the Holy Qur'án as indicative of the existence of reincarnation. It should again be reiterated that the Prophet Muḥammad categorically declared that the inner meaning of that Book would not be unsealed until the Last Days, i.e., the coming of Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>5</sup> One such sometimes misunderstood statement of the Holy Qur'án is:

*Thou causest the Night to gain on the Day, and Thou causest the Day to gain on the Night; Thou bringest the Living out of the Dead, and thou bringest the Dead out of the Living; and Thou givest sustenance to whom Thou pleasest without measure.*<sup>6</sup>

But as we now understand, when the Qur'án is talking about coming to life, it is referring to spiritual life, not physical life, and is referring to the spiritual eyesight and hearing we gain when we recognize the Messenger of God for this day.

Indeed, some of the words of Rumí, a famous Sufi poet, have also been misinterpreted in this regard, one of the reasons why many modern Sufis still believe in the idea of reincarnation,

*I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as a plant and rose to animal, I died as animal and I was man. Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?*<sup>7</sup>

It may be that these words were meant to be understood symbolically and not to be taken literally. He is talking of being spiritually like a mineral, discovering new senses, new understandings progressively until he became a man with all of the full faculties and awareness of His creator. Man was created to know and worship God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá similarly discusses the meanings of the vegetable, mineral, animal and human kingdoms — each representing a different degree of perfection, recognition, and love for the Creator.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Reincarnation and the Bahá'í Faith

Reincarnation is a popular belief among many peoples. It has such popularity because people would like to believe that they will be given a second chance if they “blow it” in their first life. Due to lack of spiritual capacity humanity had in the past often misunderstood the concept of the spiritual worlds of God. Manifestations have often spoken about the soul but could not reveal its nature or its mysteries.

Christ states:

*I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. (John 16:12-13)*

Similarly, in the Qur'án, it has been mentioned:

*And they will ask thee of the Spirit. Say: The Spirit proceedeth at my Lord's command: but of knowledge, only a little to you is given.<sup>9</sup>*

### The Bahá'í view on reincarnation

Statements in the Sacred Writings of the world's Faiths have often been used to support the idea of reincarnation, but we have now been given the key to understanding those statements. In this section, the Bahá'í position on reincarnation will be stated, we will describe the creation of the soul, what the purpose is behind its creation, how it progresses in this world and all the worlds of God.

Regarding the belief in reincarnation, the Beloved Guardian writes:

*No revelation from God has ever taught reincarnation; this is a man-made conception. (LG 536)*

and explains further:

*The Bahá'í view of 'reincarnation' is essentially different from the Hindu conception. The Bahá'ís believe in the return of the attributes and qualities, but maintain that the essence or the reality of things cannot be made to return. Every being keeps its own individuality, but some of his qualities can be transmitted. The doctrine of metempsychosis upheld by the Hindus is fallacious. (LG 536)*

The Beloved Universal House of Justice states:

It is clear from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh about the nature of the soul and of life after death as published in 'Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh', that the Bahá'í position on this subject is wholly incompatible with the theory of reincarnation. (LG 536)

### **Why reincarnation is an impossibility**

'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked on several occasions about reincarnation. It is very instructive to read what He said:

*As to what thou hast written concerning "Reincarnation": Believing in reincarnation is one of the old tenets held by most nations and creeds, as well as by the Greek and Roman philosophers and wise men, the old Egyptians and the chief Assyrians. But all these sayings and superstitions are vanity in the sight of God. (BWF 391)*

*No logical arguments and proofs of this question are brought forward; they are only suppositions and inferences from conjectures, and not conclusive arguments. (SAQ 283)*

*We must use writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahá'u'lláh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race. (LG 538)*

In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá brings forward explanations demonstrating the impossibility of reincarnation. The first explanation is that when a living body dies, it is decomposed, disintegrated, dissipated and dispersed. It is impossible for a body to have all its atoms and molecules and the spirit to return to this world.

Repetition of species is only possible through composition of new elements. In the material world nothing is identical, genetically or physically and appearances are not repeated. Since the material world corresponds to spiritual world, repeated appearance of the same spirit with its former essence and condition is impossible.

*Now observe that in the sensible world appearances are not repeated, for no being in any respect is identical with, nor the same as, another being. The sign of singleness is visible and apparent in all things. If all the granaries of the world were full of grain, you would not find two grains absolutely*

*alike, the same and identical without any distinction. It is certain that there will be differences and distinctions between them. As the proof of uniqueness exists in all things, and the Oneness and Unity of God is apparent in the reality of all things, the repetition of the same appearance is absolutely impossible. (SAQ 283)*

The second explanation that 'Abdu'l Bahá puts forward is what is considered to be the purpose of repeated reincarnations, i.e., acquiring perfections. He considers that to be impossible. Imperfection does not become perfection through return to the material world.

*If we say that this reincarnation is for acquiring perfections so that matter may become refined and delicate, and that the light of the spirit may be manifest in it with the greatest perfection, this also is mere imagination. (SAQ 285)*

*Man's refinement is through his acquiring perfections and the bounty of God. No, in reality the cause of acquiring perfections is the bounty of God. (SAQ 285)*

The third argument against reincarnation is the futility of returning to this world which 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares to a cage and a snare.

*Moreover, this material world has not such value or such excellence that man, after having escaped from this cage, will desire a second time to fall into this snare. (SAQ 286)*

He elucidates further that one develops and advances through all the worlds of God with the starting-point being this world of matter.

*No, through the Eternal Bounty the worth and true ability of man becomes apparent and visible by traversing the degrees of existence, and not by returning. When the shell is once opened, it will be apparent and evident whether it contains a pearl or worthless matter. When once the plant has grown it will bring forth either thorns or flowers; there is no need for it to grow up again. Besides, advancing and moving in the worlds in a direct order according to the natural law is the cause of existence, and a movement contrary to the system and law of nature is the cause of nonexistence. The return of the soul after death is contrary to the natural movement, and opposed to the divine system. (SAQ 286)*

There are infinite divine worlds. If we were reincarnated umpteen times in this physical world to acquire all the highest attributes and graces, creation would be futile.

Since the spirit is without material form or substance and does not enter and come forth, it would be better for man to try and extend his life span on this earth and acquire as much perfections and graces as possible rather die many times and have many lives.

*If the divine worlds culminated in this material world, creation would be futile: nay, existence would be pure child's play.* (SAQ 287)

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the idea of reincarnation has developed from the limited minds of philosophers, just the same way they thought

*... that the world, life and existence were restricted to this terrestrial globe, and that this boundless space was confined within the nine spheres of heaven, and that all were empty and void.* (SAQ 287)

The physical has its counterpart in the spiritual world. The physical constellations are innumerable, and then one can imagine the infinite number of spiritual worlds.

### **The true nature of the soul**

Let us now look more closely at the vision the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith have laid out for us on the subject of the soul and the afterlife, and also see how beautifully similar are the words in the Sacred Writings of other Faiths, which have as often as not been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The soul is a spiritual reality that is not ancient and comes into being at the time of conception.

*The soul or spirit of the individual comes into being with the conception of his physical body.* (LG 1988 504)

*Evolution in the life of the individual starts with the formation of the human embryo and passes through various stages, and even continues after death in another form. The human spirit is capable of infinite development. Man's identity or rather his individuality is never lost. His reality as a person remains intact throughout the various states of his development. He does not preexist in any form before coming into this world.* (LG 1988 537)

Its essence and its reality is beyond the understanding and comprehension of man.

*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. (GWB 158)*

When an individual aspires to spiritual things, turns to the Manifestation of God, and does not direct all his affections towards this ephemeral world, then his soul becomes illumined and it will fulfill the purpose for which he has been created.

*Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. (PT 72)*

The soul is immortal and will progress in the spiritual worlds of God for all eternity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*The spirit of man has a beginning, but it has no end; it continues eternally. (SAQ 151)*

The nature of the association of the soul and the body is like that of light and a mirror. The light is not inside the mirror but reflected from another source. It cannot be placed in a body and is exalted above entry or exit, ascent or descent.

*... the human soul is exalted above all egress and regress. It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end. (GWB 161)*

The relationship between the soul of man and that of God is between a lover and the Beloved. Man has been created out of God's love. We read in the Hidden Words:

*O SON OF THE WONDROUS VISION! I have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit, that thou mayest be My lover. Why hast thou forsaken Me and sought a beloved other than Me? (HW Arabic #19)*

*O SON OF BEING! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant. (HW Arabic #5)*

The soul of a believer whose heart has been touched by the love of Bahá'u'lláh and has become assured of the truth of His Revelation, is very precious in the estimation of God:

*We dare not, in this Day, lift the veil that concealeth the exalted station which every true believer can attain, for the joy which such a revelation must provoke might well cause a few to faint away and die. (GWB 9)*

## **The purpose of the spirit's journey through the material world**

This life is the beginning of a journey with the goal being of getting closer and closer to the Lord. When the soul is first created it is without experience but its qualities and powers are latent in it. It is capable of acquiring these latent spiritual qualities in the course of a lifetime.

*... one must remember that the purpose of this life is to prepare the soul for the next. (LG 359)*

The purpose of life is to acquire virtues and a praiseworthy character.

*The fruits of the tree of man have ever been and are goodly deeds and a praiseworthy character. Withhold not these fruits from the heedless. If they be accepted, your end is attained, and the purpose of life achieved. (ESW 25)*

*The purpose of the creation of man is the attainment of the supreme virtues of humanity through descent of the heavenly bestowals. The purpose of man's creation is, therefore, unity and harmony, not discord and separateness. (PUP 4)*

## **The true meaning of life and death**

Some reincarnationists fear the concept of dying and its consequences and prefer to be reborn. As Bahá'ís we do not fear death but rejoice in it if we have spent our lives fruitfully and acquired the virtues.

*How does one look forward to the goal of any journey? With hope and with expectation. It is even so with the end of this earthly journey. In the next world, man will find himself freed from many of the disabilities under which he now suffers. (ABL 96)*

*O SON OF THE SUPREME! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendor. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom? (HW Arabic #32)*

The elemental body will come to an end at the time of physical death and goes back to nature.

*Every soul shall taste of death.<sup>10</sup>*

The soul does not die but lives eternally, ever advancing. The death that is mentioned in the sacred writings is not the physical death one thinks of, but that of spiritual death, meaning a lack of

awareness of our Creator, of His love for us, and disobedience towards Him.

But the spiritual life, which arises from the knowledge of God, does not die:

*Him will We surely quicken to a blessed life.*<sup>11</sup>

In a passage concerning the martyrs, it states:

*Nay, they are alive and sustained by their Lord.*<sup>12</sup>

And in reference to true life, Bahá'u'lláh states:

*And from the Traditions: "He who is a true believer liveth both in this world and in the world to come."* (GDM 48)

Our second birth is not a physical birth, but a spiritual one – It is acceptance of the Manifestation of the Day and obedience to Him.

*The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation ... It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world.* (KA 19)

When one believes in the manifestation of God for the Day and obeys Him, that person has spiritual life, is 'born again' 'resurrected' and is in Paradise.

*Whoso acknowledged Him, recognized the signs of God in His inmost Being, and saw in His beauty the changeless beauty of God, the decree of "resurrection", "ingathering", "life", and "paradise" was passed upon him. For he who had believed in God and in the Manifestation of His beauty was raised from the grave of heedlessness, gathered together in the sacred ground of the heart, quickened to the life of faith and certitude, and admitted into the paradise of the divine presence. What paradise can be loftier than this, what ingathering mightier, and what resurrection greater? Indeed, should a soul be acquainted with these mysteries, he would grasp that which none other hath fathomed.* (GDM 42)

Thus, we come to understand that we can bring others to the recognition of the Manifestation by living a spiritual life.

*The beloved of the Lord must, in this day, behave in such wise amidst His servants that they may by their very deeds and actions guide all men unto the paradise of the All Glorious.* (SLH 110)

## Heaven and Hell

In the past, Hell was feared and Paradise was misunderstood. The fear of Hell by people caused them to accept the idea of reincarnation. This has now been removed through our recognition that being in Hell is possession of an evil character and a state of unbelief, and being in Paradise is belief in God's Manifestation and possession of heavenly characteristics.

*... consider love and union as delectable paradise, and count annoyance and hostility as the torment of hell-fire.* (TAB 37)

In the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá we come to understand that the descriptions of Heaven and Hell given in some of the older religious writings are symbolic, like the Biblical Story of the Creation, and not literally true. According to the Bahá'í Writings, Heaven is the state of perfection, and Hell that of imperfection; Heaven is harmony with God's will and with our fellow man, and Hell is the lack of such harmony; for instance, Bahá'u'lláh states:

*'Where is Paradise, and where is Hell?' Say: 'The one is reunion with Me; the other thine own self.'* (ESW 132)

'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

*But the paradise and hell of existence are found in all the worlds of God, whether in this world or in the spiritual heavenly worlds. Gaining these rewards is the gaining of eternal life. That is why Christ said, "Act in such a way that you may find eternal life, and that you may be born of water and the spirit, so that you may enter into the Kingdom."* (SAQ 323)

Heaven is the condition of spiritual life, and Hell that of spiritual death. A man may be either in Heaven or in Hell while still on this earthly realm. The joys of Heaven are spiritual joys; and the pains of Hell are lack of such joys. In the Hidden Words, we read:

*O SON OF BEING! Thy Paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with Me. Enter therein and tarry not. This is that which hath been destined for thee in Our kingdom above and Our exalted dominion.* (HW Arabic #6)

## Fate of man's spirit after death

The soul's destiny in this physical life is great, as we read in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh:

*Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny he would manifest naught save*

*goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct. (TB 172)*

The soul's destiny after death is also great.

*And now concerning thy question regarding the soul of man and its survival after death. 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. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty. The movement of My Pen is stilled when it attempteth to befittingly describe the loftiness and glory of so exalted a station. The honor with which the Hand of Mercy will invest the soul is such as no tongue can adequately reveal, nor any other earthly agency describe. Blessed is the soul, which, at the hour of its separation from the body, is sanctified from the vain imaginings of the peoples of the world. (GWB 155)*

The soul carries with it divine attributes and spiritual qualities to the next world and does not carry negative qualities. The degree of the progress of a soul is also dependent upon the extent it has accrued praiseworthy virtues. The soul continues to progress in the spiritual worlds of God through the bounty of God, through prayers of intercession offered by those still in this life,

*The progress of man's spirit in the divine world, after the severance of its connection with the body of dust, is through the bounty and grace of the Lord alone, or through the intercession and the sincere prayers of other human souls, or through the charities and important good works which are performed in its name. (SAQ 240)*

And also through his own prayers of entreaty and supplication:

*As we have power to pray for these souls here, so likewise we shall possess the same power in the other world, which is the Kingdom of God. Are not all the people in that world the creatures of God? Therefore, in that world also they can make progress. As here they can receive light by their supplications, there also they can plead for forgiveness and receive light through entreaties and supplications. Thus as souls in this world, through the help of the supplications, the entreaties and the prayers of the holy ones, can acquire development, so is it the same after death. Through their*

*own prayers and supplications they can also progress, more especially when they are the objects of the intercession of the Holy Manifestations.* (SAQ 232)

Ultimately, one comes to recognize that until the Coming of the Promised One of All Ages, Bahá'u'lláh, mankind has only been given milk for its nourishment – it couldn't comprehend more, and even what it was told, it distorted it into something very different from the truth, basically in this case, because it couldn't deal with the idea that it would be punished for its wrongs by its Lord; it couldn't comprehend a spiritual world, and even when it tried to understand, could only do so with visions of rivers of milk and honey and beautiful maidens – a very Earthly vision. It is not hard to see, then, how people, when taught about the soul and life after life by their divine Teachers could misunderstand it as being an Earthly return and happily go about teaching the idea to everyone else until large numbers of people accepted it, few seriously going back to the actual Teachings of their Prophets and investigating the truth for themselves. If they had, statements such as the following from each of the world's major Faiths would have been clear enough.

#### Hinduism

*Those who remember me at the time of death will come to me. Do not doubt this. Whatever occupies the mind at the time of death determines the destiny of the dying; always they will tend toward that state of being. Therefore, remember me at all times ... Remembering me at the time of death, close down the doors of the senses and place the mind in the heart.*<sup>13</sup>

#### Judaism

*Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.*<sup>14</sup>

#### Buddhism

*The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master. Relatives and friends and well-wishers rejoice at the arrival of a man who had been long absent and has returned home safely from afar. Likewise, meritorious deeds will receive the good person upon his arrival in the next world, as relatives welcome a dear one on his return.*<sup>15</sup>

#### Christianity

*Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*<sup>16</sup>

## Islam

*But ye prefer this present life, though the life to come is better and more enduring. This truly is in the Books of old, the Books of Abraham and Moses.*<sup>17</sup>

## The Bahá'í Faith

*The world beyond is as different from this world as this world is different from that of the child while still in the womb of its mother. When the soul attains the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befits its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. (GWB 157)*

*Thou hast, moreover, asked Me concerning the state of the soul after its separation from the body. 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. By the righteousness of God! It shall attain a station such as no pen can depict, or tongue describe. The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him. (GWB 161)*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Dhammapada* 18:235-238, tr. Max Müller.

<sup>2</sup> *Practice of Karma Yoga*, Swami Sivananda, Divine Life Society, 1985, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> "Origen." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2005. EB Premium Service. <http://britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=9057374> (Retrieved 2/20/05)

<sup>4</sup> *Luke* 16:19-31, KJV.

<sup>5</sup> *Qur'án*, 7:53, 86:9, Rodwell tr.

<sup>6</sup> *Qur'án*, Surih 3:27, Yusuf-Ali tr.

<sup>7</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, "I Died as a Mineral", Arberry tr., v1-4.

<sup>8</sup> SAQ 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Qur'án* 17:87, Rodwell tr.

<sup>10</sup> *Qur'án* 3:185, Rodwell tr.

<sup>11</sup> *Qur'án* 16:97, Rodwell tr.

<sup>12</sup> *Qur'án* 3:169, Rodwell tr.

<sup>13</sup> *Bhagavad-Gita* 8:5, tr. Edwin Arnold.

<sup>14</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 12:7, KJV.

<sup>15</sup> *Dhammapada* 219-20.

<sup>16</sup> *John* 11:25-26, KJV.

<sup>17</sup> *Qur'án* 87: 16-19, Rodwell tr.