

Some Answered Questions

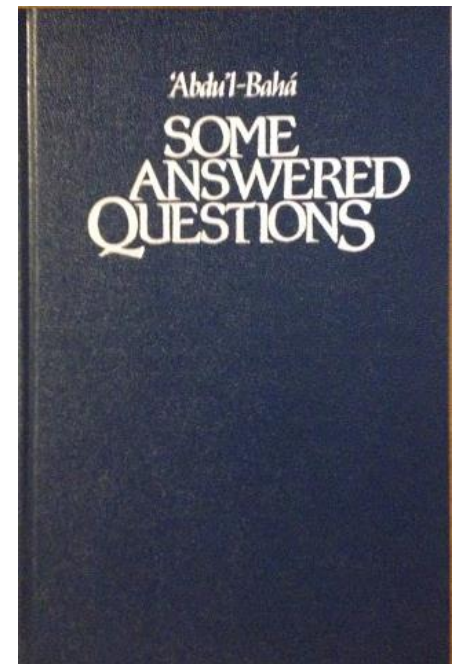
An Introduction to Bahá'í Teachings

Marco Oliveira

INTRODUCTION



- What is the best way to present the Bahá'í Faith to people from western countries?
- Have you ever considered which is the best book to use when presenting the Bahá'í Faith?
- [Some Answered Questions](#) is a book that was first published in 1908.
- It contains questions related to religion, philosophy and science, asked of `Abdu'l-Bahá by Laura Clifford Barney during several of her visits to `Akká between 1904 and 1906, along with `Abdu'l-Bahá's answers to these questions.



LAURA CLIFFORD BARNEY



- Laura Clifford Barney was born in 1879, in Cincinnati (Ohio, USA) to family of prominent scholars and artists.
- May Bolles Maxwell introduced her to the Bahá'í Faith in Paris around 1900.
- Laura Barney financed the visit of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl to the United States in 1901-04. She also sponsored the publication of the book, [*The Bahá'í Proofs*](#), in 1902.
- Between 1904 and 1906, she made several extended visits to `Abdu'l-Bahá and had the opportunity to ask Him questions on a wide range of subjects.
- Later, the notes taken from these conversations, reviewed and corrected by `Abdu'l-Bahá, became the book, *Some Answered Questions*.

WESTERN PILGRIMS, 'AKKÁ, 1901



Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Seated left to right: Ethel Jenner Rosenberg, Madam Jackson, Shoghi Effendi, Helen Ellis Cole, Lua Getsinger, Emogene Hoagg.

Standing left to right: Charles Mason Remey, Sigurd Russell, Edward Getsinger, Laura Clifford Barney.

LAURA DREYFUS-BARNEY



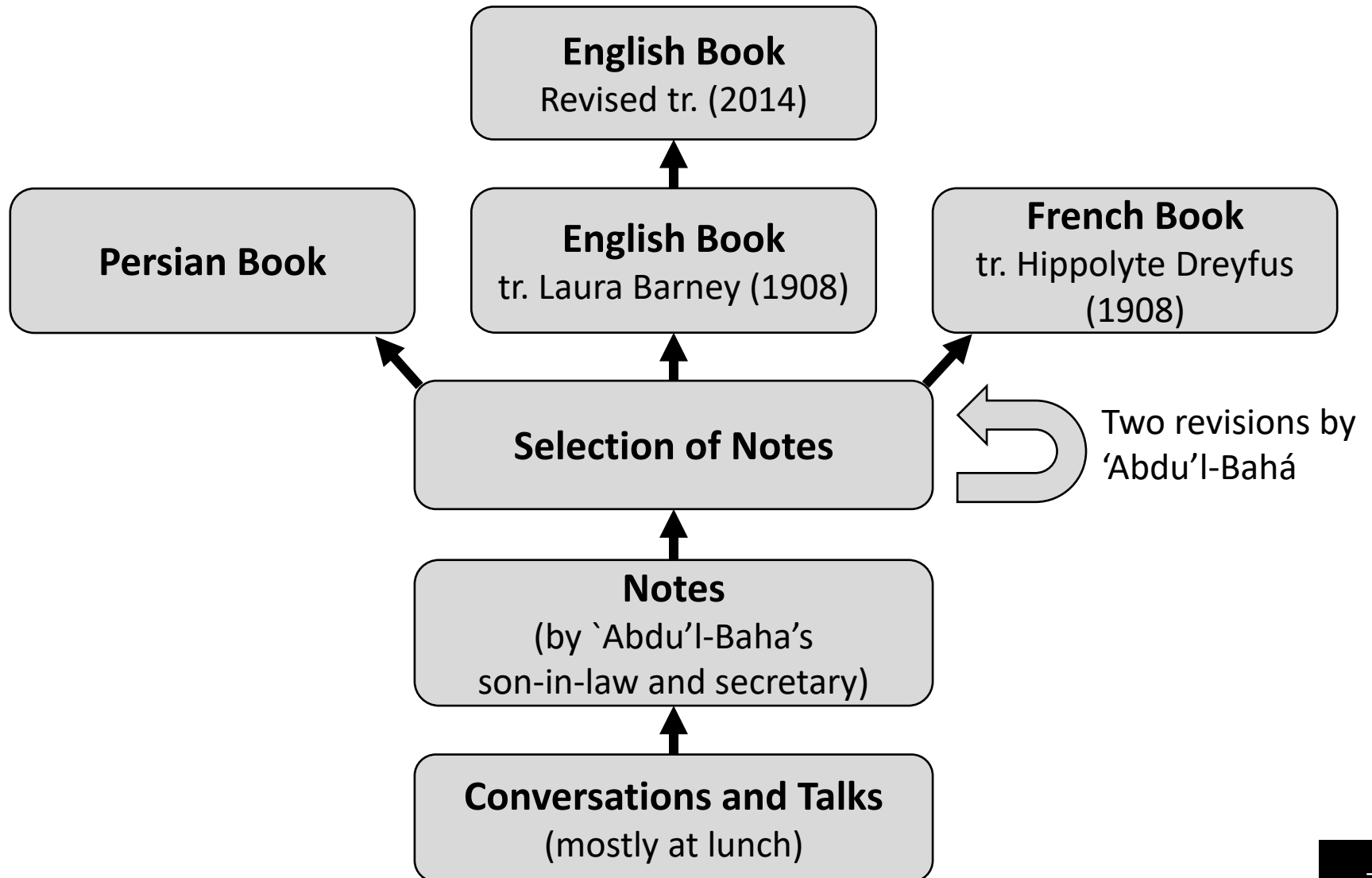
- In 1905-06, Laura Barney visited Persia, the Caucasus, and Russia with Hippolyte Dreyfus. They married in April 1911.
- Laura and Hippolyte were very important to the success of `Abdu'l-Bahá's visits to the West. They had close ties to the Master.
- They hosted the first visit of `Abdu'l-Bahá to Paris in September 1911. On many occasions, they served as interpreters.
- They also met the Master during His visit to the US in 1912.
- Their last visit to `Akká to visit `Abdu'l-Bahá was in 1921.
- Laura Dreyfus-Barney served in the Ambulance Corps and the Red Cross during World War I (1914-1918).
- She was named *chevalier* (1925) and officer (1937) of the French *Légion d'Honneur*.

HIPPOLYTE AND LAURA (1911)



Source: <http://www.thejourneywest.org/>

GENESIS OF SOME ANSWERED QUESTIONS





GOD AND REVELATION

EXISTENCE OF GOD



Anselm of Canterbury



- `Abdu'l-Bahá compares the creation to a painting and the Creator to the painter.

Thomas Aquinas



- He claims that the painting cannot exist by itself and there must be a Painter.
- Following the same rationale, the creation also implies the existence of a Creator.

René Descartes



- The created thing is always imperfect when compared to the Creator.

Gottfried Leibniz



- This kind of ontological argument was previously adopted by Western scholars.

A PAINTER AND A PAINTING



Is it possible for a painting to be a masterpiece and the painter to be deficient in his craft, notwithstanding that he is its creator? No: The painting cannot be like the painter, for otherwise it would have painted itself. And no matter how perfect the painting may be, in comparison with the painter it is utterly deficient.

[SAQ, 2:2](#)

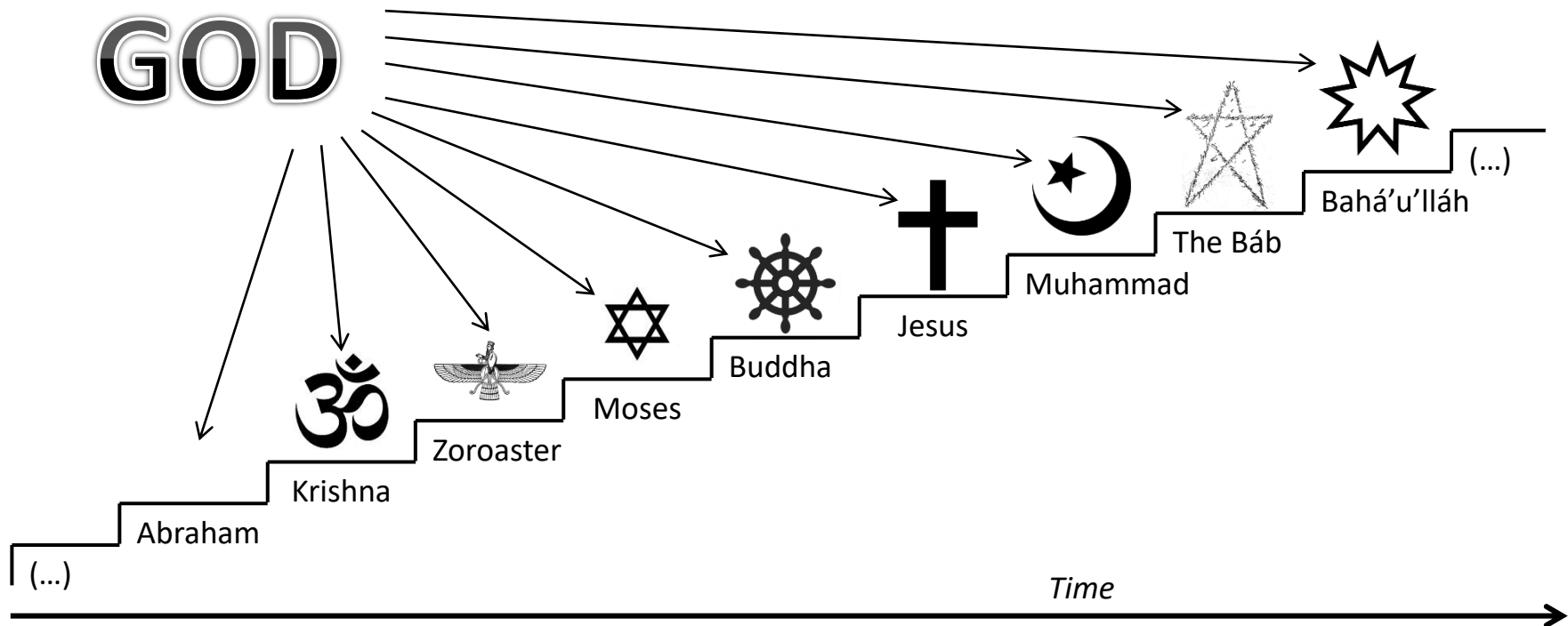


Source: wallpaperflare.com/

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION



- `Abdu'l-Bahá mentions several Manifestations of God Who work as spiritual educators of mankind. Their influence in the human world is similar to a divine springtime.



CYCLICAL REVELATION



Source: flickr.com (Les William)

The spiritual cycles of the Sun of Truth, like the cycles of the physical sun, are in a state of perpetual motion and renewal. The Sun of Truth can be likened to the material sun, which rises from many different points... The possessors of true knowledge are lovers of the sun and are not attached to its dawning points. Those who are endued with insight are seekers of the truth itself, not of its exponents and manifestations.

[SAQ, 14:12](#)

LIKE PHYSICIANS



The Prophets of God, the universal Manifestations, are even as skilled physicians; the world of being is as the body of man; and the divine religions are as the treatment and remedy. The physician must be fully aware and informed of all the parts and organs, the constitution and condition of the patient, in order to prescribe an effective remedy. Indeed, it is from the disease itself that the physician deduces the remedy, for he first diagnoses the ailment and then treats its underlying cause.

[SAQ, 40:8](#)



THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD

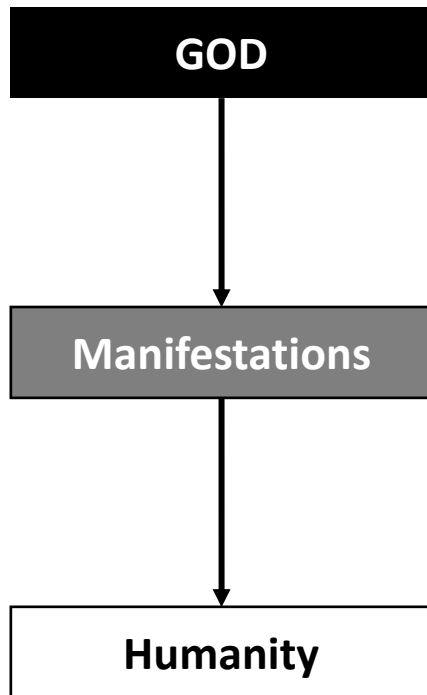
MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD



- Any human attempt to conceive God has been, and will always be, illusive. As humans we should beware of worshipping our own illusions.
- God is beyond human comprehension. His Essence can never be described or understood.
- The Manifestations of God also have no knowledge of His Essence, or access to it.
- However, the Manifestations are like mirrors reflecting God's Attributes and God's Will to humans.
- The Manifestations have material, human (no end), and divine (no beginning and no end) stations. Their knowledge is above human knowledge. They are the Founders of world religions.



A TRANSCENDENT GOD



Know that the reality of the Divinity and the nature of the divine Essence is ineffable sanctity and absolute holiness; that is, it is exalted above and sanctified beyond every praise. All the attributes ascribed to the highest degrees of existence are, with regard to this station, mere imagination. The Invisible and Inaccessible can never be known; the absolute Essence can never be described. For the divine Essence is an all-encompassing reality, and all created things are encompassed.

[SAQ, 37:2](#)

LIKE MIRRORS REFLECTING THE SUN



All the perfections, bounties, and splendours of the one true God are plainly visible in the realities of His Holy Manifestations, even as the light of the sun is fully reflected with all its perfections and bounties in a clear and spotless mirror. And if it be said that the mirrors are the manifestations of the sun and the dawning-places of the daystar of the world, this is not meant to imply that the sun has descended from the heights of its sanctity or has become embodied in the mirror, or that that limitless Reality has been confined to this visible plane.

[SAQ, 37:5](#)





SOME CHRISTIAN SUBJECTS

FOCUS ON METAPHORICAL MEANINGS



- A significant part of the book is dedicated to Christian subjects.
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the symbolic meanings in themes such as the Birth of Christ, baptism, the meaning of the bread and the wine, resurrection, Holy Spirit, Trinity, second coming, Peter and the Papacy, sin and atonement.
- Explanations on some chapters of the books of Isaiah and Revelation are also present.
- The focus of the explanations on these issues values the metaphorical meanings over the commonly accepted literal meanings.



DESCRIBING SPIRITUAL REALITIES



- `Abdu'l-Bahá explains that these symbolic expressions are used to describe spiritual realities. If taken literally, they would be against reason and science.

...when you wish to express the reality of the spirit and its conditions and degrees, you are obliged to describe them in terms of sensible things, since outwardly there exists nothing but the sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intelligible things, but when you wish to express these spiritual conditions you say, “My heart became heavy”, or “My heart was uplifted”, although one’s heart is not literally made heavy or lifted up.

[SAQ, 16:4](#)

GOD DOES NOT INCARNATE



Source: pixabay.com

The reality of the Divinity is sanctified and exalted beyond the comprehension of all created things, can in no wise be imagined by mortal mind and understanding, and transcends all human conception. That reality admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being...

God is pure perfection and the creation is absolute imperfection. For God to descend into the degrees of existence would be the greatest of imperfections...

[SAQ, 27:1,3](#)

TRINITY



...the reality of Christ was a clear mirror wherein the Sun of Truth—that is, the divine Essence—appeared and shone forth with infinite perfections and attributes. It is not that the Sun, which is the Essence of the Divinity, was ever divided or multiplied—for it remains one—but it became manifest in the mirror. That is why Christ said, “The Father is in the Son”, meaning that that Sun is manifest and visible in this mirror...

This is the true meaning of the three Persons of the Trinity. Otherwise, the foundations of the religion of God would rest upon an illogical proposition...

[SAQ, 27:7,9](#)

RESURRECTION OF CHRIST



Source: <https://unsplash.com/>

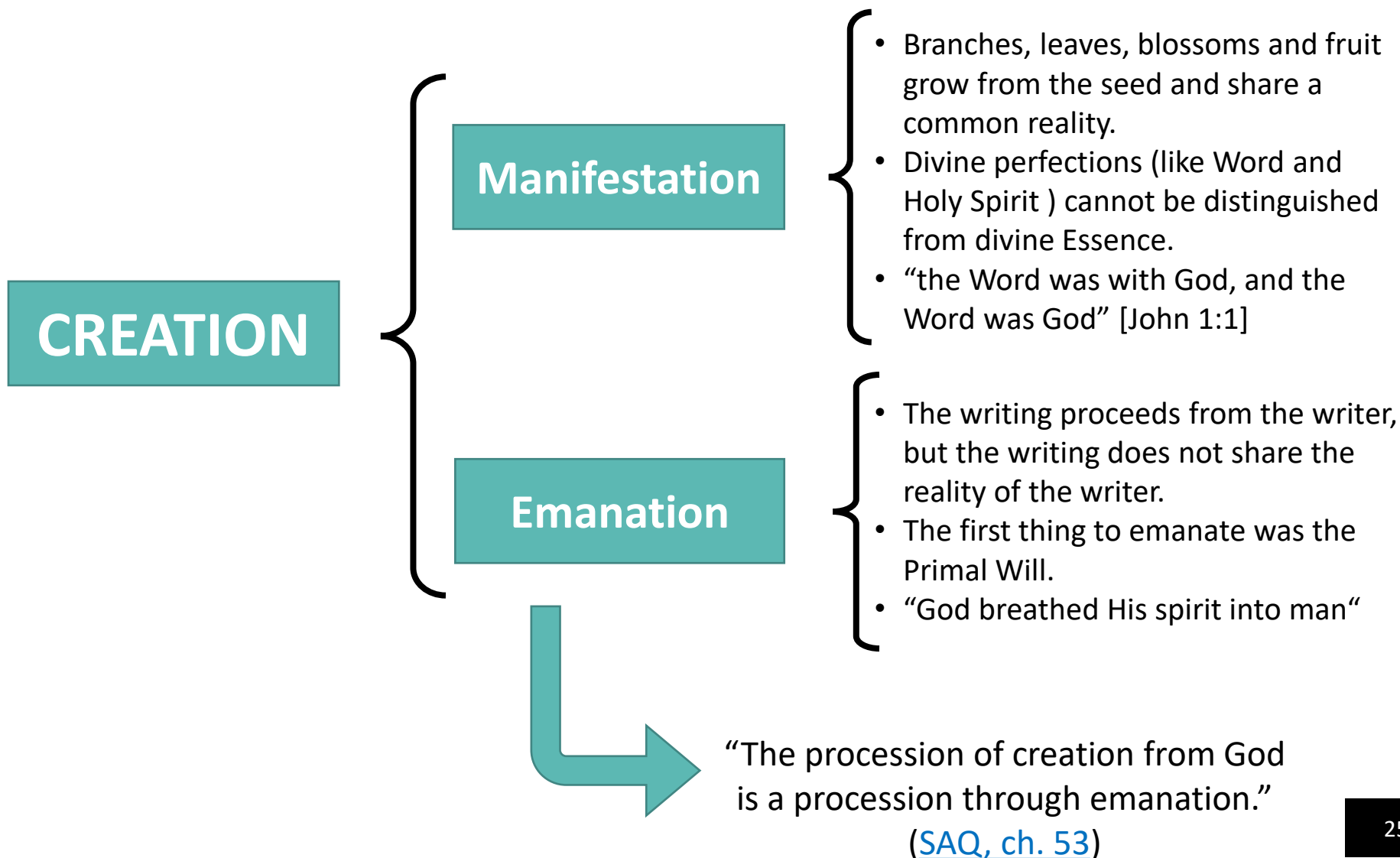
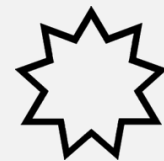
After the martyrdom of Christ, the Apostles were perplexed and dismayed. The reality of Christ, which consists in His teachings, His bounties, His perfections, and His spiritual power, was hidden and concealed for two or three days after His martyrdom... After three days the Apostles became firm and steadfast, arose to aid the Cause of Christ, resolved to promote the divine teachings and practise their Lord's admonitions, and endeavoured to serve Him... In other words, the Cause of Christ, which was like unto a lifeless body, was quickened to life and surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

[SAQ, 23:6](#)



CREATION

TWO PROCESSES OF CREATION



CREATION BY MANIFESTATION



And know that the procession of the Word and the Holy Spirit from God, which is a manifestational procession and appearance, should not be taken to mean that the reality of the Divinity has been divided or multiplied, or has descended from its heights of purity and sanctity... If a clear and spotless mirror were placed before the sun, the light and heat, the form and image of the sun would appear therein with such a manifestational appearance that if a beholder were to say, “This is the sun”, he would be speaking the truth. But the mirror is the mirror and the sun is the sun. The sun is but one sun, and remains one even if it appears in numerous mirrors.

[SAQ, 54:6](#)

ALL THINGS EMANATE FROM GOD



It follows that all things have emanated from God; that is, it is through God that all things have been realized, and through Him that the contingent world has come to exist. The first thing to emanate from God is that universal reality which the ancient philosophers termed the “First Intellect” and which the people of Bahá call the “Primal Will”. This emanation, with respect to its action in the world of God, is not limited by either time or place and has neither beginning nor end, for in relation to God the beginning and the end are one and the same.

[SAQ, 53:5](#)



CREATION BY EMANATION



The spirits of men proceed from God by emanation, in the same way as the discourse proceeds from the speaker and the writing from the writer; that is, the speaker himself does not become the speech, any more than the writer becomes the writing: The connection is rather one of emanational procession. For the speaker remains in an absolute state of ability and power, as the discourse emanates from him, even as the action emanates from its author. The true Speaker, the divine Essence, ever remains in the same condition and experiences no change or alteration, no transformation or vicissitude. It has neither beginning nor end. The procession of human spirits from God is therefore an emanational procession.

[SAQ, 54:4](#)

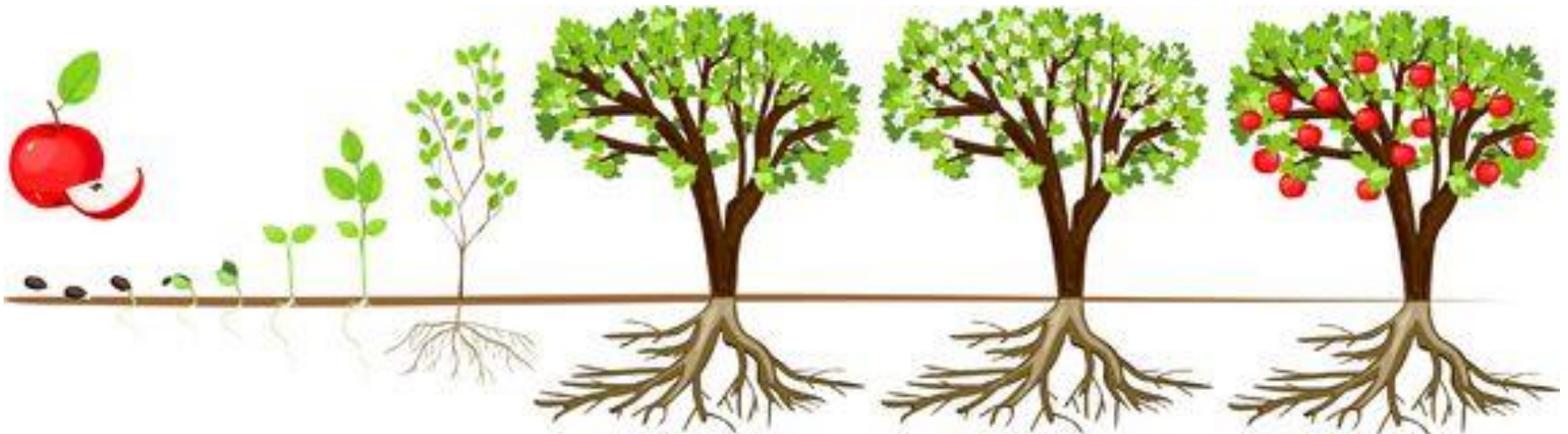


EXISTENCE AND EVOLUTION

THE TREE OF CREATION



- `Abdu'l-Bahá explained the concept of evolution on several occasions.
- Evolution is described in the Bahá'í Faith as a biological process that has a purpose: the appearance of a human being.
- Humans are described not as an animal, but as the fruit of the tree of creation, a creature endowed with a rational soul.



GRADUALLY GREW AND DEVELOPED



From the beginning of existence in the womb of the terrestrial globe, man gradually grew and developed like the embryo in the womb of its mother, and passed from one shape and form to another until he appeared with this beauty and perfection, this power and constitution. It is certain that initially he did not possess such loveliness, grace, and refinement, and that he has only gradually attained such form, disposition, comeliness, and grace... Rather, it [the embryo of humankind] gradually attained various conditions and assumed divers forms until it attained this appearance and beauty, this perfection, refinement, and grace.

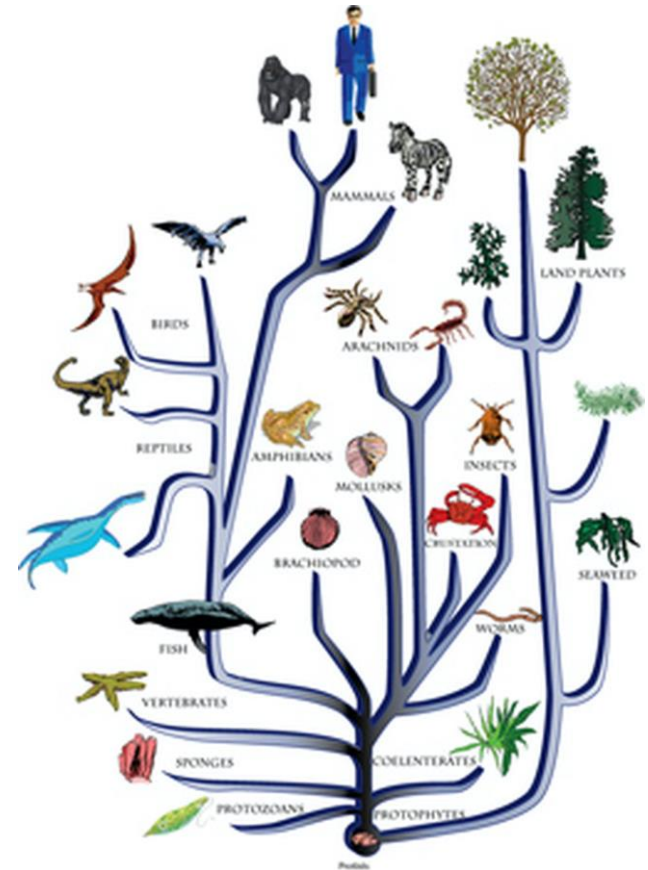
[SAQ, 47:9](#)

EXISTENCE AND PRESENCE



The splendour of all the divine perfections is manifest in the reality of man, and it is for this reason that he is the vicegerent and apostle of God. If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the purpose of existence is the revelation of the divine perfections. We cannot say, then, that there was a time when man was not. At most we can say that there was a time when this earth did not exist, and that at the beginning man was not present upon it.

[SAQ, 50:4](#)



Source: pexels.com/

A DISTINCT SPECIES



Just as man progresses, evolves, and is transformed from one form and appearance to another in the womb of the mother, while remaining from the beginning a human embryo, so too has man remained a distinct essence—that is, the human species—from the beginning of his formation in the matrix of the world, and has passed gradually from form to form. It follows that this change of appearance, this evolution of organs, and this growth and development do not preclude the originality of the species. Now, even accepting the reality of evolution and progress, nevertheless, from the moment of his appearance man has possessed perfect composition, and has had the capacity and potential to acquire both material and spiritual perfections ...

[SAQ, 49:8](#)

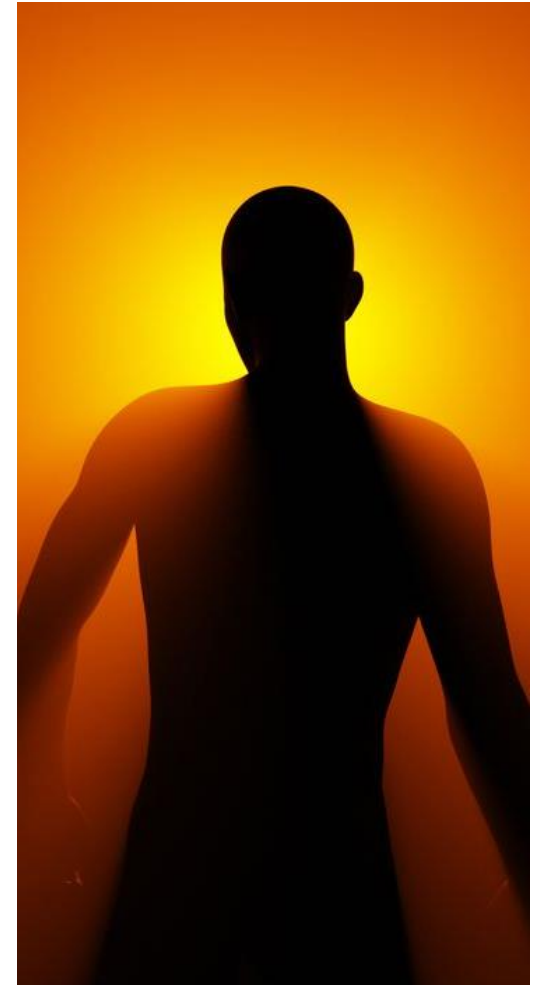


HUMANS AS SPIRITUAL CREATURES

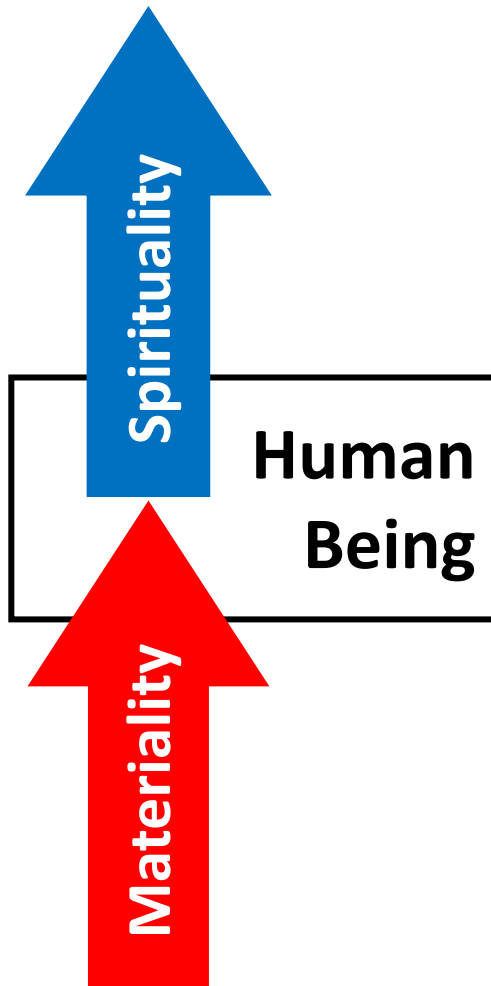
HUMAN NATURE



- Human beings have two natures:
 - Material (or physical).
 - Spiritual.
- The material nature is the result of a biological process, determined at conception. This is an ephemeral nature.
- The spiritual nature is also known as the rational soul. It was brought into existence by God. It will continue to develop after its separation from the body.
- The physical world is the first stage for the development of the human soul.



MATERIALITY AND SPIRITUALITY



Man is in the ultimate degree of materiality and the beginning of spirituality; that is, he is at the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the furthestmost degree of darkness and the beginning of the light. That is why the station of man is said to be the end of night and the beginning of day, meaning that he encompasses all the degrees of imperfection and that he potentially possesses all the degrees of perfection.

[SAQ, 64:2](#)

THE RATIONAL SOUL



The rational soul—the human spirit—did not descend into this body or subsist through it to begin with, that it should require some substance to depend upon after the constituent parts of the body have decomposed. On the contrary, the rational soul is the substance upon which the body depends. The rational soul is endowed from the beginning with individuality; it does not acquire it through the intermediary of the body. At most, what can be said is that the individuality and identity of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world, and that the soul may either progress and attain to the degrees of perfection or remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance and be veiled from and deprived of beholding the signs of God.

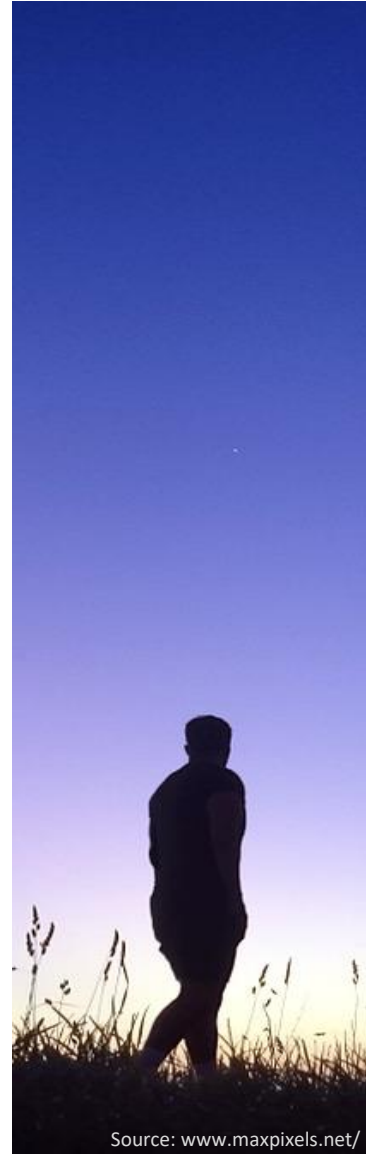
[SAQ, 66:4](#)

KNOWING GOD



Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and knowledge of His attributes and not of His Reality. And even this knowledge of His attributes extends only so far as human power and capacity permit, and remains wholly inadequate. Philosophy consists in comprehending, so far as human power permits, the realities of things as they are in themselves... The power of human understanding does not encompass the reality of the divine Essence: All that man can hope to achieve is to comprehend the attributes of the Divinity, the light of which is manifest and resplendent in the world and within the souls of men.

[SAQ, 59:7](#)





MISCELLANEOUS SUBJECTS

GOOD AND EVIL



Whatever God has created, He has created good. Evil consists merely in non-existence. For example, death is the absence of life: When man is no longer sustained by the power of life, he dies. Darkness is the absence of light: When light is no more, darkness reigns. Light is a positively existing thing, but darkness has no positive existence; it is merely its absence. Likewise, wealth is a positively existing thing but poverty is merely its absence.

It is thus evident that all evil is mere non-existence. Good has a positive existence; evil is merely its absence.

[SAQ, 74:6-7](#)



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT



An individual has no right to seek revenge, but the body politic has the right to punish the criminal. Such punishment is intended to dissuade and deter others from committing similar crimes. It is for the protection of the rights of man and does not constitute revenge, for revenge is that inner gratification that results from returning like for like. This is not permissible, for no one has been given the right to seek revenge. And yet, if criminals were entirely left to their own devices, the order of the world would be disrupted. So while punishment is one of the essential requirements of the body politic, the wronged and aggrieved party has no right to seek revenge.

[SAQ, 77:2](#)

WEALTH AND WELFARE OF THE POOR



... the appropriation of excessive wealth by a few individuals, notwithstanding the needs of the masses, is unfair and unjust, and that, conversely, absolute equality would also disrupt the existence, welfare, comfort, peace, and orderly life of the human race. Such being the case, the best course is therefore to seek moderation, which is for the wealthy to recognize the advantages of moderation in the acquisition of profits and to show regard for the welfare of the poor and the needy, that is, to fix a daily wage for the workers and also to allot them a share of the total profits of the factory.

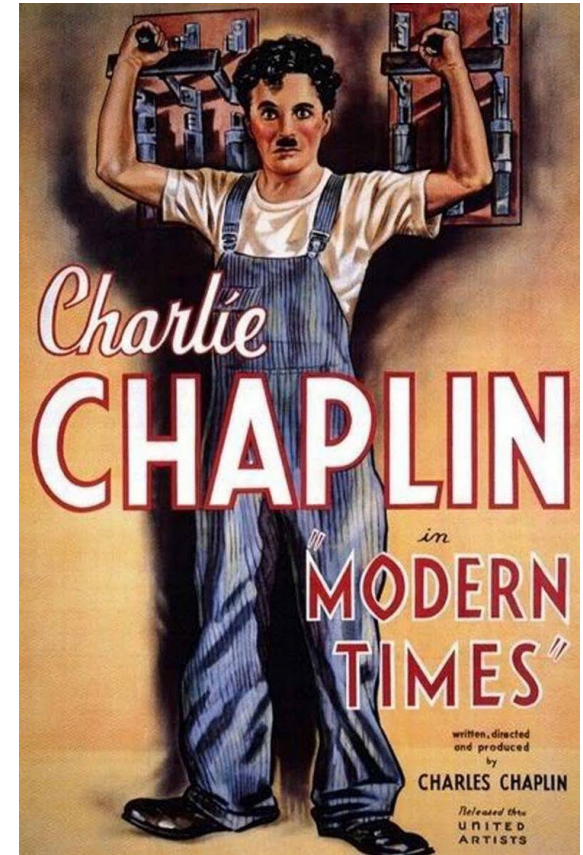
[SAQ, 78:7](#)

LABOUR RELATIONS



In brief, insofar as the mutual rights of the factory owners and the workers are concerned, laws must be enacted that would enable the former to make reasonable profits and the latter to be provided with their present necessities and their future needs, so that if they become incapacitated, grow old, or die and leave behind small children, they or their children will not be overcome by dire poverty but will receive a modest pension from the revenues of the factory itself...

[SAQ, 78:8](#)



Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

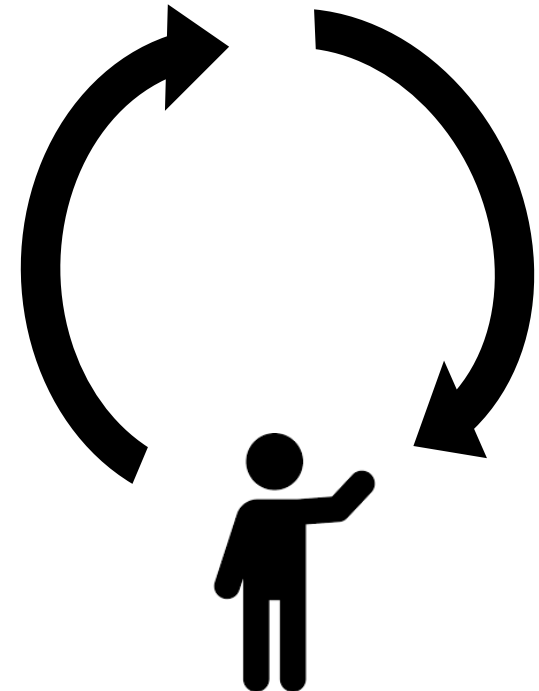
REENCARNATION



...it is in no wise possible to attain existence through returning: It is as if man, after being freed from the world of the womb, were to return to it...

This idea has its origin in the fact that certain reincarnationists imagine existence to be confined to this fleeting world, and deny the other worlds of God, whereas in reality the latter are infinite. If the worlds of God were to culminate in this material world, then all creation would be in vain and existence itself would be a childish game.

[SAQ, 81:11-12](#)



FINAL REMARKS

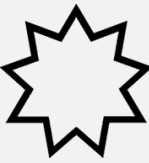


- *Some Answered Questions* was published when Bahá'í scriptures in English was scarcely available in the West.
- It presents the Bahá'í teachings in a proper way to the western mindset.
- The diversity of themes, the thoroughness of the content, and the richness and clarity of the language made it an appealing and popular book.
- It was and continues to be a precious tool for teaching and deepening the Bahá'í Faith.
- *Some Answered Questions* has no equal, and the service rendered by its compiler has been characterized by the Guardian of the Faith as “imperishable”.

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