

Death and Dying in the Bahá'í Faith *

Moshe Sharon

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The Bahá'í Faith, which was called after its Prophet-founder Husayn 'Alī Nūrī (1817 – 1892) known by his title Bahá'ulláh – “the Splendour of God,” is a direct continuation of the religious movement established by the Báb (“Gate”) the title assumed by Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819-1850). The Bahá'ís regard the latter also as the prophet-founder of their faith, being the forerunner and the Herald of Bahá'u'lláh. Most of the adherents of the Báb, (the Bábís) accepted Bahá'u'lláh's claim, but there was a minority that remained loyal to the Báb and his teachings, and regarded him as the only independent prophet of the age. The Bahá'ís regard Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, the Expected One of our time, and the Prophet-Messiah for the coming 1000 years at least. He is identified with the messianic figure whom the Báb called “He whom God Shall make Manifest,” and whose certain coming he was sent to announce. The Bábís regard this prophecy of the Báb as referring to a very distant future, whereas Bahá'u'lláh asserted that the Báb meant none else but him, and that the time set for his revelation as the Manifestation of God, far greater than the Báb himself, was no more than 19 years after the beginning of the Báb's mission in 1844, that is to say in 1863. In that year, during his exile in Iraq, Bahá'u'lláh announced his independent revelation to a group of his adherents in Baghdad, and later, in 1866, openly to the world after he had been again exiled to Adrianople (Edirne).

Although there is some justification for regarding the Bábí and Bahá'í venture as a historical continuity, there is no question that Bahá'u'lláh, although tying himself to his predecessor created a new religion. This was based on an independent revelation, which nominally continued the former but actually abrogated and replaced it. Bahá'u'lláh's successors, his son 'Abbās Effendī (known by his title: 'Abd al-Bahā' 1844-1921) and the latter's grandson Shoghī Effendī (1897-1957) carried his religion further along its independent path as a universal religion.

There are two sources for the appearance of the Bábí-Bahá'í faiths. The first is the growth of the Messianic expectations in the Shī'ah that reached unprecedented heights in the year 1260 of the Hijrah corresponding to CE1844. This year marked the end of the 1000 (lunar) years' period that had elapsed since the “disappearance” (or “occultation”) of the 12th Imām. Naturally, both Shī'ite scholars and the rank and file of the Faithful expected the Hidden Imām to reappear and finally triumph over his enemies, and establish the Messianic Age. Even if he were not to appear immediately himself at least a person with direct access to him was expected.

* Originally housed at www.hum.huji.ac.il/english/units.php?cat=3666&incat=3479; retrieved from wayback.archive.org for posting to bahai-library.com/author/sharon

The second was the intensive intellectual activity of scholars in Iran who since the 16th century had plunged into the study of metaphysics, attempting to find the right balance between the truth of the divine revelation as represented by the Qur'ān and the Tradition, and the solid truth of the philosophical logic. One of the major issues discussed by these intellectuals was that of the relation between man and the unknowable, unapproachable God. This issue was closely connected with the examination of the nature of the Revelation and prophecy, which implied a channel of grace in human form serving as a medium of contact with the divine, as well as other questions which represented the fundamentals of Islam. Among these were the issues of the immortality of the soul, its resurrection in the body at the End of Days, the vivid description of the Heaven and Hell, life after death, and divine reward and punishment. All these problems needed elucidation, and harmonization with the concepts of pure philosophical thought. It was clear that philosophical truth had no less validity than the divine truth represented by the revelation of Islam.

In the latter part of the 18th century, and the beginning of the 19th, the philosophical school called Shaykhiyyah (after its founder **Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsā'ī**, 1743-1828) offered answers to these questions exploring methods of argument that differed from the accepted Islamic doctrinal concepts. Shaykh Ahmad interpreted all the descriptions connected with the appearance of the Mahdī (or Qā'im) and the signs of the End of Days not literally but metaphorically. He was sure, however, that the time for the advent of the Qā'im was near, and urged his disciples to be prepared to look for him. He developed the idea, which came down from Platonic sources, that between the visible world of creation and the divine realm there exists an intermediary world that is totally concealed, yet is a real spiritual existence. He called this world of spiritual reality *Hūrqalyā*. This world is the abode of all the prophets and the Imāms of the Shī'ah, who are the manifestations of the Divine Attributes; and is the place where the earthly body of the dead is exchanged for another body. This body is not metaphorical yet it is not material. It is a kind of spiritual body, which becomes the pure abode of the soul. In this way the Shaykh solved the problem of the resurrection in the body, without having to succumb to the illogical concept of the dead arising from the dust. The intermediary world of *Hūrqalyā* solved also the problem of the relation between God and man. God Himself remained totally unattained, and only the prophets and Imāmas issuing from this world received the revelation through their attachment to the divine *Attributes*, but not to the divine *Essence*. Although all the divine attributes are one and the same, the most pronounced of all of them is the divine Will, or the Word that represents the creative power of God. The Imāms were the foremost representatives, even the actual embodiment of this divine Will.

‘Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī was highly influenced by the atmosphere of the time and by these ideas to which he had been directly exposed, and on 22 May 1844 he announced himself to be the “Gate” – Báb in Arabic. First it was understood that he meant that he was the gate to the Hidden Imām but then it became clear that he actually implied that he was the

Hidden Imam himself, and as such a channel of grace to God. He indicated that he was a new prophet, a Manifestation of God who began a new cycle of revelation. This meant that Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, was truly the “seal of prophecy” but only of a cycle, which had come to an end with him, while the Báb began a new one. This was a new idea that regarded Revelation as a *progressive* process, and maintained that every prophet sent throughout history, represented a revelation compatible with the degree of development of the age to which he had been sent. Claiming to be the Prophet of the Age, the Báb composed a new Book (the *Bayān*), which was to abrogate the Qur’ān, and in which he set the laws of a new world-order fit for the messianic times. In this, and other writings he offered mystical and allegorical interpretations of Qur’ānic verses, arguing that their real meaning was hidden behind the plain Arabic words. The Báb’s activity, and that of his disciples brought upon them the violent reaction of the Shī‘ite religious establishment and the government of Iran. The former regarded his teachings, especially his claim to prophecy, pure blasphemy; and the latter considered him a potential leader of popular rebellion. In July 1850, after a few years of imprisonment, he was executed in Tabrīz, and his followers witnessed persecutions, which claimed the lives of a substantial part of the initial community of the Bábīs.

Husayn ‘Alī Nūrī – Bahá’u’lláh who was one of the Báb’s disciples, was imprisoned in Iran in 1852 and then exiled to Iraq. He took over the movement of the Báb, claiming to be the Promised One whose coming the Báb had prophesized as the greatest manifestation of God for the present generation. In 1863, soon after the announcement of his claim, the Ottoman government exiled Bahá’u’lláh, first to Constantinople and then to Edirne. In 1868 he was again banished, this time to Palestine and was imprisoned in Acre (‘Akko, ‘Akkā). A few years later he was released from prison, and was able to move to an estate outside the walls of Acre where he died in 1892.

The literary production of Bahá’u’lláh (which the Bahá’ís call “tablets” and regard as revelations) is tremendous. If collected it could easily come to about 100 large volumes. Written in Arabic and Persian these works cover all aspects of his prophetic mission. They contain mystical as well as legal writings, moral teachings, prayers, polemics and epistles to various recipients, including all the most important world leaders of his time, whom he summoned to his prophetic call. He offered a plan for a world-order which was based on ideas of peace, complete equality between all humans and between the sexes, the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence, the banning of wars, the solution of all problems through the process of negotiation, and the adoption of consultation as the only method to solve problems and make decisions. In his writings he relied on the writings of the Báb, and the Qur’ān to which he applied a method of exegesis, which, like the Báb, aimed at discovering the esoteric meanings of the text. Nevertheless he regarded his book of laws, moral, and theological teachings, called the Most Holy Book (*al-Kitāb al-Aqdas*), as an independent revelation, a divine plan for humanity, superior and abrogating all the ones, which preceded it.

He presented himself as a Manifestation of God similar to all other Prophets before him, a representation of the Divine Attributes in a human frame. Prophets, he said, were actually the reflections of the divine being and this is the maximum nearness possible to God whose essence is unattainable for any creature. God is one, alone in his concealed mystery of oneness, and all realms of existence – the physical and spiritual are His creation. Bahá'u'lláh carried the idea of the world of spiritual reality further, and asserted that this intermediary spiritual world is necessary for the existence of creation as well as for the manifestation of the divine presence and power in the world of being. This intermediary spiritual world is the realm of the divine attributes or “Names” of God, which reveal themselves in the prophets, each embodying the one and the same Name. The difference between the prophets is characterized by the intensity of the reflection of the Divine Name(s) in each one of them. This intensity depends on the circumstances of the prophet’s mission, which in turn is defined by the degree of the development of the age to which he is sent.

The Greatest Name of God, is *Bahá'* – Splendour, Brilliance, Glory, or in the superlative form “*al-Abhá*” – The Most Glorious. Bahá'u'lláh saw himself as the manifestation of this greatest name of God; his title means – “The Glory of the Most Glorious, The Splendour of the Most Splendorous.” By virtue of the fact that he was the prophet sent to the present age, the most advanced of all ages, he proclaimed himself as the most perfect of all prophets, defining himself in terms such as “The Dayspring of God’s Most Excellent Titles,” the “*Abhá* Beauty,” the “King of Kings,” the “Desire of the World,” “The Promised One” of all previous revelations, the “Redeemer of Mankind,” and many other similar titles.

The intermediary world of spiritual reality is often defined as the world of “Command” namely the abode of the creative Divine Word commanding creation; and since all God’s attributes are one and the same, it can be described as the *Abhá* Kingdom, the kingdom of the most Glorious Name. This is the abode of the souls after death where they meet each other, and enjoy the presence of the Manifestations of God.

By portraying three layers of existence: the concealed secret of the Divine Oneness; the realm of the *Abhá* kingdom or the intermediary world of spiritual reality; and the world of physical reality (“the world of possibility”) the subject of death and dying could easily fit into a reasonable pattern and be treated from various aspects. The idea that this world is only the preparation for the world to come is an idea common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The reward and punishment awaiting the person after death is the outcome of his behaviour in his earthly life, and each of the former religions found ways to describe the pleasures of reward and the pains of punishment or simply the joy of Paradise and the fire of Hell.

These notions are completely absent from the Bahá'í Faith that regards the whole idea of Heaven and Hell as allegorical rather than real. The physical is not a preparation for the spiritual existence. The existential theories of the Bahá'í faith regard human life as moving between the two poles of the physical and the spiritual, and the two worlds are not separate

from each other, they are rather interwoven with each other. The only difference is that the world of physical existence has the dimension of temporality whereas the world of spiritual existence is eternal. Life in this world does not prepare for afterlife but since the spiritual world is not detached from the physical world activity in this world influences that which continues in the spiritual one. Death does not mean movement into another life, but continuation of this life. It is simply another category or stage of existence. The best that a person can do in this world, therefore, is to achieve spiritual growth, if this is achieved in this world it will continue in the *Abhā* Kingdom as well.

Death is regarded as the shedding away of the physical frame but no more, the real part of the person is the soul, which is indestructible. In this there is nothing new, but the Bahá'í thought added another dimension to this idea. The soul is the sum total of the personality it is the person himself; the physical body is pure matter with no real identity. The person, having left his material side behind, remains the same person, and he continues the life he conducted in the physical world. His heaven therefore is the continuation of the pure life that he conducted in the physical world, and his hell is the continuation of the immoral life, which he conducted on earth. The effort to come nearer to God in the physical world continues with coming near God in the heaven of the mystical paradise. Remoteness from God in the physical life means remoteness in the world to come. Or, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, Heaven is reunion with the Manifestation of God in the *Abhā* Kingdom, and hell is remaining with oneself. Heaven and Hell exist everywhere in this world as well as in the world to come. The difference between the two is the difference between the state of perfection achieved leading to the nearness of God here and hereafter, and the state of imperfection, which is caused by the failure to attain to virtue and the falling away from God.

The challenge of life in this world continues in the world of spiritual reality as well, only that in the latter the meeting of this challenge is easier because the person is free from physical needs.

Although death causes distress and pain to the friends and relatives of the deceased in fact it should be regarded as nothing more than a stage of life. It comes suddenly like birth, and it is comparable to birth, because like birth it is an open door to a new and greater life. This attitude, so simply defined, is not unfamiliar to other religions. The attitude to death as a stage in life is known from primitive religions that regarded human life as a series of stages, each finishing with death and each beginning with birth. Death and birth follow each other in the movement from stage to stage and are symbolized by the well-known ceremonies of the "rites of passage." In this way real physical death is also considered as a stage followed by birth into an invisible world but no less real.

It is clear that no logical explanation can soften the grief of death. Bahá'ulláh was very aware of this, and emphasized therefore its mysterious element. He said: "The Mysteries of man's physical death and of his return have not been divulged, and still remain unread... Were they to be revealed, they would evoke such fear and sorrow that some would perish,

while others would be so filled with gladness as to wish for death, and beseech, with unceasing longing, the one true God – exalted be His Glory – to hasten their end.” (*Gleanings*, 1978:344)

Bahá’u’lláh explains that since the mystery of death has such fateful effects, it better remains unrevealed, but he confides that far from being an occasion for grief, death is an opportunity for joy. For the soul is freed from the material form just like the bird is freed when the cage is broken. In his well known mystical work *the Hidden Words* he wrote “I have made death a messenger of Joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve?” Death brings the person, free from any hindrance, to a position where he can progress to having the divine light shining on him. “Death proffereth unto every confident believer the cup that is life indeed. It bestoweth joy, and is the bearer of gladness. It conferreth the gift of everlasting life”. (*Ibid.*) His separation from those whom he had left behind is very short because all meet in the *Abhá* World, or the Divine Kingdom. Since they remain the same persons but in the purified form of the souls they recognize each other and can continue their earthly interaction, only in pure and totally free conditions.

However Bahá’u’lláh was not oblivious to the major event of the separation between soul and body, which means the destruction of a perfect union. There is no question about the fact that death constitutes an act of great calamity for the body in this union, and these facts cannot be ignored. The psychological imbalance caused by death, in spite of all explanations, had to be treated because, as Bahá’u’lláh put it, the spiritual world of God is hidden from our eyes as the physical world is hidden from the eyes of the child in his mother’s womb. It is, therefore, very difficult for those who were left behind not to feel the suffering of the separation from their loved ones. The only consolation that can be offered to the bereaved is to convince them of the existence of the realm of spiritual reality, and of the categorical *necessary reality* of the spiritual world or the Divine Kingdom.

In spite of the apparent separation of the soul from those that it had left behind, it actually depends on their help. For the soul, which in this world could develop by its own efforts, is dependant on God’s mercy for progress and movement towards perfection when it comes to the *Abhá* Kingdom. It is therefore important to pray for the departed soul, and ask God’s mercy for it. In the same way that prayers here influence the progress of the soul, it should be remembered that this progress continues in the world to come, and is influenced by the prayers and supplications of other souls. The following special prayer for the departed conveys this idea:

“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.”

Since the body is the temple of the soul it must be treated with respect. Therefore cremation is forbidden in the Bahá'í Faith and the body must be laid to rest in the ground, and pass through the natural process of decomposition. Moreover, the body must be treated with utmost care and cannot be removed a distance of more than an hour's journey from the place of death. The body must be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton and on its finger should be placed a ring bearing the inscription: “I came forth from God and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful the Compassionate.” The coffin should be made from crystal, stone or hard wood, and a special prayer for the Dead must be said before interment. The prayer for the dead is the only prayer the Bahá'ís must perform in public. It is recited before interment. The ring, and the formal prayer are used for adults (who passed the age of fifteen, which is the age of maturity).

The prayer for the dead goes as follows:

“O my God! This is Thy servant and the son of Thy servant who hath believed in Thee and in Thy signs, and set his face towards Thee, wholly detached from all except Thee. Thou art, verily, of those who show mercy the most merciful.

“Deal with him, O Thou Who forgivest the sins of men and concealest their faults, as beseemeth the heaven of Thy bounty and the ocean of Thy grace. Grant him admission within the precincts of Thy transcendent mercy that was before the foundation of earth and heaven. There is no God but Thee the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous.” (*The Most Holy Book*, p. 101)

In its particular respect for the body of the dead, the Bahá'í faith shares the same values of Judaism and Islam, and was no doubt influenced by the attitude of Islam, its mother religion. Both Jews and Muslims take great care in purifying the dead body and wrapping it in shrouds, but unlike the Bahá'ís, the body in both religions is laid to rest directly into the ground without a coffin.

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