

Some Answered Questions, The Five Kinds of Spirit

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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The Five Kinds of Spirit

Know that in general there are five kinds of spirit. First is the vegetable spirit, which is the power that results from the composition and combination of the elements according to the wisdom and decree of the Most High, and from their mutual arrangement as well as their influence upon, and their interconnection with, other created things. When these parts and elements are separated, the associated power of growth likewise ceases to exist. So, to give an analogy, electricity results from the composition of certain constituent parts, and as soon as these parts are separated, the electrical force is immediately dissipated and lost. Such is the vegetable spirit.

After this is the animal spirit, which also results from the combination of elements that are brought together in a single composition. But this composition is more complete, and when by the decree of the almighty Lord it reaches a fuller degree of combination, the animal spirit, which consists in the power of the senses, comes to exist. This power perceives sensible realities—that which can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched. After the separation and dissolution of these composed elements, this spirit will also naturally cease to exist. It is like this lamp before you: When oil, wick, and flame are brought together, light is produced; but when the oil is exhausted, the wick consumed, and the constituent parts separated, the light will also be extinguished and lost.

As to the human spirit, its likeness is that of a glass and the bounty of the sun. That is, the body of man, which is composed of the elements, is the most perfect form of composition and combination, the soundest arrangement, the noblest composition, and the most perfect of all existing things. It grows and develops through the animal spirit. This perfect body can be compared to a mirror, and the human spirit to the sun: If the glass is shattered or the mirror destroyed, no harm befalls the outpouring grace of the sun, which continues unabated.

This spirit is the discovering power that encompasses all things. All the wondrous signs, all the crafts and discoveries, all the mighty undertakings and momentous historical events of which you are aware, have been discovered by this spirit and brought forth from the invisible realm into the visible plane through its spiritual power. Thus it abides upon the earth and yet makes discoveries in the heavens, and deduces that which is unknown from known and visible realities. For example, man is in this hemisphere, but through the power of reason he discovers, as Columbus did, another one—the Americas—which until then was unknown. His body is heavy, but he flies through the air by means of vehicles of his own devising. His movement is slow, but



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he journeys rapidly through East and West by the aid of the devices which he has fashioned. In short, this power encompasses all things.

But this human spirit has two aspects: one divine and one satanic—that is, it is capable of both the greatest perfection and the greatest deficiency. Should it acquire virtues, it is the noblest of all things; and should it acquire vices, it becomes the most vile.

As to the fourth degree of spirit, it is the heavenly spirit, which is the spirit of faith and the outpouring grace of the All-Merciful. This spirit proceeds from the breath of the Holy Spirit, and through a power born of God it becomes the cause of everlasting life. It is that power which makes the earthly soul heavenly and the imperfect man perfect. It cleanses the impure, unlooses the tongue of the silent, sanctifies the bondslaves of passion and desire, and confers knowledge upon the ignorant.

The fifth degree of spirit is the Holy Spirit, which is the mediator between God and His creation. It is like a mirror facing the sun: Just as a spotless mirror receives the rays of the sun and reflects its bounty to others, so too is the Holy Spirit the mediator of the light of holiness, which it conveys from the Sun of Truth to sanctified souls. This Spirit is adorned with all the divine perfections. Whenssoever it appears, the world is revived, a new cycle is ushered in, and the body of humanity is clothed in a fresh attire. It is like the spring: When it arrives, it transports the world from one condition to another. For at the advent of springtide the black earth, the fields, and the meadows become green and verdant; flowers and sweet-scented herbs of every kind spring forth; trees are endowed with a new life; wondrous fruits are produced; and a new cycle is inaugurated.

It is the same with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit: Whenssoever it appears, it invests the world of humanity with a new life and endows human realities with a new spirit. It clothes all existence with a glorious attire, disperses the darkness of ignorance, and causes the light of human perfections to shine resplendent. It is with such a power that Christ renewed this cycle—whereupon the divine springtide pitched its tent, with utmost vitality and grace, in the realm of humanity and perfumed the senses of the enlightened souls with its life-giving breezes.

In the same way, the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh was a new springtide which appeared with the sweet savours of holiness, with the hosts of everlasting life, and with a power born of the celestial kingdom. He established the throne of God's sovereignty in the midmost heart of the world and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, revived the souls and ushered in a new cycle.