

Some Answered Questions, Reincarnation

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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Reincarnation

Question: What is to be said about reincarnation, which is a belief upheld by the followers of certain religions?

Answer: Our purpose in what we are about to say is to express the truth and not to denigrate the beliefs of others: It is merely to explain the facts of the matter and nothing more. Otherwise, we are neither inclined to dispute anyone's deeply held beliefs, nor do we sanction such conduct.

Know, then, that the reincarnationists are of two kinds. The first do not believe in spiritual rewards and punishments in the next world. They hold instead that man receives his punishment or recompense through reincarnation and return to this world; they regard heaven and hell to be confined to this material realm, and they do not believe in the world beyond. This group is itself divided in two: One division holds that, as a severe punishment, man may at times assume an animal form in returning to this world, and that after enduring this painful torment he proceeds from the animal realm into the human world, and this they call transmigration. The other division holds that man returns to the same human world whence he departed, and that the rewards and punishments of the former life are experienced in his return, and this they call reincarnation. Neither of these divisions believes in a world beyond this one.

The second group of reincarnationists believe in the next world and see reincarnation as the means of becoming perfect, in that man gradually acquires perfections by departing from and returning again to this world until he attains to the very heart of perfection. That is, man is composed of matter and energy: In the beginning, or in the first cycle, the matter is imperfect, but upon returning repeatedly to this world it progresses and acquires refinement and subtlety until it becomes like a polished



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mirror; and then the energy, which consists in the spirit, is fully realized therein with all its perfections.

Such is a brief account of the beliefs of the reincarnationists and transmigratationists. Were we to enter into the details, much time would be lost—this summary will suffice. Such persons have no rational proofs or arguments for their belief, which is based on mere conjecture and circumstantial inference and not on conclusive proofs. It is proofs that one must demand from the reincarnationists and not inference, conjecture, and presentiment.

But you have asked me for proofs and arguments of the impossibility of reincarnation, and we must therefore explain the reasons for its impossibility. The first proof is that the outward is the expression of the inward: The earthly realm is the mirror of the heavenly Kingdom, and the material world is in accordance with the spiritual world. Now observe that in the sensible world the divine appearances are not repeated, for no created thing can be identical with another in every way. The sign of Divine Unity is present and visible in all things. If all the granaries of the world were filled with grain, you would be hard-pressed to find two grains that are absolutely identical and indistinguishable in every respect: Some difference or distinction is bound to remain between them. Now, as the proof of the Divine Unity exists within all things, and the oneness and singleness of God is visible in the realities of all beings, the recurrence of the same divine appearance is in no wise possible. Therefore reincarnation, which is the repeated manifestation in this world of the same spirit with its former essence and conditions, would be the selfsame appearance and is thus impossible. And since the recurrence of the same divine appearance is impossible for material beings, the repeated assumption of the same station, whether on the arc of descent or on the arc of ascent, is likewise impossible for spiritual beings, for the material world corresponds to the spiritual world.

With respect to the species, however, return and recurrence are plainly visible in material realities; that is, the trees which in years past bore leaves, blossoms, and fruit will in the years to come bear the same leaves, blossoms, and fruit. This is called recurrence of species. Were anyone to object that the leaf, the blossom, and the fruit have decomposed, have descended from the vegetable to the mineral world, and have returned again to the former, and that there has thus been a recurrence, we would reply that the blossom, the leaf, and the fruit of last year were decomposed, and their component elements were disintegrated and dispersed. It is not that the same particles of last year's leaf and fruit that had decomposed have recombined and returned, but that the essence of the species has returned through the combination of new elements. Likewise, the human body is fully disintegrated after the decomposition and dispersion of its constituent parts. Were this body to return from the mineral or vegetable world, it would not comprise the selfsame constituents as the former person, for its elements were decomposed, disintegrated, and dispersed in space. Afterwards

other elemental constituents were combined and another body was formed. And while it may be the case that certain constituents of the former body entered into the composition of the latter, those constituents have not been exactly and completely conserved, without any addition or diminution, so as to be composed again and to give rise through their composition and combination to another individual. One cannot deduce, then, that this body has returned with all its constituent parts, that the former individual has become the latter, and hence that a recurrence has taken place—that the very same spirit, like the body, has returned and that after death its essence has regained this world.

And were we to claim that reincarnation is intended to bring about perfection, so that matter might gain in purity and refinement and that the light of the spirit might appear therein with the utmost perfection, this too would be mere imagination. For even if we granted such an assumption, the renewal of an object's existence cannot bring about the transformation of its essence. For the substance of imperfection, by returning, will not become the reality of perfection; total darkness will not become a source of light; abject weakness will not become power and strength; and an earthly essence will not become a heavenly reality. However often it may return, the infernal tree will never bring forth a sweet fruit, nor will the good tree bear a bitter one. It is thus clear that recurrence and return to the material world are not the means of attaining perfection, and that this supposition rests on no proof or evidence; it is merely a conjecture. No, the attainment of perfection is in reality dependent upon the grace of God.

The Theosophists believe that man will return time and again on the arc of ascent until he reaches the Supreme Centre, where matter becomes as a spotless mirror, the light of the spirit shines forth in the plenitude of its power, and essential perfection is attained. However, those who have thoroughly investigated the questions of divinity know of a certainty that the material worlds terminate at the end of the arc of descent; that the station of man lies at the end of the arc of descent and the beginning of the arc of ascent, which is opposite the Supreme Centre; and that from the beginning to the end of the arc of ascent the degrees of progress are of a spiritual nature. The arc of descent is called that of “bringing forth” and the arc of ascent that of “creating anew”. The arc of descent ends in material realities and the arc of ascent in spiritual realities. The point of the compass in describing a circle does not reverse its motion, for this would be contrary to the natural movement and the divine order and would disrupt the regularity of the circle.

Moreover, this material world is not of such worth or advantage that one who has been freed from its cage should seek once again to be caught in its snare. No: By God's eternal grace the true capacity and receptivity of the human reality is made clear and manifest through traversing the degrees of existence and not through recurrence and return. When the shell is opened but once, it is made plain and clear whether it

conceals a shining pearl or worthless matter. When a plant has grown but once, it puts forth either flowers or thorns: It need not grow again. Apart from this, advancing and moving through the worlds in a direct line and according to the natural order is the cause of existence, and moving against the natural order and arrangement of things is the cause of extinction. The return of the spirit after death is incompatible with the natural movement and contrary to the divine order.

Thus 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. Consider how unfounded the conceptions of the reincarnationists and transmigratonists are! They conceive of the body as a vessel and the spirit as its contents, like water and cup, with the water being emptied from one cup and poured into another. This is indeed a childish notion: They do not reflect deeply enough to realize that the spirit is an entirely incorporeal thing, that it does not enter or exit, and that, at most, it is connected with the body as the sun is with the mirror. If the spirit could indeed traverse all the degrees and attain to essential perfection by repeatedly returning to the material world, then it would have been better if God had prolonged the life of the spirit in this material world in order for it to acquire virtues and perfections, and hence there would be no need for it to taste of the cup of death and enter this life a second time.

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. For the ultimate result of this endless universe, the most noble reality of man, would go hither and thither for a few days in this ephemeral abode and receive his rewards and punishments. In the end, all would attain perfection, the creation of God with its infinite beings would be completed and consummated, and thus the divinity of the Lord and the names and attributes of God would cease to have any effect and influence upon the spiritual beings which now exist. "Far from the glory of thy Lord, the All-Glorious, be that which His creatures affirm of Him!"

The limited minds of the philosophers of old, such as Ptolemy and others, held that the realm of life and existence was confined to this terrestrial globe, and imagined that this infinite space was contained within the nine celestial spheres, all of which were void and empty. Witness how limited were their thoughts and how deficient their reasoning! The reincarnationists likewise imagine the spiritual worlds to be confined to those realms that the human mind can conceive. Some of them, such as the Druze and the Nusayrís, even imagine existence to be confined to this material world. What an ignorant supposition this is! For in this universe of God's, which appears in the utmost perfection, beauty, and grandeur, the luminous bodies of the material universe are infinite. Pause to infer, then, how infinite and unbounded the spiritual realms of God, which are the very foundation, must be! "Take ye good heed, O people of insight!"

But let us return to our original theme. In the Holy Books and Sacred Scriptures there is mention of a “return”, but the ignorant have failed to grasp its meanings and have imagined it to refer to reincarnation. For what the Prophets of God meant by “return” is not the return of the essence but of the attributes; it is not the return of the Manifestation Himself but of His perfections. In the Gospel it is said that John the son of Zacharias is Elijah. By these words is not meant the return of the rational soul and personality of Elijah in the body of John, but rather that the perfections and attributes of Elijah became plain and manifest in him.

A lamp was lit in this room last night: When another lamp is lit tonight, we say that the light of last night is shining again. When the water that had ceased to flow from a fountain flows a second time, we say that it is the same water flowing once again, or we say that this light is the same as the former light. Likewise, last spring flowers and sweet-scented herbs bloomed and delicious fruits were produced; next year we say that those delicious fruits and those blossoms, flowers, and sweet herbs have returned. It is not that the very same constituents of last year’s flowers, after decomposing, have recombined and returned. No, the meaning is that the same freshness and delicacy, the same pleasing fragrance and wondrous colour that characterized last year’s flowers are to be exactly found in the flowers of this year. Briefly, the point is the resemblance and similarity between the former and the latter flowers. This is the “return” which is mentioned in the heavenly Scriptures. It is fully explained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán: Refer to it, that you may be informed of the truth of the divine mysteries. Upon you be greetings and praise.