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14. BAHÁ'Í BURIAL

LOCAL ASSEMBLY RESPONSIBILITIES

The burial of the dead is an occasion of great solemnity and importance, and while the conduct of the funeral service and the arrangements for the interment may be left to the relatives of the deceased, the Local Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility for educating the believers in the essential requirements of the Bahá'í law of burial as at present applied, and in courteously and tactfully drawing these requirements to the attention of the relatives if there is any indication that they may fail to observe them. These requirements are: that the body not be cremated; that it not be transported more than an hour's journey from the place of death to the place of burial; that the Prayer for the Dead be recited if the deceased is a Bahá'í of fifteen years of age or more; and that the funeral be carried out in a simple and dignified manner that would be a credit to the community.

In some parts of the world, if Local Spiritual Assemblies fail to carry out these sacred duties, some believers might gradually drift away from the Faith and even pay dues to churches or other religious organizations to ensure that, when they require to register the birth of a child, to solemnize a marriage or to have a funeral service, there will be a religious institution ready to perform the necessary services. Conversely, when Local Assemblies have arisen to carry out these responsibilities, the believers have acquired a sense of security and solidarity, and have become confident that in such matters they can rely upon the agencies of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated April 17, 1981, to all National Spiritual Assemblies, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986; The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, no. 280.22-280.23

See also:

Carry Out Other Vital Duties — Deepen Believers in Laws of Faith — Ch. 1
 Register of Vital Statistics — Ch. 6
 Wills — Role of Local Assembly in Relation to Wills — Ch. 11

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

When a Bahá'í in a community has passed away, for whatever cause, the Local Spiritual Assembly, or the National Spiritual Assembly, as the case may be, does have a responsibility to provide for a proper burial which cannot be provided for either by the family or by insurance.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated August 17, 1969, to a National Spiritual Assembly

REQUIREMENTS BINDING ON ALL BELIEVERS

The following parts of this law ... are now binding on the believers in the West:

1. That the body must be buried, not cremated.
2. That the Prayer for the Dead is to be recited for a believer of the age of 15 or over. This, as you know, is the prayer which appears as number CLXVII in *Prayers and Meditations* by Bahá'u'lláh.
3. That the body not be transported more than an hour's journey from the place of death. The method of transport is not specified, but the journey must not take longer than one hour.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 3, 1975, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 638

BURIAL WITHOUT CREMATION

He feels that, in view of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said against cremation, the believers should be strongly urged, as an act of faith, to make provisions against their remains being cremated. Bahá'u'lláh has laid down as a law, in the Aqdas, the manner of Bahá'í Burial, and it is so beautiful, befitting and dignified, that no believer should deprive himself of it.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated August 1947, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 666

Concerning your question about cremation, the Bahá'í law stipulates burial. The instructions of Bahá'u'lláh contained in His Most Holy book makes this law clear. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer in 1955, comments that 'Abdu'l-Bahá "... also explained that burial is natural and should be followed." The explanation of the Master referred to by Shoghi Effendi is found in the Tablets revealed by Him. One of those was published in *Star of the West*, Volume XI, No. 19, page 317, from which we quote:

Thy letter has been received. Due to the scarcity of time, I write the answer briefly: The body of man, which has been formed gradually, must similarly be decomposed gradually. This is according to the real and natural order and Divine Law. If it had been better for it to be burned after death, in its very creation it would have been so planned that the body would automatically become ignited after death, be consumed and turned into ashes. But the divine order formulated by the heavenly ordinance is that after death, this body shall be transferred from one stage to another different from the preceding one, so that according to the relations which exist in the world, it may gradually combine and mix with other elements, thus going through stages until it arrives in the vegetable kingdom, there turning into plants and flowers, developing into trees of the highest paradise, becoming perfumed and attaining the beauty of color.

Cremation suppresses it speedily from attainment to these transformations, the elements becoming so quickly decomposed that transformation to these various stages is checked.

When we realize that our physical bodies are composed of elements placed in the earth by their Creator, and which through the orderly processes of His Law are continually being used in the formation of beings, we can better understand the necessity for our physical bodies to be subjected to the gradual process of decomposition. As at the time of death, the real and eternal self of man, his soul, abandons its physical garment to soar in the realms of God, we may compare the body to a vehicle which has been used for the journey through earthly life and no longer needed once the destination has been reached.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated June 6, 1971, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 669

It is also highly desirable for a Bahá'í to take steps during his lifetime to ensure that he will be given a funeral in accordance with Bahá'í law and that his remains be not cremated. It may be possible to include such a provision in the will, or some other procedure may need to be followed, depending upon the civil law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 4, 1986, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 636

See also:

Carry Out Other Vital Duties — Deepen Believers in Laws of Faith — Ch. 1
Wills — Ch. 11

Aborted Fetus Not to Be Cremated

The letter from the Spiritual Assembly of ... indicates that the miscarriage took place when the mother was approximately four months into her pregnancy, therefore, they could have been assured that they did the right thing in having the fetus buried. Also, it would have been helpful for the Assembly to know that the hospital policy of incinerating a naturally aborted fetus is not in keeping with Bahá'í law which prohibits cremation.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated December 3, 1973, to a National Spiritual Assembly

If Plans Have Been Made for Cremation

Obviously a Spiritual Assembly cannot itself arrange for the cremation of remains of a Bahá'í even if it was that person's wish that his remains be disposed of in this way. Bahá'í relatives, likewise, are under the obligation of obeying the Bahá'í law and must not agree to the cremation of a Bahá'í. Where non-Bahá'í relatives of the deceased Bahá'í have charge of the body and are proposing to cremate the remains, the responsible Spiritual Assembly should do all it can to explain the Bahá'í attitude to the relatives in an effort to prevent the cremation. If these efforts fail, the Assembly can have nothing officially to do with the cremation of the body; the believers, however, are free to do as they wish about attending the funeral and the cremation and they may certainly offer a prayer for the progress of the soul of the deceased. The Assembly could, if it seemed appropriate, arrange a meeting at a time other than the funeral, at which the Prayer for the Dead could be said on behalf of the deceased.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 9, 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 670

Whereas believers should be informed of the Bahá'í law of burial and urged to ensure that their remains are not cremated this is a matter of education and not one involving the imposition of sanctions.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, in *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook*, Australia, 3rd ed., pp. 342–343

See also:

Carry Out Other Vital Duties — Educate Community — Ch. 1

BURIAL WITHIN ONE HOURS DISTANCE

It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than an hour's distance from the city; rather it should be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K130, p. 60

QUESTION: Is the ordinance that the body of the deceased should be carried no greater than an hour's journey applicable by both land and sea?

ANSWER: This command applieth to distances by sea as well as by land, whether it is an hour by steamship or by rail; the intention is the hour's time, whatever the means of transport. The sooner the burial taketh place, however the more fitting and acceptable will it be.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Questions and Answers, Q16

The Universal House of Justice advises that the place of death may be taken to be the city or town in which the believer passes away, and therefore the hour's journey may be calculated from the city limits to the place of burial. However, it should be borne in mind that the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's law is to be buried near where one dies.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 9, 1978, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 647

WHEN DEATH OCCURS AT SEA

The laws of burial as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas do not refer to the occurrence of death at sea. Until such time as the Universal House of Justice legislates on these matters, the friends when faced with such incidents should be guided by whatever civil or maritime law is applicable under the circumstances. Should land be reached, however, obviously the body must be buried on land in the nearest suitable place.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated October 20, 1974, to a National Spiritual Assembly, quoting a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 643

EMBALMING SHOULD BE AVOIDED IF LAW ALLOWS

Under the Bahá'í teachings it seems clear that the body is not to be embalmed. ... The practice in the Orient is to bury the person within 24 hours of the time of death; sometimes even sooner; although there is no provision in the teachings as to the time limit.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 2, 1955, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 37

Bahá'u'lláh has advised that it is preferable for burial to take place as soon after death as possible. When circumstances do not permit interment of the body to occur very soon after passing, or when it is a requirement of civil law, the body may be embalmed, provided that the process used has the effect of temporarily retarding the natural decomposition for a period of short duration. However, the body should not be subjected to an embalming process which has the effect of preserving it without decomposition for a lengthy period; such processes often aim to preserve the body indefinitely.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 17, 1988, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Embalming is not required in most states as long as there is no contagious disease. Refrigerated storage units at morgues and funeral homes allow bodies to be preserved for a longer period of time without embalming should burial arrangements take more than twenty-four hours.

If a Local Assembly has been told embalming is required, it can call its State Department of Licensing and Regulation to determine whether that is actually the case, as it may be a misrepresentation.

FUNERAL SERVICE

If Relatives of Deceased Are Not Bahá'í

Concerning the burial of a Bahá'í youth, if the burial has not taken place and there is time to do so, the non-Bahá'í family should be advised that the deceased is a Bahá'í (assuming they do not already know it), and every effort should be made to induce the family to allow the body of their deceased Bahá'í relative to be buried according to the requirements of his Faith. However, if they remain adamant, or if the burial has already taken place, there is nothing which can be done except, perhaps, to say prayers for the deceased.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 20, 1976, in *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook*, 3rd ed., Bahá'í Publications Australia, par. 12.5.5

Official Bahá'í Funeral Service

An official Bahá'í funeral service should only be given for a believer, but there is no objection to the reading of Bahá'í prayers, or indeed to a Bahá'í conducting the funeral service of a non-Bahá'í, if this has been requested.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 20, 1946, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 657

Prayer for the Dead

Congregational Prayer

The Prayer for the Dead (see Some Texts Supplementary to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas) is the only Bahá'í obligatory prayer which is to be recited in congregation; it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand in silence.

Universal House of Justice in "Notes" appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 10

There is a difference between chanting a prayer collectively and congregational prayer. The latter is a formal prayer usually led by an individual using a prescribed ritual. Congregational prayer in this form is forbidden in the Faith except in the case of the Prayer for the Dead.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 6, 1975, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1503

Non-Bahá'ís May Be Present

There is no objection whatsoever to non-Bahá'ís being present when the long prayer for the dead is read, as long as they respect our manner of reading it by rising and standing as the Bahá'ís do on this occasion. Nor, indeed, is there any objection to non-Bahá'ís being present during the reading of any Bahá'í prayer for the departed.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 20, 1946, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 662

Obligatory Prayer for Dead Recited According to Gender

If the dead be a woman, let him say: This is Thy handmaiden and the daughter of Thy handmaiden, etc

Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, CLXVII

The prayer for the dead which is obligatory appears on page 260 of 'Prayers and Meditations'. This prayer allows for a change in gender.

Other prayers for the dead are optional but if used they are to be used as revealed.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated January 1, 1967, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Order of Verses

The correct order for reciting the verses of the Prayer for the Dead is as follows:

- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, worship God” (*19 times*)
- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, bow down before God” (*19 times*)
- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, are devoted unto God” (*19 times*)
- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, give praise unto God” (*19 times*)
- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, yield thanks unto God” (*19 times*)
- “Alláh-u-Abhá” (*once*)
- “We all, verily, are patient in God” (*19 times*)

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 13, 1993, to a Bahá'í Publishing Trust

Service May Be Given for Deprived Believers

He [a believer deprived of his voting rights] may have the Bahá'í burial service if he or his family requests it...

Attachment to a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 9, 1985, to an National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 217

Service Should Be Simple and Flexible

Regarding the Bahá'í funeral service: it is extremely simple, as it consists only of a congregational prayer to be read before burial ... (The) National Spiritual Assembly should take great care lest any uniform procedure or ritual in this matter be adopted or imposed upon the friends. The danger in this, as in some other cases regarding Bahá'í worship, is that a definite system of rigid rituals and practices be developed among the believers. The utmost simplicity and flexibility should be observed, and a selection from the Bahá'í Sacred Writings would serve the purpose at the present time, provided this selection is not rigidly and uniformly adopted on all such occasions.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated January 10, 1936, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I, no. 32

REQUIREMENTS NOT YET BINDING ON WESTERN BELIEVERS

Although the following requirements are not currently binding on the Western believers, they are binding on Persian believers. Assemblies should become familiar with them to be able to provide guidance to the Persian believers and to prepare the Western believers for the time when they are made binding. At present, Western believers are free to observe these requirements or not as they wish:

- The body should be wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton.
- A burial ring should be placed on the finger of the deceased before interment.
- The coffin should be made of crystal, stone or of a hard, fine wood.

BURIAL RINGS

Is the use of the burial ring enjoined exclusively for adults, or is it for minors as well?

ANSWER: It is for adults only. The Prayer for the Dead is likewise for adults.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Questions and Answers, no. 70

The placing of the burial stone [ring] on the dead has no other significance than to emphasize our profound conviction that our souls come from our Creator and to Him they return, and in Him we believe and trust.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 29, 1942, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 649

In brief, the Bahá'í law for the burial of the dead states... that the body should 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*”; and that the coffin should be of crystal, stone or hard fine wood.

Universal House of Justice in “Notes” appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 149

Assemblies would be wise to keep one or more burial rings on hand to be prepared for unexpected deaths in the community, as they might not be available in a timely way otherwise. They might also wish to have them in multiple languages, as available, depending on the make-up of their community.

Burial rings can be purchased through the Bahá'í Distribution Service at (800) 999-9019 or online at www.bahai bookstore.com.

COFFINS OR CASKETS

With reference to the use of hard wood or crystal coffins for the burial of the dead, you will be interested to know that the Báb revealed the passage which appears on page 95 of *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, in connection with an injunction to bury a body in a marble coffin. Of particular significance is the sentence “Since this physical body is the throne whereon the inner temple is established, God hath ordained that the body be preserved to the extent possible, so that nothing that causeth repugnance may be experienced.”

The law of burial was confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. The clarifications given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are based on that law and are equally binding.

Bahá'u'lláh's laws are for the whole world and for the duration of His Dispensation. Certain exigencies in specific parts of the world at this time, such as the high cost of coffins or limitation of burial space in some countries, cannot become the determining factors as to what is best for humankind all over the world and for centuries to come. The specific burial problems you have mentioned require specific solutions which should be arrived at through consultation with Bahá'í institutions on a case-by-case basis.

You speak of Bahá'í laws and ordinances having “strong Islamic overtones.” It may be of interest to you to know that there is no law in Islám requiring the body to be buried in a coffin, yet those who have embraced the Faith from Islámic background have radiantly accepted and complied with the law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 3, 1987, to an individual believer

PREPARATION OF THE BODY

The preparation of the body for burial is a careful washing, and placing in a shroud of white cloth, silk preferably.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 2, 1955, to an individual believer

The Báb has told us to bury the dead in silk (if possible) in coffins of crystal. Why? Because the body, though now dust, was once exalted by the immortal soul of man!

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 29, 1942, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 649

In the Bayán, the Báb specified that the body of the deceased should be wrapped in five sheets of silk or cotton. Bahá'u'lláh confirmed this provision and added the stipulation that for “*those whose means are limited a single sheet of either fabric will suffice*”.

When asked whether the “*five sheets*” mentioned in the law referred to “*five full-length shrouds*” or “*five cloths which were hitherto customarily used*”, Bahá'u'lláh responded that the intention is the “*use of five cloths*”.

Concerning the way in which the body should be wrapped, there is nothing in the Bahá'í Writings to define how the wrapping of the body is to be done, either when “*five cloths*” are used or only “*a single sheet*”. At present, the Bahá'ís are free to use their judgment in the matter.

Universal House of Justice in “Notes” appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 151

Although the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ordains that the body be wrapped in a shroud, there is nothing in the Writings to define how the wrapping is to be done. The House of Justice does not wish to legislate at the present time on this question, and the friends are free to use their discretion in such matters.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 9, 1987, to a National Spiritual Assembly

It is not specified as to who should wash and prepare the body for burial. If neither the family nor a member of the community is able or willing to do so, most funeral homes provide this as a usual and customary service.

OTHER TOPICS RELATED TO FUNERALS AND BURIAL

ATTENDANCE AT NON-BAHÁ'Í FUNERAL OF BAHÁ'Í

There is no objection to Bahá'ís attending the non-Bahá'í funeral service of a Bahá'í whose non-Bahá'í relatives have prevented the Bahá'í funeral from taking place. The Bahá'ís should, however, endeavor to offer Bahá'í prayers for the progress of the soul of their departed friend, if circumstances permit. If they cannot be offered on the occasion of the funeral they should be offered at another time.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 4, 1966, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 659

BAHÁ'Í CEMETERIES

The Guardian thinks the ideal thing would be for the believers to have a Bahá'í cemetery.

Letter written on behalf of the Shoghi Effendi, dated September 5, 1950, to an individual believer, in *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I*, no.36

At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing Bahá'í cemeteries. However, in a Tablet of the Master's, He emphasizes the need for the cemetery to have a beautiful outward appearance and states that the graves should not be joined together but that each one should have a flower bed around its four sides. He also indicates that it would be pleasing if a pool were located in the center of the cemetery and beautiful trees were planted around it as well as around the cemetery itself.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 20, 1978, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 654

Burial of Deprived Believers

He [a believer deprived of his rights] may be buried in a Bahá'í cemetery.

Attachment to a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 9, 1985, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 217

Burial of Non-Bahá'í Relatives

[I]t is quite possible that non-Bahá'í relatives of believers or others may be permitted to be buried in a Bahá'í cemetery.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 3, 1975, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 673

BAHÁ'Í GRAVE

While the Guardian has stated that 'It is better and more appropriate to assign a grave to every dead person', the House of Justice has advised that this statement expresses a preference and is not given as a binding ruling. Moreover, the House of Justice has not legislated upon the question of what exactly constitutes a 'grave', nor does it wish to legislate at this time on the question of the placement of coffins in niches, underground chambers or in vaults one over the other as might be found in a type of mausoleum.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 16, 2004, to a National Spiritual Assembly

In a letter dated February 20, 1978, to a National Assembly, the Universal House of Justice indicated that, "In a tablet of the Master's, He...states that the graves should not be joined together." As the use of double headstones for husbands and wives has become a common practice in some localities, believers should be made aware that separate markers should be used for each grave.

Gravestone Symbols

As regards your question: there is no reason why the word "Bahá'í" should not appear in the center of a nine-pointed star on the tombstone of... but the ringstone emblem should not be used, nor the Greatest Name.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated September 30, 1955, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 671

Normally the building of structures or headstones on graves should be left to the family of the deceased, and all expenses should be covered by them.

The use of the Most Great Name or the ringstone symbol on gravestones is not appropriate. In a letter dated September 17, 1971 to an individual believer we wrote the following:

Concerning the questions you ask in postscript, there is no specific ruling regarding the type of headstone that may be used at a grave site. However, regarding the inscription on a headstone, the beloved Guardian asked the believers not to use any form of the Greatest Name but a nine-pointed star may be used. Or, you may wish to have an appropriate text from the Sacred Writings inscribed on the headstone.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 4, 1972, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 22 August 1975, about the marking of Bahá'í graves. We have been asked to tell you that nothing has been found in the Writings making this a requirement. However, in Bahá'í cemeteries in Akká and Haifa, the graves are marked and some of the words on the headstones are those of Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. As you know, Shoghi Effendi indicated that the Most Great Name would not be appropriate for gravestones and has suggested that such inscriptions as a nine-pointed star and extracts from the Writings would be suitable.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 13, 1975, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook*, 3rd ed., Bahá'í Publishing Australia, par. 12.6.4

As the name of Bahá'u'lláh is one form of the Greatest Name, it should not be used as an attribution for a quotation inscribed on a headstone. It is suggested that where an attribution is desired, the words "Bahá'í Writings" or "Bahá'í Faith" be used. Additional guidance concerning the different forms of the Greatest Name and their uses are indexed in *Lights of Guidance*, which is available from the Bahá'í Distribution Service.

Position of Body in Grave

The position of the body in the grave should be with the feet pointing toward the Qiblih, which is Bahjí in Akká.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 4, 1972, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 656

The dead should be buried with their face turned towards the Qiblih.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated July 6, 1935, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 646

Some non-Bahá'í cemeteries may not offer the option of choosing the orientation of the grave and if the foot of the grave is not oriented toward the Qiblih, it may be possible to position the head of the deceased in the casket so it will be facing the Qiblih when interment takes place.

BAHÁ'ÍS IN MILITARY SERVICE AND VETERANS

You should also advise all individual Bahá'ís who are in service that they should take whatever measures are necessary to see that Bahá'í laws regarding burial are observed. Such individuals should also notify their families or next of kin about these laws and of their wish to be buried according to Bahá'í law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated January 11, 1968, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 651

In addition to previous instructions which we have given to you concerning Bahá'ís who are killed in military service, you should inform... that, if it is possible under Army regulations, he should arrange with his Commanding Officer that in case of the loss of his life in Vietnam his body should be delivered to the National Spiritual Assembly of Vietnam, or their representatives, for interment in Vietnam in accordance with Bahá'í law. He should also arrange with his relatives, if possible, so that they will not raise any objections to this procedure.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated July 31, 1968, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The Bahá'í nine-pointed star is authorized as an emblem of belief for headstone markers in U.S. military cemeteries worldwide.

Even after separation from service, veterans and certain relatives may be eligible for burial benefits to offset the cost of burial in a private cemetery. For further information, refer to the U.S. Veterans Administration website at www.cem.va.gov/.

See also:

Military Service — Ch. 15

DONATION OF BODY TO MEDICAL SCIENCE

A person's wish to leave his or her body to medical science or to donate organs may be stipulated in his or her will. However, if the person has specific wishes concerning it, it would be wise to make sure that relatives and physicians are aware of those wishes and to leave separate instructions in an easily accessible place, especially in cases of organ donation for transplant, since the possibility of using donated organs is very time-limited and would have to take place well before the reading of the will.

If Bahá'ís are in charge of the donation process, they should try to ensure that any final disposition of the remains will involve a dignified burial without cremation. They may wish to inquire ahead of time how remains are identified and tracked in the interests of honoring the wishes of donors regarding disposition and should ask for and keep a copy of the consent form that was signed. It should include information on what the family agreed to donate.

See also:

Medical Matters — Organ Donation — Ch. 15
Wills — Ch. 11

WHEN BAHÁ'ÍS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR BURIAL OF NON-BAHÁ'ÍS

Bahá'í burial laws are not applicable to non-Bahá'ís regardless of whether a Bahá'í is responsible for making whatever arrangements are necessary following a death. If it is possible to avoid embalming, cremation and transport beyond the place of death, that is desirable, but, in such cases, the overriding principles are to carry out the wishes of the deceased and to foster harmony and unity within the family.

In situations where the wishes of a non-Bahá'í decedent involve burial in a distant location, and neither embalming nor cremation have been specified in the will, unembalmed bodies may be legally transported across state and even international boundaries in specially sealed metal caskets.

SPIRITUAL WORLD AND OUR RELATION TO IT

In His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh says that were we able to comprehend the felicities that await us in the world to come, death would lose its sting; nay rather we would welcome it as a gate-way to a realm immeasurably higher and nobler than this home of suffering we call our earth. You should therefore think of their blessings and comfort yourself for your momentary separation. In time all of us will join our departed ones and share their joys.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated January 13, 1932, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 695

According to Bahá'u'lláh the soul retains its individuality and consciousness after death, and is able to commune with other souls. This communion, however, is purely spiritual in character, and is conditioned upon the disinterested and selfless love of the individuals for each other.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated March 10, 1936, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 694

Concerning the question you have raised regarding the spiritual world beyond and our relation to it. After death the soul of man permanently departs from the material plane, and enters the world of the spirit, in which it can indefinitely progress and advance. The nature of that spiritual world is essentially different and superior to our earthly life here.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated April 10, 1938, to an individual believer

You ask an explanation of what happens to us after we leave this world: This is a question which none of the Prophets have ever answered in detail, for the very simple reason that you cannot convey to a person's mind something entirely different from everything they have ever experienced. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the wonderful example of the relation of this life to the next life being like the child in the womb; it develops eyes, ears, hands, feet, tongue, and yet it has nothing to see or hear, it cannot walk or grasp things or speak; all these faculties it is developing for this world. If you tried to explain to an embryo what this world is like it would never understand - but it understands when it is born, and its faculties can be used. So we cannot picture our state in the next world. All we know is that our consciousness, our personality, endures in some new state, and that that world is as much better than this one as this one is better than the dark womb of our mother was.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated October 3, 1943, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 701

GIFTS AND GOOD DEEDS IN MEMORY OF DECEASED

The Master has told us that gifts and good deeds done in memory of those who have passed on, are most helpful to the development of their souls in the realms beyond ...

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated December 10, 1952, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 679

MEMORIAL GATHERINGS

As you know, the offering of prayers on behalf of the departed, whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, is encouraged in our teachings, as such prayers are conducive to the progress of their souls in the world beyond. As to the holding of memorial gatherings at regular intervals, there is nothing in the teachings specifically prohibiting such gatherings, but we find general guidelines in the letters of the beloved Guardian, in which he warns the believers against adhering to the rites and customs of past systems and of former religions, and instead urges them to show forth the Bahá'í way of life and demonstrate the independent character of the Teachings of the Faith.

Advertising memorial gatherings by the family is entirely a personal matter for the family to decide. It is left to the discretion of your National Spiritual Assembly whether Local Spiritual Assemblies may permit the use of their Bahá'í Centres for such gatherings.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 24, 1974, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 665

DELIBERATE APPROACHES TO DEATH

Sometimes death occurs after a period of illness and disability during which time believers may need support, encouragement and guidance from their Local Assembly and community. Occasionally, Assemblies find themselves in the position of being asked for guidance on how to approach an impending death or how to cope with a suicide. As state laws governing ante mortem (before death) care are subject to change, Assemblies should inform themselves of the specific laws that apply within their states.

EUTHANASIA

We have received your letter of March 18, 1974, in which you ask for the Bahá'í viewpoint on euthanasia and on the removal of life support in medical cases where physiological interventions prolong life in disabling illnesses. In general our teachings indicate that God, the Giver of life, can alone dispose of it as He deems best, and we have found nothing in the Sacred Text on these matters specifically but in a letter to an individual written on behalf of the beloved Guardian by his secretary regarding mercy killings, or legalized euthanasia, it is stated:

“... this is also a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to legislate.”

Until such time as the Universal House of Justice considers legislation on Euthanasia, decisions in the matters to which you refer must be left to the consciences of those responsible.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated May 17, 1974, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 985

Euthanasia Is Violation of Civil Law

Euthanasia is prohibited in all U.S. states under general homicide laws. As a violation of criminal law, under the Bahá'í principle of obedience to law, it is forbidden to U.S. Bahá'ís.

Euthanasia is distinguished from withholding or removal of life support by two characteristics: 1) it requires a concrete action, such as administration of a lethal substance, by a person other than the one who is dying, and 2) it artificially hastens the moment of death, compressing the process of dying into a brief span of time rather than allowing it to take whatever natural course it would otherwise take.

Assisted Suicide Laws Vary by State

Assisted suicide is explicitly prohibited as criminal in many states although some states leave the matter under common law rather than criminal law. In Oregon, physician-assisted suicide, in which doctors are permitted to prescribe a lethal dose of medication to be self-administered solely by a patient who has met certain criteria, is legal. Regardless of whether suicide is legal in any civil jurisdiction, it is forbidden to Bahá'ís.

See also:

Medical Matters — Suicide Prevention — Ch. 15

REMOVAL OR WITHHOLDING OF LIFE SUPPORT

Removal or withholding of life support is when a medical intervention required to sustain life is either not used or the ongoing use of the intervention is discontinued, allowing the natural progression of an injury or existing disease state to lead to death.

As to the Bahá'í viewpoint on the removal or withholding of life support in medical cases where intervention prolongs life in disabling illness, nothing has been found in the Sacred Text specifically on this matter. In such cases decisions must be left to those responsible, including the patient.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 31, 1979, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 985

Who Decides

In cases where life can be prolonged only through artificial measures, the decision to remove or to withhold measures that would sustain life may be made by the patient, if he or she is capable at the time. Such artificial measures may include CPR, respirators, feeding tubes, intravenous fluids, exceptionally potent drugs, and other interventions. A common practice is also for individuals, while still capable, to prepare advance directives, called living wills, and appoint surrogate decision-makers, through durable powers of attorney for health care, to handle decision-making for them in the event they should be found to be suffering from an incurable and terminal condition and be unable to express themselves.

In the absence of a clear expression by the dying person, the decision of whether to use artificial measures to prolong life generally rests with the spouse, next of kin or the guardian, if there is one. In the absence of all these, the decision may devolve upon attending medical personnel according to whatever legal and policy guidelines govern their place of practice. Hospitals generally have ethics committees that may be consulted when there are questions about such decision-making.

Care While Dying

An option for individuals or families when a decision is made to remove or withhold artificial life support is hospice or palliative care. Unlike euthanasia, beyond removing artificial life supports, hospice care does nothing either to hasten or delay the moment of death. It includes use of drugs to alleviate pain, muscle spasms and other possible effects of organ failure as death approaches; skilled nursing care to maintain comfort and dignity; and spiritual and emotional counseling to support both the patient and the family during the natural process of dying, which can sometimes be difficult and involves an unpredictable duration of time.

The majority of hospice care takes place in the home with family caregivers aided by resources and assistance from hospice professionals. Inpatient hospice facilities are sometimes also available for those who have no other caregivers, for end-stage patient care, and for caregiver respite. Further information and directories for hospice care are available through the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization at (800)658-8898 or online at www.nho.org.

See also:

Health and Wellbeing — Ch. 15

SUICIDE

Abdu'l-Bahá, in replying to a bereaved widow whose husband had taken his own life, stated the following:

As to thy husband, rest assured. He will be immersed in the ocean of pardon and forgiveness and will become the recipient of bounty and favour.

Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 201

Regarding the “In Memoriam” section of Bahá'í News: although suicide is so strongly condemned in the teachings, it does not mean that a person has ceased to be a Bahá'í because he killed himself; he should, therefore, be mentioned, the same as other believers, in this section.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated March 29, 1945, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 674

When a suicide has occurred, it is usually challenging to the community, as well as to the family of the person involved. In addition to grief, various individuals both in the community and in the family may feel somehow responsible and experience feelings of guilt and shame. In addition to the funeral, the Assembly may wish to have a special consultation about the situation with those who wish to participate. The Assembly may decide to

appoint a representative to arrange for a grief counselor to meet with the community as a whole, or it may refer affected members to individual counseling, to grief support groups or other resources within the wider community.

See also:

Representatives, Task Forces and Other Appointees — Ch. 3
Spiritual World and Our Relation to It — Ch. 14
Medical Matters — Mental Illness — Ch. 15