

# BAHÁ'Í BURIALS

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## Life after death

The purpose of human life for Bahá'ís is to know and love God, to acquire virtues and spiritual qualities, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation. Bahá'ís view life in this world as a preparation for life in the next world. The soul comes into existence at conception and is immortal.

Bahá'í teachings describe life and death as parts of an eternal process of growth. In this world and after death an individual's soul develops and evolves as it draws nearer to God. Heaven is described as nearness to God; hell is separation from God. The soul is not reborn in a different body. Bahá'u'lláh said that death is reunion with God.

The anguish of earthly separation from a loved one may be assuaged by a dignified funeral conducted in a spiritual atmosphere which combines respect for the dead person with the awareness of the richer and wider experience that the soul is now enjoying.

## The importance of having a valid will

A Bahá'í funeral ceremony should be simple, dignified and uplifting. The wishes of the deceased, where known, should be carried out in their entirety. The grief of close relatives and friends, particularly of those who are not Bahá'ís, should be understood and recognised; any Bahá'í requirements should be gently explained and any non-Bahá'í wish sympathetically treated.

Every local Spiritual Assembly should strongly encourage all members of the community to have a Will, giving indication of their wishes should they die unexpectedly. This Will needs to be signed by the person and two witnesses. It should preferably be prepared by a solicitor.

It should be realised that **on death the body belongs to the next of kin** who may not wish for any Bahá'í involvement in the funeral. It is **most important** that when making a Will or when leaving instructions, **to state that one is a Bahá'í and wishes to be buried according to Bahá'í law.**

The person making the Will should ensure that next of kin and close relatives know their wishes regarding Bahá'í burial, as the contents of the Will may not be made known until after the funeral.

The believers may like to know that, if wished, they can send a copy of their Will to the National Spiritual Assembly's office for safekeeping. Please write to "Department of the Secretariat" at 27 Rutland Gate, London SW7 1PD and mark the envelope "Will".

## Planning the funeral ceremony

The nature of the Bahá'í funeral, and the reading of the obligatory prayer, should be explained to non-Bahá'í close relatives. Whoever is called upon to select readings and readers should consult closely with any non-Bahá'í family to see if they wish for the inclusion of any special prayers, readings from other scriptures, music, etc. and if they wish to participate in the service. The non-Bahá'ís should be warmly encouraged to participate.

The site of the grave, the weather, the age and health of the next of kin, the availability of a graveyard chapel, etc. should be carefully considered when deciding upon the length of the service and what should be done under cover and what prayers used for the graveside. The one asked to read or to chant at the graveside should be selected for his/her good strong voice and the mourners encouraged to gather close to the grave. This is the part of the ceremony which is usually the most emotional for the bereaved and this should be kept in mind.

The choice of a competent person to introduce the service and explain the Bahá'í approach to death is often essential if non-Bahá'ís are to be expected.

Regarding the Bahá'í funeral service; it is extremely simple, as it consists only of a congregational prayer to be read before burial. ... Your 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...

Letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States,  
10 January 1936

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 the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States 20 July  
1946

## A funeral service for a non-Bahá'í

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 the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States  
20 July 1946

## Choosing the place of burial

Interment must take place within an hours' travel time from the place of death.

It is forbidden you to carry the body more than a hour's distance from the town; bury it with tranquillity and cheer in a nearby place.

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas

**Question:** Regarding the carrying of the dead where it is bidden that they should be buried within one hour's distance, does this law apply to transportation both by land and sea, or is it otherwise?

**Answer:** The law applies to transportation by land as by sea, whether it be an hour's distance by boat or train. The purpose is the time limit of one hour, no matter what means of conveyance is employed. However, the sooner the burial takes place, the more fitting and preferable.

“Questions and Answers” supplement to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

## Burial at New Southgate Cemetery

In an email to the National Spiritual Assembly of 9 August 1988 the Universal House of Justice repeated the above guidance but added:

The House of Justice feels that the **transfer of the remains of deceased Bahá'ís by air** for burial in New Southgate Cemetery, when there are other cemeteries nearer to the place of death, is not only contrary to the spirit of the Law but is contrary to the interests of the Faith in relation to this very sacred spot.

As United Kingdom “Districts” are quite extensive and may include several towns as well as a city, further guidance was requested and the Universal House of Justice replied on 13 November 1988:

As has been conveyed to you (letter of 16 June 1982) **the hour's journey may be calculated from the city limits to the place of burial.** In the United Kingdom, where Districts are the basic administrative units and where, in some cases, the District is so large that it may take a long time before a boundary is crossed, bearing in mind that the spirit of the law of Bahá'u'lláh is for burial to occur near the place of death, you may advise the **believers who live in large Districts to calculate the hour's journey from the generally accepted limits of their towns or villages.**

These quotations are so clear that no amplification is necessary from the National Spiritual Assembly.

Friends living within one hour's travel of London who wish to arrange a burial in the Bahá'í section of New Southgate Cemetery should contact the National Spiritual Assembly's office for further guidance. Please note that burial plots are limited and may not be purchased in advance of a death.

## The direction of the grave

The body must be placed in the grave in such a position that the feet point toward 'Akká. (the Qiblih).

From a statement prepared by a National Spiritual Assembly in Africa and approved by the Universal House of Justice, 14 June 1982

In response to the query in your letter... the Universal House of Justice asks us to tell you that Bahjí is located (almost exactly) at 35° east longitude and 33° north latitude.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 27 November 1985

## Multiple interments in the same plot

While there is no prohibition on the practice of having more than one burial in the same plot, it is preferable for each believer to be buried in an individual plot:

...On a related point, and as you may be aware, although there is no prohibition on Bahá'ís being buried in graves that exist one over the other, the friends should bear in mind the statement of the Guardian that "it is better and more appropriate to assign a grave to every dead person".

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated 23 June 2015

Such matters are left to the discretion of the family of the deceased, bearing in mind the above guidance.

## Preparation of the body for burial

Cremation is forbidden.

The body is not to be embalmed (unless required by law).

Calcination or other means of speeding the process of natural decomposition should not be used. The coffin should be of crystal, stone or hard fine wood.

Briefly the law for the burial for 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.

The formal prayer and the ring are meant to be used for those who have attained the age of maturity.

There is no provision in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas determining the finger on which the burial ring should be placed....

From a letter dated 13 March 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

Burial rings are for those who have obtained the age of 15 and are available in both English or Arabic to purchase from Bahá'í Books UK – <https://books.bahai.org.uk/>

... although burial in a coffin is among the laws universally binding on believers, the law regarding the composition of the coffin is not currently applicable to believers in the West. Bahá'í law does not address the use of a grave liner; its use is left to the discretion of the family of the deceased, whose decision may be affected by civil law or the requirements of certain cemeteries. Even if a grave liner is used, the law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas mandating that the dead be buried in a coffin must still be observed.

From a letter dated 12 June 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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, whether “five cloths” are used or only “a single sheet.” At present, Bahá'ís are free to use their judgment in this matter.

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 the Guardian to an individual believer, 13 November 1944

Most funeral directors in the United Kingdom are only too happy to assist Bahá'í families and friends with preparing the body for burial, and are likely to have a non-denominational chapel of rest where the family can wash and wrap the body themselves, assisted by the staff if they feel the need. Alternatively, the funeral directors may prepare the body themselves, depending on the wishes of the deceased and his or her family. They would usually have material available to make the shroud (which is normally of soft cotton). If the family wish to buy silk, it is recommended that seven metres of a wide fabric (say one and a quarter to one and a half metres wide) be purchased and this can then be cut into the prescribed 5 sections. If the family wish to bathe the body with rose-water they should provide this themselves.

## Burial laws binding in the West

While many of the friends are eager to fulfil all the requirements given above, please note that they are not yet all obligatory. In a letter of 9 June 1974 to a National Spiritual Assembly, which has not been superseded, the Universal House of Justice reminded the friends of those laws which are applicable in the West, as follows:

For the burial of the dead the only requirements now binding in the West are to bury the body (not to cremate it), not to carry it more than a distance of one hour's journey from the place of death, and to say the Prayer for the Dead if the deceased is a believer over the age of 15.

## The long obligatory prayer for the dead

The 'Prayer for the Dead' 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. There is no requirement to face the Qiblah when reciting this prayer.

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, note 10

The Prayer for the Dead should be recited at the funeral if the deceased is 15 years old or more. This prayer is published in *Prayers and Meditations* (No. CLXVII) and in most editions of *Bahá'í Prayers*. It includes the following instructions "If the dead be a women, let him say: This is thy handmaiden and the daughter of thy handmaiden etc" The Prayer for the Dead is the only Bahá'í prayer where it is permissible to change the pronoun when the deceased person is a women.

Should the reading of the obligatory prayer be likely to cause difficulties with non-Bahá'í relatives it might be considered wise to have a two-stage service, although when explained in advance rarely are adverse comments made about the repetitions or length of that prayer, and favourable reactions to its beauty and healing value usually follow. In a "two-stage" type of funeral, the obligatory prayer may be said in the home, the undertakers' "parlour" or the cemetery chapel, prior to internment, with the other prayers, readings, music, poetry, eulogy and a statement about the soul, death and the Bahá'í funeral taking place wherever the majority of non-Bahá'ís are gathering.

## Burial 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 of the Universal House of Justice, 18 September 1968

BAHÁ'Í LAWS OF BURIAL DO NOT REFER TO BURIAL AT SEA. HOUSE OF JUSTICE HAS NOT YET LEGISLATED ON MATTER. FRIENDS IN ARRIVING AT THEIR DECISIONS, MUST BEAR IN MIND THAT 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ HAS EXPLAINED THAT BURIAL AS PRESCRIBED BY BAHÁ'U'LLÁH IS CONSISTENT WITH NATURAL LAWS, LIKEWISE SHOGHI EFFENDI, AT TIME WHEN POSSIBILITY RECOVER BODY DOROTHY BAKER WAS MOOTED, ADVISED THAT BODY, IF FOUND, BE BURIED ON LAND IN NEARBY SPOT.

Universal House of Justice, 10 April 1984

## Bahá'í Cemeteries

At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing Bahá'í cemeteries. However, in a Tablet of the Master's, He emphasises 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 centre of the centre 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 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil,  
20 February 1978

## Cremation

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 creation it would have been so planned that on death, it would be consumed and turned into ashes. But the divine order formulated by the heavenly ordinance is that after this body shall be transferred from one stage to another different from the preceding one, so that according to the relations which exist in this 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 colour. Cremation suppresses it speedily from attainment to these transformations, the elements becoming so quickly decomposed that transformation to the various stages is checked.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West*, Volume XL No. 19, p. 317

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, quoted in *Principles of Bahá’í Administration*, p.15

Obviously a Spiritual Assembly cannot itself arrange for the cremation of the remains of a Bahá’í even if it was that person’s wish that his body 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. ....

From a letter dated 9 December 1984 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

## Suicide

*Concerning the question of burial according to Bahá’í law in the case of a believer having committed suicide, the Research Department has reported that to date nothing has been found in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh or ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or in letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi that addresses this question. Although suicide has been strongly condemned in the teachings, this does not mean that a person has ceased to be a Bahá’í because he committed suicide, and the House of Justice has determined that he may certainly be given a Bahá’í funeral.*

From a letter dated 29 November 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

## Bequests of the body to medical research

Individuals are free to donate their bodies to medical science. They should request that when the use of the body for this purpose concludes the remains not be cremated but, if feasible, interred within an hour’s journey of the place of death or from the location where they are at the end of the medical process. It will be up to the prospective recipient medical institution to decide whether or

not to accept such conditions, but if the institution is unable to honor the above conditions, it would still be permissible to donate one's body if a believer chooses to do so.

The friends are encouraged to discuss these matters with their families in order to ensure that their wishes regarding the disposition of their remains are carried out.

From a letter dated 21 December 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

## Organ donation

Your email messages ... seeking clarification regarding the implications of donation of bodily organs by Bahá'ís have been received by the Universal House of Justice. As you know, Bahá'ís are free to donate their organs for medical purposes. Whatever remains of a person's body after the organs donated are removed should be buried and not cremated. However, no Bahá'í qualifications need to be placed upon the organs given for transplantation.

(From a letter dated 27 May 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

## Inscriptions on gravestones

There is no reason why the word "Bahá'í" should not appear in the centre of a nine-pointed star on the tombstone of dear ... **but the ringstone emblem should not be used, nor the Greatest Name on Bahá'í graves...**"

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer 30 September 1955

... it is permissible to use on headstones quotations from the Bahá'í Writings as well as the name of the Author of the quotation. That would include the name of Bahá'u'lláh at the end of quotations from His Writings.

From a letter dated 3 July 2019 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

## Memorial Gatherings

With regard to Bahá'ís attending a gathering for the purpose of what you refer to as celebrating a person's life, in principle, there would of course be nothing to prevent the friends from taking part in meetings held to say prayers for the progress of the soul of a deceased person and to share accounts of his or her life and services.

From a letter dated 7 June 2018 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

## Stillbirth and miscarriage

As you are aware, from a Bahá'í point of view, the soul is present from conception and therefore the foetus, no matter how young, should be treated with respect. However, as there is no specific guidance in the Writings concerning the disposition of the foetus, no hard and fast rules need be followed, and details referring to its burial are left to the discretion of the parents.

From a letter dated 22 October 2008 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly

## Green burial

As you are aware, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas provides that "the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable". Note 149 of The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book states, "the spirit of the law is that coffins should be of as durable



a material as possible.” Although the law regarding the material of the coffin is not currently applicable to Bahá’ís in the West, burial in a coffin is among the laws universally binding on believers. Given the practice of “green burial” does not involve interring the dead in a coffin, it would be inconsistent with Bahá’í law and impermissible for believers...

From a letter dated 7 April 2019 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

## Responsibilities of the local Spiritual Assembly

The local Spiritual Assembly may wish to keep on file a list of funeral directors in the area, and a list of cemeteries, especially those with unconsecrated ground (that not specifically set aside for members of the Church of England).

Each local Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility to call to the attention of the local funeral directors the fact that Bahá’ís are not to be embalmed unless required by law; nor are their bodies to be cremated; nor should their bodies be transported more than an hour’s journey from the place of death. This information should be a part of a Bahá’í’s Will, but as Wills are not generally read until several days after the death, this information should also be on file with local funeral directors.

A Bahá’í funeral is usually handled by the local Spiritual Assembly but need not be. Arrangements for the service should be made in close consultation with the family of the deceased. If they are not aware of the Bahá’í laws, it is the responsibility of the local Spiritual Assembly to inform them.

**If the family of the deceased Bahá’í does not wish to arrange the funeral together with the Assembly**, the local Spiritual Assembly must not interfere, but it may wish to hold a memorial service for the deceased Bahá’í.

Where possible, and in consultation with the deceased’s relatives, an article should be prepared for the local press.

The Assembly should be fully conscious of the supreme importance of its conduct on the occasion of the passing of a Bahá’í, not merely for the progress of the soul of the departed and his/her happiness in the next world, but also for the comfort and well-being of the bereaved family and the maintenance of the best public relations with all non-Bahá’ís.

## Resources

**Bahá’í burial rings** can be purchased by mail order from Bahá’í Books UK, tel. 01572 722780, website <https://books.bahai.org.uk/>, or in person from the National Bahá’í Centre, 27 Rutland Gate, London SW7 1PD. The bookshop is open from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. weekdays.

**Silk** can be purchased from most reputable fabric stores - however, your funeral director can advise further about suitable shroud material if necessary.

**A Guide to Bahá’í Funeral and Burial Practices**, an excellent booklet published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, is also available from Bahá’í Books UK. This book not only covers the guidance given above, but also includes helpful and moving personal accounts by individual believers of how they arranged the funerals of loved ones.