



BURIAL V. IN BAHAI COMMUNITIES

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Principles of Bahai burial. Bahai laws on burial are limited to a few basic principles that are binding on all Bahai communities around the world. Details are left to the discretion of individuals, but in general simplicity is encouraged, and care is taken to avoid rigid procedures and rituals. In the Bahai faith it is maintained that the human spirit ends its connection with the body as soon as it departs, but, as the body has formerly been the temple of the spirit, it must be treated with dignity and respect. It is believed too that, as the composition of the body is a gradual process, its decomposition should also be gradual, consistent with the laws of nature. For this reason, a corpse is not to be embalmed or cremated but must be buried. Although there is no specified interval after death within which burial must occur, early burial is considered most appropriate if circumstances do not dictate a delay. The common practice of Bahais in Iran is to bury the deceased within twenty-four hours after the time of death. The deceased must also be buried within an hour's journey from the place of death. This limit is applied, regardless of the conveyance (including air transport) used. The place of death is defined as the city or town in which one dies; an hour's journey is calculated from the city limits to the place of burial. Donation of a body for research is permitted if it is



not subsequently cremated or buried in a location more than one hour distant. Furthermore, should circumstances call for the remains to be exhumed, Bahai law offers no obstacle, provided that the same basic requirements are observed in the reburial. The spirit of the law is that one is to be buried near where one passes away.

Preparation of the dead for burial. The corpse must first be carefully washed. Although who should wash the body and what should be used in the water are not

specified in Bahai law, the practice in Iran has been for a close relative, a friend, or the staff of the Bahai cemetery to wash the body with soap and water and then to anoint it with perfume (*‘atr*), rose water, or similar essences. Washing may take place in the residence of the deceased, in a hospital, or at the cemetery. If the deceased was an adult, a burial ring is then placed on one of the fingers; it is inscribed, “I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” The body is wrapped in a shroud of white cotton or silk. The length and manner of wrapping are not specified; the shroud can be either a single piece of cloth or, if the family can afford it, as many as five pieces. The body is then placed in a coffin, which must be made of crystal, stone, or the hardest wood available.

The funeral service. Before interment of any person who has lived fifteen years or more an obligatory congregational prayer for the dead is to be recited; the recital of this prayer for children is, however, not prohibited. All the participants stand in silence while the prayer is spoken, but there are no further prescriptions for this part of the ceremony. Usually excerpts from Bahai writings and additional prayers are also read. The coffin is then placed in a grave or vault. The dimensions of the grave or the use of various kinds of vaults is left to the discretion of the family. The law does state, however, that it is more appropriate to assign an individual grave to every dead person. The law also requires that the body be buried so that the feet point toward ‘Akkā (Acre), the *qebla*, or primary holy site, of the Bahais. The headstone may be inscribed with a nine-pointed star (the nine-pointed star being the numerical value of the word *bahā*) and/or an appropriate extract from Bahai writings, in addition to the name of the deceased. After the interment a varied selection of Bahai writings may be read or recited at the graveside, but there is no fixed format. Funeral expenses are normally covered by the estate of the deceased, but, if the family does not have sufficient funds, it is the responsibility of Bahai



institutions to offer financial assistance to provide a dignified funeral. Although memorial services are not obligatory, the Bahais of Iran do hold such gatherings if the family wishes; they may be held at any time after the funeral. At such a gathering the program usually consists of readings from Bahai writings and recitation of prayers for the progress of the deceased's soul. Members of the family may also make charitable donations in the memory of the person who has died. If a non-Bahai desires a Bahai funeral, individual Bahais are permitted to conduct it, but Bahai institutions may not sponsor it.

Bahai cemeteries. 'Abd-al-Bahā' described the appearance of the Bahai cemetery (*golestān-e jāvīd*, lit. eternal garden) in a letter to the spiritual assembly of the Bahais of Bombay: The cemetery should be bordered all around by trees; its beauty would be enhanced if it had a pool with a tree in its center, and each grave must be separate and have a flower bed on all four sides (*Aḵbār-e amrī*, 12 Farvardīn 1328 Š./1 April 1949, pp. 5-6).

Cemeteries can be purchased by Bahai communities, donated by individual Bahais, or sometimes granted by governments. Ideally there should be a Bahai-owned cemetery in each community, but circumstances do not always allow it. Sometimes plots are set aside in public cemeteries for Bahais. Bahai law does not prohibit burial of a Bahai in a non-Bahai cemetery or burial of non-Bahais in Bahai burial grounds.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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1982, pp. 40-47; *Bešārat al-nūr*, Langenhain, 1983. For description of a Bahai cemetery see *AḳĀ bār-e amrī* 12, Farvardīn 1328 Š./March-April 1949, pp. 5-6.