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13. BAHÁ'Í BURIAL AND RELATED LAWS

BAHÁ'Í BURIAL LAW

As this physical frame is the throne of the inner temple, whatever occurs to the former is felt by the latter. In reality that which takes delight in joy or is saddened by pain is the inner temple of the body, not the body itself. 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 inner temple beholdeth its physical frame, which is its throne. Thus, if the latter is accorded respect, it is as if the former is the recipient. The converse is likewise true.

Therefore, it hath been ordained that the dead body should be treated with the utmost honor and respect.

The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, 3. Excerpts from the Persian Bayán, no. 23

The Lord hath decreed that the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable, and that graven rings should be placed upon their fingers. He, verily, is the Supreme Ordainer, the One apprised of all....

If the following verse, which hath at this moment been sent down by God, be engraved upon the burial rings of both men and women, it shall be better for them; We, of a certainty, are the Supreme Ordainer: "I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate." ...

The Lord hath decreed, moreover, that the deceased should be enfolded in five sheets of silk or cotton. For those whose means are limited a single sheet of either fabric will suffice. Thus hath it been ordained by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed. It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 128-130

In the Bayán, the Báb prescribed that the deceased should be interred in a coffin made of crystal or polished stone. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, explained that the significance of this provision was to show respect for the human body which "was once exalted by the immortal soul of man."

In brief, the Bahá'í law for the burial of the dead states that it is forbidden to carry the body for more than one hour's journey from the place of death; 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. A specific Prayer for the Dead (see note 10) is ordained, to be said before interment. As affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, this law precludes cremation of the dead. The formal prayer and the ring are meant to be used for those who have attained the age of maturity, i.e. 15 years of age (Q&A 70).

With regard to the material from which the coffin is to be made, the spirit of the law is that coffins should be of as durable a material as possible. Hence, the Universal House of Justice has explained that, in addition to the materials specified in the Aqdas, there is no objection to using the hardest wood available or concrete for the casket. For the present, the Bahá'ís are left free to make their own choices in this matter.

Universal House of Justice in "Notes" appended to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 149

With regard to the hesitations you have experienced because of the Bahá'í teachings on burial, it is to be expected that when one begins to learn about the Faith, one encounters aspects of the teachings that differ from one's beliefs. Naturally, the customs and views of people worldwide vary greatly with regard to issues

such as burial practices. Yet, in coming to understand that Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God for this Day, that His Revelation reflects God's will for humanity, and that His teachings are intended to unite the peoples of the world in one common Faith, one can, over time, come to see the wisdom of His teachings and appreciate the importance of adopting them, confident that "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind" and recognizing that "No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained."

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 29, 2018, to an individual

REQUIREMENTS BINDING ON ALL BELIEVERS

For the burial of the dead, the only requirements now universally binding are to bury the body in a coffin (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.

From a document entitled "Laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Not Yet Universally Applied", March 2016, approved by the Universal House of Justice

See Also:

Assembly to Educate on all Laws and Ordinances — Wills — Ch.10

BURIAL IN A COFFIN 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 July 7, 1947, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 666

The prohibition against cremation is not an arbitrary law pertaining to burial, but rather an aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's guidance to His followers about how to respectfully inter the deceased. By choosing cremation, one deprives oneself of the blessings of obedience to Bahá'u'lláh's laws.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 2, 2018, to an individual believer

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

The House of Justice sympathizes with you in the difficulty you are experiencing in modifying your views about cremation to conform to the Bahá'í teachings. It is a clearly stated principle of the Bahá'í Faith that the laws and teachings revealed by the Manifestation of God must not be weighed according to the standards and sciences current amongst men. Once the investigation of truth has led to the recognition of the Manifestation of God, a believer is expected to accept the statements of the Manifestation as being divine truth, even if the reason for these statements is not entirely clear. Through prayer, meditation and diligent study of the Bahá'í writings, together with the passage of time, one gradually comes to understand more deeply the truths brought by Bahá'u'lláh in His Revelation...

[I]t is evident that Bahá'í law calls for burial, rather than cremation. Although this law differs markedly from the aspects of Hindu philosophy referred to in your letter, it should be remembered that one of the purposes of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh is to clarify misconceptions about religious and philosophic issues, and provide authoritative guidance on matters which were hitherto the subject of speculation and conjecture.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 25, 1987, to an individual believer

In relation to the current [Covid-19 pandemic] health crisis, the House of Justice advises that hygiene and public safety must be diligently and thoroughly observed. Although the Bahá'í laws and regulations concerning the burial of the dead are clear, yet in case of serious and contagious diseases, hygiene and public health are priorities, and thus whatever advice the health authorities provide must be followed.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 29, 2020, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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 the state's department of licensing and regulation to determine whether that is actually the case, as it may be a misrepresentation.

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

Other Impermissible Methods for Disposing the Body

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.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 7, 2019, to an individual

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... in which you describe a new method being used ... for disposing of the body of the deceased, and it has asked us to respond as follows.

The House of Justice agrees with your assessment that this process of freezing the body and subsequently shattering the remains into powder form is not in conformity with Bahá'í law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated October 10, 2006, to a National Spiritual Assembly

See also:

Other Topics Related to Burial – Bahá'í Graves – Ch. 13

Requirements Not Yet Binding on Western Believers – Preparation of Body and Burial Shroud – Ch. 13

Requirements Not Yet Binding on Western Believers – Coffins of Crystal or Stone – Ch. 13

BURIAL WITHIN ONE HOUR'S 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, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 130

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, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, “Questions and Answers”, no. 16

The intention of this command is to limit the duration of the journey to one hour's time, irrespective of the means of transport that are chosen to carry the body to the burial site. Bahá'u'lláh affirms that the sooner the burial takes place, “the more fitting and acceptable will it be” (Q&A 16).

The place of death may be taken to encompass the city or town in which the person passes away, and therefore the one hour's journey may be calculated from the city limits to the place of burial. The spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's law is for the deceased to be buried near where he or she dies.

Universal House of Justice in “Notes” appended to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 152

[Y]ou wished to know whether there is an explanation for this law given in the Bahá'í Writings, so that you can explain it to non-Bahá'í relatives. The words of the law, as they appear in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, are: “It is forbidden you to transport the body of the deceased a greater distance than one hour's journey from the city; rather should it be interred, with radiance and serenity, in a nearby place.” The Research Department has been unable to locate any passage in the Writings giving specific reasons for this law, but if one bears in mind Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to unite mankind and to free it from many of the ritual observances and traditional practices which divide one people from another, one can perhaps obtain an understanding for the very simple and dignified burial laws that He has given us. In past centuries it has been a practice of various peoples to transport the bodies of the dead over long distances so that they could be buried either in the vicinity of a sacred place or in some other location of special significance for the deceased. The Bahá'í law abolishes such

practices. It also emphasizes the unity of the world and recognizes the importance of the spirit as compared with the body. The body of the dead person is treated with reverence and dignity and, without undue delay, is consigned to the earth in a place near where the person dies. The soul, we know, continues to exist in a world that is exalted above the limitations of time and place.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 23, 1993, to an individual believer

[W]hile transportation of the body by air is permissible, due consideration should always be given to the preference expressed by Bahá'u'lláh for the body to be buried soon and in a nearby place.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 16, 1982, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Concerning your query as to whether it would be a sin to disregard Bahá'í law by interring the deceased in a family plot that is more than an hour's distance from the place of death, there are vitally important spiritual questions surrounding this issue that must be given due consideration when making such a decision. Spiritual blessings accrue to all concerned when the law of God is obeyed, and, in this instance, the soul of the departed is also a factor to take into account. While it may be distressing for family members to be unable to inter the deceased in a family plot, the friends are encouraged to place their trust in God and abide by the law if at all possible, confident that obedience to the laws of Bahá'u'lláh is a source of divine bestowal.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 10, 2008, to an individual believer

The House of Justice hopes that it will be possible for you to locate a suitable burial place, in which the remains of your dear wife are to be interred, which can be reached within one hour from the civil limits of the city in which she passes away, by whatever form of conveyance you choose to use. Should you continue to experience difficulty in locating a cemetery, you are encouraged to turn to your National Spiritual Assembly for advice and assistance. Since the time limit is determined by transportation from the city limits to the cemetery, it is not affected by the holding of a funeral service at the Bahá'í Centre in the city.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 6, 1988, to an individual believer

Bahá'ís in Military Service and Veterans

In response to your question regarding whether there are any exceptions to Bahá'í burial requirements in the case of believers who pass away while on military service outside their home country, you are advised that while in exceptional cases it may not be possible to comply with Bahá'í law, believers serving in the military should take whatever measures are necessary to see that Bahá'í laws regarding burial are observed. If it is possible under military regulations, you should arrange with your commanding officer that in the event you should pass away during your service in ..., the responsible military authorities will arrange for your burial in accordance with Bahá'í law—which prohibits cremation and calls for no more than one-hour's transport from the place of death, as well as for the Bahá'í Prayer for the Dead to be said on behalf of the deceased. Beyond this, you may leave this matter in the hands of God and trust that His unerring eye will watch over you. You may be interested to learn that in connection with prior military conflicts, United States military agencies have acknowledged Bahá'í ordinances on burial and shown willingness to respect them. Further, in response to your question, there is no objection to the combination of the Bahá'í burial service with the military one.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated January 14, 2004, to an individual believer

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 United States 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. Department of Veterans Affairs website at www.cem.va.gov/.

See also:

External Issues — Military Service — Ch. 14

When Death Occurs at Sea, on an Airplane, or in a Desert

In an email ... from your National Bahá'í Secretariat, the question was posed as to how the provision of the Bahá'í law concerning burial within the distance of one hour's journey from the place of death is to be applied if death occurs in the course of an extended journey by plane or ship, or in a desert.

The Universal House of Justice provided the following reply on 18 September 1968 to an individual who asked about death 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.

Applying this guidance to death in an aeroplane, the principle would be to bury the body in the nearest suitable place to where the plane lands, within the provisions of civil law in that locality.

Concerning the occurrence of death in a desert, the principles noted above can be applied to conclude that the body of the deceased may be transported to the nearest location suitable for burial, even if this would require transportation for more than one hour's journey from the place of death.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 16, 2002, to a National Spiritual Assembly

PRAYER FOR THE DEAD

Save in the Prayer for the Dead, the practice of congregational prayer hath been annulled. He, of a truth, is the Ordainer, the All-Wise.

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 12

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 in silence.

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

Bahá'í family members and friends will surely wish to offer Bahá'í prayers for the progress of the soul, of which the Prayer for the Dead is the essential element of a Bahá'í funeral. There is no stipulation, however, that it must be recited at the graveside or at the funeral service; only that it be recited before the interment of the body takes place. It may even be recited in a private setting prior to any graveside prayers and the interment of the body.

Message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 4, 1994, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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

The Prayer for the Dead should be offered even if a believer has lost his or her administrative rights. Normally it would not be appropriate for a believer whose administrative rights have been suspended to be asked to read the Prayer for the Dead at a Bahá'í funeral service unless there are special reasons to do so, for example, if such a believer is a close relative of the deceased.

Response written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 3, 2012

Your thoughtfulness in raising questions concerning the use of recordings of the Prayer for the Dead at a funeral service and the Tablets of Visitation at commemorations of Holy Days associated with the Central Figures of the Faith is appreciated. Because of the special nature of these prayers, the House of Justice feels that it would not be appropriate for a recording of any of them to be used in place of live recitation or chanting.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 14, 2008, to an individual believer

It would not be appropriate to set the Prayer for the Dead to music for such purposes as a recording or performance. However, there would be no objection to a believer chanting it during a Bahá'í funeral service if you are satisfied the style is appropriate and dignified.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 25, 2019, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The Prayer for the Dead is the only Bahá'í obligatory prayer that is to be recited in congregation; it is to be recited by one believer while all present stand in silence. Bahá'u'lláh has clarified that this prayer is required only when the deceased is over the age of fifteen, that its recital must precede interment, and that there is no requirement to face the Qiblah during its recitation. “Alláh-u-Abhá” is said once; then the first of the six verses is recited nineteen times. Then “Alláh-u-Abhá” is said again, followed by the second verse, which is recited nineteen times, and so on.

Only 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 Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... forwarding an inquiry from a believer who is assisting in the preparations of a funeral programme for another believer in your community and requests to know if she can change the gender pronouns from male to female in two prayers for the departed. This believer is concerned that, given the unique sensitivities in ... regarding gender equality, as expressed in language, and that several distinguished and well-known members of the believer's non-Bahá'í family will be present at the programme—including members of the local public—they may misunderstand the Faith's views on gender equality. We have been asked to convey the following.

As you are aware, the Guardian did not wish Bahá'ís to change the gender of pronouns and nouns in the revealed prayers. The following excerpt from a letter dated 14 January 1947 written on his behalf makes this clear:

In regard to the question you asked him: As Bahá'u'lláh Himself specified, in the long prayer for the dead, that the gender could be changed and “his” said for “her”, etc., it is permissible to do it—nay obligatory—but in all other prayers, including those for the dead, we must adhere to the exact text and not change the gender.

You should inform the friends of this principle so that they can make any necessary changes to the plan for the funeral programme....

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 30, 2018, 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

BAHÁ'Í FUNERAL SERVICE

The Bahá'í funeral service is marked by its dignity, simplicity and flexibility. The only requirement is that the Prayer for the Dead be read before burial. Other prayers and passages from the Writings may, of course, be included. The friends are encouraged to avoid adopting a uniform procedure lest it become a ritual.

Response written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 3, 2012

There is considerable flexibility in the Bahá'í burial service, and there is no reason why non-Bahá'ís should not be invited to participate in some element of its program; however, their involvement would be governed by the need to not introduce into a Bahá'í event such as a funeral service practices from other religions.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 2, 1992, to an individual believer

See also:

Assembly's Responsibilities – When Bahá'ís Are Responsible for Burial of Non-Bahá'ís — Ch. 13

Location of Service

The Research Department advised the House of Justice that it has not found any guidance in the Bahá'í Writings to suggest that it is inappropriate to hold a Bahá'í funeral service in a Bahá'í Centre. The House of Justice recognizes that there may well be cultural, social or civil factors to be considered in some parts of the world when deciding whether or not a Bahá'í funeral service should be conducted in a Bahá'í Centre.

Therefore, it should be left to the Local Spiritual Assembly involved, in consultation with the family of the deceased, to decide whether to use the Bahá'í Centre for this purpose.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 5, 2005, to an individual believer

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... seeking guidance on whether a Bahá'í may plan for her funeral service to be held in a church, which would function just as a venue for the occasion. The House of Justice has directed us to reply as follows.

Generally there is no objection to holding functions, other than marriages, in places owned or operated by non-Bahá'í religious bodies, provided such use does not tend to identify the Faith, in the eyes of the public, with the other religions.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 19, 2015, to an individual believer

Viewing the Body during Service

Your email letter ... concerning viewing the body of the deceased at a Bahá'í funeral has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which has asked us to convey to you the following. Nothing has been found in the Writings concerning the viewing of the body before interment, and the House of Justice has not legislated on the matter. Therefore, the decision as to whether the body is to be viewed is left to the family or those responsible for arranging the funeral. While for the time being the friends are free to decide for themselves whether the body of their loved one is to be viewed before interment, they should be mindful that this should not become an issue in the community and that the personal decisions of the friends in this regard are to be respected.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 4, 2012, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Service for Deceased Children

[T]he Universal House of Justice has instructed us to convey the following explanation concerning your question regarding the use of the Prayer for the Dead for children.

The statement in the American Prayer Book is correct and is based on the section of “Questions and Answers”, which is an annexe to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, quoted below:

“Question: Is the burial ring decreed in the Aqdas only for adults or is it for minors as well?

“Answer: It is only for adults and the Prayer for the Dead is likewise only for adults.”

As stated in “A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, the Prayer for the Dead is an obligatory one, and in it the following supplication is made:

“Deal with him, O Thou Who forgivest the sins of men and concealest their faults, as beseemeth the heaven of Thy bounty and the ocean of Thy grace.”

However, regarding children, as you know, in “Some Answered Questions” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that children “are under the shadow of the favor of God; and as they have not committed any sin and are not soiled with the impurities of the world of nature, they are the centers of the manifestation of bounty, and the Eye of Compassion will be turned upon them.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 24, 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly

As to your question about Bahá'í burials for stillborn infants and miscarriages, according to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh the formal prayer for the dead has been revealed only for adults. The friends are, of course, free to recite other prayers at funerals for children, whether they died before or after birth.

Letter written by the Universal House of Justice, dated July 30, 1971, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... requesting guidance on behalf of ... whose unborn baby, you state, has serious health problems that are likely to cause him to be stillborn...

The House of Justice regretted to learn of the circumstances giving rise to this question. While the feelings that prompted this question are understood, Bahá'í law requires that burial occur within an hour's distance

from the place of death. Should your cousin's baby pass away after birth, his body should not be transported for burial to a place which is more than one hour's journey from the place of his passing. However, if he is stillborn, as nothing has been found in the Writings that addresses this matter, all the details of the burial are left to the discretion of his parents.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 9, 2019, to an individual believer

Service May Be Given for Believers Deprived of Administrative Privileges

[A] person who is deprived of his Bahá'í administrative rights may have a Bahá'í burial service if he or his family requests it....

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 9, 2009, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Service May Not Be Given for Covenant-breakers

[I]t is not permissible for a Covenant-breaker to receive a Bahá'í burial. In the case of Mr. ..., you acted wisely by informing his relatives that, while he could not receive a Bahá'í burial, as he had requested, they themselves were of course free to recite Bahá'í prayers at his funeral.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 21, 1995, to a National Spiritual Assembly

See also:

Register of Vital Statistics — Ch. 5

Assembly to Educate on all Laws and Ordinances — Wills — Role of Local Assembly in Relation to Wills — Ch. 10

Assembly's Responsibilities — When Non-Bahá'í Relatives Are Responsible for the Burial of a Bahá'í — Ch. 13

ASSEMBLY'S RESPONSIBILITIES

The conduct of the funeral service and the arrangements for the interment are usually handled by the relatives of the deceased, though the Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility for educating the believers in the essential requirements of the Bahá'í law of burial as presently 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. While the Assembly plays a role in upholding Bahá'í burial laws, it does not necessarily have an extensive role in carrying out the funeral itself. Other than ensuring that the Prayer for the Dead is recited at the funeral, the Assembly offers support to the extent that the relatives of the deceased may require it. Unlike a Bahá'í marriage ceremony, a Bahá'í funeral is not a legal ceremony, so there is more flexibility in how it may be carried out and what part the Assembly may play in it.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 22, 2016, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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

The House of Justice appreciates the desire of ... to be of service to the friends. However, a crucial consideration is to protect the Bahá'í community from succumbing to forms of commercialism that are commonplace and which have left their mark on religious practice in the wider society. The House of Justice finds no justification for marketing a Bahá'í burial kit. Rather, Local Assemblies should be encouraged to take the necessary steps in order to be fully prepared to assist believers with funeral arrangements, especially in tragic circumstances that arise unexpectedly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 12, 2010, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Generally, of course, Bahá'ís are encouraged to make a last will and testament and to set aside funds, if possible, to cover their last expenses, including the cost of burial. In many cases, family members and/or insurance may also be able to help provide for these expenses. Bahá'ís who have served in the military may qualify for burial in a veteran's cemetery or for other burial benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Cemetery Administration (www.cem.va.gov). In addition, in some localities social service agencies can be called upon to assist with burial-related expenses.

Furthermore, funeral homes are often able to work with the family or a Local Assembly representative to provide a modest, dignified burial at a more affordable cost.

Should such funding sources and efforts not be able to cover the expenses, however, the institutions of the Faith, as noted above, have a responsibility to assist. Depending on the amount needed, Local Assemblies may have sufficient funds to draw upon, particularly if they have established a humanitarian fund, to which community members can apply when experiencing urgent financial need. Further information about establishing such a fund is available from the Office of the Treasurer (finance@usbnc.org or 847-733-3472).

If additional funding is still needed, a Local Assembly may apply for assistance from the National Assembly. This can be done by submitting a detailed request to the Office of Community Administration (community@usbnc.org or 847-733-3485), which will consider whether any other funding sources are available and whether the amount requested seems reasonable. The request will then be forwarded for approval by the National Assembly's treasurer, who will direct the finance department at the Bahá'í National Center to arrange for payment to the funeral home or cemetery (or possibly to the Local Assembly, if it was only able to temporarily cover the expenses).

See also:

Other Topics Related to Burial — Bahá'í Cemeteries — Ch. 13

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

The laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are obviously binding only on Bahá'ís. Nevertheless, if there is a request for a Bahá'í funeral for an individual who was not a Bahá'í, the Bahá'í community should generally respond positively in honouring the deceased and serving his or her relatives. Through consultation, it can be ascertained to what degree the relatives of the non-Bahá'í desire to have Bahá'í law carried out. Some may wish only to have Bahá'í prayers and Writings recited as part of the funeral; others may also want the Prayer for the Dead to be read; and still others may ask that Bahá'í burial laws related to the preparation of the body of the deceased also be observed. Normally, it would be sufficient for one or a few believers known to the deceased's relatives to assist with the necessary arrangements, and the Assembly would not need to become involved, unless it were directly approached by the relatives.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 22, 2016, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Your first question addresses the possibility of having a burial ceremony according to Bahá'í laws for a deceased non-Bahá'í. The following guidance in this regard has been provided on behalf of the Guardian to individual believers.

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.

Concerning your question whether a Bahá'í Burial Service can be conducted for non-Bahá'ís if requested by them: If non-Bahá'ís desire that the believers should conduct such a service there is no objection at all.

In the light of this guidance a Bahá'í funeral service may be performed for a non-Bahá'í although it cannot be official, that is to say it cannot be sponsored by a Local Spiritual Assembly or another Bahá'í institution. The use of the congregational prayer as part of a funeral service for a non-Bahá'í is a matter left to the discretion of the family involved until such time as the House of Justice decides upon this question.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 25, 2002, to a National Spiritual Assembly

[C]oncerning the burial wishes of your non-Bahá'í mother, you are advised that, since Bahá'í law is not, of course, binding on non-Bahá'í relatives, their own wishes regarding burial may be carried out.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 1, 1998, to an individual believer

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 descendent involve burial in a distant location, and neither embalming nor cremation have been specified in the will, only embalmed bodies may be legally transported across state and even international boundaries in specially sealed metal cases.

WHEN NON-BAHÁ'Í RELATIVES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE BURIAL OF A BAHÁ'Í

In instances where non-Bahá'í relatives are arranging funeral services, there may be interference in carrying out the written will of the deceased which clearly stipulates that Bahá'í burial laws are to be followed. If this should occur, no legal action should be taken. However, the importance of adhering to the last wishes of the deceased should be brought to the attention of the non-Bahá'í relatives, and the Assembly should endeavour to convey to them the moral obligation which this entails, but should not insist if the family refuses to comply.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 4, 1994, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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

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

IF PLANS CONTRARY TO BAHÁ'Í BURIAL LAW HAVE BEEN MADE

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.

[I]f a Bahá'í makes a provision in his will that is contrary to Bahá'í law, that provision is null and void in Bahá'í law, and neither the Bahá'í relatives nor the Spiritual Assembly are permitted to fulfil it. Thus, if a

Bahá'í states in his will that his remains are to be cremated he should, nevertheless, be buried in accordance with Bahá'í law unless there is some element of the civil law that would prevent such an occurrence—in which case the civil law would have to be followed, but the Assembly, as indicated above, could take no part in it. If the remains are under the control of non-Bahá'í relatives, the principles explained in [the] paragraph ... above apply.

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

The Universal House of Justice has decided that at this time disregard of the law on burial does not call for deprivation of administrative rights.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated October 29, 1996, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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., Bahá'í Publications Australia, no. 12.5.4

If Mrs. ... recognizes the station of Bahá'u'lláh, then she should understand that He is the Law-giver for our Day and, further, that the law of God supersedes all human conceptions of right and wrong. Since one of the important laws is that one's body should be buried and not cremated, it is unseemly that a believer in Him would consciously disobey that law, even if that person had made a promise, as did she, to her father to have her body cremated.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 7, 1995, to an individual believer

The House of Justice sympathizes with your concern over the situation in which some local believers, holding important positions in the Faith and familiar with the requirements of the law regarding Bahá'í burial, follow traditional practices which require burial in specific locations that are often at a distance greater than one hour's journey from the place of death. It may be helpful to bear in mind that weaning indigenous believers away from prevailing tribal customs is a gradual process, which requires the greatest patience and understanding in the education of believers and also perseverance on the part of the affected friends as they resolutely strive to conform to Bahá'í standards.... As indicated in a letter dated 27 February 1943 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, "The greater the patience, the loving understanding and the forbearance the believers show towards each other and their shortcomings, the greater will be the progress of the whole Bahá'í Community at large"....

As you may know, the Bahá'í institutions have the responsibility to uphold the authority of Bahá'í law and to educate the believers in the laws and principles of the Faith. In this connection, you might consider consulting with an Auxiliary Board member or your Local Spiritual Assembly as to how to wisely foster increased adherence to the laws you have mentioned.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 22, 2005, to an individual believer

See also:

Assembly to Educate on all Laws and Ordinances — Wills — Ch. 10

REQUIREMENTS NOT YET BINDING ON WESTERN BELIEVERS

When the House of Justice determines that it is timely to apply additional aspects of the burial law, it will provide any clarifications that are necessary. In the meantime, it is important that these teachings not be presented in a way that would imply that any of the laws are binding beyond those that are explicitly identified as such or that would suggest there are qualifications or restrictions beyond what is clearly stated.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 5, 2010, to an individual believer

Although the following requirements are binding only on the Persian believers, Assemblies should become familiar with them to be able to provide guidance to the friends. 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.

PREPARATION OF BODY AND BURIAL SHROUD

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

With reference to your two questions concerning the washing of the body, there is nothing in the Writings stating who should wash the body, nor what should be used in the water.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 7, 1982, 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

[W]hile ... the Bahá'í writings suggest that after the body is washed it should be shrouded and buried, to date no mention has been found as to whether or not clothing the body prior to shrouding is either allowed or prohibited. Although the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ordains that the body of a deceased believer be wrapped in a shroud, the details of this aspect of Bahá'í burial have not been laid down by the House of Justice, and the friends are free to use their discretion in the matter at this time.

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

In relation to the current health crisis [COVID-19 pandemic], the House of Justice advises that hygiene and public safety must be diligently and thoroughly observed. Although the Bahá'í laws and regulations concerning the burial of the dead are clear, yet in case of serious and contagious diseases, hygiene and public health are priorities, and thus whatever advice the health authorities provide must be followed. In a Tablet that addresses the question of whether cremation of bodies is permissible in the event of contagious diseases, 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms that hygiene and protection are the highest priority. Thus, for example, believers from Bahá'í communities in the East who have customarily washed and shrouded the bodies of the deceased may refrain from such observances in relation to a Bahá'í who has died from the coronavirus disease, in order to avoid exposure.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 29, 2020, to a National Spiritual Assembly

As to whether individuals who are not Bahá'ís may prepare the body of a deceased believer or assist with its preparation, to date, nothing has been found in the Bahá'í writings to indicate that only Bahá'ís may do so. The House of Justice sees no objection to someone who is not a Bahá'í preparing or assisting with the preparation of the body of a deceased believer according to the provisions of Bahá'í burial law.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 29, 2020, to an individual believer

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.

See also:

Requirements Binding on All Believers — Burial in a Coffin without Cremation — Ch.13

BURIAL RING

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, *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

The inscription to be engraved on burial rings is set out in the latter part of paragraph 129 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. There are no provisions about the size of the ring or its composition.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated May 18, 1999, to an individual believer

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

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

Assemblies would be wise to keep a few 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.bahaibookstore.com.

COFFINS OF CRYSTAL OR STONE

As you know, it is stated in paragraph 128 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that “the dead should be interred in coffins made of crystal, of hard, resistant stone, or of wood that is both fine and durable”. In recent years, in situations in which the friends are unable to use these specific materials because they are not available at all in the location of the funeral, or could be obtained only at excessive cost, the House of Justice has referred to note 149 relating to this passage in the Most Holy Book indicating that “the spirit of the law is that coffins should be of as durable a material as possible” and that “for the present, the Bahá'ís are left free to make their

own choices in this matter". Materials that have been used under these provisions include concrete and pressed particle wood composite.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated January 7, 2002, to a Bahá'í couple

POSITION OF BODY IN GRAVE

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

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

While it is not a binding requirement at present, eventually Bahá'ís in all countries will be buried facing the Qiblih (i.e., so that the feet of the body will point towards Bahjí), as is now done in the East. If you consider the direction that the face of such a body would assume if it were in an upright position, it should become clear that the two passages you refer to ... do not present a contradiction.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 13, 1992, to an individual believer

[A] provision of the burial law is that the body is to be laid on its back in the grave oriented so that the feet point toward the Qiblih, and not on its right side with the face toward the Qiblih, as is the custom in Islam...

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 15, 2013, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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.

APPLICATION OF BAHÁ'Í BURIAL LAWS TO PERSIAN BELIEVERS LIVING IN THE WEST

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter ... in which you seek guidance regarding the application of Bahá'í burial laws to Iranian Bahá'ís living in the "west", and has asked us to reply as follows.

The issue of application of the laws for "eastern" and "western" Bahá'ís at this time is perhaps best considered in the light of the following explanation. As you are aware, many of the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas were applied in Iran and the neighbouring lands of the Middle East from very early days, and others were progressively enforced by Shoghi Effendi.

As the Faith spread in Europe and the Western Hemisphere, certain laws were applied there also, but fewer than were already current in Iran. The Faith continued to spread around the world, and the terms "east" and "west" in this context acquired specialized meanings. While the "east" continued to designate Iran, Iraq and other countries of the older Bahá'í communities of the Middle East, the term "west" came to include the rest of the world. Thus, Persian pilgrims in the time of Shoghi Effendi would stay in the "Eastern" Pilgrim House, while Australian and Chinese pilgrims would stay in the "Western" Pilgrim House.

To pioneer for the Faith and for many other reasons, believers from Iran began to move to other parts of the world. This mere change in residence was no reason for them to cease to observe those laws of the Aqdas with which they were familiar, but they had to learn not to impose them on the "western" Bahá'ís. With intermarriage between "eastern" and "western" Bahá'ís other variations arose, depending upon whether the children were raised in a western or eastern family environment.

With this understanding, the individual believers now residing in the "west" must decide, given their own situations, which of the laws are binding upon them. The House of Justice has clearly specified those laws

which are currently not binding on the “western” friends. The fact that certain laws are not binding does not, of course, mean that the believers are forbidden to obey them if they wish to and circumstances permit. Bahá'ís from Iran who have migrated to the west should already know which laws are binding upon them, having learned this in their homeland. Bahá'ís of Iranian or mixed descent living in the west, whose parents have not familiarized them with the laws, should at least follow those laws which are universally binding.
Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 19, 2006, to a National Spiritual Assembly

OTHER TOPICS RELATED TO BURIAL

BAHÁ'Í GRAVES

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.

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

The House of Justice has not legislated upon the question of what exactly constitutes a “grave”, nor does it wish to legislate on such details of burial laws at this time. Individual friends are, therefore, free to use their own discretion in this matter at this time. Of course, when a Spiritual Assembly is faced with the question of whether more than one body should be buried in a grave, for example when the Assembly is establishing a cemetery, the decision would be left to the Assembly.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated September 20, 2016, to an individual believer

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.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 12, 2016, to an individual believer

[I]t would be more appropriate for the remains to be reburied in a separate grave and not in a common grave. There is no prohibition in Bahá'í law to burial in several levels of graves nor against the use of vaults above the level of the ground.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated April 19, 2016, to a National Spiritual Assembly

Your email letter ... regarding the application of Bahá'í burial laws in areas subject to flooding has been received by the Universal House of Justice, and we have been asked to reply as follows...

As a first step, your Assembly will wish to determine whether any means exist for the burial of the bodies of the deceased in the affected locality, or nearby place, in a manner permissible by civil law, which could include burial above ground. For example, in response to one National Spiritual Assembly in whose country the land available for cemeteries was very scarce, the House of Justice suggested that the Assembly might be able to acquire a small piece of land in each location where a cemetery is needed, on which a mausoleum consisting of many single burial vaults could be built. It was pointed out that there would be no objection to the vaults' being on top of one another and that a small but attractive garden could be made around the building, in front of it, or even inside it.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 15, 2008, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The House of Justice sees no objection to the believers' following the custom which is normal in ..., namely that of placing the coffin directly in a grave dug in the earth and covering it with loose earth, rather than lining

the grave with concrete or cement blocks. This is a matter that should be left entirely to the discretion of the family....

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 29, 1984, 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.

Gravestones and Gravestone Symbols

Normally, matters related to headstones on graves are for consideration by the Bahá'í institution which has jurisdiction over that cemetery. Generally, the decision as to the nature of the headstones, their size and design is left to the family of the deceased, but it will, of course, need to take into account any requirements or considerations that the Local or National Spiritual Assembly concerned may determine.

With regard to your query concerning guidance from the Writings, no texts have been found specifying requirements for the headstone or the type of superstructure on a grave.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 3, 2002, to an individual believer

In regard to your question regarding the use of the Greatest Name on tombstones of Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, the Guardian considers this too sacred to be placed in such a position in general use, and the friends should not use it on their tombstones.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated June 20, 1954, to a National Spiritual Assembly

[R]egarding the inscription on a headstone, ... a nine-pointed star may be used.

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated September 17, 1971, to an individual

[I]t 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.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 3, 2019, to an individual

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

See also:

Requirements Binding on All Believers — Bahá'í Funeral Service — Ch. 13

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

[I]n countries ... where there are large numbers of believers scattered in small communities, the House of Justice appreciates that the friends undoubtedly feel the need to have a Bahá'í cemetery. It understands that many governments are willing to provide land for cemeteries, and there is no objection to Bahá'í institutions accepting grants of land for this purpose. It is suggested that as a first step you should approach government authorities about your needs. If the government is unable to assist you in setting aside such lands, you should investigate whether it is permissible to bury on private property and whether privately-owned property of Bahá'ís might be available for this purpose. Should this be so, you could then endeavour to find out what can

be done locally; that is, whether any of the friends are willing to donate a piece of land or, in the alternative, how much the friends are able to contribute toward the purchase of a suitable piece of land....

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 24, 1983, to a National Spiritual Assembly

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

In a Bahá'í cemetery believers should be buried with their feet pointing towards the Qiblih (the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká). However, this is not a binding requirement at present....

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 24, 1992, to a National Spiritual Assembly

[I]n considering the layout of the new cemetery, you should bear in mind that, eventually, Bahá'ís will be buried facing the Qiblih of the Bahá'í world. Therefore, it would be desirable to align any future graves in such a way that the feet of the bodies will point towards Bahjí.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 10, 2013, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The direction of the Qiblih from a given location on earth may be set along the shorter arc of a great circle that passes through Bahjí and the point concerned. A great circle in this context is one whose plane bisects the earth (e.g., the equator and longitudinal meridians). Bahjí is located at approximately 35 degrees east longitude and 33 degrees north latitude.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 27, 2011, to an individual believer

Naturally, the Bahá'í cemetery should be maintained in a neat and beautiful condition. Since a Bahá'í cemetery is the property of the Bahá'í community, funds for the purchase of the land should be the responsibility of the institutions of the Faith. Some of the believers may wish to purchase a plot or plots. Others may wish to make earmarked contributions for the project. However, the House of Justice feels that no Bahá'í should be denied the use of such a facility because he cannot afford to pay the full cost of a plot and its maintenance. General appeals may be made to the friends for contributions to a fund for the upkeep of the cemetery, but it would not be proper to solicit funds for this purpose from the families of those buried in the cemetery, whether Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 24, 1992, to a National Spiritual Assembly

The burial of Bahá'ís in a Bahá'í burial ground, although most appropriate, is not a law of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. However, burial of the dead within a distance of one hour's travel is one of the laws. Therefore, should the Bahá'í cemetery be located more than one hour's journey away, the believers should make use of a nearby non-Bahá'í burial ground, providing there is no objection on the part of the local people and the authorities.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 6, 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly

It is left to the discretion of Local Spiritual Assemblies to decide whether or not to purchase gravesites. Regarding the legal aspects of establishing a cemetery, this is generally a matter for local law. Therefore, it is suggested that the Local Assembly consult about such matters with a competent local attorney. The funds associated with operating the Bahá'í section of the cemetery should be kept separate from other Bahá'í Funds. Although the National Assembly generally discourages Local Assemblies from appealing to other communities for funds, if the activity or venture serves several communities in an area, it has permitted such appeals (and then communities are free to respond to the appeal as they wish). In addition, if the cemetery is actually located within the jurisdiction of another Local Assembly, that Assembly would be the one that should have responsibility for it.

Burial of Non-Bahá'ís and Believers Deprived of Administrative Privileges

It would not be right to refuse to bury in a Bahá'í cemetery one who has lost his voting rights. Furthermore, it is quite possible that non-Bahá'í relatives of believers or others may be permitted to be buried in a Bahá'í cemetery. However, a deciding factor could be whether the area of land chosen for use as a Bahá'í cemetery would be large enough to permit burial of non-Bahá'ís. It is suggested that no hard and fast rules be adopted, but that each case be considered on its own merits.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated July 12, 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly

DONATION OF BODY TO MEDICAL SCIENCE

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.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 21, 2014, to an individual believer

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 this, 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-sensitive 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 as most medical centers routinely cremate donated remains. 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.

Organ Donation

Concerning your question about the Teachings of the Faith in connection with donating or receiving human organs, in a letter dated 6 September 1946 written on behalf of the beloved Guardian, it was stated that there was nothing in the Teachings which would forbid a Bahá'í to bequeath his eyes to another person or for a hospital, adding that it seemed a noble thing to do.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated October 1, 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook, Australia, 4th ed.*, Bahá'í Publications Australia, no.16.7.3

See also:

Assembly to Educate on all Laws and Ordinances — Wills — Ch. 10

EXHUMATION AND REBURIAL

As the beloved Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf, "The spirit has no more connection with the body after it departs, but, as the body was once the temple of the spirit, we Bahá'ís are taught that it must be treated with respect." These words show why, in principle, it is preferable not to disturb the remains of the deceased once they have been interred.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 5, 2014, to an individual believer

Regarding exhumation and reburial, generally speaking, it is preferable not to disturb the remains of the deceased once they have been interred. However, when circumstances demand or if it is required by civil law, it is permitted in Bahá'í law to exhume and reinter mortal remains, keeping in mind that the friends should do everything possible to ensure that the remains are not removed more than one hour's journey from the place of death and that the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's law for burial to take place near the place of death is observed. Whenever the problem of the obliteration of a grave or the incineration of remains arises, it is left to individual families to take whatever action they feel is within their means. In cases where there are no family members or the family cannot afford to cover the expenses associated with extending the lease of a burial plot or transferring the remains, it would not be feasible for the Bahá'í community to incur such costs, although there may be special circumstances that would require it to do so.

In places where land is scarce and it is the common practice to lease burial plots for limited periods of time, the only solution may be to acquire land for a Bahá'í cemetery.... Even if making provision for such cemeteries may not currently be financially feasible, it is a course of action that many Local and National Spiritual Assemblies will have to take in the future and that will then make it possible to exhume and reinter the remains of the believers as the need arises. For now, it is left to the friends and their families to do the best they can with the resources available to them and within the circumstances presented by their society.
Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 10, 2019, to a National Spiritual Assembly

It is understood that you are considering the possibility of transferring the remains of some believers to a new site as there is concern that the current burial area is becoming polluted. Generally speaking, it is preferable not to disturb the remains of the deceased once they have been interred. However, when circumstances demand, such as when required by civil law, it is permitted in Bahá'í law to exhume and reinter mortal remains. Whether the present situation necessitates that the remains be transferred to a new cemetery site is left to your judgement, considering the circumstances in light of the principles outlined above and taking into account the views of the family members of the deceased as to the exhumation and reburial.

Exhumation and reburial, when necessary, should be undertaken with minimal disturbance to the body and in a manner which shows respect. Bahá'í law does not rule out transferring the mortal remains into a new or smaller casket. However, the remains should not be reshrouded nor should the Prayer for the Dead be recited again, though, of course, there would be no objection to other prayers being offered on the occasion.
Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated November 14, 2019, to a National Spiritual Assembly

HONORING THE DEAD

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

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.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated June 7, 2018, to an individual believer

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

NAMING BUILDINGS IN MEMORY OF DECEASED BELIEVERS

In keeping with a principle established by the beloved Guardian, the House of Justice ordinarily advises against naming a building such as a Ḥazíratu'l-Quds, which is an institution of the Faith, after a person, even if that person is or was a distinguished Bahá'í who has nobly served the Cause. However, there is no objection in some cases to naming a particular room such as a meeting hall, library or other designated area in the name of such a believer as an alternative way of honouring his or her memory. Also, it is quite acceptable and is a common practice throughout the world to name a Bahá'í educational facility or training institute after a much-loved and highly regarded believer who has passed away.

In such matters a National Assembly has to exercise wise discretion. The House of Justice wants to avoid the emergence within the Bahá'í community of the practice that has been common in other religions whereby people of financial means contribute substantial sums of money for the erection of buildings with the understanding or on condition that the building would be named after a departed loved one. The friends should give freely in support of projects for the construction of facilities to be used for the good of the community without personal interests being attached to their donations and the institutions of the Faith should be left free, in certain circumstances, to name such facilities after souls who are deserving of the honour independent of financial considerations.

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated March 11, 2012, to a National Spiritual Assembly