

Reproduction and other Biological Subjects

by Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

Compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

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1. With regard to the soul of man: According to the Bahá'í Teachings the human soul starts with the formation of the human embryo, and continues to develop and pass through endless stages of existence after its separation from the body. Its progress is thus infinite.

As to your question regarding the possibility of an artificial production of life by means of an incubator: this is essentially a matter that concerns science, and as such should be investigated and studied by scientists.

(31 December 1937, to an individual)

2. The Teachings do not tell us of any miraculous birth besides that of Jesus. As to the possibility of conception without the presence of a male sperm in the future: this is a question which lies entirely within the province of science, and which future scientists will have to investigate.

(27 February 1938, to an individual)

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3. Your second question concerning the possible synthesis of an elementary 'life' form such as a simple virus relates to the statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on "The Origin of Man" from Bahá'í World Faith, p. 298 (originally Some Answered Questions, p. 211):

For example, if a man of his own mind and intelligence collects some elements and combines them, a living being will not be brought into existence, since the system is unnatural. This is the answer to the implied question that, since beings are made by the composition and the combination of elements, why is it not possible for us to gather elements and mingle them together, and so create a living being. This is a false supposition, for the origin of this composition is from God; it is God Who makes the combination, and as it is done according to the natural system, from each composition one being is produced, and an existence is realized. A composition made by man produces nothing because man cannot create.

To understand the implications of this statement it is necessary to know what the Master meant by "a living being" and what limitations He intended by the phrases "of his own mind and intelligence" and "since the system is unnatural." As the science of biology develops and men acquire ever deeper insights into the nature of living things, these implications will no doubt become clearer.

(22 June 1977, to an individual)

4. This answer was written in response to a question concerning childbirth—specifically, whether conception and gestation will, in the future, take place in an incubator, rather than through natural means or artificial insemination.

Concerning your first question, the House of Justice understands that the genetic engineering of fertilized human eggs is far from becoming a reality in the foreseeable future, therefore it does not feel it is propitious or necessary for it to legislate on this matter, or to take up a position about it.

(8 March 1983, to an individual believer)

5. 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.

The House of Justice feels that this statement applies equally to living bodies.

Concerning organs received from a dead person, in a letter dated 26 June 1956, also written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi pointed out:

“... there is nothing in the Teachings to prevent a Bahá'í from willing his body for medical research after death. However, it should be made clear that the remains must be buried eventually and not cremated, as this is according to Bahá'í law.”

(1 October 1984, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

6. With respect to the question of multiple ovulation and pregnancies induced through the use of certain chemical agents, the House of Justice knows of nothing in the Writings on this matter. Since the process described is essentially only an accentuation of a normal process, i.e., inducing ovulation where formerly there was some physiological obstacle to successful release of ova, the possibility of multiple pregnancies may be viewed as the chance that is taken in achieving an otherwise successful outcome to a therapeutic intervention

On the question of removing life support in medical cases where physiological intervention prolongs life in disabling and otherwise fatal illnesses our Teachings indicate that God, the Giver of life, can alone dispose of it as He deems best, and nothing has been found in the Sacred Text on these matters specifically. Until such time as the Universal House of Justice considers legislation on euthanasia, decisions in the matters to which you refer must be left to the consciences of those responsible, within the limits prescribed by the law of the land.

Bahá'ís are permitted to specify in their wills that their bodies or organs of their bodies may be donated to the proper uses of science or the replacement of organs or organ parts.

(30 August 1988, to an individual)

7. _____ has raised a number of questions in her search for a deeper understanding of the implications to which the House of Justice has referred. The proposed procedure [surrogacy] leads to a mechanistic use of the human body, incompatible with the dignity assigned to the individual in the Bahá'í teachings. Apart from legal questions to which such a procedure could give rise, it should be remembered that, since human beings are endowed with a spiritual nature, an accurate assessment of the implications of the physical actions in which an individual engages must include consideration of the spiritual, emotional and psychological effects of these actions; this interrelationship is evident on examining the emphasis placed in the Bahá'í teachings on modesty, chastity and fidelity. The use of a surrogate for the gestation of an embryo would raise a number of issues pertaining to the future impact on the child itself, as well as the emotional ties between the surrogate and the child, and also between the donor of the ovum and the child.

(22 November 1989, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

8. The beloved Guardian states in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, that “... there is no objection to having a baby by means of artificial insemination as long as your husband is the father of it”. In view of this, it would not be permissible under Bahá'í law for a Bahá'í couple seeking to have a child to utilize a sperm bank.

As to the permissibility of terminating a pregnancy following the discovery through amniocentesis of a severely handicapped foetus, this is a matter left to the judgement of capable professionals in the field, and the consciences of the parents. As you are aware, the Bahá'í Writings prohibit the practice of abortion solely for the purpose of terminating unwanted pregnancies; however, circumstances may occur in which an abortion would be justifiable. The Texts of the Faith do not specify what these circumstances are, and the House of Justice does not wish to legislate on this matter presently. Therefore, a Bahá'í couple faced with making this decision should be guided by this principle, the best medical advice possible, and their individual consciences.

(21 May 1992, to an individual)

9. The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of ... on your recent activities with the National Council of Women, now concerned with the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill presently before the House of Commons. We are asked to convey its advice.

You have specifically requested information defining the Bahá'í position on the important matter of experimentation with human embryos. It is not practicable for the House of Justice to consider this delicate issue at this time, hence you are asked not to express opinions in matters of women's activities which might be ascribed to the Faith which you so worthily serve.

(11 April 1990, to an individual)

10. With reference to your fax of 26 March 1996 inquiring about the question of in-vitro fertilization, we have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to reply as follows.

The beloved Guardian, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, states, "... there is no objection to having a baby by means of artificial insemination as long as your husband is the father of it." While artificial insemination is a very different process from in-vitro fertilization, the principle enunciated by the Guardian is the same, namely, that to be acceptable to Bahá'ís, the egg cell of the wife should be fertilized by the sperm of the husband in the procedure.

(5 April 1996, to an individual)

11. The Universal House of Justice has considered the question of whether Bahá'ís are required to take extraordinary measures to facilitate the natural process of conception. For the present, it is left to the Bahá'í couple to decide whether or not they wish to use in vitro fertilization as a means of having children. The use of such procedures is clearly a matter of choice, and not a requirement. In this regard, there is value in obtaining the best medical advice available.

(6 May 1996, to the Research Department)

12. ... the Bahá'í Writings affirm that the human soul comes into being at the time of conception. However, they do not clearly define the exact biological moment and nature of the event described as conception and this may, indeed, be a question that is insoluble by human thought or investigation, since it relates to mysteries of the spiritual world and the nature of the soul itself.

(6 February 1997, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

13. Nothing specific has been found in the Bahá'í writings on genetic engineering. This is therefore a matter on which the House of Justice may have to legislate but the time has not yet come for that. The subject is quite complex, and an informed opinion can be offered only when the scientific understanding is much further advanced than at present and the social implications are clearer. With the emergence of adequate understanding, it will also be opportune to deal with the ethical issues involved. In the meantime, Bahá'ís faced with questions about genetic engineering are free to come to their own conclusions based on their knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings on nature and the purpose of life. However, they should be careful not to make dogmatic statements or offer their own understanding as the teaching of the Faith.

(20 April 1997, to an individual)

14. Reports appearing in the press and in scientific literature indicate that the study of the cloning of animals is at an early stage. Many fundamental questions about the biological and genetic features of this process, and its physiological implications, remain unresolved, and will only become clear with the passage of time.

Nothing specific has been found in the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of human cloning. The House of Justice regards it as premature for it to give consideration to this matter and its spiritual consequences. For the present, the believers faced with questions about cloning are free to come to their own conclusions based on their knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings on the nature and purpose of life. However, they should be careful not to make dogmatic statements or to offer their own understanding as a teaching of the Faith.

(19 May 1998, to an individual)