

conditions of his time he aimed to protect women from slander and danger and wrote those beautiful words, "Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church.[1] Similarly it is affirmed that Muhammad raised Arab women from lowly status and commended their protection, though some modern perversions of his teaching tend to reduce women to 'no-status-at-all'.

CHASTITY

Like many other religious and reforming movements, Bahá'ís are firm in moral attitudes. Yet there is no clergy to dictate what is right or wrong, and individuals must be responsible for their lives before God. The ruling body, the Universal House of Justice, declared that 'It is neither possible nor desirable for the Universal House of Justice to set forth a set of rules covering every situation. Rather is it the task of the individual believer to determine, according to his own prayerful understanding of the Writings, precisely what his course of conduct should be in relation to situations which he encounters in his daily life.'[2]

The importance of chastity both before and during marriage is stressed in many writings. There is no concept of original sin, on the one hand, or placing celibacy as the highest spiritual state, on the other. But chastity is seen as a proper preparation for marriage and maintaining it successfully.

Bahá'ís are exhorted to keep even their 'secret thoughts pure'. A chaste and holy life demands modesty, decency and temperance, in dress, language, amusements and all vocations. 'Carnal desires and corrupt inclinations' should be controlled with vigilance, and frivolous conduct

[1] Janet Cullen Tanaka, Bahá'í Studies Notebook: The Divine Institution of Marriage, 1983, p. 137.

[2] Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 17 October 1968, A chaste and Holy Life.

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abandoned. Such a life requires 'total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks, from opium, and from similar habit-forming drugs'. It renounces immorality in art and literature, the practices of nudism and of companionate marriage, easy familiarity and sexual vice.[3]

Not only gross immorality but any practices which might arouse temptation and lead to undue intimacy between the sexes are to be avoided. Modern customs, such as kissing between unmarried persons, are discouraged since they may be seen as part of the easy familiarity and frivolous conduct of the 'thoroughly rotten morals of the present world'. Indiscriminate kissing, it is feared, may arouse appetites to suppress which is a strain and which can only be satisfied legitimately through marriage.

Young people should exercise self-control, which has a salutary effect on both character and personality, and they may therefore be encouraged to marry while they are still young and vigorous. Economic factors, which often hinder early

marriage, are sometimes used as excuses and should not be over-stressed.

Chastity should be practised by both sexes, and sexual relationships in any form are not permissible outside marriage, so that practices such as free love and companionate marriage are illegitimate. A modern Bahá'í convert remarked that the obligation to remain chaste until marriage may appear impossible in the conditions of modern life, where chastity is often considered to be abnormal. But 'you are forgetting that human beings are not robots'. Love and honest relationships, with firm religious faith, can lead to the recognition that chaste behaviour is the will of God, in which sex has its place but does not dominate life.[4]

MARRIAGE

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, encouraged his followers to develop both the

[3] Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 1984, p. 30.

[4] *The Gardeners of God*, 1993, p. 107.

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physical and spiritual sides of their marriages, as this would lead to the creation of a bond to unite a couple for ever. 'Bahá'í marriage', he wrote, 'is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart', so that the purpose of marriage is for the partners 'to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity'.[5]

Shoghi Effendi, grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, wrote that 'according to the Bahá'í teaching no sexual act can be considered lawful unless performed between lawfully married persons. Outside of marital life there can be no lawful or healthy use of the sex impulse'.[6]

Within marriage both the procreation of children and sensual pleasure are recognized as having their proper place. A well-known quotation states that 'the primary purpose of sexual relations is, clearly, to perpetuate the species. The fact that personal pleasure is derived therefrom is one of the bounties of God. The sex act is merely one moment in a long process, from courtship through marriage, the procreation of children, their nursing and rearing, and involves the establishment of a mutually sustaining relationship between two souls which will endure beyond life on this earth'.[7]

In preparation for marriage, Bahá'ís are encouraged to develop self-knowledge, to choose a suitable partner, and to take great care to become fully acquainted with his or her character, and this process should be continued during the period of engagement.

There are no arranged marriages, for the two partners choose each other. But Bahá'í law requires the consent of the biological parents, if they are known or can be traced, in order to promote family unity and ensure that the marriage

is fully supported by the extended families. If a Bahá'í marries a non-Bahá'í, the consent of the parents of both families is still required. There is no bar to interracial marriage, since one aim of the religion is the oneness of

[5] Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1978, p. 118.

[6] Letter to an individual, 13 December 1940.

[7] Universal House of Justice, 16 March 1992.

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humanity.

In a Bahá'í wedding ceremony the only obligatory part is a simple vow, recited by both bride and groom: 'We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.' [8] Otherwise couples have freedom of choice in the location and content of the wedding ceremony, and marriage customs vary from country to country. All that is required are two witnesses (who can be Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í) and the requisite verse. Some governments recognize this simple form of marriage, but where it is not yet accepted as a legal contract, it is preceded by a civil ceremony.

DIVORCE

Divorce has been keenly debated in religious circles in modern times, with many discussions as to whether its practice should entail exclusion from religious rituals or not. Compared with the relative ease of divorce in Judaism and Islam, and rigid opposition to it in Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism, Bahá'í teachings have permitted divorce but only under certain conditions.

Bahá'u'lláh urged believers to do everything in their power to preserve their marriages and make them exemplary unions, yet he allowed divorce when it is clear that there is a complete marital breakdown. The married couple have a covenant with God and with each other, which commits them to stay together and aims at providing both unity and freedom in their relationships. This covenant should not be broken lightly, but there is a recognition that high ideals are not always achieved in practice.

Marital problems among Bahá'ís should be referred to the local spiritual assembly, the elected council for the area in which the couple lives, and it will try to sort out difficulties through consultation and advice. This spiritual assembly should be consulted as the first step towards divorce, though it is an ideal and not a law, and some couples may be reluctant to consult their local assembly

[8] Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, 1992, p. 105.

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over personal difficulties.

Divorce is regarded as reprehensible, to be resorted to only when grave issues

are involved which transcend considerations such as physical attraction and sexual compatibility. But if the couple come to have an aversion for each other then they may separate, and a divorce will undoubtedly be granted.

An 'indispensable condition of divorce' is a waiting period of one year, which will be begun in consultation with the assembly. During that 'year of patience' the couple should seek reconciliation, if at all possible. But they should live in separate quarters and not have sexual relations, for that would invalidate the year of waiting and it would have to be begun again. If reconciliation is achieved and sexual relations resumed, but the relationship breaks down, then a full year of waiting begins again.

After the 'year of patience', if a reconciliation has proved impossible, the spiritual assembly grants a divorce and the couple are free to seek a civil divorce. This may in fact be sought at the same time as the religious divorce, though this is not encouraged since it may impair the chances of reconciliation, and there can be no engagement or remarriage until the Bahá'í divorce is granted. The divorcees receive the support of the community and the local spiritual assembly will assist in working out terms for division of property and custody of children.

CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION

Neither Bahá'u'lláh nor 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote anything on the subjects of contraception or abortion, and in the absence of scriptural teachings Bahá'ís have taken as guiding principles the sanctity of human life and the purpose of marriage being the formation of an environment for the procreation and education of children.

Contraception in the abstract is neither condoned nor condemned. It may be practised within married life, and there are other purposes to sexual relationships than solely procreation. Within the bond of marriage couples can make their own decisions in spacing the birth of children

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and in controlling conception. But this would not justify trial or companionate marriage, in which the couple would postpone or abandon having children with the possibility of separation by mutual consent.

Acceptance of contraception within marriage is a more liberal attitude than the official Roman Catholic position, but on abortion there is a closer resemblance and for a similar reason. A letter in 1976, from the Universal House of Justice, pointed out that in Bahá'í belief 'the soul appears at conception, and that therefore it would be improper to use a method [of contraception], the effect of which would be to produce an abortion after conception has taken place'.^[9] Yet even in such cases Bahá'ís should be guided both by their own consciences and the best professional advice available. Factors such as purpose and reversibility should be taken into account when making decisions on contraception. Abortion, however, is not considered permissible except in exceptional circumstances. Abortion for convenience, or for the sake of

preserving a particular lifestyle, is thus ruled Out. Teachings insist on the sacredness of life, and the purposes for which marriage was ordained. This is linked to a general respect for science, and a couple that finds itself faced with conditions that would threaten the life of the mother-to-be should seek guidance from the most competent doctor available.

HOMOSEXUALITY

In the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, homosexual and transsexual practices are not regarded as permissible. This is despite the varying attitudes often adopted towards them in history and in modern life in the West, indeed in a challenge to such laxity. Homosexual relationships are regarded as against nature, aberrations, and it is said to be wrong to give them expression in sexual acts, however devoted and fine the love may be between people of the same sex.

[9] Bahá'í Studies Notebook, p. 143.

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As often in other religions, Bahá'í writings on homosexuality include two concepts. One is the homosexual orientation or disposition, a relatively stable psychological or mental condition in which a man or woman is attracted to persons of the same sex. The second is homosexual behaviour, meaning sexual acts between individuals of the same sex. It is the latter that is regarded as immoral, to be avoided like pre-marital or extra-marital relationships. Thus a letter from the Universal House of Justice stated that 'the condition of being sexually attracted to some object other than a mature member of the opposite sex, a condition of which homosexuality is but one manifestation, is regarded by the Faith as a distortion of true human nature, as a problem to be overcome, no matter what specific physical or psychological condition may be the immediate cause'.^[10]

The homosexual state is regarded as unnatural, but the community is advised to be forbearing for 'to be afflicted in this way is a great burden upon a conscientious soul . . . any Bahá'í who suffers from such a disability should be treated with understanding, and should be helped to control and overcome it. All of us suffer from imperfections which we must struggle to overcome and we all need one another's understanding and patience.'^[11]

The homosexual person is advised to seek the help of doctors and to make determined efforts to overcome this condition. He or she should be helped and advised by spiritual means as well as medical. The community should be forbearing in matters of moral conduct, but not endure them indefinitely which would bring disgrace to the Cause.

Blatant acts of homosexual behaviour are firmly censored and the person told to abandon them. Unless an individual's actions were flagrant, a homosexual would not be removed from full participation in the Bahá'í community. Voting rights may be removed as a temporary administrative sanction, which simply removes the right of

[10] Letter to an individual, 1993.

[11] Ibid.

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participation in the life of the community for a time.

Although marriage was strongly recommended by Bahá'u'lláh, and normally it is the duty of every person to marry, yet he or she may have to wait a long time before finding a suitable spouse. Similarly it is said that a homosexual may remain single for life, and yet be able to fulfil his or her life's purposes.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The Bahá'í Faith affirms the equality of men and women, and this is claimed as peculiar to its teachings and an advance from the patriarchal emphasis of the Semitic religions.

The Bahá'í Faith originated in the Islamic society of nineteenth-century Iran where then, as now, women were heavily veiled. Bahá'í women were not required by their religion to wear the veil in the Middle East, but they usually did wear the chador so as not to offend the cultural values and proprieties of the societies in which they lived.

Bahá'ís point out that humanity 'has two wings', male and female, and not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Not until men and women become equal, 'in the acquisition of virtues and perfections', can success and prosperity be attained.

In the family the man cannot claim scriptural support for headship which would justify wife or child abuse. More generally, no major decision should be taken without husband and wife consulting each other. All family members have rights and 'certain prerogatives' which must be preserved.

The education of women is insisted upon, girls being taught equally with boys. Not only are parents enjoined to educate both sons and daughters, but they are told that the training and culture of daughters is 'more necessary than that of sons'. For these girls will become mothers and will mould the lives of their own children in due course. An untrained and uneducated daughter, when she becomes a mother, will be 'the prime factor in the deprivation and lack of training' of children. So parents are exhorted to

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train their children, 'especially the daughters'.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said that the female qualities of love and service were gaining ascendancy in the world, and the coming new age would be 'less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals'.

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