

Counselling Members of the Bahá'í Faith Involved in Domestic Violence: Some Special Consideration

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Introduction: Religion as Resources and Roadblock

The crisis of family violence affects people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of these dimensions must be addressed, both for victims and for those in the family who abuse them. Occasionally in response to abuse in the family, a social worker, psychotherapist, or other secular service provider will wonder, "Why bother with religious concerns?" The answer is a very practical one: religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of family violence are primary issues. If not addressed in some way they will become roadblocks to the client's efforts to resolve the crisis. In addition, a person's religious beliefs and community of faith... can provide a primary support system for the individual and his family.

Religious concerns can become roadblocks or resources for those dealing with experiences of family violence because these concerns are central to many people's lives. The outcome depends on how they are handled.¹

It is a tragic fact that much domestic violence is reinforced by so-called "religious" teachings that are actually man-made perversions of teachings of the Manifestations and Prophets of God—perversions which the old world order has allowed to alter, and eventually displace, the true teachings. For example: Moses' commandment to "Honor thy father and mother" has been perverted to "children have no rights." The Old Testament prophets' teachings on humility have been twisted to "I am worthless." Jesus' example of obedience to his mission, even to death, and his acceptance of the bitter cup of crucifixion has somehow become "suffering is good for the soul, and happiness and fun are tools of the devil."

Muhammad's bold actions in raising women from no-status-at-all and commanding their protection have been perverted back to what, in our modern society, amounts to no-status-at-all. Even St. Paul never intended his words, originally meant to protect Christian women from being mistaken for women of easy virtue, to mean non-personhood for females. Some forget that he also wrote those beautiful words: "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church"—willing to submit to humiliation, torture, and death; to accept all toil and torment; to give up one's very life in eternal faithfulness to one's beloved.

These perversions of divine teachings are some of the spoiled fruits of the old world order that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh came to replace. How then, can a Bahá'í spouse or parent be guilty of domestic violence or abuse?

The answer becomes immediately obvious. Because of the Faith's youth, the great majority of Bahá'ís are converts. Although they have embarked on a voyage to the spiritual new world, their "new clothes" are packed in the old, worn luggage of past intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives.

As the Faith expands rapidly, there are new Bahá'ís—even whole new Bahá'í communities (community corresponds to church or parish)—with insufficient deepening to (1) overcome their past misconceptions of the roles of men and women (to mention one area) or (2) correct their present misunderstandings of the tenets of their newfound faith.

It is easy to see how a person's religion can be a resource to strengthen families. However, any poorly understood religious belief in the hands and hearts of people experiencing stresses and tensions, people who have a poor self-image, people who are fearful, can become not only a roadblock to family healing, but can itself become a tool for inflicting hurt.

This paper is intended primarily for family counsellors who are not members of the Bahá'í Faith. Because it is an independent religion, the Bahá'í Faith is as distinct from Christianity as Hinduism is from Islam. Although many Christian and Bahá'í teachings are similar, there are many differences—differences that are important to remember for successful counseling of Bahá'ís involved in domestic or sexual violence situations.

The paper is also intended for assistance to Local Spiritual Assemblies in their handling of such cases within their jurisdiction. Although some of the roadblocks discussed here will seem incredible to many Bahá'ís, they must not be dismissed lightly. Many Bahá'ís are not well deepened in the teachings of the Faith. The principles and writings to which they have been exposed have often been no more than a few sentences, used in a particular context, with no background offered to fill in the complete picture. Every one of the examples used in this paper is from real life. It is these kinds of incomplete understanding of the Bahá'í teachings that are the roadblocks which wise and compassionate Assemblies must dismantle.

The thrust of the paper is threefold:

1. To show how misunderstandings of certain teachings can become roadblocks to successful counseling.
2. To show how Bahá'í beliefs, properly understood, can be resources on which a counselor can draw to strengthen family relationships (and individuals facing problems in this area of life)
3. To show how other teachings can be used as resources to correct the misunderstandings that act as roadblocks.

The Role of Bahá'í Institutions in the Life of the Individual Believer

There is no such idea in Bahá'í law or teachings as “absolute rights” over any human being by any other. Only the Manifestations of God possess the divine right to order human beings in the conduct of their lives. However, humans have always retained that awesome gift of free will, the ability to say “yes” or “no” to the commands of God. Yet, if life on this planet is to follow, in any measure, the divine order, there must be rules and institutions to enforce those rules. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

...the free exercise of the individual’s rights and the security of...person and property,...dignity and good name [must be] assured.²

In *Paris Talks*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “The general rights of mankind must be guarded and preserved.”³ Bahá'ís are given two ultimate ruling bodies to whom they are responsible: the civil law of the country wherein they reside and the Universal House of Justice.

Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested are: ...to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals; and to give attention to the preservation of human honour.⁴

At the national level there are the National Spiritual Assemblies and at the community level, the Local Spiritual Assemblies, which will one day be called by their intended titles: Houses of Justice. Bahá'u'lláh has ordained that:

...in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá.... It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God...even as they regard their own interests.⁵

...all Bahá'ís should be encouraged to turn to their Assemblies for the solution of the various problems.⁶

These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to—indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and unity and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers.⁷

The proper course, for a Bahá'í, is to report a problem to the Local Spiritual Assembly. It is the duty of the Assembly to investigate and then direct a victim to the proper authorities. Should the aggressor be willing to meet with the Assembly, an attempt should be made to consult about taking steps to overcome his noxious behaviour.

In recent and continuing studies, the National Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence has found that Christian and Jewish clergy are not equipped to recognize the problem or to admit that it exists, let alone deal with it. It would be surprising if most Bahá'í Assemblies were in any better state of understanding with regard to family violence and/or sexual abuse.

It may be, for personal reasons, the victim consults a civil authority or professional counselor without first consulting with the Assembly. The counsellor should always ascertain whether or not the counselee has consulted with the Assembly. If so, what was its advice or decision? If not, why has there not been a consultation? Unless there is a serious breach of communication between the counselee and his Assembly, the Bahá'í who has not sought Assembly consultation should be encouraged to do so. At best, additional strengths and resources may be made available to both the abused and the abuser. At worst, the counselee's conscience will be clear. Further, if a counselee feels that the Assembly's advice or decision is in error, he may appeal its decision to the National Spiritual Assembly.

The Local Spiritual Assembly has the authority to inform appropriate members of the Bahá'í community that a problem exists, if the problem is such that potential victims must be cautioned. The Assembly, of course, has no influence on the behaviour of those who do not recognize or respect its authority, and other steps may have to be taken, under the Law of Justice, to protect members of the Bahá'í community and the larger civil community as well.

Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life

For Bahá'ís, the family is the building block of society. Marriage, though not mandatory, is encouraged and religious celibacy forbidden.

And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book. He saith...."Marry, O people, that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants; this is one of My commandments unto you; obey it as an assistance to yourselves."⁸

In a true Bahá'í marriage the two parties must become fully united both spiritually and physically, so that they may attain eternal union throughout all the worlds of God, and improve the spiritual life of each other.⁹

Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties on to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart...Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity....¹⁰

Bahá'í family life thus involves high ideals and hard spiritual work. To bolster family unity, no Bahá'í can marry without the consent of his living parents, as Bahá'u'lláh has written in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

As We desired to bring about love and friendship and the unity of the people, therefore We made it conditional upon the consent of the parents also, that enmity and ill-feeling might be avoided.¹¹

The Bahá'í revelation introduces the equality of men and women as an article of faith. It is stated categorically as a major principle of faith:

He establishes the equality of man and woman. This is peculiar to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, for all other religions have placed man above woman.¹²

The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.¹³

In line with these teachings on equality, there is no one "head" of the household to whom the other must submit. In the book *Fortress of Well-Being*, this interesting point is made:

When two people agree on and submit to the same principles, they have both freedom and unity in their relationship. If one submits his will to the other, rather than both submitting to God's will, neither is free,

and the union is man-made rather than spiritual. It is out of touch with reality and may be unstable or even destructive.¹⁴

The word “I” does not appear in the Bahá’í wedding vow: “Verily, we will all abide by the Will of God.”

No Bahá’í male can ever claim any scriptural support for “male authority/headship” as an excuse for wife or child abuse. Husband and wife are to be equal in all things and make no major decision without consulting each other, and, when relevant, their children. Parents and children are to consult together on important matters, consonant with the maturity of the children. All family members are to respect each other’s rights and fulfill their responsibilities to the family. Patriarchal or matriarchal households have no place in the Bahá’í life.

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogative must be conserved....¹⁵

These references apply to sons and daughters equally. Many specific quotations are from a source in which that is clear, or were originally directed to a particular individual.

Bahá’í children are to be neither pampered and spoiled, nor beaten into submission.

Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element. The child when born is far from being perfect....He should be trained, his natural inclinations harmonized, adjusted and controlled, and if necessary suppressed or regulated, so as to insure his healthy physical and moral development. Bahá’í parents cannot simply adopt an attitude of non-resistance toward their children...they should endeavor to inculcate, *gently and patiently*, into their youthful minds such principles of moral conduct...with such *tactful and loving care* as would enable them to become “true sons of God...”¹⁶ [author’s emphasis]

This respect for women and children is also true of the Christian ideal, of course, but unlike Christianity with its history of subordinating women to their husbands and fathers, the Bahá’í Faith has no scriptures that can be interpreted to rationalize the abuses about which we are concerned in this paper. Furthermore, there is no Bahá’í law permitting a child to submit to violence or sexual abuse, under the guise of “obedience.” Bahá’í children are children of the Bahá’í community, and the community has the duty and responsibility to protect them from harm.

“Companionate marriage”—defined by dictionaries as both “a system of trial marriage in which the couple would postpone having children and could be divorced by mutual consent”¹⁷ or “an association of a man and a woman in cohabitation without the bonds of marriage”¹⁸—is absolutely forbidden. Thus, sex outside the marriage, including living together, is not permitted. Sex education for the wise and healthy use of sex, however, is definitely encouraged.

The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established.¹⁹

In Bahá’í life, the primary purpose of marriage is the formation of a stable sexual union to bring forth and educate children. As other previous quotations have shown, it is also the formation of a lifelong, even eternal, bond of intimate friendship between a man and a woman, each assisting the other in spiritual growth.

Within this bond, the couple is expected to make its own decisions about the control of conception and the spacing of births. Among the things couples are to take into account, according to letters from Shoghi Effendi in 1937 and quoted and enlarged upon by the Universal House of Justice in 1972 and 1976, are the following: the Bahá’í purpose of life and of marriage; an attitude of hope and joy for the future of mankind; and the medical circumstances. However, in a 1976 letter, the Universal House of Justice points out that:

...the Teachings state that the soul appears at conception, and that therefore it would be improper to use a method, the effect of which would be to produce an abortion after conception has taken place....²⁰

In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice instructs that although sterilization and abortion are forbidden, there may be medical circumstances which justify even these extreme means. Abortion for the sake of

preserving a lifestyle or for convenience seems clearly to be ruled out. Therefore, the teachings on the sacredness of life, the purposes of marriage, the respect for science, and the guidance to seek the best and most competent physicians must all be taken into account when a couple is forced to make such a weighty decision.

Divorce is another weighty decision facing some Bahá'í couples. Divorce is strongly condemned in the Bahá'í writings, but not forbidden. When the entity of marriage is dead and the covenant between the couple is broken, there is nothing to be gained by prolonging the outward union.

The friends must strictly refrain from divorce unless something arises which compels them to separate because of their aversion for each other; in that case, with the knowledge of the Spiritual Assembly, they may decide to separate. They must then be patient and wait one complete year. If during this year harmony is not reestablished...then their divorce may be realized.... The foundation of the Kingdom of God is based upon harmony and love, oneness, relationship and union, not upon differences, especially between husband and wife. If one of these two becomes the cause of divorce, that one will unquestionably fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse.²¹

Divorce is permitted, but only when it is clear that there is no hope of resuscitating the bond of matrimony. The individuals are free to remarry. But divorce is to be viewed only as a last resort, when all other measures have failed. However, once the individual is granted divorce, he or she continues to receive the support of the community. A Bahá'í couple (including a marriage where there is only one Bahá'í partner) is to bring the marital problem to the Assembly, which will consult with them and direct certain action. If the rift is too wide for early counseling, the couple is granted a “year of waiting.” This is required. Shoghi Effendi has stated:

...the one-year separation between husband and wife [is] an indispensable condition of divorce....²²

During this year they live in separate quarters. They are usually directed to seek counseling. They are not permitted to date or to have sexual relations with anyone, not even each other. They are, instead, encouraged to talk about their problems and seek a reconciliation, if possible, and if not, agree to fair and honourable terms of divorce, child custody and property division.

The local Assembly... can act as a board of arbitration if the couple disagrees about the terms and conditions of divorce, and when it so acts the couple are to abide by its decision.²³

When a year has ended, if there is no reconciliation, the Assembly grants a divorce. When the Bahá'í divorce is granted, they are free to seek a civil divorce. In actuality, most couples pursue both at the same time. Should the civil divorce be granted—for instance to a non-Bahá'í partner—before the Bahá'í divorce, there is no penalty for the Bahá'í partner, but he still may not date or remarry until the Bahá'í divorce has been granted. Remarriage to a third party during the year of waiting may result in the loss of Bahá'í administrative rights.²⁴

Specific Teachings as Resources and Roadblocks

A. Prohibition of Asceticism

It is not a Bahá'í teaching that this life is a “vale of tears,” nor is it God's Will that his creatures endure suffering for the sake of suffering. The Bahá'í Faith rejects all asceticism. Shoghi Effendi says:

The standard inculcated by Bahá'u'lláh, seeks, under no circumstances, to deny anyone the legitimate right and privilege to derive the fullest advantage and benefit from the manifold joys, beauties, and pleasures with which the world has been so plentifully enriched by an All-Loving Creator.²⁵

God commands that we be happy and shows us how to overcome fear and anxiety.

The primary purpose, the basic objective, in laying down powerful laws and setting up great principles and institutions dealing with every aspect of civilization, is human happiness; and human happiness consists only in drawing closer to the Threshold of Almighty God, and in securing the happiness and well-being of the human race.²⁶

We must always be happy... for it is impossible to live in the Spiritual World and be sad. God desires happiness for all His creatures.²⁷

As to spiritual happiness, this is the true basis of the life of man, for life is created for happiness, not for sorrow, for pleasure, not for grief....²⁸

The foregoing paragraphs do not mean that Bahá'ís are never unhappy—only that they have the duty to “get over it” and get on with fulfilling their main purpose in life: carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization, or as Christians would say, to be about their Father’s business. As Bahá'ís, we believe that we have the power within us to be happy—not ecstatic over misfortune, necessarily, but to have within us a deep conviction that God loves us so much He has placed us within this most exciting time in history. The Lord of Hosts has come! The time has been fulfilled and the new world is at hand.

One of the most beautiful—and spiritually useful—prayers of ‘Abdu’-Bahá is this:

O God, refresh and gladden my spirit...I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved, I will be a happy and joyful being.²⁹

Note that the prayer does not say: “I wish I could,” or “Gee, it would be nice if I could.” It says: “I will.” But suffering does occur. Certainly we will never understand the mysteries of suffering while in this world: the inevitable sorrows of life that result from situations beyond our control and the sufferings which we bring on ourselves and others by failure to follow the laws of God. Rúhíyyih Rabbani (the widow of Shoghi Effendi) has put it well:

Life is full of hazards...it is right and proper that people should do all in their power to struggle against and abolish unnecessary suffering and things that cause tragedy, heartbreak and illness.... People should always resent afflictions thrust upon them unnecessarily and strive to eliminate them.³⁰

This suffering, e.g., wars, prejudice, is not part of God’s plan; it is in opposition to it. That these sufferings should continue is not acceptable to God, nor should it be acceptable to us. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá even attributes the sufferings caused by natural disasters indirectly to disobedience to God’s laws.³¹ The laws of geology, weather, psychology, and biology are, after all, God’s laws. When we ignore them, suffering results.

The other kind of suffering, that which is beyond our control, comes not only from the actions of others (as given above) but also results from the ordinary turns of life: the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, separation and so on. God, like a loving parent, gives us what we need more often than He gives us what we want. The trials of earthly living are tests, i.e. opportunities for spiritual growth. As Rúhíyyih Rabbani puts it:

...We must recognize that under duress great things are born.... To struggle gives us strength.... We must not run away from the heartbreaks of life; we must go through with them, however fiery they may be.... We are not expected to like suffering; we should not foolishly think of it as some ascetics do, as a virtue in itself and cultivate it through self-mortification and torture; but we should, when the cup is at our lips and we have no choice but to drink it down strongly and courageously, knowing it will hurt but strengthen, wound, but eventually heal.³²

God is not some monstrous fiend who sends us trouble after trouble in order to “purify our souls.” God is not a “hanging judge” who delights in punishing each and every failure and infraction with divine wrath!

It is not God’s Will that a woman be beaten by her husband or be sexually assaulted. He did not “send” her that man to punish her or test her. The husband chose to behave as he does; the wife chose to remain with her husband despite his behaviour. She may indeed gain strength from her experience; she may find new strengths and insights into her own choices, but she neither has to feel guilty nor continue to put up with the ill-treatment.

B. The Prohibition of Backbiting

A Bahá'í teaching which, when misconstrued, may keep a victim from seeking aid is the law against “backbiting,” speaking evil against another person. Bahá'u'lláh says:

Regard backbiting as {a} grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quengeth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.³³

But it is important that the Bahá'í who is reluctant to “blow the whistle” on a relative, spouse, or friend who is guilty of domestic or sexual abuse be made clear on what backbiting is and what is not.

There is no Bahá'í writing that forbids giving testimony against a wrongdoer. As a matter of fact, the Law of Justice (which we will later present at greater length) demands it in order that peace and harmony may prevail in the community and human life be respected. On no account can the law against backbiting be used to allow an abuser to escape justice or prosecution. This may be made very clear to the victim and references on justice used to give moral support.

The Assembly can also assist the offender by invoking the law against backbiting to suppress gossip and keep a problem from becoming a community scandal. This makes it possible for the offender to seek help and make a new start without being condemned by the weight of a bad reputation. On the other hand, unfortunately, this can result in keeping potential victims in ignorance, especially when it involves sexual abuse of children. This is a serious and delicate issue, and one which requires the utmost in sound judgment on the part of the Assembly. When and how to caution the community is a decision that must be made, however, as the community also has a God-given responsibility for the safety and welfare of its members, especially its children.

C. The Prohibition of Confession

Another law, which, when misunderstood, may keep Bahá'ís from seeking counseling or may cause them to refuse to undertake counseling, is the law forbidding confession.

It is not allowable to declare one's sins and transgressions before any man, inasmuch as this has not been, nor is, conducive to securing God's forgiveness and pardon.³⁴

Bahá'u'lláh prohibits confession to, and seeking absolution of one's sins from a human being, and enjoins the sinner, when alone, to repent before God... In this connection the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer: “We are forbidden to confess to any person... our sins or shortcomings... However, if we spontaneously desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something, or that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so.”³⁵

It is clear from the writings that the confession referred to is a spiritual matter, and not psychological or judicial. It is sin and its forgiveness that we are not to bring before another human. If we have broken a civil law, the Bahá'í law of civil obedience takes precedence: we are to admit the wrongdoing and take our punishment.

Other teachings which apply are related to the principles of the unity of science and religion and the worthiness of knowledge and use of our intellectual capacities.

The fourth teaching... is the agreement of religion and science. God has endowed man with intelligence and reason... the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition.³⁶

The teachings on science and religion hold the science of healing, in all its aspects, in the highest regard. Bahá'u'lláh directs us to make use of the best available physicians and techniques.

Should ye be attacked by illness or disease, consult skillful physicians.³⁷

... Bahá'u'lláh has urged us to avail ourselves of the help of good physicians, Bahá'ís are certainly not only free to turn to psychiatry for assistance but should, when available, do so... it means we are free to avail ourselves of the best medicine has to offer us.³⁸

In short, the admission of one's mistakes, faults, and evil deeds to a counselor, a psychiatrist, or a representative of the law is not “confession” any more than giving testimony against an abuser is “backbiting.”

D. Nonviolence

O friends of God! Force and violence, constraint and oppression are condemned....³⁹

The foundation of the Kingdom of God is laid upon justice, fairness, mercy, sympathy and kindness to every soul. Then strive ye with heart and soul to practice love and kindness to the world of humanity at large....⁴⁰

The same issues are involved in nonviolence as in equality, except that it may be the wife or mother involved instead of the man of the household. Bahá'ís are permitted to engage in physical violence under certain circumstances, but none of these occasions involves taking the offensive. A Bahá'í is permitted—even commanded—to defend himself or anyone else against violence. But violence, even to repel violence, is always the last resort.

...in an emergency when there is no legal force at hand to appeal to, a Bahá'í is justified in defending... life.... The assault of an irresponsible assailant upon a Bahá'í should be resisted....⁴¹

The exception is that Bahá'ís are not permitted to take up arms in defense of the Faith. We are cautioned that religious persecution must never be allowed to turn into religious warfare. This is the reason that individual Bahá'ís have not defended themselves against the attacks made upon them by Iranian “religious” zealots.

...it is... preferable to be killed in the path of God's good-pleasure than to kill, and ... organized religious attack ... should never turn into any kind of warfare....⁴²

The Bahá'í sent to a counselor (or who has come on his own) for correction of violent behaviour knows that he is at fault, and that there is no spiritual justification whatsoever for his violent behaviour.

Any blatant acts of immorality on the part of Bahá'ís should be strongly censured; the Friends should be urged to ... straighten out their affairs and conduct themselves as Bahá'ís.⁴³

E. Individual Worth

A Bahá'í who is serious about his religion and who is also guilty of domestic violence is already carrying a heavy load of guilt by the time he gets to counseling. Social scientists know that the root cause of abusive behaviour is a lack of self-worth, the lack of a place in the world in one's own right. Therefore, counseling must aim at restoring the offender's sense of self-worth as well as the victim's. There are no more valuable references in any holy books than these:

O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.... I loved thy creation, hence I created thee.... I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down... Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself?... Out of the clay of love I molded thee.... Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.... Thou art My light and My light shall never be extinguished.... Thou art My glory and My glory fadeth not; thou art My robe and My robe shall never be outworn.... My grace to thee is plenteous, it cannot be veiled. My love has made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed.... My eternity is My creation, I have created for thee.... My majesty is My gift to thee, and My grandeur the token of My mercy into thee.... Know thou, that I have wafted unto thee all the fragrances of holiness, have fully revealed to thee My word... and have desired for thee that which I have desired for My self.⁴⁴

These teachings of self-worth are equally necessary for the abused spouse or child. Victims do not “deserve” the maltreatment they have received. No one has any right to demean their God-given dignity as human beings!

F. The Law of Justice

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice....⁴⁵

As forgiveness is one of the attributes of the Merciful One, so also justice is one of the attributes of the Lord. The tent of existence is upheld upon the pillar of justice.⁴⁶

Justice is not limited, it is a universal quality.... Justice must be sacred, and the rights of all people must be considered.⁴⁷

For the Bahá'í there is no such thing as forgiveness without justice:

If a person commit a crime against you, you have not the right to forgive him....⁴⁸

In other writings by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi it is made clear that individuals are to forgive, as individuals, but that they must seek justice as members of the social order. You may find it in your heart—in fact, you *must* find it— personally to forgive someone who has harmed you, rather than seek revenge, but you also have duty to see that he is safely put away in jail (if need be) for the protection of society.

If the community and the inheritors of the murdered one were to forgive and return good for evil, the cruel would be continually ill-treating others.... The foundation of human life would crumble.⁴⁹

The canopy of existence resteth upon the pole of justice, and not of forgiveness, and the life of mankind dependeth on justice and not on forgiveness... it is not advisable to show kindness to a tyrant, a traitor or a thief, because kindness encourages him to become worse.⁵⁰

This clarifies the apparent flaw that many find in the Christian teaching of turning the other cheek. A confused Christian may ask what is to stop the bully from bullying? The Bahá'í answer is the Law of Justice.

Summary

In this brief paper, I have tried to present aspects of the Bahá'í Faith that differ from Christianity as it is expressed and/or practiced by a large part of contemporary North American society. Armed with this knowledge, a counsellor of any faith can be of significant help to his Bahá'í clients and their families; and a Bahá'í counselor or Assembly can be of immeasurable help to undependent or confused Bahá'ís.

The Bahá'í Faith is young, corresponding to the Christian Faith in its second century, and this is an imperfect world full of imperfect people all struggling toward perfection. Health professionals will inevitably encounter some Bahá'ís as victims and offenders. I hope that the information given here will help counsellors to deal successfully with their Bahá'í clients' problems in a way that will strengthen their families, their humanness, and their faith.

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