

THE DIVINE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Introduction

Marriage is the basic human unit upon which the societies of mankind are built. Without this foundation the vitality, cohesion and the very life of society suffers, and its growth is hampered if not prevented. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, marriage is a "divine creation and there is not the slightest possibility that change or alteration affect this divine creation."¹

Atoms combine to form molecules; and molecules, if quickened by the forces of life, become the basic components of a unified and growing body. Likewise, when a man and woman are brought together by the power of love and are united through spiritual bonds in the institution of marriage, they become the cause of well-being, salvation, and ongoing growth of society.

Marriage, in its healthy, mature state, functions as: (1) an instrument for the fulfillment of some basic human needs; (2) as a medium for growth; and (3) as a contribution to the peace and tranquillity of the world of mankind

Marriage and Basic Needs

Basic human needs are biological, psychosocial and spiritual. The biological needs for procreation and sex find their fullest, healthiest gratification in the context of marital life. The Bahá'í teachings acknowledge the validity and importance of procreation and sex in marriage: "Enter ye into wedlock, that after you another may arise in your stead"² and "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."³ Likewise, the psychosocial needs are most possibly fulfilled within the marriage relationship. Such strong psychosocial needs as the need to belong, to care and to be cared for, to understand and to be understood, to give and to receive, to praise and to be praised, to appreciate and to be appreciated, to notice and to be noticed, and to love and to be loved, are all best developed and fulfilled in the context of a healthy marriage and family. Important issues such as the laws of interpersonal relationships, individual and social rights and responsibilities, and the development of cooperative and creative (constructive) forms of behaviour are all most effectively developed and safeguarded in the context of marriage and family. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. 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 of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all.⁴

Finally, spiritual needs such as the development of an all-encompassing purpose and meaning, an unconditional love, a creative and constructive lifestyle and an ever-expanding knowledge of the human being about both himself and his Creator, are best satisfied in the context of the joys and sorrows, accomplishments and trials, mysteries and wonders of marriage and family. The following statement by Bahá'u'lláh identifies knowledge and love as the main purpose of man's existence. However, these two qualities are also the essential ingredients for the creation and development of marriage and family. The couple needs to know and to love each other:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation....⁵

Marriage and Individual Growth

Marriage also functions as a medium for personal growth. For an individual to grow in a healthy and complete manner he needs to move from the condition of self-centeredness to other directedness, from quest for *mosavat*⁶ (i.e., equality) to *movasat* (i.e., preferring others over oneself), from self-ignorance to universal knowledge, and from the bondage of instinctual animal life to the freedom of an enlightened and creative spiritual life. The tasks, challenges and opportunities of marriage and family life greatly assist all the individuals involved to grow and mature along these lines. In order best to understand the relationship between individual growth and marriage and family life, one needs only to review the responsibilities of parenthood. It is clear that for parents to be effective teachers of their children and to be able to assist their children's growth and maturation, parents must themselves possess the cardinal qualities of maturity and healthy development. Consequently, the many references in the Bahá'í writings to the education of children are directly applicable to the parents. Thus, the following statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is a blueprint for personal growth which can best be achieved in the context of family life:

As to thy question regarding the education of children: It behooveth thee to nurture them at the breast of the love of God, and urge them onward to the things of the spirit—that they may turn their faces unto God; that their ways may conform to the rules of good conduct and their character be second to none; that they make their own all the graces and praiseworthy qualities of humankind; that they acquire a sound knowledge of the various branches of learning—so that from the very beginning of life they may become spiritual beings, dwellers in the Kingdom, enamored of the sweet breaths of holiness, and may receive an education religious, spiritual, and of the Heavenly Realm. Verily will I call upon God to grant them a happy outcome in this.⁷

The parents should not only help their children to grow in this manner but as husband and wife, should help each other to acquire these positive qualities.

Marriage and Peace

The third cardinal purpose of marriage is its contributions to the peace and tranquillity of not only the members of an individual family but also of the members of the family of mankind.

And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to man, 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....⁸

In a general sense the truth of this statement is clear and needs no elaboration. However, even in a more specific manner, marriage and family promote the oneness of mankind, facilitate unity between different age groups and unity along sexual, educational, and social lines. From the Bahá'í perspective there is considerable similarity of purpose for the life of the individual, the family, and the world of humanity at large. At the core of these purposes is unity and peace. The following quotes from the Bahá'í writings elaborate on this fact:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization....To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.⁹

Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household, and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations, and you have all humanity. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation. Would it add to the progress and advancement of a family if dissensions should arise among its members, all fighting, pillaging each other, jealous and revengeful of injury, seeking selfish advantage? Nay, this would be the cause of the effacement of progress and advancement. So it is in the great family of nations, for nations are but an aggregate of families.¹⁰

Of the principles enshrined in these Tablets the most vital of them all is the principle of the oneness and wholeness of the human race, which may well be regarded as the hallmark of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and the pivot of His teachings. Of such cardinal importance is this principle of unity that...He unreservedly proclaims it as the central purpose of His Faith.¹¹

This brief review of the Bahá'í teachings on the roles and function of marriage attempts not only to point out the importance of this divine institution in the life of humanity, but also to remind us how far we are from the objectives and characteristics of a true Bahá'í marriage. In the midst of the gloom, despair, and ineptitude of contemporary marriage, the Bahá'í perspective and views on marriage may be perceived as too idealistic and impossible to achieve. Beyond this initial perception, however, one can recognize the validity and soundness of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on marriage through personal experiences, hopes, and aspirations. We all yearn to create marriages and families characterized by unwavering love, harmony, cooperation, joy, and trust. Furthermore, we know that all our efforts must be dedicated to these objectives regardless of the negative conditions characterizing the unhealthy, divided marriages and families of our time.

The presentations in this volume are the responses of a number of researchers and clinicians, both Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, focussing on marriage from a new, universal perspective. These authors, while putting forward their individual views (not a Bahá'í perspective on marriage) have, nevertheless, studied the Bahá'í writings on the subject of marriage and have attempted to integrate these insights with their clinical and scientific experience and knowledge. The readers of this volume, therefore, will find these presentations particularly illuminating supplemented with a comprehensive study of the writings of the Bahá'í Faith on this topic.

There are a total of nine papers in this volume, and they appear alphabetically according to author. Michael Bruwer, in his paper, "The Poetry of Loving Family Therapy and the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith," covers a wide range of topics and insights found in current literature on family therapy. He identifies a number of concepts enunciated in the Bahá'í writings on the topic of marriage and points to the harmony between these teachings and the current scientific and clinical insights on marriage and family therapy. The reader will especially enjoy the sensitivity with which these topics are treated.

In "The Development and Dimensions of Love in Marriage" Hossain Danesh describes the developmental stages of love and identifies the cardinal components of a marital love relationship. His concepts are based on the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and on his clinical experience and research. Of particular interest is the fact that he shows the fundamental harmony existing in all aspects of the life of humanity. In the same way that growth and development are the basic characteristics of every individual and society, they are also the main qualities of other aspects of life such as man's love and knowledge. Thus, we recognize the quality of unity and harmony in the life processes of an individual, a marriage and love relationship. All are advancing towards greater heights of maturity, spirituality, and refinement.

Ruth and Helgi Eyford, mother and son, collaborated to produce a paper entitled "Marriage: The Eternal Principle." In this paper they focus on man's spiritual journey which begins at this level of existence and continues as a journey toward the ultimate goal of attaining knowledge and love of God. The universal phenomenon operative at all levels is that of the union of male and female entities. This phenomenon is the most rewarding in the union of a man and a woman in the divine institution of marriage. Thus, marriage becomes a vehicle for immortality. After setting forth these basic foundations, the authors then review some of the current concepts of marital therapy in support of their views.

In "Human Responses to Life Stress and Suffering," 'Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian summarizes the current theories of stress and identifies four types of responses to stress: the psychological, physiological, social, and spiritual. In this paper, he identifies both the healthy and unhealthy aspects of each of these responses and identifies some aspects of coping with stress. In the section on spiritual coping, some examples are drawn from the recent martyrdoms of Bahá'ís in Iran, stressing the importance of dealing with suffering in a meaningful manner.

Khalil Khavari, in his paper on "Marriage and the Nuclear Family: A Bahá'í Perspective," discusses the importance of the nuclear family within a general Bahá'í framework. He describes the main purpose of marriage such as procreation and the training and education of children and focusses on other important objectives as well. A sound marriage, he purports, must be based on a balanced attraction between a man and a woman—spiritual, intellectual, and physical. The author, furthermore, outlines some of the attitudes and behaviours essential for the maintenance of a loving, positive marital relationship and communication and identifies the primary importance of relying on the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith for inspiration and direction.

"Marriage Breakdown in North America: A Psychosocial Perspective," is Kerry Mothersill's comprehensive review of the current conditions of the institution of marriage and its breakdown. He points out that between 1966 and 1979 the Canadian divorce rate increased by 490%. In 1979 there was approximately one divorce for every three marriages in Canada and one divorce in every two marriages in the United States. The author then reviews some of the psychosocial consequences of marriage breakdown and the related stresses. The remainder of the paper is a review of the causes of marriage breakdown in which such factors such as individualism, societal pressures, sex role expectations, materialism, and erosion of community life are identified as playing important roles.

Nossrat Peseschkian, in his paper entitled “Applications of Positive Psychotherapy for Marriage and Family Therapy,” describes the basic aspects of Positive Psychotherapy, a therapeutic approach he developed and which is accepted in psychiatric circles in Europe. Positive Psychotherapy is based on cross cultural insights and wisdom, a basis which allows the therapist to see the constructive and inherently positive aspects of a given type of behaviour and, through the use of stories and humour, help the individual to resolve his conflicts. Furthermore, the focus in Positive Psychotherapy is on health rather than illness and on the fundamental nobility of man rather than negative concepts current in other schools of psychotherapy. For those interested in new methods of therapy, this paper offers an interesting new approach and conceptual framework.

“Parental Authority: Its Uses, Misuses and Implications,” is one of the few papers in the volume which focusses exclusively on the family. In this paper, Sandra Roberts stresses the important responsibility of parents to educate their children. She focusses specifically on the issue of power and authority in the family. Three forms of parenting are identified: the authoritarian, the authoritative, and the permissive, the authoritative parenting style being considered most healthy. The author points out that parenting is not an easy task and that it requires considerable attention and knowledge which can be obtained through study of academic literature on these issues, as well as the extensive guidance available in the Bahá’í writings.

The final paper in this volume is “Counselling Members of the Bahá’í Faith Involved in Domestic Violence: Some Special Considerations,” by Janet Tanaka, and is addressed to those family therapists who may be in a position of counselling Bahá’ís involved in domestic violence. The author points out that family violence has become widespread and is found in both the religious and nonreligious types of families. To orient the non-Bahá’í counsellor towards the Bahá’í Faith, the author describes the role Bahá’í institutions play in the life of the individual believer, the importance of marriage and family life in the Bahá’í Faith, and some of the more specific teachings of the Bahá’í Faith affecting human relationships. Among this latter group are such topics as the prohibition of backbiting, confession, violence, and injustice.

Throughout this volume, the pronoun “he” is used to indicate the third person. In no way is it intended to focus the reader’s attention on its gender connotation. Everything that is said about “he” applies equally to “she.” Men and women are absolutely equal. Biological differences do not and should not stand for inequality.

It is the hope of the editors that this volume will help the readers in their efforts to understand various issues related to marriage and family, to engender interest for further research, and to create a forum for the exchange of views and research findings.

References

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *A Fortress for Well-being* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1973), p. 6.
2. Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 49.
3. Shoghi Effendi, Letter on his behalf dated September 5, 1938, *National Bahá’í Review*, no. 47, November, 1971, p. 3.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 168.
5. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 65.
6. “Mosavat” and “movasat” are two Arabic words used in the writings of the Bahá’í Faith to describe relationships based on equality (mosavat) and preference of others over oneself (movasat).
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Education: A Compilation*, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (Thornhill: Bahá’í Community of Canada, 1977), p. 27.
8. *Bahá’í Prayers*, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 105.
9. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 215.
10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 157.
11. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes by* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1965), pp. 216–17.