

Marriage in the Bahá'í Faith

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The Bahá'í World, Volume 7, pp. 761-765

Immediately following Naw-Rúz, celebrated in the quickened spirit which observance of the Nineteen Day Fast brings and in anticipation of the 25th anniversary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America, this cablegram from Haifa was received by The National Assemblies of the Bahá'í World:

“Announce assemblies celebration marriage beloved Guardian. Inestimable honor conferred upon handmaid of Bahá'u'lláh, Rúhíyyih Khánum, Miss Mary Maxwell. Union of East and West proclaimed by Bahá'í Faith cemented.” (Signed) Zíáíyyih, Mother of the Guardian.”

During that first electric moment of comprehension, the longing heart of every believer was fused in spirit to the heart of the Bahá'í World in Haifa, to become recharged with the currents of spiritual energy secreted there. For it is not alone the union of two well-beloved individuals that is bringing about such far-reaching results. The roots of this marriage lie embedded in the soil from which the faith itself springs, and its fruits will nourish and sustain future generations.

It contributes to the permanence of the institution of the Guardianship, head cornerstone of the Administrative Order and focal point of the power of Interpretation, the only center wherein the seeds of unity can germinate, the purest channel from which the unfoldment of Truth springs; it is the fulfillment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, “The East and the West shall embrace as two lovers” and a visible symbol of the future when the spiritual dynamic contributed by the East and the World Order ushered in by the West shall be centered in one spot, in Haifa; it makes the followers of Bahá'u'lláh—already divorced from crumbling religious institutions—dissociated from the corruption of modern politics—more acutely aware of the sharp cleavage between a society which mocks at chastity, condones the practice of celibacy, free-love, sterile and companionate marriage, unbridled divorce and between those distinctive attributes of a moral life commanded by Bahá'u'lláh as the immovable foundation of His universal society.

Though we label the various crises through which the world is passing as economic or national in character, fundamentally the problem is one of human relationships. And in the vast complex network of personal influences in which the pattern of society is interwoven, its first nucleus, its most fundamental institution throughout all the ebb and flow of human history has been that of marriage. Upon the stability of its laws, made in accordance with the exigencies of time, civilizations have been born, and upon its decay, they decline. It is a laboratory into which all the elements of social readjustment are tried and evaluated, the hidden core where man's deepest emotions are focused.

A true understanding of the meaning and purpose of marriage depends upon a knowledge of man as the form to which this institution, as all others, must be shaped; of a knowledge of the true axis around which man's responses to life must revolve; and a knowledge of the one power that can turn man on that axis.

Bahá'u'lláh has said, “The essence of all knowledge is the knowledge of God which can be known only through His manifestations.” Let us learn how He speaks of God and of them, and of man.

(1) “From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self and will everlastingly continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence.... No one except Thyself can unravel the secret of Thy Nature, and naught else but Thy transcendental Essence can grasp the reality of Thy unsearchable being.... How can I claim to have known Thee, when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy mystery and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo, the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy Truth?”

(2) “These sanctified Mirrors, these Day Springs of ancient glory, are, one and all, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the Universe, its Essence and Ultimate Power....

“The Source of Infinite grace hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the Spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be manifest unto all men, that They may

impart unto the world the mysteries of the Unchangeable Being and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence...through Them is transmitted a grace that is infinite and by Them is revealed a light that can never fade.”

(3) “The purpose of God in creating man hath been and will ever be to enable him to know His Creation and to attain His Presence.... Upon the reality of man, He hath focused the radiance of all His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His Own Self.”

“Thou art My dominion and My dominion perisheth not, wherefore fearest thou Thy perishing? Thou art My light and My light shall never be extinguished, why dost thou dread extinction? Thou art My glory and My glory fadeth not, thou art My Robe and My Robe shall never be outworn. Abide then in thy love for Me that thou mayest find Me in the realm of glory.”

Against such a background made luminous by such concepts, man must learn to move in obedience to Divine laws as the only ones fitted to mold him and society. Religion as revealed by the Prophets must be recognized to have the right to regulate human conduct. For it alone surrounds and embraces in its comprehension all realities, the tangible proofs of science as well as the invisible power of the abstractions of the spirit. It is this power—or its lack—which brings about the birth or death of great historic epochs, and a new awareness to man of himself as an eternal, spiritual being. Today man, enmeshed like a Jonah in the whale-like body of materialism, is enslaved to an animal condition. Static and fixed about a confused and torn axis, a center of conflicting emotions and ideas on the very essentials of life, he is either consumed by hatreds or frozen sterile to any thought of mitigating the misery and injustice that sweep the world. We need to reverse this process. To seek a calm and fixed and stable axis around which the responses of mind and heart—of both the greatest and smallest social unit—must revolve, tempering the cold of one and heat of the other; an instrument by which all capacity may be measured, a constant point wherein the vari-colored racial and cultural individual temperaments may each retain their special characteristics yet embrace one another as in the unity of light.

All these requirements are met in the Love of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “There are four kinds of love:

(a) “The love of God for His Creation, the reflection of Himself in the mirror of creation. Through one ray of this Love all other love exists.

(b) “Love of God for His children, His servants. Through this love man is endowed with physical existence until, through the breath of the Holy Spirit—this same Love—he receives eternal life and becomes the image of the Living God. This Love is the origin of all love in the world of creation.

(c) “The love of man for God. This is faith...this is attraction to the Divine World, entrance into the Kingdom of God, receiving the bounties of God.... This love is the origin of all philanthropy; this love causes the heart of man to reflect the rays of the Sun of Reality.

“Bahá’u’lláh says, ‘Love Me that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can never reach thee.’

(d) “The love of man for man. The love which exists between the believers is prompted by the ideal of the unity of spirits. This love is attained through the knowledge of God, so that men see the Divine Love reflected in the heart. Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and, finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love. This love will make all men the waves of one sea, the stars of one heaven, the fruits of one tree.”

“But the love which sometimes exists between friends is not true love, but is subject to transmutation. As the breeze blows, the slender trees yield.... This kind of love is originated by the accidental conditions of life. This is not love, it is merely acquaintanceship; it is subject to change....”

Life might be expressed in the form of a triangle. The base is laid upon the connection between the expression of life’s duality—negative and positive, active and passive, male and female, giver and receiver. Reality is at the apex and cannot be realized in the submission of one basic force to another or loss of identity of either, but that the essential quality of each is equally contributed to meet in a common center higher than and outside each other. This analogy illustrates the contribution of man and woman, potentially equal in the faculties in which they share and of those particular gifts in which they differ. Together they are

“the two wings of a bird” sharing equally in the power of mind and spirit while differing in aspect and the fields in which their specialized gifts qualify them to operate. Muhammad stated that everything was created in pairs: man and woman each have vacuums in their nature which seek completion. Cognizant of this void and realizing the necessity for its fulfillment, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

“Regarding the question of matrimony: know that the command of marriage is eternal. It will never be changed or altered. This is a Divine creation and there is not the slightest possibility that change or alteration shall affect this Divine Creation.”

“Among the majority of the people of the world marriage consists of physical relationship, and the union and relationship is but temporary, for at the end physical separation is destined and ordained. But the marriage of the people of Bahá must consist of both physical and spiritual relationship.... When relationship, union and concord exist between the two from a physical and spiritual standpoint, that is real union and is therefore everlasting...”

“Consequently when the people of Bahá desire to enter the sacred union of matrimony, eternal connection, ideal relationship, spiritual and physical association of thoughts and conceptions of life must exist between them, so that in all the grades of existence and in all the worlds of God this union may continue forever and ever. For this union is a splendor of the Light of the Love of God.”

Referring to those who become spiritually awakened after marriage, He writes: “Likewise if the souls become real believers in God they will find themselves ushered into this exalted state of relationship, become manifesters of the Love of the Merciful, and exhilarated by the cup of the love of God. Undoubtedly that union and relationship is eternal.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá in writing to a Bahá’í stated that everyone had an affinity, but that affinities did not always meet in this world, and if they did, they might not be happy together, as this was not a place for perfect happiness. He added that there was no power that could keep them apart and that in one of the worlds of God they would recognize their oneness, and go through eternity inseparable. He refers further to this:

“The souls who sacrifice self, become detached from the imperfections of the realm of man and free from the bondage of this ephemeral world, assuredly the splendors of the rays of Divine Union shall shine in their hearts, and they shall find ideal relationship and happiness in the Eternal Paradise.”

Out of the fusion of two souls a third subtle entity is born. Though invisible and intangible on earth it is the composite soul of true lovers. The progress of one mysteriously influences the other, they become the tutors of each other’s soul. Distance or death, being physical forces, cannot cause its disintegration. To a Bahá’í whose husband had died, the Master wrote:

“Be confirmed with such deeds as to become the cause of his joy and happiness in the other world.”

When marriage has such permanent value, we can understand the importance of the preliminary steps which lead up to it.

“In this Merciful Age the ignorant prejudices are entirely removed. The Bahá’í engagement is the perfect communication and the entire consent of both parties. However, they must show forth the utmost attention and become informed of one another’s character, and the firm covenant between them must become an eternal bond and their intention must be everlasting affinity, friendship, unity and life.”

No parental interference is permitted until after careful study of each other’s character and the sincerity of one another’s intentions are assured. Then the matter is brought before the four parents for consent. If consent is given a three months’ engagement is suggested. Should the consent be withheld for any just cause, the two may strive to eradicate the cause, while if the reason for dissent seems founded on prejudice, the matter may be brought before the Local Assembly.

These laws might seem to restrict rather than extend the means of human happiness. The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh is to establish unity and all these laws are to widen the area of that unity. Marriage is not primarily for the gratification of personal desires. Dr. Alfred Adler says, “Love and marriage are never the private affair of anyone: they are the concern of the whole of mankind, and they constitute a social problem.” In the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, society is dedicated to the service of God: marriage is one aspect. Though adherence to the laws of the country of origin is compulsory, the Bahá’í marriage

ceremony—performed by any chosen Bahá'í of voting age and in the presence of nine witnesses—circles around this theme. [Note: Some of these guidelines are no longer accurate.] 'Abdu'l-Bahá when performing the wedding ceremony of two Iránian Bahá'ís in London first asked each one separately, “Do you love—with all your heart and soul?” Then joining their hands together, He asked them to repeat after Him the words, “We do all to please God.” Further instructions are:

“The bridegroom must, before the bridesmen and a few others, say, ‘Verily, we are content with the will of God.’ And the bride must rejoin: ‘Verily, we are satisfied with the desire of God.’ This is Bahá'í matrimony.” [Note: The translation currently in use for both the bride and bridegroom is: “We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.”]

The love which each partner bears for the other is made subservient to the love of God and is merged solely to increase their capacity to serve Him. Not through centering all their forces upon each other is the reality of the beloved found. That love fluctuates and is conditioned by outward circumstances. One moment it is aroused by ephemeral incidents and accidents, the next to hate by the irritations which close proximity sometimes brings. But in seeking unity in the love of God (the apex higher than their separate selves), the inmost reality of each is found, for it is a magnet which can only draw forth truth. Though the currents of life's experiences eddy around the outer rim of existence, yet the very heart of one's being rises upward to lie undisturbed in the unity of this Divine love. The deep happiness of such a union makes more clear the meaning of procreation as the primary purpose of marriage. Bahá'u'lláh forbids celibacy and commands, “Enter ye into wedlock that one may rise up in your stead.” When one has touched even the outer fringe of the joy which faith in Bahá'u'lláh brings, a life-time spent in grateful service seems too short. It is then the greatest privilege and most sacred obligation to bring into being those who may continue in joy to serve and praise God, who showers those bounties on His conscious servants.

The most fundamental attributes of love, faithfulness and loyalty which attract and eternally connect the souls with God, are the qualities which bind lovers together in marriage. Chastity then is a prerequisite and adultery an abomination. The deferment of marriage, due to economic causes and industrial life which now has lowered the morale, will disappear in the new World Order. A new sense of values is arising in this age, and “one moment of chastity is equal to ten thousand years of adoration.” [The current translation is: “One speck of chastity is greater than a hundred thousand years of worship and a sea of knowledge.”] The severe punishment imposed upon adultery by Bahá'u'lláh we can understand. When marriage is entered into in the Bahá'í spirit and the promises are made not to one another but to God—“Promise not that which you cannot fulfill” commands Bahá'u'lláh—adultery is a complete violation of that pledge and a negation of the forces of unity; it is spiritual anarchy affecting both the innocent and the guilty; it is blasphemy towards that Source to which both turn. Should one of the partners in a marriage entered into sincerely, afterwards meet another who was his or her true affinity, the violation of the former vows can only more deeply separate the affinities. For it is a spiritual attraction which cannot be truly consummated except in the love of God. There are all the worlds of God where such lovers may unite.

In the matter of divorce 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

“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 re-established between them, 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 become the cause of divorce, that one will, unquestionably, fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse.”

Should the husband absent himself from home and neglect to notify his wife of his movements, Bahá'u'lláh has given her the right to divorce him and to remarry, but He added, “If she is patient it is better, for God loves those who are patient.” Divorce is made slightly easier than marriage. In the future, when through evolution we have more appreciation and greater understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's ordinances, divorce will be rare and the forces of disunion would have to be so great as to endanger one another's

spiritual growth and physical health. The year's separation before divorce is granted will abolish all the abuses of the present day when incompatibility of temperament is based upon the childish dislikes of undisciplined adults rather than on any legitimate cause. The problems of marriage are, for the most part, fundamentally problems of living, so its failure is to acknowledge defeat in one's adjustment to life and lack of faith in the love of God.

This love of God is the indwelling spirit of every human creature, which motivates him as an individual in the personal contacts of his every day. But that spirit, to become the living force of civilization, must be transformed into its social counterpart of Justice. Within Bahá'u'lláh's Plan for World Order, the Houses of Justice (local, national and internationally) become the lamp which diffuses the flame of this love into Justice. Upon the members of the local Houses of Justice—now called Spiritual Assemblies—lies the responsibility for the spiritual and material unity of the group as a whole; upon each individual member lies the sacred obligation to maintain that unity by turning to that body for advice or the solution to any problem affecting the relationship of two or more individuals. And the decision of that freely elected body (chosen in the spirit of prayer), is unanimously obeyed. The highest point of fulfillment to be reached through the Administrative bodies and the first point of contact with the invisible, spiritual resources of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh both meet in the institution of the Guardianship. The Bahá'í World celebrates in the marriage of the first Guardian the further strengthening and safeguarding of its glorious destiny. Each Bahá'í man and woman, within an infinitely smaller orbit, strives to make his or her own marriage become a vital and integral part of that future, the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh.

To that end and in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, they pray:

“Glory be unto Thee, O My God! Verily this Thy servant and this Thy maid-servant have gathered under the shadow of Thy Mercy and they are united through Thy favor and generosity. O Lord, confirm them in Thy Servitude and assist them in Thy Service. Suffer them to become the Signs of Thy Name in Thy world and protect them through Thy Bestowals which are inexhaustible in this world and in the worlds to come. O Lord, they are supplicating towards the Kingdom of Thy Mercifulness and invoking towards the Realm of Thy Singleness. Verily they are married in obedience to Thy Command. Cause them to become the Signs of harmony and unity till the end of time.

“Verily Thou art the Omniscient, the Omnipresent and the Almighty.”