

# PRESERVING BAHÁ'Í MARRIAGES

AMEMORANDUM PREPARED BY THE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF THE  
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In recent months a number of questions have been raised about the Bahá'í attitude towards divorce and the importance of preserving the marriage bond. These questions served to stimulate both a review of the guidance contained in the Bahá'í Teachings on this vital subject and an exploration of some of the implications of these Teachings for everyday life. The focus of the following presentation is limited to a consideration of the Bahá'í attitude towards marriage and divorce, the grounds for a Bahá'í divorce, and a discussion of steps that can be taken to strengthen distressed marriages. No attempt has been made to address such topics as the requirements of the year of waiting and the responsibility of the Spiritual Assembly in administering the Bahá'í divorce law.

## 1. THE BAHÁ'Í ATTITUDE TOWARDS MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

The subject of divorce needs to be considered within the framework of the Bahá'í concept of marriage. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the bond between the marriage partners.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes marriage as "a true relationship"<sup>1</sup> a spiritual and physical "coming together",<sup>2</sup> a "union"<sup>3</sup> that "will endure"<sup>4</sup> "in all the worlds of God".<sup>5</sup> He refers to the marriage partners as "two intimate friends"<sup>6</sup> and asserts that, should they live in unity,

they will pass through this world with perfect contentment, bliss and peace of heart, and become the object of divine grace and favour in the Kingdom of heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Shoghi Effendi in letters written on his behalf characterized marriage as a “divine institution”<sup>8</sup> and a “most sacred and binding tie”<sup>9</sup> that “should lead to a profound friendship of spirit, which will endure in the next world”.<sup>10</sup>

“Harmony, unity and love”<sup>11</sup> are described as “the highest ideals in human relationships”.<sup>12</sup> It follows, then, that wherever a Bahá’í family exists every effort should be made to preserve it. Marriage and family life have a vitally important “social function”<sup>13</sup> — the perpetuation of the human race and the preservation of social order.

The Bahá’í Teachings permit divorce but strongly discourage its practice. Shoghi Effendi indicates that Bahá’u’lláh “has only permitted it as a last resort”<sup>14</sup> and that He “strongly condemns it”.<sup>15</sup> He noted that there was a tendency for the believers to be affected by the prevailing cultural influences which “are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tearing down the moral structure of society”.<sup>16</sup> He adjudged “modern society”<sup>17</sup> to be “criminally lax as to the sacred nature of marriage”<sup>18</sup> and called upon the friends to “combat this trend assiduously”.<sup>19</sup> It is useful, therefore, to examine more closely the statements in the Writings in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Bahá’í attitude towards divorce and to identify ways to stem its rising tide.

The serious nature of divorce is conveyed graphically in the Bahá’í Writings. For example, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá’u’lláh states that “God. . . abhorreth separation and divorce”,<sup>20</sup> while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that if one of the partners

becomes the cause of divorce, that one will unquestionably fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse.<sup>21</sup>

While divorce is not forbidden in the Bahá’í Faith, it is “very strongly frowned upon”.<sup>22</sup> Letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi indicate that divorce is “discouraged, deprecated and against the good pleasure of God”.<sup>23</sup> It is considered as “a reprehensible act”<sup>24</sup> and the believers are called upon to “make almost a superhuman effort not to allow a Bahá’í marriage to be dissolved”.<sup>25</sup> Divorce is, therefore, regarded as “a last resort to be avoided if humanly possible”.<sup>26</sup>

Both husband and wife have the right to ask for a divorce should they feel it “absolutely essential to do so”.<sup>27</sup> The Guardian’s secretary, writing on his behalf, has indicated that, though permissible, “only under very exceptional and unbearable circumstances is di-

voiced as advisable for Bahá'ís<sup>28</sup> and that the believers should resort to divorce "only when every effort to prevent it has proved to be vain and ineffective".<sup>29</sup> In this context, it must also be recognized that the very fact that Bahá'u'lláh has permitted divorce is "an indication that in certain circumstances it is unavoidable".<sup>30</sup>

## 2. REASONS FOR DIVORCE

Under what circumstances, then, is divorce permissible?

In *A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 42, it is stated that:

If antipathy or resentment develop on the part of either the husband or the wife, divorce is permissible, only after the lapse of one full year.<sup>31</sup>

Also, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised the believers to

strictly refrain from divorce unless something ariseth which compelleth 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.<sup>32</sup>

The Universal House of Justice links the notion of "aversion"<sup>33</sup> with the concept of "irreconcilable antipathy"<sup>34</sup> and it states that "divorce is permissible when an irreconcilable antipathy exists between the two parties to the marriage".<sup>35</sup> It further clarifies that such "antipathy . . . is not merely a lack of love for one's spouse but an antipathy which cannot be resolved"<sup>36</sup> and states that the Spiritual Assembly must find that this condition "appears"<sup>37</sup> to exist before the date for the year of waiting can be established.

It is interesting to note that there are "no specific 'grounds' for Bahá'í divorce such as there are in some codes of civil law".<sup>38</sup> Hence the misbehaviour of either party and considerations such as a lack of "physical attraction or sexual compatibility and harmony"<sup>39</sup> do not automatically constitute causes for divorce. The House of Justice has clarified that:

A Bahá'í should consider the possibility of divorce only if the situation is intolerable and he or she has a strong aversion to being married to the other partner.<sup>40</sup>

The strength of the “aversion”<sup>41</sup> is thus a key element. The responsibility for determining whether a condition of “aversion”<sup>42</sup> or “antipathy or resentment”<sup>43</sup> exists in any particular situation rests with the individual marriage partners in consultation with the Spiritual Assembly.

### 3. PRESERVING MARRIAGE

Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá’í marriage. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi set out a number of helpful guidelines to assist individuals to make wise and considered decisions in relation to marriage. For example, the Master counselled potential partners

to exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever.<sup>44</sup>

The Guardian’s secretary writing on his behalf to an individual who had sought his advice about a proposed marriage plan cautioned against “too hasty action”<sup>45</sup> which “inevitably produces”<sup>46</sup> “anxiety and suffering”<sup>47</sup> and called upon the believer to

give this question, which is of such vital concern to your future, the full consideration it deserves, and examine all its aspects carefully and dispassionately.<sup>48</sup>

The choice of marriage partner rests with the individuals concerned. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that, before this choice is made, the parents “have no right to interfere”.<sup>49</sup> However, once the individuals have chosen, “then the matter is subject to the consent of father and mother”.<sup>50</sup> Shoghi Effendi in a letter dated 19 March 1938 written on his behalf affirmed that the “freedom of the parents”<sup>51</sup> in exercising their “right”<sup>52</sup> to consent to the marriage of their child is “unrestricted and unconditioned”.<sup>53</sup> He further stated that they “may refuse their consent on any ground, and they are responsible for their decision to God alone”.<sup>54</sup>

It must be noted that the requirement of parental consent to marriage is not merely an administrative regulation. It is described as a “great law”<sup>55</sup> which Bahá’u’lláh “has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home”.<sup>56</sup> Its purpose is “to promote unity and avoid friction”.<sup>57</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings contain many references to the importance of maintaining loving and unified family relationships. The friends are not only called upon to “do everything in their power to preserve the marriages they have contracted”,<sup>58</sup> but they must also “make of them exemplary unions, governed by the noblest motives”.<sup>59</sup> In addressing this theme we draw specifically on letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice in response to questions from believers who were experiencing marital difficulties, in order to identify steps that might be taken to reduce the need for divorce.

### 3.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFORT

Patient, prayerful and self-sacrificing effort is required in order to preserve marital and family life. In this regard Shoghi Effendi called upon couples to “take constructive action”<sup>60</sup> and not allow a deteriorating situation to get worse:

When the shadow of separation hangs over a husband and wife they should leave no stone unturned in their effort to avert its becoming a reality.<sup>61</sup>

Couples are encouraged to make every effort to “salvage their marriage for the sake of God, rather than for their own sake”,<sup>62</sup> confident in the knowledge that even if their “endeavours do not yield any immediate fruit”<sup>63</sup> they are, thereby, fulfilling their “duty as a Bahá'í”.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2 MUTUAL RESPECT AND EQUALITY

The relationship between husband and wife is characterized by “mutual respect and equality”.<sup>65</sup> It is “governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of force to compel obedience to one’s will”.<sup>66</sup> When asked to provide specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives, the Universal House of Justice drew attention to a number of broad guidelines contained in the Writings:

... for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when

the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgement they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.<sup>67</sup>

### 3.3 COOPERATION AND A FORGIVING ATTITUDE

Reconciliation calls for a forgiving attitude and the willingness to endeavour to “compose . . . differences”<sup>68</sup> and to avoid “acting in such wise as to alienate the other party”.<sup>69</sup> In relation to the development of an attitude of forgiveness, the Universal House of Justice provided the following advice to a spouse who enquired about how to cope with angry feelings experienced as a result of marital disharmony:

You ask how to deal with anger. The House of Justice suggests that you call to mind the admonitions found in our Writings on the need to overlook the shortcomings of others; to forgive and conceal their misdeeds, not to expose their bad qualities, but to search for and affirm their praiseworthy ones, and to endeavour to be always forbearing, patient, and merciful. Such passages as the following extracts from letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian will be helpful:

There are qualities in everyone which we can appreciate and admire, and for which we can love them; and perhaps, if you determine to think only of these qualities which your husband possesses, this will help to improve the situation. . . . You should turn your thoughts away from the things which upset you, and constantly pray to Bahá'u'lláh to help you. Then you will find how that pure love, enkindled by God, which burns in the soul when we read and study the Teachings, will warm and heal, more than anything else.

Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own. Each of us is immeasurably far

from being 'perfect as our heavenly father is perfect' and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will-power and energy. . . .<sup>70</sup>

The crucial importance of the cooperative efforts of the marriage partners in striving to create a happy and secure marriage is stressed in the extract from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice which is cited below:

Noting that you and your husband have consulted about your family problems with your Spiritual Assembly but did not receive any advice, and also discussed your situation with a family counsellor without success, the House of Justice feels it most essential for your husband and you to understand that marriage can be a source of well-being, conveying a sense of security and spiritual happiness. However, it is not something that just happens. For marriage to become a haven of contentment it requires the cooperation of the marriage partners themselves, and the assistance of their families.<sup>71</sup>

### 3.4 CONSIDERATION OF CHILDREN

In letters addressed to couples who were contemplating divorce, Shoghi Effendi drew attention to the fact that the presence of children "places an even greater weight of moral responsibility on the man and wife considering such a step".<sup>72</sup> They are called upon to "think of the future"<sup>73</sup> of their children and to recognize that children of divorced parents

cannot but suffer from conflicting loyalties, for they are deprived of the blessing of a father and mother in one home, to look after their interests and love them jointly.<sup>74</sup>

It should be noted that while the Bahá'í Teachings place great emphasis on giving careful consideration to the potential impact of a divorce on the children, the couple is not required to remain married *solely* because of the existence of children in the household. Shoghi Effendi in a letter dated 10 November 1943 written on his behalf stated:

Bahá'u'lláh has laid great emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, and the believers should exert their utmost to create harmony in their homes and a situation which at least is not bad for their children. But if, after prayer and self-sacrificing effort, this proves quite impossible, then they may resort to divorce.<sup>75</sup>

### 3.5 FAMILY CONSULTATION

The Universal House of Justice has identified "loving consultation"<sup>76</sup> as "one of the keys to the strengthening of unity"<sup>77</sup> in the family. Furthermore, the House of Justice has stated that: "Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict."<sup>78</sup> To be effective, such consultation must, in addition to being frank, moderate and balanced, be characterized by mutual respect and equality. For example, in describing the process of consultation and decision-making within the family, the Universal House of Justice stated:

In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.6 CONSULTATION WITH THE SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

When believers are experiencing marital difficulties they are encouraged "to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship".<sup>80</sup> The general and continuing responsibilities of the Spiritual Assembly in handling an application for Bahá'í divorce and in counselling the believers are spelled out in the following extract from a letter dated 6 May 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:



When an application for divorce is made to a Spiritual Assembly, its first thought and action should be to reconcile the couple and to ensure that they know the Bahá'í teachings on the matter. God willing, the Assembly will be successful and no year of waiting need be started. However, if the Assembly finds that it is unable to persuade the party concerned to withdraw the application for divorce, it must conclude that, from its point of view, there appears to be an irreconcilable antipathy, and it has no alternative to setting the date for the beginning of the year of waiting. During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their differences, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them. . . .<sup>81</sup>

### 3.7 PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING

In addition to consulting the Spiritual Assembly, it might also be beneficial for the couple “individually and together if possible”<sup>82</sup> to seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counsellors. Such professionals can, according to the Universal House of Justice, provide “useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity”.<sup>83</sup> The House of Justice further suggests that “it is usually necessary to temper”<sup>84</sup> non-Bahá'í counselling with “Bahá'í insight”.<sup>85</sup>

### 3.8 SERVICE — “THE TRUE BASIS OF UNITY”<sup>86</sup>

Shoghi Effendi described “service”<sup>87</sup> as “the true basis”<sup>88</sup> of family unity and called upon the family members to “arise with renewed effort to teach the Faith”.<sup>89</sup> The Guardian’s secretary writing on his behalf to one couple who had “jointly undertaken a most successful teaching tour”<sup>90</sup> stated:

This bond of common service to the Cause which is so closely uniting your hearts . . . has proved such an effective solution of your personal problems.<sup>91</sup>

And the hope was expressed that this “bond”<sup>92</sup> would be “further cemented by the passing of years”<sup>93</sup> and through the couple’s “increased and joint participation in the teaching work”.<sup>94</sup>

In another instance, where “inharmonious and unhappiness”<sup>95</sup> had arisen in a couple’s home, they were counselled to devote more of their time to teaching the Cause and “to pray together that Bahá’u’lláh may give you a real and lasting love for each other”.<sup>96</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Bahá’í Teachings present a very balanced approach to the subject of divorce. On the one hand, “divorce is discouraged and should be resorted to only when a prolonged effort to effect reconciliation has been unsuccessful”.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, “divorce is permissible when an irreconcilable antipathy exists between the two parties to the marriage”.<sup>98</sup> The marriage partners, in the first instance, have the moral responsibility to determine both the extent of the “aversion”<sup>99</sup> and whether their effort has been “prolonged”.<sup>100</sup> The Spiritual Assembly must also conclude that the condition of “antipathy or resentment”<sup>101</sup> appears to exist before setting the date of the year of waiting.

The effort required to preserve and strengthen a Bahá’í marriage is prolonged and inescapable. It requires prayer, perseverance, self-sacrifice, mutual respect, a willingness to cooperate and to forgive, and frank and loving consultation. It can, at times, be very painful. However, the Universal House of Justice provides the following assurance that the result of a “consecrated and determined effort”,<sup>102</sup> even in seemingly impossible cases, is frequently blessed with a positive outcome:

There have been many instances in which a couple has, through a consecrated and determined effort, aided by the power of prayer and the advice of experts, succeeded in overcoming seemingly insuperable obstacles to their reconciliation and in reconstructing a strong foundation for their marriage. There are also innumerable examples of individuals who have been able to effect drastic and enduring changes in their behaviour, through drawing on the spiritual powers available by the bounty of God.<sup>103</sup>