

*** THE FAMILY IN A WORLD COMMUNITY

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Like the world as a whole, the family is in transition. In every culture, families are disintegrating, fragmenting under pressure of economic and political upheavals and weakening in the face of moral and spiritual confusion.

The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation.*

Baha'is see these disturbances as signs of humanity's struggle toward a new age in its collective development, an age of maturity. The family, as the most basic unit of society, must in this process be remolded and revitalized according to the same principles that are reshaping civilization as a whole.

The central principle for this new day is the oneness of humanity. "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security," Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, asserted over a century ago, "are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." Acceptance of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all people implies the renewal of every social institution on the planet, including the family.

** UNITY IN THE FAMILY

If love and agreement are manifest in a single family, that family will advance, become illumined and spiritual.

The Baha'i approach to family unity combines elements of traditional wisdom with progressive principles and practical tools. Adherence to these teachings offers a bulwark against the forces of disintegration and a framework for the creation of strong, healthy, unified families.

The foundation and precondition for a Baha'i family is the loving relationship of husband and wife. Marriage, a divine creation, is intended to unite a couple "both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other." A man and woman, having freely chosen one another and having obtained the consent of their parents, marry, according to Baha'i law, in the presence of witnesses designated by the elected governing council of the community, the Local Spiritual Assembly. With the words "We will all, verily,

abide by the will of God," recited by both bride and groom, the two commit themselves to God and, thereby, to one another.

One purpose of marriage is the creation of a new generation who will love God and serve humanity. The task of the family is, therefore, to establish a loving, respectful and harmonious relationship among parents and children.

Harmony and cooperation in the family, as in the world, are maintained in the balance of rights and responsibilities. All family members "have duties and responsibilities towards one another and to the family as a whole," which "vary from member to member because of their natural relationships."

Children, for instance, have the duty to obey their parents. They also have the corresponding right to be cared for, educated and protected. Mothers, as bearers and first educators of children, are primarily, but not exclusively, responsible for their spiritual education and the creation of a loving nurturing home. Fathers bear primary, but again not exclusive, responsibility for the financial well-being of the family and for the formal education of the children.

The personal moral standards promoted by the Baha'i teachings condemn many of the agents that contribute to the break-up of families. Alcohol is forbidden to Baha'is, as are mind-altering drugs. No form of violence or abuse within the family is ever to be tolerated. According to the Baha'i sacred writings:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed.

Although strongly discouraged by Baha'u'llah, divorce is permitted on the grounds of antipathy between husband and wife. It may be granted only after a year of waiting during which a couple lives separately and makes every attempt to reconcile their differences. Protected against hasty decisions and rash emotions, many couples are able to rebuild their marriages during this year of reflection. If, however, reconciliation proves impossible, the couple may divorce.

** THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

The principle of the equality of men and women is transforming relationships within Baha'i marriages. Because they are equal partners, a status embodied in their identical wedding vows, neither husband nor wife may dominate. Decision-making is to be shared.

Always, the atmosphere within a family and within the community as a whole should express. . . not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.

The Baha'i principles of consultation are tools for discussing openly, honestly and tactfully any problem which arises within the family. The goal is to allow "the truth to be revealed" in a way which will solve the problem to the benefit of all. When used by a couple or a family, consultation is a powerful means for

maintaining unity.

Recognition of equality and the use of consultation allow a husband and wife flexibility to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. Although men and women have complementary capacities and functions in certain areas, roles are not rigidly defined and may be adjusted, when necessary, to meet the needs of each family member and the family as a whole. While women are encouraged to pursue their careers, it is in a manner that does not conflict with their role as mothers. And fathers are not exempt from household duties and child-rearing.

When relations within the family are conducted with due regard for justice, it will be an important factor in bringing about peace in the world. When women are denied equality and respect in the family, men and boys develop harmful attitudes and habits which they carry into the workplace, into political life, and ultimately into international relations. As more and more children grow up in families where the rights of all members are respected and problems are solved with the benefit of consultation, prospects for peace in the world improve.

** EDUCATION AND THE FAMILY

Although the child receives formal education at school, it is at home that character is developed and moral and spiritual attitudes are formed. Therefore, "all the virtues must be taught the family." Patience, loyalty, trustworthiness, justice, honesty -- such virtues as these constitute the building blocks of character. The virtues named by all sacred traditions as the common elements of spirituality are the reflection of the Divinity in each person. While nurturing the highest qualities and values in each member of the family, parents must also provide for the integrated development of all their children's capacities -- spiritual, moral, intellectual, emotional, and physical. Therefore, girls and boys are to be formally educated according to the same basic curriculum. Should limited resources force a choice, daughters, as the potential trainers of the next generation, are to be granted a "prior right to education over sons."

** THE FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

The Baha'i Faith has over 17,000 organized local communities in more than 200 independent countries and territories. These communities act in some ways like extended families.

Baha'is come from all nations, ethnic groups, cultures, professions and classes. Although the Baha'i wedding ceremonies vary widely from culture to culture, the marriage laws and vows are universal and apply whether the partners are Baha'is or not. Baha'is around the world are finding that the principles and laws which give a distinctive shape to Baha'i family life are conducive to love and unity.

** CONCLUSION

As the foregoing principles are gradually put into practice around the world, families are being created which are able to play a part in building a unified world society. For the link between the family, the nation, and a world civilization, destined to come in time is inescapable:

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.

*All quotations are from the Baha'i Writings.

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