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A Fortress of Well-Being: Tradition Combined with Progressive Values

Brad Pokorny

"And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed ordinances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it 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."¹

BahĀi'u'llĀih

When families are strong, much is right with the world. In the loving matrix of the family, we can develop our full potential as individuals. Family life is the source of some of our happiest and most satisfying feelings. When families are weak or fragmented, however, almost nothing goes well. The most stressful times of our lives often stem from family troubles, and the overall deterioration of family ties worldwide manifests itself directly in some of humanity's most egregious social problems, from child abuse and homelessness to alcoholism and even modes of development that are not environmentally sustainable.

The Unity of Humanity

The essential message of the Bahá'í Faith is unity. Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Faith, taught that there is only one God, that all the world's major religions have been revealed by God, and that the entire human race is one. Humanity has collectively come of age, Bahá'u'lláh said, and the time has now arrived for all people to unite into a peaceful and integrated global society.

This message of unity has been embraced by increasing numbers of people since 1844, when the Bahá'í Faith was founded. Today, the worldwide Bahá'í community is among the most diverse and widespread organizations on earth. Indeed, members of the Bahá'í Faith reside in more than 200 countries, making it the second most widespread independent world religion after Christianity. The world's five million Bahá'í's come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, trade, profession and social or economic class.

The theme of unity in diversity extends to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the family. Bahá'í's understand that the family is the basic unit of society. Unless this all-important building block is healthy and unified, society itself cannot be healthy and unified.

Traditional yet Progressive

In many respects, the Bahá'í teachings on the family are quite traditional. For Bahá'í's, the family centers around the marriage of two people, man and woman. Monogamy and faithfulness are upheld, as are the virtues of honesty, trustworthiness and mutual respect. The role of mothers,

especially because they are the first educators of children, is exalted.

As well, the personal moral standards promoted by the Bahá'í teachings condemn many of the agents that contribute to the break-up of families. Alcohol is forbidden to Bahá'ís, as are mind-altering drugs. Any form of violence or abuse is strictly contrary to Bahá'í teachings.

At the same time, however, many aspects of Bahá'í family life are not traditional. In its social principles, the Bahá'í teachings are quite progressive and the expression of these principles in daily life has in many respects transformed the institution of marriage so as to withstand far better the crosscurrents of modern society.

In particular, the distinctive nature of Bahá'í family life stands out in at least three areas: 1) the characteristic diversity that one finds within Bahá'í families, 2) the commitment of Bahá'ís to the equality of women and men, 3) the application of consultation, a nonadversarial method for decision-making, in arriving at family decisions.

The response to Bahá'u'lláh's call for human unity can be seen in the sheer diversity of Bahá'í marriages. Bahá'ís pay little attention to differences in race, nationality and ethnic background in choosing mates and international marriages--as well as cross-racial marriages--are extremely common in Bahá'í communities.

Testimonies of Triumph

The marriage of Truitt and Behin White offers an example of a marriage that crosses traditional racial, religious and international bounds. Truitt, an African American who was born in Texas in 1950, was raised initially as a Southern Baptist. At age 19 he became a Bahá'í, and in 1973 he traveled to India and attended a Bahá'í conference for youth in Bangalore. There he met Behin Mihrshahi, a Bahá'í from India and they have lived since both there and in the United States. They have two children: a daughter, Ruha, and a son, Jamal.

The Whites realize that as an interracial and intercultural couple, they stand out from the norm almost everywhere they travel. But for them this visibility is a source of pride. "I realized after we came here to the United States that, as an interracial family, people would be looking at us," said Behin. "But we want to show that it is alright to be from different races and to be married. Because of our belief in the oneness of humankind and in promoting unity, we feel more than comfortable in our relationship."

As in most religions, the marriage vow is considered sacred in the Bahá'í Faith. Yet, although the Bahá'í view on marital fidelity might be viewed as traditional, the Faith's emphasis on the equality of women and men and its promotion of consultation as a tool for problem-solving mean that the roles of husband and wife within the marriage need not be traditional at all. Neither dominates. Decision-making is to be shared. Women are encouraged to pursue their own careers. And fathers are not exempt from household duties or child rearing.

Perhaps most importantly, marriage is seen fundamentally as a spiritual union. One passage from the Bahá'í sacred writings describes marriage this way: "The Lord, peerless is He, hath made man and woman to abide with each other in the closest companionship, and to be even as a single soul. They are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned with the welfare of each other."²

This emphasis on spirituality enables Bahá'ís of diverse backgrounds to come together harmoniously. Take the marriage of Tadaaki and Mary Nouguchi, a Bahá'í couple living in Japan.

Their marriage is unusual by Japanese standards because Tadaaki is a native of Japan and Mary is American-born. In Japan, international marriage is rare because of cultural attitudes that discourage close contact with outsiders.

"Sometimes, when I am out with my wife, I see Japanese people pointing at us and talking about us," said Tadaaki, who is a professor of English literature at Ritsumeikan university in Kyoto. "But I like to believe that we are part of a process where people can come to accept such marriages and can begin to say, 'Yes, it is different to marry a foreigner, but it is also quite normal.'" The pair met in the early 1960s when Mary came to Japan to study Japanese. "When I first came to Japan, I believed that I would never marry a Japanese man, because they tend to be so male chauvinistic," said Mary. "But then I met a number of Japanese Bahá'í men who were very helpful with their families and who obviously had good marriages. Because the Bahá'í Faith stresses the equality of

men and women and the importance of family life, I believe, these men made sacrifices in their careers and in their social status in order to have better relationships with their wives. And I found Tadaaki to be this sort of man."

At the same time, Mary has made sacrifices of her own, sacrifices which she feels would have been next to impossible were it not for the emphasis on life's spiritual reality. In traditional Japanese society, for example, the oldest son is expected to care for his parents when they get old. From the start of their relationship, Tadaaki said he would like to have his parents live with them. Although it is unusual for Americans to live with parents-in-law, Mary readily consented.

"I have several American friends who are not Bahāi'Ā- who are married to Japanese men," she said. "They simply would not put up with having the in-laws in one household. But as a Bahāi'Ā-, I believe that the family is the basic unit of society. If we can't have unity in the family, we can't have unity in the world. So I encouraged Tadaaki's parents to come live with us."

Of course, not every Bahāi'Ā- marriage goes well. While the spiritual insights provided by Bahāi'u'llĀih's teachings can provide great assistance to the individual in facing up to the trials and stresses of modern life, Bahāi'Ā-s would be the first to admit that they are not perfect.

The Bahāi'Ā- teachings permit divorce, although it is strongly discouraged. And if a divorce is sought, the marriage partners must spend at least one year living apart and attempting to

reconcile. If after that "year of waiting" either partner, or both, finds that he or she simply cannot continue, a divorce can be granted.

Many marriages are saved during this year of reflection. It provides a buffer against hasty decisions and rash emotions, and it gives both parties a chance to rebuild their relationships in an atmosphere that is detached from the stresses of living in the same household.

One of the key purposes of Bahá'í marriage, beyond physical, intellectual and spiritual companionship, is children. Bahá'ís view child rearing not only as a source of great joy and rewards, but as a sacred obligation.

For Rebequa Getahoun and her husband, Marshall Murphy, the importance of children has played a central role in their family life. Ms. Getahoun, a native of Ethiopia, married Mr. Murphy, an American, in 1973. They have three sons: Rahim, born in 1974, Yohannes, born in 1976, and Yosafe, born in 1979.

"After Rahim was born, we made a conscious decision to lower our standard of living by living on one salary so that I could stay home with the children," said Rebequa. "We felt that once we started having children, they were our primary responsibility. So we choose a simple life, so that we could create that kind of family atmosphere for our children. That atmosphere included not only a strong sense of parental love, but a determination to ensure that everyone in the family, both children and parents, are treated with respect."

The Limits of Personal Rights

"In our family life, we have made a concerted effort to respect the rights of each member, and not to allow any one member of the family to abuse other members," Rebequa said. "This includes teaching that there are limits to rights. Because we have found that, especially in this American society, individual rights seem to know no bounds. And therefore the concept of limits is a difficult lesson to teach children.

"That is probably one of the most valuable lessons that a family can give to society, to raise individuals to be keenly aware of their rights, and also of the responsibilities that come with those rights," Rebequa said, "because the model for society is the family. When we learn respect and cooperation and equality in the family, we learn it for society."

Bahá'ís understand that each child is born as a blank slate. There is no predisposition to evil or to good. "Children are even as the branch that is fresh and green," say the Bahá'í- sacred writings. "They will grow up in whatever way we train them."³ Accordingly, Bahá'ís understand that when they are raised in the loving atmosphere of a unified family and are provided with parental models for honesty, truthfulness, obedience, respect and unselfishness, children will indeed grow spiritually and gravitate towards good behavior.

Moral and Spiritual Education

Bahá'í- communities, and not just parents, also devote considerable effort to the education of children, and especially

to their moral and spiritual education. "The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind," say the Bahá'í- sacred writings, "for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory..."⁴

Classes for children on moral and spiritual values are a common feature of Bahá'í- community life, and many Bahá'í- communities have established public preschools as a service to the community at large. In Fiji, for example, a Bahá'í- kindergarten at Lomatvunu has become a model institution for the country. Likewise in Swaziland, Bahá'í- preschools established in a half a dozen cities in that small Southern African kingdom have been widely recognized and commended; the government has even worked closely with Bahá'í- teachers in developing its national curriculum for early education.

A Progressive Model

To summarize, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the family contribute to the creation of a distinctive home life for Bahá'í-s. While Bahá'í- is traditional in its emphasis on chastity before wedlock, faithfulness within marriage, and the abhorrence of divorce, Bahá'í- family life is at the same time progressive because of teachings that promote equality between the sexes, full and frank consultation on family problems and new educational models for child rearing. The recognition of humanity's spiritual reality translates into a respect for all members of the family as individuals, while at the same time engendering a warm and loving sense of unity and security within the family unit. The result is a model for

modern, integrated families that offer to the individual a safe haven from the world at large, while at the same time promoting his or her spiritual, intellectual and emotional growth.

Brad Pokorny, a journalist and writer, formerly of The Boston Globe, is currently writing on issues of sustainable development. He has traveled to many countries, visiting Bahá'í communities around the world. His forthcoming book, *A Journey through the Bahá'í World*, is to be published by One World Publishing in Oxford, England.

Notes: 1. Bahá'í'u'lláh, Bahá'í Prayers (Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954), 105; 2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (Chatham, England: W&J Mackay Limited, 1978), 122; 3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid*, 136; 4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid.*, 129

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