

Breastfeeding and the Bahá'í Faith

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Abstract

The Bahá'í Sacred Writings reference breastfeeding literally and symbolically and provide guidance as to its practice. Breastfeeding is endorsed as the ideal form of infant nutrition. The importance of breastfeeding is underscored by the exemption of breastfeeding women from fasting, as well as by the identification of breastfeeding as being linked to the moral development of children. Several of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith, such as the equality of women and men and the harmony of science and religion, may engender attitudes that support the practice of breastfeeding. The implications of the Bahá'í Writings with regard to breastfeeding are explored and summarized here.

Introduction

THE WRITINGS OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH contain numerous references to human lactation. Breastfeeding is used in the Bahá'í Writings as a symbol of divine benevolence and bounty, enveloping its practice in a positive light. This article is a review of the Bahá'í Writings as they pertain to breastfeeding. As many readers may be unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, a basic introduction is provided as context for this discussion.

Bahá'í Faith Overview

As its official U.S. website states, "the Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the world's independent monotheistic religions," having originated in the mid-19th century.¹ It was founded in what is now Iran by one known as Bahá'u'lláh, or "The Glory of God." Today, members of the Bahá'í community "come from nearly every national, ethnic, and religious background, making the Bahá'í Faith the second-most widespread religion in the world."^{1,2} It is estimated that there are at least "five million adherents in 236 countries and territories"¹ representing over "2,100 indigenous tribes, races, and ethnic groups."³

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that God has guided humanity since its beginning through a series of messengers who helped the human race to reach developmental milestones according to its increasing maturity from age to age. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) "is recognized by the Bahá'í community as the most recent in a line of Divine Messengers that includes Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, and Muhammad."^{1,4} The lessons brought by these messengers can be likened to successive grade levels in school, each one re-emphasizing fun-

damental lessons while setting new challenges appropriate for the pupil's increased capacity. The teachings enshrined in antecedent religions are regarded as having originated from God and are referred to and honored by Bahá'ís as divine scripture. In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh quotes from the Torah,⁵ the Gospel of Christ,⁵ and the Koran⁵ and addresses the Zoroastrian Faith.⁶ Bahá'ís view each of the world's major religions as part of one continuous stream of divine guidance: "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."⁷ This continuity is a manifestation of God's "everlasting covenant" with humanity.⁸

It is therefore not surprising to Bahá'ís that the core spiritual teachings of the major religions are similar. They all encourage some version of the "Golden Rule," to "Do to others as you would have them do to you."⁹ The essential character of the world's religions remains the same, but the outward form of the religion, including its social teachings, changes according to the needs of humanity from age to age. The Bahá'í Faith has the same core, spiritual principles of the other world religions, while teaching that the milestone for which a maturing humanity must strive today is the realization of its fundamental oneness. As Bahá'u'lláh stated: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."⁷

The Historical Context of Breastfeeding and the Bahá'í Faith

Nineteenth century Persian breastfeeding rates were influenced by factors such as the Islamic tradition that children be nursed for 2 years and that wet nurses be used if necessary.¹⁰ Indeed, there is evidence that some wealthy Persian women did employ wet nurses.¹¹ The Bahá'í

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teachings were not formulated based on convenience by drawing from the existing Persian culture, but rather had a wider audience. Indeed, early converts to the Bahá'í Faith included Zoroastrians and Jews.¹² The Bahá'í Faith emerged from a culture that traditionally supported breastfeeding, and although the Bahá'í teachings challenged many traditions, the new religion reinforced the existing support for breastfeeding in Persia.

What we know about the historical context in which the Bahá'í Faith's teachings about breastfeeding emerged is gleaned primarily from the Bahá'í Writings themselves, which are usually defined as the writings and recorded utterances of the Báb (the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh), Bahá'u'lláh (the founder of the Bahá'í Faith), and Abdu'l-Bahá (the Son of Bahá'u'lláh).¹³ The most important of these are attributed to Bahá'u'lláh and include teachings, recorded in Arabic and Persian, that were authenticated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself. They are considered by Bahá'ís as their Scripture and are often referred to in English as Tablets. These Writings were produced during the years of 1852–1892 while Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner of the Persian and Ottoman Empires.¹³

Breastfeeding in the Context of the Bahá'í Writings

The principle of the oneness of humanity is reflected in both the content and style of the Bahá'í Writings. The teachings are presented in a way that is accessible to the reader regardless of her or his cultural background. Breastfeeding is an assumed universal cultural norm referenced directly and symbolically throughout the Bahá'í Writings. Prayers for children often refer to small children and infants as a "suckling," "suckling babe," or "suckling child."¹⁴ Breastfeeding is referred to as "nursing," "giving suck," or to "suckle."^{14,15} Breasts are also referred to as "founts" or "fountains" of milk.^{16,17} An electronic search of the Bahá'í Writings using the terms "breast" and "milk" as well as the roots "suck-", "nurs-", and "fount-" yielded 33 individual references. Veneration for breastfeeding is clearly reflected in these writings. Several examples are included as follows:

Examples of direct references

Ere thou didst issue from thy mother's womb, I destined for thee two founts of gleaming milk, eyes to watch over thee, and hearts to love thee.¹⁶

Before we were born into this world did we not pray, "O God! Give me a mother; give me two fountains of bright milk; purify the air for my breathing; grant me rest and comfort; prepare food for my sustenance and living?"¹⁷

Examples of symbolic references

Ye were but babes in the womb, then were ye sucklings, and from a precious breast ye drew the milk of knowledge, then came ye to your full growth, and won salvation.¹⁴

O Thou peerless Lord! Let this suckling babe be nursed from the breast of Thy loving-kindness, guard it within the cradle of Thy safety and protection and grant that it be reared in the arms of Thy tender affection.¹⁸

Explicit Instructions Regarding Breastfeeding

The Bahá'í Writings contain several specific instructions regarding the practice of breastfeeding. Chief among these instructions are those concerning fasting, infant and child nutrition, and moral development.

Fasting

Bahá'ís observe a religious fast in the month of March each year. During this period, breastfeeding mothers are exempt from the fast: ". . . Those who are with child or giving suck, are not bound by the Fast; they have been exempted by God as a token of His grace."¹⁵ The breastfeeding mother who exercises her choice to abstain from fasting may fast during another time if she wishes but is not required to "make up" for the fast that was omitted while breastfeeding.¹⁵ The allowance for delaying the fast is consistent with that in Islam: "If a pregnant or nursing woman has concerns about harming herself or her infant by fasting, it is permissible for her to delay fasting to another time."¹⁰

Infant and child nutrition

The Bahá'í Writings clearly endorse breastmilk as the foundation of childhood nutrition: "The child must, from the day of his birth, be provided with whatever is conducive to his health; and know ye this: so far as possible, the mother's milk is best for, more agreeable and better suited to the child, unless she should fall ill or her milk should run entirely dry. . . ." (quote of Abdu'l-Bahá).¹⁹

The Bahá'í Writings do not clearly specify an age range for breastfeeding. The Persian word, "tifl" is used in the original script of the above quote ("so far as possible, the mother's milk is best for, more agreeable and better suited to the child") recommending breastfeeding. The word is generally translated as "infant," but can be used to refer to children as well.²⁰ There are no specific references in the Bahá'í Writings to expressed milk.

Breastfeeding and moral development

The fields of anthropology and developmental psychology increasingly demonstrate the relationship between the fulfilment of basic mammalian needs (John Bowlby's "environment of evolutionary adaptedness"),²¹ with normal moral development.²² In this context, it is interesting that the Bahá'í Writings emphasize the relationship between breastfeeding and the spiritual or moral development of the child: "From the very beginning, the children must receive divine education and must continually be reminded to remember their God. Let the love of God pervade their inmost being, commingled with their mother's milk."¹⁴ This "commingling" of breastfeeding with moral education serves to underscore the importance of breastfeeding, not only for proper child development, but also as a cornerstone of a healthy society.

Of note is that breastfeeding as a mode of transmission of both desirable and undesirable qualities from mother to child is present as an idea in earlier religions. In Islam, an insane or adulterous woman's milk is considered to be dangerous to a suckling child,¹⁰ suggesting from a different perspective that breastfeeding may be intertwined not only with nutrition but also with the development of character.

Breastfeeding in the Context of General Principles of the Bahá'í Faith

In addition to the references specific to breastfeeding, several general principles in the Bahá'í Writings affect the social context and conceptual frameworks of mothers. Chief among these principles are that women and men are equal in value and that men should support their partners in raising children, that science and true religion agree, and that the advice of competent doctors should be sought and considered carefully in relation to health and healing.^{15,17} It may also be worth considering that the Bahá'í concept of modesty does not place unreasonable restrictions on the breastfeeding mother.²³ Whether these principles have a measurable effect on breastfeeding rates in the Bahá'í community has not been studied but would be a worthwhile topic for future research.

Equality of women and men

The support of breastfeeding by the child's father has been shown to be a powerful influence upon a mother's decision to breastfeed and success in breastfeeding.^{24,25} There are many ways that the status of women specifically, gender dynamics, and family and social support in general are related to breastfeeding rates. Consequently, the Bahá'í principle of the equality of women and men is worthy of exploration with regard to breastfeeding.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, men have a significant responsibility to support the advancement of women as well as to work towards a model of partnership that is mutually empowering: "When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!"²⁶ The Bahá'í model precludes misogynistic attitudes permissive of violence against women, attitudes shown to undermine the successful practice of breastfeeding.^{27,28} Bahá'u'lláh clearly states: "Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."²⁹

Of note is that motherhood is highly honored within the Bahá'í Faith: "For mothers are the first educators, the first mentors; and truly it is the mothers who determine the happiness, the future greatness, the courteous ways and learning and judgment, the understanding and the faith of their little ones."¹⁴ The Bahá'í Writings do not provide specific instructions to fathers regarding how to assist mothers in breastfeeding, but the Writings do establish the right of a mother "to be supported by her husband," materially.³⁰ In addition, there is historical evidence that Bahá'u'lláh and his brother helped Bahá'u'lláh's wife, Navvab, with the domestic tasks of cooking and laundry to support her during pregnancy.³¹

These teachings and traditions are consistent with those of the major world religions. The latter, in passages outlining protections for women, sometimes have more specific references to breastfeeding. In Islam, the "infant's father has an obligation to support his wife through any circumstances that may affect breastfeeding and, in case of divorce, provide shelter and financial support to the mother-infant dyad for as long as breastfeeding continues" (verses 2:233 and 65:6 in the Qur'an).¹⁰ In Judaism, the Talmud requires that women's "work obligations (including housework) both as to effort and duration must be reduced during the nursing period, so as to preserve both the quantity and quality of the milk."³² In Hinduism and other religions, there are traditional protections for pregnant women beginning in the third trimester and through the first 40 days after delivery:

Traditionally, an expectant mother is required to rest as much as possible after the seventh month of pregnancy. To this end, it is not unusual for the young mother to go to her parents' home for the delivery of her first child. The recuperation time for the mother and baby usually lasts for 40 days after birth, during which she is protected from housework and exclusively looks after the newborn infant. Traditionally, she is cared for by female relatives and is encouraged to remain at home, where she is to obtain adequate rest and is offered special food along with regular meals.³³

Attitudes toward science and medical advice

When an individual receives health-related advice, her or his acceptance of that advice may be influenced by her or his attitudes towards healthcare providers as well as the perceived validity of the information that is being provided.^{34,35} The relationship between the advice of healthcare providers and breastfeeding rates has also been established.^{36,37} Attitudes towards medicine and the sciences in general reflected in the Bahá'í Writings are mentioned here as they may pertain to a mother's decision to breastfeed.

The Bahá'í Writings state that science and research are valid means of investigating reality: "The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of them all."³⁸ Furthermore, the Bahá'í Writings emphasize the harmony between a religious life and a scientific approach to decision-making: "Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible. . . ."¹⁷ In other words, one must take into account both the spiritual and physical nature of reality when faced with a decision.

Regarding health and healing, Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi, states: "In case of disease we should pray but at the same time refer to competent physicians, and abide by their considered decisions. . . . You can render your assistance by praying for him and at the same time helping the physician to treat him."¹⁹ The admonition to consult competent physicians extends to both acute illness and health maintenance: "One must not turn aside from the advice of a competent doctor. . . . you should maintain your health by consulting a highly-skilled physician."¹⁴ The overarching principle of the harmony of science and religion, when examined in the context of health and healing, anticipates that one will take "competent" medical advice into account in decision-making, even as one draws upon spiritual resources to address challenges.

For these reasons, breastfeeding is a logical practice among Bahá'ís. The unanimous and enthusiastic support for extended and exclusive breastfeeding by such professional organizations as the World Health Organization and the Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine reflects recommendations, in the context of the Bahá'í model, by "competent physicians,"³⁹⁻⁴¹ recommendations based on the overwhelming scientific evidence that human breastmilk is the ideal nutritional source in early life.⁴²

Modesty

Like other religions, the Bahá'í Faith encourages a personal standard of modesty and uprightness: "Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the

exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations."²³ However, part of what constitutes "modesty" is interpersonal or social in nature. According to the Bahá'í Writings, the responsibility for maintaining a standard of modesty is shared by all. This concept is reflected in the following passage: "And if he met the fairest and most comely of women, he would not feel his heart seduced by the least shadow of desire for her beauty."⁷

In contrast to frameworks in which the burden to preserve modesty within a society is placed predominantly on women or predominantly on men, in applying the Bahá'í teachings to breastfeeding, preserving modesty is not only the task of the breastfeeding mother, but is shared by those who might be present. The observer is responsible for her or his reaction to the breastfeeding mother.

Conclusions

Although the Bahá'í community encompasses a diversity of cultural practices, the Bahá'í Writings clearly endorse breastfeeding, leaving details of its practice to the individual. Furthermore, the frequent use of the language of human lactation in positive symbolic terms identifies breastfeeding as a practice that is both dignified and worthy of juxtaposition with the sacred. Finally, the Bahá'í teachings encourage individual and societal attitudes that may be generally conducive to breastfeeding success. Breastfeeding mothers and the healthcare providers who serve them will and do find ample support for this beneficial practice in the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. The relationship between the existence of these teachings and actual rates of breastfeeding among Bahá'í women has not been formally studied and is a possible area for future research.

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