

Extracts from the Bahá'í Teachings Discouraging Divorce

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I.

Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

1. Truly, the Lord loveth union and harmony and abhorreth separation and divorce.
("The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, The Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh", Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992, p. 44)
2. At all times hath union and association been well-pleasing in the sight of God, and separation and dissension abhorred. Hold fast unto that which God loveth and is His command unto you. He, verily, is the All-Knowing and the All-Seeing, and He is the All-Wise Ordainer.
(Bahá'u'lláh, from a Tablet -- translated from the Persian and Arabic)
3. God, exalted be His glory, disliketh divorce...
(Bahá'u'lláh, from a Tablet -- translated from the Persian)
4. Thou hast asked about affection and reconciliation, in the case of Mírzá This matter was mentioned in the Holy Presence. This is what the tongue of our All-Merciful Lord uttered in response: "This is regarded with favour and is well-pleasing. After man's recognition of God, and becoming steadfast in His Cause, the station of affection, of harmony, of concord and of unity is superior to that of most other goodly deeds. This is what He Who is the Desire of the world hath testified at every morn and eve. God grant that ye may follow that which hath been revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas."
(Bahá'u'lláh, from a Tablet -- translated from the Persian)

II.

Extracts from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá

5. O ye two believers in God! The Lord, peerless is He, hath made woman and man 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 about the welfare of each other.

If they live thus, 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. But if they do other than this, they will live out their lives in great bitterness, longing at every moment for death, and will be shamefaced in the heavenly realm.

Strive, then, to abide, heart and soul, with each other as two doves in the nest, for this is to be blessed in both worlds.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" [rev. ed.], (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), sec. 92, p. 122)

6. Formerly in Persia divorce was very easily obtained. Among the people of the past Dispensation a trifling matter would cause divorce. However, as the light of the Kingdom shone forth, souls were quickened by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh, then they totally eschewed divorce. In Persia now divorce doth not take place among the friends, unless a compelling reason existeth which makes harmony impossible. Under such rare circumstances some cases of divorce take place.

Now the friends in America must live and conduct themselves in this way. They must 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. 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. It should not happen that upon the occurrence of a slight friction or displeasure between husband and wife, the husband would think of union with some other woman, or, God forbid, the wife also think of another husband. This is contrary to the standard of heavenly value and true chastity. The friends of God must so live and conduct themselves, and evince such excellence of and conduct, as to make others astonished. The love between husband and wife should not be purely physical, nay, rather it must be spiritual and heavenly. These two souls should be considered as one soul. How difficult it would be to divide a single soul! Nay, great would be the difficulty!

In short, 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 becomes the cause of divorce, that one will unquestionably fall into great difficulties, will become the victim of formidable calamities and experience deep remorse.

Upon you be the glory of Abhá!

('Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet -- translated from the Persian)

III.

Extracts from Letters Written by Shoghi Effendi

7. The recrudescence of religious intolerance, of racial animosity, and of patriotic arrogance; the increasing evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear and of fraud; the spread of terrorism, of lawlessness, of drunkenness and of crime; the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches and pleasures; the weakening of family solidarity; the laxity in parental control; the lapse into luxurious indulgence; the irresponsible attitude towards marriage and the consequent rising tide of divorce; the degeneracy of art and music, the infection of literature, and the corruption of the press; the extension of the influence and activities of those "prophets of decadence" who advocate companionate marriage, who preach the philosophy of nudism, who call modesty an intellectual fiction, who refuse to regard the procreation of children as the sacred and primary purpose of marriage, who denounce religion as an opiate of the people, who would, if given free rein, lead back the human race to barbarism, chaos, and ultimate extinction — these appear as the outstanding characteristics of a decadent society, a society that

must either be reborn or perish.

(Shoghi Effendi, "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters" rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 187-88)

8. Not only must irreligion and its monstrous offspring, the triple curse that oppresses the soul of mankind in this day, be held responsible for the ills which are so tragically besetting it, but other evils and vices, which are, for the most part, the direct consequences of the "weakening of the pillars of religion," must also be regarded as contributory factors to the manifold guilt of which individuals and nations stand convicted. The signs of moral downfall, consequent to the dethronement of religion and the enthronement of these usurping idols, are too numerous and too patent for even a superficial observer of the state of present-day society to fail to notice. The spread of lawlessness, of drunkenness, of gambling, and of crime; the inordinate love of pleasure, of riches, and other earthly vanities; the laxity in morals, revealing itself in the irresponsible attitude towards marriage, in the weakening of parental control, in the rising tide of divorce, in the deterioration in the standard of literature and of the press, and in the advocacy of theories that are the very negation of purity, of morality and chastity — these evidences of moral decadence, invading both the East and the West, permeating every stratum of society, and instilling their poison in its members of both sexes, young and old alike, blacken still further the scroll upon which are inscribed the manifold transgressions of an unrepentant humanity.

(Shoghi Effendi, "The Promised Day is Come", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), pp. 114-15)

IV.

Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

9. On behalf of the Guardian I wish to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated December 15th, and to express his sorrow at the disharmony existing between you and your husband. He is the more grieved to learn that the situation has reached such a state as to compel you to ask for separation from Mr... — a step which, though legally valid from the standpoint of the Cause, is nevertheless most sad and painful to you and to those concerned.

The Guardian, however, appreciates the fact that, in conformity with the Teachings, you have laid the matter before the Local Spiritual Assembly. He sincerely hopes that under the guidance of that body, and through your own efforts as well, conditions between you and your husband will gradually improve, and that you will not feel it necessary to ask for divorce after the one year period of separation has been terminated.

He is fervently entreating Bahá'u'lláh that He may guide you and Mr. Clark in solving this most delicate problem of your life, and that the solution reached may be such as to bring peace and satisfaction to your heart, and thus bring happiness to you, and also protection to the Cause whose interests you have so devotedly served for many years.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 14 January 1936 to an individual believer)

10. Regarding the Bahá'í teachings on divorce. While the latter has been made permissible by Bahá'u'lláh yet he has strongly discouraged its practice, for if not checked and seriously controlled it leads gradually to the disruption of family life and to the disintegration of society...

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 16 November 1936 to an individual believer)

11. Regarding divorce, the Guardian stated that it is discouraged, deprecated and against the good pleasure of God. The Assembly must circulate among the friends whatever has been revealed from the Pen of `Abdu'l-Bahá in this connection so that all may be fully reminded. Divorce is conditional upon the approval and permission of the Spiritual Assembly. The members of the Assembly must in such matters independently and carefully study and investigate each case. If there should be valid grounds for divorce and it is found that reconciliation is utterly impossible,

that antipathy is intense and its removal is not possible, then the Assembly may approve the divorce.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a Tablet to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran -- translated from the Persian)

12. While he wishes me to assure you that he will pray for the solution of your domestic troubles, he would urge you to endeavour, by every means in your power, to compose your differences, and not to allow them to reach such proportions as to lead to your complete and final separation from your husband.

For while, according to the Bahá'í law, divorce is permissible, yet it is highly discouraged, and should be resorted to only when every effort to prevent it has proved to be vain and ineffective.

It is for you, and for Mr... as well, to ponder carefully over the spiritual implications which any act of divorce on either part would involve, and strengthened by the power of faith and confident in the blessings which strict adherence to the principles and laws of Bahá'u'lláh is bound to confer upon every one of His faithful followers, to make a fresh resolve to solve your common difficulties and to restore the harmony, peace and happiness of your family life.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 11 September 1938 to an individual believer)

13. The situation facing you is admittedly difficult and delicate, but no less grave and indeed vital are the responsibilities which it entails and which, as a faithful and loyal believer, you should conscientiously and thoroughly assume. The Guardian, therefore, while fully alive to the special circumstances of your case, and however profound his sympathy may be for you in this challenging issue with which you are so sadly faced, cannot, in view of the emphatic injunctions contained in the Teachings, either sanction your demand to contract a second marriage while your first wife is still alive and is united with you in the sacred bonds of matrimony, or even suggest or approve that you divorce her just in order to be permitted to marry a new one.

For the Bahá'í Teachings do not only preclude the possibility of bigamy, but also, while permitting divorce, consider it a reprehensible act, which should be resorted to only in exceptional circumstances, and when grave issues are involved, transcending such considerations as physical attraction or sexual compatibility and harmony. The institution of marriage, as established by Bahá'u'lláh, while giving due importance to the physical aspect of marital union, considers it as subordinate to the moral and spiritual purposes and functions with which it has been invested by an all-wise and loving Providence. Only when these different values are given each their due importance, and only on the basis of the subordination of the physical to the moral, and the carnal to the spiritual can such excesses and laxity in marital relations as our decadent age is so sadly witnessing be avoided, and family life be restored to its original purity, and fulfil the true function for which it has been instituted by God.

The Guardian will most fervently pray that, inspired and guided by such a divine standard, and strengthened by Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing assistance and confirmations, you may be able to satisfactorily adjust your relations with the persons concerned, and thus reach the one right solution to this assuredly challenging problem of your life.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 8 May 1939 to an individual believer who, having married his first wife out of compassion, now wished to be permitted to marry a woman with whom he had fallen in love, saying that his wife was agreeable to his taking this second wife.)

14. As regards the action you contemplate in seeking divorce from him: He leaves the final decision in this matter to you and your husband, though of course, from the standpoint of the Cause, he thinks it preferable for you both not to resort to such drastic action, unless it is absolutely unavoidable.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 24 February 1940 to an individual believer)

15. Marriage is, in the "Aqdas", set forth as a most sacred and binding tie, and the Bahá'ís should realize that divorce is viewed as a last resort, to be avoided at all costs if possible and not to be lightly granted.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 October 1944 to an individual believer)

16. Marriage is viewed by Bahá'u'lláh as a very sacred tie which should under no circumstances be

severed unless the reasons are very grave. He hopes and will pray that you and your wife, as believers, will reconsider this matter and do your utmost to live together in the service of the Cause you both love so dearly.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 October 1944 to an individual believer)

17. He was very sorry to hear that you and your husband are still so unhappy together. It is always a source of sorrow in life when married people cannot get on well together, but the Guardian feels that you and your husband, in contemplating divorce, should think of the future of your children and how this major step on your part will influence their lives and happiness.

If you feel the need of advice and consultation he suggests you consult your Local Assembly; your fellow Bahá'ís will surely do all they can to counsel and help you, protect your interests and those of the Cause.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 16 November 1945 to an individual believer)

18. Shoghi Effendi wishes me to add this note in connection with your marriage: he does not feel that any believer, under any circumstances whatsoever, can ever use the Cause or service to it as a reason for abandoning their marriage; divorce, as we know, is very strongly condemned by Bahá'u'lláh, and only grounds of extreme gravity justify it...

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 7 April 1947 to an individual believer)

19. As Bahá'u'lláh was so very much against divorce (even though He permits it) and considered marriage a most sacred responsibility, believers should do everything in their power to preserve the marriages they have contracted, and to make of them exemplary unions, governed by the noblest motives.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 October 1947 to an individual believer)

20. Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator. We Bahá'ís must realize that in present-day society the exact opposite process is taking place: young people care less and less for their parents' wishes, divorce is considered a natural right, and obtained on the flimsiest and most unwarrantable and shabby pretexts. People separated from each other, especially if one of them has had full custody of the children, are only too willing to belittle the importance of the partner in marriage also responsible as a parent for bringing those children into this world. The Bahá'ís must, through rigid adherence to the Bahá'í laws and teachings, combat these corrosive forces which are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tearing down the moral structure of society.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 25 October 1947 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

21. He wishes me to tell you that he regrets extremely the sorrow that has come into your life, and that he agrees with all you have stated in general on the subject of divorce.

There is no doubt about it that the believers in America, probably unconsciously influenced by the extremely lax morals prevalent and the flippant attitude towards divorce which seems to be increasingly prevailing, do not take divorce seriously enough and do not seem to grasp the fact that although Bahá'u'lláh has permitted it, He has only permitted it as a last resort and strongly condemns it.

The presence of children, as a factor in divorce, cannot be ignored, for surely it places an even greater weight of moral responsibility on the man and wife in considering such a step. Divorce under such circumstances no longer just concerns them and their desires and feelings but also concerns the children's entire future and their own attitude towards marriage.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 19 December 1947 to an individual believer)

22. Divorce should be avoided most strictly by the believers, and only under rare and urgent circumstances be resorted to. Modern society is criminally lax as to the sacred nature of marriage,

and the believers must combat this trend assiduously.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 January 1948 to an individual believer)

23. He will pray for your husband and son and your daughter-in-law, that, through drawing near to Bahá'u'lláh, they may be united and uplifted into a happier and more harmonious atmosphere, for the Cause can heal friction if people will let it and make the effort themselves as well.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 11 June 1948 to an individual believer)

24. He was very sorry to hear that you are contemplating separation from your husband. As you no doubt know, Bahá'u'lláh considers the marriage bond very sacred; and only under very exceptional and unbearable circumstances is divorce advisable for Bahá'ís.

The Guardian does not tell you that you must not divorce your husband; but he does urge you to consider prayerfully, not only because you are a believer and anxious to obey the laws of God, but also for the sake of the happiness of your children, whether it is not possible for you to rise above the limitations you have felt in your marriage hitherto, and make a go of it together.

We often feel that our happiness lies in a certain direction; and yet, if we have to pay too heavy a price for it in the end we may discover that we have not really purchased either freedom or happiness, but just some new situation of frustration and disillusion.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 5 April 1951 to an individual believer)

25. As regards the problem of your marriage, you are free to refer this to the National Spiritual Assembly. As both you and your wife know, however, Bahá'u'lláh was not in favour of divorce, and the friends should make every effort to avoid bringing it about. If it is absolutely impossible, they then are free to divorce, but they should bear in mind the will of God in such matters.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 13 March 1953 to an individual believer)

26. He has been very sorry to hear that your marriage seems to have failed utterly. I need not tell you as a Bahá'í that every effort should be made by any Bahá'í to salvage their marriage for the sake of God, rather than for their own sake. In the case of pioneers, it is even more important, because they are before the public eye. However, in such matters it is neither befitting nor right that the Guardian should bring pressure on individuals. He can only appeal to you and ... to try again; but if you cannot rise to this test, that is naturally a personal matter.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 13 January 1956 to an individual believer)

27. Wherever there is a Bahá'í family, those concerned should by all means do all they can to preserve it, because divorce is strongly condemned in the Teachings, whereas harmony, unity and love are held up as the highest ideals in human relationships. This must always apply to the Bahá'ís, whether they are serving in the pioneering field or not.

(In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 9 November 1956 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Central America)

Endnote

- i. A newer translation of this passage has been substituted for the translation originally included.