

Abortion and the Bahá'í Faith

By Susan Gammage ¹

Someone once asked me about a friend (who was not a Bahá'í), who was planning on getting an abortion. She was hesitant to share the Faith's view that a soul comes into existence at the moment of conception, and that therefore, an embryo is a spiritual being, and wondered what to do.

What a great question! Let's start by looking at what the Writings say about abortion.

The soul appears at conception so it would be improper to have an abortion after conception has taken place:

It should be pointed out, however, that the Teachings state that the soul appears at conception, and that therefore it would be improper to use such a method, the effect of which would be to produce an abortion after conception has taken place. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 345, #1155)

Abortion and surgical operations for the purpose of preventing the birth of unwanted children are forbidden in the Cause unless there are circumstances which justify such actions on medical grounds:

Abortion and surgical operations for the purpose of preventing the birth of unwanted children are forbidden in the Cause unless there are circumstances which justify such actions on medical grounds, in which case the decision, at present, is left to the consciences of those concerned who must carefully weigh the medical advice in the light of the general guidance given in the Teachings. Beyond this nothing has been found in the Writings concerning specific methods or procedures to be used in family planning. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 345, #1155)

Abortion to prevent the birth of an unwanted child is strictly forbidden in the Cause.

Abortion merely to prevent the birth of an unwanted child is strictly forbidden in the Cause. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 345, #1154)

Circumstances might exist in which such an operation would be justified. In that situation, individual believers are called upon to make such a decision guided by the Bahá'í principles involved, the best professional advice available to them and their own consciences.

It is clear that to have surgical operation merely to avoid unwanted children is not acceptable. However, as in the case of abortion, circumstances might exist in which

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such an operation would be justified. Individual believers called upon to make such a decision must be guided by the Bahá'í principles involved, the best professional advice available to them and their own consciences. In arriving at a decision the parties must also take into consideration the availability, reliability, and reversibility of all contraceptive methods. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 348, #1166)

Terminating a pregnancy following the discovery through amniocentesis of a severely handicapped foetus is a matter left to the judgment of capable professionals in the field, and the consciences of the parents

As to the permissibility of terminating a pregnancy following the discovery through amniocentesis of a severely handicapped foetus, this is a matter left to the judgement of capable professionals in the field, and the consciences of the parents. (Universal House of Justice, 21 May 1992, to an individual, at http://bahai-library.com/uhj_compilation_reproduction#8)

If a Baha'i becomes pregnant as a result of rape, it is for her to decide whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, and no pressure should be brought on her by Baha'i Institutions to marry:

One of the most heinous of sexual offences is the crime of rape. When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community, and she is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so. If she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá'í institutions to marry. As to whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, it is for her to decide on the course of action she should follow, taking into consideration medical and other relevant factors, and in the light of the Bahá'í Teachings. If she gives birth to a child as a result of the rape, it is left to her discretion whether to seek financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father; however, his claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá'í law, be called into question, in view of the circumstances. (The Universal House of Justice, 1992, Violence Against Women and Children, https://bahai-library.com/uhj_violence_against_women)

At present, the House of Justice does not intend to legislate on this very delicate issue, so it's left to the consciences of those concerned, who must carefully weigh medical advice in light of the general guidance in the Baha'i Writings:

Legislation on this matter has been left to the Universal House of Justice. At the present time, however, the House of Justice does not intend to legislate on this very delicate issue, and therefore it is left to the consciences of those concerned who must carefully weigh the medical advice in the light of the general guidance given in the teachings. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 345, #1154)

It would be unacceptable for a Bahá'í doctor to advocate abortion as a method of birth control and set up a clinic for that purpose:

All Bahá'ís are subject to Bahá'í law and Bahá'í standards. It would clearly be unacceptable for a Bahá'í doctor to advocate abortion as a method of birth control and set up a clinic for that purpose, or for a Bahá'í psychiatrist to publicly advocate sexual intercourse before marriage. (The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith, p.8, https://bahai-library.com/compilation_issues_study_bahai)

Knowing all of this, of course you'd want to protect the life of the unborn child, and perhaps even save your friend from being considered a murderer in the eyes of God!

Keeping silent on this topic, however, might be one of the biggest tests of your life!

Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LXXXIX, p. 176)

Rather than teaching your friend about the rules and regulations, it's much better to fan the spark of faith with the love of God:

The Process of educating people of different customs and backgrounds must be done with the greatest patience and understanding, and rules and regulations not imposed upon them, except where a rock-bottom essential is in question. He feels sure that your Assembly is capable of carrying on its work in this spirit, and of fanning the hears to flame through the fire of the love of God, rather than putting out the first sparks with buckets, full of administrative information and regulations. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 78, #274)

As with everything in the Faith, one topic cannot be examined without understanding a LOT of other principles, which isn't always possible or desirable for a seeker without giving them spiritual indigestion!

You ask about 'spiritual indigestion': Bahá'ís should seek to be many-sided, normal and well-balanced, mentally and spiritually. We must not give the impression of being fanatics but at the same time we must live up to our principles. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 112, #382)

For example, Farzin Aghdasi gave a course for the Association for Baha'i Studies in Southern Africa (April-June 2000) on Reproductive Health, Abortion, Sacredness of Life, and Women's Choice, in which he examined this topic from the following perspectives:

1. History of oppression against women

2. Societal patterns that would imprison women at home & abandon them to chores including child rearing
3. Religious support for mistreatment of women
4. Neglected condition of women's health issues
5. Irresponsible male behaviour towards pregnancy, and maintenance of family
6. Consequences of sexual revolution, and unwanted pregnancies
7. Asserting women's rights not to become victims vs. a licence for promiscuity or carelessness
8. Teenage pregnancy
9. Illegal, back street abortions
10. Timing of the appearance of the soul
11. Debates around when to consider the foetus as a separate individual
12. Viability of an independent life, and the first tri-mester
13. The potential for growth, and the definition of the individual
14. The right to life, and its limits
15. The role of education, and availability of counselling to women
16. Sex education before puberty
17. Moral education and abstention, vs. practical safe-sex lessons
18. The roles of the family and the school system
19. Building character and pride in nobility
20. Family planning: education, the tools and support system
21. Birth control: avoiding pregnancy vs. early termination
22. Mechanical, chemical and surgical tools for birth control
23. Social support systems for untimely pregnancy
24. Dealing with unwanted children
25. Adoption
26. African community practices that support social security
27. Abortion in rape cases
28. The unhealthy outcome of a politically polarized debate
29. Pure motives and an intelligent search for the solutions
30. The role of consultation
31. Finding pragmatic solutions to difficult situations
32. Strengthening Baha'i Assemblies to seek solutions within cultural context
33. A statement to the South African Government as part of the public debate on termination of pregnancy act.

The following link contains the complete outline of his presentation to the Baha'i Studies conference.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20101119070959/https://www.bci.org/bahaistudies/courses/contemporary.htm>

As you can see from the above list, the subject of abortion is a complex topic, which is probably why the House doesn't want to legislate on it just yet. First we have to deal with the roots of the problem!

Another thing to consider, is that as a non-Bahá'í, she is not bound by the laws, because she hasn't accepted Bahá'u'lláh's authority. In a letter written by the House of Justice regarding a gay couple who wanted to declare, we read:

If persons involved in homosexual relationships express an interest in the Faith, they should not be instructed by Bahá'í institutions to separate so that they may enroll in the Bahá'í community, for this action by any institution may conflict with civil law. The Bahá'í position should be patiently explained to such persons, who should also be given to understand that although in their hearts they may accept Baha'u'llah, they cannot join the Bahá'í community in the current condition of their relationship. They will then be free to draw their own conclusions and act accordingly. Within this context, the question you pose about the possibility of the removal of administrative rights should, therefore, not arise. (Universal House of Justice, 5 March 1999 to an individual)

What this suggests to me is that even if people want to become Bahá'ís, (which your friend does not yet), if they know the law and don't want to abide by it, it's better that they not declare, so that they can continue living a life outside the Bahá'í law.

Our job as individuals is to be loving and forgiving:

In their relationships with one another individual believers should be loving and forgiving, overlooking one another's faults for the sake of God, but the Spiritual Assemblies are the upholders of the law of God. They are embryonic Houses of Justice. The education of a child requires both love and discipline; so also does the education of believers and the education of a community. One of the failings of Bahá'ís, however, is to confuse these two roles, individuals behaving like little Spiritual Assemblies, and Spiritual Assemblies forgetting that they must exercise justice. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice, 1963 to 1986, p. 499)

Even Bahá'í institutions in this situation, would be required to be one of education, encouragement, assistance and counsel:

The institutions of the Faith ... do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgmental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education. (Universal House of Justice to an individual, 19 April 2013.
https://bahai-library.com/pdf/uhj/uhj_bahai_western_life.pdf)

You might find it helpful to read another Bahá'í author on this topic:

One Bahá'ís Approach – Abortion: <http://onebahai.blogspot.ca/2010/03/abortion.html>

Finally, I'd like to end with a Baha'i Statement on Termination of pregnancy, submitted by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of South Africa in response to the call by the Parliament of South Africa for public submissions prior to legislative action, which might give some other ideas:

The subject of wilful termination of pregnancy has been a controversial subject of great importance to many societies. Its many aspects have been discussed, argued, and debated with great conviction by many people in the last two decades. Despite much soul searching and sincere efforts many societies who have already legislated on this subject still find themselves with an unhappy state of affairs. Whatever the merits of these arguments on either side of the issue may have been, one thing is clear to the unbiased observer, namely that it has been a divisive subject. The Baha'i teachings offer a different and unified approach.

The primary purpose here is not to prescribe a specific course of action, but rather to present a universal framework, and to elaborate on those principles that must guide our collective search for a wise and just solution.

The fundamental Baha'i teaching is the oneness of mankind. This is the principle which is the pivot round which all the Teachings of Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, revolve. It has widespread implications, which affect and remould all dimensions of human activity. It calls for a fundamental change in the manner in which people relate to each other, and the eradication of those age-old practices which deny the intrinsic human right of every individual to be treated with consideration and respect.

The Baha'i sacred texts affirm the essential nobility of all human beings irrespective of colour, class, creed, gender or age. Each individual member of human race is a trust of the whole. "Nobel have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created," are the revealed words written by Baha'u'llah. The sources of this nobility are the God-given talents, capacities and potentialities in each one of us. These endowments which distinguish the human race from all other forms of life are summed up in what is known as the human spirit.

The human spirit, or soul, is not confined to certain individual members of the species. It is the essential characteristic of all humans, much the same as heat is an essential quality of fire, or growth is the inseparable quality of the vegetable kingdom. The seed of a plant or a tree has all the attributes of the tree in a concealed form. In like manner a fertilised human egg has all the potentialities and attributes of man albeit in a concealed form. The human soul of an individual therefore comes to existence at the moment of conception. For this reason alone the practice of deliberate termination of pregnancy cannot be regarded as a routine solution for family planning.

While the soul is created at the moment of conception, it will continue to acquire perfections in this life and in the world beyond.

Recognition of this cardinal principle would determine our attitude towards human embryo. To treat either the embryo or the foetus as anything other than a human is to deny its latent potentialities. To consider a properly fertilised human egg as merely a biochemical object, to be disposed of at will, is no different than to

reduce our own humanity to a clump of biochemical material in a sack made of skin, and devoid of all meaning or purpose.

Equally, the interpretation of embryo as a part of a woman's own body, or determination of the exact age at which foetus becomes independently viable is to miss the point about the ultimate potential of a being who, for a while, is dependent on the good will of another person - the mother - whose unique privilege it is to extend such a gift of love, as life itself.

Considerations such as this make it abundantly clear that the resolution of these complex social problems does not reside in a mere code of legal practice. The social forces that demand the right of women to ask for abortion need to be addressed in an integrated and wholesome fashion.

The Baha'i Faith recognises the natural existence and the value of the sexual impulse, but it also believes in its regulation. The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established and is regarded as a fortress for well being. The sexual expression is therefore confined between lawfully married couples. Observance of chastity before and fidelity during marriage therefore should be an integral part of one's moral upbringing.

Within the family also there are definite relationships that define the role of its members. In this context the Baha'i Faith categorically declares the equality of men and women. All decisions should be arrived at as a result of a frank, free and loving consultative process within the family. Specifically the act of procreation must enjoy the consent of both husband and wife. In this aspect of the marital relationship, as in all others, mutual consideration and respect should apply. In view of the greater responsibilities of women, who not only will have to bear the child for 9 months, but who also must act as the first teacher of that child a greater measure of say must be accorded her in deciding when to fall pregnant.

The supreme role of education in this matter, as in so many other areas relevant to a developing society is abundantly clear.

Effective means of family planning, and provision of reliable methods of contraceptives should be encouraged. Those contraceptive methods that function by destroying the fertilised egg clearly vitiate against the principle of sanctity of the life of the embryo.

If the social support structures are in place, then the practice of abortion for the sole purpose of getting rid of unwanted children and without any extenuating circumstances is unacceptable to conscientious people.

As is the case with most matters of the law, such exceptional circumstances will always exist and should be catered for. One obvious case in question is where medical opinion determines that there are serious risks to the health of either the child or the mother, should pregnancy be allowed to continue. Another case is when the mother had no choice in the decision to conceive, and was a victim of rape, either as a result of violence or statutory grounds of being under legal age. In such circumstances the supportive attitude of the family, and the society will play an important role in making the decision to opt for abortion or to continue with the natural course of pregnancy, a decision which must ultimately rest with the mother. If after all the required counselling, and consideration of all the physical, medical,

emotional, social and financial considerations, and the recognition of the potentials of the unborn child, the mother still opts for abortion, then the society must recognise her right not to be victimised. There may well exist other exceptional circumstances that would warrant the deliberate termination of pregnancy.

In summary, the Baha'i community, in its earnestness to contribute to the development process, wishes to stress that all those concerned with setting the human affairs aright would do well to first identify those salient spiritual principles that operate at the root of social issues. If these principles are used to guide our decisions then the outcome will be both enduring and beneficial to all segments of the society.

This link contains a wealth of other thoughts and ideas as well as the preceding statement.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20101119070959/https://www.bci.org/bahaistudies/courses/contemporary.htm>