

## VIOLENCE AND ABUSE: Guidance

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[Person's name omitted], in her letter of 7 June 1993, has asked about Bahá'í Writings on the above subjects. She was disappointed to read the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and not find direct mention of either subject, and further disappointed to find that, to her understanding, Shoghi Effendi seems to have equated the two.

Although she does not specifically mention the words of the beloved Guardian to which she is referring, we assume that (Person's name omitted) concern stems from Note #134 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, on "*the subject of boys*", which refers to the words of Bahá'u'lláh that, "*We shrink, for very shame, from treating of the subject of boys.*" The note states:

The word translated here as "*boys*" has, in this context, in the Arabic original, the implication of pederasty. Shoghi Effendi has interpreted this reference as a prohibition on all homosexual relations.

Pederasty may indeed be considered a form of childhood sexual abuse. But the sexual abuse of children is not limited to pederasty, and encompasses a much broader range of behaviour. Shoghi Effendi's interpretation of this verse of the Aqdas as being a prohibition on homosexuality is a separate issue from the broader one of the sexual abuse of children.

The Research Department has not been able to locate any Writings of Bahá'u'lláh on the specific subject of childhood sexual abuse. However, there can be no doubt that the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are in no way compatible with such an abhorrent practice. A statement of the Universal House of Justice, in a letter written on its behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada on the subject of violence in the family, applies well to the question of sexual abuse of children. Indeed, the following letter refers to the abuse of children as an "extreme form" of acts of aggression within a family.

"No statements dealing directly with violence in the family have come to light from the Writings: however, the House of Justice feels that the absence of specific references to the subject should not be construed as implying that we do not have the necessary guidance in the Faith to treat the problems cited in your letter. Acts of violence might properly be regarded as a negation of the persistent emphases on concord, understanding and unity which are at the heart of the Bahá'í Teachings, and the sacred Writings are replete with advice as to how these positive objectives may be attained. In His "Tablet of the World" Bahá'u'lláh states,

*"The distinguishing feature that marketh the pre-eminent character of this Supreme Revelation consisteth in that We have, on the one hand, blotted out from the pages of God's holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men, and have, on the other, laid down the essential*

*prerequisites of concord, of understanding, or complete and enduring unity. Well is it with them that keep My statutes."*

“Elsewhere in the same Tablet the *"people of God"* are forbidden *"to engage in contention or conflict."* In view of such statements and the stress laid by both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá on love and harmony as the hallmark of marriage, the law for which Bahá'u'lláh describes as a *"fortress for well-being and salvation"*; and in view of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá 's exhortation that each member of the family must uphold the rights of the others, it becomes obvious that violence in the family is antithetical to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned.

“If the broad structure of society is to remain intact, resolute efforts, including medical ones, as necessary, should be made to curb acts of aggression within families, particularly their extreme forms of wife beating and child abuse by parents. This is a matter of fundamental importance, for if the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace? The following statements by the beloved Master sheds illumination on these points:

*“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. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation. Would it add to the progress and advancement of a family if dissention should arise among its members, all fighting, pillaging each other, jealous and revengeful or injury, seeking selfish advantage? Nay, this would be the cause of the effacement of progress and advancement. So it is in the great family of nations, for nations are but an aggregate of families.”* (22 September 1983)

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly forbids all acts of sexual immorality, including fornication, adultery, rape and sodomy (see notes 36, 77, and 134 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas). In the case of fornication Bahá'u'lláh Himself has prescribed the specific fine, while in the case of the others He has left the punishment to be decided upon by the Universal House of Justice in the future. It is adults, of course, who are responsible for abiding by these laws, and to the same adults is given the responsibility of rearing, caring for and protecting children within the shelter of God's laws:

*“Among the safeguards of the Holy Faith is the training of children, and this is among the weightiest of principles in all the Divine Teachings...*

*“The purport is this, that to train the character of humankind is one of the weightiest commandments of God, and the influence of such training is the same as that which the sun exerteth over tree and fruit. Children must be most carefully*

*watched over, protected and trained; in such consisteth true parenthood and parental mercy.*” (From a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, published in ‘Bahá'í Education’ (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977), pp. 22-23)

Considering that the perpetration of an immoral sexual act by one adult against another is punishable by law, the perpetration of such an act against a helpless child seems indeed heinous...

(From a memorandum prepared by the Research Department to the Universal House of Justice, 10 August 1993)

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Your letter of 14 October 1985, in which you express great anguish at the plight of babies and children who suffer at the hands of exploitative and disturbed individuals, was received by the Universal House of Justice. We are instructed to convey this reply to you.

On this plane of existence, there are many injustices that the human mind cannot fathom. Among these are the heart-rending trials of the innocent. Indeed, even the Prophets of God Themselves have borne their share of grievous afflictions in every age. Yet in spite of the evidence of all this suffering, God's Manifestations, Whose lives and wisdom show Them to have been far above human beings in understanding, unitedly bear testimony to the justice, love and mercy of God.

With regard to the spiritual significance of the suffering of children “*who are afflicted by the hands of oppressors*”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá not only states that for those souls “*suffering is the greatest mercy of God*”, He also explains that to be a recipient of God's mercy is “*far better and preferable to all the comfort of this world*”, and He promises that “*for those souls there is a recompense in another world*”. Thus:

*As to the subject of babes and infants and weak ones who are afflicted by the hands of oppressors: This contains great wisdom and this subject is of paramount importance. In brief, for those souls there is a recompense in another world and many details are connected with this matter. For those souls that suffering is the greatest mercy of God. Verily that mercy of the Lord is far better and Preferable to all the comfort of this world and the growth and development of this place of mortality.*

You enquire why some souls, notably those born to loving parents, are seemingly favoured by God, while those born to abusing and rejecting parents are destined to endure a lifetime of suffering, since children, growing up in such a destructive atmosphere are more likely as adults, to perpetrate abuse on their own children, thus repeating the cycle of violence and thereby further placing in jeopardy their relationship to God. Clearly, only God is able to know the true state of any soul. It is therefore important to appreciate that God in His bounty has endowed every created thing, however humble, “*with the capacity to exercise a particular influence, and been made to possess a distinct virtue*”.

And, reminiscent of the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Bahá'u'lláh, in the "Gleanings", (p. 149) draws attention to the need to make efforts to develop and demonstrate in action our God-given potential:

*...All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth.*

Is it not an evidence of the justice of God that each of us, irrespective of family background, is assessed in terms of the efforts we have made to seize whatever opportunities existed in our lives, to develop and use our allotted talent, be it large or small? "Each shall receive his share from the Lord", is Bahá'u'lláh's assurance. Sufferings and trials, sent by God to test and perfect His creatures, are an integral part of life. They contain the potential for man's progress or retrogression, depending on the individual's response. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

*...The souls who bear the tests of God become the manifestations of great bounties: for the divine trials cause some souls to become entirely lifeless, while they cause the holy souls to ascent to the highest degree of love and solidity.*

In addition, we know from the Bahá'í Writings that man's soul "is independent of all infirmities of body or mind," and not only continues to exist "after departing from this mortal world", but progresses "through the bounty and grace of the Lord". Therefore, an evaluation of man's material existence and achievements cannot ignore the potential spiritual development stimulated by the individual's desire to manifest the attributes of God and his response to the exigencies of his life, nor can it exclude the possibility of the operation of God's mercy in terms of compensation for earthly suffering, in the next life.

As to your own torment and suffering arising from your perception of the fate of children and their oppressors, the way to peace and security for you and for humanity as a whole, is through service to the Cause, to which you have so earnestly committed yourself. We are instructed to assure you that the Universal House of Justice will offer prayers at the Holy Shrines that your faith may be deepened and your perplexities resolved, and we share with you these solacing words of Bahá'u'lláh:

*My servants! Sorrow not if, in these days and on this earthly plane, things contrary to your wishes have been ordained and manifested by God, for days of blissful joy, of heavenly delight, are assuredly in store for you. Worlds, holy and spiritually glorious, will be unveiled to your eyes. You are destined by Him, in this world and hereafter, to partake of their benefits, to share in their joys, and to obtain a portion of their sustaining grace. To each and every one of them you will, no doubt, attain.*

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 2 December 1985)