

## The Bahá'í Teachings and Homosexuality

### Overview

Human beings think differently. They have different values and beliefs. Too often these differences lead to contention, conflict, injustice, suffering, oppression, and social instability.

Bahá'ís believe that all humanity is one, under the mercy of an all-loving Creator. In emphasizing the essential spiritual dignity and freedom of every soul, Bahá'u'lláh affirms that “the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself.” Our challenge then is to learn to live together, respecting diverse individuals and groups, each with their own perspectives on reality, while cultivating a unity in diversity of thought and action through which progress and a peaceful social order can be fostered.

Today, across the world and in different ways in different societies, the question of homosexuality is often addressed in a dichotomous way, demanding affirmation or rejection. It is thus framed as a zero-sum game, which dictates that society must take a particular form, and regards those who hold a different view as either immoral or bigoted. Bahá'ís take no part in this conflict, seeing the matter as more complex and nuanced. It is not appropriate to coerce other human beings on matters of belief. All must exercise their own agency. Any effort to impose a particular perspective or outcome on a part of humanity that does not agree is likely only to unleash forces that oppose and resist the change, thereby prolonging conflict, suffering, and disorder.

At the heart of the disagreement is a difference of perspective about the framework for sexual ethics. Historically, religious belief systems across cultures have been a primary source of moral insight and order. Sacred texts or traditions contain various laws and admonitions that, in one way or another, redirect or restrict behaviors that arise from inclinations and desires which occur naturally in human beings. In more recent centuries, ethical thought regarding sexuality was frequently based on the perspective provided by natural law: human sexuality was tied to procreation, one of the distinctive goods associated with marital union and an expression of an innate human purpose, and consequently proper sexual behavior was considered to be confined to the limited behaviors surrounding reproduction. Certain contemporary views challenge this perspective, suggesting that a framework of sexual ethics should instead be based on human psychology, which places emphasis on personal aspiration and fulfillment. In this view, the most important values for sexual ethics are not concerned with particular acts, but with consent and ensuring that an individual does not become solely the object of the action of another.

The Bahá'í framework of sexual ethics is rooted in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. For His followers, the precepts and counsels found in these teachings represent “the breath of life unto all created things,” “the lamps” of God’s “wisdom and loving providence,” and so should be observed, as Bahá'u'lláh urges, “with joy and gladness, for this is best for you, did ye but know.”

This framework affirms the value of the sex impulse, rejects sexual puritanism, but acknowledges the need for proper expression and self-control. It stands in contrast to the permissive standards of the contemporary age, which tend to place sexual liberty above other aims and values. Bahá'u'lláh affirms that the family is the foundation of society and civilization, that marriage is between a man and a woman “that they may bring forth one who will make mention of God”, and that sexual relations are only permissible between a couple who are married to each other. These teachings are set forth in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and in the authoritative statements of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. They are not susceptible to change by the Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

One of the fundamental verities of the Bahá'í Faith is that conscience cannot be coerced. Every human being has the right to freedom of conscience and belief. Each is ultimately accountable to God for the choices made. Thus, despite their own convictions, Bahá'ís are enjoined to be tolerant and respectful of those whose views differ from their own, not to judge others according to Bahá'í standards, and not to attempt to impose these standards on society. Prejudice of any kind is entirely against the spirit of the Faith; for embedded into the ethos of the Bahá'í community is recognition that “love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest.” Whether believer or not, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts all human beings “to traverse this brief span of life with sincerity and fairness;” to show forth “forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.”

In freely recognizing Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God—the divine Educator—for this age, Bahá'ís also freely choose to abide by His teachings, which they believe will awaken individual potential, further the development of spiritual qualities, and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. True freedom, then, is found in recognizing that human beings are spiritual beings who aspire to a higher purpose; in moving beyond solely material understandings of reality by drawing on the capacities of both reason and faith in navigating the challenges of life.

## **Answers to Common Questions**

### *What is the Bahá'í view pertaining to identity?*

The question of identity—what it is and who defines it—goes to the very heart of how the Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality can be understood. For those who believe in Bahá'u'lláh, it is one's spiritual essence, the human soul, that constitutes one's true identity, and it is the Manifestation of God, the source of truth in each age, Who illuminates our understanding of this reality and prescribes the teachings that will allow the soul to draw closer to its Creator and to attain true happiness. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the soul has no gender, race, or other physically ascribed identities. It is a spiritual reality that transcends all such distinctions. From this vantage point, Bahá'ís understand that the autonomy and welfare of human beings are not only determined by the laws and constraints of the natural world, but also by an objective

spiritual existence that is integrally related to it. As human beings advance by understanding and applying physical laws, so too do they progress by internalizing spiritual concepts and principles into their lives.

In essence, the Bahá'í teachings offer a conception of human identity in which the inner aspirations of the self are aligned with the goals of a just, empathetic and creative social reality, thereby offering a more expansive sense of human identity, one that affirms the innate nobility of all, where every human being is “born into the world as a trust of the whole.” As articulated by Bahá'u'lláh, “Let your vision be world embracing, rather than confined to your own self.”

*Can anyone become a Bahá'í?*

The doors of the Bahá'í community are open to all; this applies equally to those with a homosexual orientation. In the late 1940s, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and its head at the time, was informed and asked about the situation of a group of young men with homosexual orientation who were deeply interested in the Bahá'í Faith and some of whom wished to become Bahá'ís. In his response he advised that the young men “should be treated like any other people seeking admittance to the Bahá'í Faith, and be accepted on the same basis.” That approach continues to this day. Associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is the expectation that all those who accept Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God will make a sincere and persistent effort to align their conduct with His teachings. This is the very definition of what it means to be a Bahá'í. Believers who experience same-sex attraction freely choose this path of observing the “counsels” of God, out of love for “His beauty,” for to do so realizes the soul's essential spiritual purpose. If someone does not wish to formally enroll as a Bahá'í, he or she is still welcome to participate in Bahá'í activities. It is notable that in many locations around the world, those who are not adherents are playing an active role in enriching devotional, educational and social initiatives inspired by Bahá'í principles.

*What kind of guidance is given to Bahá'ís who struggle to conduct themselves in accord with Bahá'í standards?*

There is a difference between the state of being attracted to those of the same sex and the practice of homosexuality. Once an individual recognizes Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this time, then, like every other believer, he or she will strive to follow His teachings regardless of the particular challenges he or she may personally face. All believers struggle in different ways to live a Bahá'í life, and there is no reason that the challenge of being attracted to persons of the same sex should be singled out above others. Life brings each soul different tests, and the challenge some souls have with the Bahá'í teachings pertaining to homosexuality is essentially no different from that which others face in adhering to other teachings. A sympathetic approach to the question of homosexuality is certainly warranted and the efforts of those with a homosexual orientation who strive to live the Bahá'í life are worthy of admiration. They are free to participate in service to the community, and they should know that the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith do not pry into the private lives of the believers.

*Are the Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality in accord with the findings of science?*

While science may provide insight into what is natural—that is, what appears in nature—it does not speak to whether a “natural” behavior ought or ought not be expressed. A strictly material perspective that regards nature as perfect is not accepted by Bahá'ís. A distinction is made in the Bahá'í teachings between what human beings may be inclined to do and what ultimately best represents our spiritual purpose. The Bahá'í understanding of homosexuality is therefore viewed as a matter of moral understanding and action rather than a scientific question.

*Do Bahá'ís believe homosexuality is a condition that is subject to medical intervention?*

The perspective of the medical community on homosexuality has changed significantly over the years. The question, however, is not whether sexual orientation can be changed but whether, as a Bahá'í, one endeavors to abide by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. It is left to the individual believer to determine whether counselling or some other approach would be of personal assistance in this regard.

*What should be the attitude of a Bahá'í towards his or her child who has a homosexual orientation?*

A parent in such a situation would naturally continue to express deep and abiding love towards his or her child. If the child has reached the age of maturity and does not consider himself or herself to be a Bahá'í, then Bahá'í law would of course not apply to the child. The parent should be mindful that Bahá'ís are enjoined to be respectful of those whose views differ from their own, and they do not judge others according to their own standards. If the child is a Bahá'í, the parent would wish to encourage the child to reflect on the principles discussed above about identity and every believer's struggle to follow the teachings of the Manifestation of God.

*What should a Bahá'í with a homosexual orientation do if he or she experiences prejudice in the Bahá'í community?*

The Bahá'í teachings instill the belief that every human soul is indelibly imprinted with the image of God; this affords the ultimate dignity that all persons seek. Bahá'u'lláh calls on His followers to focus on and bring about unity in the world: “adhere tenaciously unto that which will promote fellowship, kindness and unity,” and “be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body.” Toward this end, Bahá'ís endeavor to manifest “all-embracing love” and respect towards every member of the community, to create social environments of individual empowerment and mutual flourishing. There is no place for judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness. Therefore, to regard those with a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain would be entirely against the spirit of the Bahá'í Faith. In their efforts to build unified communities, it is inevitable that Bahá'ís will encounter fellow believers whose behavior does not fully conform to the standards of their Faith. When facing such shortcomings, one can often

positively affect others by demonstrating patience and forbearance. However, if the prejudicial behavior of the community member persists and is undermining unity, then Bahá'í institutions would have a responsibility to address the matter.

*Why don't Bahá'ís establish or recognize same-sex marriage within the Bahá'í community?*

In light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on marriage and sexual conduct, it is not possible to recognize same-sex marriage within the Bahá'í community. To be a Bahá'í means to recognize that Bahá'u'lláh is the divinely-inspired source of truth for this age. It would be a contradiction for someone to profess to accept Bahá'u'lláh yet consciously reject, disregard, or contend with aspects of belief or practice ordained by Him. If an individual in a same-sex marriage wished to formally join the Bahá'í community, it would only be reasonable for the person to resolve any fundamental contradiction for himself or herself before deciding whether to make the commitment to become a Bahá'í. No pressure would be brought to bear by the Bahá'í community on any person in this position, who must prayerfully determine the path to take. While it may not be possible for some individuals to enroll as Bahá'ís, they can, if they choose, continue their study of the Bahá'í teachings and strive to put them into practice in their lives.

*Does the Bahá'í community have a position regarding same-sex civil marriage?*

The Bahá'í Faith takes no position concerning the sexual practices of those who are not adherents. The global Bahá'í community does not see itself as one among competing social groups and organizations, each vying to establish its particular social agenda. Its approach toward effecting positive social change avoids contention and the contest for power while seeking to unite people in the search for underlying principles and meaningful measures that can lead to the just resolution of the problems afflicting society. As Bahá'u'lláh states: “The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God.” But in working for social justice and well-being, Bahá'ís distinguish between those dimensions of public issues that are in keeping with the Bahá'í teachings, which they can actively support, and those that are not, which they would neither promote nor necessarily oppose. In connection with the issue of homosexuality, Bahá'ís strive to end discrimination and to protect the fundamental human rights of all people, while neither promoting nor opposing the opportunity for civil marriage.