

Sexual Morality: The Bounds of Sexual Expression

Exported from Holy-Writings.com on 2026-07-05 — 1 clipping

Copyright © 1995 by The Association for Bahá'í Studies - Australia

Abstract

Society's burgeoning preoccupation with sex and unbridled permissiveness in its expression affronts the sacredness of the institution of marriage, which, for Bahá'ís, constitutes the very foundation of social life. According to Bahá'í law the preservation of its sacredness requires the abstinence of sex before marriage, and sexual exclusivity between spouses after marriage. These bounds are predicated on the belief that the only legitimate use of the sex instinct is in marriage. It is argued, in this paper, that both premarital and extramarital sex fail to give the same degree of attention to the preservation of trust as does the contraction of marriage. This thesis is developed using the methodology of moral reasoning from a deontological point of view.

I

How ought we view sex or, for the want of a better expression, put it into perspective in our lives? Is it a force whose end is the production of physical pleasure?, the procreation of life? Or is it inextricably linked to cultural expressions of love and affection?, a sacred act, constituting the epitome of intimacy, performed only between married couples? All of these are valid conceptions of the significance of sex in our every-day lives. However, I posit that the value ascribed to each of them is contingent on the degree to which we value other things. This will invariably mould our sexual perspective, and as such, define the bounds of sexual expression.

In the West it is legal for consenting adults - whether or not either of them is married to another - to engage in sexual intercourse. By legal I

mean not sanctionable by the law. Only when the act of sexual intercourse involves a physical violation of individual rights (namely the right to bodily security) is it punishable by law (the most obvious example being rape). This is in stark contrast to Bahá'í law which, in the absence of any concomitant physical violation of individual rights, also imposes penalties on those who engage in mutual premarital or extramarital sex and their respective partner(s). This is predicated on the belief that the only legitimate use of the sex instinct is in marriage (Lights, 1988).

Laws primarily serve to preserve what we as a society value. They reflect our morals, ie. what we believe to be right and wrong. It is in this connection that the Bahá'í law regarding marriage canalises the value given to it by Bahá'u'lláh. He writes:

"And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book" (Bahá'í Prayers 1991).

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith in explicating the conception and establishment of this institution by Bahá'u'lláh succinctly states that it is "...of vital social importance, constituting as it does the very foundation of social life" (Lights, 1988); and that..."its chief and sacred purpose [is] the perpetuation of the human race" (Lights, 1988). He furthermore affirms that..."while [it gives] 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" (Lights, 1988). The veracity of this is, at a later date, emphasised yet again. He categorically states: "that two people should live their lives in love and harmony is of far greater importance than that they should be consumed with passion for each

other" (Bahá'í
Marriage, 1983).

So what makes sex within the above context of the purpose and nature of the institution of marriage morally right?. Or, conversely, what makes sex outside of this context morally wrong? More specifically, what makes premarital and extramarital sex morally wrong?

II

Many advocates of premarital sex argue its legitimacy on the grounds that it conforms to the law of nature, ie it is the natural thing to do. Yet natural acts, although they end in the satisfaction of a physiological or psychological need, are not always morally right: torture and rape are natural acts in the sense that they are part of human nature, yet they are deemed morally wrong (Goods, 1975).

In deeming such actions as being morally wrong implies that we should not do them, which is tantamount to the recognition of a need to accept limits.

In relation to the environment we have already realised the necessity of accepting some kind of limit in our interaction with it; if we are to prevent the destruction of the natural systems that regenerate this world. The imposition of limits confers worth on these natural systems. In this connection natural acts such as torture are morally wrong. They de-value human worth. They treat persons as a mere means, ie not mattering in themselves.

Laws of nature can be defined in two senses: scientific and ethical.

"In the scientific sense, a law of nature is a descriptive principle; it is a universal generalisation describing how all entities of a certain kind do in fact

act....In the ethical sense, a law of nature is a normative principle. It is a universal generalisation setting up an ideal of how all agents ought to act" (Morals, 1975).

Ethical principles set the bounds of propriety and give preservation to human worth; whereas scientific laws reflect how entities behave. Is there a correlation between scientific laws and ethical principles?

Consider the following psychological definition of aggression, a human disposition. "The most common definition proposed that aggression is a behaviour that aims at inflicting injury or pain on other" (Aggression, 1970). As it is injurious to others it is condemned by society thus rendering it morally wrong. In making a moral judgement, such as this, society appeals to its ethical principles. However, how ought we regard actions that, although not directly de-valuing worth of persons, relegate other less tangible things that we value?

Consider the following comment regarding virtues: "many virtues only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues" (Goods, 1983). For example lying is morally reprehensible because we value truthfulness. Thus, an action is as morally right or, if you will, virtuous insofar as it supports the things that we in society value.

Natural acts aim solely at the satisfaction of a physiological need. Sex in this context aims solely at satisfying the human sex drive, the value of which is recognised by Bahá'í law; insofar as it regards its proper use as being the natural right of every individual, for which purpose the institution of marriage has been established (Lights, 1988). Aside from its procreative significance, how does constraining sex to marriage make it proper? I conjecture that it is related to the degree to which it gives attention to the preservation of trust.

III

Sexual intercourse provides a means of expressing love and affection towards another human being. The expression of love and affection are inestimably valued in society, surely sex gives attention to the value conferred upon them.

Perhaps it does, but is it not possible that in doing so it fails to

give adequate attention to the preservation of trust? I will consider this in view of premarital sex, and in the next section in view of extramarital sex.

Marriage according to Bahá'í Law is the legal contraction of the physical and spiritual union between a man and a woman. This union is predicated on the "commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart" (Selections, 1978). They - in reciting the marriage vows: "We will all, verily, abide by the will of God" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 1992) - pledge obedience to the Will of God, which in this instance is the contraction of their marriage.

In this sense Marriage is a divine contract binding two people together. This generates a feeling of security for both parties that their feelings of love and affection will be reciprocated by the other and vice versa. The feeling of security occurs as a result of the commitment they made to each other, which resulted in the contraction of their marriage. The pivot of this feeling of security is trust : faith in the belief that they will honour such a commitment - this forms the basis of their marital union.

Premarital sex often causes one of the partners to be lulled into a false sense of security, even if they engage in it to express their love for one another. Imagine that two consenting adults engage in premarital sex, to express the mutual love that they have for each other, on a regular basis; and that after some time one of them (for whatever reasons) falls out of love with the other, and decides to pursue other relationships. This person, regardless of the other's feelings toward them, is not obligated to stay in that relationship as together they made no such commitment.

It is "commitment [that] generates a sense of responsibility which provides stable trust through fluctuations in temperament....[It] is not sufficient to maintain love, but it adds an additional motive for not succumbing to, much

less seeking
out, temptations that threaten love" (Love's Constancy, 1993).

The mere act of sexual intercourse, even when it is an expression of love, cannot generate the same sense of responsibility that a lifelong commitment does;
which gives attention to the preservation of trust.

IV

Marriage, as argued previously, gives attention to the preservation of trust. Extramarital sex undermines this on two accounts.

Firstly, it is in breach of the initial commitment to one's spouse.

Secondly, it, as in the case of premarital sex, is unattended by any lifelong commitment between the adulterous spouse and the extramarital partner. For it to do so would require that they be married, which is not permissible according to Bahá'í Law:

In addition to its procreative significance, which (as previously stated) is "its chief and sacred purpose", sex in Bahá'í-marriage, viewed in light of the preceding arguments, is an expression of a love that is sustained and held together by trust. At best sexual intercourse outside of this context is not an expression of this kind of love, ie. one held together by trust derived from a life-long commitment.

This life-long commitment can be revoked - divorce, though strongly discouraged, is permissible according to Bahá'í Law. This provision, however, does not vitiate the institution of marriage as its legitimacy is founded upon irreconcilable antipathy between both partners. This ensures that marriage maintains a stable framework that promotes and fosters unity and harmony.

Constraining sex to marriage amounts to strengthening and promoting the virtue of trust. The degree of stability in any form of interaction between persons is contingent on the extent to which they can trust each other. The value of this is exalted by Bahá'u'lláh. He states: "trustworthiness is the greatest portal

leading unto the tranquillity and security of the people. In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend upon it" (Tablets, 1988).

References

1. Wellman, C. *Morals and Ethics*, Scott, Forman and Company, 1975.
2. Ervin, S. & Lane, C. "Aggression", in C. Costello (ed.), *Symptoms of Psychopathology: A Handbook*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc 1970.
3. Effendi, S. in H. Hornby (ed.) *Lights of Guidance* 2nd ed Copyright Bahá'í Publishing Trust: New Delhi 1988.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers*, U.S., 1991, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, Illinois.
5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá', *Selection from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust Haifa 1978.
6. Martin, M. "Love's Constancy", *Philosophy* 68 (1993).
7. Slote, M. "Goods and Virtues (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) cited in *Loves Constancy*.
8. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, Illinois.
9. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, Illinois.
10. Anon, *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, copyright 1983 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada.

— Sexual Morality: The Bounds of Sexual Expression (Used by permission of the curator)