

A Bahá'í View on Social and Family Responsibility

A submission to the Government
by the National Spiritual Assembly
of the Baha'is of New Zealand

April 1998

SUBMISSION ON THE PROPOSED CODE OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

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Introduction

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's invitation to participate in a wide ranging discussion on the proposed *Code of Social and Family Responsibility*.

Challenging conditions in our present society demonstrate that much needs to be done in order to build a "secure and confident community", and it is our view that real progress will only be made when the spiritual essence of humanity is recognised and nurtured through a life-long process of education. We do not refer here to the narrow definition of education as being that of a teacher passing on knowledge to a pupil in a classroom; but rather to a process of development which involves all sectors of society: the family, the media, businesses, government **and** the education system. However, since our young are the key to the future, many of our comments in this submission are concerned with the education of children — in the family, at school and in the wider community; an education which is as much concerned with the moral development of the child as it is with the child's intellectual, cultural and physical development.

Since this process of education over-arches each and all of the issues being addressed in the Discussion Document, we will respond indirectly rather than directly to the questions it raises, and trust that the comments below will be of value.

Concept of responsibility

A new understanding of the nature of society is needed in order to provide the foundation for the true fulfillment of human potential. Rather than society being seen as a collection of competing elements, it should be seen as an indivisible whole, in which the

interests of the individual and of society are inextricably linked. The Government and the individual each have particular responsibilities in creating a healthy society and this can best be achieved through a strongly reciprocal relationship. In one sense, the responsibilities of the Government and the citizen are identical, in that they must be founded on the same fundamental principles, such as equity, justice and trustworthiness; while in another sense they are very different, in that the Government exercises a great deal of power and authority over people's lives; much more than most individuals will ever exercise. With this power and authority comes a commensurate measure of responsibility.

While individuals have both the right and the responsibility to tell the Government what they want, they must also recognise that in order to establish a better social order and economic condition, they must give allegiance to the laws and principles of government. Moreover, the main focus of an individual's social responsibilities will vary from time to time: the social responsibilities of a child include acquiring an education; of a young adult, to seek meaningful employment; of a parent, to educate, nurture and protect their child; an older person, to guide, educate and to share wisdom. And of course, there are many more responsibilities than these. It must be acknowledged, too, that responsibilities are not confined to one particular age group, and that all age groups have a responsibility to care about others and to care for their environment.

In return, the Government has the responsibility to act in the best interests of society as a whole; to enact laws, establish just legislation and economics in order that all citizens may enjoy a full measure of welfare and privilege. Ideally, those in government would lead by example, always striving for "win/win" solutions through a **co-operative** consultative process based on the principles of justice and equity to all parties.

A Change of hearts and attitudes

"Man has two powers, and his development two aspects. One power is connected with the material world and by it he is capable of material advancement.

*The other power is spiritual and through its development his inner potential nature is awakened. These powers are like two wings. Both must be developed, for flight is impossible with one wing."*¹

"The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward."

It is our belief that the eleven expectations set out in the Discussion Document will best be achieved when the inner, spiritual essence of humanity is recognised and nurtured. The concept of spirituality we advocate is a broad and universal outlook which fully respects the findings of science, while also revering the eternal truths taught by the Founders of the world's great religions. Acknowledging and developing this spiritual dimension, both in our education system and in other institutions of society, is the only truly effective way of reaching the hearts and minds of people, and, consequently, of changing limited, outworn and unhelpful attitudes into a broader and richer understanding of the purpose of our life on earth.

Our state education system has for many years been determinedly secular, and has therefore generally failed to address this spiritual dimension. Indeed, New Zealand (like so many other countries) has worked on the assumption that society's progress can be measured in terms of material prosperity. However, as the twentieth century draws to a close, it is no longer viable to maintain that this materialistic conception of life is capable of meeting humanity's needs. On the contrary, our society has become ever more prone to social ills (or what some would call "spiritual" ills) — domestic violence, child abuse, racism, suicide, teenage pregnancy, mental health problems, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, etc. It is apparent that, unless the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail to attain even those goals.

We therefore endorse recent comments by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Jenny Shipley, acknowledging that the lack of "spirituality" in our society has not served us well.

1. All quotations are from the Baha'i Holy Writings

What is meant by spiritual education?

"Training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning. A child that is cleanly, agreeable, of good character, well-behaved — even though he be ignorant — is preferable to a child that is rude, unwashed, ill-natured, and yet becoming deeply versed in all the sciences and arts. The reason for this is that the child who conducts himself well, even though he be ignorant, is of benefit to others, while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he be learned. If however, the child be trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light."

Spiritual education must have as its goal the development of those characteristics and qualities which are a reflection of our true nature — courtesy, friendliness, trustworthiness, endurance, justice, tolerance, kindness, consideration, and the like. Such an education will inevitably give priority to teaching such principles as the essential oneness of the human family, the equality of men and women, and the removal of all forms of prejudice.

Programmes must be formulated (indeed, some already exist) which assist parents, teachers and other educators to foster the spiritual development of the children in their care. By spiritual education we do not mean teaching the doctrines of religion. Rather we advocate an appreciation for ethical principles, or values, which are universally accepted. Since a child's education begins in the home, parents must learn how to develop the finer human qualities within the family; in addition teachers must learn how to integrate such development into the school curriculum.

Many of these concepts could be easily integrated into the present Social Studies Curriculum and/or the new Health Curriculum. However, we believe that they should become **integral** components of the curriculum, rather than the curriculum simply **allowing** for them to be taught. Moreover, they should be introduced into the education system at a much earlier stage, in a manner which is appropriate to the maturity and capacity of the child.

It should also be acknowledged that spiritual education is an attitude and a skill which the educator demonstrates in his or her own interactions with the children, and encourages in the children's interactions

with each other.

The essential oneness of the human family

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

"In keeping with the requirements of the times, consideration should also be given to teaching the concept of world citizenship as part of the standard education of every child."

A "secure and confident community" can be founded only on an unshakeable consciousness of the oneness of mankind. Recognition of this spiritual truth requires that prejudice of every kind must be abandoned — prejudice of race, class, colour, creed, nation, religion, sex, degree of material civilisation, everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others. Inevitably, those who recognise this truth will feel a sense of responsibility for the well-being of society as a whole.

An integral part of this principle is the concept of **unity in diversity** — the concept that humanity, like the human body, comprises various elements which may look different and have different functions, abilities and qualities, yet which are all essential for the healthy functioning of the whole. When these various elements are all working in harmony, the full potential of both the individual and the collective body of humanity can be realised.

An understanding of this principle will enable the wonderful diversity of Aotearoa/New Zealand to be seen as a source of enrichment, and will create a climate in which individuals appreciate, support, assist and learn from each other. In such a climate, many of the social ills presently afflicting our society will disappear as individuals recover from that sense of worthlessness, alienation and despair which drives them to behave in ways which are destructive to them, their families, and society as a whole.

This principle should be taught in schools, and constantly asserted in the wider community.

The equality of men and women

"Inasmuch as human society consists of two parts, the male and female, each the complement of the other, the happiness and stability of humanity cannot be assured unless both are perfected. Therefore, the standard and status of man and woman must become equalised."

The achievement of the equality of men and women is fundamental to the future well-being of New Zealand — indeed, of this entire globe and its people. Statistics which show the comparative incomes of men and women; the comparative amount of property owned by men and women; the comparative numbers of women heading single-parent households; the number of women living in poverty as compared with men; and so on, make it abundantly clear that we are still a long way from achieving this goal.

When greater numbers of men arise to fulfill their responsibilities to their families, the drain on the resources of society and the damage to the future of our children will be significantly eased.

The extent to which women gain access to all avenues of endeavour will provide visible evidence of the pace of our progress. This must go beyond the equitable distribution of opportunity — important though that is. In fact, a fundamental rethinking of present attitudes and practices is required; a re-focus in which the inter-relationships of all people, and the role of the family, are recognised as being central to the well-being of the community, and society as a whole. This re-focus can be greatly assisted by the wider participation of women, particularly those who have, until now, been largely excluded, but whose experience and insight have prepared them to make crucial contributions to the common effort.

A continued commitment to the establishment of full equality between men and women, in all departments of life and at every level of society, will facilitate the removal from our society of such ills as domestic violence, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, mental health problems, and alcohol and drug abuse.

The status of motherhood and the role of parents

"The education of woman is more necessary and important than that of man, for woman is the trainer of the child from its infancy."

"... it is through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society."

Our society greatly undervalues the role of motherhood. Indeed, far too many of our mothers are raising their children alone (or at least without the biological father), perhaps entirely dependent upon a benefit; or, even if married, are seeking outside employment because of economic necessity, rather than choice.

Furthermore, our young people receive seriously inadequate training for parenthood — not just in terms of pregnancy care, but in terms of how to raise their children to be well-adjusted and responsible adults.

The following quotation outlines some of the major subjects which should be taught as part of preparation for parenthood:

"... the various branches of knowledge, good behaviour, a proper way of life, the cultivation of a good character, chastity and constancy, perseverance, strength, determination, firmness of purpose; with household management, the education of children... Let them also study whatever will nurture the health of the body and its physical soundness, and how to guard their children from disease."

Although it is recognised that the mother is the first educator of the child, nevertheless the role of the woman should in no way be confined to the home and to the rearing of children. Indeed, women must continue to be given every opportunity to fully take their part in all aspects of society; in science and commerce, arts and crafts, in politics and so on.

The father's role is of immense importance to the well-being of the child. When the children are in their infancy, his primary (but not exclusive) role is usually to provide for the financial needs of the family, and to support and assist the mother of his children in creating a strong family unit.

The parenting of children should always be considered a partnership, with the mother and father both taking essential but often differing

roles. These roles will change from time to time as the children grow, and will also vary according to the circumstances of the family. The key here is the equality of the two partners and their ability to consult with each other on all matters concerning the well-being of the children.

"...the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother — none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogative. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honour of one, the honour of all."

With well-prepared and well-supported parents, our children will grow into healthy, well-adjusted, mature and responsible adults, ready and willing to serve not only their families, but the wider community as well.

As well as encouraging a greater understanding of the status of motherhood, current trends which emphasise the importance of fathers, and which stress parenting as a partnership, should be strongly encouraged.

Work in the spirit of service

"...each child must be taught a profession, art, or trade, so that every member of the community will be enabled to earn his own livelihood. Work done in the spirit of service is the highest form of worship."

Among the employed, the present attitude towards work is often one of apathy and lethargy; work is undertaken simply as a means of acquiring available goods. At the same time, the unemployed are increasingly demoralised. Such a situation weakens people's sense of solidarity with society and saps their sense of responsibility to it.

As the experience of recent decades has demonstrated, material benefits and endeavours cannot be regarded as ends in themselves. The value of work consists not only in providing for humanity's basic needs in housing, food, health care, and the like, but in extending the reach of human abilities. However, for those who are living in poverty, providing even the most basic necessities of life becomes an all-consuming concern, as well as a source of huge resentment and anger when others are seen to be living in luxury. The extremes of both wealth and poverty must be eliminated if we wish to develop a "secure and confident" community.

What is needed is a fundamental reorientation of habits and attitudes — a new "work ethic". This can only be achieved when it is recognised that, unlike animals, human beings are impelled to express the immense capacities latent within them. Productive work which both meets their own needs and contributes to the well-being of others enables individuals to participate (however modestly) in the advancement of society.

Accompanying this new "work ethic" must be a new attitude on the part of the wealthy; an attitude of loving concern for those less fortunate, and a **willingness** to sacrifice a portion of their own wealth to assist those in need. Such an attitude would, of course, be an automatic outcome of a full and complete understanding of the concept of the "oneness of humanity".

The essential unity and harmony of all religions

"That which is of paramount importance for the children, that which must precede all else, is to teach them the oneness of God and the Laws of God...."

Religion has an important role to play in cultivating a sense of responsibility in society and religious institutions should be invited to play their part. However, a narrow sectarian approach will not work in today's diverse society. Rather, we advocate an approach based on the points of unity that can be discerned in all religious traditions.

The teaching that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, an ethic variously repeated in all the great religions of the

world, sums up the moral attitude, the peace-inducing aspect, which extends through all of them; it also signifies an aspect of unity which is their essential virtue, a virtue which mankind, in its disjointed view of history, has failed to appreciate.

The Founders of the world's great religions (Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and Bahá'u'lláh — the Prophet/Founder of the Bahá'í Faith) were all Educators of humanity and agents of one vast, ongoing, civilizing process.

Teaching this concept in our education system would prevent the development of divisive and harmful attitudes which, so often, lead to alienation and despair, and thus seriously hamper the development of a "secure and confident community".

Conclusion

It is our belief that society has arrived at a decisive turning point and that we are being impelled forward into a new stage of development. Individually and collectively we can either resist this transformation by clinging to old attitudes and patterns of behaviour, or we can assist it by embracing spiritual principles which will enable us to create a secure and confident community.

In brief, the New Zealand Bahá'í Community asserts that a change of hearts and attitudes is needed — both within the family and about the family — and that this can only be achieved through a life-long process of education (in schools, tertiary and other institutions, in the media and in the wider community) which:

- nurtures the spiritual dimension of the human being
- teaches the essential oneness of the human family (and thereby the elimination of all prejudices)
- promotes the equality of men and women
- gives priority to the education of women as the first educators of the children

- recognises the status of women as mothers and the importance of fathers
- honours the family as being central to the well-being of the community and society as a whole
- teaches a new work ethic by showing how individuals contribute to the well-being of society
- teaches the unity and harmony of all the religions.

We trust that these thoughts will be of value, and thank you for the opportunity to provide input into a matter of such crucial importance.

"Be just: can this nominal civilisation, unsupported by a genuine civilisation of character, bring about the peace and well-being of the people or win the good pleasure of God?"

"...when the pure intentions and the justice of the ruler, the wisdom and consummate skill and statecraft of the governing authorities, and the determination and unstinted efforts of the people, are all combined; then day by day the effects of the advancement, of the far-reaching reforms, of the pride and prosperity of government and people alike, will become clearly manifest."

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