

Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith

14 November 2005

Transmitted by email

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Recently, questions have arisen which have prompted the Universal House of Justice to comment further on matters treated in the compilation "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith".

The Bahá'í principle calling for investigation of reality encourages an unfettered search for knowledge and truth by whoever wishes to engage in it. When applied to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, it inevitably gives rise to a wide range of responses. Some, attracted to the Message, embrace the Cause as their own. Some may respond positively to certain precepts or principles and willingly collaborate toward shared aims. Some may find it to be an interesting social phenomenon worthy of study. Still others, content with their own beliefs, may reject its claims. Bahá'ís are taught to be respectful of the views of others, believing that conscience should not be coerced.

Upon becoming a Bahá'í, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one's knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that "an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds." Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Bahá'í life, immature ideas yield to a more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Bahá'í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence

of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on "problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book".

In searching for understanding, Bahá'ís naturally acquaint themselves with published materials from a variety of sources. A book written by disinterested non-Bahá'í scholar about the Faith, even if it reflects certain assumptions and puts forward conclusions acceptable within a given discipline but which are at variance with Bahá'í belief, poses no particular problem for Bahá'ís, who would regard these perceptions as an honest attempt to explore a religious phenomenon as yet little understood generally. Any non-biased effort to make the Faith comprehensible to a thoughtful readership, however inadequate it might appear, would evoke genuine Bahá'í appreciation for the perspective offered and research skill invested in the project. The matter is wholly different, however, when someone intentionally attacks the Faith. An inescapable duty devolves upon the friends so to situate themselves in the knowledge of the Teachings as to be able to respond appropriately to such a challenge as it arises and thus uphold the integrity of the Faith.

The words of Bahá'u'lláh Himself shed light on the proper attitude to adopt. He warns the believers "not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men". "Let them", He instructs, "rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this Day, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God."

A different type of challenge arises when an individual or group, using the privilege of Bahá'í membership, adopts various means to impose personal views or an ideological agenda on the Bahá'í community. In one recent instance, for example, an individual has declared himself a "Bahá'í theologian, writing from and for a religious community," whose aim is "to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahá'í

community, to enable Bahá'ís to understand their relatively new Faith and to see what it can offer the world". Assertions of this kind go far beyond expressions of personal opinion, which any Bahá'í is free to voice. As illustrated, here is a claim that lies well outside the framework of Bahá'í belief and practice. Bahá'u'lláh has liberated human minds by prohibiting within His Faith any caste with ecclesiastical prerogatives that seeks to foist a self-assumed authority upon the thought and behaviour of the mass of believers. Indeed, He has prescribed a system that combines democratic practices with the application of knowledge through consultative processes.

The House of Justice is confident that the principles herein presented will enable the friends to benefit from diverse contributions resulting from exploration of the manifold implications of Bahá'u'lláh's vast Revelation, while remaining impervious to the efforts of those few who, whether in an explicit or veiled manner, attempt to divert the Bahá'í community from essential understandings of the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre