

II. Religion and Cultural Change

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi

Original English



II. Religion and Cultural Change

Religion — “The Very Basis and Root-Principle of Culture and Civilization”

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Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose. Through the mere revelation of the word “Fashioner,” issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name. In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before.

“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh”, section LXXIV, p. 141

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Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society — is religion....

By the Lord God, and there is no God but He, even the minutest details of civilized life derive from the grace of the Prophets of God. What thing of value to mankind has ever come into being which was not first set forth either directly or by implication in the Holy Scriptures?

...the Divine religions enjoin upon and encourage all the faithful to adopt such principles as will conduce to continuous improvements, and to acquire from other peoples sciences and arts.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *“The Secret of Divine Civilization”*, p. 71; p. 96; and p. 99



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

...as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms, so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.

23 December 1942, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

When the masses of mankind are awakened and enter the Faith of God, a new process is set in motion and the growth of a new civilization begins. Witness the emergence of Christianity and of Islám. These masses are the rank and file, steeped in traditions of their own, but receptive to the new Word of God, by which, when they truly respond to it, they become so influenced as to transform those who come in contact with them.

13 July 1964, the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, *"Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986"*, p. 38

The House of Justice is deeply concerned at the plight of so many of the indigenous and aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world who have been denied their rights as a consequence of actions by oppressive majorities. Such inequities and injustices are to be found in many countries. The purpose of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh is to lift the yoke of the world, and to provide the means for their abiding happiness.

The Bahá'í approach to resolution of the manifold problems affecting human society rests upon the assertion by Bahá'u'lláh that these ills are but various symptoms and side effects of the basic disease, which the Divine Physician has diagnosed to be disunity. Bahá'u'lláh has made it abundantly clear that the first step essential for the health and harmony of the whole of mankind is its unification. He says: "the well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 203). By contrast, the approach of most people is the exact opposite: their concentration is on attempts to remedy the multitude of ills besetting mankind, with the expectation that the resolution of these problems will ultimately lead to unity.

15 June 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple

It is, of course, true that new movements of thought, especially in the field of religion, tend to obliterate old ones, or to transform their nature in the eyes of the people. One has only to consider how the religions of Greece and Rome, and those of the Keltic and Germanic peoples, although still remembered by the European peoples in the form of legend and literary tradition, have been replaced by Christianity.

The House of Justice feels that in discussion ... you should not challenge this point, nor should you enter into criticisms of the often ruthless manner in which the followers of new religions have suppressed the old ways. It is suggested that, instead, you present the Bahá'í concepts, as expressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, namely that the fountainhead of all religions is to be found in God through the Teachings of His Prophets, and that all peoples have drunk at this ocean of divine Revelation; that sterile traditions and blind imitations accumulating over the centuries, exacerbated by the barriers of geography, have caused hatred and conflict where there should have been love and collaboration. These distortions have also given rise to the cruel and debased customs which are to be found in some religions. It is the Bahá'í belief that each human soul has the duty to God and the inborn capacity to seek out truth for himself. Those who do this sincerely will ultimately find themselves united, for there is only one God and Source of Truth. The Bahá'í attitude to earlier religions, therefore, is not that they are false or "heathen", but that, at root, they are all true and that these fundamental truths still persist within them.

Bahá'ís encourage Indians in South America, for example, to see and reverence the profound spiritual truths which are to be found in both their pre-Christian religions and in the Catholicism which, in later centuries, has to varying degrees, supplanted or overlaid their archaic faiths.

Through the Bahá'í teachings, the inner conflict which many still feel between their ancient religions and Christianity is resolved and, at the same time, they are enabled to understand their spiritual unity with the peoples of other continents, such as Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims with whom they will undoubtedly come into contact with increasing frequency.

An example of the Bahá'í attitude is to be found in the operation of such radio stations as Radio Bahá'í Ecuador, which has a policy of encouraging Indian arts and music and fostering in the Indians pride in their heritage.

22 March 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly



A "New Way of Life for Humanity"

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The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has assimilated, by virtue of its creative, its regulative and ennobling energies, the varied races, nationalities, creeds and classes that have sought its shadow, and have pledged unswerving fealty to its cause. It has changed the hearts of its adherents, burned away their prejudices, stilled their passions, exalted their conceptions, ennobled their motives, coordinated their efforts, and transformed their outlook. While preserving their patriotism and safeguarding their lesser loyalties, it has made them lovers of mankind, and the determined upholders of its best and truest interests. While maintaining intact their belief in the Divine origin of their respective religions, it has enabled them to visualize the underlying purpose of these religions, to discover their merits, to recognize their sequence, their interdependence, their wholeness and unity, and to acknowledge the bond that vitally links them to itself. This universal, this transcending love which the followers of the Bahá'í Faith feel for their fellow-men, of whatever race, creed, class or nation, is neither mysterious nor can it be said to have been

artificially stimulated. It is both spontaneous and genuine. They whose hearts are warmed by the energizing influence of God's creative love cherish His creatures for His sake, and recognize in every human face a sign of His reflected glory.

11 March 1936, Shoghi Effendi, in *"The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh"*, p. 197

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To believe in the Mouthpiece of God in His Day confers very great blessings, not only on individuals, but on races, and He hopes that you who are now numbered amongst the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will give His Message to many more of your tribe, and in this way hasten for your people a bright and happy future.

21 December 1947, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Native American Local Spiritual Assembly

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...when a person becomes a Bahá'í, he gives up the past only in the sense that he is a part of this new and living Faith of God, and must seek to pattern himself, in act and thought, along the lines laid down by Bahá'u'lláh. The fact that he is by origin a Jew or a Christian, a black man or a white man, is not important anymore, but, as you say, lends color and charm to the Bahá'í community in that it demonstrates unity in diversity.

12 March 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh will establish a new way of life for humanity. Those who are Bahá'ís must endeavour to establish this way of life just as rapidly as possible. Now that the hour has arrived when the Bahá'í Faith is gaining prominence, and is being viewed and reviewed by so many peoples, it is necessary that the adherents of the Faith should live up to the high ideals of the Faith in every way. In this way they can demonstrate that the Bahá'í Faith does create a new way of life, which brings to the individual a complete association with the Will of God, and thus the establishment of a peaceful and universal society. Divisional attachments are of man, while universal service is of God.

20 November 1955, Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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It is not enough to proclaim the Bahá'í message, essential as that is. It is not enough to expand the rolls of Bahá'í membership, vital as that is. Souls must be transformed, communities thereby consolidated, new models of life thus attained. Transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, but it lies in the will and effort of the individual to achieve it in obedience to

the Covenant. Necessary to the progress of this life-fulfilling transformation is knowledge of the will and purpose of God through regular reading and study of the Holy Word.

Ridván 1989, the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World



Inevitability of Change

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...change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *"Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986"*, p. 85

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Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose — that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *"Some Answered Questions"*, p. 233

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God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end....

The superiority of the present in relation to the past consists in this, that the present can take over and adopt as a model many things which have been tried and tested and the great benefits of which have been demonstrated in the past, and that it can make its own new discoveries and by these augment its valuable inheritance.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *"The Secret of Divine Civilization"*, p. 3; p. 114

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O ye respected souls! From the continual imitation of ancient and worn-out ways, the world had grown dark as darksome night. The fundamentals of the divine Teachings had passed from

memory; their pith and heart had been totally forgotten, and the people were holding on to husks. The nations had, like tattered garments long outworn, fallen into a pitiful condition.

Out of this pitch blackness there dawned the morning splendour of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. He hath dressed the world with a garment new and fair, and that new garment is the principles which have come down from God.

Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life. The autumn hath gone by, and the reviving spring is here. All things are now made new. Arts and industries have been reborn, there are new discoveries in science, and there are new inventions; even the details of human affairs, such as dress and personal effects — even weapons — all these have likewise been renewed. The laws and procedures of every government have been revised. Renewal is the order of the day.

And all this newness hath its source in the fresh outpourings of wondrous grace and favour from the Lord of the Kingdom, which have renewed the world. The people, therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age.

Unless these Teachings are effectively spread among the people, until the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten, this world of being will find no peace, nor will it reflect the perfections of the Heavenly Kingdom. Strive ye with all your hearts to make the heedless conscious, to waken those who sleep, to bring knowledge to the ignorant, to make the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and restore the dead to life.

"Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" #205, p. 264

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The Bahá'ís should not always be the last to take up new and obviously excellent methods, but rather the first, as this agrees with the dynamic nature of the Faith which is not only progressive, but holds within itself the seeds of an entirely new culture and civilization.

5 May 1946, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer



Nature and Processes of Cultural Evolution

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Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh. Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be

avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity...

The call of Bahá'u'lláh is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.

28 November 1931, Shoghi Effendi, in *"The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh"*, p. 41

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The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.

21 March 1932, Shoghi Effendi, in *"The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh"*, p. 57

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As regards the questions of tribal practice, the Guardian wishes you to be extremely forbearing and patient in weaning the Bahá'ís away from their old customs. This can only be done by taking each case individually as it comes up, using the greatest wisdom and kindness, and not trying rigorously to impose all Bahá'í laws in every detail at this time.

8 August 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity. Although most of these festive celebrations have no doubt stemmed from religious rituals in bygone ages, the believers should not be deterred from participating in those in which, over the course of time, the religious meaning has given way to purely culturally oriented practices. For example, Naw-Rúz itself was originally a Zoroastrian religious festival, but gradually its Zoroastrian connotation has almost been forgotten. Iranians, even after their conversion to Islám, have been observing it as a national festival. Now Naw-Rúz has become a Bahá'í Holy Day and is being observed throughout the world, but, in addition to the Bahá'í observance, many Iranian Bahá'ís continue to carry out their past cultural traditions in connection with this Feast. Similarly, there are a number of national customs in every part of the world which have cultural rather than religious connotations.

In deciding whether or not to participate in such traditional activities, the Bahá'ís must guard against two extremes. The one is to disassociate themselves needlessly from harmless cultural observances and thus alienate themselves from their non-Bahá'í families and friends; the other is to continue the practice of abrogated observances of previous dispensations and thus undermine the independence of the Bahá'í Faith and create undesirable distinctions between themselves and their fellow-Bahá'ís. In this connection there is a difference between what Bahá'ís do among themselves and what they do in companionship with their non-Bahá'í friends and relations. For example, in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian there appears the following guidance:

As regards the celebration of the Christian Holidays by the believers: it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing such holidays as Christmas and New Year, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Rúz.

Further, there is no objection to Bahá'ís' attending religious marriage ceremonies of their friends and relatives or take part in festivities usually connected with these events, provided that in doing so they do not contravene Bahá'í Law. For example, if consuming alcoholic beverages is a part of such activities, the Bahá'ís, of course, would be obliged to refrain from partaking of such drinks.

There are some exclusive religious ceremonies in which Bahá'ís should not participate, in order to safeguard the independence of the Faith. In this regard, the beloved Guardian has given the following advice to an individual believer: "In these days the friends should, as much as possible, demonstrate through their deeds the independence of the Holy Faith of God, and its freedom from the customs, rituals and practices of a discredited and abrogated past."

In observing this principle, the House of Justice advises the Bahá'ís to maintain a balance between their adherence to the Cause and obedience to its laws on the one hand, and their role in society on the other. When an individual becomes a Bahá'í he acquires, as you are aware, a wider loyalty to the Manifestations of God. Having found this new way of life, he should be

careful not to isolate himself from his family and his people, and he should show respect for his former religion. The Bahá'ís should, of course, avoid performing any acts which could be considered as implying their membership in another religion or which are contrary to Bahá'í principles. There is a clear distinction between participating in festive and cultural events, as opposed to performing religious ceremonies and rituals.

It should also be remembered that the weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions, which have been established among communities for centuries, takes time and is a gradual process. Therefore, while the National Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake.

26 May 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

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The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings....

Of course, many cultural elements everywhere inevitably will disappear or be merged with related ones from their societies, yet the totality will achieve that promised diversity within world unity. We can expect much cultural diversity in the long period before the emergence of a world commonwealth of nations in the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh's new world order. Much wisdom and tolerance will be required, and much time must elapse until the advent of that great day.

25 July 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

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...what Bahá'u'lláh has done for us all is to provide a standard by which to determine what is pleasing in God's sight, thereby freeing us to maintain those elements of diversity which are unique to our different cultures. The adoption of this divine standard enables each people to be confident in the permissibility of what it can retain from its past.

23 June 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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Since change is inevitable if progress is to be made by any African society, a primary challenge to Bahá'ís is to preserve and improve those wholesome aspects of tribal and family custom that are in accord with the Bahá'í Teachings and to dispense with those that are not. Such a challenge must be embraced with the understanding that the Book of God is the standard by which to weigh all forms of behaviour. While unwavering action is necessary, wisdom and tact and patience must, of course, be exercised. Let it be understood, too, that Africans are not alone in the struggle to change certain age-old practices. People everywhere have customs which must be abandoned so as to clear the path along which their societies must evolve towards that

glorious, new civilization which is to be the fruit of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Indeed, in no society on earth can there be found practices which adequately mirror the standards of His Cause. His own truth-bearing Words clarify the matter: "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty. The whole earth is illuminated with the resplendent glory of God's Revelation."

Riḍván, 1996, the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa

