

III. Appreciation of Cultural Diversity

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

Original English



III. Appreciation of Cultural Diversity

“Consider the Flowers of a Garden” — the Principle of Unity in Diversity

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All countries, in the estimation of the one true God, are but one country, and all cities and villages are on an equal footing. Neither holds distinction over another.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *“Tablets of the Divine Plan”*, p. 61

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A critic may object, saying that peoples, races, tribes and communities of the world are of different and varied customs, habits, tastes, character, inclinations and ideas, that opinions and thoughts are contrary to one another, and how, therefore, is it possible for real unity to be revealed and perfect accord among human souls to exist?

In answer we say that differences are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord.

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination.



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity.

Praise be to God, today the splendour of the Word of God hath illumined every horizon, and from all sects, races, tribes, nations, and communities souls have come together in the light of the Word, assembled, united and agreed in perfect harmony. Oh! What a great number of meetings are held adorned with souls from various races and diverse sects! Anyone attending these will be struck with amazement, and might suppose that these souls are all of one land, one nationality, one community, one thought, one belief and one opinion; whereas, in fact, one is an American, the other an African, one cometh from Asia and another from Europe, one is a native of India, another is from Turkestan, one is an Arab, another a Tajik, another a Persian and yet another a Greek. Notwithstanding such diversity they associate in perfect harmony and unity, love and freedom; they have one voice, one thought and one purpose. Verily, this is from the penetrative power of the Word of God!

"Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" #225, p. 305

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The Cause does not wish to suppress national characteristics. It abhors too much uniformity, and stands for the principle of unity in diversity, which principle we believe can alone provide a solution for the unification of mankind.

25 June 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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Such a Faith knows no division of class or of party. It subordinates, without hesitation or equivocation, every particularistic interest, be it personal, regional, or national, to the paramount interests of humanity, firmly convinced that in a world of inter-dependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no abiding benefit can be conferred upon the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are ignored or neglected.

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the

component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples....

National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated.

11 March 1936, Shoghi Effendi, in *"The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh"*, p. 203

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With the coming of Bahá'u'lláh and the emphasis that His Revelation gives to the oneness of mankind, it is inevitable that peoples in all parts of the world who once seemed dormant or who have suffered discrimination would rise to assert their place in society. As with so many fundamental social issues, those concerning "indigenous rights" and "self-determination" find, for Bahá'ís, their proper expression and resolution within the context of the principle of the oneness of mankind. However, as is often the case, such issues are expressed in political forms which are unacceptable to Bahá'ís, who conscientiously avoid partisanship, subversion, and the corrupt attitudes and involvements associated with politics. At the present time, it is recognized that important issues of society fall within the province of government and perforce engage political processes currently in practice. Increasingly, as the Faith emerges from obscurity the Bahá'í community will find itself compelled to assist in finding solutions to the social problems afflicting humanity, it will have to be wise in its actions to avoid the pitfalls of politics.

Generally, the wisest course for individual Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community in controversial situations is to remain uninvolved, although not uninterested. It is the responsibility of the Bahá'ís, in their contact with the native people, to explain that the Bahá'í approach, with its emphasis upon the achievement of unity as a basis for an enduring resolution to the problems of mankind, far from being indifferent to the real needs of disadvantaged peoples, represents a fundamental solution derived from the diagnosis by the All-Knowing Physician of the manifold ills of human society.

27 June 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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The fundamental principle of the oneness of mankind, and the aim of the Faith to promote unity in diversity, underlie the Bahá'í approach to indigenous peoples. Their rights are inseparable from human rights for all, and the Bahá'í Faith upholds the right of indigenous peoples to develop and take pride in their own identity, culture and language. Great importance is attached to teaching the Faith to the indigenous populations in a country, more especially since they have so often been neglected or downtrodden by other segments of society; in many instances their suffering has made them particularly receptive to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh....

A unique feature of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the manner in which it enables all the diverse elements of the Bahá'í community, drawn from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural and educational backgrounds, to work together in a mutually supportive and spiritually beneficial manner. This is in direct contrast to the declining social order external to the Bahá'í community, in which each segment seeks to pursue a separate path in its social and political organization and activities.

25 July 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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...the oneness of mankind will not be based on forced assimilation, but upon protection of cultural diversity. At the same time, however, we should beware of inadvertently settling upon a limited model, such as the one sometimes associated in contemporary discourse on multiculturalism. A distinctively Bahá'í culture will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics, but also firmly uphold unity in regard to fundamental principles, thereby achieving a vigorous complementarity. For example, in "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), page 260-1, we find the following intriguing statement:

What a blessing that will be — when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea. And to such a degree will the inherent unity of all prevail, that the traditions, rules, customs and distinctions in the fanciful life of these populations will be effaced and vanish away like isolated drops, once the great sea of oneness doth leap and surge and roll.

The point is not to minimize differences, nor to make of unity and diversity a false dichotomy, but ever to keep in mind that the Bahá'í standard is very high and grounded in divine love.

13 February 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer



An "Equal Standard of Human Rights"

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...Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognized and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal; there is no distinction or preferment for any soul in the dominion of His justice and equity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *"The Promulgation of Universal Peace"*, p. 182

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As to your question concerning the rights of the minority of non-Bahá'í citizens in a Bahá'í state, it is clear from the writings of our Faith that under a Bahá'í system the rights of minorities of any

type must always be respected and upheld. Just as Bahá'ís today show obedience and loyalty to the government but refuse to bow to the majority if they are asked to deny their faith, so in the future, when the majority is represented by the Faith the Bahá'ís will not force the minority to become followers of Bahá'u'lláh but they will expect the minority to be similarly obedient and loyal. As you indicate the ways of the world are basically and usually at variance with this standard...

The ultimate safeguard in the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to ensure that this principle and all its other fundamental tenets are not violated is the Universal House of Justice, which, as its Constitution clearly stipulates, is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of the teachings and of safeguarding their inviolability.

9 March 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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We appreciate the careful thought you have given to the subject of indigenous populations. The Bahá'í International Community should maintain its involvement with this issue, continuing the emphasis on the need for unity in diversity — a unity which implies mutual tolerance among the various populations, a recognition by dominant populations of the freedom of indigenous peoples to exercise their rights in all legitimate varieties of ways, and the corollary recognition of indigenous peoples themselves that such freedom carries with it the responsibility of recognizing the rights of all others to the same expressions. The implications for indigenous peoples also include: realization of the virtues of cross-cultural influence; appreciation of the values of other cultures as accruing to the wealth of human experience and the freedom of all to share in such values without necessarily giving up their respective identities; avoidance of parochial attitudes which degenerate into ethnic and cultural prejudices; and, above all, appreciation of the necessity to maintain a global expression within which the particulars of indigenous expression can find an enduring context.

19 July 1985, the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í International Community UN Office

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Concerning indigenous rights, it stands to reason that indigenous people are entitled to all the human rights accorded other peoples. For example, they should be guaranteed the full rights of citizenship, and all acts of discrimination against them, which may have developed over the years, should be eliminated. At the same time, it would be unseemly for the demands for their rights to make, on the basis of their indigenesness, a special claim to exclusive rights and privileges which exceed the necessity to redress injustices. The Bahá'í attitude on such questions should be guided by Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." Thus it should be borne in mind that while upholding indigenous rights may well deserve the support of the Bahá'ís, often the viewpoints of those claiming such rights are so circumscribed and narrow that Bahá'ís find it difficult to wholeheartedly subscribe to them.

14 January 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

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Indigenous people have a highly significant role to play in the development of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, as is indicated in the oft-quoted words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning the American continent to the effect that "should these Indians be educated and properly guided, there can be no doubt that through the Divine teachings they will become so enlightened that the whole earth will be illumined". In this period of social evolution, however, minorities, including indigenous peoples, continue to suffer from oppressive and disheartening treatment in many parts of the world. On the subject of amelioration of the condition of oppressed and unjustly treated minorities, in a letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice has stated the following:

The Universal House of Justice is deeply concerned at the plight of so many of the aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world who have been denied fundamental human rights by uninterested and selfish majorities. Humanity is plagued with many inequities and injustices in every part of the world. Bahá'u'lláh speaks of these and points out time and again that the solution to these problems lies in the recognition of God and His Manifestation for this Day.

While there is no objection to any member of a minority group asserting his legal claim to property or rights through the courts or administrative agencies which may be open to him, it is contrary to Bahá'í principles to take political action in asserting those rights.

The principles stated in the Writings are clear, but usually it is when these principles are applied that questions arise, and in cases in which there is any doubt about the correct course of action, the believers should consult their National Assembly.

27 June 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer



Enrichment of Community Life

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...the Guardian was very pleased to learn of the progress done by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in its efforts to consolidate, widen and maintain the scope of its national activities. The difficulties in your way are tremendous. The differences of language and of social and intellectual background do, undoubtedly, render the work somewhat difficult to carry out and may temporarily check the efficient and smooth working of the national administrative machinery of the Faith. They, nevertheless, impart to the deliberations of the National Assembly a universality which they would be otherwise lacking, and give to its members a breadth of view which is their duty to cultivate and foster. It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any national or local assembly. For the bedrock of the Bahá'í administrative order is the principle of unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause. Differences which are not fundamental

and contrary to the basic teachings of the Cause should be maintained, while the underlying unity of the administrative order should be at any cost preserved and insured. Unity, both of purpose and of means is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national.

2 January 1934, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

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Now that more of the Latin believers are active and beginning to assume responsibilities, the work will go forward on a more permanent foundation, as pioneers from a foreign land can never take the place of native believers who must always constitute the bedrock of any future development of the Faith in their country.

30 January 1948, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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Every effort should be made to teach the native Swedish people, so they may ultimately take their part in the community of races and people, who make the world order of Bahá'u'lláh.

4 January 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two Local Spiritual Assemblies

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He was likewise very happy to know that there are now new Assemblies formed in the Malayan Federation, and he hopes that the Cause will make rapid progress in that part of the world. There are so many races and so many nationalities, and the future is infinitely bright when we think of what these souls are going to contribute to the international Bahá'í life as they become strong supporters of our glorious Faith.

7 May 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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In connection with the teaching work throughout the Pacific, ... [the] Bahá'ís ... must bear in mind that the primary object of their living there is to teach the native population the Faith...

He attaches great importance to teaching the aboriginal Australians, and also in converting more Maoris to the Faith, and hopes that the Bahá'ís will devote some attention to contacting both of these minority groups.

16 June 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

At the same time there is a challenge of great urgency facing the world-wide Bahá'í community. When launching the Ten Year Crusade, Shoghi Effendi urged the believers to "carry the torch of the Faith to regions so remote, so backward, so inhospitable that neither the light of Christianity or Islám has, after the revolution of centuries, as yet penetrated." A number of such regions still exist in places like New Guinea, the heart of Africa and the Amazon Basin in South America. As the influence of civilization spreads, the age-old ways of life of the inhabitants of these regions will inevitably perish, and they will rapidly be infected with the materialistic ideas of a decadent civilization. It is our pressing duty to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to such people while they are still pure-hearted and receptive, and through it to prepare them for the changed world which will come upon them....

In addition to the tribes in these remote regions of the world, there are tribes and minorities who still live in their traditional ways in the midst of other cultures. All too often such peoples are despised and ignored by the nations among whom they dwell, but we should seek them out, teach them the Cause of God, and enrich through their membership the Bahá'í communities of the lands in which they live. So important is this goal that each National Spiritual Assembly should study the requirements for teaching each of the different tribes and groups within its area, appoint a committee for this purpose — even a special committee for each tribe or minority where this is feasible and desirable — and launch a series of well-conceived, far-reaching campaigns to bring about the enrollment of these peoples within the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, and the establishment among them of the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

25 May 1975, from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies

