

## V. Cultural Diversity in the Bahá'í Community

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Original English



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#### Associating with People of Divers Beliefs and Customs

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The most important teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is to leave behind racial, religious, national and patriotic prejudices. Until these prejudices are entirely removed mankind will not find rest. Nay, rather, discord and bloodshed will increase day by day, and the foundation of the prosperity of the world of man will be destroyed.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet translated from the Persian

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To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. The consciousness of any division or cleavage in its ranks is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals. Once its members have fully recognized the claim of its Author, and, by identifying themselves with its Administrative Order, accepted unreservedly the principles and laws embodied in its teachings, every differentiation of class, creed, or color must automatically be obliterated, and never be allowed, under any pretext, and however great the pressure of events or of public opinion, to reassert itself. If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise. Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community. In the light of this principle, and bearing in mind the extreme desirability of having the minority elements participate and share responsibility in the conduct of Bahá'í activity, it should be the duty of



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every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible. The adoption of such a course, and faithful adherence to it, would not only be a source of inspiration and encouragement to those elements that are numerically small and inadequately represented, but would demonstrate to the world at large the universality and representative character of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and the freedom of His followers from the taint of those prejudices which have already wrought such havoc in the domestic affairs, as well as the foreign relationships, of the nations.

Shoghi Effendi, *"The Advent of Divine Justice"*, p. 35

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Association with all people of divers beliefs, customs and outlook is enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh, but we must guard against interference in political affairs, nor must we give the impression that we are a sect of any existing religion. We must be tolerant, kind, broad-minded, and unprejudiced in our dealings with all sorts and conditions of men, but it is our duty also to assert and prove the independence of our precious and sacred Faith, and to explain its liberal, universal principles.

12 December 1932, Shoghi Effendi, in a footnote appended to a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer

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The friends should first start by applying the principle of the oneness of races within their own community, and thus set before the world outside a noble and inspiring example. Every trace of racial prejudice should be banished by the friends in their community life, and also in their private life, so much so that they should come to gradually forget the very existence of the racial problem as such. Such an attitude is bound to strongly impress every outsider and draw his attention to the Cause, and convince him of the sublimity and practicability of its Teachings.

11 November 1936, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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It is a great mistake to believe that because people are illiterate or live primitive lives, they are lacking in either intelligence or sensibility. On the contrary, they may well look on us, with the evils of our civilization, with its moral corruption, its ruinous wars, its hypocrisy and conceit, as people who merit watching with both suspicion and contempt. We should meet them as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient descent, and who feel that they will be interested, as we are, in a living religion and not in the dead forms of present-day churches.

21 September 1951, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Teaching Committee

If the Japanese friends will realize that the American believers have failures and weaknesses which often reflect those of their nation, they will feel encouraged to not only be patient and understanding in regard to them, but also to contribute more of the fine points of their own national characteristics to the community work as a whole. If they think that, because the Cause is perfect the American Bahá'ís are perfect, they are bound to be disappointed. In our great Bahá'í family we see both the strong points and the weak points in national character come out in the believers of different countries. The strong points of the American friends are their devotion and their initiative, their courage and determination and zeal, but there are many characteristics they need, just like every people.

The whole aim of teaching work is to create a body of native believers who will carry on the work in their own land. Therefore, the sooner the meetings can be conducted in Japanese, the better; certainly on the Spiritual Assembly there should be adequate translation into Japanese, in fact it would be better if it could be the other way round, but perhaps this is not feasible at present, and would cause confusion and inharmony.

19 August 1952, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

I need not tell you that the work in Africa, and more particularly in Uganda, is very dear to his heart. The progress made there during the last year has borne him up and encouraged him greatly when he was often weighed down with work. He feels that this country and its peoples, in the very heart of Africa, are a most precious trust. Their receptivity to the Teachings, their great desire to serve their new Faith, the number of them who have arisen to go out as pioneers, mark them as a people apart in the Bahá'í world, at least for the time being. May many others in neighbouring countries prove as worthy, and follow their example.

In dealing with people who are still backward in relation to our civilized standards, and in many cases guided by a tribal system which has strong orders of its own, he feels that you should be both tactful and forbearing.

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

In spite of the fact that Mr.... has been expelled from Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the remarkable progress of the Faith there has been a source of great satisfaction. It shows that a spiritual receptivity, a purity of heart and uprightness of character exists potentially amongst many of the peoples of the Pacific Isles to an extent equal to that of the tribesmen of Africa. It is indeed an encouraging and awe-inspiring sight to witness the spread of our beloved Faith amongst those whom civilised nations misguidedly term "savages", "primitive peoples" and "uncivilised nations".

11 July 1956, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

The second issue which causes difficulties for the African friends in these days is the matter of tribalism....

The Bahá'í attitude in such a situation is clearly set forth in the Writings. As Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity....

In these days when tribal tensions are increasing in Africa the friends should be vigilant lest any trace of prejudice or hatred, God forbid, may enter their midst. On the contrary, they should endeavor to bring into the Faith an ever larger representation of the various tribes in each country, and through complete lack of prejudice as well as through the love that Bahá'ís have for each other and for their non-Bahá'í neighbors, demonstrate to their countrymen what the Word of God can do. They will thus provide, for the scrutiny of the leaders and rulers of their countries, a shining example of a unified community, working together in full concord and harmony, demonstrating a hope that is attainable, and a pattern worthy to be emulated.

To discriminate against any tribes because they are in a minority is a violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. As followers of God's Holy Faith it is our obligation to protect the just interests of any minority element within the Bahá'í community. In fact in the administration of our Bahá'í affairs, representatives of minority groups are not only enabled to enjoy equal rights and privileges, but they are even favored and accorded priority. Bahá'ís should be careful never to deviate from this noble standard, even if the course of events or public opinion should bring pressure to bear upon them.

8 February 1970, from the Universal House of Justice  
to the National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa, in  
*"Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986", p. 165*

The entry in into the Spanish Bahá'í communities of Gypsies, with their distinctive traditions and attitudes, is a welcome evidence of the power of the Faith to unite human beings of diverse backgrounds and cultures. It also provides the Spanish Bahá'í community with the challenge of working out ways of gradually and patiently deepening the new believers' understanding of and obedience to the teachings and laws of the Faith.

In this process the older believers must be careful to distinguish between those matters which are principles of the Faith, and those which may merely be traditional Spanish or Persian attitudes. As you are undoubtedly aware, pioneers have sometimes caused unnecessary complications by insisting that the new believers in a country adopt practices which turn out to have nothing to do with the Faith but are merely norms of behaviour from the pioneers' own homeland. In uniting the peoples of the world in the Bahá'í community, we must establish uniformity in essentials, but must permit diversity in secondary matters.

1 November 1979, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

We should have no class prejudice in the Faith, but we should not be blind to the differences and sensitivities of people who come from different classes of society. There are social differences in Europe, and the Bahá'ís should be aware of them and make every effort to bridge them. The Bahá'í community should aim at becoming a cross-section of the national community.

12 October 1983, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

...many Bahá'í communities around the world today function in the context of societies which are struggling with problems arising from ethnic differences. Conflicts often involve cultural and linguistic issues and may be further complicated by the presence of religious differences, and by opportunistic political movements which use them for their own benefit. It is not uncommon for the relevant issues to find expression through violence. The essential challenge facing Bahá'ís in such situations is to avoid becoming embroiled in pointless debate. Inspired by the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, we are called on to make the Bahá'í community a haven of harmony and love, in contrast to the distress, contention and strife of the surrounding society.

Like their fellow-believers in many lands, the Bahá'í community ... is challenged by such a situation. In seeking to respond, the Bahá'í administration and the more experienced friends must exercise a great patience and wisdom in guiding believers, some of whose passions may be raised by the various issues. Essentially, the problems produced by cultural and linguistic differences are impulses which can serve to facilitate the growth of individuals and the maturation of the institutions if we learn to take advantage of them.

13 April 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly

The difficulties which you describe are undoubtedly among those facing many members of inter-racial families... The House of Justice feels that these are matters which need to be worked out through the study and implementation of Bahá'í principles, through personal wisdom and initiative, and by taking advantage of the benefits of consultation among those concerned. Of very great importance is development of the consciousness that one is, above all, a human being and a Bahá'í, and that differences of race are of far less significance. It is hoped that the efforts of the believers, in conjunction with those of the Bahá'í institutions, to resolve such difficulties will attract divine confirmations and yield lasting results.

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

