

Responsibilities of Bahá'í Administrative Institutions

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

Original English



Responsibilities of Bahá'í Administrative Institutions

Preserving Flexibility

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Shoghi Effendi believes that, although the friends may have different methods of teaching the Cause, yet they should not let such diversity lead to a consciousness of division among them. To safeguard the unity of the Faith is the sacred obligation of every loyal Bahá'í. We should, therefore, avoid creating any misunderstandings which might develop into actual division. We stand for unity through diversity and we hold in contempt every attempt at uniformity or at complete separateness.

3 June 1993, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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The Guardian's emphasis on the question of uniformity between national constitutions is prompted by his desire to maintain in all national Bahá'í affairs a degree of uniformity which he feels is essential to the effective functioning of national administrative bodies throughout the Bahá'í world. In matters which are not specified in the text of national constitutions, and as such are secondary in character, every National Spiritual Assembly is free to act according to its wish and with due consideration to local exigencies and demands. In this way, the principle of unity in diversity will be strictly preserved and effectively applied.

5 January 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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The believers are free to paint, write or compose as their talents guide them. If music is written incorporating the Sacred Writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The farther away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds — and vice versa.

20 July 1946, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

He does not feel, however, that the regular meetings should all open and close with songs. You see our Faith is for the whole world, for all people, not just for Christians, and this is a Christian custom to sing religious songs at a spiritual gathering. The friends should, however, do all they can to make the meetings interesting and hold the attention of people.

31 May 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

...he feels that the friends should be very careful not to place hindrances in the way of those who wish to accept the Faith. If we make the requirements too rigorous, we will cool off the initial enthusiasm, rebuff the hearts and cease to expand rapidly. The essential thing is that the candidate for enrolment should believe in his heart in the truth of Bahá'u'lláh. Whether he is literate or illiterate, informed of all the Teachings or not, is beside the point entirely. When the spark of faith exists the essential Message is there, and gradually everything else can be added unto it. The process of educating people of different customs and backgrounds must be done with the greatest patience and understanding, and rules and regulations not imposed upon them, except where a rock-bottom essential is in question. He feels sure that your Assembly is capable of carrying on its work in this spirit, and of fanning the hearts to flame through the fire of the love of God, rather than putting out the first sparks with bucketsful of administrative information and regulations.

9 July 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

We have reviewed your letter ... about the application of Bahá'í marriage laws to persons who had married according to the native custom, which we assume was prior to their enrollment in the Faith.

Persons who are married according to native custom prior to their enrollment as Bahá'ís are fully married in the eyes of the Faith, and there is no point in their going through a Bahá'í ceremony.

6 April 1971, the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

You have asked for suggestions regarding the preparation of the handbook on Bahá'í Holy Days which you are planning to publish. It is important that notwithstanding whatever details you set forth therein, it be made clear that the contents do not constitute procedures that must be rigidly adhered to.

Dignity and reverence befitting the occasion should obviously characterize observances of Bahá'í Holy Days by the friends, but this does not mean that cultural traditions which do not

contravene Bahá'í principles may not, and cannot, find expression in the local observances and meetings of the friends.

1 August 1983, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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With reference to the question concerning the clapping of hands in songs where the Greatest Name is used, the House of Justice does not want to draw hard and fast rules. Clearly such matters are secondary and subject to cultural considerations, customs, and the social conventions prevailing in a given society. In some cultures, for example, clapping, as part of religious expression, is considered offensive; in other cultures, clapping is a means of keeping the rhythm of the hymn, especially in the absence of a musical instrument, and is integral to religious experience; among other peoples, clapping may constitute a demonstration of religious fervor. Further, within any given country there may well be regional cultural differences.

Therefore, it is left to the National Spiritual Assembly to weigh each case with care and sensitivity in light of the prevailing cultural milieu and, if necessary, provide guidance to the friends.

1 October 1986, the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre



Fostering Diversity

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No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered the Cause of God, at the present hour, than a successful effort to enhance the diversity of the members of the American Bahá'í community by swelling the ranks of the Faith through the enrollment of the members of these races.¹ A blending of these highly differentiated elements of the human race, harmoniously interwoven into the fabric of an all-embracing Bahá'í fraternity, and assimilated through the dynamic process of a divinely-appointed Administrative Order, and contributing each its share to the enrichment and glory of Bahá'í community life, is surely an achievement the contemplation of which must warm and thrill every Bahá'í heart.

Shoghi Effendi, *"The Advent of Divine Justice"*, p. 54

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It has been a great source of joy to the Guardian to see the marked increase of native Bahá'ís throughout that area, particularly in Japan, Korea and Formosa. However devoted the pioneers may be to these distant countries of their adoption, their relation to them cannot but be a transient one, especially in view of the disturbed state of the world and gloomy clouds that hang over its political horizons. They may suddenly be forced to go home; therefore, the native

1. "the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races".

Bahá'ís, in particular, must seize this opportunity and arise too, themselves, in their own countries, pioneer to new cities and towns, new islands and as yet unopened territories, so that they may, with the help of their Bahá'í brethren from overseas, lay a firm and enduring foundation, and commence the great task of building up the Administrative Order, which is itself the foundation of the future World Order.

15 July 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

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In response to your letter ... requesting guidance about the propriety of burning incense at Bahá'í Feasts and meetings, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to convey the following:

The reasons which prompted you to ask about the above matter undoubtedly stemmed from your desire to safeguard the interests of the Faith and to keep it free from the rituals of past religions, points which Bahá'í institutions should bear in mind when discharging their duties and responsibilities. At the same time they should uphold the principle of unity in diversity, which often demonstrates itself through the cultural heritage of peoples. Your National Assembly may be aware that although incense is burned in religious ceremonies and temples, it is also a custom in some countries which is carried out at non-religious gatherings. For example, in India people of both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds burn incense in their homes and at social gatherings. In some cases the reason behind their using it is to freshen the air. It is therefore not objectionable in principle for the friends to burn incense if they wish when hosting Bahá'í meetings. However, this should not be done in such a way as to give the impression that it is a regular practice which is required at all Bahá'í meetings.

28 June 1983, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

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At the present time, the challenge to every Bahá'í community is to avoid suppression of those culturally-diverse elements which are not contrary to the teachings, while establishing and maintaining such a high degree of unity that others are attracted to the Cause of God.

25 July 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple

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The Bahá'í Faith subscribes to the principle of unity in diversity; the Bahá'í administrative structure provides a model of people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who unite together under a National Spiritual Assembly to form a dynamic social unit in which there is provision for the expression of cultural diversity.

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

You have asked about the appropriateness of ceremonies from other cultures being presented at Bahá'í national events and local gatherings...

You mention that the popularity of the "Pipe Ceremony" is part of the revival of native cultural values. While seeking out the spiritual roots of their own tradition, it is natural for Alaskan natives to view sympathetically symbols of the spiritual roots that once sustained the indigenous peoples of North America. Such a desire for the rediscovery of one's culture is one in which Bahá'ís rejoice. In this context, it would be acceptable occasionally to hold such cultural ceremonies at Bahá'í national events and local gatherings, so long as their features are not contrary to Bahá'í Teachings and they do not become customary. Moreover, these ceremonies should not be carried out during the formal part of a Bahá'í event, such as during the consultation of a National Convention, or in connection with the reading of prayers and passages from the Writings during a feast or Holy Day programme. Rather, such ceremonies may be included as an adjunct to the programme, and participation in them should be on a voluntary basis.

Regarding your question as to whether the audience should be informed that the cultural ceremonies are not part of the Bahá'í Faith, perhaps it would be possible to have this information presented in a positive manner, such as by explaining Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on unity in diversity, or the respect held by Bahá'ís for diversity of cultural expression.

16 November 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

The House of Justice sympathizes with your great desire to find ways of making the Bahá'í Teachings attractive to the Chinese people. Concerning the need, as you say, to reformulate the Teachings in order to make them more readily comprehensible to peoples of different cultural backgrounds, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the up building of Bahá'í national communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisite for any successful teaching enterprise, which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the divers races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract. The susceptibilities of these races and nations, from both the northern and southern climes, springing from either the Germanic or Latin stock, belonging to either the Catholic or Protestant communion, some democratic, others totalitarian in outlook, some socialistic, others capitalistic in their tendencies, differing widely in their customs and standards of living, should at all times be carefully considered, and under no circumstances neglected.

From a letter written by the Guardian to the American believers, dated June 5, 1947

However, this desire must be balanced against the requirements of the Covenant which it is our sacred duty as Bahá'ís to uphold...

While you have a laudable aim in preparing materials on the Faith that will serve as a bridge of understanding for Chinese people who encounter the Bahá'í Teachings, you undoubtedly realize that these Teachings cannot be made to conform to the beliefs and understanding of any portion of humanity.

Indeed, for every people certain beliefs are as veils that prevent the penetration of the light of truth brought by a new Manifestation. Just as the followers of, say, Christianity and Islám must shed the veils imposed by their traditional beliefs, so too must the Chinese who are deeply attracted to Confucius be led to see that their aspirations are realized in the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, Whose life-giving Message is the divine elixir necessary for every people to achieve its promised destiny.

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

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As you know, in many parts of the world there are certain tribal and traditional dances which are performed in glorification of God, and it is perfectly acceptable for a prayer to be interpreted in the form of movement or dance. However, to avoid that such expressions of prayer become gradually ritualized, or that certain gestures and movement become habitual accompaniments to prayers, it is preferable that they not accompany the reciting of words of the prayers.

Through the revealed prayers we seek communion with God; hence they must be offered with the utmost reverence and dignity. Each individual Bahá'í should be free to pray as he wishes, for there is no set form for prayer except for those few which have special instructions for observance upon their recitation.

24 March 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly



Guiding and Encouraging Social Evolution

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He fully appreciates the fact that the believers are still somewhat attached to the different cults from which they have come; this is a problem which always faces the Faith in a new region; it existed a long time in America, and seems part of the growth of the Cause. He feels your Assembly can afford to be patient with the friends, while at the same time educating them into a deeper understanding of the Cause. As their awareness of the true significance of Bahá'u'lláh grows, they will become weaned from the old ideas and give full allegiance to His teachings.

30 June 1952, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

When enrolling new believers, we must be wise and gentle, and not place so many obstacles in their way that they feel it impossible to accept the Faith. On the other hand, once accorded membership in the Community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, it must be brought home to them that they are expected to live up to His Teachings, and to show forth the signs of a noble character in conformity with His Laws. This can often be done gradually, after the new believer is enrolled.

25 June 1953, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly

...we noted your decision to place a notice in your Bahá'í newsletter requesting clothing for the new believers, who are described as "primitive".

It is not clear from the information contained in your Minutes whether your decision to obtain clothing for the new believers is for humanitarian reasons or whether it is your wish to clothe the believers whose tribal custom does not require clothing. If your reasons are humanitarian, certainly the plight of people in great need arouses concern and sympathy in all of us. You should bear in mind, however, that to begin such a program might well endanger the future of the Cause among those people and would affect the motives of other members of the tribe when again offered the bounty of becoming followers of Bahá'u'lláh. Assemblies, either Local or National, must always hold as their first consideration that we, with our limited resources, have the obligation to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and that while millions of people can support projects such as this one, only Bahá'ís may contribute to the work of the Cause.

If it is the tribal custom of those believers to remain unclothed, you should avoid taking steps to obtain clothing for them or to request them to wear clothing at this stage in their deepening. The changing of such a custom should be a natural and gradual process, and not an imposed one. We should avoid the mistakes which have been made in the past by missionaries.

8 February 1972, the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

Concerning your question whether Bahá'ís can participate in the rites of other religions, it is clear from letter written on behalf of the Guardian that while Bahá'ís are encouraged to associate with the followers of other religions, they should not in any way identify themselves with the doctrines and usages of other religions. There may be a few cases, however, when withdrawal of the new believer from membership in a religious organization and his non-observance of its ceremonies and customs may take place gradually, with the permission or upon the advice of your National Assembly, which must consider such situations carefully and render its decision in each case separately.

10 July 1978, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

The cardinal purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is to establish the oneness of the human race. As we do this, we bring into the Bahá'í community people of many varied backgrounds and temperaments, and only gradually can true unity be forged out of such divergent elements while preserving the desirable diversities which are not inconsistent with the divine Teachings.

This is most apparent in tribal societies, which have very strong traditions. The Spiritual Assemblies in such countries have the task, while teaching the Faith, of giving the people pride and self-confidence in their native traditions, of preserving those which are colourful enrichments of social and personal life, while weaning the new believers gradually away from those traditions which are harmful and in conflict with the teachings and spirit of the Cause of God. A similar process is necessary in Europe.

It is in establishing the unity of mankind that the administration of the Faith plays such a vital part ... 'Abdu'l-Bahá ... wrote in the strongest terms about the fundamental importance of the Administrative Order. In a Tablet to an individual believer, for example, the translation of which is published as section 69 of "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", He states:

Thou hast written concerning organization. The divine teachings and the admonitions and exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh are manifestly evident. These constitute the organization of the Kingdom and their enforcement is obligatory. The least deviation from them is absolute error.

There are also all the statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament, with which you must be familiar. By obeying the Spiritual Assemblies and adhering to their guidance, the Bahá'ís maintain the unity of the Faith, promote God's Covenant, and ensure that the Cause does not fly into a myriad conflicting sects and schools as has happened with the earlier religions, no matter how spiritual they have been.

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

With regard to the questions you submitted as a result of your contacts with the village women, the House of Justice has directed us to convey its advice.

During this period of transition from practices current in the present social orders of tribal society to the standards advocated and upheld in the Bahá'í community, it is important for Bahá'ís to exercise patience, and endeavour to show respect to the tribal laws that apply in each case, provided they do not contradict basic Bahá'í principles and regulations involving such acts as denial of one's faith or contracting polygamous marriages. It should also be borne in mind that in cases calling for personal guidance, the friends should feel free to turn to their Local Spiritual Assemblies which, being on the spot and normally familiar with tribal and customary practices as well as with the Bahá'í teachings which apply, will be able to proffer advice, suggest solutions to personal difficulties and, indeed, in some cases, be themselves instrumental in resolving the problems.

12 January 1986, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

When a Spiritual Assembly is faced with questions of possible conflict between tribal practices and Bahá'í law, it should distinguish between aspects of tribal community life which are related to fundamental laws (such as monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the friends can and should extricate themselves gradually. Furthermore, the House of Justice has offered the advice that the institutions of the Faith should be careful not to press the friends to arbitrarily discard those local traditions which are harmless and often colourful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes. Were a new Bahá'í suddenly to cease following the customs of his people, it is possible that they might misunderstand the true nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Bahá'ís could be regarded as having turned against the traditions of the land. However, Bahá'ís should exercise vigilance, with the aid of the institutions of the Faith, to avoid inadvertent involvement in events which appear at first sight to be purely cultural and traditional in nature, but which are, in fact, held as a cover for politically oriented gatherings. 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. While an 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....

When the Bahá'í community in a village is a significant proportion of the population, it has a wide range of opportunities to be an example and an encouragement of means of improving the quality of life in the village. Among the initiatives which it might take are measures to foster child education, adult literacy and the training of women to better discharge their responsibilities as mothers and to play an enlarged role in the administrative and social life of the village; encouragement of the people of the village to join together in devotions, perhaps in the early morning, irrespective of their varieties of religious belief; support of efforts to improve the hygiene and the health of the village, including attention to the provision of pure water, the preservation of cleanliness in the village environment, and education in the harmful effects of narcotic and intoxicating substances. No doubt other possibilities will present themselves to the village Bahá'í community and its Local Spiritual Assembly.

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

The matters raised in your letter are concerned with the differing cultures ... and their expression in the Bahá'í community. The aim of the Bahá'í Faith is to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. This diversity will enrich human life in a peaceful world society. Within the Bahá'í community the cultural traditions of the people who comprise it should be observed, as long as those traditions are not contrary to the Bahá'í teachings. It should also be recognized that many cultural practices will eventually disappear or be merged with related ones from other societies as the social evolution of mankind continues.

The application of these principles requires great wisdom and the exercise of careful judgement on the part of the Spiritual Assemblies. When there is a conflict between a traditional cultural practice and the Bahá'í teachings, the Assembly concerned must decide whether the issue

involved is of fundamental importance, in which case the traditional practice cannot be continued by the Bahá'ís, or whether it is of lesser importance, such that the believers can be left to gradually extricate themselves from it over a period of time. An Assembly must also carefully seek out and follow a path which offers encouragement and support to each culture with which it comes in contact, while taking care not to slight the rights and preferences of the believers whose cultural group constitutes the majority in the community.

You are urged to consult fully and frankly with the Spiritual Assemblies concerning the issues raised in your letter. Also, you may well find it useful to seek advice from the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members on these matters. Should you find yourself in disagreement with a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly on a specific issue which you feel to be of fundamental importance, you are free to appeal to the National Assembly for reconsideration of the matter or for its submission to the Universal House of Justice; in the latter case, the Assembly will transmit your appeal together with its own comments. By following these approaches, the unity of the Bahá'í community is preserved as it devises appropriate means of responding to the new challenges associated with the expansion of the scope of its endeavours.

7 May 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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With regard to the ritual use of peyote within the Native American Church, it is understood that this practice is countenanced by civil law. However, this should not alter the clear understanding that, according to Bahá'í law, the use of peyote and similar hallucinogenic agents is prohibited to Bahá'ís except when prescribed for medical treatment by competent physicians.

Notwithstanding the prohibition observed by Bahá'ís in this respect, the friends are advised to adopt attitudes of tolerance and forbearance with regard to the beliefs and practices of others and to exercise patience with new believers in the Cause. Any Bahá'í who is found to be involved in the use of peyote should be told by his Assembly that in the Faith spiritual stimulation comes from turning one's heart to Bahá'u'lláh and not through any physical means. The Assembly should therefore encourage him, patiently but persistently, to give up the use of peyote; otherwise it is not possible for him to maintain membership in the Bahá'í community.

1 August 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

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Regarding the use of traditional curative herbs, any herb known to have medicinal effects can surely be used by the friends, and those administering such medicaments should be left entirely free to carry out their profession. However, it must be borne in mind that this is different from traditional fetishist practices which involve communication with departed spirits.

23 December 1991, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

...the House of Justice does not wish to go beyond its statement in 1985 that, “While we feel that under present circumstances the drinking of kava should not be summarily banned, the believers should be gradually weaned away from its use.” Any action to be taken on the use of kava is left to the decision of National Spiritual Assemblies.

Since you are a member of the National Assembly..., you are certainly free to raise the matter with it from time to time, as you deem wise. However, in dealing with such matters it is often well to emphasize the role Bahá’í communities are to play in bringing about the change essential for the transformation of society.

20 April 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer

The House of Justice has given careful consideration to the question of the genital mutilation of girls, otherwise known as “female circumcision”. No reference in the Bahá’í Writings to this subject has come to light; however, the House of Justice regards the practice of female circumcision as contrary to the spirit of the Bahá’í Teachings.

The House of Justice has noted a growing concern on the part of medical authorities in Africa and other places over the various methods and dire consequences of the operations involved in such genital mutilation...

Because this damaging custom is entrenched in tradition and is reported to be widespread in Africa, the Bahá’í institutions have the duty of weaning the friends from it through an ongoing programme of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information.

29 March 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly

In many of the nations of your area, women have traditionally been restricted to a secondary role in the life of society. We call upon the Bahá’í women of these countries, assured of the support and encouragement of all elements of the Bahá’í community, to demonstrate the transforming power of this Revelation by their courage and initiative in the teaching work and their full participation in the administrative activities of the Faith.

Riḍván 1996, the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá’u’lláh in Australia

