

VIII. Flexibility in Secondary Matters

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

Original English



VIII. Flexibility in Secondary Matters

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In regard to your criticism of the Article VIII of the By-Laws of the N.S.A., the Guardian wishes you to know that since this is a secondary matter arising out of the general principles he has already laid down in one of his latest communications addressed to you and to the N.S.A. concerning the power of the delegates and the relation of these to the National Assembly, he does not think it is necessary for him to enter into these details which by their very nature fall within the jurisdiction of the N.S.A. It is to that body which you should submit any criticism, whether in regard to the provisions of the Constitution, or in connection with any other phase of the administrative work of the Cause. It is not for the Guardian to enter into matters of detail. His overwhelming and pressing duties, and the very nature of his position as the supreme Guardian of the Faith, make it impossible for him to interfere in affairs of a local character, and of a relatively secondary importance. It is for you, as one of the distinguished members of the highest administrative body of the Cause in the States, to remind your fellow-members of what is their duty to consider and to act upon. The Guardian lays down the general principle, and it is for the National Assembly to direct all local assemblies and groups as to the best way they can apply it to their local conditions.

From a letter 11 November 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

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In connection with his cablegram sent in July urging your Assembly to cease issuing any more statements on various administrative matters, the Guardian wishes me again to reiterate and confirm the directions and explanations already conveyed in one of his recent communications to the National Spiritual Assembly to the effect that the publication of such statements no longer fills an urgent need, and that their multiplication would only result in making the administration of the Cause too rigid.



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The various rulings and regulations recorded in the “Bahá’í Administration” and the supplementary statements already issued by the National Assembly, he feels, are for the present sufficiently detailed to guide the friends in their present-day activities. He himself has in recent years deliberately refrained from adding any more administrative regulations, or from even elucidating and elaborating those already enforced.

All the more reason that your Assembly should, likewise, desist from multiplying the administrative regulations which, as their number increases, must necessarily fetter and confuse those who are called upon to carry them out. It is not necessary for your Assembly to anticipate situations which have not arisen, and to lay down general rules and regulations to meet them. It would be wiser to consider every case individually as it arises, and then to resolve the problem connected with it in the most suitable and practical manner. The American believers, as well as their national representatives, must henceforth direct their attention to the greater and vital issues which an already established Administration is called upon to face and handle, rather than allow their energies to be expended in the consideration of purely secondary administrative matters. The Guardian wishes your Assembly to refer again to the communication already referred to bearing on this subject.

From a letter 25 November 1937 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

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In reading your annual Convention report the Guardian has noted the request made that the National Spiritual Assembly should lay down certain rules of procedure. He has already informed the American N.S.A. that they should henceforth refrain from laying down any further rules and regulations, as these would tend to rigidify the affairs of the Cause and ultimately obscure its spirit and retard its growth. He feels that your Assembly should exercise the same care, and avoid introducing any rules of procedure not already in existence. Every case coming before the Assembly should be judged on its own merits, and be decided individually without any recourse to new rulings.

From a letter 29 June 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma

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Now that your Assembly is formed, and is embarking on its independent existence as a National Body, he wishes to emphasize a point which he is constantly stressing to other National Bodies: you must avoid issuing rules and regulations. The fundamentals laid down in the Bahá’í Administration must, of course, be adhered to, but there is a

tendency for Assemblies to constantly issue detailed procedures and rules to the friends, and he considers this hampers the work of the Cause, and is entirely premature. As far as is possible cases which come up should be dealt with and settled as they arise, and not a blanket ruling be laid down to cover all possible similar cases. This preserves the elasticity of the Administrative Order and prevents red tape from developing and hampering the work of the Cause.

You must likewise bear in mind that you are now a wholly independent National Body, and must consider the administration of the affairs of the Faith within your jurisdiction as your separate problem. There is no more need for you to follow every single rule laid down by the American N.S.A., than there is for the British or the Australian and New Zealand N.S.A.s to do this. Uniformity in fundamentals is essential, but not in every detail. On the contrary, diversity, the solving of the local situation in the right way, is important.

From a letter 4 November 1948 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada

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He was particularly pleased to see that members of your Assembly have been out travelling and contacting the friends in an effort to deepen their understanding of the workings of the administration and also their knowledge of the Faith in general. He feels that particularly at present in Latin America this intimate, loving and friendly approach will do more to further the work than anything else. Indeed, he would go so far as to advise your Assembly to avoid deluging the friends with circulars and unnecessary bulletins. You must always bear in mind the genuine difference between the peoples of the south and the peoples of the north; to use the same techniques as those adopted in the United States would be disastrous because the mentality and background of life are quite different. Much as the friends need administration, it must be brought to them in a palatable form, otherwise they will not be able to assimilate it and instead of consolidating the work you will find some of the believers become estranged from it.

From a letter 30 June 1952 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Central America

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As regards the “Administrative Manual”: he urges you to not add to the rules and regulations, but try to cut down on these and decide cases as they arise; there is a natural tendency to codify the teachings and produce handbooks of procedure, there

are not enough Bahá'ís in the whole world to justify this, and he continuously urges the various National Spiritual Assemblies to beware of this tendency. He has no time, at all, to go over such things himself; indeed, your Assembly, and all the others, will have to assume increasing responsibility for your work in order to relieve him. He is worn out with all his work and added material to read.

From a letter 19 June 1953 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Central America

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He hopes your Assembly will devote special, constant attention to encouraging the friends in their teaching work, and facilitate their tasks. As the new National Assemblies are being formed, he feels it incumbent upon him to issue a word of warning to avoid rules and regulations and tying the believers' work up in red tape. Over-administration can be even worse for the Faith at this time than under-administration. The believers are, for the most part, young in the Cause, and if they make mistakes it is not half as important as if their spirit is crushed by being told all the time — do this and don't do that! The new National Body should be like a loving parent, watching over and helping its children, and not like a stern judge, waiting for an opportunity to display his judicial powers.

The reason he points this out to you is that constantly, for the past twenty years and more, he has been pointing this out to the old and tried National Assemblies, and he does not want the younger bodies to make the same mistakes. Individual cases should be dealt with as they arise, according to the Teachings, of which the believers have quite sufficient available to handle all of their problems at this time, and no more additional rules and regulations need be introduced.

From a letter 30 June 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska

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The whole purpose of the Bahá'í administrative bodies at this time is to teach, to increase the membership, to increase the Assemblies and to increase the groups, not to create rules and regulations and impede the work through unnecessary red tape, but to ensure that a great breath of spiritual vitality and inspiration goes out to the friends from their new National Body. Your Assembly should constantly bear this in mind, encourage and stimulate the friends in the teaching field, smooth out difficulties and misunderstandings and hurt feelings through love, understanding and wisdom, refrain from harsh measures, and, above all, from over-organization of the affairs of the

Communities. There is a definite tendency of people everywhere to try and over-administer, so to speak, and the beloved Guardian points this out to your Assembly during the very first year of its existence in order to put it on its guard against this danger, which will stifle the spiritual life of the Community. You may be sure that many, many times he has issued this same warning to such old and tried National Bodies as that of America, Germany, England, etc.

From a letter 5 July 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Benelux countries

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Your Assembly must be very careful not to overload the Bahá'ís with rules and regulations, circulars and directions. The purpose of the administration at this time is to blow on the fire newly kindled in the hearts of these people who have accepted the Faith, to create in them the desire and capacity to teach, to facilitate the pioneer and teaching work, and help deepen the knowledge and understanding of the friends. The beloved Guardian issues this word of warning, as long experience has shown that it is a tendency on the part of all N.S.A.s to over-administer. In their enthusiasm they forget that they only have a handful of inexperienced souls to guide, and attempt to deal with their work as if they had a large population to regulate! This then stifles the spirit of the friends and the teaching work suffers.

From a letter 15 July 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of North East Asia

