

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh

Shoghi Effendi

Original English



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Selected Letters

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To the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada.

Dearly-beloved

co-workers:

I have been acquainted by the perusal of your latest communications with the nature of the doubts that have been publicly expressed, by one who is wholly misinformed as to the true precepts of the Cause, regarding the validity of institutions that stand inextricably interwoven with the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Not that I for a moment view such faint misgivings in the light of an open challenge to the structure that embodies the Faith, nor is it because I question in the least the unyielding tenacity of the faith of the American believers, if I venture to dwell upon what seems to me appropriate observations at the present stage of the evolution of our beloved Cause. I am indeed inclined to welcome these expressed apprehensions inasmuch as they afford me an opportunity to familiarize the elected representatives of the believers with the origin and the character of the institutions which stand at the very basis of the World Order ushered in by Bahá'u'lláh. We should feel truly thankful for such futile attempts to undermine our beloved Faith — attempts that protrude their ugly face from time to time, seem for a while able to create a breach in the ranks of the faithful, recede finally into the obscurity of oblivion, and are thought of no more. Such incidents we should regard as the interpositions of



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Providence, designed to fortify our faith, to clarify our vision, and to deepen our understanding of the essentials of His Divine Revelation.

Sources of the Bahá'í World Order

It would, however, be helpful and instructive to bear in mind certain basic principles with reference to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which, together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, constitutes the chief depository wherein are enshrined those priceless elements of that Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith. A study of the provisions of these sacred documents will reveal the close relationship that exists between them, as well as the identity of purpose and method which they inculcate. Far from regarding their specific provisions as incompatible and contradictory in spirit, every fair-minded inquirer will readily admit that they are not only complementary, but that they mutually confirm one another, and are inseparable parts of one complete unit. A comparison of their contents with the rest of Bahá'í sacred Writings will similarly establish the conformity of whatever they contain with the spirit as well as the letter of the authenticated writings and sayings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In fact, he who reads the Aqdas with care and diligence will not find it hard to discover that the Most Holy Book itself anticipates in a number of passages the institutions which 'Abdu'l-Bahá ordains in His Will. By leaving certain matters unspecified and unregulated in His Book of Laws, Bahá'u'lláh seems to have deliberately left a gap in the general scheme of Bahá'í Dispensation, which the unequivocal provisions of the Master's Will have filled. To attempt to divorce the one from the other, to insinuate that the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have not been upheld, in their entirety and with absolute integrity, by what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has revealed in His Will, is an unpardonable affront to the unswerving fidelity that has characterized the life and labors of our beloved Master.

I will not attempt in the least to assert or demonstrate the authenticity of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for that in itself would betray an apprehension on my part as to the unanimous confidence of the believers in the genuineness of the last written wishes of our departed Master. I will only confine my observations to those issues which may assist them to appreciate the essential unity that underlies the spiritual, the humanitarian, and the administrative principles enunciated by the Author and the Interpreter of the Bahá'í Faith.

I am at a loss to explain that strange mentality that inclines to uphold as the sole criterion of the truth of the Bahá'í Teachings what is admittedly only an obscure and unauthenticated translation of an oral statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in defiance and total disregard of the available text of all of His universally recognized writings. I truly deplore the unfortunate distortions that have resulted in days past from the incapacity of the interpreter to grasp the meaning of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and from his incompetence to render adequately such truths as have been revealed to him by the Master's statements. Much of the confusion that has obscured the understanding of the believers should be attributed to this double error involved in the inexact rendering of an only partially understood statement. Not infrequently has the interpreter even failed to convey the exact purport of the inquirer's specific questions, and, by his deficiency of understanding and expression in conveying the answer of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, has been responsible for reports wholly at variance with the true spirit and purpose of the Cause. It was chiefly in view of the misleading nature of the reports of the informal conversations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with

visiting pilgrims, that I have insistently urged the believers of the West to regard such statements as merely personal impressions of the sayings of their Master, and to quote and consider as authentic only such translations as are based upon the authenticated text of His recorded utterances in the original tongue.

It should be remembered by every follower of the Cause that the system of Bahá'í administration is not an innovation imposed arbitrarily upon the Bahá'ís of the world since the Master's passing, but derives its authority from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is specifically prescribed in unnumbered Tablets, and rests in some of its essential features upon the explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It thus unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith. To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.

Local and National Houses of Justice

It should be carefully borne in mind that the local as well as the international Houses of Justice have been expressly enjoined by the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; that the institution of the National Spiritual Assembly, as an intermediary body, and referred to in the Master's Will as the "Secondary House of Justice," has the express sanction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; and that the method to be pursued for the election of the International and National Houses of Justice has been set forth by Him in His Will, as well as in a number of His Tablets. Moreover, the institutions of the local and national Funds, that are now the necessary adjuncts to all local and national spiritual assemblies, have not only been established by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Tablets He revealed to the Bahá'ís of the Orient, but their importance and necessity have been repeatedly emphasized by Him in His utterances and writings. The concentration of authority in the hands of the elected representatives of the believers; the necessity of the submission of every adherent of the Faith to the considered judgment of Bahá'í Assemblies; His preference for unanimity in decision; the decisive character of the majority vote; and even the desirability for the exercise of close supervision over all Bahá'í publications, have been sedulously instilled by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as evidenced by His authenticated and widely-scattered Tablets. To accept His broad and humanitarian Teachings on one hand, and to reject and dismiss with neglectful indifference His more challenging and distinguishing precepts, would be an act of manifest disloyalty to that which He has cherished most in His life.

That the Spiritual Assemblies of today will be replaced in time by the Houses of Justice, and are to all intents and purposes identical and not separate bodies, is abundantly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. He has in fact in a Tablet addressed to the members of the first Chicago Spiritual Assembly, the first elected Bahá'í body instituted in the United States, referred to them as the members of the "House of Justice" for that city, and has thus with His own pen established beyond any doubt the identity of the present Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies with the Houses of Justice referred to by Bahá'u'lláh. For reasons which are not difficult to discover, it has been found advisable to bestow upon the elected representatives of Bahá'í communities throughout the world the temporary appellation of Spiritual Assemblies, a term which, as the position and aims of the Bahá'í Faith are better understood and more fully recognized, will

gradually be superseded by the permanent and more appropriate designation of House of Justice. Not only will the present-day Spiritual Assemblies be styled differently in future, but they will be enabled also to add to their present functions those powers, duties, and prerogatives necessitated by the recognition of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, not merely as one of the recognized religious systems of the world, but as the State Religion of an independent and Sovereign Power. And as the Bahá'í Faith permeates the masses of the peoples of East and West, and its truth is embraced by the majority of the peoples of a number of the Sovereign States of the world, will the Universal House of Justice attain the plenitude of its power, and exercise, as the supreme organ of the Bahá'í Commonwealth, all the rights, the duties, and responsibilities incumbent upon the world's future super-state.

It must be pointed out, however, in this connection that, contrary to what has been confidently asserted, the establishment of the Supreme House of Justice is in no way dependent upon the adoption of the Bahá'í Faith by the mass of the peoples of the world, nor does it presuppose its acceptance by the majority of the inhabitants of any one country. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Himself, in one of His earliest Tablets, contemplated the possibility of the formation of the Universal House of Justice in His own lifetime, and but for the unfavorable circumstances prevailing under the Turkish régime, would have, in all probability, taken the preliminary steps for its establishment. It will be evident, therefore, that given favorable circumstances, under which the Bahá'ís of Persia and of the adjoining countries under Soviet rule, may be enabled to elect their national representatives, in accordance with the guiding principles laid down in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings, the only remaining obstacle in the way of the definite formation of the International House of Justice will have been removed. For upon the National Houses of Justice of the East and the West devolves the task, in conformity with the explicit provisions of the Will, of electing directly the members of the International House of Justice. Not until they are themselves fully representative of the rank and file of the believers in their respective countries, not until they have acquired the weight and the experience that will enable them to function vigorously in the organic life of the Cause, can they approach their sacred task, and provide the spiritual basis for the constitution of so august a body in the Bahá'í world.

The Institution of Guardianship

It must be also clearly understood by every believer that the institution of Guardianship does not under any circumstances abrogate, or even in the slightest degree detract from, the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and repeatedly and solemnly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. It does not constitute in any manner a contradiction to the Will and Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, nor does it nullify any of His revealed instructions. It enhances the prestige of that exalted assembly, stabilizes its supreme position, safeguards its unity, assures the continuity of its labors, without presuming in the slightest to infringe upon the inviolability of its clearly-defined sphere of jurisdiction. We stand indeed too close to so monumental a document to claim for ourselves a complete understanding of all its implications, or to presume to have grasped the manifold mysteries it undoubtedly contains. Only future generations can comprehend the value and the significance attached to this Divine Masterpiece, which the hand of the Master-builder of the world has designed for the unification and the triumph of the world-wide Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Only those who come after us will be in a position to realize the value of the surprisingly strong emphasis that has been placed on the

institution of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship. They only will appreciate the significance of the vigorous language employed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá with reference to the band of Covenant-breakers that has opposed Him in His days. To them alone will be revealed the suitability of the institutions initiated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the character of the future society which is to emerge out of the chaos and confusion of the present age. In this connection, I cannot but feel amused at the preposterous and fantastic idea that Muḥammad-'Alí, the prime mover and the focal center of unyielding hostility to the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, should have freely associated himself with the members of the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the forging of a will which in the words of the writer herself, is but a "recital of the plottings" in which for thirty years Muḥammad-'Alí has been busily engaged. To such a hopeless victim of confused ideas, I feel I can best reply by a genuine expression of compassion and pity, mingled with my hopes for her deliverance from so profound a delusion. It was in view of the aforesaid observations, that I have, after the unfortunate and unavoidable delay occasioned by my ill health and absence from the Holy Land during the Master's passing, hesitated to resort to the indiscriminate circulation of the Will, realizing full well that it was primarily directed to the recognized believers, and only indirectly concerned the larger body of the friends and sympathizers of the Cause.

The Animating Purpose of Bahá'í Institutions

And now, it behooves us to reflect on the animating purpose and the primary functions of these divinely-established institutions, the sacred character and the universal efficacy of which can be demonstrated only by the spirit they diffuse and the work they actually achieve. I need not dwell upon what I have already reiterated and emphasized that the administration of the Cause is to be conceived as an instrument and not a substitute for the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, that it should be regarded as a channel through which His promised blessings may flow, that it should guard against such rigidity as would clog and fetter the liberating forces released by His Revelation. I need not enlarge at the present moment upon what I have stated in the past, that contributions to the local and national Funds are of a purely voluntary character; that no coercion or solicitation of funds is to be tolerated in the Cause; that general appeals addressed to the communities as a body should be the only form in which the financial requirements of the Faith are to be met; that the financial support accorded to a very few workers in the teaching and administrative fields is of a temporary nature; that the present restrictions imposed on the publication of Bahá'í literature will be definitely abolished; that the World Unity activity is being carried out as an experiment to test the efficacy of the indirect method of teaching; that the whole machinery of assemblies, of committees and conventions is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself; that they will rise or fall according to their capacity to further the interests, to coördinate the activities, to apply the principles, to embody the ideals and execute the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith. Who, I may ask, when viewing the international character of the Cause, its far-flung ramifications, the increasing complexity of its affairs, the diversity of its adherents, and the state of confusion that assails on every side the infant Faith of God, can for a moment question the necessity of some sort of administrative machinery that will insure, amid the storm and stress of a struggling civilization, the unity of the Faith, the preservation of its identity, and the protection of its interests? To repudiate the validity of the assemblies of the elected ministers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh would be to reject those countless Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá wherein They have extolled the station of the "trustees of the Merciful," enumerated their privileges and duties, emphasized the glory of their mission,

revealed the immensity of their task, and warned them of the attacks they must needs expect from the unwisdom of their friends as well as from the malice of their enemies. It is surely for those to whose hands so priceless a heritage has been committed to prayerfully watch lest the tool should supersede the Faith itself, lest undue concern for the minute details arising from the administration of the Cause obscure the vision of its promoters, lest partiality, ambition, and worldliness tend in the course of time to becloud the radiance, stain the purity, and impair the effectiveness of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.

Situation in Egypt

I have already referred in my previous communications of January 10, 1926, and February 12, 1927, to the perplexing yet highly significant situation that has arisen in Egypt as a result of the final judgment of the Muslim ecclesiastical court in that country pronounced against our Egyptian brethren, denouncing them as heretics, expelling them from their midst, and refusing them the application and benefits of the Muslim Law. I have also acquainted you with the difficulties with which they are faced, and the plans which they have conceived, in order to obtain from the Egyptian civil authorities a recognition of the independent status of their Faith. It must be explained, however, that in the Muslim countries of the Near and Middle East, with the exception of Turkey which has lately abolished all ecclesiastical courts under its rule, every recognized religious community has, in matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, its own ecclesiastical court, totally independent of the civil and criminal tribunals, there being in such instances no civil code promulgated by the government and embracing all the different religious communities. Hitherto regarded as a sect of Islám, the Bahá'ís of Egypt, who for the most part are of Muslim origin, and unable therefore to refer for purposes of marriage and divorce to the recognized religious tribunals of any other denomination, find themselves in consequence in a delicate and anomalous position. They have naturally resolved to refer their case to the Egyptian Government, and have prepared for this purpose a petition to be addressed to the head of the Egyptian Cabinet. In this document they have set forth the motives compelling them to seek recognition from their rulers, have asserted their readiness and their qualifications to exercise the functions of an independent Bahá'í court, have assured them of their implicit obedience and loyalty to the State, and of their abstinence from interference in the politics of their country. They have also decided to accompany the text of their petition with a copy of the judgment of the Court, with selections from Bahá'í writings, and with the document that sets forth the principles of their national constitution which, with few exceptions, is identical with the Declaration and By-laws promulgated by your Assembly.

I have insisted that the provisions of their constitution should, in all its details, conform to the text of the Declaration of Trust and By-laws which you have established, endeavoring thereby to preserve the uniformity which I feel is essential in all Bahá'í National Constitutions. I would like, therefore, in this connection to request of you what I have already intimated to them, that whatever amendments you may decide to introduce in the text of the Declaration and By-laws should be duly communicated to me, that I may take the necessary steps for the introduction of similar changes in the text of all other National Bahá'í Constitutions.

It will be readily admitted that in view of the peculiar privileges granted to recognized religious Communities in the Islámic countries of the Near and Middle East, the request which is to be

submitted by the Bahá'í Egyptian National Assembly to the Government of Egypt is more substantial and far-reaching than what has already been granted by the Federal Authorities to your Assembly. For their petition is chiefly concerned with a formal request for recognition by the highest civil authorities in Egypt of the Egyptian National Spiritual Assembly as a recognized and independent Bahá'í court, free and able to execute and apply in all matters of personal status such laws and ordinances as have been promulgated by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

I have asked them to approach informally the authorities concerned, and to make the fullest possible inquiry as a preliminary measure to the formal presentation of their historic petition. Any assistance which your Assembly, after careful deliberation, may find it advisable to offer to the valiant promoters of the Faith in that land will be deeply appreciated, and will serve to confirm the solidarity that characterizes the Bahá'í Communities of East and West. Whatever the outcome of this mighty issue — and none can fail to appreciate the incalculable possibilities of the present situation — we can rest assured that the guiding Hand that has released these forces will, in His inscrutable wisdom and by His omnipotent power, continue to shape and direct their course for the glory, the ultimate emancipation, and the unqualified recognition of His Faith.

Your
Shoghi.

true

brother,

Haifa,
February 27,

Palestine.

