

Internet, the World Wide Web, and Electronic Discussion Lists:

A perspective from the Baha'i Writings

by Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

Compiled by Stephen Birkland.
1998-08-31

To Auxiliary Board members

Dearest Friends,

For some time I have been promising to send more material collected on the subject of the Internet, World Wide Web, and electronic discussion groups. Here is an attempt, however inadequate, to explore some of these current issues and the principles by which we can make wise decisions and help the friends. In the following document I have tried to address many of the questions received from the believers by citing quotations from the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith, as well as excerpts from letters written by the Universal House of Justice. In addition to addressing general matters, I have tried to include guidance about the specific topics of criticism, conflict and attacks on the Faith.

My hope is that this will be helpful to you and especially to your dear assistants as they interact with the friends in the course of their work.

Every development in this world can have a positive and negative side. However, it will always be better if we can help the friends to distinguish between the negative and positive aspects of this electronic communication and encourage the friends to strengthen their capacity to contribute to the positive.

The purpose of this document is to explore some current issues associated with the Internet and examine the Bahá'í principles by which we can make wise decisions that will help the friends. Questions received from the believers are considered by citing quotations from the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith and excerpts from letters written by the Universal House of Justice. In addition to addressing general matters, guidance on specific topics of criticism, conflict and attacks on the Faith are addressed.

-
1. Every development in this world can have a positive and negative side. However, it will always be better if we can help the friends to distinguish between the negative and positive aspects of electronic communications and encourage the friends to strengthen their capacity to contribute to the positive aspects.

“Every outward thrust into new fields, every multiplication of Bahá'í institutions, must be paralleled by a deeper thrust of the roots which sustain the spiritual life of the community and ensure its sound development.”¹

2. It will be helpful if you and your assistants can encourage the friends to remain focussed on the

1 Shoghi Effendi: *Letters to Australia and New Zealand*, p. 76.

positive aspects of the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

“The opportunity which electronic communication technology provides for more speedy and thorough consultation among the friends is highly significant. Without doubt, it represents another manifestation of a development eagerly anticipated by the Guardian when he foresaw the creation of 'a mechanism of world inter-communication ... embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.’”^{2 3}

3. However, as the Universal House of Justice points out, using this medium in an honourable and unifying manner will require discipline, in some ways even higher levels of discipline than required in direct personal and social interaction.

“As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Bahá'ís to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion.”⁴

“The ease and relative impersonality of the electronic medium require in some ways an even higher level of self-discipline than is the case in situations where a spirit of unity is reinforced by the opportunity for direct personal contact and social interaction. In the pursuit of such a spirit of unity, Bahá'ís will, without doubt, wish to assist the consultative processes by sharing and discussing relevant Bahá'í texts. This will itself have the further effect of drawing attention back to the framework of Bahá'í belief.”⁵

4. In the following excerpt the Universal House of Justice elaborates on this need for higher levels of self-discipline and even gives some definition.

“The House of Justice notes that you have been disturbed by some of the postings made to the email discussion group of which you have recently been a member. Email discussion groups are a new phenomenon; they can provide immense benefits for communication between people and for the teaching of the Faith, but, as you have seen, they can also give rise to far-reaching problems. The use of email requires an adjustment of perception. In the past, discussions among Bahá'ís would take place orally among groups of friends in private, or at summer schools and other Bahá'í events, or in letters between individuals. Inevitably, many erroneous statements were made; not all comments were as temperate as they should have been; many statements were misunderstood by those who heard them. After all, not all Bahá'ís have a profound knowledge of the teachings, and it is clear that even academic eminence is no guarantee of a correct understanding of the Revelation of God. Before email such extravagances had a limited range and were of an ephemeral nature. Now, the same kind of discussion is spread among a hundred or more people, who often do not know one another, in a form more durable than speech, and can be disseminated to a vast readership at the touch of a button. A new level of self-discipline, therefore, is needed by those who take part. Such discussions among Bahá'ís call for self-restraint and purity of motive as well as cordiality, frankness and openness”⁶

5. The surest guarantee, as always, is to rely on the guidance of our teachings.

“Most important of all, as with any exploration by Bahá'ís of the beliefs and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members

2 Shoghi Effendi: *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 203.

3 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual Bahá'í, 19 May 1995. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, a compilation, p. 17.

4 *ibid.*

5 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual Bahá'í, 19 May 1995. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, compilation, p. 19.

6 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual Bahá'í, 16 February 1996. Published in *Pathways to Transformation*, 2000.

only as it is conducted within the framework of the Bahá'í teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction.”⁷

6. We should also rely on the framework provided by the Covenant.

“The central, unifying element of the Faith is the Covenant. This is the institution which guarantees that the Faith and its teachings will remain true to the Revelation brought by Bahá'u'lláh and expounded by His divinely guided Interpreters. It is the one agency which can protect the Faith against the distortion and disruption to which all previous Revelations have been subjected by the efforts—whether well-intentioned or not—of the self-opinionated and ambitious among their followers to force the Cause of God into patterns which they personally favoured.”⁸

7. Participants in electronic discussion groups will be used to reading postings that differ from their own and some that appear to contradict the teachings. They may wonder how to respond and will often turn to Auxiliary Board members or one of their assistants for advice. Since you can best help the believers by referring them to principles, the following excerpt from a letter can be a wonderful starting point.

“The combination of absolute loyalty to the Manifestation of God and His teachings, with the searching and intelligent study of the teachings and history of the Faith which those teachings themselves enjoin, is a particular strength of this Dispensation. In past Dispensations the believers have tended to divide into two mutually antagonistic groups: those who held blindly to the letter of the Revelation, and those who questioned and doubted everything. Like all extremes, both [of] these can lead into error. The beloved Guardian has written that “The Bahá'í Faith ... enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth”⁹ Bahá'ís are called upon to follow the Faith with intelligence and understanding. Inevitably believers will commit errors as they strive to rise to this degree of maturity, and this calls for forbearance and humility on the part of all concerned, so that such matters do not cause disunity or discord among the friends.”¹⁰

8. The following letter from the Universal House of Justice reminds us of how the principles of consultation form the attitude required for a successful dialogue among Bahá'ís.

“As it is beyond the scope of this letter to expatiate upon these principles, let it suffice to recall briefly certain of the requisites of consultation, particularly for those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies. Love and harmony, purity of motive, humility and lowliness amongst the friends, patience and long-suffering in difficulties—these inform the attitude with which they proceed *'with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views'*,¹¹ each using *'perfect liberty'* both in so doing and in *'unveiling the proof of his demonstration. If another contradicts him, he must not become excited because if there be no investigation or verification of questions and matters, the agreeable view will not be discovered neither understood.'*¹² *'The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.'*¹³¹⁴

7 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual Bahá'í, 19 May 1995. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, compilation, p. 18.

8 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual Bahá'í, 18 February 1996.

9 Shoghi Effendi: *The Promised Day is Come*, pp. 15-16.

10 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf, 7 October 1980. Published in *Bahá'í Scholarship: A Compilation and Essays*, p. 34; and *Pathways to Transformation*, 2000.

11 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 88.

12 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 406.

13 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 87.

14 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to the Bahá'ís in the United States, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, p. 14.

9. Not only does the Universal House of Justice advise that we react with forbearance and humility, they have also urged us to react calmly when confronted with views that differ from our own since none of us has a perfect understanding of this Revelation.

“The House of Justice agrees that it is most important for the believers, and especially those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own, remembering that all Bahá'ís are but students of the Faith, ever striving to understand the teachings more clearly and to apply them more faithfully, and none can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation.”¹⁵

10. The above quotation tells us to react calmly and humbly. The same letter warns us not to foment discord.

“At the same time all believers, and scholars in particular, should remember the many warnings in the Writings against the fomenting of discord among the friends. It is the duty of the institutions of the Faith to guard the community against such dangers.”¹⁶

11. The House of Justice encourages dialogue that promotes learning and exploration. However, they also encourage self-discipline to avoid contention and disunity. Ideas will no doubt conflict, but within the framework of the teachings there should be an honourable discourse. When participants cannot resolve an issue, they should refer the matter to the Universal House of Justice.

“Thus, if any participant in an email discussion feels that a view put forward appears to contradict or undermine the provisions of the Covenant, he should be free to say so, explaining candidly and courteously why he feels as he does. The person who made the initial statement will then be able to re-evaluate his opinion and, if he still believes it to be valid, he should be able to explain why it is not contrary to either the letter or the spirit of the Covenant. The participants in such a discussion should avoid disputation and, if they are unable to resolve an issue, they should refer the point to the Universal House of Justice since, in accordance with the *Will and Testament* of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved ...'¹⁷ and it has the authority to decide upon 'all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.'¹⁸ In this way the Covenant can illuminate and temper the discourse and make it fruitful.”¹⁹

12. Unfortunately, at this early stage of development and maturity, some electronic discussions have witnessed an abundance of intemperate comments, misunderstandings, offensive remarks, and even attacks among the friends. The potential of this medium for promoting the development of the Faith requires great care by the participants. Even though some of the friends are distressed by the abuse of electronic discussions, the Universal House of Justice assures us that they will not permit a climate of intolerance to prosper in the Bahá'í community.

“Not surprisingly, the abuse of Internet discussions on the Faith and its teachings has had just the effect of greatly distressing friends who become aware of it. That the response has included, as your letter suggests, a degree of intemperate criticism, inappropriate comment and unjust accusation is lamentable, but also not surprising, for contentiousness begets contention. You should be confident that the Universal House of Justice will not permit a climate of intolerance to prosper in the Bahá'í community, no matter from what cause it arises.”²⁰

13. Repeatedly invoking the existence of the Covenant will help us preserve the needed perspective

15 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 18 July 1979.

16 *ibid.*

17 Page 14.

18 Page 20.

19 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, dated, 16 February 1996

20 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 20 July 1997.

because, in terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction.

“If Bahá’í individuals deliberately ignore the principles imbedded in the Order which Bahá’u’lláh Himself has established to remedy divisiveness in the human family, the Cause for which so much has been sacrificed will surely be set back in its mission to rescue world society from complete disintegration. May not the existence of the Covenant be invoked again and again, so that such repetition may preserve the needed perspective? For, in this age, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh has been protected against the baneful effects of the misuse of the process of criticism; this has been done by the institution of the Covenant and by the provision of a universal administrative system which incorporates within itself the mechanisms for drawing out the constructive ideas of individuals and using them for the benefit of the entire system. Admonishing the people to uphold the unifying purpose of the Cause, Bahá’u’lláh in the *Book of His Covenant*, addresses these poignant words to them: *‘Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord.’*²¹ Such assertions emphasise a crucial point; it is this: In terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá’í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of mankind.”²²

14. The following excerpts from the Writings contain principles that can be used to guide electronic discussions. Bahá’u’lláh makes unity the paramount goal and writes in the *Tablet of the World*:

*“Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished. ... Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse and set a new direction to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy Book.”*²³

15. Conventional wisdom and widely accepted views often differ greatly from the Bahá’í perspective.

*“We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions. We see it languishing on its bed of sickness, sore-tried and disillusioned. They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy. They have conceived the straight to be crooked, and have imagined their friend an enemy.”*²⁴

16. The Blessed Beauty writes that many people are unable to distinguish guidance from error.

*“We exhort mankind in these days when the countenance of Justice is soiled with dust, when the flames of unbelief are burning high and the robe of wisdom rent asunder, when tranquillity and faithfulness have ebbed away and trials and tribulations have waxed severe, when covenants are broken and ties are severed, when no man knoweth how to discern light and darkness or to distinguish guidance from error.”*²⁵

17. Bahá’u’lláh writes that some people will even use the Holy Writings to challenge the authority of the Representative of God.

“Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose

21 Bahá’u’lláh: *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 222.

22 Universal House of Justice: Letter to the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, p. 17.

23 Bahá’u’lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, section XLIII, pp. 95-96; and *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 87-88.

24 Bahá’u’lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, section CVI, p. 213; and *The Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 116-117.

25 Bahá’u’lláh: *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 137-138.

hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbours, and share with them their food and their drink.”²⁶

18. The Bahá'í Writings warn the believers to be constantly on guard to ensure that what they write will not be the cause of disunity. The Master even appealed for an end to certain kinds of fancies and illusions.

*“Let us not keep on forever with our fancies and illusions, with our analysing and interpreting and circulating of complex dubieties. Let us put aside all thoughts of self; let us close our eyes to all on earth, let us neither make known our sufferings nor complain of our wrongs. Rather let us become oblivious of our own selves, and drinking down the wine of heavenly grace, let us cry out our joy, and lose ourselves in the beauty of the All-Glorious.”*²⁷

19. We are not only free, but encouraged, to seek meaning and understandings from the Writings and even share them with others. However, we must make it clear that these views are merely our own.

“... individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings.”²⁸

20. We should create an environment in the Faith where views can be shared without pressing ideas on others, and to listen to other views without allowing our faith to be shaken.

“... although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís.”²⁹

21. There is no objection to using scientific methods to try to understand and explain our teachings, but every method will no doubt have limitations.

“... the House of Justice understands that you desire to find ways of conveying spiritual truths in logical ways and demonstrating their validity through scientific proofs. There can be no objection to such an attitude. 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself used such a method. The danger Bahá'í scholars must avoid is the distortion of religious truth, almost forcibly at times, to make it conform to understandings and perceptions current in the scientific world. True Bahá'í scholars should guard against this.”³⁰

22. However knowledgeable and learned any person may be, at this stage of the development of the Bahá'í Faith, their understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh can be only partial.

“The Bahá'í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. It is a revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Bahá'í at this early stage in Bahá'í history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it.”³¹

26 Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section [LXXXIX](#), pp. [175-176](#).

27 'Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. [236](#).

28 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 27 May 1966. Published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, para. [35.13](#), p. [88](#).

29 *ibid.*

30 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 7 June 1983.

31 Universal House of Justice: *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*, para. [217.7](#), p. [389](#). Comments by the Research

“... when searching after the facts of any matter, a Bahá'í must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Bahá'í Revelation which he has already accepted ...”³²

23. The Master explained how our learning and our conditioned minds can restrict understanding.

*“Although the reality of Divinity is sanctified and boundless, the aims and needs of the creatures are restricted. God's grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations—dimensions, appearance, shape—according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon, in an eight-sided pool an octagon, and so forth. The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form, but it taketh on one form or another, according to the restrictions of its vessel. In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendours become finite in the creatures, because of their limitations,”*³³

24. These limitations can lead to extremes and this is often the time when contention and conflict dominate discussions.

“Some of the protagonists in the discussions on the Internet have implied that the only way to attain a true understanding of historical events and of the purport of the sacred and historical records of the Cause of God is through the rigid application of methods narrowly defined in a materialistic framework. They have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it.

“The House of Justice recognizes that, at the other extreme, there are Bahá'ís who, imbued by what they conceive to be loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh, cling to blind acceptance of what they understand to be a statement of the Sacred Text. This shortcoming demonstrates an equally serious failure to grasp the profundity of the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of faith and reason. The danger of such an attitude is that it exalts personal understanding of some part of the Revelation over the whole, leads to illogical and internally inconsistent applications of the Sacred Text, and provides fuel to those who would mistakenly characterize loyalty to the Covenant as 'fundamentalism'.

“It is not surprising that individual Bahá'ís hold and express different and sometimes defective understandings of the Teachings; this is but an evidence of the magnitude of the change that this Revelation is to effect in human consciousness. As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse—with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds—a deepening of comprehension should take place. The strident insistence on individual views, however, can lead to contention, which is detrimental not only to the spirit of Bahá'í association and collaboration but to the search for truth itself.”³⁴

25. Bahá'u'lláh encourages us to immerse ourselves in the ocean of His Revelation to discover its treasures. This exploration is balanced by a methodical intelligent study on one hand and prayer and inspiration on the other. This integrated approach yields both understanding and harmony.

“Just as there is a fundamental difference between divine Revelation itself and the understanding that believers have of it, so also there is a basic distinction between scientific fact and reasoning on the one hand and the conclusions or theories of

Department attached to a letter 3 January 1979.

32 *ibid.*, para. 217.8, p. [390](#)

33 `Abdu'l-Bahá: Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. [161](#).

34 Universal House of Justice: Letter to an individual believer, 8 February 1998. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, a compilation, pp. [37-38](#).

scientists on the other. There is, and can be, no conflict between true religion and true science: true religion is revealed by God, while it is through true science that the mind of man 'discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings' and 'comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete'. However, whenever a statement is made through the lens of human understanding it is thereby limited, for human understanding is limited; and where there is limitation there is the possibility of error; and where there is error, conflicts can arise."³⁵

The following excerpt was earlier cited (item number 13):

"If Bahá'í individuals deliberately ignore the principles imbedded in the Order which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has established to remedy divisiveness in the human family, the Cause for which so much has been sacrificed will surely be set back in its mission to rescue world society from complete disintegration."³⁶

Without unity, the paramount goal of the Bahá'í Faith, we will not really benefit from the thinking of brilliant minds.

The next section consists of a number of excerpts related to obedience, criticism and the importance of avoiding conflict and contention. These quotations provide useful points for helping the friends to conduct productive and honourable electronic dialogues.

26. "Let no one, while this System is still in its infancy, misconceive its character, belittle its significance or misrepresent its purpose. The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God's immutable Purpose for mankind in this day."³⁷
27. "Admonish, then, the people to lend a hearing ear to the words which the Spirit of God hath uttered in this irradiant and resplendent Tablet. Say: Sow not, O people, the seeds of dissension amongst men, and contend not with your neighbour. Be patient under all conditions, and place your whole trust and confidence in God. Aid ye your Lord with the sword of wisdom and of utterance. This indeed well becometh the station of man. To depart from it would be unworthy of God, the Sovereign Lord of all, the Glorified. The people, however, have been led astray, and are truly of the heedless."³⁸
28. "Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness."³⁹
29. "Therefore, it hath been said: 'To seek evidence, when the Proof hath been established is but an unseemly act, and to be busied with the pursuit of knowledge when the Object of all learning hath been attained is truly blameworthy.'⁴⁰
30. "O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the

35 Universal House of Justice: : From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 26 December 1973. Published in *Bahá'í Scholarship: A compilation and essays*, pp. 9-10.

36 Universal House of Justice: Letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, p. 17.

37 Shoghi Effendi: *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 156.

38 Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 296.

39 Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 279.

40 Bahá'u'lláh: *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 147.

spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly. Thus man must strive that his reality may manifest virtues and perfections, the light whereof may shine upon everyone. The light of the sun shineth upon all the world and the merciful showers of Divine Providence fall upon all peoples. The vivifying breeze reviveth every living creature and all beings endued with life obtain their share and portion at His heavenly board. In like manner, the affections and loving kindness of the servants of the One True God must be bountifully and universally extended to all mankind. Regarding this, restrictions and limitations are in no wise permitted.”⁴¹

31. *“In brief, O ye believers of God! The text of the divine Book is this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute may arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. Should there appear the least trace of controversy, they must remain silent, and both parties must continue their discussions no longer, but ask the reality of the question from the Interpreter. This is the irrefutable command!”⁴²*
32. *“It is incumbent upon the loved ones of God to exercise the greatest care and prudence in all things, whether great or small, to take counsel together and unitedly resist the onslaught of the stirrers up of strife and the movers of mischief. They must endeavour to consort in a friendly spirit with everyone, must follow moderation in their conduct, must have respect and consideration one for another and show loving-kindness and tender regard to all the peoples of the world. They must be patient and long-suffering, that they may grow to become the divine magnets of the Abhá Kingdom and acquire the dynamic power of the hosts of the realm on high.”⁴³*
33. *“What the Master desired to protect the friends against was continual bickering and opinionatedness. A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Bahá’í must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony—even if a mistake has been made—are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Bahá’í way, God will right any wrongs done in the end.”⁴⁴*
34. *“Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá’u’lláh (i.e. the administrative order) and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it. If the Bahá’ís would follow the Bahá’í laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by assembly decisions, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into co-operation and achieving the Plan. Keep on trying to point this out to them!”⁴⁵*
35. *“When criticism and harsh words arise within a Bahá’í community, there is no remedy except to put the past behind one, and persuade all concerned to turn over a new leaf, and for the sake of God and His Faith refrain from mentioning the subjects which have led to misunderstanding and inharmony. The more the friends argue back and forth and maintain, each side, that their point of view is the right one, the worse the whole situation becomes.*
- “When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly*

41 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Will and Testament*, pp. 13-14.

42 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 56.

43 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 233.

44 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (The Local Spiritual Assembly), No. 1402, p. 58. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 19 October 1947.

45 Shoghi Effendi: *Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand*, p. 53. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 18 December 1949.

insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow Bahá'ís to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.”⁴⁶

36. “In the application of the social laws of the Faith, most of the difficulties can be seen to arise not only from outright disobedience, but also from the actions of those who, while careful to observe the letter of the law, try to go as far as it will permit them away from the spirit which lies at its heart. A similar tendency can be noted among some Bahá'í scholars. The great advances in knowledge and understanding in the vital field of Bahá'í scholarship will be made by those who, while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of its teachings.”⁴⁷
37. “Regarding the matter of Mrs ___ and the inharmony that seems to exist among certain of the friends in ...: when Bahá'ís permit the dark forces of the world to enter into their own relationships within the Faith they gravely jeopardise its progress; it is the paramount duty of the believers, the local assemblies, and particularly the N.S.A. to foster harmony, understanding and love amongst the friends. All should be ready and willing to set aside every personal sense of grievance—justified or unjustified—for the good of the Cause, because the people will never embrace it until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking in the world: love and unity.”⁴⁸
38. “At such a time when the political world is chaotic and society seems to be on the verge of death, as a result of the activities of societies that contain only half-truths, the friends of God should be united and act as one single organism. The greater their unity the surer they can be of winning the day. And this unity cannot be achieved save through obedience to the Assemblies. It is true these are still immature and may at times act unwisely. But supporting them will help more their advance towards an administration that is truly representative of the Cause, than by criticizing them and ignoring their advice. Bahá'u'lláh has not only advocated certain principles, but has also provided a mechanism whereby that ideal can be established and perpetuated. Both of these phases are essential for the realization of His goal of world unity.”⁴⁹
39. Upholding the authority of the Assemblies is pivotal to creating the kind of united environment where learning and creativity can thrive.

“... you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í Community.

46 Shoghi Effendi: *Directives of the Guardian*, pp. 17-18; and *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (Living the Life), no. 1330, p. 23. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 February 1951.

47 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 27 March 1983. Published in *Bahá'í Scholarship: A compilation and essays*, p. 35.

48 Shoghi Effendi: *Letters to Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 54-55. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 13 May 1945.

49 Shoghi Effendi: From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 27 February 1933. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, p. 57.

“But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community.”⁵⁰

40. “While constructive criticism is encouraged, destructive criticism, such as the pattern of 'continually challenging and criticizing the decisions'⁵¹ of the Assemblies, prevents the rapid growth of the Faith and repels those who are yet outside the community. Indeed 'all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the community.'⁵² 'Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity', the root of which is 'lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh' and failure to 'follow the Bahá'í laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by Assembly decisions'. ”^{53 54}
41. “But let us be on our guard—so the Master continually reminds us from His Station on high—lest too much concern in that which is secondary in importance, and too long a preoccupation with the details of our affairs and activities, make us neglectful of the most essential, the most urgent of all our obligations, namely, to bury our cares and teach the Cause, delivering far and wide this Message of Salvation to a sorely-stricken world.”⁵⁵
42. “The Guardian believes that a great deal of the difficulties from which the believers ... feel themselves to be suffering are caused by their neither correctly understanding nor putting into practice the administration. They seem—many of them—to be prone to continually challenging and criticizing the decisions of their Assemblies. If the Bahá'ís undermine the very bodies which are, however immaturely, seeking to co-ordinate Bahá'í activities and administer Bahá'í affairs, if they continually criticize their acts and challenge or belittle their decisions, they not only prevent any real rapid progress in the Faith's development from taking place, but they repel outsiders who quite rightly may ask how we ever expect to unite the whole world when we are so disunited among ourselves!
- “There is only one remedy for this: to study the administration, to obey the Assemblies, and each believer seek to perfect his own character as a Bahá'í. We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weaknesses of others; if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength. The Bahá'ís everywhere, when the administration is first established, find it very difficult to adjust themselves. They have to learn to obey, even when the Assembly may be wrong, for the sake of unity. They have to sacrifice their personalities, to a certain extent, in order that the community life may grow and develop as a whole. These things are difficult—but we must realize that they will lead us to a very much greater, more perfect, way of life when the Faith is properly established according to the administration.”⁵⁶
43. “The believers should have confidence in the directions and orders of their Assembly, even though they may not be convinced of their justice or right. Once the Assembly, through a

50 Shoghi Effendi: From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 13 December 1939. Revised November 1990. Published in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I (Nineteen Day Feast), p. 452.

51 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (The National Spiritual Assembly), no. 1469, p. 111; and *Lights of Guidance*, no. 287, p. 82. (26 October 1943.)

52 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I (Nineteen Day Feast), no. 995, p. 452. (13 December 1939.)

53 Shoghi Effendi: *Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand*, p. 53; *Directives from the Guardian*, no. 48, p. 18; and *Lights of Guidance*, no. 314, p. 92. (18 December 1949.)

54 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to an individual believer, 2 July 1996. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, pp. 54-55.

55 Shoghi Effendi: *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 42.

56 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (National Spiritual Assembly), no. 1469, pp. 111-112. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 26 October 1943.

majority vote of its members, comes to a decision the friends should readily obey it. Specially those dissenting members within the Assembly whose opinion is contrary to that of the majority of their fellow-members should set a good example before the community by sacrificing their personal views for the sake of obeying the principle of majority vote that underlies the functioning of all Bahá'í Assemblies.”⁵⁷

44. Fundamental to our understanding appeals for moderation, for expressing criticism appropriately and for the exhortations to avoid conflict and contention is the individual's relation to society.

“While constructive criticism is encouraged, destructive criticism, such as the pattern of 'continually challenging and criticizing the decisions'⁵⁸ of the Assemblies, prevents the rapid growth of the Faith and repels those who are yet outside the community. Indeed 'all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the community.'⁵⁹ 'Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity', the root of which is 'lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh' and failure to 'follow the Bahá'í laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by Assembly decisions'.”⁶⁰

“The questions of how criticism is expressed and acted upon in the Bahá'í community, and how the Spiritual Assemblies administer justice in regard to individual believers are but elements of far greater concepts and should become second nature in the social discourse of Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í community is an association of individuals who have voluntarily come together, on recognizing Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behaviour and to build the institutions that are to promote these patterns. There are numerous individuals who share the ideals of the Faith and draw inspiration from its Teachings, while disagreeing with certain of its features, but those who actually enter the Bahá'í community have accepted, by their own free will, to follow the Teachings in their entirety, understanding that, if doubts and disagreements arise in the process of translating the Teachings into practice, the final arbiter is, by the explicit authority of the Revealed Text, the Universal House of Justice.

“It is the ardent prayer of the Universal House of Justice that any friends who find themselves at odds in this endeavour will have confidence in the guidance it provides for them, will renew their study of the Teachings and, for the sake of Bahá'u'lláh, strengthen their love for one another. As the beloved Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer on 25 October 1949: 'Without the spirit of real love for Bahá'u'lláh, for His Faith and its Institutions, and the believers for each other, the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. For it is not preaching and rules the world wants, but love and action.'⁶¹ The world-wide undertakings on which the Cause of God is embarked are far too significant, the need of the peoples of the world for the Message of Bahá'u'lláh far too urgent, the perils facing mankind far too grave, the progress of events far too swift, to permit His followers to squander their time and efforts in fruitless contention. Now, if ever, is the time for love among the friends, for unity of understanding and endeavour, for self-sacrifice and service by Bahá'ís in every part of the world.”⁶²

57 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I (Consultation), no. 197, p. 104; Vol. II (The Local Spiritual Assembly), no. 1400, p. 57; and *Lights of Guidance*, no. 281, p. 80. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 28 October 1935.

58 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (The National Spiritual Assembly), no. 1469, p. 111; and *Lights of Guidance*, no. 287, p. 82. (26 October 1943.)

59 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I (Nineteen Day Feast), no. 995, p. 452. (13 December 1939.)

60 Shoghi Effendi: *Arohanui: Letters to New Zealand*, p. 53; *Directives from the Guardian*, no. 48, p. 18; and *Lights of Guidance*, no. 314, p. 92. (18 December 1949.)

61 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (Living the Life), no. 1324, p. 21; and Vol. II (Guidelines for Teaching), no. 1971, p. 315. (25 October 1949.)

62 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to an individual believer, 2 July 1996. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a

45. “The individual's relation to society is explained by Shoghi Effendi in the statement that ‘The Bahá’í conception of social life is essentially based on the principle of the subordination of the individual will to that of society. It neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an antisocial creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the *golden mean*.’⁶³
- “This relationship, so fundamental to the maintenance of civilized life, calls for the utmost degree of understanding and co-operation between society and the individual; and because of the need to foster a climate in which the untold potentialities of the individual members of society can develop, this relationship must allow ‘free scope’ for ‘individuality to assert itself’ through modes of spontaneity; initiative and diversity that ensure the viability of society. Among the responsibilities assigned to Bahá’í institutions which have a direct bearing on these aspects of individual freedom and development is one which is thus described in the Constitution of the Universal House of Justice: ‘to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals.’ A corollary is: ‘to give attention to the preservation of human honour.’⁶⁴
- “How noteworthy that in the Order of Bahá’u’lláh while the individual will is subordinated to that of society, the individual is not lost in the mass but becomes the focus of primary development, so that he may find his own place in the flow of progress, and society as a whole may benefit from the accumulated talents and abilities of the individuals composing it. Such an individual finds fulfilment of his potential not merely in satisfying his own wants but in realizing his completeness in being at one with humanity and with the divinely ordained purpose of creation.
- “The quality of freedom and of its expression—indeed, the very capacity to maintain freedom in a society—undoubtedly depends on the knowledge and training of individuals and on their abilities to cope with the challenges of life with equanimity. As the beloved Master has written: ‘*And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellowmen? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.*’^{65 66}
46. “He fully appreciates the spirit which has prompted you to abide whole-heartedly and without any hesitation by the instructions of the National Assembly, and he strongly feels that your attitude in the whole matter constitutes an example which the friends will gladly learn to follow. You have [sacrificed], and must indeed continue to sacrifice, some of your personal opinions and views regarding the teaching work for the sake of upholding the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly. For such a sacrifice on your part does not involve submission to any individual, but has the effect of strengthening the authority of the community as a whole as expressed through the medium of its duly recognized representatives. We should, indeed, learn to curb our individualism when we are confronted with problems and issues affecting the general welfare of the Cause. For Bahá’í community life implies a consciousness of group solidarity strong enough to enable every individual believer to give up what is essentially personal for the sake of the common weal.”⁶⁷
47. Concerns about the proper functioning of the Bahá’í community should be a natural part of our development.

compilation, pp. 54-56.

63 Shoghi Effendi: *Directives from the Guardian*, no. 144, p. 53; and *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 435-436. (21 November 1936.).

64 Universal House of Justice: *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice*, 1972, Declaration of Trust, para. 10, p. 5.

65 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 23.

66 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to the Bahá’ís in the United States, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, pp. 22-22.

67 Shoghi Effendi: *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II (National Spiritual Assembly, no. 11517, pp. 133-134. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two believers, 31 May 1934.

“The House of Justice understands and appreciates your concern for the proper functioning of the Bahá’í community. It urges you to contemplate the issues you have raised in the light of the Teachings themselves, and not to weigh them with the standards of other philosophies or of any civil system, the fundamental assumptions of which differ in many respects from those of Bahá’u’lláh’s divinely conceived Order.”⁶⁸

48. “There have, however, been cases of believers who look upon themselves as scholars, and may even be such in an academic sense, who have considerable expertise in certain aspects of the Faith but are lamentably ignorant or misinformed about other aspects of the Cause and the Teachings. Others have expressed biting critical views with a quite unscholarly intemperance.”⁶⁹
49. “Beyond contention, moreover, is the condition in which a person is so immovably attached to one erroneous viewpoint that his insistence upon it amounts to an effort to change the essential character of the Faith. This kind of behaviour, if permitted to continue unchecked, could produce disruption in the Bahá’í community, giving birth to countless sects as it has done in previous Dispensations. The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh prevents this. The Faith defines elements of a code of conduct, and it is ultimately the responsibility of the Universal House of Justice, in watching over the security of the Cause and upholding the integrity of its Teachings, to require the friends to adhere to standards thus defined.”⁷⁰
50. “It is natural that the friends would discuss such matters among themselves, as you and your correspondent have been doing on your Internet discussion group; how otherwise are they to deepen their understanding of the Teachings? But they should recognize that the resolution of differences of opinion on such fundamental questions is not to be found by continued discussion, but in referring to the Universal House of Justice itself, as you have done. Prolonged, unresolved, public discussion of these fundamental questions can do nothing but breed confusion and dissension.”⁷¹
51. “It is our primary task to keep the most vigilant eye on the manner and character of its [the Bahá’í Faith] growth, to combat effectively the forces of separation and of sectarian tendencies, lest the Spirit of the Cause be obscured, its unity be threatened, its Teachings suffer corruption; lest extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the other, cause it to deviate from that Straight Path which alone can lead it to success.”⁷²
52. In this Faith, the manner in which we communicate is just as important as what we are communicating.

“Bahá’u’lláh warns us that *'the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison.'* *'Material fire consumeth the body;'* He says in elaborating the point, *'whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.'*⁷³ In tracing the framework of free speech, He again advises *'moderation.'* *'Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation,'* He states, adding, *'As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with*

68 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to an individual believer, 2 July 1996. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, p. 56.

69 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an individual believer, 8 October 1980. Published in *Bahá’í Scholarship: A Compilation and Essays*, p. 14.

70 Universal House of Justice: From a letter to an individual believer, 8 February 1998. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá’í Faith*, a compilation, p. 38.

71 Universal House of Justice: From a letter to an individual believer, 3 June 1997. Published in *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá’í Faith*, a compilation, p. 30.

72 Shoghi Effendi: *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 42.

73 Bahá’u’lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, section CXXXV, p. 265.

*tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.*⁷⁴

“Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that *'Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely; nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.'*⁷⁵

“Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences. Thus there exist in the system of Bahá'u'lláh checks and balances necessary to the beneficial uses of this freedom in the onward development of society. A careful examination of the principles of Bahá'í consultation and the formal and informal arrangements for employing them offer new insights into the dynamics of freedom of expression.”⁷⁶

Beyond the concern about intemperate remarks, inappropriate criticisms, and other abuses is another development, the increasing use of this medium by Covenant-breaker groups. Their aim, of course, is to undermine the Covenant and promote their own ideas about successorship and leadership in the Faith. Various groups of Covenant-breakers have established Web sites and their members have participated in Bahá'í discussion groups both openly and deviously. This has been particularly upsetting to many Bahá'ís who have never experienced this kind of attack. It has also been frustrating to Bahá'ís who have had difficulty keeping their discussion groups free of these unwanted postings. The advice we can give to the friends is really nothing new. The principle to shun Covenant-breakers and avoid or ignore their supporters and their material remains unchanged.

53. “... one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past.”⁷⁷
54. If a believer is approached by a Covenant-breaker (whether part of a group or individually) directly via email, he or she should be encouraged to report this contact and then ignore the message. The Covenant-breakers have devised many approaches to engage the Bahá'ís in discussing their views, but the impact of their efforts will be minimized if we just follow the principle given to us above by the Master in His *Will and Testament*.

“... It is a pity that some of the Western friends, with remarkable naiveté, do not grasp the fact that there is absolutely nothing keeping those who have broken the Covenant, whether Bahá'u'lláh's or the Master's, out of the Cause of God except their own inner spiritually sick condition. If they were sound, instead of diseased, and wanted to enter the service of our Faith, they would apply direct to the Guardian, and he would be able to adjudge of their sincerity and, if sincere, would welcome them into the ranks of the faithful as he did with Sydney Sprague. Unfortunately a man who is ill is not made well just by asserting there is nothing wrong with him! Facts, actual states, are what count. Probably no group of people in the world have softer tongues, or proclaim more loudly their innocence, than those who in their heart of hearts, and by their every act, are enemies of the Centre of the Covenant. The Master well knew this, and that is why He said we must shun their company, but pray for them. If you put a leper in a room with healthy people, he cannot catch their health; on the contrary they are very likely to catch

74 Bahá'u'lláh: *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 143, 172 and 198.

75 Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section LXXXIX, p. 176.

76 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written to the Bahá'ís in the United States, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, pp. 13-14.

77 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Will and Testament*, p. 20.

his horrible ailment.”⁷⁸

55. “With regard to avoiding association with declared Covenant-breakers. Shoghi Effendi says that this does not mean that if one or more of these attends a non-Bahá’í meeting any Bahá’ís present should feel compelled to leave the meeting or to refuse to take part in the meeting, especially if that part has been prearranged. Also if in the course of some business transaction it should become necessary to negotiate with one of these people, in order to clear up the business, that is permissible, provided the association is confined to the matter of the business in hand. It is different if one of these people should come to Bahá’í meetings. Then it would become necessary to ask him in a most tactful and dignified way to leave the meeting as Bahá’ís are forbidden to associate with him.”⁷⁹
56. “We have your letter of 14 March 1970 asking whether it is forbidden for the friends to associate with non-Bahá’ís who are in close association with Covenant-Breakers.
“There are no hard and fast rules about such things. Under some conditions the involvement of the non-Bahá’í party may be superficial and harmless, in which case no action should be taken. For example, Bahá’ís have at times used non-Bahá’ís, such as lawyers, to contact Covenant-breakers in certain matters of business.
“If, however, the Covenant-breaker is using the non-Bahá’í party to spread his ideas among the friends, the matter should be reported to the Continental Board of Counsellors, and whatever they decide in such cases in consultation with the National Spiritual Assemblies concerned should be unreservedly accepted by the friends.”⁸⁰
57. “Regarding Mr ___'s question about the Covenant-breakers, Bahá'u'lláh and the Master in many places and very emphatically have told us to shun entirely all Covenant-breakers as they are afflicted with what we might try and define as a contagious spiritual disease; they have also told us, however, to pray for them. These souls are not lost forever. In the *Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh says that God will forgive Mírzá Yahyá if he repents. It follows, therefore, that God will forgive any soul if he repents. Most of them don't want to repent, unfortunately. If the leaders can be forgiven it goes without saying that their followers can also be forgiven.
"Also, it has nothing to do with unity in the Cause; if a man cuts a cancer out of his body to preserve his health and very life, no one would suggest that for the sake of unity it should be reintroduced into the otherwise healthy organism. On the contrary, what was once a part of him has so radically changed as to have become a poison.”⁸¹
58. “No one has any right to see the Covenant-Breakers without the permission of the N.S.A., and Mrs ___ in doing so should realize she is putting herself in contact with a dangerous, contagious, spiritual disease, as the Master pointed out over and over again! She is also disobeying express instructions of the Master and the Guardian by contacting Covenant-Breakers.”⁸²
59. “To read the writings of Covenant-breakers is not forbidden to the believers and does not constitute in itself an act of Covenant-breaking. Indeed, some of the Bahá’ís have the unpleasant duty to read such literature as part of their responsibilities for protecting the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. However, the friends are warned in the strongest terms against reading such

78 Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 618, p. 188. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 11 April 1949.

79 Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 610, p. 186. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 May 1925.

80 Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 605, p. 184. From a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of Ecuador, 2 April 1970.

81 Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 604, p. 184. *Directives of the Guardian*, no. 45, p. 16; and *Principles of Bahá’í Administration*, pp. 22-23. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 30 November 1944.

82 Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, no. 608, p. 185. From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to two individual believers, 5 May 1947.

literature because Covenant-breaking is a spiritual poison and the calumnies and distortions of the truth which the Covenant-breakers give out are such that they can undermine the faith of the believer and plant the seeds of doubt unless he is forearmed with an unshakeable belief in Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant and a knowledge of the true facts.”⁸³

60. To a believer who moderates an electronic discussion group the Universal House of Justice wrote that he may have to read postings of Covenant-breakers as a part of his duties but the Universal House of Justice also suggested that his “contact with them be kept to a minimum” In the same letter they wrote:

“You will want to resist any temptation to be drawn into discussions or consideration of the arguments which they [Covenant-breakers] may advance.”⁸⁴

61. It is always helpful and valuable when the friends bring these concerns about Covenant-breakers to the attention of the Institutions and they should be encouraged to do this.

“You are free at any time to refer to the Continental Boards of Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members for protection any matters about which you are not clear involving the security of the Faith in your area and you will always find them willing to assist you in dealing with such problems.”⁸⁵

62. It is important to be vigilant but not quick to judge a person who has posted a contribution to an electronic discussion. It is also important not to label someone as a Covenant-breaker unless he or she has been expelled from the Faith by the Central Authority of our Cause. Covenant-breaking is very serious and a matter for certain Bahá'í institutions. We should encourage the friends not to use this term casually or indiscriminately.

In any event, when a Bahá'í is trying to decide whether or not to interact with another, it is best to pray and to follow one's spiritual instincts. We can ask questions like: Is this discussion uplifting and spiritually stimulating or does it have the “odour of mischief”? Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

*“Time and again have We admonished Our beloved ones to avoid, nay to flee from, anything whatsoever from which the odour of mischief can be detected. The world is in great turmoil, and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions. He, verily is the All-Possessing, the Most High.”*⁸⁶

63. Our teachings warn us not to judge others but we are also encouraged to be discriminating and to avoid situations that distract us, cause doubts, and lead to ignoble thoughts and actions.

“O FRIEND!

*“In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love, and from the nightingale of affection and desire loosen not thy hold. Treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly.”*⁸⁷

64. A sure safeguard for all of us will be to beseech God for strength and spiritual insights.

“Help them, then, O God, to reach forth, through the power of Thy sovereign might, towards such a station that they can readily distinguish every foul smell from the fragrance of the raiment of Him Who is the Bearer of Thy most lofty and exalted name, that they may turn with all their affections toward Thee, and may enjoy such intimate

83 Universal House of Justice: Lights of Guidance, no. 611, p. 186. From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 29 October 1974.

84 Universal House of Justice: From a letter to an individual believer, 28 March 1998.

85 Universal House of Justice: Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 1 October 1979. Cited in *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*, section 5.17.

86 Bahá'u'lláh: *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 94; and *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 97-98.

87 Bahá'u'lláh: *The Hidden Words*, Persian No. 3.

communion with Thee that if all that is in heaven and on earth were given them they would regard it as unworthy of their notice, and would refuse to cease from remembering Thee and from extolling Thy virtues.”⁸⁸

65. *“O ye beloved of the Lord! On one side the standard of the One True God is unfurled and the Voice of the Kingdom raised. The Cause of God is spreading, and manifest in splendour are the wonders from on high. The east is illumined and the west perfumed; fragrant with ambergris is the north, and musk-scented the south.*

“On the other side the faithless wax in hate and rancour, ceaselessly stirring up grievous sedition and mischief. No day goeth by but someone raiseth the standard of revolt and spurreth his charger into the arena of discord. No hour passeth but the vile adder bareth its fangs and scattereth its deadly venom.

“The beloved of the Lord are wrapped in utter sincerity and devotion, unmindful of this rancour and malice. Smooth and insidious are these snakes, these whisperers of evil, artful in their craft and guile. Be ye on your guard and ever wakeful! Quick-witted and keen of intellect are the faithful, and firm and steadfast are the assured. Act ye with all circumspection!

“Fear ye the sagacity of the faithful, for he seeth with the divine light!”

“Beware lest any soul privily cause disruption or stir up strife. In the Impregnable Stronghold be ye brave warriors, and for the Mighty Mansion a valiant host. Exercise the utmost care, and day and night be on your guard, that thereby the tyrant may inflict no harm.”⁸⁹

66. We should not be surprised that the emergence of electronic communication via the Internet and email has coincided with the emergence of our precious Cause from relative obscurity at the end of the twentieth century. Neither should it be surprising that our emergence from obscurity has given rise to increasing attacks on the Faith, both from outside and from within. A few years ago the Universal House of Justice wrote:

“As the Bahá’í community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken”⁹⁰

And:

67. *“As the stature of the Cause of God increases in the eyes of the world, the process of its emergence into the limelight of public attention ... is accelerated, and the Faith, gradually and inevitably, is projected into the next stage of its divinely propelled development.*

“Now, with the entrance of the Faith on the world scene, we call upon the believers everywhere not to allow themselves, even for one moment, to be perturbed by any increase in opposition to the Cause. Rather let them deepen their understanding of the creative interaction between crisis and victory in the evolution of the Faith, and increase their awareness of the power inherent in the Cause to surmount all obstacles that threaten its progress. Armed with this knowledge, let them seize the opportunities that arise and embrace the God-given challenges, confident in the invincibility of the Faith and the steady onward march of its Institutions.”⁹¹

68. Through the efforts of the members of this Institution, the Bahá’ís must be aided to increase their

88 Bahá'u'lláh: *Prayers and Meditations*, section [XCV](#), pp. 159-160.

89 `Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 314.

90 Universal House of Justice: From a letter written on its behalf to an Association for Bahá’í Studies, quoted in a letter to an individual Bahá’í, dated 19 October 1993.

91 Universal House of Justice: Letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 27 October 1987.

understanding of this process and their confidence in the invincibility of the Faith. Our goal is that the friends will not “allow themselves, even for one moment, to be perturbed by any increase in opposition to the Cause.”

We can expect many challenges as the Cause moves forward.

“The resistless march of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, viewed in this light, and propelled by the stimulating influences which the unwisdom of its enemies and the force latent within itself, both engender, resolves itself into a series of rhythmic pulsations, precipitated, on the one hand, through the explosive outbursts of its foes, and the vibrations of Divine Power, on the other, which speed it, with ever-increasing momentum, along that predestined course traced for it by the Hand of the Almighty.”⁹²

69. However, this process will always produce positive results.

"Viewed in the light of past experience, the inevitable result of such futile attempts, however persistent and malicious they may be, is to contribute to a wider and deeper recognition by believers and unbelievers alike of the distinguishing features of the Faith proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. These challenging criticisms, whether or not dictated by malice, cannot but serve to galvanize the souls of its ardent supporters, and to consolidate the ranks of its faithful promoters. They will purge the Faith from those pernicious elements whose continued association with the believers tends to discredit the fair name of the Cause, and to tarnish the purity of its spirit. We should welcome, therefore, not only the open attacks which its avowed enemies persistently launch against it, but should also view as a blessing in disguise every storm of mischief with which they who apostatize their faith or claim to be its faithful exponents assail it from time to time. Instead of undermining the Faith, such assaults, both from within and from without, reinforce its foundations, and excite the intensity of its flame. Designed to becloud its radiance, they proclaim to all the world the exalted character of its precepts, the completeness of its unity, the uniqueness of its position, and the pervasiveness of its influence.”⁹³

70. The Universal House of Justice has written favourably about the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Ours is the challenge to rise up to a level of maturity so that we can make the most use of this development for the propagation of our precious Cause. Let us pray that we will be able to create an etiquette of expression and communication worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.

“We return to the phenomenal characteristics of speech. Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race. Just as this discipline applies to the spoken word, it applies equally to the written word; and it profoundly affects the operation of the press.”⁹⁴

71. “... the House of Justice will continue to encourage use of the greatly expanded opportunities for the discussion of Bahá'í concepts and ideals, which Internet communication so marvellously provides.”⁹⁵

92 Shoghi Effendi: *Messages to America*, p. 51.

93 Shoghi Effendi: *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 15-16.

94 Universal House of Justice: From a letter to the Bahá'ís in the United States, 29 December 1988. Published in *Rights and Responsibilities*, a compilation, pp. 17-18.

95 Universal House of Justice: Letter written on its behalf to an individual, 20 July 1997.

Dear friends, I hope this expanded compilation of excerpts from the Central Figures of the Faith and letters from the Universal House of Justice will be helpful in your work and the work of your dear assistants. I will be grateful if you can share with me your reactions and any suggestions for the next draft.

With loving gratitude for all your efforts,

Stephen Birkland, Member
Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas

This compilation is online at http://bahai-library.com/birkland_compilation_internet_web