

Cultural Diversity in the Age of Maturity

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

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I. THE VISION UNFOLDING

- An “ever-advancing civilization”

1 All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.

(“Gleanings from the writings of Bahá’u’lláh” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983), section CIX, p. 215)

2 The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God. Religion bestoweth upon man the most precious of all gifts, offereth the cup of prosperity, imparteth eternal life, and showereth imperishable benefits upon mankind.

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), pp. 129-30)

3 ... the religions of God are the true source of the spiritual and material perfections of man, and the fountainhead for all mankind of enlightenment and beneficial knowledge.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The Secret of Divine Civilization” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994), p. 94)

- The Coming of Age of the Entire Human Race

4 For every era hath a spirit; the spirit of this illumined era lieth in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. For these lay the foundation of the oneness of the world of humanity and promulgate universal brotherhood. They are founded upon the unity of science and religion and upon investigation of truth. They uphold the principle that religion must be the cause of amity, union and harmony among men. They establish the equality of both sexes and propound economic principles which are for the happiness of individuals. They diffuse universal education, that every soul may as much as possible have a share of knowledge. They abrogate and nullify religious, racial, political, patriotic and economic prejudices and the like. Those teachings that are

scattered throughout the Epistles and Tablets are the cause of the illumination and the life of the world of humanity.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997), section 71, p. 115)

- 5 In this day ... means of communication have multiplied, and the five continents of the earth have virtually merged into one. And for everyone it is now easy to travel to any land, to associate and exchange views with its peoples, and to become familiar, through publications, with the conditions, the religious beliefs and the thoughts of all men. In like manner all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century. Of this past ages have been deprived, for this century—the century of light—hath been endowed with unique and unprecedented glory, power and illumination. Hence the miraculous unfolding of a fresh marvel every day. Eventually it will be seen how bright its candles will burn in the assemblage of man.

Behold how its light is now dawning upon the world’s darkened horizon. The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned. The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed. The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass. The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the cornerstone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour. The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland. The sixth candle is unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race. The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse. Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization.¹

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, section 15, pp. 35-36)

¹ Shoghi Effendi, in a letter dated 19 November 1945, written on his behalf, explained that: “The Seven Lights of Unity will not necessarily appear in the order given. A product of the second may well be universal culture.”

- 6 “The Tabernacle of Unity,” Bahá’u’lláh proclaims in His message to all mankind, “has been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers ... Of one tree are all ye the fruit and of one bough the leaves... The world is but one country and mankind its citizens ... Let not a man glory in that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and goodwill among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious co-operation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds—creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units.

It represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.

(28 November 1931, Shoghi Effendi, in “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 41-43)

- 7 The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the COMING OF AGE OF THE ENTIRE HUMAN RACE. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture—all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.

That mystic, all-pervasive, yet undefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and the development of the fruit, must, if we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh, have its counterpart in the evolution of the organization of human society. A similar stage must sooner or later be attained in the collective life of mankind, producing an even more striking phenomenon in world relations, and endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide, throughout the succeeding ages, the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfilment of its high destiny. Such a stage of maturity in the process of human government must, for all time, if we would faithfully recognize the tremendous claim advanced by Bahá'u'lláh, remain identified with the Revelation of which He was the Bearer.

(11 March 1936, Shoghi Effendi, in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters", pp. 163-164)

- 8 ... the World Civilization which will follow upon the Most Great Peace will unfold and evolve and gradually perfect itself during following Dispensations; in other words, a World Civilization and a World Culture, which will reach its ascendancy in the distant future and is something that will require many thousands of years to mature.

(23 April 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

II. RELIGION AND CULTURAL CHANGE

- Religion—“the very basis and root-principle of culture and civilization” ²

² “The Secret of Divine Civilization”, p. 75

⁹ Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose. Through the mere revelation of the word “Fashioner,” issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name. In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before.

(“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh”, section LXXIV, pp. 141-142)

¹⁰ Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society—is religion...

By the Lord God, and there is no God but He, even the minutest details of civilized life derive from the grace of the Prophets of God. What thing of value to mankind has ever come into being which was not first set forth either directly or by implication in the Holy Scriptures? ...

... the Divine religions enjoin upon and encourage all the faithful to adopt such principles as will conduce to continuous improvements, and to acquire from other peoples sciences and arts.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The Secret of Divine Civilisation”, p. 71; p. 96; and p. 99)

- 11 ... as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms, so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing. It is premature to try and grasp what they will be at present.

(23 December 1942, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- 12 When the masses of mankind are awakened and enter the Faith of God, a new process is set in motion and the growth of a new civilization begins. Witness the emergence of Christianity and of Islám. These masses are the rank and file, steeped in traditions of their own, but receptive to the new Word of God, by which, when they truly respond to it, they become so influenced as to transform those who come in contact with them.

(13 July 1964, the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, published in "Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 38)

- 13 The House of Justice is deeply concerned at the plight of so many of the indigenous and aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world who have been denied their rights as a consequence of actions by oppressive majorities. Such inequities and injustices are to be found in many countries. The purpose of the coming of Bahá'u'lláh is to lift the yoke of oppression from His loved ones, to liberate all the people of the world, and to provide the means for their abiding happiness.

The Bahá'í approach to resolution of the manifold problems affecting human society rests upon the assertion by Bahá'u'lláh that these ills are but various symptoms and side effects of the basic disease, which the Divine Physician has diagnosed to be disunity. Bahá'u'lláh has made it abundantly clear that the first step essential for the health and harmony of the whole of mankind is its unification. He says, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 203). By contrast, the approach of most people is the exact opposite: their concentration is on attempts to remedy the multitude of ills besetting mankind, with the expectation that the resolution of these problems will lead ultimately to unity.

(15 June 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple)

- 14 It is, of course, true that new movements of thought, especially in the field of religion, tend to obliterate old ones, or to transform their nature in the eyes of the people. One has only to consider how the religions of Greece and Rome, and those of the Keltic

and Germanic peoples, although still remembered by the European peoples in the form of legend and literary tradition, have been replaced by Christianity.

The House of Justice feels that in discussion with ... you should not challenge this point, nor should you enter into criticisms of the often ruthless manner in which the followers of new religions have suppressed the old ways. It is suggested that, instead, you present the Bahá'í concepts, as expressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, namely that the fountainhead of all religions is to be found in God through the Teachings of His Prophets, and that all peoples have drunk at this ocean of divine Revelation; that sterile traditions and blind imitations accumulating over the centuries, exacerbated by the barriers of geography, have caused hatred and conflict where there should have been love and collaboration. These distortions have also given rise to the cruel and debased customs which are to be found in some religions. It is the Bahá'í belief that each human soul has the duty to God and the inborn capacity to seek out truth for himself. Those who do this sincerely will ultimately find themselves united, for there is only one God and Source of Truth. The Bahá'í attitude to earlier religions, therefore, is not that they are false or "heathen", but that, at root, they are all true and that these fundamental truths still persist within them. Bahá'ís encourage Indians in South America, for example, to see and reverence the profound spiritual truths which are to be found in both their pre-Christian religions and in the Catholicism which, in later centuries, has to varying degrees supplanted or overlaid their archaic faiths. Through the Bahá'í teachings, the inner conflict which many still feel between their ancient religions and Christianity is resolved and, at the same time, they are enabled to understand their spiritual unity with the peoples of other continents, such as Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims with whom they will undoubtedly come into contact with increasing frequency.

An example of the Bahá'í attitude is to be found in the operation of such radio stations as Radio Bahá'í Ecuador, which has a policy of encouraging Indian arts and music and fostering in the Indians pride in their heritage.

(22 March 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

• A "new way of life for humanity" ³

³ 20 November 1955, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.

15 The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has assimilated, by virtue of its creative, its regulative and ennobling energies, the varied races, nationalities, creeds and classes that have sought

its shadow, and have pledged unswerving fealty to its cause. It has changed the hearts of its adherents, burned away their prejudices, stilled their passions, exalted their conceptions, ennobled their motives, co-ordinated their efforts, and transformed their outlook. While preserving their patriotism and safeguarding their lesser loyalties, it has made them lovers of mankind, and the determined upholders of its best and truest interests. While maintaining intact their belief in the Divine origin of their respective religions, it has enabled them to visualize the underlying purpose of these religions, to discover their merits, to recognize their sequence, their interdependence, their wholeness and unity, and to acknowledge the bond that vitally links them to itself. This universal, this transcending love which the followers of the Bahá'í Faith feel for their fellow-men, of whatever race, creed, class or nation, is neither mysterious nor can it be said to have been artificially stimulated. It is both spontaneous and genuine. They whose hearts are warmed by the energizing influence of God's creative love cherish His creatures for His sake, and recognize in every human face a sign of His reflected glory.

(11 March 1936, Shoghi Effendi, in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters", pp. 197-198)

- 16 To believe in the Mouthpiece of God in His Day confers very great blessings, not only on individuals, but on races, and he hopes that you who are now numbered amongst the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will give His Message to many more of your tribe, and in this way hasten for your people a bright and happy future.

(21 December 1947, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Native American Local Spiritual Assembly)

- 17 ...when a person becomes a Bahá'í, he gives up the past only in the sense that he is a part of this new and living Faith of God, and must seek to pattern himself, in act and thought, along the lines laid down by Bahá'u'lláh. The fact that he is by origin a Jew or a Christian, a black man or a white man, is not important any more, but, as you say, lends colour and charm to the Bahá'í Community in that it demonstrates unity in diversity.

(12 March 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- 18 The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh will establish a new way of life for humanity. Those who are Bahá'ís must endeavour to establish this way of life just as rapidly as possible. Now that the hour has arrived when the Bahá'í Faith is gaining prominence, and is

being reviewed by so many peoples, it is necessary that the adherents of the Faith should live up to the high ideals of the Faith in every way. In this way they can demonstrate that the Bahá'í Faith does create a new way of life, which brings to the individual a complete association with the Will of God, and thus the establishment of a peaceful and universal society. Divisional attachments are of men, while universal service is of God.

(20 November 1955, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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- 19 It is not enough to proclaim the Bahá'í message, essential as that is. It is not enough to expand the rolls of Bahá'í membership, vital as that is. Souls must be transformed, communities thereby consolidated, new models of life thus attained. Transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, but it lies in the will and effort of the individual to achieve it in obedience to the Covenant. Necessary to the progress of this life-fulfilling transformation is knowledge of the will and purpose of God through regular reading and study of the Holy Word.

(Ridván 1989, the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World)

• Inevitability of Change

- 20 ... change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in “Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986”, p. 85)

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- 21 Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose—that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Some Answered Questions” (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), p. 233)

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- 22 God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all

lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end ...

The superiority of the present in relation to the past consists in this, that the present can take over and adopt as a model many things which have been tried and tested and the great benefits of which have been demonstrated in the past, and that it can make its own new discoveries and by these augment its valuable inheritance.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The Secret of Divine Civilization”, p. 3; p. 114)

23 o ye respected souls! From the continual imitation of ancient and worn-out ways, the world had grown dark as darksome night. The fundamentals of the divine Teachings had passed from memory; their pith and heart had been totally forgotten, and the people were holding on to husks. The nations had, like tattered garments long outworn, fallen into a pitiful condition.

Out of this pitch blackness there dawned the morning splendour of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. He hath dressed the world with a garment new and fair, and that new garment is the principles which have come down from God.

Now the new age is here and creation is reborn. Humanity hath taken on new life. The autumn hath gone by, and the reviving spring is here. All things are now made new. Arts and industries have been reborn, there are new discoveries in science, and there are new inventions; even the details of human affairs, such as dress and personal effects—even weapons—all these have likewise been renewed. The laws and procedures of every government have been revised. Renewal is the order of the day.

And all this newness hath its source in the fresh outpourings of wondrous grace and favor from the Lord of the Kingdom, which have renewed the world. The people, therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age.

Unless these Teachings are effectively spread among the people, until the old ways, the old concepts, are gone and forgotten, this world of being will find no peace, nor will it reflect the perfections of the Heavenly Kingdom. Strive ye with all your hearts to make the heedless conscious, to waken those who sleep, to bring knowledge to the ignorant, to make the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and restore the dead to life.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, section 205, pp. 264-65)

- 24 The Bahá'ís should not always be the last to take up new and obviously excellent methods, but rather the first, as this agrees with the dynamic net of the Faith which is not only progressive, but holds within itself the seed of an entirely new culture and civilization.

(5 May 1946, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

• Nature and Processes of Cultural Evolution

- 25 Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the worldwide Law of Bahá'u'lláh. Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remould its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity ...

The call of Bahá'u'lláh is primarily directed against all forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices. If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer administer to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.

(28 November 1931, Shoghi Effendi, in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters", pp. 41-42)

- 26 The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and centre, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary, purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.

(21 March 1932, Shoghi Effendi, in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters", pp. 57-58)

- 27 As regards the questions of tribal practice, the Guardian wishes you to be extremely forbearing and patient in weaning the Bahá'ís away from their old customs. This can only be done by taking each case individually as it comes up, using the greatest wisdom and kindness, and not trying rigorously to impose all Bahá'í laws in every detail at this time.

(8 August 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 28 Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity. Although most of these festive celebrations have no doubt stemmed from religious rituals in bygone ages, the believers should not be deterred from participating in those in which, over the course of time, the religious meaning has given way to purely culturally oriented practices. For example, Naw-Rúz itself was originally a Zoroastrian religious festival, but gradually its Zoroastrian connotation has almost been forgotten. Iranians, even after their conversion to Islám, have been observing it as a national festival. Now Naw-Rúz has become a Bahá'í Holy Day and is being observed throughout the world, but, in addition to the Bahá'í observance, many Iranian Bahá'ís continue to carry out their past cultural traditions in connection with this Feast. Similarly, there are a number of national customs in every part of

the world which have cultural rather than religious connotations.

In deciding whether or not to participate in such traditional activities, the Bahá'ís must guard against two extremes. The one is to disassociate themselves needlessly from harmless cultural observances and thus alienate themselves from their non-Bahá'í families and friends; the other is to continue the practice of abrogated observances of previous dispensations and thus undermine the independence of the Bahá'í Faith and create undesirable distinctions between themselves and their fellow-Bahá'ís. In this connection there is a difference between what Bahá'ís do among themselves and what they do in companionship with their non-Bahá'í friends and relations. For example, in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian there appears the following guidance:

As regards the celebration of the Christian Holidays by the believers: it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing such holidays as Christmas and New Year, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Ruz.

Further, there is no objection for Bahá'ís to attend religious marriage ceremonies of their friends and relatives or take part in festivities usually connected with these events, provided that in doing so they do not contravene Bahá'í Law. For example, if consuming alcoholic beverages is a part of such activities, the Bahá'ís, of course, would be obliged to refrain from partaking of such drinks.

There are some exclusive religious ceremonies in which Bahá'ís should not participate, in order to safeguard the independence of the Faith. In this regard, the beloved Guardian has given the following advice to an individual believer: "In these days the friends should, as much as possible, demonstrate through their deeds the independence of the Holy Faith of God, and its freedom from the customs, rituals and practices of a discredited and abrogated past."

In observing this principle, the House of Justice advises the Bahá'ís to maintain a balance between their adherence to the Cause and obedience to its laws on the one hand, and their role in society on the other. When an individual becomes a Bahá'í he acquires, as you are aware, a wider loyalty to the Manifestations of God. Having found this new way of life, he should be careful not to isolate himself from his family and his people, and he should show respect for his former religion. The Bahá'ís should, of course, avoid performing any acts which could be considered as implying their membership in another religion or which are contrary to Bahá'í principles. There is a clear distinction between participating in festive and cultural events, as opposed to performing religious ceremonies and rituals.

It should also be remembered that the weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions, which have been established among communities for centuries, takes time and is a gradual process. Therefore, while the National Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake.

(26 May 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 29 The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings...

Of course, many cultural elements everywhere inevitably will disappear or be merged with related ones from their societies, yet the totality will achieve that promised diversity within world unity. We can expect much cultural diversity in the long period before the emergence of a world commonwealth of nations in the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh's new world order. Much wisdom and tolerance will be required, and much time must elapse until the advent of that great day.

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

- 30 ...what Bahá'u'lláh has done for us all is to provide a standard by which to determine what is pleasing in God's sight, thereby freeing us to maintain those elements of diversity which are unique to our different cultures. The adoption of this divine standard enables each people to be confident in the permissibility of what it can retain from its past.

(23 June 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 31 Since change is inevitable if progress is to be made by any African society, a primary challenge to Bahá'ís is to preserve and improve those wholesome aspects of tribal and family custom that are in accord with the Bahá'í Teachings and to dispense with those that are not. Such a challenge must be embraced with the understanding that the Book of God is the standard by which to weigh all forms of behaviour. While unwavering action is necessary, wisdom and tact and patience must, of course, be exercised. Let it be understood, too, that Africans are not alone in the struggle to change certain age-old practices. People everywhere have customs which must be abandoned so as to clear the path along which their societies must evolve towards

that glorious, new civilization which is to be the fruit of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Indeed, in no society on earth can there be found practices which adequately mirror the standards of His Cause. His own truth-bearing Words clarify the matter: "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty. The whole earth is illuminated with the resplendent glory of God's Revelation."

(Ridván 1996, the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa)

III. APPRECIATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

• "Consider the flowers of a garden"—The Principle of Unity in Diversity ⁴

⁴ "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 304.

32 All countries, in the estimation of the one true God, are but one country, and all cities and villages are on an equal footing. Neither holds distinction over another.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, "Tablets of the Divine Plan" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), p. 61)

33 A critic may object, saying that peoples, races, tribes and communities of the world are of different and varied customs, habits, tastes, character, inclinations and ideas, that opinions and thoughts are contrary to one another, and how, therefore, is it possible for real unity to be revealed and perfect accord among human souls to exist?

In answer we say that differences are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord.

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, color, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This

diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for coordination.

How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adometh the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity.

Praise be to God, today the splendor of the Word of God hath illumined every horizon, and from all sects, races, tribes, nations, and communities souls have come together in the light of the Word, assembled, united and agreed in perfect harmony. Oh! What a great number of meetings are held adorned with souls from various races and diverse sects! Anyone attending these will be struck with amazement, and might suppose that these souls are all of one land, one nationality, one community, one thought, one belief and one opinion: whereas, in fact, one is an American, the other an African, one cometh from Asia and another from Europe, one is a native of India, another is from Turkestan, one is an Arab, another a Tajik, another a Persian and yet another a Greek. Notwithstanding such diversity they associate in perfect harmony and unity, love and freedom; they have one voice, one thought and one purpose. Verily, this is from the penetrative power of the Word of God!

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", section 225, pp. 304-305)

34 The Cause does not wish to suppress national characteristics. It abhors too much uniformity, and stands for the principle of unity in diversity, which principle we believe can alone provide a solution for the unification of mankind.

(25 June 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

35 Such a Faith knows no division of class or of party. It subordinates, without hesitation or equivocation, every particularistic interest, be it personal, regional, or national, to the paramount interests of humanity, firmly convinced that in a world of interdependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no abiding benefit can be conferred upon the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are ignored or neglected...

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples ...

National rivalries, hatred, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and co-operation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated.

(11 March 1936, Shoghi Effendi, in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters", p. 198; and pp. 203-4.)

36 With the coming of Bahá'u'lláh and the emphasis that His Revelation gives to the oneness of mankind, it is inevitable that peoples in all parts of the world who once seemed dormant or who have suffered discrimination would rise to assert their place in society. As with so many fundamental social issues, those concerning "indigenous rights" and "self-determination" find, for Bahá'ís, their proper expression and resolution within the context of the principle of the oneness of mankind. However, as is often the case, such issues are expressed in political forms which are unacceptable to Bahá'ís, who conscientiously avoid partisanship, subversion, and the corrupt attitudes and involvements associated with politics. At the present time, it is recognized that important issues of society fall within the province of government and perforce engage political processes currently in practice. Increasingly, as the Faith emerges from obscurity the Bahá'í community will find itself compelled to assist in finding solutions to the social problems afflicting humanity; it will have to be wise in its actions to avoid the pitfalls of politics.

Generally, the wisest course for individual Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community in controversial situations is to remain uninvolved, although not uninterested. It is the responsibility of the Bahá'í, in their contact with the native people, to explain that the Bahá'í approach, with its emphasis upon the achievement of unity as a basis for an enduring resolution to the problems of mankind, far from being indifferent to the real needs of disadvantaged peoples, represents a fundamental solution derived from the diagnosis by the All-Knowing Physician of the manifold ills of human society.

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

37 The fundamental principle of the oneness of mankind, and the aim of the Faith to promote unity in diversity, underlie the Bahá'í approach to indigenous peoples. Their rights are inseparable from human rights for all, and the Bahá'í Faith upholds the right of indigenous peoples to develop and take pride in their own identity, culture and language. Great importance is attached to teaching the Faith to the indigenous populations in a country, more especially since they have so often been neglected or downtrodden by other segments of society; in many instances their suffering has made them particularly receptive to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh ...

A unique feature of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the manner in which it enables all the diverse elements of the Bahá'í community, drawn from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural and educational backgrounds, to work together in a mutually supportive and spiritually beneficial manner. This is in direct contrast to the declining social order external to the Bahá'í community, in which each segment seeks to pursue a separate path in its social and political organization and activities.

(25 July 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

38 ... the oneness of mankind will not be based on forced assimilation, but upon protection of cultural diversity. At the same time, however, we should beware of inadvertently settling upon a limited model, such as the one sometimes associated in contemporary discourse on multiculturalism. A distinctively Bahá'í culture will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics, but also firmly uphold unity in regard to fundamental principles, thereby achieving a vigorous complementarity. For example, in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), page 273, we find the following intriguing statement:

What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate

torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea. And to such a degree will the inherent unity of all prevail, that the traditions, rules, customs and distinctions in the fanciful life of these populations will be effaced and vanish away like isolated drops, once the great sea of oneness doth leap and surge and roll.

The point is not to minimize differences, nor to make of unity and diversity a false dichotomy, but ever to keep in mind that the Bahá'í standard is very high and grounded in divine love.

(13 February 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

• An “equal standard of human rights”⁵

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 182.

39 ... Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognized and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal; there is no distinction or preferment for any soul in the dominion of His justice and equity.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, "The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912", rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 182)

40 As to your question concerning the rights of the minority of non-Bahá'í citizens in a Bahá'í state, it is clear from the writings of our Faith that under a Bahá'í system the rights of minorities of any type must always be respected and upheld. Just as Bahá'ís today show obedience and loyalty to the government but refuse to bow to the majority if they are asked to deny their faith, so in the future, when the majority is represented by the Faith the Bahá'ís will not force the minority to become followers of Bahá'u'lláh but they will expect the minority to be similarly obedient and loyal. As you indicate the ways of the world are basically and usually at variance with this standard ...

The ultimate safeguard in the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to ensure that this principle and all its other fundamental tenets are not violated is the Universal House of Justice, which, as its Constitution clearly stipulates, is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of the teachings and of safeguarding their inviolability.

(9 March 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

41 We appreciate the careful thought you have given to the subject of indigenous populations. The Bahá'í International Community should maintain its involvement with this issue, continuing the emphasis on the need for unity in diversity—a unity which implies mutual tolerance among the various populations, a recognition by dominant populations of the freedom of indigenous peoples to exercise their rights in all legitimate varieties of ways, and the corollary recognition of indigenous peoples themselves that such freedom carries with it the responsibility of recognizing the rights of all others to the same expressions. The implications for indigenous peoples also include: realization of the virtues of cross-cultural influences; appreciation of the values of other cultures as accruing to the wealth of human experience and the freedom of all to share in such values without necessarily giving up their respective identities; avoidance of parochial attitudes which degenerate into ethnic and cultural prejudices; and, above all, appreciation of the necessity to maintain a global perspective within which the particulars of indigenous expression can find an enduring context.

(19 July 1985, the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í International Community UN Office)

42 Concerning indigenous rights, it stands to reason that indigenous people are entitled to all the human rights accorded other peoples. For example, they should be guaranteed the full rights of citizenship, and all acts of discrimination against them, which may have developed over the years, should be eliminated. At the same time, it would be unseemly for the demands for their rights to make, on the basis of their indigenousness, a special claim to exclusive rights and privileges which exceed the necessity to redress injustices. The Bahá'í attitude on such questions should be guided by Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." Thus it should be borne in mind that while upholding indigenous rights may well deserve the support of the Bahá'ís, often the viewpoints of those claiming such rights are so circumscribed and narrow that Bahá'ís find it difficult to wholeheartedly subscribe to them.

(14 January 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

43 Indigenous people have a highly significant role to play in the development of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, as is indicated in the oft-quoted words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning the American continent to the effect that "should these Indians be educated and properly guided, there can be no doubt that through the Divine

teachings they will become so enlightened that the whole earth will be illumined". In this period of social evolution, however, minorities, including indigenous peoples, continue to suffer from oppressive and disheartening treatment in many parts of the world. On the subject of amelioration of the condition of oppressed and unjustly treated minorities, in a letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice has stated the following.

The Universal House of Justice is deeply concerned at the plight of so many of the aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world who have been denied fundamental human rights by uninterested and selfish majorities. Humanity is plagued with many inequities and injustices in every part of the world. Bahá'u'lláh speaks of these and points out time and again that the solution to these problems lies in the recognition of God and His Manifestation for this Day. While there is no objection to any member of a minority group asserting his legal claim to property or rights through the courts or administrative agencies which may be open to him, it is contrary to Bahá'í principles to take political action in asserting those rights.

The principles stated in the Writings are clear, but usually it is when these principles are applied that questions arise, and in cases in which there is any doubt about the correct course of action, the believers should consult their National Assembly.

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

- **Enrichment of Community Life**

44 ... the Guardian was very pleased to learn of the progress made by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in its efforts to consolidate, widen and maintain the scope of its national activities. The difficulties in your way are tremendous. The differences of language and of social and intellectual background do, undoubtedly, render the work somewhat difficult to carry out and may temporarily check the efficient and smooth working of the national administrative machinery of the Faith. They, nevertheless, impart to the deliberations of the National Assembly a universality which they would be otherwise lacking, and give to its members a breadth of view which it is their duty to cultivate and foster. It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any national or local Assembly. For the bedrock of the Bahá'í administrative order is the principle of unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause. Differences which are not fundamental and contrary to the basic teachings of

the Cause should be maintained, while the underlying unity of the administrative order should be at any cost preserved and ensured. Unity, both of purpose and of means, is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national.

(2 January 1934, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 45 Now that more of the Latin believers are active and beginning to assume responsibilities, the work will go forward on a more permanent foundation, as pioneers from a foreign land can never take the place of native believers who must always constitute the bedrock of any future development of the Faith in their country.

(30 January 1948, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- 46 Every effort should be made to teach the native Swedish people, so they may ultimately take their part in the community of races and people, who make the world order of Bahá'u'lláh.

(4 January 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two Local Spiritual Assemblies)

- 47 He was likewise very happy to know that there are now new Assemblies formed in the Malayan Federation, and he hopes that the Cause will make rapid progress in that part of the world. There are so many races and so many nationalities, and the future is infinitely bright when we think of what these souls are going to contribute to the international Bahá'í life as they become strong supporters of our glorious Faith.

(7 May 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- 48 In connection with the teaching work throughout the Pacific area,... [the] Bahá'ís... must bear in mind that the primary object of their living there is to teach the native population the Faith...

He attaches great importance to teaching the aboriginal Australians, and also in converting more Maoris to the Faith, and hopes that the Bahá'ís will devote some attention to contacting both of these minority groups.

(16 June 1954, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

49 At the same time there is a challenge of great urgency facing the world-wide Bahá'í community. When launching the Ten Year Crusade, Shoghi Effendi urged the believers to “carry the torch of the Faith to regions so remote, so backward, so inhospitable that neither the light of Christianity or Islám has, after the revolution of centuries, as yet penetrated.” A number of such regions still exist in places like New Guinea, the heart of Africa and the Amazon Basin in South America. As the influence of civilization spreads, the age-old ways of life of the inhabitants of these regions will inevitably perish, and they will rapidly be infected with the materialistic ideas of a decadent civilization. It is our pressing duty to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to such people while they are still pure-hearted and receptive, and through it to prepare them for the changed world which will come upon them ...

In addition to the tribes in these remote regions of the world, there are tribes and minorities who still live in their traditional ways in the midst of other cultures. All too often such peoples are despised and ignored by the nations among whom they dwell, but we should seek them out, teach them the Cause of God, and enrich through their membership the Bahá'í communities of the lands in which they live. So important is this goal that each National Spiritual Assembly should study the requirements for teaching each of the different tribes and groups within its area, appoint a committee for this purpose—even a special committee for each tribe or minority where this is feasible and desirable—and launch a series of well-conceived, far-reaching campaigns to bring about the enrollment of these peoples within the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, and the establishment among them of the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

(25 May 1975, from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

V. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

- Associating with People of Divers Beliefs and Customs

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

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablet translated from the Persian)

51 To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. The consciousness of any division or cleavage in its ranks is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals. Once its members have fully recognized the claim of its Author, and, by identifying themselves with its Administrative Order, accepted unreservedly the principles and laws embodied in its teachings, every differentiation of class, creed, or color must automatically be obliterated, and never be allowed, under any pretext, and however great the pressure of events or of public opinion, to reassert itself. If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise. Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community. In the light of this principle, and bearing in mind the extreme desirability of having the minority elements participate and share responsibility in the conduct of Bahá'í activity, it should be the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfil the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible. The adoption of such a course, and faithful adherence to it, would not only be a source of inspiration and encouragement to those elements that are numerically small and inadequately represented, but would demonstrate to the world at large the universality, and representative character of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and the freedom of His followers from the taint of those prejudices which have already wrought such havoc in the domestic affairs, as well as the foreign relationships, of the nations.

(Shoghi Effendi, "The Advent of Divine Justice" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), pp. 35-36)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

different countries. The strong points of the American friends are their devotion and their initiative, their courage and determination and zeal, but there are many characteristics they need, just like every people!

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

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

56 I need not tell you that the work in Africa, and more particularly in Uganda, is very dear to his heart ... He feels that this country and its peoples, in the very heart of Africa, are a most precious trust. Their receptivity to the Teachings, their great desire to serve their new Faith, the number of them who have arisen to go out as pioneers, mark them as a people apart in the Bahá'í world, at least for the time being. May many others in neighbouring countries prove as worthy, and follow their example.

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

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

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

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

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

The Bahá'í attitude in such a situation is clearly set forth in the Writings. As

Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity ...

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

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

(8 February 1970, from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa, in "Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986", pp. 165-166)

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

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

must permit diversity in secondary matters.

(1 November 1979, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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

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

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

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

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

62 The difficulties which you describe are undoubtedly among those facing many members of inter-racial families ... The House of Justice feels that these are matters which need to be worked out through the study and implementation of Bahá'í principles, through personal wisdom and initiative, and by taking advantage of the benefits of consultation among those concerned. Of very great importance is

development of the consciousness that one is, above all, a human being and a Bahá'í, and that differences of race are of far less significance. It is hoped that the efforts of the believers, in conjunction with those of the Bahá'í institutions, to resolve such difficulties will attract divine confirmations and yield lasting results.

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

• Responsibilities of Bahá'í Administrative Institutions

Preserving Flexibility

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

(3 June 1933, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

69 You have asked for suggestions regarding the preparation of the handbook on Bahá'í Holy Days which you are planning to publish. It is important that notwithstanding

whatever details you set forth therein, it be made clear that the contents do not constitute procedures that must be rigidly adhered to.

Dignity and reverence befitting the occasion should obviously characterize observances of Bahá'í Holy Days by the friends, but this does not mean that cultural traditions which do not contravene Bahá'í principles may not, and cannot, find expression in the local observances and meetings of the friends.

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

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

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

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

Fostering Diversity

71 No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered the Cause of God, at the present hour, than a successful effort to enhance the diversity of the members of the American Bahá'í community by swelling the ranks of the Faith through the enrollment of the members of these races.⁶ A blending of these highly differentiated elements of the human race, harmoniously interwoven into the fabric of an all-embracing Bahá'í fraternity, and assimilated through the dynamic processes of a divinely appointed Administrative Order, and contributing each its share to the enrichment and glory of Bahá'í community life, is surely an achievement the contemplation of which must warm and thrill every Bahá'í heart.

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

⁶ "the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races".

72 It has been a great source of joy to the Guardian to see the marked increase of native Bahá'ís throughout that area ... However devoted the pioneers may be to these distant countries of their adoption, their relation to them cannot but be a transient one, especially in view of the disturbed state of the world and gloomy clouds that hang over its political horizons. They may suddenly be forced to go home; therefore, the native Bahá'ís, in particular, must seize this opportunity and arise to, themselves, in their own countries, pioneer to new cities and towns, new islands and as yet unopened territories, so that they may, with the help of their Bahá'í brethren from overseas, lay a firm and enduring foundation, and commence the great task of building up the Administrative Order, which is itself the foundation of the future World Order.

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

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

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

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

74 At the present time, the challenge to every Bahá'í community is to avoid suppression

of those culturally-diverse elements which are not contrary to the teachings, while establishing and maintaining such a high degree of unity that others are attracted to the Cause of God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the upbuilding of Bahá'í national communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisite for any successful teaching enterprise, which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the divers races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract. The susceptibilities of these races and nations,... differing widely in their customs and standards of living, should at all times be carefully considered, and under no circumstances neglected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(24 March 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Guiding and Encouraging Social Evolution

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

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

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

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

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

It is not clear from the information contained in your Minutes whether your decision to obtain clothing for the new believers is for humanitarian reasons or whether it is your wish to clothe the believers whose tribal custom does not require clothing. If your reasons are humanitarian, certainly the plight of people in great need arouses concern and sympathy in all of us. You should bear in mind, however, that to begin such a program might well endanger the future of the Cause among those people and would affect the motives of other members of the tribe when again

offered the bounty of becoming followers of Bahá'u'lláh. Assemblies, either Local or National, must always hold as their first consideration that we, with our limited resources, have the obligation to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and that while millions of people can support projects such as this one, only Bahá'ís may contribute to the work of the Cause.

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

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

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

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

- 83 The cardinal purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is to establish the oneness of the human race. As we do this, we bring into the Bahá'í community people of many varied backgrounds and temperaments, and only gradually can true unity be forged out of such divergent elements while preserving the desirable diversities which are not inconsistent with the divine Teachings. This is most apparent in tribal societies, which have very strong traditions. The Spiritual Assemblies in such countries have the task, while teaching the Faith, of giving the people pride and self-confidence in their native traditions, of preserving those which are colourful enrichments of social and personal life, while weaning the new believers gradually away from those traditions which are harmful and in conflict with the teachings and spirit of the Cause of God. A similar process is necessary in Europe.

It is in establishing the unity of mankind that the administration of the Faith

plays such a vital part ... ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ... wrote in the strongest terms about the fundamental importance of the Administrative Order. In a Tablet to an individual believer, for example, the translation of which is published as section 69 of “Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, He states:

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

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

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

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

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

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

85 When a Spiritual Assembly is faced with questions of possible conflict between tribal practices and Bahá’í law, it should distinguish between aspects of tribal community life which are related to fundamental laws (such as monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the friends can and should extricate themselves gradually.

Furthermore, the House of Justice has offered the advice that the institutions of the Faith should be careful not to press the friends to arbitrarily discard those local traditions which are harmless and often colourful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes. Were a new Bahá'í suddenly to cease following the customs of his people, it is possible that they might misunderstand the true nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Bahá'ís could be regarded as having turned against the traditions of the land. However, Bahá'ís should exercise vigilance, with the aid of the institutions of the Faith, to avoid inadvertent involvement in events which appear at first sight to be purely cultural and traditional in nature, but which are, in fact, held as a cover for politically oriented gatherings. The weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions which have been established among communities for centuries takes time and is a gradual process. While an Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake ...

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

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

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

from other societies as the social evolution of mankind continues.

The application of these principles requires great wisdom and the exercise of careful judgement on the part of the Spiritual Assemblies. When there is a conflict between a traditional cultural practice and the Bahá'í teachings, the Assembly concerned must decide whether the issue involved is of fundamental importance, in which case the traditional practice cannot be continued by the Bahá'ís, or whether it is of lesser importance, such that the believers can be left to gradually extricate themselves from it over a period of time. An Assembly must also carefully seek out and follow a path which offers encouragement and support to each culture with which it comes in contact, while taking care not to slight the rights and preferences of the believers whose cultural group constitutes the majority in the community.

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

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

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- 87 With regard to the ritual use of peyote within the Native American Church, it is understood that this practice is countenanced by civil law. However, this should not alter the clear understanding that, according to Bahá'í law, the use of peyote and similar hallucinogenic agents is prohibited to Bahá'ís except when prescribed for medical treatment by competent physicians. Notwithstanding the prohibition observed by Bahá'ís in this respect, the friends are advised to adopt attitudes of tolerance and forbearance with regard to the beliefs and practices of others and to exercise patience with new believers in the Cause. Any Bahá'í who is found to be involved in the use of peyote should be told by his Assembly that in the Faith spiritual stimulation comes from turning one's heart to Bahá'u'lláh and not through any physical means. The Assembly should therefore encourage him, patiently but persistently, to give up the use of peyote; otherwise it is not possible for him to

maintain membership in the Bahá'í community.

(7 August 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Riḍván 1996, the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Australasia)
