

Political Non-Involvement and Obedience to Government

By Shoghi Effendi, Universal House of Justice

Compiled by Peter Khan
with Cover Letter from the Secretariat
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Bahá'í World Centre

12 January 2003

Transmitted by email:

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter of 8 November 2002 has been received at the Bahá'í World Center and passed to our Department for response. As you are aware, it is not the practice of Bahá'í institutions or individuals to take positions on the political decisions of governments. One of the greatest obstacles to progress is the tendency of Bahá'ís to be drawn into the general attitudes and disputes that surround them. The central importance of the principle of avoidance of politics and controversial matters is that Bahá'ís should not allow themselves to be involved in the disputes of the many conflicting elements of the society around them.

The aim of the Bahá'ís is to reconcile viewpoints, to heal divisions, and to bring about tolerance and mutual respect among men, and this aim is undermined if we allow ourselves to be swept along by the ephemeral passions of others. This does not mean that Bahá'ís cannot collaborate with any non-Bahá'í movement; it does mean that good judgment is required to distinguish those activities and associations which are beneficial and constructive from those which are divisive.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
Department of the Secretariat

Political Non-Involvement and Obedience to Government

A compilation of some of the Messages of the Guardian
and the Universal House of Justice
Compiled by Dr. Peter J. Khan

1. The Importance of Study of this Subject

Q. Why does it matter what a Bahá'í does, since we have promises in the

Writings about the triumph of the Cause?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“The Army of the Cause, advancing at the bidding of the Lord, to conquer the hearts of men, can never be defeated, but its rate of advance can be slowed down by acts of unwisdom and ignorance on the part of its supporters.” (6)

Q. What possible effect could result from a Bahá'í involving himself in a political matter?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“an unwise act or statement by a Bahá'í in one country could result in a grave setback for the Faith there or elsewhere - and even loss of the lives of fellow believers.” (5)

Q. What will be the value to Bahá'ís of a deeper study of the teachings on this subject?

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

“these observations will not only help the friends to intelligently and radiantly follow the holy teachings on this matter, but will help them to explain the Bahá'í attitude to those who may question its wisdom and usefulness.” (6)

2. The Great Processes in the World

Q. How can the great plan of God be described?

The Universal House of Justice has stated:

“the great Plan of God, tumultuous in its progress, working through mankind as a whole, tearing down barriers to world unity and forging humankind into a unified body in the fires of suffering and experience.” (5)

Q. What will this process lead to?

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

“This process will produce, in God’s due time, the Lesser Peace.” (5)

Q. What are the principal features of the Lesser Peace?

The Universal House of Justice describes it as:

“the political unification of the world. Mankind at that time can be likened to a body that is unified but without life.” (5)

Q. How does the work of the Bahá’ís relate to this?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“The second process, the task of breathing life into this unified body - of creating true unity and spirituality culminating in the Most Great Peace - is that of the Bahá’ís, who are laboring consciously, with detailed instructions and continuing Divine guidance, to erect the fabric of the Kingdom of God on earth, into which they call their fellowmen, thus conferring upon them eternal life.” (5)

Q. Is the work of the Bahá’ís important?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“the Minor Plan that He has given us to execute, as our part in His grand design for the redemption of mankind, is clearly delineated. It is to this work that we must devote all our energies, for there is no one else to do it.” (5)]

3. The Destructive Process in the World

Q. What are the distinguishing features of the trouble in the world today?

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

“When viewing the conditions of our society we see a world beset by ills and groaning under the burden of suffering.” (7)

Q. What are these ills with which the world is now afflicted?

The Guardian refers to:

“the ominous manifestations of acute political conflict, of social unrest, of

racial animosity, of class antagonism, of immorality and of irreligion, proclaiming, in no uncertain terms, the corruption and obsolescence of the institutions of a bankrupt Order.” (7)

Q. How do these things relate to the prophecies of Bahá'u'lláh?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“Bahá'u'lláh wrote: ‘soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.’ ‘After a time’, He further wrote, ‘all the governments on earth will change. Oppression will envelop the world. And following a universal convulsion, the sun of justice will rise from the horizon of the unseen realm.’ “ (7)

Q. Has this universal convulsion already occurred?

The Guardian described the First World War as:

“the first stage in a titanic convulsion long predicted by Bahá'u'lláh.” (7)

He called the Second World War a:

“tempest unprecedented in its violence’, and the ‘great and mighty wind of God invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth.’ After the termination of this War and the creation of the United Nations, the Guardian wrote in 1948, anticipating ‘still more violent convulsions’ and referred to the ‘wings of yet another conflict’ destined to ‘darken the international horizon.’ “ (7)

In 1957 he referred to:

“dire predictions made by Him Who is the unerring Interpreter of His teachings, all foreshadowing a universal commotion, of a scope and intensity unparalleled in the annals of mankind.” (7)

Q. What are the signs of this universal commotion?

The Guardian describes:

“the signs and portents that must either herald or accompany the retributive calamity which, as decreed by Him Who is the Judge and Redeemer of mankind, must, sooner or later, afflict a society which, for the most part, and for over a century, has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of

God's Messenger in this day." (7)

as being:

"The violent derangement of the world's equilibrium; the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day Order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smoldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth." (7)

Q. What will be the effect of this calamity?

The Guardian states that this calamity:

"must purge the human race of the dross of its age-long corruptions, and weld its component parts into a firmly-knit world-embracing Fellowship." (7)

Q. Will mankind survive this disruptive period?

The Guardian, referring to humanity, stated:

"Its present state, indeed even its immediate future, is dark, distressingly dark. Its distant future, however, is radiant, gloriously radiant - so radiant that no eye can visualize it." (7)

He also assured us that:

"God's purpose, ...is none other than to usher in, in ways He alone can bring about, and the full significance of which He alone can fathom, the Great, the Golden Age of a long-divided, a long-afflicted humanity." (7)

4. Secular Efforts to Solve World Problems

Q. What could be achieved if the world's best statesmen got together, and applied

themselves with a supreme effort to solve mankind's problems?

The Guardian has written:

“Humanity, whether viewed in the light of man’s individual conduct or in the existing relationships between organized communities and nations, has, alas, strayed too far and suffered too great a decline to be redeemed through the unaided efforts of the best among its recognized rulers and statesmen - however disinterested their motives, however concerted their action, however unsparing in their zeal and devotion to its cause.” (5)

Q. Many great schemes are being devised, and comprehensive economic solutions proposed, for the world's problems; can they succeed in laying a suitable foundation for the future?

The Guardian wrote:

“No scheme which the calculations of the highest statesmanship may yet devise; no doctrine which the most distinguished exponents of economic theory may hope to advance; no principle which the most ardent of moralists may strive to inculcate, can provide, in the last resort, adequate foundations upon which the future of a distracted world can be built.” (5)

Q. There seems to be a growing tolerance toward people of other backgrounds and nations, and international co-operation is becoming more systematic and organized; would these measures suffice to bring stability to the world?

The Guardian has stated:

“No appeal for mutual tolerance which the worldly-wise might raise, however compelling and insistent, can calm its passions or help restore its vigor. Nor would any general scheme of mere organized international co-operation, in whatever sphere of human activity, however ingenious in conception, or extensive in scope, succeed in removing the root cause of the evil that has so rudely upset the equilibrium of present-day society.” (5)

Q. The world seems headed toward political unification, with associated economic interdependence, will these measures be enough to energize and stabilize society?

The Guardian wrote:

“Not even, I venture to assert, would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world - a principle that has been increasingly advocated in recent times - provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigor of organized peoples and nations.” (5)

Q. If the world crisis cannot be solved by “the highest statesmanship”, “mutual tolerance”, “organized international co-operation”, or “devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world”, what else is needed?

The Guardian has written:

“What else, might we not confidently affirm, but the unreserved acceptance of the Divine program enunciated, with such simplicity and force as far back as sixty years ago, by Bahá'u'lláh, embodying in its essentials God's divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age, coupled with an indomitable conviction in the unfailing efficacy of each and all of its provisions, is eventually capable of withstanding the forces of internal disintegration which, if unchecked, must needs continue to eat into the vitals of a despairing society.” (5)

5. The Bahá'í Approach to Solving World Problems

Q. What is the first step which must be taken to solve these problems?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“When Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Message to the world in the nineteenth century He made it abundantly clear that the first step essential for the peace and progress of mankind was its unification. As He says, 'The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.' “ (5)

Q. Is this a generally accepted view, or do most people have a different set of priorities?

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

“To this day, however, you will find most people take the opposite point of

view: they look upon unity as an ultimate, almost unattainable goal and concentrate first on remedying all the other ills of mankind. If they did but know it, these other ills are but various symptoms and side effects of the basic disease - disunity.” (5)

Q. How does religion relate to this unification?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“Bahá’u’lláh has, furthermore, stated that the revivification of mankind and the curing of all its ills can be achieved only through the instrumentality of His Faith. ‘That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful and inspired Physician. This, verily, is the truth, and all else naught but error.’ “ (5)

Q. What is the best course of action for a Bahá’í to take?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“the best way Bahá’ís can serve the highest interests of their country and the cause of true salvation for the world, is to sacrifice their political pursuits and affiliations and whole-heartedly and fully support the divine system of Bahá’u’lláh.” (6)

The Guardian has stated:

“the Bahá’ís must turn all their forces into the channel of building up the Bahá’í Cause and its administration. They can neither change nor help the world in any other way at present. If they become involved in the issues the governments of the world are struggling over, they will be lost. But if they build up the Bahá’í pattern they can offer it as a remedy when all else has failed.”

“We must build up our Bahá’í system, and leave the faulty systems of the world to go their way. We cannot change them through becoming involved in them; on the contrary, they will destroy us.” (5)

Q. Is it not likely that a Bahá’í would be regarded as avoiding the real problems of the world?

The Universal House of Justice writes:

“Bahá’ís are often accused of holding aloof from the ‘real problems’ of their fellow-men.” (7)

Q. What is the most common reason for this accusation?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“when we hear this accusation let us not forget that those who make it are usually idealistic materialists to whom material good is the only ‘real’ good, whereas we know that the working of the material world is merely a reflection of spiritual conditions and until the spiritual conditions can be changed there can be no lasting change for the better in material affairs.” (7)

Q. What is the approach used by these “idealistic materialists” in an attempt to improve the condition of the world?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“most people have no clear concept of the sort of world they wish to build, nor how to go about building it. Even those who are concerned to improve conditions are therefore reduced to combating every apparent evil that takes their attention.” (7)

Q. How do they decide whether a person is making a significant contribution to improving the world, from their point of view?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“Willingness to fight against evils, whether in the form of conditions or embodied in evil men, has thus become for most people the touch-stone by which they judge a person’s moral worth.” (7)

Q. How does the Bahá’í approach differ from that of most other people?

The Universal House of Justice writes:

“Bahá’ís, on the other hand, know the goal they are working towards and know what they must do, step by step, to attain it. Their whole energy is directed towards the building of the good, a good which has such a positive strength that in the face of it the multitude of evils - which are in essence negative - will fade away and be no more.” (7)

Q. Should a Bahá'í try to combat every apparent evil in the world?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“To enter into the quixotic tournament of demolishing one by one the evils in the world is, to a Bahá'í, a vain waste of time and effort. His whole life is directed towards proclaiming the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, reviving the spiritual life of his fellow-men, uniting them in a divinely-created World Order.” (7)

Q. Then how will the Bahá'í World Order solve these many problems?

The Universal House of Justice writes, about the individual believer:

“as that Order grows in strength and influence, he will see the power of that Message transforming the whole of human society and progressively solving the problems and removing the injustices which have so long bedeviled the world.” (7)

6. Bahá'í Teachings on Political Non-Involvement

Q. What do the Bahá'í teachings state about involvement in politics?

The Guardian calls for:

“no interference whatsoever in political matters or questions.” (4)

“We should - every one of us - remain aloof, in heart and in mind, in words and in deeds, from the political affairs and disputes of the Nations and of Governments. We should keep ourselves away from such thoughts.” (4)

“Shun politics like the plague.” (4)

“instruction which, at the present stage of the evolution of our Faith, should be increasingly emphasized, irrespective of its application to the East or to the West. And this principle is no other than that which involves the non-participation by the adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, whether in their individual capacities or collectively as local or national Assemblies, in any form of activity that might be interpreted, either directly or indirectly, as an interference in the political affairs of any particular government.” (2)

“Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions.”
(2)

The Universal House of Justice referred to:

“the Bahá’í principle of noninterference in political affairs.” (6)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quoted, referring to Bahá’u’lláh:

“He hath forbidden them (the believers) to interfere at all with political problems.” (7)

Q. What about political controversies?

The Guardian wrote:

“In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that world-wide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster.” (2)

With political crises increasing, the Guardian called upon Bahá’ís to:

“resolve, despite (the) pressure (of) fast crystallizing public opinion, (to) abstain individually and collectively, in word (and) action, informally as well as in all official utterances and public actions, from assigning blame, taking sides, however indirectly, in recurring political crises now agitating (and) ultimately engulfing human society.” (4)

6.2 Reasons for Non-Involvement in Politics

Q. Is the Bahá’í Faith compatible with any political party?

The Guardian has written:

“To some of the principles and ideals animating political and ecclesiastical institutions every conscientious follower of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh can, no doubt, readily subscribe. With none of these institutions, however, can he

identify himself, nor can he unreservedly endorse the creeds, the principles and programs on which they are based.” (2)

“the broad principle that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will, under no circumstances, suffer themselves to be involved, whether as individuals or in their collective capacities, in matters that would entail the slightest departure from the fundamental verities and ideals of their Faith.” (2)

“He is above all else, the supporter of the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, with which, I am firmly convinced, the program of no political party is completely harmonious.” (3)

The Universal House of Justice states:

“Membership in any political party, therefore, necessarily entails repudiation of some or all of the principles of peace and unity proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. As ‘Abdu'l-Bahá stated: ‘Our party is God’s party; we do not belong to any part.’ “ (6)

Q. Would political involvement affect the unity within the Bahá'í community?

The Guardian wrote:

“We Bahá'ís are one the world over; we are seeking to build up a new World Order, divine in origin. How can we do this if every Bahá'í is a member of a different political party - some of them diametrically opposite to each other? Where is our unity then? We would be divided, because of politics, against ourselves, and this is the opposite of our purpose. Obviously if one Bahá'í in Austria is given freedom to choose a political party and join it, however good its aims may be, another Bahá'í in Japan or America, or India has the right to do the same thing and he might belong to a party the very opposite in principle to that which the Austrian Bahá'í belongs to. Where would be the unity of the Faith then? These two spiritual brothers would be working against each other because of their political affiliations (as the Christians of Europe have been doing in so many fratricidal wars).” (3)

The Universal House of Justice states:

“If a Bahá'í were to insist on his right to support a certain political party he could not deny the same degree of freedom to other believers. This would mean that within the ranks of the Faith, whose primary mission is to unite

all men as one great family under God, there would be Bahá'ís opposed to each other. Where, then, would be the example of unity and harmony which the world is seeking?" (6)

Q. Could political involvement create difficulties for the Faith in another country?

The Guardian has written:

“the very extension of the activities in which we are engaged, and the variety of the communities which labor under divers forms of government, so essentially different in their standards, policies, and methods, make it absolutely essential for all those who are the declared members of any one of these communities to avoid any action that might, by arousing the suspicion or exciting the antagonism of any one government, involve their brethren in fresh persecutions or complicate the nature of their task.” (2)

The Universal House of Justice wrote :

“If the institutions of the Faith, God forbid, became involved in politics, the Bahá'ís would find themselves arousing antagonism instead of love. If they took one stand in one country, they would be bound to change the views of the people in another country about the aims and purposes of the Faith. By becoming involved in political disputes, the Bahá'ís instead of changing the world or helping it, would themselves be lost and destroyed.” (6)

6.3 Applications - General Principles

Q. To what extent should the principle of non-involvement in politics be applied today?

The Guardian states:

“These directing and regulating principles of Bahá'í belief the upholders of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh feel bound, as their Administrative Order expands and consolidates itself, to assert and vigilantly apply. The exigencies of a slowly crystallizing Faith impose upon them a duty which they cannot shirk, a responsibility they cannot evade.” (2)

Q. What role should the National Spiritual Assembly play?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“The principles in the Writings are clear, but usually it is when these principles are applied that questions arise. In all cases where the correct course of action is not clear believers should consult their National Spiritual Assembly who will exercise their judgment in advising the friends on the best course to follow.” (6)

Q. Should Bahá'ís even discuss political affairs?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quoted, referring to Bahá’u’lláh:

“He hath even prohibited the believers from discussing political affairs.” (7)

Q. Are there promises of aid from Bahá’u’lláh in implementing this principle?

The Guardian has written:

“Difficult and delicate though be our task, the sustaining power of Bahá’u’lláh and of His Divine guidance will assuredly assist us if we follow steadfastly in His way, and strive to uphold the integrity of His laws. The light of His redeeming grace, which no earthly power can obscure, will if we persevere, illuminate our path, as we steer our course amid the snares and pitfalls of a troubled age, and will enable us to discharge our duties in a manner that would redound to the glory and the honor of His blessed Name.” (2)

Q. What is the consequence to a Bahá'í of his involving himself in politics?

The Guardian has warned:

“But if a certain person does enter into party politics and labors for the ascendancy of one party over another, and continues to do it against expressed appeals and warnings of the Assembly, then the Assembly has the right to refuse him the right to vote in Bahá’í elections.” (3)

6.4 Applications – Employment

Q. In what government positions could a Bahá'í seek employment?

The Universal House of Justice states:

“working in the administrative channels of the government instead of through party politics or in diplomatic or political posts.” (6)

Q. How can Bahá'ís decide which posts are acceptable?

The Guardian wrote:

“It is their duty to strive to distinguish, as clearly as they possibly can, and if needed with the aid of their elected representatives, such posts and functions as are either diplomatic or political from those that are purely administrative in character, and which under no circumstances are affected by the changes and chances that political activities and party government, in every land, must necessarily involve.” (2)

6.5 Applications - Relations with Parties and Politicians

Q. Is the Bahá'í Faith opposed to any party?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“The Faith is not opposed to the true interests of any nation, nor is it against any party or faction. It holds aloof from all controversies and transcends them all.” (6)

Q. Should we form any connection with a party?

The Guardian wrote:

“We should have no political connection with any of the parties and should join no faction of these different and warring sects.” (4)

Q. What should be our attitude toward political parties?

The Guardian has stated:

“Absolute impartiality in the matter of political parties should be shown by words and by deeds, and the love of the whole humanity, whether a Government or a nation, which is the basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, should also be shown by words and by deeds.” (4)

Q. Should Bahá'ís associate with politicians?

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

“The Bahá'ís may, indeed are encouraged to, mix with all strata of society, with the highest authorities and with leading personalities as well as with the mass of the people, and should bring the knowledge of the Faith to them; but in so doing they should strictly avoid becoming identified, or identifying the Faith, with political pursuits and party programs.” (6)

Q. What pitfalls are to be avoided in such association?

The Guardian warned the believers:

“Let them beware lest they allow themselves to become the tools of unscrupulous politicians, or to be entrapped by the treacherous devices of the plotters and the perfidious among their countrymen.” (2)

6.6 Applications - Teaching and Proclamation

Q. Is it appropriate to mention a political figure in a Bahá'í public talk?

The Guardian wrote, through his Secretary:

“The Guardian wishes me to draw the attention of the Friends through you that they should be very careful in their public addresses not to mention any political figures - either side with them or denounce them. This is the first thing to bear in mind. Otherwise they will involve the friends in political matters, which is infinitely dangerous to the Cause.” (3)

Q. Should the Faith publish articles which give a detailed analysis of controversial issues?

The Guardian has written:

“Touching the publication of articles and pamphlets bearing on the controversial and political issues of the day, I desire to remind my dearly-beloved fellow-workers that at the present stage when the Cause is still in its infancy, any minute and detailed analysis by the Friends of subjects that are in the forefront of general discussion would often be misconstrued in certain quarters and give rise to suspicions and misunderstandings that

would react unfavorably on the Cause. They would tend to create a misconception of the real object, the true mission, and the fundamental character of the Bahá'í Faith.” (3)

Q. What are some guidelines for public presentations in connection with the Faith?

The Guardian stated:

“We should, while endeavoring to uphold loyalty and expound conscientiously our social and moral principles in all their essence and purity, in all their bearings upon the divers phases of human society, insure that no direct reference or particular criticism in our exposition of the fundamentals of the Faith would tend to antagonize any existing institution, or help to identify a purely spiritual movement with the base clamorings and contentions of warring sects, factions, and nations.” (3)

Q. What approach should we use in our public utterances, written or verbal?

The Guardian wrote:

“We should strive in all our utterances to combine the discretion and noble reticence of the wise with the frankness and passionate loyalty of the ardent advocate of an inspiring Faith. While refusing to utter the word that would needlessly alienate or estrange any individual, government, or people, we should fearlessly and unhesitatingly uphold and assert in their entirety such truths the knowledge of which we believe is vitally and urgently needed for the good and betterment of mankind.” (3)

Q. Does the principle of non-involvement in politics affect our general proclamation and administrative activities?

The Guardian has written:

“Whether it be in the publications which they initiate and supervise; or in their official and public deliberations; or in the posts they occupy and the services they render; or in their dealings with men of eminence and authority; or in their affiliations with kindred societies and organizations, it is, I am firmly convinced, their first and sacred obligation to abstain from any word or deed that might be construed as a violation of this vital principle.” (2)

6.7 applications - The Electoral Process

Q. Is it appropriate to vote in a civil election?

The Guardian wrote:

“The Friends may vote, if they can do it, without identifying themselves with one party or another. To enter the arena of party politics is surely detrimental to the best interests of the Faith and will harm the Cause.” (3)

Q. Does such a vote imply acceptance of the program of a political party?

The Guardian has written:

“no Bahá’í vote for an officer nor Bahá’í participation in the affairs of the Republic shall involve acceptance by that individual of a program or policy that contravenes any vital principle, spiritual or social, of the Faith. I feel it incumbent upon me to clarify the above statement, written on my behalf, by stating that no vote cast, or office undertaken, by a Bahá’í should necessarily constitute acceptance, by the voter or office holder, of the entire program of any political party.” (3)

Q. Upon what basis should a Bahá’í cast his vote in a civil election?

The Guardian stated:

“It remains for the individuals to so use their right to vote as to keep aloof from party politics, and always bear in mind that they are voting on the merits of the individual, rather than because he belongs to one party or another. The matter must be made perfectly clear to the individuals, who will be left free to exercise their discretion and judgment.” (3)

6.8 Applications - Dangers and Pitfalls at the Present Time

Q. Why would a Bahá’í be led to involve himself in politics?

The Universal House of Justice has written:

“It is often through our misguided feeling that we can somehow aid our fellows better by some activity outside the Faith, that Bahá’ís are led to

indulge in politics.” (5)

Q. What are the spiritual consequences of compromising the principle of non-involvement in politics?

The Guardian warned of:

“Grave apprehension lest cumulative effect (of) such compromises (should) disintegrate (the) fabric, clog (the) channel of grace that sustains (the) system of God’s essentially supranational, supernatural order so laboriously evolved, so recently established.” (4)

Q. What challenges could Bahá’ís face in upholding this principle?

The Guardian warned of:

“the charges which the uninformed and the malicious may be led to bring against them,” (2)

and:

“the allurements of honors and rewards,” (2)

He called on Bahá’ís to:

“Let their words proclaim, and their conduct testify, that they who follow Bahá’u’lláh, in whatever land they reside, are actuated by no selfish ambition, that they neither thirst for power, nor mind any wave of unpopularity, of distrust or criticism, which a strict adherence to their standards might provoke.” (2)

6.9 Applications - Future Dangers and Pitfalls

Q. In the future, will politicians try to enlist Bahá’í support?

The Guardian states:

“As the number of the Bahá’í communities in various parts of the world multiplies and their power, as a social force, becomes increasingly apparent, they will no doubt find themselves increasingly subjected to the pressure which men of authority and influence, in the political domain, will exercise

in the hope of obtaining the support they require for the advancement of their aims.” (2)

Q. Will Bahá'ís be subject to temptation, in the future, to compromise their principles for material benefits they could obtain thus from a government?

The Guardian warns:

“These communities will, moreover, feel a growing need of the good-will and the assistance of their respective governments in their efforts to widen the scope, and to consolidate the foundations, of the institutions committed to their charge. Let them beware lest, in their eagerness to further the aims of their beloved Cause, they should be led unwittingly to bargain with their Faith, to compromise with their essential principles, or to sacrifice, in return for any material advantage which their institutions may derive, the integrity of their spiritual ideals.” (2)

7. Bahá'í Teachings on Obedience to Government

Q. What is the Bahá'í attitude toward the government?

The Guardian points out to Bahá'ís:

“Theirs is the duty to demonstrate, on one hand, their unqualified loyalty and obedience to whatever is the considered judgment of their respective governments.” (2)

The Guardian also states:

“The attitude of the Bahá'ís must be two-fold, complete obedience to the government of the country they reside in, and no interference whatsoever in political matters or questions.” (4)

and again:

“The cardinal principle which we must follow is obedience to the government prevailing in any land in which we reside.

“We see therefore that we must do two things - Shun politics like the plague, and be obedient to the Government in power in the place where we reside.” (4)

The Universal House of Justice, referring initially to statements of Bahá'u'lláh, and then to statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, writes:

“This same Physician, addressing His followers, ‘the beloved of the one true God’, wrote: ‘Forbear ye from concerning yourselves with the affairs of this world and all that pertaineth unto it, or from meddling with the activities of those who are its outward leaders. The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority.’

“In another Tablet He laid on His followers the obligation to ‘behave towards the government of the country in which they reside with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness.’ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá reaffirmed the same principles. When in America He explained: ‘The essence of the Bahá'í spirit is that in order to establish a better social order and economic condition, there must be allegiance to the laws and principles of government.’

“And finally in His last Will and Testament He wrote: ‘We must obey and be the well-wishers of the government of the land.’ ” (7)

Q. Do we only obey a just government?

The Guardian wrote:

“What the Master’s statement really means is obedience to a duly constituted government, whatever that government may be in form. We are not the ones, as individual Bahá'ís, to judge our government as just or unjust - for each believer would be sure to hold a different viewpoint, and within our own Bahá'í fold a hotbed of dissension would spring up and destroy our unity.” (4)

Q. Does our obedience extend to the administrative regulations which may be promulgated by civil authorities?

The Guardian stated, referring to the Bahá'ís who were at that time being restricted in Persia:

“To all administrative regulations which the civil authorities have issued from time to time, or will issue in the future in that land, as in all other countries, the Bahá'í community, faithful to its sacred obligations towards its government, and conscious of its civic duties, has yielded, and will

continue to yield implicit obedience.” (10)

Q. When Federal and State laws or government policies appear to differ, are we free to decide to obey only the Federal law?

The Universal House of Justice has stated:

“Bahá’ís obey the law, Federal or state, unless submission to these laws amounts to a denial of their Faith. We live the Bahá’í life, fully and continuously, unless prevented by authorities. This implies, if it does not categorically state, that a Bahá’í is not required to make a judgment as to the precedence of Federal or state law - this is for the courts to decide.” (9)

Q. Do we obey the government even when it restricts our administrative activities?

The Guardian has written:

“the guiding principles of Bahá’í conduct that in connection with their administrative activities, no matter how grievously interference with them might affect the course of the extension of the Movement, and the suspension of which does not constitute in itself a departure from the principle of loyalty to their Faith, the considered judgment and authoritative decrees issued by their responsible rulers must, if they be faithful to Bahá’u’lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s express injunctions, be thoroughly respected and loyally obeyed.” (1)

Q. Is there any limit to the extent of our obedience to the government?

The Guardian has written:

“We must obey in all cases except where a spiritual principle is involved, such as denying our Faith. For these spiritual principles we must be willing to die.” (4)

The Guardian has stated:

“In matters, however, that vitally affect the integrity and honor of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh, and are tantamount to a recantation of their faith and repudiation of their innermost belief, they are convinced, and are unhesitatingly prepared to vindicate by their life-blood the sincerity of their conviction, that no power on earth, neither the arts of the most insidious

adversary nor the bloody weapons of the most tyrannical oppressor, can ever succeed in extorting from them a word or deed that might tend to stifle the voice of their conscience or tarnish the purity of their faith.” (1)

and again:

“To such orders, however, as are tantamount to a recantation of their faith by its members, or constitute an act of disloyalty to its spiritual, its basic and God-given principles and precepts, it will stubbornly refuse to bow, preferring imprisonment, deportation and all manner of persecution, including death – as already suffered by the twenty thousand martyrs that have laid down their lives in the path of its Founders - rather than follow the dictates of a temporal authority requiring it to renounce its allegiance to its cause.” (10)

Q. What should be our attitude to the policies of the government?

The Guardian advised the Bahá’ís in these words:

“Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions.”
(2)

Q. What should we do when controversies arise as a result of government policies?

The Guardian stated:

“In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that world-wide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster.” (2)

Likewise, the Universal House of Justice has written, concerning the Faith:

“It holds aloof from all controversies and transcends them all, while enjoining upon its followers loyalty to government and a sane patriotism.”
(6)

Q. Some of the issues that governments are struggling over seem to be moral

issues; should we not involve ourselves in these issues?

The Guardian has written:

“What we Bahá’ís must face is the fact that society is disintegrating so rapidly that moral issues which were clear a half century ago are now hopelessly confused and what is more, thoroughly mixed up with battling political interests. That is why the Bahá’ís must turn all their forces into the channel of building up the Bahá’í Cause and its Administration. They can neither change nor help the world in any other way at present. If they become involved in the issues the Governments of the world are struggling over, they will be lost. But if they build up the Bahá’í pattern they can offer it as a remedy when all else has failed.” (4)

Q. Does the attitude of Bahá’ís imply any lack of concern for the welfare of their country, or any lack of love for their country?

The Guardian emphasizes:

“It should be made unmistakably clear that such an attitude implies neither the slightest indifference to the cause and interests of their own country, nor involves any insubordination on their part to the authority of recognized and established governments. Nor does it constitute a repudiation of their sacred obligation to promote, in the most effective manner, the best interests of their government and people. It indicates the desire cherished by every true and loyal follower of Bahá’u’lláh to serve, in an unselfish, unostentatious and patriotic fashion, the highest interests of the country to which he belongs, and in a way that would entail no departure from the high standards of integrity and truthfulness associated with the teachings of his Faith.” (2)

The Universal House of Justice has stated:

“This love for their country the Bahá’ís show by serving its well-being in their daily activity, or by working in the administrative channels of the government instead of through party politics or in diplomatic or political posts.” (6)

Q. What concept of social life is implicit in the Bahá’í teachings on obedience to governments?

The Guardian has written:

“The Bahá’í conception of social life is essentially based on the subordination of the individual will to that of society. It neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an antisocial creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the ‘golden mean.’ The only way that society can function is for the minority to follow the will of the majority.” (8)

8. Social Welfare and Progressive Social Movements

Q. Should Bahá’ís engage in works of social relief and charity?

The Guardian has written, through his Secretary, to an individual:

“He feels that, although your desire to partake actively of the dangers and miseries afflicting so many millions of people today, is natural, and a noble impulse, there can be no comparison between the value of Bahá’í work and any other form of service to humanity.

“If the Bahá’ís could evaluate their work properly they would see that, whereas other forms of relief work are superficial in character, alleviating the sufferings and ills of men for a short time at best, the work they are doing is to lay the foundation of a new spiritual Order in the world founded on the Word of God, operating according to the Laws He has laid down for this age. No one else can do this work except those who have fully realized the meaning of the Message of Bahá’u’lláh, whereas almost any courageous, sincere person can engage in relief work, etc.

“The believers are building a refuge for mankind. This is their supreme, sacred task, and they should devote every moment they can to this task.” (3)

The Universal House of Justice stated:

“Because love for our fellowmen and anguish at their plight are essential parts of a true Bahá’í’s life, we are continually drawn to do what we can to help them. It is vitally important that we do so whenever the occasion presents itself, for our actions must say the same thing as our words—but this compassion for our fellows must not be allowed to divert our energies into channels which are ultimately doomed to failure, causing us to neglect

the most important and fundamental work of all. There are hundreds of thousands of well-wishers of mankind who devote their lives to works of relief and charity, but a pitiful few to do the work which God Himself most wants done: the spiritual awakening and regeneration of mankind.” (5)

Q. Is it appropriate for Bahá'ís to associate with progressive social movements?

The Guardian is quoted by the Universal House of Justice as having written:

“Much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teaching - such as, for instance, better race relations.” (7)

Q. Are there some social movements with which we should not associate?

The Guardian wrote:

“Fully aware of the repeated statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that universality is of God, Bahá'ís in every land are ready, nay anxious, to associate themselves by word and deed with any association of men which, after careful scrutiny, they feel satisfied is free from every tinge of partisanship and politics and is wholly devoted to the interests of all mankind.” (3)

Q. What is the primary purpose of such association with modern social movements?

The Guardian pointed out:

“It is surely very necessary that the Friends should keep in touch with the modern social movements, but their main objective should be to draw more people to the spirit and teachings of the Cause. They should learn from the experience of others and not permit themselves to go (off) at a tangent, and finally be so absorbed in other movements as to forget the Cause of God.” (3)

Q. How can we use this contact to further promote the Faith?

The Guardian wrote:

“We should welcome and seize every opportunity that presents itself,

however modest it may be, to give a wider publicity to the Cause, to demonstrate its all-inclusiveness and liberal attitude, its independence and purity, without committing ourselves, whether by word or deed, to programs or politics that are not in strict conformity with the tenets of the Faith.” (3)

9. References

- (1) Bahá'í Administration, p. 162
 - (2) The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 64-67, 199
 - (3) Principles of Bahá'í Administration, pp. 24, 26-33
 - (4) Directives from the Guardian, pp. 54-57
 - (5) Letter of the Universal House of Justice, December 8, 1967 (Wellspring of Guidance, pp. 131-136)
 - (6) Letter of the Universal House of Justice, February 8, 1970 (Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1968 - 1973, pp. 44-50)
 - (7) Letter of the Universal House of Justice, July 7, 1976
 - (8) U.S. National Bahá'í Review, No. 20, August 1969, p. 3
 - (9) U.S. National Bahá'í Review, No. 32, August 1970, p. 1
 - (10) God Passes by, p. 372
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