

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

19 April 2013

Transmitted by email: ...

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Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter of 24 July 2009, regarding the difficulties experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in Western countries in adhering to certain of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, was received, and it is deeply regretted that a reply has been so long delayed. Your thoughtful questions were carefully considered by the Universal House of Justice, which has instructed us to write to you as follows.

You state that the disparity between the sexual mores of contemporary Western society and the standards of the Bahá'í teachings, which, you indicate, are “in accordance with the moral code of the East,” poses a considerable challenge to the current generation of young believers. In this connection you explain that, since, historically, a great deal of shame was associated with sexuality in European society, and so much energy was directed towards hiding and suppressing it, to abstain from sexual relations before marriage is now negatively viewed as pietism. You add that today marriage is delayed into the thirties after young people have completed their education and saved money for a home, that married life is more complex than in the past since both spouses usually work, and that those who profess ideals of chastity, as in the priesthood, often fall prey to illicit behaviour. Further, you suggest that many young Bahá'ís struggle to meet the standard of purity set forth in the teachings and that other young people may be reticent to join the Faith out of a reluctance to uphold it. The House of Justice appreciates the sincerity with which you have expressed your thoughts and acknowledges the very real sense of concern you feel, as the gulf between the principles laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and the generally accepted practices of society continues to widen.

Young Bahá'ís in Europe face a particular challenge in this respect. Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture, the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others. Yet, reflect upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trenchant analysis of the limitations of European civilization in His treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Weigh carefully, next, His many exhortations to the individual in that same volume to “become a source of social good” and to “lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race.” Far from allowing themselves to be acculturated to the standards of society, then, Bahá'ís are called upon to be the vanguard and champions of a new civilization.

The important issues you raise, therefore, need to be considered not only in the context of the current condition of society but also in light of the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's laws and teachings and the responsibilities shouldered by every one of His followers, as well as by the community and the institutions of the Faith—this, if the potential to achieve His purpose for humanity is to be realized.

We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.

Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. Yet, the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon the opposite: cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality. Divine teachings shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. “Man should know his own self”, Bahá'u'lláh states, “and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.”

“The object of every Revelation”, Bahá'u'lláh declares, is “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.” His appearance signals the emergence of “a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God”, a race that will be purified “from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires” and that will manifest “the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth.” The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh provide “such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth”. Thus, enshrined in His Revelation is a pattern for future society, radically different from any established in the past, and the promotion of His laws and exhortations constitutes an inseparable part of the effort to lay the foundations of such a society.

It is evident that, if the body and mind are to maintain good health, the laws that govern physical existence cannot be ignored. So, too, for any nation to function properly, there are certain social conventions and laws that, everyone accepts, must be followed. In the same way, there are laws and principles that govern our spiritual lives, and attention to them is of vital importance if the individual and society as a whole are to develop in a sound and harmonious manner. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress. His teachings serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness,

whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behaviour, leads to true freedom. “Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation,” Bahá’u’lláh states, “they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things.” “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,” He declares further, “Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”

Throughout the world, in diverse cultures, Bahá’ís encounter values and practices that stand in sharp contrast to the teachings of the Faith. Some are embedded in social structures, for instance, racial prejudice and gender discrimination, economic exploitation and political corruption. Others pertain to personal conduct, especially with respect to the use of alcohol and drugs, to sexual behaviour, and to self-indulgence in general. If Bahá’ís simply surrender to the mores of society, how will conditions change? How will the people of the world distinguish today’s moribund order from the civilization to which Bahá’u’lláh is summoning humanity? “Humanity”, the Riḍván 2012 message of the House of Justice explained, “is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire.” “A single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself,” the message noted. Young Bahá’ís especially need to take care, lest they imagine they can live according to the norms of contemporary society while adhering to Bahá’í ideals at some minimum level to assuage their conscience or to satisfy the community, for they will soon find themselves consumed in a struggle to obey even the most basic of the Faith’s moral teachings and powerless to take up the challenges of their generation. “Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar,” Bahá’u’lláh warns. The inner joy that every individual seeks, unlike a passing emotion, is not contingent on outside influences; it is a condition, born of certitude and conscious knowledge, fostered by a pure heart, which is able to distinguish between that which has permanence and that which is superficial. “Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven,” are Bahá’u’lláh’s words, “yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face.”

The duty to obey the laws brought by Bahá’u’lláh for a new age, then, rests primarily on the individual believer. It lies at the heart of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved; “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation. Yet what is expected in this connection is effort sustained by earnest desire, not instantaneous perfection. The qualities and habits of thought and action that characterize Bahá’í life are developed through daily exertion. “Bring thyself to account each day”, writes Bahá’u’lláh. “Let each morn be better than its eve”, He advises, “and each morrow richer than its yesterday.” The friends should not lose heart in their personal struggles to attain to the Divine standard, nor be seduced by the argument that, since mistakes will inevitably be made and perfection is impossible, it is futile to exert an effort. They are to steer clear of the pitfalls of hypocrisy, on the one hand—that is, saying one thing yet doing another—and heedlessness, on the other—that is, disregard for the laws, ignoring or explaining away the need to follow them. So too is paralysis engendered by guilt to be avoided; indeed, preoccupation with a particular moral failing can, at times, make it more challenging for it to be overcome.

What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá’í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to

establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá'í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the licence that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will.

The Universal House of Justice wishes us to assure you of its supplications on your behalf, that the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty may attend all your efforts undertaken in His path.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: National Assembly of ...