

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 May 2014

Transmitted by email: ...

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U.S.A.

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter dated 11 January 2014 has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey to you the following.

You express concern about the challenge Bahá'ís encounter in understanding and upholding the Teachings in the face of powerful social forces influencing public attitudes towards homosexuality. In this connection, you observe that some Bahá'ís are susceptible to the argument that the Faith must change to keep up with what are perceived to be progressive social values, while some others, despite their firm adherence to the Teachings, are unable to resolve the incongruity between the Bahá'í perspective and attitudes prevailing in the wider society. Your thoughtful analysis of the issues you raise is warmly appreciated.

The contemporary discussion surrounding homosexuality, which began in the West and is increasingly promoted in other parts of the world, generally takes the form of a false dichotomy, which compels one to choose between a position that is either affirming or rejecting. It is understandable that Bahá'ís would be sensitive to acts of prejudice or oppression in any form and to the needs of those who suffer as a result. But to align with either side in the public debate is to accept the premises on which it is based. Moreover, this debate occurs within the context of a rising tide of materialism and consequent reorientation of society, over more than a century, which has among its outcomes a destructive emphasis on sexuality. Various philosophies and theories have eroded precepts of right and wrong that govern personal behavior. For some, relativism reigns and individuals are to determine their own moral preferences; others dismiss the very conception of personal morality, maintaining that any standard that restrains what is considered a natural impulse is harmful to the individual and ultimately to society. Self-indulgence, in the guise of expressing one's true nature, becomes the norm, even the touchstone of healthy living. Consequently, sexuality has become a preoccupation, pervading commerce, media, the arts, and popular culture, influencing disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and education and reducing the human being to an object. It is no longer merely a part of life, but becomes the defining element of a person's identity. At its most extreme, the doctrine aggressively propagated in some societies is that it is abnormal for adolescents to restrain their sexual impulses, unreasonable for young adults to marry without first having had sexual relations, and impossible for a married couple to remain monogamous. The unbounded expression of sexuality in almost any form is thought to be natural and is accepted as a matter of

course, the only limitation being to cause no harm to others, while any notion to the contrary is deemed narrow-minded or retrogressive. The question of same-sex marriage arises not simply as an appeal for fairness within a framework of existing values but as another step, presumed to be inevitable, in clearing away the vestiges of what is regarded to be a repressive traditional morality.

The perspective presented in the Bahá'í writings departs sharply from the pattern of thought achieving ascendancy in many societies. Bahá'u'lláh states that the knowledge of God is revealed through His Manifestation, Who has an innate awareness of the human condition and the social order, and Whose purpose is to set forth such precepts as will effect a profound transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humankind. "No man, however acute his perception," He affirms, "can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the human being has two natures, the spiritual or higher nature and the material or lower nature, and that the purpose of life is to gain mastery over the limitations and promptings of one's material nature and to cultivate spiritual qualities and virtues—the attributes of the soul which constitute one's true and abiding identity. Worldly desire is not the essence of a human being, but a veil that obscures it. Adherence to the Teachings of the Divine Educator refines the character and develops the potentialities with which each person is endowed; it liberates the individual and society from lower inclinations that give rise to the ills that afflict humanity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the distinction between the two worldviews outlined above by contrasting "the political freedom of Europeans, which leaves the individual free to do whatsoever he desires as long as his action does not harm his neighbor" with the freedom "born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty." "In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God," 'Abdu'l-Bahá concludes. "Man may not transgress this law, even though no harm is inflicted on one's neighbor. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all—others as well as oneself—and, in the sight of God, the harm done to one individual or to his neighbor is the same and is reprehensible in both cases." Thus, for Bahá'ís, just as the development of a strong and healthy body requires adherence to sound physical practices and disciplines, so too, the refinement of character requires effort to act within the framework of moral principles delineated by the Manifestation of God.

While Bahá'ís hold specific beliefs about human identity, sexuality, personal morality, and individual and social transformation, they also believe that individuals must be free to investigate truth and should not be coerced. They are, therefore, enjoined to be tolerant of those whose views differ from their own, not to judge others according to their own standards, and not to attempt to impose these standards on society. To regard a person who has a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain is entirely against the spirit of the Faith. And where occasion demands, it would be appropriate to speak out or act against unjust or oppressive measures directed towards homosexuals.

The House of Justice feels it would be ill-advised to engage in discussions intended to convince those who do not accept the station of Bahá'u'lláh that their views are erroneous; such an effort would ultimately prove fruitless. Shoghi Effendi counseled the friends "to have neither concern for, nor involvement in, the controversies of politicians, the wranglings of theologians or any of the ailing social theories current amongst men." The response of the Bahá'í community to the challenges facing humanity lies not in combating specific issues one

by one but rather in making efforts to uplift the vision of their compatriots and to work with them for the betterment of the world. In their involvement in society at all levels, the friends should distinguish between those discourses associated with forces of disintegration, such as those which overemphasize sexuality, where involvement would be unproductive, and those associated with forces of integration, whose aim is unity and the collaborative resolution of social ills, to which they can constructively contribute. They should be mindful that the divisive issues of the day, diametrically opposed to the Teachings but often presented in the guise of truth or progress, exert themselves upon the Bahá'í community and can at times result in those "severe mental tests" that the writings state would "inevitably sweep over His loved ones of the West—tests that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life."

Just as Bahá'ís do not impose their views on others, they cannot relinquish their principles because of changing trends in popular thought. The pattern of life to which they aspire, Shoghi Effendi writes, "can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age." Bahá'u'lláh counsels not to weigh "the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men," and "in this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed...." To accept Bahá'u'lláh is to accept His Teachings, including those that pertain to personal morality, even if one must struggle to live up to His standard. It would be a profound contradiction for someone to profess to be a Bahá'í, yet reject, disregard, or contend with aspects of belief or practice He ordained. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh describes the twin duties "prescribed by God for His servants" to be recognition of the Manifestation and acceptance of all His ordinances. "These twin duties are inseparable," He asserts. "Neither is acceptable without the other." Bahá'ís consciously choose to abide by Bahá'u'lláh's exhortations out of love for Him and assurance in the efficacy of His guidance, not out of blind obedience. "Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws," Bahá'u'lláh states. "Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power." His Teachings are a safeguard for one's true nature and purpose. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "It is essential that children be reared in the Bahá'í way, that they may find happiness both in this world and the next. If not, they shall be beset by sorrows and troubles, for human happiness is founded upon spiritual behavior."

You are, of course, well aware of the explicit Bahá'í standard. Marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and sexual relations are only permissible between husband and wife. These points are laid down in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi and are not subject to change by the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'u'lláh also prohibits certain sexual acts, including homosexual relations; if such statements are considered by some to be unclear, the unambiguous interpretations provided by Shoghi Effendi constitute a binding exposition of His intent. The Guardian's interpretations, made in his role as the authoritative expounder, clarify the true meaning of the Text and are not derived from the scientific knowledge of the time.

Bahá'ís must also be on their guard lest condemnatory attitudes stemming from the public debate take root in their communities. Backbiting and gossip, prejudice and estrangement, have no place. All recognize the need to transform themselves in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, all struggle in different ways to live a Bahá'í life, and there is no reason that the challenge of being attracted to persons of the same sex should be singled out and treated

differently from other challenges. The Guardian made it clear that Bahá'ís with a homosexual orientation should not withdraw from the community and should receive its support and encouragement. The House of Justice sympathizes deeply with those individuals, and their families, who strive in this respect to understand and hold fast to the Teachings while buffeted by the controversy unfolding within their societies.

Enclosed for your study are copies of two letters that touch on related themes. Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that you may be guided and confirmed by the blessings of the Almighty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Enclosures

cc: International Teaching Centre	(with enclosures)
Board of Counsellors in the Americas	(with enclosures)
National Assembly of the United States	(with enclosures)