

Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet

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The efforts of Bahá'ís to use various Internet media to explore the spiritual underpinnings of human life have opened new avenues of dialogue, study and reflection. Blogs, social networks, multimedia presentations, discussion fora and other Internet tools provide creative ways to share insights from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and relate them to the central issues of individual and social well-being. Bahá'ís welcome an unfettered and constructive examination of these teachings, but will not engage in forms of exchange or presentation that are divisive or contentious in character. At the same time, Bahá'ís will not hesitate to respond, in a spirit of courtesy and fairness, to serious misrepresentations of their Faith.

As with all instruments of human expression, the Internet mirrors the social reality in which it is embedded. The Universal House of Justice has observed:

It is useful to bear in mind that the Internet is a reflection of the world around us, and we find in its infinitude of pages the same competing forces of integration and disintegration that characterize the tumult in which humanity is caught up. In their use of the Internet, Bahá'ís should stand aloof from the negative forces operating within it, availing themselves of its potential to spread the Word of God and to inspire and uplift others, while ignoring any negative reactions their efforts may from time to time elicit.¹

Internet initiatives by Bahá'ís should therefore aim to broaden vision concerning challenging spiritual and social questions, shape discourse in a unifying way, and emphasize the potentialities and promise of the present moment in human affairs. When harnessed in this way, the Internet can become a vehicle for promoting mutual understanding and learning, serving others, instilling hope about the human condition, and demonstrating rectitude of conduct.

At times, however, Bahá'ís will find it necessary to correct misconceptions about essential Bahá'í tenets and goals, or respond to attempts that deliberately misrepresent Bahá'í beliefs or history. In determining appropriate responses to criticisms, disparaging commentary or distortions of the Bahá'í teachings, believers can draw on a number of spiritual principles.

Bahá'u'llah counsels His followers “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy.”² The Bahá'í community, Shoghi Effendi further

¹ From a letter dated 9 April 2008 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.

² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 329, (section CLIV).

explains, should not “be afraid of any criticism that might be directed against it,” for “the voice of criticism is a voice that indirectly reinforces the proclamation of its Cause.”³ While some categories of criticism might best be ignored for their benign character, or understood as sincere but uninformed explorations of Bahá’í belief, intentional efforts to assail or defame the Faith, Bahá’u’lláh indicates, are to be treated differently: “It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God.”⁴ Consequently, an “inescapable duty” falls on Bahá’ís to deepen their knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation so that when circumstances require they may “uphold the integrity of the Faith.”⁵

Given the remarkable scope and achievements of the Bahá’í community, particularly its evident spiritual vitality and visible commitment to social betterment in all parts of the globe, it is inevitable that the aims and purposes of the Faith will be misunderstood, challenged and even vilified. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice advises:

In correcting misrepresentations of the Faith made by those who are hostile to it, our obligation is to set forth Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings cogently and courteously, but firmly, supporting them with rational proofs. Once this has been done, the challenge rests with our hearers, whatever their interests or motivations, to consider our responses in this same spirit of courtesy and objectivity. For Bahá’ís to go further than this, by engaging in acrimonious debate, much less by reflecting on the character of others, would be to cross the line that separates legitimate defense of the Faith from contention.

Because circumstances differ so widely, the responsibility must rest on each individual believer to determine, on the basis of the specific situation, where that line applies.⁶

In emphasizing the importance of harmony in human relationships, Bahá’u’lláh declares that “conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book.”⁷ He further exhorts all people to “utter that which is meet and seemly,” to “refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men,” and to recognize that the “religion of God is for love and unity” and not to be made the “cause of enmity or dissension.”⁸

³ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 42.

⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 329, (section CLIV).

⁵ From a letter dated 14 November 2005 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

⁶ From a letter dated 22 November 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice.

⁷ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 221.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Clearly, any tendency toward argumentation or confrontation is to be eschewed by Bahá'ís while opportunities to clarify or defend the Faith's basic precepts and goals should be carried out "in a restrained and unprovocative language."⁹ In some cases, it may be appropriate to directly address topics raised by critics, but in other situations, it may be more constructive to simply present the authoritative Bahá'í perspective on a matter. Confusion or erroneous understandings surrounding Bahá'í belief can best be dispelled through a reasoned focus on issues, and the principles underlying issues, without reference to the motivations or identity of individuals raising the criticisms. Regardless of the approach taken, "in our presentations and relationships we should always try to build bridges so that our beautiful Teachings can be understood and accepted, and the power which they have to establish unity amongst men will be exemplified."¹⁰ In the end, though, if critics are not receptive to clarifications or explanations offered, it is preferable to respectfully leave them to themselves.

On a practical level, to argue directly or indirectly with those critical of the Faith can be counterproductive. Disputatious interactions can provide opponents with platforms to disseminate their views and agendas, and repel the wider audience observing such interactions. In addition, as the House of Justice notes, "Under most circumstances, it would seem worse than futile for a Bahá'í to attempt to defend the institutions or members of the Faith from the kind of reckless slander that has become an all too common feature of the moral deterioration of contemporary society, and that tends to characterize much of the language of the Faith's current critics."¹¹

It is apparent that some opponents seek to draw Bahá'ís into exchanges with the intent of demonstrating that Bahá'ís are either naïve, dogmatic, or intolerant. In particular, adherence to the provisions of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is sometimes cast in these terms, while for believers such adherence expresses faith in a power "which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth."¹² Bahá'u'lláh affirms that it is indeed possible to both tread the path of religious faith and to be tolerant: "...observe tolerance and righteousness, which are two lights amidst the darkness of the world and two educators for the edification of mankind."¹³

Freedom to believe or disbelieve is a fundamental Bahá'í principle, and the Bahá'í community has distinguished itself by the respect it has shown for the convictions of those who are not Bahá'ís. Diversity of expression and creative give and take are essential aspects of Bahá'í community development. Without diversity, unity is impossible—only uniformity can be the result. For this reason, individual exploration of the Bahá'í teachings is valued for its potential contribution to community discourse and advancement. Here, the Internet affords novel ways of fostering such investigation and learning. The individual search for knowledge and truth, however, cannot be allowed to

⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 23.

¹⁰ From a letter dated 18 December 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly.

¹¹ From a letter dated 22 November 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice.

¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 239.

¹³ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 36.

become a source of disunity or disagreement among Bahá'ís or between Bahá'ís and those studying the Faith. Unity of understanding and progress at the collective level are achieved by the application of knowledge through consultative processes.

In the interactive environment that characterizes current and emerging Internet technologies, exceptional discipline is necessary if Bahá'í standards of moderation, amity, dignity, civility, probity and candor are to be upheld. As with all Bahá'í undertakings, Internet initiatives should reflect a spirit of cooperation, trust, and genuine concern for others. With regard to the treatment of detractors, Shoghi Effendi stresses that uncompromising rectitude “must be demonstrated in the impartiality of every defender of the Faith against its enemies, in his fair-mindedness in recognizing any merits that enemy may possess, and in his honesty in discharging any obligations he may have towards him.”¹⁴ Thus, whether offering comments on Web sites, discussion boards, blogs, video or social network pages, what is being called for is a pattern of behavior and “an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.”¹⁵

All Bahá'ís, “however humble their origin, however limited their experience” are called upon to vindicate the distinguishing truths and defend the interests of the Faith.¹⁶ The Internet extends unprecedented opportunities for Bahá'ís around the world to participate in this endeavor. Although wide latitude is given to the individual believer in pursuing initiatives on the Internet, the advice of Bahá'í institutions should be sought in circumstances where public perception of the Faith is being unduly affected by misinformation or misrepresentation.

As Bahá'ís enter this arena of activity, the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá impart assurance as to the outcome of such efforts:

...ultimately the radiance of the Kingdom will overwhelm the darkness of the world of being, and the holy, exalted character of your aims will become unmistakably apparent.¹⁷

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Universal House of Justice, “Individual Rights and Freedoms”, to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988.

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 45.

¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in “Crisis and Victory”, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, October 1987.