

ON A BAHÁ'ÍS ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIETY AND NON- INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

1. From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in Iran, dated 2 March 2013

Inseparable from the Bahá'í perspective on politics is a particular conception of history, its course and direction. Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race. Not unlike the individual who passes through the unsettled yet promising period of adolescence, during which latent powers and capacities come to light, humankind as a whole is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose. Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Bahá'ís, of course, strive to align themselves, individually and collectively, with forces associated with the process of integration, which, they are confident, will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated. Such is the view of history that underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá'í community.

As you know from your study of the Bahá'í writings, the principle that is to infuse all facets of organized life on the planet is the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity. That humanity constitutes a single people is a truth that, once viewed with scepticism, claims widespread acceptance today. The rejection of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. Yet, however promising the rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will take decades—nay, centuries—to unfold. For the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature; the deterioration of the home environment, with the accompanying rise in the systematic exploitation of women and children worldwide, makes clear how pervasive are the misbegotten notions that define relations within the family unit; the persistence of despotism, on the one hand, and the increasing disregard for authority, on the other, reveal how unsatisfactory to a maturing humanity is the current relationship between the individual and the institutions of society; the concentration of material wealth in the hands of a minority of the world's population gives an indication of how fundamentally ill-conceived are relationships among the many sectors of what is

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now an emerging global community. The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society.

What should be stated plainly here is that Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation thus envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts. Nor are they trying to create a movement that would seek to impose on society their vision of the future. Every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving. Unity will progressively be achieved, as foreshadowed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in different realms of social existence, for instance, “unity in the political realm”, “unity of thought in world undertakings”, “unity of races” and the “unity of nations”. As these come to be realized, the structures of a politically united world, which respects the full diversity of culture and provides channels for the expression of dignity and honour, will gradually take shape.

The question that occupies the worldwide Bahá'í community, then, is how it can best contribute to the civilization-building process as its resources increase. It sees two dimensions to its contribution. The first is related to its own growth and development, and the second to its involvement in society at large.

Regarding the first, Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men; that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few; that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances; that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated; that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity; that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.

Numerous, of course, are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a

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community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory “other” or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. To explore questions such as these and the many others certain to arise, the Bahá'í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned—these are, themselves, the object of regular examination.

The overall direction of the process of learning that the Bahá'í community is pursuing is guided by a series of global plans, the provisions of which are established by the Universal House of Justice. Capacity building is the watchword of these plans: they aim at enabling the protagonists of collective effort to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighbourhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches.

At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. Animating the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. Just as the appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through the complex association of countless cells, whose organization in tissues and organs allows for the realization of distinctive capacities, so can civilization be seen as the outcome of a set of interactions among closely integrated, diverse components which have transcended the narrow purpose of tending to their own existence. And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race. In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression

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responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.

If the web of relationships alluded to above is to take shape and give rise to a pattern of life distinguished by adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind, certain foundational concepts must be carefully examined. Most notable among them is the conception of power. Clearly the concept of power as a means of domination, with the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, must be left behind. This is not to deny the operation of power; after all, even in cases where institutions of society have received their mandates through the consent of the people, power is involved in the exercise of authority. But political processes, like other processes of life, should not remain unaffected by the powers of the human spirit that the Bahá'í Faith—for that matter, every great religious tradition that has appeared throughout the ages—hopes to tap: the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds. Associated with power in this sense are words such as “release”, “encourage”, “channel”, “guide” and “enable”. Power is not a finite entity which is to be “seized” and “jealously guarded”; it constitutes a limitless capacity to transform that resides in the human race as a body.

The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that it has a considerable distance to traverse before its growing experience yields the necessary insights into the workings of the desired set of interactions. It makes no claims to perfection. To uphold high ideals and to have become their embodiment are not one and the same. Myriad are the challenges that lie ahead, and much remains to be learned. The casual observer may well choose to label the community's attempts to surmount these challenges “idealistic”. Yet it certainly would not be justified to portray Bahá'ís as uninterested in the affairs of their own countries, much less as unpatriotic. However idealistic the Bahá'í endeavour may appear to some, its deep-seated concern for the good of humankind cannot be ignored. And given that no current arrangement in the world seems capable of lifting humanity from the quagmire of conflict and contention and securing its felicity, why would any government object to the efforts of one group of people to deepen its understanding of the nature of those essential relationships inherent to the common future towards which the human race is being inexorably drawn? What harm is there in this?

Within the framework traced out by the above ideas, then, it is possible to consider the second dimension of the Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization: its involvement in society at large. Clearly what Bahá'ís see as one aspect of their contribution cannot contradict the other. They cannot be seeking to establish patterns of thought and action that give expression to the principle of oneness within their community, yet engage in activities in another context which, to whatever extent, reinforce an entirely different set of assumptions about social existence. To avoid such a duality, the Bahá'í community has progressively refined over time, on the basis of the teachings of the Faith, the main features of its participation in the life of society. First and foremost, Bahá'ís endeavour, whether as individuals or as a community, to put into practice the command of Bahá'u'lláh: “They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations.” It is through “association and meeting”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has explained further, that “we find happiness and development, individual and collective.” “That which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men”, He has written in this connection, “is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind.” Even in the case of religion, He has made it clear that it “must be the cause of love and

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fellowship. Should religion become the cause of contention and enmity, its absence is preferable.” So it is that Bahá'ís do their utmost at all times to heed the counsel of Bahá'u'lláh, “Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity.” “That one indeed is a man”, He exhorts His followers, “who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.” “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,” is His admonition, “and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” “The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity,” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated. “The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity.” “So powerful is the light of unity”, Bahá'u'lláh declares, “that it can illuminate the whole earth.”

It is with such thoughts in mind that Bahá'ís enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity. Indeed, the standard set by passages such as the above inspires the Bahá'í community to become actively engaged in as many aspects of contemporary life as feasible. In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. It should be noted here that, despite the limitations imposed by adherence to this principle, the community has not experienced a shortage of opportunities for collaboration; so many people in the world today are working intensely towards one or another aim which Bahá'ís share. In this respect, they also take care not to overstep certain bounds with their colleagues and associates. They are not to regard any joint undertaking as an occasion to impose religious convictions. Self-righteousness and other unfortunate manifestations of religious zeal are to be utterly avoided. Bahá'ís do, however, readily offer to their collaborators the lessons they have learned through their own experience, just as they are happy to incorporate into their community-building efforts insights gained through such association.

This brings us, at last, to the specific question of political activity. The conviction of the Bahá'í community that humanity, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, stands at the threshold of its collective maturity; its belief that the principle of the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity, implies a change in the very structure of society; its dedication to a learning process that, animated by this principle, explores the workings of a new set of relationships among the individual, the community and the institutions of society, the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization; its confidence that a revised conception of power, freed from the notion of dominance with the accompanying ideas of contest, contention, division and superiority, underlies the desired set of relationships; its commitment to a vision of a world that, benefitting from humanity's rich cultural diversity, abides no lines of separation—these all constitute essential elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics set out in brief below.

Bahá'ís do not seek political power. They will not accept political posts in their respective governments, whatever the particular system in place, though they will take up positions which they deem to be purely administrative in nature. They will not affiliate themselves with political parties, become entangled in partisan issues, or participate in programmes tied to the divisive agendas of any group or faction. At the same time, Bahá'ís respect those who, out of a sincere desire to serve their countries, choose to pursue political aspirations or to engage in political activity. The approach adopted by the Bahá'í community of non-involvement in such activity is not intended as a statement

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expressing some fundamental objection to politics in its true sense; indeed, humanity organizes itself through its political affairs. Bahá'ís vote in civil elections, as long as they do not have to identify themselves with any party in order to do so. In this connection, they view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of a society, and they undertake, one and all, to observe the laws of the land in which they reside, without allowing their inner religious beliefs to be violated. Bahá'ís will not be party to any instigation to overthrow a government. Nor will they interfere in political relations between the governments of different nations. This does not mean that they are naive about political processes in the world today and make no distinction between just and tyrannical rule. The rulers of the earth have sacred obligations to fulfil towards their people, who should be seen as the most precious treasure of any nation. Wherever they reside, Bahá'ís endeavour to uphold the standard of justice, addressing inequities directed towards themselves or towards others, but only through lawful means available to them, eschewing all forms of violent protest. Moreover, in no way does the love they hold in their hearts for humanity run counter to the sense of duty they feel to expend their energies in service to their respective countries.

The approach, or strategy if you will, with the simple set of parameters outlined in the foregoing paragraph enables the community, in a world where nations and tribes are pitted one against the other and people are divided and separated by social structures, to maintain its cohesion and integrity as a global entity and to ensure that the activities of the Bahá'ís in one country do not jeopardize the existence of those elsewhere. Guarded against competing interests of nations and political parties, the Bahá'í community is thus able to build its capacity to contribute to processes that promote peace and unity.

2. What does non-involvement in politics mean?

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. 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 the communications they address to their fellow-disciples; 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. Theirs is the duty to demonstrate, on one hand, the non-political character of their Faith, and to assert, on the other, their unqualified loyalty and obedience to whatever is the considered judgement of their respective governments.

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 programmes of parties and factions. 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. 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. Let them so shape their lives and regulate their conduct that no charge of secrecy, of fraud, of bribery or of intimidation may, however ill-founded, be brought against them. Let them rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions

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that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world. 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. Let them affirm their unyielding determination to stand, firmly and unreservedly, for the way of Bahá'u'lláh, to avoid the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician, and to become worthy agencies of that Divine Polity which incarnates God's immutable Purpose for all men.

[From a letter dated 21 March 1932, written by Shoghi Effendi, published in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 64 – 65]

3. What do Bahá'ís regard as being "political"?

Generally speaking every activity can be said to be political which directly affects or is related to the policy of the government. It is for the individual believer to seek the guidance of his Assembly and the help of any competent and conscientious person he can find in order to ascertain whether a particular line of activity falls under such a category or not.

[From a letter dated 21 August 1938, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly]

4. What are the implications of non-interference in political matters? Is there a way we can engage in criticizing the present social and political order?

There is one fundamental point which Shoghi Effendi wishes me to emphasize. By the principle of non-interference in political matters we should not mean that only corrupt politics and partial and sectarian politics are to be avoided. But that any pronouncement on any current system of politics connected with any government must be shunned. We should not only take side with no political party, group or system actually in use, but we should also refuse to commit ourselves to any statement which may be interpreted as being sympathetic or antagonistic to any existing political organization or philosophy. The attitude of the Baha'is must be one of complete aloofness. They are neither for nor against any system of politics. Not that they are the ill-wishers of their respective governments but that due to certain basic considerations arising out of their teachings and of the administrative machinery of their Faith they prefer not to get entangled in political affairs and to be misinterpreted and misunderstood by their countrymen.

In the light of this principle it becomes clear that to contribute articles on current political affairs to any newspaper must inevitably lead the writer to express, directly or in an indirect manner, his views and his criticisms on the subject. He is, in addition, always liable to be misinterpreted and misunderstood by the politicians. The best thing to do, therefore, is simply not to write on current politics at all.

There is, however, one case in which one can criticize the present social and political order without being necessarily forced to side with or oppose any existing regime. And this is the method adopted by the Guardian in his "Goal of a New World Order". His criticisms of the world conditions besides being very general in character are abstract; that is, instead of condemning existing institutional organizations it goes deeper and analyzes the basic ideas and conceptions which have been responsible for their establishment. This being a mere intellectual and

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philosophical approach to the problem of world political crisis, there is no objection if you wish to try such a method, which immediately carries you from the field of practical politics to that of political theory. But in view of the fact that no clear-cut line can be drawn between theory and practice you should be extremely careful not to make too free a use of such a method.

[From a letter dated 2 March 1934, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer]

5. How can one engage in discourse and action that will bring about constructive change, contribute to public policy and at the same time not be drawn into taking a partisan and divisive stance?

The term "politics" can have a broad meaning, and therefore it is important to distinguish between partisan political activity and the discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. While the former is proscribed, the latter is enjoined; indeed, a central purpose of the Bahá'í community is social transformation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization* amply demonstrates the Faith's commitment to promoting social change without entering into the arena of partisan politics. So too, innumerable passages in the Bahá'í Writings encourage the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," Bahá'u'lláh states, "and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges the friends to "become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world – for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace." Further, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explains that "much as the friends must guard against in any way 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 teachings". In another letter written on his behalf in 1948, when racial inequality was enshrined in the laws of many states in the United States, he indicates that there is "no objection at all to the students taking part in something so obviously akin to the spirit of our teachings as a campus demonstration against race prejudice." Bahá'ís must, therefore, be tireless in addressing, through word and deed, a range of social issues.

When the Bahá'í community was small, its contribution to social well-being was naturally limited. In 1983 the House of Justice announced that the growth of the Faith had given rise to the need for a greater involvement in the life of society. Bahá'ís began to engage more systematically in the work of social and economic development through activities of varying degrees of complexity. Efforts to contribute to social transformation also include participation in the public discourse on issues of concern to humanity, such as peace, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, and the promotion of justice. These two types of activity have steadily increased over the past twenty-five years and will grow in scope and influence in the future.

The organized endeavors of the Bahá'í community in these areas are reinforced by the diverse initiatives of individual believers working in various fields – as volunteers, professionals, and experts – to contribute to social change. The distinctive nature of their approach is to avoid conflict and the contest for power while striving to unite people in the search for underlying moral and spiritual principles and for practical measures that can lead to the just resolution of the problems afflicting society. Bahá'ís perceive humanity as a single body. All are inseparably bound to one

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another. A social order structured to meet the needs of one group at the expense of another results in injustice and oppression. Instead, the best interest of each component part is achieved by considering its needs in the context of the well-being of the whole.

Involvement in social discourse and action will at times require that Bahá'ís become associated with the development of public policy. In this regard, the term “policy,” like the term “politics,” has a broad meaning. While refraining from discussion of policies pertaining to political relations between nations or partisan political affairs within a country, Bahá'ís will no doubt contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that address certain social concerns. Examples of such concerns are safeguarding the rights of women, extending effective education to all children, curbing the spread of infectious disease, protecting the environment, and eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty.

It is evident, then, that as a Bahá'í who is a political scientist you have a great deal of latitude to comment on social issues. Yet it is also possible to participate in the generation and application of knowledge in your field by dealing with topics that are more directly political in nature. You are no doubt aware of the general advice, written on behalf of the Guardian, that one way to criticize the social and political order of the day without siding with or opposing an existing regime is to offer a deeper analysis on the level of political theory rather than practical politics. Another approach would be to contribute to scientific inquiry and shed light on differing viewpoints to seek common understanding and effective solutions without succumbing to partisan advocacy and obfuscation. Bahá'u'lláh states that “every matter related to state affairs which ye raise for discussion falls under the shadow of one of the words sent down from the heaven of His glorious and exalted utterance.” You have the opportunity to mine the gems of His Revelation and to prepare and present them in a manner that is attractive to those seeking new insights. You will have to learn over time how to find a balance between the principles and concepts you hold as true that come from the Teachings of the Faith and from your discipline.

Challenges will inevitably arise. For example, you may find that an issue pertaining to social action has been co-opted by the political debate among competing factions, and wisdom will be required to determine whether to adjust your approach or let the matter rest for a time. In some cases it may be necessary to forgo opportunities that would thrust you into political debate or criticism of partisan policies of governments. In other instances there may be special sensitivities, such as topics related to countries where the Bahá'í community faces hardship or oppression, when comments could create the impression that the friends are engaged in political activity against the interests of a particular government. These same considerations arise when evaluating invitations from the media to comment or engage in discussion on the political affairs of the day. Your National Spiritual Assembly is available to assist you in clarifying particular questions should the need arise.

[Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 23 December 2008]

6. What about participating in demonstrations; is it appropriate to participate in these?

You state that there are large-scale demonstrations arising in your community and in communities around the world, and you inquire about the appropriateness of Baha'is participating in demonstrations for peace. It is important to keep in mind that while these activities are generally carried out in the name of peace, such occasions are motivated by highly political and controversial sentiments at a time of turmoil and confusion in the world. Not only would it be contrary to the Baha'i principle of non-involvement in politics for individual believers, or Baha'i institutions, to

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become associated with such activities, it could also be harmful to the interests of the Faith internationally. The point to bear in mind here is that current demonstrations are not intended to promote peace in principle but are focused on a specific dispute among governments. As you can no doubt understand, Baha'i participation in public demonstrations involving controversial issues would undermine the Faith's essential purpose of promoting unity in all aspects of human affairs, and your desire to remain focused on the essential work of the Faith is deeply appreciated.

[From a letter dated 27 March 2003, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer]

As your letter points out, there are instances where the Guardian endorsed Bahá'ís identifying themselves with protest activities on vital issues which the Bahá'í teachings illuminate. It must be remembered that there is an important distinction between protest against attitudes and practices prevalent in some quarters of society and protest antagonistic to the government. The Bahá'í Faith directs its attention principally to the promotion of attitudinal change consequent to acceptance of the claim of Bahá'u'lláh, confident that the transformation of attitudes and values will, in due course, yield its fruit in measures which will resolve the problems with which humanity is now burdened.

[Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 24 October 1990, to a group of Bahá'ís]

7. Is it wise for Bahá'ís to wisely engage in debates on controversial and political issues of the day?

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. We should, while endeavoring to uphold loyally 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. 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.

[From a letter dated 10 January 1926 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1998 printing), p. 102]

One of the great obstacles to progress is the tendency of Bahá'ís to be pulled into the general attitudes and disputes that surround them. Involvement in politics and controversial questions is another aspect of the same phenomenon. The central importance of this principle of avoidance of politics and controversial matters is that Bahá'ís should not allow themselves to be drawn into the disputes of the many conflicting elements of the society around them. The aim of Bahá'ís is to

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reconcile, to heal divisions, 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. As the beloved Guardian has stated: “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. 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 worldwide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster.”¹ For Bahá'ís to be drawn into such conflicts would be futile and would only perpetuate the culture of contest deranging human affairs; it would also divide the community and prevent it from making any significant contribution to the betterment of the world.

[From a letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 20 August 2014 to a National Spiritual Assembly]

It is not the practice of Bahá'í institutions to take a position on the political decisions of the government; therefore, the believers should not allow themselves to be pressured into making comments on political issues of the day. This does not mean that they should remain silent when questions are put to them, but they are required to refrain from taking sides and instead attempt to give answers, drawn from the Bahá'í Writings, that provide an illuminating perspective on the underlying spiritual and social causes for the conflict and confusion besetting the world of humanity...

[Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 24 October 1990, to a group of Bahá'ís]

8. Can Bahá'ís join movement that support causes that are compatible with the principles of the Faith? If so, are there any pitfalls to be aware of?

Although it is permissible for individual Baha'is to support causes compatible with the principles of the Faith, nevertheless the friends should be aware that these movements may stray from their original purpose and become part of the political arena. The principle of non-involvement in politics implies that Bahá'ís do not allow themselves to be drawn into the struggles and conflicting interests which divide the many factions and groups of their fellow-men.

In principle, there is no objection to Baha'is participating in organisations in which political issues are raised by others. Indeed, the believers can show the distinctiveness of the Baha'i approach in such settings, through their commitment to reconciliation and unity and their refusal to be part of any partisan political controversy. Such participation requires careful monitoring to ensure that the presence of the Baha'is at such a gathering cannot be construed as implying an endorsement of a partisan political stance. The Baha'is who are selected for involvement in the work of these organisations should also be guided in the need to abstain from voting on any resolution touching on controversial political issues. They may find it advantageous to contribute to the consultation by presenting the positive Baha'i teaching on the underlying non-partisan issues.

With regard to participating in marches and campaigns sponsored by some organisations, for or against certain issues, it is felt that each case should be carefully reviewed. For example, although the cornerstone of Baha'i teachings is the oneness of mankind, the House of Justice has counselled the friends not to participate in demonstrations and protest activities sponsored by anti-apartheid groups. The reason behind this guidance is that since apartheid is identified with the Government

¹ [Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 64.]

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of South Africa, such participation could be construed as opposition to that Government, which would be tantamount to involvement in politics. On the other hand, Baha'is can, and indeed should, support groups advocating the abolition of all racial prejudice.

[From a letter dated 22 December 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly]

9. Should Bahá'ís get involved in debates concerning the political future of a country, or actions of one nation or group of people against another nation or group of people?

...in a letter dated 14 July 1947 to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, the Guardian writes,

"The Bahá'í Faith is entirely non-political and we neither take sides in the present tragic dispute going on over the future of the Holy Land it peoples nor have we any statement to make or advice to give as to what the nature of the political future of this country should be. Our aim is the establishment of universal peace in this world and our desire to see justice prevail in every domain of human society, including the domain of politics."

...With reference to the attitude of the Bahá'ís towards the "enemies of the revolution" as well as other matters such as the Palestinian organisation Hezbollah and the like, Shoghi Effendi has in the past instructed the Bahá'ís to "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 programmes of parties and factions." He further 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"...

[From a letter dated 1 May 2008 of the Universal House of Justice to the Friends in Iran]

The question of independence for Scotland is plainly a political issue, and Bahá'ís should refrain from discussing the matter, especially within the Bahá'í community. Believers are, of course, entirely free to decide for themselves whether to participate in the referendum and how to vote, taking care that their doing so does not lead to an impression of aligning with a partisan perspective.

[Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom dated 16 July 2013]

In his World Order letters, Shoghi Effendi set out the Bahá'í principle of non-involvement in politics, exhorting the friends in words such as these:

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.

(The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2009 printing), p. 64)

Moreover, in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the Guardian connected "nonacceptance of political posts, nonidentification with political parties, nonparticipation in political controversies, and nonmembership in political organizations" with the spiritual requisite of "rectitude of conduct".

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More recently, in its 2 March 2013 letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran discussing the principle of non-involvement in politics, the House of Justice declared that believers will not “interfere in political relations between the governments of different nations.” Finally, the principle of non-involvement in politics implies that Bahá'ís do not allow themselves to be drawn into the struggles and conflicting interests which divide the many factions and groups of their fellowmen.

The referendum on Scottish independence concerns the political policies of governments, their political relations, and the future political status of a particular territory. Further, the issue has inevitably become a divisive controversy. It is for these reasons that our letter of 16 July 2013 identified this matter as plainly a political issue.

Although Bahá'ís should refrain from becoming involved in debates surrounding any political controversy, there are generally many other issues affecting the future of society that could be addressed by the friends at the level of profound spiritual principle without their being drawn into partisan camps. If you have specific questions in the context of the prevailing circumstances you face, you may refer these to your National Spiritual Assembly and seek its guidance.

[Universal House of Justice to an individual, 17 February 2014]