

# “CONSTRUCTIVE” CRITICISM

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## Is criticism allowed?

1. “The Bahá’ís are fully entitled to address criticisms to their Assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the Assembly, local or national, but then they must wholeheartedly accept the decision of the Assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Bahá’í administration.”

Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, May 13, 1945, enclosed with a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 1, 1989 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States

2. “It is clear then that criticism is allowed, but it should be addressed to the institutions of the Faith and not aired in the community where it might foment division and misunderstandings.”

Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, letter dated May 12, 1988 to individual believer quoted in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* p. 4.16

## Avoiding dispute

3. “In exercising their privilege to contribute to the consultation in . . . gatherings or publications, Bahá’ís are enjoined to be courteous and considerate of others, to be moderate in tone and to not insist on the correctness of their views; however, such conditions should not preclude the frank expression of differing views. Bahá’u’lláh has forbidden ‘conflict’ and ‘contention’; open disputation in the public arena over matters in the Bahá’í teachings is an inappropriate means of clarifying difficult issues. It can be extremely harmful to the interests of the Faith if Bahá’ís who hold strong opinions but are not well-versed in the teachings publish documents which attack basic tenets of the Faith or undermine the authority of Bahá’u’lláh Himself. There is ample scope within the channels of the Administrative Order for questions to be raised and discussed in a manner which avoids dispute.

Enclosed with a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 1, 1989, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States quoted in *Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities* p 4.16

## Criticism is a two-edged sword

4. “. . . Clearly, then, there is more to be considered than the critic’s right to self-expression; the unifying spirit of the Cause of God must also be preserved, the authority of its laws and ordinances safeguarded, authority being an indispensable aspect of freedom. Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one’s fellows, love for one’s community, love for one’s institutions.

“The responsibility resting on the individual to conduct himself in such a way as to ensure the stability of society takes on elemental importance in this context. For vital as it is to the progress of society, criticism is a two-edged sword: It is all too often the harbinger of conflict and contention. The balanced processes of the Administrative Order are meant to prevent this essential activity from degenerating to any form of dissent that breeds opposition and its dreadful schismatic consequences. How incalculable have been the negative results of ill-directed criticism: in the catastrophic divergences it has created in religion, in the equally contentious factions it has spawned in political systems, which have dignified conflict by institutionalizing such concepts as the ‘loyal opposition’ which attach to one or another of the various categories of political opinion— conservative, liberal, progressive, reactionary, and so on.

“If Bahá’í individuals deliberately ignore the principles imbedded in the Order which Bahá’u’lláh Himself has established to remedy divisiveness in the human family, the Cause for which so much has been sacrificed will surely be set back in its mission to rescue world society from complete disintegration. May not the existence of the Covenant be invoked again and again, so that such repetition may preserve the needed perspective? For, in this age, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh has been protected against the baneful effects of the misuse of the process of criticism; this has been done by the institution of the Covenant and by the provision of a universal administrative system which incorporates within itself the mechanisms for drawing out the constructive ideas of individuals and using them for the benefit of the entire system. Admonishing the people to uphold the unifying purpose of the Cause, Bahá’u’lláh, in the Book of His Covenant, addresses these poignant words to them: *‘Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord.’* Such assertions emphasize a crucial point; it is this: in terms of the Covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá’í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of mankind.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 15-16