

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

11 February 2021

Transmitted by email: ...

Dr. ...

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Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 9 December 2020 seeking guidance regarding what you observe to be the tendency of some Bahá'í friends to rely on unsound sources of information for scientific or medical questions and to insist upon such perspectives in discussions within the community. While the House of Justice appreciates your suggestion to share the views of Bahá'í experts with the community, it does not feel that this will resolve the fundamental problem you perceive. Further, we have been asked to convey the following.

One of the unfortunate features of the present age is the difficulty of attaining truth, which seems to be an inherent characteristic of the process of disintegration that is assailing humanity in its transition to a new order. “In these days truthfulness and sincerity are sorely afflicted in the clutches of falsehood,” Bahá'u'lláh lamented, “and justice is tormented by the scourge of injustice.” Of course, there are a number of Bahá'í teachings that directly bear on this dilemma. To the extent to which the friends imbibe and hold fast to these teachings, they can guard themselves and their communities from the tumult buffeting society and contribute to its protection and transformation.

The independent investigation of reality is a fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, through which, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explained, “the world of humanity may be saved from the darkness of imitation and attain to the truth”. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh called the individual to observe justice, by whose aid “thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor.” An essential method for the attainment of truth is consultation—“the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.”

Furthermore, the Bahá'í writings stress the importance of science. “Great indeed is the claim of scientists ... on the peoples of the world”, Bahá'u'lláh observed. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the “sciences of today are bridges to reality” and repeatedly emphasized that “religion must be in conformity with science and reason”. Significantly, on an occasion when a scientific question was asked of Shoghi Effendi, he responded in a letter written on his behalf that “we are a religion and not qualified to pass on scientific matters”. And in reply to scientific issues raised on a number of occasions, he consistently advised Bahá'ís that such matters would need to be investigated by scientists.

In light of the foregoing, when faced with issues of a scientific or medical nature, Bahá'ís should seek out and rely on the best expert advice available. For example, in connection with medical matters, believers should bear in mind Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: "Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning-place of His shining and glorious Cause." In relation to the coronavirus pandemic, the friends should follow the counsel of medical and other scientific experts on the advisability and efficacy of the various vaccination options that are becoming available and the wisdom of particular public health measures. They should not be concerned merely with their own personal choices and well-being, but in reaching their decisions, they should also consider their social responsibilities and the common good.

Of course, with a new outbreak of a previously unknown disease, available information may change rapidly. If an individual believer is unclear as to what may be reputable sources on a given issue, he or she may seek the recommendations of Bahá'í institutions or friends who have scientific training. In rare instances when experts appear to be providing inconsistent opinions, then one would do well to pursue the prevailing or majority expert opinion. Responding through his secretary to a believer who had received conflicting medical advice, Shoghi Effendi once advised: "you should refer to other doctors, and follow the majority vote." It is scientific consensus arrived at through the sound methods of science, rather than a particular opinion from an individual expert, that should be sought. In this regard, there are reputable national and international health agencies created for the purpose of assessing circumstances that impact public health and well-being, and of determining what can be considered the established scientific consensus.

Through adherence to the above principles, Bahá'ís can offer a much-needed example of respect for science and truth. Yet, while these principles are straightforward and no doubt generally known to the friends, in recent years, the challenges associated with finding the truth pertaining to various issues in the wider society have grown more acute, creating greater opportunities for confusion and misdirection. In particular, one aspect of this breakdown that exacerbates the confusion is the systematic misuse of media and communication technologies—whether traditional or Internet-based. While the advancement of such technologies has had many positive effects and offers promise as yet unrealized, regrettably those same instrumentalities are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and too often can have socially destructive consequences. Through these vehicles, the uninformed, the self-interested, and the malicious can easily disseminate rumours, conspiracy theories, and outright falsehoods regarding just about any conceivable issue, including important scientific and medical ones. As these erroneous statements circulate and are repeated many times through different means, especially through social media—supported in some instances by isolated voices who may present themselves as experts—they take on the status of authoritative views in the minds of some. Information surrounding the current global pandemic is a prime example, with the consequences of such misinformation being potentially catastrophic. In the search for truth and understanding, the friends should therefore weed out those sources of information that prove to be biased and unreliable, which are attempting to offer unsubstantiated views for partisan purposes, in order to determine where consensus lies among reliable sources.

There, of course, remain scientific or medical matters about which experts have legitimate differences of opinion. Believers may, thus, come to various conclusions about such

matters, and there is no obligation for the friends to have uniformity of thought about them. However, they should not allow differing opinions to become a point of contention among themselves and should act in ways that demonstrate their care for the welfare of others. If specific questions arise in relation to the activities of the Bahá'í community, the friends should turn for resolution to the institutions of the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat