

3 June 2007

Transmitted by email: ...

Mr. ...

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Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 19 August 2004, inquiring as to the role and future of people of African descent in America, and has asked us to reply as follows. We regret that the pressure of work at the Bahá'í World Centre has prevented us from writing to you sooner.

The sincere spirit of love and devotion which prompted your eloquent email letter is warmly acknowledged, and it was encouraging to note that you are reflecting deeply on your own identity and responsibilities as a Bahá'í and participant in the Black Men's Gatherings. The African-American believers indeed hold a special place in the Bahá'í community of that country. You may be familiar with the following excerpts from letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian, but it is fitting to recite them here.

The Negroes, though they themselves may not realize it, have a contribution to make to the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. His teachings and the society He has come to establish are for every race and every nation, and each one of them has his own part to play and the gift of his own qualities and talents to give to the whole.
(10 December 1942)

The Guardian feels very strongly that the Negro Bahá'ís have great responsibilities, both towards their own race and towards their fellow-believers. They must not only arise to teach the Cause to the members of their own race, but must do all in their power to ensure that within their Bahá'í Community itself the Negro and white believers understand and love each other and are truly as one soul in different bodies. Our allegiance as believers is to Bahá'u'lláh; we must fix our attention and devotion on Him, and His Will, and, heedless of the shortcomings of our fellow-Bahá'ís, act as He would have us toward them.
(23 November 1941)

It is always important to remember that with the coming of Bahá'u'lláh the human race as a whole was summoned to recognition of its oneness, and this has launched it on a wholly new stage in its spiritual and social evolution. He has stated clearly that His message and the glorious prospects envisaged belong to every people on the planet. "The summons and the

message”, He wrote, “which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty.”

Yet, it is clear, too, from the Teachings that every people, through its inherent potentialities and particular range of experience, will make its own distinct contribution to the creation of a new civilization. To the extent that African-Americans who embrace the new Revelation arise to do their part by adhering to the Teachings will the gifts which are uniquely theirs be realized in the splendors of the Golden Age. The “pupil of the eye”, Bahá'u'lláh's metaphoric reference to Black people, will no doubt acquire clear meaning as they conscientiously strive over time to fulfill the divine purpose for which the Blessed Beauty came. There can be no doubt that Americans of African descent can find in themselves the capacity, so well developed as a result of their long encounter with injustice, to recognize and respond to the vision of love and justice brought by the Promised One of all ages. Imbued with that vision, past and present sufferings are transformed into measures of patience, wisdom and compassion—qualities so essential to the effort to moderate the discordant ways of a confused world and aid the healing of its spiritual ills. What better than the transformed character of a bruised people to smooth the course, to offer perspectives for new beginnings toward world order!

As to the need for scholarly works that will interpret the meaning of the issues created by the cruelties of slavery, it is not an empty hope that souls illumined by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and equipped with trained minds will arise to author the kinds of treatises and books you rightly feel will promote understanding. But for those who have turned towards Him, the vision of human purpose given by the Divine Word illumines the way forward for all peoples. The legacy of pain passed down from the global history of man's cruelty to man so burdens and confuses peoples of various climes that there can be no more immediate necessity than to spread knowledge of that Word far and wide. Has it not conveyed the vital truth that “the Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty”? Surely, for any believer knowing this, the foremost act, the most important duty, is to present the Bahá'í message to all who will receive it now.

Regarding the question of slavery, its horrifying aftermath in America and the abetment of Christians, you are no doubt aware that enslaving other human beings and otherwise discriminating against them were not unique to members of this religious community. Centuries before the African slave trade was introduced to the West, it was practiced by Muslims in the East. In fact this act of enforced, uncompensated labor and the humiliation it imposed have been a common part of mankind's history stretching back to ancient times; Africans have themselves imposed slavery on different tribes residing among them. It is a sobering fact that this form of oppression has injured the lives of human groups across the planet. Erasing the scars so deeply etched on human consciousness requires a monumental remedy that only a Revelation of the global magnitude of the Bahá'í Faith can ensure. All so afflicted can now find relief in Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that, as the Divine Physician, He has prescribed the remedy for all that ails the world of humanity.

You have mentioned your disappointment with the corruption and powerlessness of the Church and the Christian clerics, but how else would they be when Bahá'u'lláh has declared

that power has been seized from the clergy? It is not to be expected that the Church can regain the spiritual capacity adequately to influence the significant social and moral change needed to rectify the problems created by the baleful history to which you have referred. Certainly you know that the current situation is no worse with the Christian clergy than with the clergy of other faiths. Think, for instance, of the woeful fate that Bahá'ís in Iran have been facing for many scores of years at the hands of the Muslim clergy. One must, however, separate the deeds of religious leaders from the Teachings they profess to uphold. The religion taught by Christ, it is only fair to recognize, did not advocate slavery and the spate of other evil deeds practiced by His followers. For the Africans brought to America as slaves, believing in the religion of their oppressors was in a sense ironic but not surprising. The message to which their souls responded came, after all, from a divine Source. So despite all that was wrong with the ill deeds of so many that claimed to believe in that creed, the fact that Black people, notwithstanding their geographical and cultural origins, did recognize the Manifestation of God in Christ was a mark of the divine favor vouchsafed to them by a merciful Providence. This clearly enabled them to endure and transcend the dire circumstances in which they were mired. The history of slavery in that land testifies abundantly of feats of their spiritual transcendence in outstanding examples of courage, fortitude and creativity, which demonstrate the profound effect of the Christ spirit on their lives. Ultimately, of course, Christians played a major role in the fight for emancipation of the slaves, and it is just that this be acknowledged with gratitude, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has advised. But those were the happenings of yesterday, and we are now living in a new Day. Centuries have elapsed, and we know that the dispensation associated with Christ, as with every other Manifestation of God before the Báb, has passed. The long promised springtime has indeed come with the appearance of the Everlasting Father, Bahá'u'lláh.

Appreciating the uniqueness of this Day of Days ushered in by the Blessed Beauty surpasses by far the effect, however valuable, of any scholarly effort to provide interpretations of the dreadful acts and consequences of slavery; for with the vision of the future unveiled by His Word all things become new and memories of a horrific past fade in the brilliance of the new Light. This vision assumes a special luminosity when considered in the sense of Bahá'u'lláh's characterization of the first Riḍván, the time of His great announcement in Baghdad, as the Day whereon "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification", whereon "the breezes of forgiveness were wafted over the entire creation". How clearly, then, He created a new beginning, separating the past from the present and beckoning the entire human race to the path leading towards realization of the ultimate and most glorious purpose for which it was created. In this same context, valuable understanding can as well be gained from a statement by Shoghi Effendi on the social evolution of humanity in face of the current challenge of the Bahá'í message. He wrote:

The long ages of infancy and of childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.

The summons of Bahá'u'lláh to so outright a departure from the past moves us away from ancient models of activity, such as the experience of the Hebrews at the time of Moses—the prospects of our community do not fit into the framework of the recorded wanderings of that people. For Bahá'u'lláh, in vowing to create a new race, has provided the instruments by which the processes of the social transformation of those composing it are to be guided. He has given us the prescription for a new World Order, declaring that “mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.” As His followers strive to raise up this System, which comprises the institutions of His administration at the local, national and global levels, the spiritual and practical powers of its world-shaping capacity will gradually increase. But we need dedicated souls in great numbers to accomplish what has to be done, and it is for this reason that the House of Justice has set forth a Five Year Plan that calls upon us all to make efforts to advance the process of entry by troops. As you are no doubt aware, this Plan represents the current stage in the operation of the charter of teaching outlined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan He addressed to the North American believers.

The Black Men’s Gathering was inspired by a thought to stimulate African-Americans to respond to the urgent call to action of the Divine Plan and so overcome the crippling effects of a long history of oppression. The participants in the Gathering have wisely concentrated their energies on pursuing the requirements of that charter. Indeed, the fulfillment of their highest hopes for the advancement of the race depends on the extent to which they maintain their dedication to the Five Year Plan and succeeding enterprises that the House of Justice will devise in a continuing effort to accomplish the Master’s scheme for world redemption. What the Gathering does so well is to instill in its participants the desire to strive to realize the potentialities they possess—both from their natural endowments as creatures of God and from the wisdom afforded them by the experience of their particular history—for contributing significantly to that effort. Such consecrated endeavor is the only way by which they can arrive at the furthestmost goal of the common destiny of the entire human race: the Kingdom of God on earth.

One who recognizes Bahá'u'lláh, as you have, and remains steadfast in carrying out His bidding is indeed attuning his soul to the true purpose of his earthly existence; he is contributing towards the building of the World Order the Lord of Mankind proclaimed; and at whatever stage in this development his physical life ends, he will thus have prepared himself for transition to the Celestial City, the ultimate object of one’s lifelong striving. Even so, the reality of the station to which he may attain remains incomprehensible to him in this world. Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the mystery of such a station in an exhortation addressed to believers who are faithful to His instructions:

Ye are better known to the inmates of the Kingdom on high than ye are known to your own selves. ...Would that ye had the power to perceive the things your Lord, the All-Merciful, doth see—things that attest the excellence of your rank, that bear witness to the greatness of your worth, that proclaim the sublimity of your station! God grant that your desires and unmortified passions may not hinder you from that which hath been ordained for you.

The House of Justice will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines on your behalf that the Blessed Beauty may guide all your devoted endeavors in His path and that the much-loved believers of African descent may be favored by His bountiful grace.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat