

# Association for Bahá'í Studies Speech – 2017

## *Race, Gender, and Immigration: Working towards Equality while Avoiding Partisan Politics*

### QUOTATIONS

#### Quotations on Social Justice

1.

In a specific message to America, Shoghi Effendi spoke about the “onrushing calamities,” “cataclysmic forces that are to convulse human society,” He says that, “Humanity, heedless and impenitent, is admittedly hovering on the edge of an awful abyss, ready to precipitate itself into that titanic struggle, that crucible whose chastening fires alone can and will weld its antagonistic elements of race, class, religion and nation into one coherent system, one world commonwealth. ‘The hour is approaching’ is Bahá’u’lláh’s own testimony, ‘when the most great convulsion will have appeared.... I swear by God! The promised day is come, the day when tormenting trials will have surged above your heads, and beneath your feet, saying: “Taste ye, what your hands have wrought.”’”

In the same message, he says, we are witnessing “the confusion and breakdown of human institutions, and in the ensuing epoch during which the shattered basis of a dismembered society is to be recast, and its forces reshaped, re-directed and unified.”

“Though powerless to avert the impending contest the followers of Bahá’u’lláh can, by the spirit they evince and the efforts they exert help to circumscribe its range, shorten its duration, allay its hardships, proclaim its salutary consequences, and demonstrate its necessary and vital role in the shaping of human destiny. Theirs is the duty to hold, aloft and undimmed, the torch of Divine guidance, as the shades of night descend upon, and ultimately envelop the entire human race.”

He goes on to say, “By the sublimity and serenity of their faith, by the steadiness and clarity of their vision, the incorruptibility of their character, the rigor of their discipline, the sanctity of their morals, and the unique example of their community life, they can and indeed must in a world polluted with its incurable corruptions, paralyzed by its haunting fears, torn by its devastating hatreds, and languishing under the weight of its appalling miseries demonstrate the validity of their claim to be regarded as the sole repository of that grace upon whose operation must depend the complete deliverance, the fundamental reorganization and the supreme felicity of all mankind.” (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, p. 28)

2.

Shoghi Effendi explains, “Humanity, whether viewed in the light of man’s individual conduct or in the existing relationships between organized communities and nations, has, alas, strayed too far and suffered too great a decline to be redeemed through the unaided efforts of the best among its recognized rulers and statesmen – however disinterested their motives, however concerted their action, however unsparing in their zeal and devotion to its cause. No scheme which the calculations of the highest statesmanship may yet devise, no doctrine which the most distinguished exponents of economic theory may hope to advance, no principle which the most ardent of moralists may strive to inculcate, can provide, in the last resort, adequate foundations upon which the future of a distracted world can be built.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 33)

3.

In a letter to an individual believer, the House of Justice wrote, “The issue of social justice is, as you know, central to the Bahá’í Revelation.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated November 27, 2001)

4.

In 1941, Shoghi Effendi told us that “Movements for social progress and social justice, as long as they are disassociated from both political and religious partisanship, should be supported by those Bahá’ís who feel urged to undertake such work.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, dated November 23, 1941)

5.

In a letter in 2001, the House of Justice said to an individual believer “Yet another is the concern you mention to avoid involvement in any form of partisan political action. This principle should not, however be misunderstood. The programme of the Bahá’í Cause itself operates in the political realm to the extent that it is concerned with inducing changes in public policy and behavior at local, national and international levels.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated November 27, 2001)

6.

Again in 2008, we were told by the House of Justice “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. ... Bahá’ís must therefore be tireless in addressing through word and deed, a range of social issues.”

“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 to effective education to all children, curbing the spread of infectious disease, protecting the environment, and eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty.” (From a letter written on behalf of Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated December 23, 2008)

7.

In a letter written on April 27, 2017, the House of Justice clarified that “The principles of non-involvement in politics and obedience to government, far from being obstacles to social change, are aspects of an approach set forth in the Bahá’í writings to implement effective remedies for and address the root causes of the ills afflicting society. This approach includes active involvement in the life of society as well as the possibility of influencing and contributing to the social policies of government by all lawful means. Indeed, service to others and to society is a hallmark of the Bahá’í life.” (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated April 27, 2017)

## Six Parameters for Engaging in Social Action

1. First, we have to obey those in authority.

What mankind needeth in this day is obedience unto them that are in authority, and a faithful adherence to the cord of wisdom. The instruments which are essential to the immediate protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleaning from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CII, pp. 206-207)

2. We must not only obey, but wish our government well, with pressure to deny our Faith as the only exception

“We must obey and be the well-wishers of the governments of the land, regard disloyalty unto a just king as disloyalty to God Himself and wishing evil to the government a transgression of the Cause of God.” (*Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 8)

3. We must not even discuss political affairs.

“The irrefutable command that the Blessed Perfection hath given in Tablets that the believers must obey the kings with the utmost sincerity and fidelity, and He hath forbidden them to interfere at all with political problems. He hath even prohibited the believers from discussing political affairs.” (*Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá* v3, p. 497)

4. We should not judge as “just or unjust” our government. And, we are warned that, if we do, this will cause disunity.

“We are not the ones, as individual Bahá'ís to judge our Government as just or unjust – for each believer would be sure to hold a different viewpoint, and within our own Bahá'í fold a hotbed of dissention would spring up and destroy our unity. We must build up our Bahá'í system, and leave the faulty systems of the world to go their own way. We cannot change them through becoming involved in them, on the contrary they will destroy us.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Teaching Committee dated July 3, 1948)

5. We cannot judge how someone came into power

“We cannot start judging how a particular government came into power, and therefore whether we should obey it or not. This would immediately plunge us into politics. We must obey in all cases except where a spiritual principle is involved such as denying our Faith. For these spiritual principles we must be willing to die.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, dated December 21, 1948)

6. We cannot ridicule those in power, we may debase or belittle them.

“It is not for a Bahá'í, in offering social commentary, to vilify specific individuals, organizations, or governments or to make attacks on them. Indeed, the Guardian specifically cautioned the friends against referring to political figures in their public remarks, whether in criticism or support.” (UHJ, April 27, 2017)

“Even though we find a defective branch or leaf upon this tree of humanity or an imperfect blossom, it, nevertheless, belongs to this tree and not to another. Therefore, it is our duty to protect and cultivate this tree until it reaches perfection. If we examine its fruit and find it imperfect, we must strive to make it perfect. There are souls in the human world who are ignorant; we must make them knowing. Some growing upon the tree are weak and ailing; we must assist them toward health and recovery. If they are as infants in development, we must minister to them until they attain maturity. We should never detest and shun them as objectionable and unworthy. We must treat them with honor, respect and kindness; for God has created them and not Satan. They are not manifestations of the wrath of God but evidences of His divine favor. God, the Creator, has endowed them with physical, mental and spiritual qualities that they may seek to know and do His will; therefore, they are not objects of His wrath and condemnation. In brief, all humanity must be looked upon with love, kindness and respect; for what we behold in them are none other than the signs and traces of God Himself. All are evidences of God; therefore, how shall we be justified in debasing and belittling them, uttering anathema and preventing them from drawing near unto His mercy? This is ignorance and injustice, displeasing to God; for in His sight all are His servants.” (Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 230)

#### Coalition engagement – mindful to avoid self-righteousness, religious zeal

“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.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of Iran, dated March 2, 2013)

#### Remaining friendly, while opposing oppression

On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 12/23/41 to individual believer, “Clearly, the Guardian feels that we can boldly and fearlessly stand up to oppression whilst remaining friendly. This may seem strange or odd to those of us who have been raised according to traditions long established by the norms of the old world order.”

#### Question common approaches assumed by most social justice activists.

“Unity and co-operation are the important values which should be the watchwords for activities in which the believers engage. As a consequence, Bahá’ís eschew the adversarial approach of dispute and

confrontation, and seek rather the methods of consultation, with its commitment to informed discussion and mutual respect, and with its goal the achievement of consensus in the pursuit of truth. Bahá'ís aim to persuade others of the correctness of their views through their example and the use of reason, and shun the techniques of pressure, condemnation and abuse which are a deplorable feature of much of the present-day quest for social justice.” (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, dated October 24, 1990)

#### Mindfulness of optics/style, in addition to substance.

“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 that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 64)

#### Oneness of Mankind

“Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind -- the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve -- is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. ... It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world -- a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 42-44)

#### Preferring Others to Ourselves

“We are told that our Faith requires us to “subordinate[s] without hesitation or equivocation, every particularistic interest, be it personal, regional, or national, to the paramount interests of humanity, firmly convinced that in a world of inter-dependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no abiding benefit can be conferred upon the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are ignored or neglected.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 198)

#### Importance of Teaching the Faith

In a 1996 letter written to an American believer specifically on the plight of African-American men, the House of Justice said, “If we are to avoid becoming entrapped in the enervating coils of cynicism which are a characteristic of this age of transition, we must, as the "custodians of...the forces of love", ground our efforts in indomitable faith. In the future the Cause of God will spread throughout America; millions will be enlisted under its banner and race prejudice will finally be exorcised from the body politic. Of this have no doubt. It is inexorable, because it is the Will of Almighty God. However, as the House of Justice has been trying to get the friends to understand for some time, the necessary precondition to translation of our community's social vision into reality

is a massive expansion in the Cause. Those who fail to comprehend the urgency assigned to the objective of achieving a large expansion have obviously failed to appreciate the moral imperative behind this aim.” (The Universal House of Justice, 1996 Apr 01, Baha'i Public Role in Plight of African-American Males)

### Confidence in the Face of Stress

“In responding to the challenges, whether immediate or long term, that the Bahá'í principles of social justice entail, it is vital that none of us lose sight, even momentarily, of the goal toward which all of our efforts are bent. ‘Know thou, of a truth,’ Bahá'u'lláh declares, ‘these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice’. However great the demands of the work in which we are engaged, and however stressful it will undoubtedly become, we can be confident that the forces released in this age of transition – this greatest crisis in the history of the human race – ultimately reinforce the efforts we make, swell the ranks of the community we are building and empower the Cause we serve to achieve every objective its Founder has decreed for it.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated November 27, 2001)