

Selected Extracts on Political Non-Involvement and Social Transformation

A new religious principle is that prejudice and fanaticism whether sectarian, denominational, patriotic or political are destructive to the foundation of human solidarity; therefore man should release himself from such bonds in order that the oneness of the world of humanity may become manifest.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956, 1976 printing), p. 247)

[1]

LOYALTY WORLD ORDER BAHÁ’U’LLÁH SECURITY ITS BASIC INSTITUTIONS BOTH IMPERATIVELY DEMAND ALL ITS AVOWED SUPPORTERS PARTICULARLY ITS CHAMPION-BUILDERS AMERICAN CONTINENT IN THESE DAYS WHEN SINISTER UNCONTROLLABLE FORCES ARE DEEPENING CLEAVAGE SUNDERING PEOPLES NATIONS CREEDS CLASSES RESOLVE DESPITE PRESSURE FAST-CRYSTALLIZING PUBLIC OPINION ABSTAIN INDIVIDUALLY COLLECTIVELY IN WORD ACTION INFORMALLY AS WELL AS IN ALL OFFICIAL UTTERANCES PUBLICATIONS FROM ASSIGNING BLAME TAKING SIDES HOWEVER INDIRECTLY IN RECURRING POLITICAL CRISES NOW AGITATING ULTIMATELY ENGULFING HUMAN SOCIETY...

(Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá’ís, 1932–1946* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2002), par. 43.1)

[2]

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 Bahá’ís 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.

(From a letter dated 2 March 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

[3]

... no loyal believer should under any circumstances commit himself in any way to a political programme or policy formulated and upheld by a political party. For affiliation with such a party necessarily entails repudiation of some principles and teachings of the Cause, or partial recognition of some of its fundamental verities. The friends should, therefore, keep aloof from party politics. What they should mainly keep away from under all circumstances and in all its forms is partisanship.

(From a letter dated 17 December 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [4]

If a Bahá'í were to insist on his right to support a certain political party, he could not deny the same degree of freedom to other believers. This would mean that within the ranks of the Faith, whose primary mission is to unite all men as one great family under God, there would be Bahá'ís opposed to each other. Where, then, would be the example of unity and harmony which the world is seeking?

(From a letter dated 8 February 1970 written by the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa) [5]

It is perfectly in order for Bahá'í institutions to present the Bahá'í view or recommendations on any subject of vital interest to the Faith which is under the consideration of a government, if the governmental authority itself invites such a submission, or if it is open to receive recommendations. The Bahá'í Assemblies should, however, refrain from bringing pressure to bear on the authorities in such matters, either separately or in concert with others. The Bahá'ís will submit their views, if permissible, expressing them as cogently and forcefully as the occasion warrants, but will not go beyond this to the stage of pressing the authorities to adopt these views. Moreover, when considering whether or not it is wise to make such a submission on any particular matter, the Bahá'í Assembly concerned must take care that it will not diffuse the energies of the Community or divert its resources by making submissions unless the interests of the Faith demand it. Likewise the Assembly must ensure that it does not, by any minute and detailed analysis of a situation, “needlessly alienate or estrange any individual, government or people”, or involve the Faith in “the base clamorings and contentions of warring sects, factions and nations.”

(From a letter dated 21 November 1971 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [6]

The world around us is seething with unrest caused by the conflicting interests of governments, peoples, races and individuals. Each of these contending parties has some good and some evil on its side, and, whereas we will unhesitatingly uphold Bahá'í principles, we will never become embroiled in these internecine conflicts by identifying ourselves with one or other of the parties, however much in our hearts we may sympathize with its aims.

(From a letter dated 18 August 1985, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [7]

Concerning your question about the relationship between the appeals to governments on behalf of the Bahá'ís in Iran and the principle of non-involvement in politics, we are to point out that the principle 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 Faith is free to employ every legal measure available to obtain its recognition, to acquire legal rights for the operation of its institutions and the application of its laws and to obtain redress from persecution of its followers. It will not, however, attempt to obtain legislation to compel non-Bahá'ís to obey Bahá'í laws and principles, nor will it ever engage in subversive activities and anarchy or advocate rebellion.

When the persecution of the Bahá'í community began, the Iranian Bahá'ís addressed appeals to the authorities in that country for the justice and protection to which they were entitled under the internationally accepted agreements on human rights to which Iran itself is a signatory. When the authorities showed no response, the Bahá'ís outside Iran joined their voices to the appeals of their Iranian brethren, but still directed to the Iranian government. Only as it became clear that the Iranian authorities were aiding and abetting the activities of fanatical elements who were working for the eradication of the Bahá'í community from the land of its birth, did the world-wide Bahá'í community appeal to other governments, to the United Nations and to world opinion to urge the Iranian authorities to respect their obligations and put an end to the persecutions which they are now fostering. Such actions are no different in principle from the appeals made by Bahá'u'lláh in His Tablet to the Kings.

(From a letter dated 24 January 1989 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [8]

Non-involvement in politics does not mean that Bahá'ís should shirk their civic responsibilities. The friends should therefore be left free to register to vote. Since partisanship is contrary to the spirit of the Faith, the friends should not join a political party; they can vote for individual candidates or for a party, on the basis of merit, without becoming members of any such party. Whether or not a person votes in civil elections is a matter for that person's independent decision, is better kept private and, as with Bahá'í elections, should not become an issue in the Bahá'í community.

(From a letter dated 20 June 1989 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [9]

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....

(From a letter dated 24 October 1990 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [10]

Clearly the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth is a “political” enterprise, and the Teachings of the Faith are filled with “political” principles—using the word in the sense of the science of government and of the organization of human society. At the same time the Bahá'í world community repeatedly and emphatically denies being a “political” organization, and Bahá'ís are required, on pain of deprivation of their administrative rights, to refrain from becoming involved in “political” matters and from taking sides in “political” disputes. In other words, the Bahá'ís are following a completely different path from that usually followed by those who wish to reform society. They eschew political methods towards the achievement of their aims, and concentrate on revitalizing the hearts, minds and behaviour of people and on presenting a working model as evidence of the reality and practicality of the way of life they propound.

(From a letter dated 27 April 1995 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [11]

What is at issue is the need for Bahá'ís interested in promoting social justice to dissociate themselves from the divisive tendencies that so often enter the arena of social and political activism. Our aim, as Bahá'ís, is to champion the cause of justice, but the type of language we utilize and the conduct we evince should stand in contrast to the adversarial modes of activism commonly adopted in society today.

(From a letter dated 14 November 2010 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[12]

With respect to your question about the defence of the Bahá'ís in Iran, Bahá'ís are not pursuing any political aims. This is not a political question. The efforts of Bahá'ís consist of legal and moral appeals, undertaken in a non-partisan manner, both within Iran and within the current framework of global governance, and with the aim of influencing the government of Iran to live up to its responsibility to safeguard the most basic rights of its Bahá'í citizens, which are provided for in the constitution of Iran as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the government of that country is a signatory. A correct understanding of what is legitimate Bahá'í action towards governments is bound to be difficult to achieve on the part of individual friends. Given the utter complexity of human affairs with which the Bahá'í community must increasingly cope both spiritually and practically, individual judgement is not sufficient. Hence, it is important that decisions as to the conduct of such relationships be made by authorized institutions of the Faith and not by individuals.

Of course, there is plenty of space for individual believers to take constructive social action without resorting to denouncing a specific government or becoming involved in partisan politics....

(From a letter dated 25 September 2019 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[13]

The heart of a Bahá'í cannot but be distressed when contemplating the wretched conditions of the world which affect so many of its peoples. The challenges now facing humanity reflect the disintegrative process at play in a world that has yet to respond meaningfully to the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh. In a letter dated 8 December 1935 written on his behalf to an individual believer, Shoghi Effendi stated: "The universal crisis affecting mankind is ... essentially spiritual in its causes." More recently, the House of Justice has observed: "The Bahá'í community encourages and supports the manifold efforts being made by people of goodwill to better the condition of humankind and promote unity and harmony among the peoples and nations of the earth. However, the believers should never, for even one moment, lose sight of the fact that the crisis now engulfing every part of the planet is essentially spiritual." If the crisis afflicting humanity is spiritual, can there be any question that its solution must also be spiritual? As the House of Justice has highlighted in its Riqvân 2015 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, "ultimately, it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan's framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society." In such a context, the friends can gradually address the problems that face them and their surrounding communities.

You ask whether the believers are to take an active role in combatting what they perceive as negative forces in their society. As the House of Justice has previously stated, “most people have no clear concept of the sort of world they wish to build, nor how to go about building it. Even those who are concerned to improve conditions are therefore reduced to combatting every apparent evil that takes their attention. Willingness to fight against evils, whether in the form of conditions or embodied in evil men, has thus become for most people the touchstone by which they judge a person’s moral worth. Bahá’ís, on the other hand, know the goal they are working towards and know what they must do, step by step, to attain it. Their whole energy is directed towards the building of the good, a good which has such a positive strength that in the face of it the multitude of evils—which are in essence negative—will fade away and be no more. To enter into the quixotic tournament of demolishing one by one the evils in the world is, to a Bahá’í, a vain waste of time and effort.”

In this period of uncertainty and transition, different political and social groups are vying for power to direct humanity towards their varying, and often conflicting, visions of an ideal society. At times, some of their objectives may be similar to those of the Faith. However, the Bahá’í community does not see itself as one among these competing groups and organizations. As discussed above, its approach is different. In working to build a new world based on the vision of Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’ís must inevitably distinguish between those dimensions of public issues that are in keeping with the Bahá’í Teachings, which they can actively support, and those that are not, which they would neither promote nor necessarily oppose. Moreover, in pursuing their aims, Bahá’ís cannot become embroiled in political controversies that would divide the Bahá’í community, dissipate its energies, and deflect it from its purpose to unify society. In attempting to determine what lines of action may be suitable in this regard, believers are advised to turn to their National Spiritual Assemblies.

(From a letter dated 6 August 2020 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[14]