

After her visit to the United States in 1960, Hand of the Cause of God ‘Amatu’l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum addressed her observations to the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States. A slightly abridged version of her letter (printed in Baha’i News U.S. Supplement No. 40, June 1961) is reprinted here in response to the many recent requests for its republication and because of the timeliness of her statements.

Challenging Observations on Teaching in North America  
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and  
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada

Dearly loved Friends:

This is certainly a very late date at which to write the letters to you I assured you I would be sending you after my wonderful trip last Spring, through the U.S.A. and Canada! I had planned to write you properly, separately, and touching on points connected with the two different countries but fatigue and the work at the World Center engulfed me before I got around to it. I think this is all to the good for the ideas I wanted to express then are very much clearer now, after my trip through East Africa, and as they are applicable to both Canada and the U.S.A., I am sure you will not mind my sending you a joint letter.

Whatever my trips amongst the friends have produced of good, they could not possibly have had as great an effect on anyone as on me. I have learned so much, had such new thoughts come to me, that I feel as if I was living in a different mental world from before. My perspective has changed very radically and I feel the best way I can be of help to your two Assemblies— shouldering such great responsibility as the primary promoters of the Divine Plan—is to just share my new thoughts with you. I have not got time for composition so will just think out loud.

It seems to me if we Bahá’ís, and especially the teachers and assembly members, do not ponder more deeply what lies ahead in the next stages of our development we are not going to be properly oriented towards the work we are carrying on.

Bahá’u’lláh warned us against the evils of civilization when carried to extremes, the Master and particularly the Guardian, elaborated on this theme until at the end of his life Shoghi Effendi fairly thundered against our civilization—particularly the American variety of it. The future culture and civilization is therefore scarcely likely to be patterned on it. It occurs to me (speaking for myself) that we have confused the things so highly praised in

our Teachings, such as freedom of speech, the democratic method of election, the ideal of justice for all and integrity in administrative affairs, with our materialistic civilization which the Guardian stigmatized as corrosive and corrupt in Western civilization, and against the dangers of which he constantly warned us. It is these inherent weaknesses that may lead to the greatest catastrophe in history. These thoughts have formed the background in my mind, against which other thoughts are beginning to stand out more clearly.

I remember when we had the first Japanese pilgrim here, Shoghi Effendi said to him that the majority of the human race was not white and that the majority of Bahá'ís would not be white in the future. As up until very recently the Bahá'ís of the world were almost exclusively white, it is only natural that their virtues and their faults should have colored the Faith and its community life. It is illogical to suppose that what we have now is either mature or right; it is a phase in the development of the Cause; when peoples of different races are incorporated in the world-wide community (and in local communities), who can doubt that it will possess far greater power and perfection and be something quite different from what we have now? And yet let us ask ourselves frankly if we do not believe that what we North American Bahá'ís have, is the real thing, practically a finished product, and it is up to the rest of the world to accept it? I think this is our mentality; it was mine up until a few years ago. It seems to me we are confusing the fact that North America is the cradle of the Administrative Order with the old order that already exists there. Perhaps we forget sometimes that just as Baha'u'llah appeared in Persia because it was the worst country in the world, the Administrative Order was given to America to develop because she was politically the most corrupt. I remember when the Guardian was writing *The Advent of Divine Justice* and elaborated on this theme how astonished I was. I thought we had the best democratic system in the world and were therefore best qualified to elaborate it! We all know what great emphasis the beloved Guardian put on mass conversion during the last five years of the Crusade and how urgently he appealed to the Bahá'ís to press forward in teaching the people of Africa and the Pacific region. He likewise repeatedly stressed teaching the American Negro and the Indian people. It has been borne in on me, at least to a limited degree, during my trips in America and Africa, the vast significance of two statements in our Writings. Bahá'u'lláh said the black people are like the pupil of the eye and sight is in the pupil: The Master said

when we converted the American Indians to the Faith they would be like the original inhabitants of Arabia. The Words of these Divine Beings, we know, are the very essence of Truth. When Bahá'u'lláh likens the Negro race to the faculty of sight in the human body—the act of perception with all it implies—it is a pretty terrific statement. He never said this of anyone else. I thought the American Negro's humility, his kindness, friendliness, courtesy and hospitableness were something to do with his oppression and the background of slavery. But after spending weeks, day after day in the villages of Africa, seeing literally thousands of Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, I have wakened up to the fact that the American Negro has these beautiful qualities not because he was enslaved but because he has the characteristics of his race. I learned why the Guardian so constantly spoke of the "pure-hearted" Africans. The emphasis on the "heart" in our teachings is overwhelming. "My first counsel is this: possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart." "Thy heart is My habitation." — "All in heaven and on earth have I ordained for thee except the human heart which I have made the habitation of My Beauty and Glory—" etc. It is the spiritual quality defined as "Heart" in our teachings which I think is one of the priceless gifts the Negro race is going to share with others in the community of the Most Great Name. I can truthfully say my association with the Africans humiliated me deeply. I felt unworthy. I felt my race unworthy. I have not said anything about intelligence because I firmly believe it is a common characteristic of all human beings, the more primitive they are the sharper their wits! What about Abdu'l-Bahá's words concerning the American Indians? When I had the experience of being with them I kept asking myself what did the Master mean? Then I reviewed in my mind what had been the effect of the conversion of the original inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula to Islam; the spread of the Faith from China to the gates of Vienna, the rise of Islamic culture and civilization which was responsible for the renaissance in Europe which in turn became the cradle of Western Civilization which has given rise to so many good things that Bahá'u'lláh Himself praised. This is what the conversion of the early Arabs meant. And Abdu'l-Bahá says the conversion of the American Indians will be like that other conversion. It certainly gives one food for thought!

The non-white world is stirring. Africa is awakening, our civilization is beginning to crumble. I believe the responsibility we Bahá'ís (most of us still white) have at this time is tremendous. We must make haste to obey the instructions of the Master and the Guardian and teach in active, determined

campaigns by every means in our power, the American Negroes and Indians. In the first place it is a duty placed upon us in writing, in the second place we need them in our communities for their characteristics of mind and heart can greatly enrich our Bahá'í community life, and in the third place we cannot estimate at this time how far-flung will be the repercussions of bringing these two races in North America into the Faith. I am convinced that if we start mass conversion of the Indians and Negroes, mass conversions of the whites will follow. The people of the world are tired of words, words, words. They don't really pay any attention to what we say about "oneness, unity, world brotherhood" although many of them agree with this. What they need is to see deeds, to see Bahá'í communities, local and national, full of people of different races working together, in love, for their common belief. Then the spiritual force such a reality will release (as opposed to words) and will bring an inwardly hungry, sad and disillusioned white race into the Faith in larger numbers. It is all there in the writings of Shoghi Effendi; we just don't think about it enough.

Nero fiddled while Rome burned. God forbid we Bahá'ís should ever be like that! A terrible sense of urgency had come over me. Take Africa alone: her nations are coming into independence rapidly — which surely is the plan of God — but they are in danger internally and externally from immature, calculating political forces. What a difference it would make if there were at least ballast in their new ships launching on the world's turbulent sea, if there were a strong Bahá'í minority with their good will and vision of the future world, and the non-political quality of a Bahá'í community! And if these new and often turbulent African nations, being taught racial tensions in a world filled with hatred and ambition, could look across the seas and see that in America and Canada there is a community truly representative of the different races, where the Indian and the Negro Bahá'ís march abreast with those of European descent in serving mankind and promulgating Baha'u'llah's redeeming Faith; think what a force for stability in the whole world this might be! Are we Bahá'ís thinking about those things? Or are we for the most part absorbed in playing with the Administrative Order, criticizing, judging and disputing with each other? Do we constantly bear in mind that as early as the start of the first Seven Year Plan the Guardian told us that now that we had built up the Administrative machinery we must put it into operation for teaching the Cause?...

I would like to make an observation about teaching the Indians and the Negroes. It is the result of as much analysis as I am capable of. When we

Bahá'ís go to teach these people, our first act, I firmly believe, should be to try and give them back their self-respect. Probably the greatest crime of the white man is that in his folly and conceit in the great power of his money-civilization, he has made other men feel inferior; 2nd, 3rd and 4th class passengers on the boat of life. How deep this acid has bitten into the souls of other men I suppose we white people can never know. But I was startled and moved by something I saw during my African trip. Invariably, whenever I mentioned this injustice of ours and denounced it as such, there was a spontaneous burst of applause from my listeners whether at the Teaching Conference in Kampala where the cream of the African Bahá'í teachers were present or an illiterate audience way out in the Bush seated under a tree! The arrow is far deeper in the hearts than we dream and we Bahá'ís should draw out this arrow in the name of Bahá'u'lláh and pour the healing salve of His Praises and love into the wound.

I could see the American Indians straighten their shoulders when I asked their forgiveness for the injustices my race had done them and when I praised their great past. The Africans in their wilderness have not, thank God, suffered this humiliation of soul the Indian has because they have been too far away, for the most part, from white people. But they look wistfully at our world and wonder why they have no part. This touched me deeply and I tried to tell them as much as I could about the history of Africa. Again the need to reestablish self-respect. Both the Africans and the Indians should be encouraged to retain their tribal characteristics, their language, their music, their folklore, their crafts. What a people is has grown up in its setting of tribal customs and qualities. If you destroy this through criticism you also, I believe, weaken and destroy all the fine qualities of the race too. It's a large subject and this is not the place to go into it, but all one has to do is to study primitive people in their own lives — and in our cities or after close contact with us — to see the truth.

There is one other subject I would like to share with you some of my thoughts on, and that is education. One of the products of our Western Civilization is a worship of education. From the Bahá'í standpoint what is the purpose of education? To enable man to acquire a deeper knowledge of God, His ways and His plan for His creatures, to enable him to better carry forward an ever-advancing civilization whose aim is to realize the Kingdom of God on earth. In other words, education should bring man closer to God and help him serve his fellow man. Our education does not do this nowadays...

We must guard ourselves against the dry and dead intellectualism of the world in which we live! Over and over again the Guardian told the Bahá'ís to study the talks of Abdu'l-Bahá and teach by His methods, simple language, parables, stories, examples. It is teaching through this method that is bringing about mass conversion in Africa and Indonesia, and can do the same, I believe, not only amongst the red Indians and the Negroes, but amongst the white people as well.

Another thing I found in Africa was love. Considering it is the reason God created us and His first law to us is to love Him and one another, to find not just talk about it but the feeling of it was too wonderful for words! If we will bring into the Faith more of these people— these black people and brown people — who have the spiritual qualities so greatly needed in our communities, I think we will infuse a new life into the Cause in North America and this will directly assist us in accomplishing our great destiny as outlined by the Master and the Guardian...

I must really stop.

...We have the promises of the Guardian, the instructions he gave us, the loyalty and devotion of the Bahá'ís. What more do we need but self-sacrificing and inspired leadership, and that is surely what your two Assemblies can and must provide.

With warmest love to you all,

In the service of the beloved Guardian,

(signed) Ruhyyih

Haifa Israel

March 9, 1961