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**Subject: National Spiritual Assembly Releases Compilation on Homosexuality and Related Issues**

## **National Spiritual Assembly Releases Compilation on Homosexuality and Related Issues**

We greet you warmly and with deepest affection as we direct your attention to a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly introducing a compilation – prepared by its Office of Community Administration – on the subject of homosexuality and related issues. A full explanation is supplied in the Assembly's letter. Both the letter and the compilation itself can be accessed by clicking on the relevant link below:

- National Spiritual Assembly cover letter introducing compilation on homosexuality—<https://app.box.com/s/ur7d8c62yb8tb5ybjgjybx8i82aygaur>
- Compilation: Concerning Issues Related to Homosexuality—<https://app.box.com/s/x280zbjphbaf8vdh68jpk0wg72nm6tsu>

This mailing is being directed to the secretaries or contact persons of all Local Spiritual Assemblies, to be utilized in whatever manner your Assembly deems appropriate. As an added convenience, the Assembly's letter is supplied as plain text immediately below this transmittal note.

With loving Bahá'í regards,

Office of the Secretary

National Spiritual Assembly of the  
Bahá'ís of the United States

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July 9, 2015

To all Local Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We are happy to provide you with the attached compilation of writings concerning issues related to homosexuality. The compilation, which was prepared by the Office of Community Administration at the Bahá'í National Center, includes a number of extracts from recent letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, as well as three full letters that have previously been shared with all Local Assemblies. We hope that this material will be of assistance to you in advancing understanding within your communities about this important topic, which is currently the focus of many questions from friends throughout the country.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Kenneth E. Bowers  
Secretary

National Spiritual Assembly of the  
Bahá'ís of the United States

# Compilation: Concerning issues related to homosexuality

Prepared by the Office of Community Administration for the  
National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United  
States

July 9, 2015

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## Concerning issues related to homosexuality

### Passages from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.

They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples. He that turneth away from them is accounted among the abject and foolish. We, verily, have commanded you to refuse the dictates of your evil passions and corrupt desires, and not to transgress the bounds which the Pen of the Most High hath fixed, for these are the breath of life unto all created things. The seas of Divine wisdom and Divine utterance have risen under the breath of the breeze of the All-Merciful. Hasten to drink your fill, O men of understanding! They that have violated the Covenant of God by breaking His commandments, and have turned back on their heels, these have erred grievously in the sight of God, the All-Possessing, the Most High.

O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures. Thus hath it been sent down from the heaven of the Will of your Lord, the Lord of Revelation. Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness.

Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty." Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.

Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight!

(Paragraphs 1–5)

These are the ordinances of God that have been set down in the Books and Tablets by His Most Exalted Pen. Hold ye fast unto His statutes and commandments, and be not of those who, following their idle fancies and vain imaginings, have clung to the standards fixed by their own selves, and cast behind their backs the standards laid down by God.

(Paragraph 17)

By My life, were ye to discover what We have desired for you in revealing Our holy laws, ye would offer up your very souls for this sacred, this mighty, and most exalted Faith.

(Paragraph 45)

[1]

### **Clarifications by Shoghi Effendi**

No matter how devoted and fine the love may be between people of the same sex, to let it find expression in sexual acts is wrong...

...

God judges each soul on its own merits. The Guardian cannot tell you what the attitude of God would be towards a person who lives a good life in most ways, but not in this way. All he can tell you is that it is forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh, and that one so afflicted should struggle and struggle again to overcome it. We must be hopeful of God's mercy but not impose upon it.

(From a letter dated 26 March 1950 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

[2]

Homosexuality is forbidden in the Bahá'í Faith by Bahá'u'lláh; so, for that matter, are immorality and adultery.

(From a letter dated 20 August 1955 written on behalf of the Guardian to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[3]

### **Elucidations from the Universal House of Justice**

#### **A. The question of personal identity**

Only God, the Creator of mankind and of each human soul, knows the purpose of His creation and exactly what, at each stage of its development, is required for its fulfilment. This purpose, through His great love, is conveyed to mankind by the Divine Manifestation. As Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." The Manifestation "doeth as He willeth" in establishing His laws and ordinances in accordance with human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. To recognize Bahá'u'lláh is to have faith in His authority to make the judgements necessary to guide the progress of humanity through the course of the dispensation.

...

Bahá'ís believe that the true nature of the human being is spiritual and that following the Teachings of the Manifestation of God is the key to developing one's true potential. "Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth," Bahá'u'lláh states, "every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed."

(From a letter dated 22 December 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[4]

The understanding about human beings today is heavily influenced by materialistic assumptions. Perspectives of social movements, leaders of thought, and the media are shaped by them. Even the findings of science are interpreted according to such prevalent cultural notions. It is not surprising, then, that there are many ideas about human identity and behaviour in contemporary society commonly accepted as truths that conflict with the Bahá'í teachings. Yet, as Bahá'u'lláh asks every thoughtful soul, "Where shalt thou secure the cord of thy faith and fasten the tie of thine obedience?" His answer, revealed in innumerable passages, is, as you know, unambiguous. "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind." "No man, however acute his perception," He affirms, "can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." And He counsels not to weigh "the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men", and in "this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed. . . ." The Manifestation institutes His laws and ordinances in accordance with His intrinsic knowledge of human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. From a Bahá'í perspective, then, it is the teachings of the Manifestation of God that clarify the essential elements of human identity.

In contrast to many contemporary conceptions, the Bahá'í teachings maintain that a person must rise above certain material aspects of human nature to develop and manifest inherent spiritual qualities that characterize his or her true self. The Sacred Texts contain laws and exhortations that, in many instances, redirect or restrict behaviours that arise from impulses, tendencies, and desires, whether inborn or acquired. Some of these are physical, while others are emotional or psychological. Yet, whatever their origin, it is through their regulation and control that the higher, spiritual nature is able to predominate and flourish. Those who are not Bahá'ís may have no cause to take into account such considerations. A Bahá'í, however, cannot set aside the implications of these teachings and must endeavour to respond to the best of his or her ability, though it be little by little and day by day. In so doing, all believers face challenges, although the specific type or extent of a test may differ. They act with faith in Bahá'u'lláh's declaration, "Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures", and they respond to His call, "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty."

(From a letter dated 22 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[5]

## B. The Bahá'í standard

According to the Bahá'í Teachings, marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and sexual relations are only permissible between a couple who are married to each other. This is set forth in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and in the authoritative statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and is not susceptible to change by the House of Justice. However, the Bahá'í community does not seek to impose its values on others and does not pass judgement on others on the basis of its own moral standards. Rather, Bahá'u'lláh enjoins the believers to manifest tolerance and respect towards all, and therefore, to regard those with a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain would be entirely against the spirit of the Faith.

(From a letter dated 22 December 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[6]

The Guardian's statements that homosexual practice is forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh are expositions of the meaning of the Text made in his role as authorized interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings. The import of his interpretation for Bahá'ís is clear enough: sexual relations are confined to marriage, which is a union between a man and a woman. Naturally, those who accept Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God will make a sincere and persistent effort to modify those aspects of their conduct which are not in conformity with His Law. Indeed, it would be a profound contradiction for someone to profess the intention to be a Bahá'í, yet consciously dismiss, reject, or contend with aspects of belief or practice ordained by Bahá'u'lláh.

(From a letter dated 12 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[7]

The Bahá'í teachings on marriage and sexual morality are explicit: marriage is between a man and a woman and sexual relations outside of marriage are prohibited, including sexual relations between members of the same sex. These teachings are set forth in the Sacred Text and are not susceptible to change by the Universal House of Justice. If the statements of Bahá'u'lláh about homosexual relations are considered by some to be unclear, the unambiguous interpretations provided by Shoghi Effendi constitute an authoritative and binding exposition of His intent.

The House of Justice sympathizes with those individuals and families who struggle to understand and uphold the teachings, especially in light of the dominant attitudes in many societies. However, the Faith cannot progress along the course intended by Bahá'u'lláh if individual believers, no matter how sincere, are determined to apply their personal and necessarily limited views, especially when they contradict the clear text, or insist on arguing that something is true because it appears desirable or necessary, or because it conforms to the prevailing standards of the day. "Service to the Cause of God", the House of Justice has explained, "requires absolute fidelity and integrity and unwavering faith in Him." And it adds: "Our part is to cling tenaciously to the revealed Word and to the Institutions that He has created to preserve His Covenant."

It is obvious that the Bahá'í teachings on sexual morality are not in accord with currently accepted practices of certain societies. In one of his utterances, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides the following analysis which offers a framework in which the distinctions pertaining to moral questions can be understood:



There are three types of freedom. The first is divine freedom, which is one of the inherent attributes of the Creator for He is unconstrained in His will, and no one can force Him to change His decree in any matter whatsoever....

The second is the political freedom of Europeans, which leaves the individual free to do whatsoever he desires as long as his action does not harm his neighbour. This is natural freedom, and its greatest expression is seen in the animal world. Observe these birds and notice with what freedom they live. However much man may try, he can never be as free as an animal, because the existence of order acts as an impediment to freedom.

The third freedom is that which is born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty. This is the freedom of the human world, where man severs his affections from all things. When he does so, he becomes immune to all hardship and sorrow. Wealth or material power will not deflect him from moderation and fairness, neither will poverty or need inhibit him from showing forth happiness and tranquillity. The more the conscience of man develops, the more will his heart be free and his soul attain unto happiness. In the religion of God, there is freedom of thought because God, alone, controls the human conscience, but this freedom should not go beyond courtesy. In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God. Man may not transgress this law, even though no harm is inflicted on one's neighbour. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all—others as well as oneself—and, in the sight of God, the harm done to one individual or to his neighbour is the same and is reprehensible in both cases. Hearts must possess the fear of God. Man should endeavour to avoid that which is abhorrent unto God. Therefore, the freedom that the laws of Europe offer to the individual does not exist in the law of God. Freedom of thought should not transgress the bounds of courtesy, and actions, likewise, should be governed by the fear of God and the desire to seek His good pleasure.

As this passage indicates, God is unconstrained in setting forth His will and purpose. Many contemporary societies provide space for moral behavior within the limits of that which does no harm to others. For Bahá'ís, however, the boundaries of moral behavior are defined by the Divine laws and teachings set forth in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís do not expect others to honor the standard to which they aspire, nor should they impose their views on or adopt judgmental attitudes towards others. Rather, the friends are enjoined to consort with all people with fellowship and love and to work with them for the betterment of the world.

At the same time, Bahá'ís cannot disregard the teachings or modify them to conform to the standards current in society. Bahá'u'lláh counsels not to weigh “the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men”, and states that in “this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed....” The

Manifestation institutes His laws and ordinances in accordance with His inherent knowledge of human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. From a Bahá'í perspective, then, it is the teachings of the Manifestation of God that clarify the essential elements of human nature and identity. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, when describing the chaste and holy life to which the friends are called, Shoghi Effendi explains: "It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age. Nay rather it seeks to demonstrate, through the dynamic force of its example, the pernicious character of such theories, the falsity of such standards, the hollowness of such claims, the perversity of such habits, and the sacrilegious character of such excesses." A believer in Bahá'u'lláh accepts His teachings and, out of love for Him, strives to obey His commandments; all Bahá'ís struggle in different ways to adhere to these teachings, and they are encouraged to remain steadfast and active in community life despite their shortcomings.

(From a letter dated 12 June 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[8]

### **C. Contemporary sexual practices and living a Bahá'í life**

The Bahá'í attitude towards the condition of homosexuality differs from its attitude towards those who engage in homosexual practices. The Guardian states that a Bahá'í who faces this challenge must strive daily to come closer to the Bahá'í standard and, in this process, should be treated with tolerance and receive help, advice, and sympathy. In one instance he encouraged the believers in question to adhere to their Faith and not to withdraw from active service because of the tests they experienced. In this connection, it may be helpful to consider that the challenge of striving to live a chaste and holy life is one that confronts every Bahá'í who is seeking to align his life with the principles of the Faith.

(From a letter dated 22 December 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[9]

### **D. The Bahá'í teachings and the perspective of the scientific and medical communities**

In letters written on his behalf, the Guardian explained that homosexual practice is forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh. This conclusion is drawn not as a reflection of the scientific knowledge of the time but is a statement of the meaning of the Text made in his role as authorized interpreter and therefore cannot be altered.

(From a letter dated 20 January 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly)

[10]

As to the points you raise about homosexuality, this is not a question of the relationship between science and religion. Sacred Texts contain various laws and admonitions that, in one way or another, redirect or restrict behaviors that arise from inclinations and desires which occur naturally in human beings. As you are well aware, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts: "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men". The fundamental Bahá'í teachings pertaining to sexual behavior are found in the explicit statements of Bahá'u'lláh and the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and are not subject to change by the House of Justice.

(From a letter dated 21 July 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[11]

With respect to the causes of homosexuality, this appears to be a complex question and further inquiry will no doubt be conducted by scientists in future. While there are passages from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi suggesting that individuals might benefit from medical counsel when dealing with aspects of the challenge they face, the perspective of the medical community on homosexuality, which has changed significantly over the years, is one that only it can determine. The House of Justice does not wish to comment on the merits of particular forms of intervention, some of which are quite controversial. It is left to the individual to determine whether a medical approach or counseling will be of personal assistance.

(From a letter dated 12 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[12]

You indicated that you cannot point to any credible evidence of a scientific nature that a long-term homosexual relationship is damaging. While science may provide insight into what is natural—that is, what appears in nature—it does not speak to whether a “natural” behavior ought or ought not be expressed. In the mid-1900s, scientific information was interpreted to support the social consensus on homosexuality; today, the same is true, but with opposite results. Questions concerning moral action, however, lie beyond the province of science. In some societies, traditional values set the standard for behavior. Many contemporary societies allow freedom in personal morality so long as the choices of individuals do no harm to others. For Bahá’ís, moral boundaries are defined by the divine Laws and Teachings set forth in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. There is, however, no expectation that those who are not Bahá’ís will uphold this standard; we are to eschew prejudice of all kinds, and avoid imposing our values on others or passing judgment on them on the basis of our own beliefs.

You have also asked whether the House of Justice “can point to effective treatments of homosexuality that have a track record of success.” This is a matter for science to determine, and, clearly, the perspective of the medical community on homosexuality has changed significantly over the years. The question, however, is not whether sexual orientation can be changed, but whether, as a Bahá’í, one endeavors to abide by Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. It is left to the individual believer to determine whether counselling or some other approach would be of personal assistance in this regard.

(From a letter dated 7 July 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[13]

### **E. Attitudes toward homosexuality**

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 30 January 2005, on the subject of homosexuality. It warmly acknowledges your attitude of compassion and deep love for your daughter, who has informed you recently of her homosexual orientation, and it commends your sincere efforts to understand the Bahá’í Teachings on homosexuality through exhaustive study of the writings and consultation with a Counsellor for your area.

You indicate that the source of your anguish is the impossibility of reconciling your appreciation of the many wonderful qualities of your daughter with what you understand to be the Bahá'í belief that “the practice of homosexuality will lead to the degradation of society through the erosion of the family”. The essence of the Bahá'í position on this subject, however, does not have to do with judgments about individuals or about evidence pertaining to social consequences. Rather, homosexual practice is proscribed for Bahá'ís because of the explicit statements of Bahá'u'lláh and their clarification by Shoghi Effendi. The Manifestation “doeth as He willeth” in establishing His laws and ordinances in accordance with human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. To recognize Bahá'u'lláh is to have faith in His authority to make the judgments necessary to guide the progress of humanity through the course of the dispensation. Someone who is not a Bahá'í, of course, is not expected to adhere to the teachings, while a believer, just as naturally, will struggle to conform to the divine standard in its entirety.

As you are aware from your reading, the Bahá'í attitude towards the condition of homosexuality differs from its attitude towards those who engage in homosexual practices. To regard homosexuals with prejudice and disdain would be entirely inappropriate for a Bahá'í. The House of Justice urges you to avoid dwelling on any conflicted thoughts or emotions which you may experience and to continue to demonstrate wholehearted love and acceptance toward your daughter. Such an attitude does not in any way imply agreement with her actions. As a parent, the main thing is that you strive to deal with these challenges in a manner consistent with the spirit of the Cause of God, which is neither harsh and maledictory nor excessively liberal and forbearing.

(From a letter dated 5 June 2005 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[14]

The purpose of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is the realization of the organic unity of the entire human race, and Bahá'ís are enjoined to eliminate from their lives all forms of prejudice and to manifest respect towards all. Therefore, to regard those with a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain would be against the spirit of the Faith. Furthermore, a Bahá'í is exhorted to be “an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression”, and it would be entirely appropriate for a believer to come to the defense of those whose fundamental rights are being denied or violated.

At the same time, you are no doubt aware of the relevant teachings of the Faith that govern the personal conduct of Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í Writings state that marriage is a union between a man and a woman and that sexual relations are restricted to a couple who are married to each other. Other passages from the Writings state that the practice of homosexuality is not permitted. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on personal morality are binding on Bahá'ís, who strive, as best they can, to live up to the high standards He has established.

In attempting to reconcile what may appear to be conflicting obligations, it is important to understand that the Bahá'í community does not seek to impose its values on others, nor does it pass judgment on others on the basis of its own moral standards. It does not see itself as one among competing social groups and organizations, each vying to establish its particular social agenda. In working for social justice, 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. In connection with issues of concern to homosexuals, the former would be freedom from discrimination and the latter the opportunity for civil marriage.

(From a letter dated 27 October 2010 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[15]

In a letter written on his behalf concerning the Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality, Shoghi Effendi explained that “the young believers in question must adhere to their Faith, and not withdraw from active service, because of the tests they experience. In one way or another, we are all tested; and this must strengthen us, not weaken us.” All Bahá'ís struggle to meet the Bahá'í standard in different ways, and this effort is, except in limited circumstances, between the individual and God. The attitude an individual believer is to hold toward the imperfections of others is explicitly set forth. We are to be forbearing, concerned with our own shortcomings and not the shortcomings of others; we are to dwell only on good qualities and ignore the bad; and we are not to gossip, backbite, or “breathe ... the sins of others”. Yet, we are not to deny or contend with the authoritative texts, try to impose personal views on others, or insist that the community evolve in a manner that conforms to our personal desires. Thus, it is entirely against the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings to regard those who have a homosexual orientation with prejudice and disdain. At the same time, all Bahá'ís embrace the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in their entirety and make every effort to uphold the standards set forth.

(From a letter dated 21 July 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[16]

Although they affirm their conviction that Bahá'u'lláh's teachings reflect God's purpose for humankind in this Day, Bahá'ís do not seek to impose their values on others. They do not pass judgement on others on the basis of their own moral standards and can never presume to know the standing of any soul in the eyes of God. Rather, the friends are enjoined to show forth unconditional love, to engage in fellowship with all, and to be forbearing, concerned with their own shortcomings and not those of others. They are to have a sin-covering eye, focusing on good qualities and ignoring the bad, and they must eschew backbiting and gossip. As the Bahá'í community continues to grow and develop, increasing its involvement with the wider society, such characteristics will become more pronounced and a hallmark of Bahá'í culture.

(From a letter dated 22 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[17]

Your compassion for the followers of the world's religions who are attracted to members of the same sex and face ostracism by their religious communities is warmly acknowledged.... As you state in your letter, it is not possible for the House of Justice to alter the teachings found in the explicit Text. However, the House of Justice agrees that a sympathetic approach to the question of homosexuality is warranted and that the efforts of those with a homosexual orientation who struggle to live the Bahá'í life are worthy of admiration. The Guardian made it clear that such friends should not withdraw from the community and should receive its support and encouragement. All believers struggle in different ways to live a Bahá'í life, and there is no reason that the challenge of being attracted to persons of the same sex should be singled out above others. The friends must

guard themselves against succumbing to the standards of the wider society that do not conform to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, and this is equally true for those who may absorb or manifest prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals.

(From a letter dated 2 July 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[18]

## **F. Teaching the Faith to friends who have a homosexual orientation**

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 26 March 2014 seeking advice in addressing the challenges you encounter when teaching the Faith to friends and colleagues who are homosexuals and in responding to their questions. We have been asked to convey the following.

Across different cultures and within different societies there are, of course, many individuals and groups with diverse views or practices that, in one or more ways, are not in keeping with aspects of the Bahá'í Teachings. In this respect, the instance you cite is no different from many other situations—for example, that of a confirmed atheist or a devoted believer of another religion, a committed political activist, or an individual whose habits, manner of living, or moral convictions are at variance with the standards set forth by Bahá'u'lláh. In considering how to respond to such situations, it may be helpful to reflect upon fundamental principles and admonitions about teaching the Faith. The teacher should not contend with anyone, nor concentrate on proving to others that their beliefs or way of life are wrong. Rather, the goal of teaching is to assist the seeker to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh so that, out of love for His Beauty, he or she will accept whatever has been revealed by His Pen. Ultimately, however, there must be a hearing ear. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him.

Thus, whether someone is interested in becoming a Bahá'í or not, Bahá'ís are encouraged to associate with all humanity in a manner governed by tolerance, unity, and love. Given the polemical nature of discussions concerning homosexuality in many societies, the friends should avoid being drawn into the debate, lest they be led to one or another extreme, either compromising Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings by weighing them according to contemporary social standards or allowing judgmental and prejudicial attitudes to creep into their community life. Enclosed for your assistance is an excerpt from a letter dated 9 May 2014 written on behalf of the House of Justice to an individual believer that explores these issues.

(From a letter dated 7 July 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[19]

## **G. The struggle to reconcile personal views with the Bahá'í Teachings**

It should not be surprising to find that certain aspects of the Teachings of the Faith may not conform to one's personal understanding. "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men," Bahá'u'lláh states. "In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it." As you persevere in your efforts to resolve your concerns, you are encouraged to focus your attention principally on the proofs of the authority of Bahá'u'lláh. This process will be facilitated through prayer, study of the Writings, participation in Bahá'í community life, and identification of preconceived ideas which are derived from the standards and theories of current society. As the years go by and humanity's understanding of the spiritual nature of the human being grows and develops, its view of many of the issues that are a cause of much uncertainty and contention today can be expected to change.

(From a letter dated 22 December 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[20]

You have also asked how you should deal with the conflict you face in being a Bahá'í while struggling to appreciate certain aspects of the teachings, and you wonder whether you should withdraw from the Faith or simply acknowledge that on this point you have a different view. It can be helpful to consider that, on occasion, a believer may discover that a personal understanding differs to some degree from the teachings. How can it be otherwise, when our conceptions are forged in a social milieu that Bahá'u'lláh has come to radically transform? "An exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust," Shoghi Effendi reminds us, "is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds." A sensible approach is simply to recognize that the human mind is both finite and fallible and that acquiring spiritual insight and greater understanding is a gradual and ever-unfolding process that requires time, continued study, reflection on action, and consultation with others. This perspective is quite different, however, from contending with or attempting to change explicit provisions of the Faith. Humility is required, rather than an insistence that one's personal views at any given time are correct. Thus, there is no reason why you should feel a need to withdraw from the Bahá'í community. Rather you are encouraged to keep an open mind and acknowledge, like every other Bahá'í, that there are elements of the Revelation that you are striving to understand more fully. This does not prevent you from showing forth unconditional love and support for your son.

(From a letter dated 22 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[21]

## **H. Bahá'í institutions and upholding Bahá'í standard**

The doors are open for all of humanity to enter the Bahá'í community, irrespective of their present circumstance. Associated with this invitation is the expectation that all those who accept Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God will make a sincere and persistent effort to modify those aspects of their conduct which are not in conformity with His Law. Spiritual Assemblies should, to a certain extent, be forbearing in the matter of people's moral conduct, in view of the terrible deterioration of society in

general. It would be a profound contradiction, however, for someone to profess the intention to be a Bahá'í, yet consciously reject, disregard or contend with aspects of belief or practice ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. It would only be reasonable, therefore, for a Local Assembly to request that a person with such views wait until this contradiction is resolved before enrolling in the Bahá'í community.

(From a letter dated 20 January 2009 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly)

[22]

Your email letter dated 17 April 2013, sent through your National Spiritual Assembly and asking whether Bahá'ís may attend same-sex marriages and their surrounding events, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following in response.

As you know, according to the Bahá'í Teachings, marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and sexual relations are only permissible between a couple who are married to each other. This is set forth in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and in the authoritative statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and is not susceptible to change by the House of Justice. These Teachings are only applicable to Bahá'ís, however, so if those involved are not Bahá'ís there is no reason to expect them to obey the Bahá'í law in this respect. The Bahá'í community does not seek to impose its values on others and does not pass judgement on others on the basis of its own moral standards. Rather, Bahá'u'lláh enjoins the believers to manifest tolerance and respect towards all, and therefore, to regard those with a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain would be entirely against the spirit of the Faith.

Since the circumstances of same-sex marriages in the wider society differ from case to case for all concerned, it is left to the judgement of the individual Bahá'í to decide whether or not to attend.

(From a letter dated 14 June 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[23]

Any Bahá'í who enters into wedlock with a partner of the same sex has clearly violated Bahá'í law. Despite their personal affection for the individual, the members of the community, including family members and especially members of Local Assemblies, cannot condone the conscious violation of the laws of the Faith; in such circumstances, they may themselves become subject to partial or complete suspension of administrative privileges.

(From a letter dated 30 June 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

[24]



## Letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

### 1. May 9, 2014 letter to an individual

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 May 2014

Transmitted by email: ...

...

U.S.A.

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter dated 11 January 2014 has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey to you the following.

You express concern about the challenge Bahá'ís encounter in understanding and upholding the Teachings in the face of powerful social forces influencing public attitudes towards homosexuality. In this connection, you observe that some Bahá'ís are susceptible to the argument that the Faith must change to keep up with what are perceived to be progressive social values, while some others, despite their firm adherence to the Teachings, are unable to resolve the incongruity between the Bahá'í perspective and attitudes prevailing in the wider society. Your thoughtful analysis of the issues you raise is warmly appreciated.

The contemporary discussion surrounding homosexuality, which began in the West and is increasingly promoted in other parts of the world, generally takes the form of a false dichotomy, which compels one to choose between a position that is either affirming or rejecting. It is understandable that Bahá'ís would be sensitive to acts of prejudice or oppression in any form and to the needs of those who suffer as a result. But to align with either side in the public debate is to accept the premises on which it is based. Moreover, this debate occurs within the context of a rising tide of materialism and consequent reorientation of society, over more than a century, which has among its outcomes a destructive emphasis on sexuality. Various philosophies and theories have eroded precepts of right and wrong that govern personal behavior. For some, relativism reigns and individuals are to determine their own moral preferences; others dismiss the very conception of personal morality, maintaining that any standard that restrains what is considered a natural impulse is harmful to the individual and ultimately to society. Self-indulgence, in the guise of expressing one's true nature, becomes the norm, even the touchstone of healthy living. Consequently, sexuality has become a preoccupation, pervading commerce, media, the arts, and popular culture, influencing disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and education and reducing the human being to an object. It is no longer merely a part of life, but becomes the defining element of a person's identity. At its most extreme, the doctrine aggressively propagated in some societies is that it is abnormal for adolescents to restrain their sexual impulses, unreasonable for young adults to marry without first having had sexual relations, and impossible for a married couple to remain monogamous. The unbounded expression of sexuality in almost any form is

thought to be natural and is accepted as a matter of course, the only limitation being to cause no harm to others, while any notion to the contrary is deemed narrow-minded or retrogressive. The question of same-sex marriage arises not simply as an appeal for fairness within a framework of existing values but as another step, presumed to be inevitable, in clearing away the vestiges of what is regarded to be a repressive traditional morality.

The perspective presented in the Bahá'í writings departs sharply from the pattern of thought achieving ascendancy in many societies. Bahá'u'lláh states that the knowledge of God is revealed through His Manifestation, Who has an innate awareness of the human condition and the social order, and Whose purpose is to set forth such precepts as will effect a profound transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humankind. "No man, however acute his perception," He affirms, "can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the human being has two natures, the spiritual or higher nature and the material or lower nature, and that the purpose of life is to gain mastery over the limitations and promptings of one's material nature and to cultivate spiritual qualities and virtues—the attributes of the soul which constitute one's true and abiding identity. Worldly desire is not the essence of a human being, but a veil that obscures it. Adherence to the Teachings of the Divine Educator refines the character and develops the potentialities with which each person is endowed; it liberates the individual and society from lower inclinations that give rise to the ills that afflict humanity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the distinction between the two worldviews outlined above by contrasting "the political freedom of Europeans, which leaves the individual free to do whatsoever he desires as long as his action does not harm his neighbor" with the freedom "born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty." "In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God," 'Abdu'l-Bahá concludes. "Man may not transgress this law, even though no harm is inflicted on one's neighbor. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all—others as well as oneself—and, in the sight of God, the harm done to one individual or to his neighbor is the same and is reprehensible in both cases." Thus, for Bahá'ís, just as the development of a strong and healthy body requires adherence to sound physical practices and disciplines, so too, the refinement of character requires effort to act within the framework of moral principles delineated by the Manifestation of God.

While Bahá'ís hold specific beliefs about human identity, sexuality, personal morality, and individual and social transformation, they also believe that individuals must be free to investigate truth and should not be coerced. They are, therefore, enjoined to be tolerant of those whose views differ from their own, not to judge others according to their own standards, and not to attempt to impose these standards on society. To regard a person who has a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain is entirely against the spirit of the Faith. And where occasion demands, it would be appropriate to speak out or act against unjust or oppressive measures directed towards homosexuals.

The House of Justice feels it would be ill-advised to engage in discussions intended to convince those who do not accept the station of Bahá'u'lláh that their views are erroneous; such an effort would ultimately prove fruitless. Shoghi Effendi counseled the friends "to have neither concern for, nor involvement in, the controversies of politicians, the wranglings of theologians or any of the ailing social theories current amongst men." The response of the Bahá'í community to the challenges facing humanity lies not in combating specific issues one by one but rather in making efforts to uplift the vision of their compatriots and to work with them for the betterment of

the world. In their involvement in society at all levels, the friends should distinguish between those discourses associated with forces of disintegration, such as those which overemphasize sexuality, where involvement would be unproductive, and those associated with forces of integration, whose aim is unity and the collaborative resolution of social ills, to which they can constructively contribute. They should be mindful that the divisive issues of the day, diametrically opposed to the Teachings but often presented in the guise of truth or progress, exert themselves upon the Bahá'í community and can at times result in those "severe mental tests" that the writings state would "inevitably sweep over His loved ones of the West—tests that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life."

Just as Bahá'ís do not impose their views on others, they cannot relinquish their principles because of changing trends in popular thought. The pattern of life to which they aspire, Shoghi Effendi writes, "can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age." Bahá'u'lláh counsels not to weigh "the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men," and "in this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed...." To accept Bahá'u'lláh is to accept His Teachings, including those that pertain to personal morality, even if one must struggle to live up to His standard. It would be a profound contradiction for someone to profess to be a Bahá'í, yet reject, disregard, or contend with aspects of belief or practice He ordained. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh describes the twin duties "prescribed by God for His servants" to be recognition of the Manifestation and acceptance of all His ordinances. "These twin duties are inseparable," He asserts. "Neither is acceptable without the other." Bahá'ís consciously choose to abide by Bahá'u'lláh's exhortations out of love for Him and assurance in the efficacy of His guidance, not out of blind obedience. "Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws," Bahá'u'lláh states. "Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power." His Teachings are a safeguard for one's true nature and purpose. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "It is essential that children be reared in the Bahá'í way, that they may find happiness both in this world and the next. If not, they shall be beset by sorrows and troubles, for human happiness is founded upon spiritual behavior."

You are, of course, well aware of the explicit Bahá'í standard. Marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and sexual relations are only permissible between husband and wife. These points are laid down in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi and are not subject to change by the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'u'lláh also prohibits certain sexual acts, including homosexual relations; if such statements are considered by some to be unclear, the unambiguous interpretations provided by Shoghi Effendi constitute a binding exposition of His intent. The Guardian's interpretations, made in his role as the authoritative expounder, clarify the true meaning of the Text and are not derived from the scientific knowledge of the time.

Bahá'ís must also be on their guard lest condemnatory attitudes stemming from the public debate take root in their communities. Backbiting and gossip, prejudice and estrangement, have no place. All recognize the need to transform themselves in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, all struggle in different ways to live a Bahá'í life, and there is no reason that the challenge of being attracted to persons of the same sex should be singled out and treated differently from other challenges. The Guardian made it clear that Bahá'ís with a homosexual orientation should not withdraw from the community and should receive its support and encouragement. The House of Justice sympathizes deeply with those individuals, and their families, who strive in this respect to

understand and hold fast to the Teachings while buffeted by the controversy unfolding within their societies.

Enclosed for your study are copies of two letters that touch on related themes. Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that you may be guided and confirmed by the blessings of the Almighty.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Enclosures

cc:International Teaching Centre	(with enclosures)
Board of Counsellors in the Americas	(with enclosures)
National Assembly of the United States	(with enclosures)

## 2. April 23, 2013 letter to a National Spiritual Assembly

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

23 April 2013

Transmitted by email: ...

The National Spiritual Assembly  
of the Bahá'ís of ...

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter of 6 November 2009, in which you state that some of the friends in your community and in other Scandinavian countries experience difficulties in adhering to the Bahá'í principle of chastity, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been directed to convey to you the following and regret that the pressure of work at the Bahá'í World Centre has prevented us from writing to you sooner.

The challenge you face in helping the friends in your community to understand the Baha'i teachings and to apply them in their lives, as the forces of materialism continue to grow in strength, is appreciated by the Universal House of Justice. Enclosed for your reference is a letter recently written on its behalf to three believers in a neighbouring country who shared similar concerns about the struggles experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in their efforts to uphold the standards of the Faith, particularly those related to chastity and marriage. It is hoped that the points set out in the letter will assist you in your deliberations on the subject. As the letter makes clear, the issues involved can best be considered in light of the relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavours, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted them.

One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with "the feet of detachment". The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through "active, whole-hearted and continued participation" in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: "Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe from the Teachings." "By becoming a real part of that living organism", the letter went on, "you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá'í Teachings." Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet, when the desire to uphold the Bahá'í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unflinching love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.

Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá'ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring to achieve the Bahá'í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá'í community; nor do judgemental attitudes and self-righteousness.

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá'í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: "A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society." The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community's mission. The institutions of a Bahá'í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá'í institution must energetically engage.

Apart from the measures noted above, which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá'í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá'í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behaviour contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá'í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

Should the conduct of a believer become so blatant as to attract the attention of the Assembly, it would want, after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues, to offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved. In most cases it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards. Dispassionate counselling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law is generally required. So, too, is patience needed, and he or she should be given sufficient time to bring about a change. The Assembly, often aided by the Counsellors or the members of the Auxiliary Boards, may have to help the individual reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options. In deciding on what approach to take, the Assembly should be guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá'í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards. When a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation, continued patience and loving guidance are in order. All throughout, of course, care is taken to ensure that an individual's struggles do not become a source of backbiting or disunity in the community. In this the members of the community need to remember that they should each focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.

Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions—this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection. What is at stake is the participation of the individual in those aspects of community life internal to the body of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, not his or her civil rights. In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community. Restricting the believer from other forms of service—for instance, acting as a tutor of a study circle or as a children's class teacher—may also be considered. Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the

individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, "although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline," this prerogative of the National Assembly "should be used only in extreme cases." If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, "it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá'ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Bahá'u'lláh," which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, "create an impossible and ridiculous situation."

One final point deserves mention: There may be times when an individual who shows complete indifference to the counsels of the institutions and firm resolution in his or her desire to maintain the status quo has no apparent interest in engaging in the life of the Bahá'í community. In such a case, provided that his or her conduct has no significant bearing on the good name of the Faith, the Assembly may decide to leave the individual to go his or her own way, neither insisting on continued contact nor feeling obliged to impose sanctions. Equally, however, the Assembly need not be anxious about quickly removing the name of the individual from its rolls, given that circumstances change and a person may, over time, decide to mend his or her ways and return to participate in the life of the community.

In considering matters such as those outlined above, both in handling particular cases and in addressing the broader question of cultivating an attitude of love and respect towards Bahá'í laws and standards, you will no doubt find ongoing consultation with the Counsellors both essential and illuminating.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure

cc:International Teaching Centre	(with enclosure)
Board of Counsellors in ...	(with enclosure)
Counsellor ...	(with enclosure)



### 3. April 19, 2013 letter to a group of individuals

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

19 April 2013

Transmitted by email: ...

...

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter of 24 July 2009, regarding the difficulties experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in Western countries in adhering to certain of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, was received, and it is deeply regretted that a reply has been so long delayed. Your thoughtful questions were carefully considered by the Universal House of Justice, which has instructed us to write to you as follows.

You state that the disparity between the sexual mores of contemporary Western society and the standards of the Baha'i teachings, which, you indicate, are "in accordance with the moral code of the East," poses a considerable challenge to the current generation of young believers. In this connection you explain that, since, historically, a great deal of shame was associated with sexuality in European society, and so much energy was directed towards hiding and suppressing it, to abstain from sexual relations before marriage is now negatively viewed as pietism. You add that today marriage is delayed into the thirties after young people have completed their education and saved money for a home, that married life is more complex than in the past since both spouses usually work, and that those who profess ideals of chastity, as in the priesthood, often fall prey to illicit behaviour. Further, you suggest that many young Bahá'ís struggle to meet the standard of purity set forth in the teachings and that other young people may be reticent to join the Faith out of a reluctance to uphold it. The House of Justice appreciates the sincerity with which you have expressed your thoughts and acknowledges the very real sense of concern you feel, as the gulf between the principles laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and the generally accepted practices of society continues to widen.

Young Bahá'í in Europe face a particular challenge in this respect. Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture, the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others. Yet, reflect upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trenchant analysis of the limitations of European civilization in His treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Weigh carefully, next, His many exhortations to the individual in that same volume to "become a source of social good" and to "lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race." Far from allowing themselves to be acculturated to the standards of society, then, Bahá'ís are called upon to be the vanguard and champions of a new civilization. The important issues you raise, therefore, need to be considered not only in the context of the current condition of society but also

in light of the nature of Bahá'u'lláh's laws and teachings and the responsibilities shouldered by every one of His followers, as well as by the community and the institutions of the Faith—this, if the potential to achieve His purpose for humanity is to be realized.

We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.

Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. Yet, the happiness and well-being of humanity—depend upon the opposite: cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality. Divine teachings shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. "Man should know his own self, Baha'u'llah states, "and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty."

"The object of every Revelation", Bahá'u'lláh declares, is "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions." His appearance signals the emergence of "a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God", a race that will be purified "from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires" and that will manifest "the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth." The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh provide "such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth". Thus, enshrined in His Revelation is a pattern for future society, radically different from any established in the past, and the promotion of His laws and exhortations constitutes an inseparable part of the effort to lay the foundations of such a society.

It is evident that, if the body and mind are to maintain good health, the laws that govern physical existence cannot be ignored. So, too, for any nation to function properly, there are certain social conventions and laws that, everyone accepts, must be followed. In the same way, there are laws and principles that govern our spiritual lives, and attention to them is of vital importance if the individual and society as a whole are to develop in a sound and harmonious manner. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress. His teachings serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness, whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behaviour, leads to true freedom. "Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation," Baha'u'llah states, "they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God

in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things." "Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws," He declares further, "Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power."

Throughout the world, in diverse cultures, Bahá'ís encounter values and practices that stand in sharp contrast to the teachings of the Faith. Some are embedded in social structures, for instance, racial prejudice and gender discrimination, economic exploitation and political corruption. Others pertain to personal conduct, especially with respect to the use of alcohol and drugs, to sexual behaviour, and to self-indulgence in general. If Bahá'ís simply surrender to the mores of society, how will conditions change? How will the people of the world distinguish today's moribund order from the civilization to which Bahá'u'lláh is summoning humanity? "Humanity", the Ridvan 2012 message of the House of Justice explained, "is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire." "A single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself," the message noted. Young Bahá'ís especially need to take care, lest they imagine they can live according to the norms of contemporary society while adhering to Bahá'í ideals at some minimum level to assuage their conscience or to satisfy the community, for they will soon find themselves consumed in a struggle to obey even the most basic of the Faith's moral teachings and powerless to take up the challenges of their generation. "Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar," Bahá'u'lláh warns. The inner joy that every individual seeks, unlike a passing emotion, is not contingent on outside influences; it is a condition, born of certitude and conscious knowledge, fostered by a pure heart, which is able to distinguish between that which has permanence and that which is superficial. "Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven," are Bahá'u'lláh's words, "yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face."

The duty to obey the laws brought by Bahá'u'lláh for a new age, then, rests primarily on the individual believer. It lies at the heart of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved; "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty," is Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation. Yet what is expected in this connection is effort sustained by earnest desire, not instantaneous perfection. The qualities and habits of thought and action that characterize Bahá'í life are developed through daily exertion. "Bring thyself to account each day", writes Bahá'u'lláh. "Let each mom be better than its eve", He advises, "and each morrow richer than its yesterday." The friends should not lose heart in their personal struggles to attain to the Divine standard, nor be seduced by the argument that, since mistakes will inevitably be made and perfection is impossible, it is futile to exert an effort. They are to steer clear of the pitfalls of hypocrisy, on the one hand—that is, saying one thing yet doing another—and heedlessness, on the other—that is, disregard for the laws, ignoring or explaining away the need to follow them. So too is paralysis engendered by guilt to be avoided; indeed, preoccupation with a particular moral failing can, at times, make it more challenging for it to be overcome.

What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually

acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá'í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and backbiting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the licence that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will.

The Universal House of Justice wishes us to assure you of its supplications on your behalf, that the confirmations of the Blessed Beauty may attend all your efforts undertaken in His path.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: National Assembly of ...