

INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CENTRE
WORLD CENTRE OF THE BAHAI FAITH

1 July 1984

Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas

Dearly loved Co-workers,

Recently Dr. Peter Khan, a Counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre, completed a visit to North America which included meetings with Baha'is in a number of cities throughout the United States.

Upon his return Dr. Khan reported to us that he had met some believers who appeared preoccupied with a fear of impending calamity, based largely on views derived from pilgrim notes, and that this fear was diverting these believers from the teaching work and the pursuit of the goals of the Plan.

In light of Dr. Khan's impressions we decided to provide you with some passages of guidance from the authoritative Institutions of the Faith which clarify the issues raised by this subject.

The first issue concerns the status of pilgrim notes. The history of religion clearly illustrates the misunderstanding, division and error that have resulted from reliance on verbal statements as a source of authoritative knowledge of religious teachings. One of the precious bounties of this Dispensation is that the door has been closed, clearly and unambiguously, to such a source of problems. In response to a question, the Master wrote:

"Thou hast written concerning the pilgrims and pilgrim's notes. Any narrative that is not authenticated by a Text should not be trusted. Narratives, even if true, cause confusion. For the people of Baha, the Text, and only the Text, is authentic."
(Translated extract from a previously-untranslated Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha)

while a letter written on behalf of the Guardian stated that:

"Shoghi Effendi has often said that the notes of the pilgrims should be for their own personal use and bear absolutely no authority. What he desires to convey to the friends at large he will always say in his general letters."

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 26 February 1933)

A very valuable clarification has been provided recently by the Universal House of Justice in stating:

"The instructions of the Master and the Guardian make it very clear that pilgrims' notes are hearsay and cannot claim the authority and binding power of the Sacred Text.... Moreover, the fact that the pilgrim writing of his experience is a reliable or well-known believer, or that the reported statement seems to be repeated in the notes of several pilgrims, does not in itself confer authority upon the pilgrim's note in question."

(Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated 23 January 1980)

In light of these passages from the authoritative centre of the Faith, we believe the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members can perform a valuable service by encouraging the believers to base their knowledge of the Teachings on Sacred Text, together with the interpretations of the Guardian and the clarifications of the Universal House of Justice, rather than upon pilgrim notes, no matter how tantalising these notes may be or how dramatic may be the future events described in these notes.

The second issue concerns the nature of the catastrophic events associated with this period in history. The general messages of the Guardian to the world-wide Baha'i community make clear reference in several places to a "retributive calamity" which will purify the human race and knit its components into a unified whole. One of the most detailed passages from the writings of the Guardian is the following:

"The violent derangement of the world's equilibrium; the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day Order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smouldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth - these stand out as the signs and portents that must either herald or accompany the retributive calamity which, as decreed by Him Who is the Judge and Redeemer of mankind, must, sooner or later, afflict a society which, for the most part, and for over a century, has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of God's Messenger in this day - a calamity which must purge the human race of the dross of its age-long corruptions, and weld its component parts into a firmly-knit world-embracing Fellowship..." (Taken from "Messages to the Baha'i World 1950-1957" by Shoghi Effendi, page 103)

The Guardian addressed this theme in several other passages in his writings, and also spoke of it to pilgrims. In some instances these pilgrims returned to their homes in America and conveyed an alarming account of their impressions of what the Guardian said about the prospects of warfare and its effect on the large cities of the world. These impressions were clarified, and an authoritative statement provided when Shoghi Effendi wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, stating through his secretary:

"He has been told that some of the friends are disturbed over reports brought back by the pilgrims concerning the dangers facing America in the future whenever another world conflagration breaks out.

"He does not feel that the Baha'is should waste time dwelling on the dark side of things. Any intelligent person can understand from the experiences of the last world war, and keeping abreast of what modern science has developed in the way of weapons for any future war, that big cities all over the world are going to be in tremendous danger. This is what the Guardian has said to the pilgrims.

"Entirely aside from this, he has urged the Baha'is, for the sake of serving the Faith, to go out from these centers of intense materialism, where life nowadays is so hurried and grinding and, dispersing to towns and villages, carry the Message far and wide throughout the cities of the American Union. He strongly believes that the field outside the big cities is more fertile, that the Baha'is in the end will be happier for having made this move, and that, in case of an outbreak of war, it stands to reason they will be safer, just the way any other person living in the country, or away from the big industrial areas, is safer.

"It is remarks such as these that the pilgrims have carried back in their notes. He sees no cause for alarm, but he certainly believes that the Baha'is should weigh these thoughts, and take action for the sake of spreading the Faith of Baha'u'llah, and for their own ultimate happiness as well. Indeed the two things go together."

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, 20 June 1954)

Particularly noteworthy in the passage from the Guardian is the statement that "He does not feel that Baha'is should waste time dwelling on the dark side of things". This is far removed from the endless speculation, even to the point of obsessive preoccupation, with which some believers have unfortunately approached this subject. While the Guardian envisaged the likelihood of further warfare in the world, he did not categorically identify such war with the "unforeseen calamity" foretold by Baha'u'llah. In fact, he wrote, on another occasion:

"We have no indication of exactly what nature the apocalyptic upheaval will be: it might be another war ... but as students of our Baha'i writings it is clear that the longer the 'Divine Physician' (i.e. Baha'u'llah) is withheld from healing the ills of the world, the more severe will be the crises, and the more terrible the sufferings of the patient."

(From a letter dated 21 November 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

This point was further emphasised by the Universal House of Justice in a letter which stated:

"... although there is every reason to expect that the world will experience travails and testing as never before, we do not know what form these upheavals will take, when exactly they will come, how severe they will be, nor how long they will last."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 19 March 1981)

In the light of this definitive statement from the Supreme Body, it is difficult to see how some individual believers can make categorical statements about the exact form and severity of the upheavals which lie in store for mankind.

On another occasion, the Universal House of Justice responded to some questions forwarded from a number of Baha'i children who had been present at a District Convention and who enquired about impending calamities. In its answer the Supreme Body stated:

"Without minimizing the serious situation facing a world heedless of Baha'u'llah's admonitions, it must be remembered that He also refers to the Golden Age of civilization to come. The House of Justice hopes that Baha'i teachers and parents will do their utmost to encourage the children to study the explanations of the beloved Guardian about the twin processes at work in the world -- the steady growth of the Faith, and the devastating forces of disintegration assailing the outworn institutions of present-day society."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 29 December 1981)

The importance of the believers acquiring a clear understanding of these twin processes, discussed by the Guardian in "The World Order of Baha'u'llah", "Citadel of Faith", "God Passes By" and "The Promised Day is Come", cannot be over-emphasized. The writings of Shoghi Effendi provide an invaluable perspective in which to view present-day events and trends, and describe in some detail the manner in which a presently-troubled world will progress to that Golden Age of world unity and world civilization which will be the choicest fruit of the Dispensation of Baha'u'llah.

The third issue concerns the way in which the believers should respond to the prospect of an "unforeseen calamity" to occur in the future. This is perhaps the most important of the three issues, since it is of paramount importance to the future well-being and happiness of the believers that they follow, as closely as possible, the infallible guidance emanating from the pen of the Guardian and now the Universal House of Justice. The Guardian repeatedly emphasised the vital role assigned to the Baha'is in bringing unity and healing to a disordered world. He wrote:

"The world with the various calamities that have befallen it, will be completely ravaged and its civilization demolished, if the Baha'is do not come to its help and imbue it with the spirit that Baha'u'llah has brought to the world. The economic factions, political parties, national hatreds, racial prejudices, and religious antagonisms, will continue to bring about devastating wars until the spirit of the Cause permeates the heart of man, and its universal teachings pull down the existing barriers.

Let us be reminded of our duty by the misery we see around us, and arise for the prosecution of our noble duty."

(From a letter dated 24 November 1931 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the American National Spiritual Assembly)

The supreme importance of direct Baha'i work was further emphasised in this passage, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

"... he is constantly pointing out to the Baha'is that their direct Baha'i work - teaching, perfecting the administration, propagating the Cause of God is their job and of immediate importance because, it is, so to speak, spiritually organic. What they are doing will release forces which will combat the terrible disintegration of society which we witness today in every field, political, economic or otherwise."
(From a letter dated 5 July 1947, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He also pointed out the direct connection between the suffering in the world and the lamentable spiritual condition of mankind at the present time, when he wrote:

"There is nothing in the teachings to tell us exactly how much longer the present turbulent state of the world is going to endure; but we do know that humanity must suffer until it becomes spiritually awakened, and that the Most Great Peace will come, as promised by Baha'u'llah."
(From a letter dated 26 February 1946, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

This most important theme has been reiterated in many letters of the Universal House of Justice to individual believers, two of which are quoted below.

"The House of Justice points out that calamities have been and are occurring and will continue to happen until mankind has been chastened sufficiently to accept the Manifestation for this day. 'Abdu'l-Baha anticipated that the Lesser Peace could be established before the end of the twentieth century. However, Baha'is should not be diverted from the work of the Cause by the fear of catastrophes but should try to understand why they occur. The beloved Guardian, in innumerable places, has explained the reasons for these occurrences, and since they happen from time to time as explained above we should not be concerned as to when they occur."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 15 April 1976)

"The House of Justice points out that Baha'u'llah in no uncertain terms has said 'O ye peoples of the world! Know, verily, that an unforeseen calamity followeth you, and grievous retribution awaiteth you. Think not that which ye have committed hath been effaced in My sight.' Therefore it considers that it would be fruitless to attempt to foresee the time or the nature of a calamity which Baha'u'llah Himself said was 'unforeseen'. No doubt the remarkable progress being made in scientific endeavor holds true in the study by experts of geologic upheavals. But we cannot be certain that predictions of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or tidal waves caused by such phenomena can be identified as the cataclysmic events to which Baha'u'llah refers.

"In letters to other believers who have asked questions similar to yours, the House of Justice has emphasized that the friends should not waste their time and energies in fruitless speculations on this question. Rather, they should concentrate every ounce of energy on the winning of the goals of the Five Year Plan, which they have clearly

before them, confident in the knowledge that whatever may happen in the world, however calamitous it may outwardly appear, will promote God's unalterable purpose for the unification of mankind."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 20 June 1976)

Note that the second letter was written during the course of the Five Year Plan, and its guidance is equally applicable to the present Plan. A few months ago, the Universal House of Justice responded to a question arising from the Counsellors in Europe by stating:

"... the believers should understand that a catastrophic breakdown of human society as a result of mankind's ignoring His Message has been clearly foretold by Baha'u'llah, and that we are, indeed, in the midst of such a breakdown. The main concern of the Baha'is should be, not how to preserve themselves physically, but how to seize the opportunities that these conditions present to convey the healing teachings of the Faith to their fellow-citizens. The rising level of concern at this time may well be one of the keys that will assist the friends to open the eyes of the peoples of Europe to the true nature of their predicament and to win their allegiance to the Cause of God."

(From a communication dated 20 February 1984 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

The opportunities which the House of Justice describes as existing in Europe as a result of concern about the breakdown of human society are also to be found elsewhere throughout the world as the disruption of human affairs invades even the most remote corners of the planet.

Our purpose in sharing these passages with you is to seek the aid of the members of the Auxiliary Boards and the assistants, in drawing the attention of the believers to the responsibilities, privileges and opportunities which are now before them, and in reassuring the believers that the teachings of the Faith indicate unmistakably that mankind will definitely traverse this period of unprecedented turmoil and will establish the Lesser Peace as a prelude to the ultimate proclamation of the Most Great Peace.

The believers will find their true salvation, their abiding happiness and their ultimate well-being through unremitting dedication to pursuit of the goals of the Plan rather than through paralyzing inertia at the prospect of further disruption of those institutions and conditions that impede the forward march of the Cause of God.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

(signed) International Teaching Centre