

author: Ann M. Boylan
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Ann M. Boylan

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About this Document

This file contains four parts:

- (1) a 1912 one-page Pilgrim's Note from Ann Boylan;
- (2) a 1947 letter from John B. Cornell to the Guardian which, among other topics, quoted three lines from this Pilgrim's Note;
- (3) the 1947 response written on behalf of the Guardian to John B. Cornell;
- (4) a 1974 letter from the Universal House of Justice which quoted the Guardian's letter to Cornell. Material shared by and posted with permission from Cornell.

#1: Pilgrim's Note from Ann Boylan

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

- Recorded by Ann M. Boylan {{p1}}*

Walking today in the gardens by the Hudson River in the early morning, I had the privilege of being with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and I told Him how some people have tried to spread the untruth that the Bahá'ís teach "free love."

He answered: "The marriage bond is very important." He repeated it again: "Very, very important. Marriage must be strict and pure. You must all be very careful about this." He continued: "Women and men must not embrace each other when not married, or not about to be married. They must not kiss each other. If women kiss women, that is not bad. If men kiss men, that is not bad. But men and women must not embrace. Such conduct is not taught in the Bahá'í Revelation. AND IT MUST NOT BE DONE. IT IS NOT PERMITTED. If they wish to greet each other, or comfort each other, they may take each other by the hand. "Describe how you have seen the women of the East, as in Haifa. The Blessed Beauty directed that there should be great modesty in the women, that they should not bare the neck and bosom, and that the women in the East should wear a veil. "The conditions are different in the West, but the women of the West must see the spiritual significance of this Teaching. Do not distress

them by saying that they should not have done this or that. They will see by themselves. Talk about this only, so to speak, one by one, with the friends, when you have the opportunity.”

[^] The meaning of this statement can be understood via reference to this passage from J.E. Esslemont’s *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, pp. 149-150: “In bringing about the emancipation of women as in other matters, Bahá’u’lláh counsels His followers to avoid methods of violence. An excellent illustration of the Bahá’í method of social reform has been given by the Bahá’í in Persia, Egypt and Syria. In these countries it is customary for Muḥammadan women outside their homes to wear a veil covering the face. The Báb indicated that in the New Dispensation women would be relieved from this irksome restraint, but Bahá’u’lláh counsels His followers, where no important question of morality is involved, to defer to established customs until people become enlightened, rather than scandalize those amongst whom they live, and arouse needless antagonism. The Bahá’í women, therefore, although well aware that the antiquated custom of wearing the veil is, for enlightened people, unnecessary and inconvenient, yet quietly put up with the inconvenience, rather than rouse a storm of fanatical hatred and rancorous opposition by uncovering their faces in public. This conformity to custom is in no way due to fear, but to an assured confidence in the power of education and in the transforming and life-giving effect of true religion. Bahá’ís in these regions are devoting their energies to the education of their children, especially their girls, and to the diffusion and promotion of the Bahá’í ideals, well knowing that as the new spiritual life grows and spreads among the people, antiquated customs and prejudices will by and by be shed, as naturally and inevitably as bud scales are shed in spring when the leaves and flowers expand in the sunshine.” — ed.

Notes of a talk with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, New York City, June 7, 1912

#2: Letter from John B. Cornell to The Guardian

Laguna Honda Home San Francisco 16, California September 21, 1947

Beloved Shoghi Effendi,

These questions have perplexed me and a number of my fellow-believers:

1. Some of the friends consider that your letter of February 23, 1924, means that local and national assemblies are infallible, or at least not to be criticized, even in the business discussions of the 19-Day Feast. If the assembly decision is “the voice of truth, never to be challenged. . . its verdict truly inspired,” does this mean infallibility, with its implications of no need for community or other advice and of the heretical nature of any criticism of an assembly policy or decision?

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that it is better to agree on a subject even though it be

wrong than to disagree and be in the right, does He refer only to co-ordinating our actions or does He mean (by this and by “. . . if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise. . .”) that we should also avoid disagreeing with anyone in assembly or community consultations?

2. Does the desirability of unanimity in assembly decisions imply that a member with a minority opinion should vote against his conscience? If he feels very strongly that the other eight members were wrong may he, while obedient to the majority decision, bring the matter up at a subsequent assembly meeting and try to persuade the others to his point of view; or does the instruction to not “object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, a decision arrived at previously” preclude such reconsideration?

Some societies have artificial methods of achieving unanimity, such as motions “that the secretary be directed to cast a unanimous ballot.” Is it proper, where the “voice of the majority” is regarded as “the voice of truth, never to be challenged,” for an assembly to achieve a unanimous vote by taking a revote following a majority decision, in which case it is considered wrong for anyone to vote opposed once the voice of truth has been discovered and established?

3. Although the principle of chastity has been strongly emphasized, I have been unable to find any authoritative writings that explain clearly enough what it means for Bahá’ís. English dictionaries define chastity as freedom from unlawful sexual intercourse, and no believer doubts this requirement, so that free love, companionate marriage, etc., are regarded as wrong. However, not all can agree on whether any of the forms of sexual activity which stop short of intercourse are forbidden. A pilgrim’s note by Ann Boylan reports the Master as saying: “Women and men must not embrace each other when not married, or not about to be married. They must not kiss each other. . . . If they wish to greet each other, or comfort each other, they may take each other by the hand.” Many believers do not know this or do not believe it. The term, “easy familiarity,” is thought by many to mean simply rudeness and not applicable to invited or accepted demonstrations. Even some of the most unquestionably loyal follow the Christian custom of “kissing the bride” at Bahá’í weddings. Would you explain for us what our conduct should be in order to uphold the Bahá’í concept of chastity?

Do you give your permission to publication of your answers to the above questions in “Bahá’í News”?

Yours in His service, (Signed) John Bernard Cornell John Bernard Cornell
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#3: Response from the Guardian to John. B. Cornell

Oct. 19, 1947 Dear Bahá’í Brother:

Your letter dated Sept. 21st has been received and our beloved Guardian has instructed me to answer it on his behalf.

Regarding your questions: No. 1. There are only two institutions which are infallible, one is the guardianship, the other the International House of Justice. What the Master desired to protect the friends against was continual bickering and opinionatedness. A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Bahá'í must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony — even if a mistake has been made — are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Bahá'í way, God will right any wrongs done in the end.

No. 2. Bahá'ís are not required to vote on an Assembly against their consciences. It is better if they submit to the majority view and make it unanimous. But they are not forced to. What they must do, however, is to abide by the majority decision, as this is what becomes effective. They must not go around undermining the Assembly by saying they disagreed with the majority. In other words, they must put the Cause first and not their own opinions. He (an S.A. member) can ask the Assembly to reconsider a matter, but he has no right to force them or create inharmony because they won't change. Unanimous votes are preferable, but certainly cannot be forced upon Assembly members by artificial methods such as are used by other societies.

What Bahá'u'lláh means by chastity certainly does not include the kissing that goes on in modern society. It is detrimental to the morals of young people, and often leads them to go too far, or arouses appetites which they cannot perhaps at the time satisfy legitimately through marriage, and the suppression of which is a strain on them. The Bahá'í standard is very high, more particularly when compared with the thoroughly rotten morals of the present world. But this standard of ours will produce healthier, happier, nobler people, and induce stabler marriages. The Master's words to Ann Boylan, which you quoted, can certainly be taken as the true spirit of the teachings on the subject of sex. We must strive to achieve this exalted standard.

Assuring you of his loving prayers for the success of your Bahá'í services.

With warm greetings, R. Rabbání

P.S. If the N.S.A. wish to publish this in Bahá'í News he has no objection.

May the Beloved bless your efforts, guide your steps, and enable you to promote the best interests of His Faith,

Your true brother Shoghi {{{p3}}}

#4: Letter from the Universal House of Justice quoting #1 and #3

February 10, 1974 Universal House of Justice

National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

“We have your letter...asking about a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the subject of embracing. We have seen no such Tablet, but we have seen reference to a pilgrim’s note and the comment of the beloved Guardian on it.

“The pilgrim’s note reports the Master as saying: ‘Women and men must not embrace each other when not married, or not about to be married. They must not kiss each other....If they wish to greet each other, or comfort each other, they may take each other by the hand.’

“In a letter to an individual written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi it is said: ‘The Master’s words to..., which you quoted, can certainly be taken as the true spirit of the teachings on the subject of sex. We must strive to achieve this exalted standard.’”

(Bahá’í National Review, June, 1979, p. 5; partially cited in Lights of Guidance, pp. 440-441)

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