

Defence of the Faith and the Use of Language

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

O My Name! Utterance must needs possess penetrating power. For if bereft of this quality it would fail to exert influence. And this penetrating influence dependeth on the spirit being pure and the heart stainless. Likewise it needeth moderation, without which the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would manifest opposition from the very outset. And moderation will be obtained by blending utterance with the tokens of divine wisdom which are recorded in the sacred Books and Tablets. Thus when the essence of one's utterance is endowed with these two requisites it will prove highly effective and will be the prime factor in transforming the souls of men. This is the station of supreme victory and celestial dominion.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 2005 printing), pp 198–199) [1]

Fair speech and truthfulness, by reason of their lofty rank and position, are regarded as a sun shining above the horizon of knowledge.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 40) [2]

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 good will. 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. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding....

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, 2013 printing), CXXXII, par. 5) [3]

Say: Sow not, O people, the seeds of dissension amongst men, and contend not with your neighbor. Be patient under all conditions, and place your whole trust and confidence in God. Aid ye your Lord with the sword of wisdom and of utterance. This indeed well becometh the station of man. To depart from it would be unworthy of God, the Sovereign Lord of all, the Glorified.

(Gleanings, CXXXVI, par. 4) [4]

Beware lest ye contend with anyone, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness.

(Gleanings, CXXVIII, par. 10) [5]

...the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.

(Gleanings, CXXV, par. 2) [6]

Say: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. Meditate upon that which hath streamed forth from the heaven of the Will of thy Lord, He Who is the Source of all grace, that thou mayest grasp the intended meaning which is enshrined in the sacred depths of the Holy Writings.

(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143) [7]

However, it behoveth the writers thereof to be purged from the promptings of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity. They should enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing.

(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 39–40) [8]

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible.

(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.172–173) [9]

Thou hast written that one of the friends hath composed a treatise. This was mentioned in the Holy Presence, and this is what was revealed in response: Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the one true God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat*: “The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.” Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.

(*The Compilation of Compilations, vol. II* (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), p. 407) [10]

This Wronged One hath forbidden the people of God to engage in contention or conflict and hath exhorted them to righteous deeds and praiseworthy character. In this day the hosts that can ensure the victory of the Cause are those of goodly conduct and saintly character. Blessed are they who firmly adhere unto them and woe betide such as turn away therefrom.

(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 88) [11]

Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely preserved from annulment and is invested by Him with the splendour of His confirmation. Verily He is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

(*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 221) [12]

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace. It is incumbent upon everyone to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly. Thus man must strive that his reality may manifest virtues and perfections, the light whereof may shine upon everyone. The light of the sun shineth upon all the world and the merciful showers of Divine Providence fall upon all peoples. The vivifying breeze reviveth every living creature and all beings endued with life obtain their share and portion at His heavenly board. In like manner, the affections and loving kindness of the servants of the One True God must be bountifully and universally extended to all mankind. Regarding this, restrictions and limitations are in no wise permitted.

(Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2013, pp. 26–27) [13]

In brief, O ye believers of God! The text of the divine Book is this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong.

(Tablets of the Divine Plan, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1993, 2006 printing, p. 56) [14]

Follow thou the way of thy Lord, and say not that which the ears cannot bear to hear, for such speech is like luscious food given to small children. However palatable, rare and rich the food may be, it cannot be assimilated by the digestive organs of a suckling child. Therefore unto everyone who hath a right, let his settled measure be given.

“Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.” Such is the consummate wisdom to be observed in thy pursuits. Be not oblivious thereof, if thou wishest to be a man of action under all conditions. First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skillful physician.

(Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997, 2009 printing), section 214) [15]

It is incumbent upon the loved ones of God to exercise the greatest care and prudence in all things, whether great or small, to take counsel together and unitedly resist the onslaught of the stirrers up of strife and the movers of mischief. They must endeavor to consort in a friendly spirit with everyone, must follow moderation in their conduct, must have respect and consideration one for another and show loving-kindness and tender regard to all the peoples of the world. They must be patient and long-suffering, that they may grow to become the divine magnets of the Abhá Kingdom and acquire the dynamic power of the hosts of the realm on high.

(Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, par. 194.1) [16]

Let us not keep on forever with our fancies and illusions, with our analysing and interpreting and circulating of complex dubieties. Let us put aside all thoughts of self; let us close our eyes to all on earth, let us neither make known our sufferings nor complain of our wrongs. Rather let us

become oblivious of our own selves, and drinking down the wine of heavenly grace, let us cry out our joy, and lose ourselves in the beauty of the All-Glorious.

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, par. 195.5) [17]

Public opinion must be directed toward whatever is worthy of this day, and this is impossible except through the use of adequate arguments and the adducing of clear, comprehensive and conclusive proofs. For the helpless masses know nothing of the world, and while there is no doubt that they seek and long for their own happiness, yet ignorance like a heavy veil shuts them away from it.

(*The Secret of Divine Civilization*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2015), par. 196) [18]

It is my hope that thou mayest succeed in writing thy book. However, the language should be moderate, tempered, and infinitely courteous. Look not at the language used by that hostile writer, for he was prejudiced and unrefined. Any person with the slightest degree of fairness will understand that his writing is totally biased and inspired by enmity. This is enough proof that what he hath written is spurious.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer—translated from the Persian) [19]

From letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Touching the publication of articles and pamphlets bearing on the controversial and political issues of the day, I desire to remind my dearly-beloved fellow-workers that at the present stage when the Cause is still in its infancy, any minute and detailed analysis by the friends of subjects that are in the forefront of general discussion would often be misconstrued in certain quarters and give rise to suspicions and misunderstandings that would react unfavorably on the Cause. They would tend to create a misconception of the real object, the true mission, and the fundamental character of the Bahá'í Faith.

(*Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922–1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1998 printing), p. 102) [20]

I would specially request all National Assemblies to give their anxious and immediate consideration to this grave matter, and to devise ways and means that will secure the fullest publicity for our grievances. I would remind them that whatever is published should be couched in terms that are at once correct, forceful and inoffensive.

(*Bahá'í Administration*, p. 105) [21]

Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions. In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that world-wide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster. Let them beware lest they allow themselves to become the tools of unscrupulous politicians, or to be entrapped by the treacherous devices of the plotters and the perfidious among their countrymen.

(*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2012 printing), p. 64) [22]

There is, however, one case in which one can criticize the present social and political order without being necessarily forced to side with or oppose any existing regime. And this is the method adopted by the Guardian in his “Goal of a New World Order”. His criticisms of the world conditions besides being very general in character are abstract; that is, instead of condemning existing institutional organizations it goes deeper and analyzes the basic ideas and conceptions which have been responsible for their establishment. This being a mere intellectual and philosophical approach to the problem of world political crisis, there is no objection if you wish to try such a method, which immediately carries you from the field of practical politics to that of political theory. But in view of the fact that no clear-cut line can be drawn between theory and practice you should be extremely careful not to make too free a use of such a method.

(From a letter dated 2 March 1934 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual)

[23]

From letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The world-embracing goals of the Bahá'í Faith and the need to comply with the distinctive features of the framework for action laid out for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh at the present time dictate that, in some cases, Bahá'ís should avoid involvement in certain activities, avoid making comments on specific issues, and avoid employing particular means of expressing their desire to seek justice. They should, of course, do so without the least criticism of the aspirations of others, their actions, or methods.

(From a letter dated 24 July 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a group of three individual believers)

[24]

Your statement that the tone of articles written by Bahá'í authors in defence of the Faith should not be offensive to others is, of course, correct. The believers should concentrate their attention on their individual service and, avoiding fault-finding, preoccupy themselves with safeguarding the unity of the community, which is at present of the most vital importance. They are, however, free to consult on this matter and to share their views and suggestions with the authors of such articles in a spirit of respect and courtesy.

(From a letter dated 18 July 2010 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

[25]

While counselling His followers “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men”, but to approach diverse opinions “in the spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy”, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that deliberate attacks on the Faith are to be treated in a quite different manner:

It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God.... He that wisheth to promote the Cause of the one true God, let him promote it through his pen and tongue, rather than have recourse to sword or violence.... By the righteousness of Him Who, in this Day, crieth within the inmost heart of all created things: “God, there is none other God besides Me!” If any man were to arise to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants, such a man, however inconsiderable his share, shall be so honored in the world to come that the Concourse on high would envy his glory.

That the Faith will increasingly become the target of attacks “from within and without” is a subject that has been dealt with at considerable length in the writings of the Guardian. Speaking of “the forces that are destined to contest with God’s holy Faith”, the Guardian foresaw some decades ago the emergence of problems of the kind that have begun to concern present-day Bahá’ís, especially those friends who participate in Internet discussion groups:

They will assail not only the spirit which it inculcates, but the administration which is the channel, the instrument, the embodiment of that spirit. For as the authority with which Bahá’u’lláh has invested the future Bahá’í Commonwealth becomes more and more apparent, the fiercer shall be the challenge which from every quarter will be thrown at the verities it enshrines.

This being the case, Shoghi Effendi drew attention to the clear obligation the situation creates for members of the Faith:

No opportunity, in view of the necessity of ensuring the harmonious development of the Faith, should be ignored, which its potential enemies, whether ecclesiastical or otherwise, may offer, to set forth, in a restrained and unprovocative language, its aims and tenets, to defend its interests, to proclaim its universality, to assert the supernatural, the supra-national and non-political character of its institutions....

The Guardian’s reference to the spirit that should govern such responses on the part of the friends echoes the perspective set out in many of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings:

You must withstand them with the utmost love and kindness; consider their oppression and persecution as the caprice of children, and do not give any importance to whatever they do. For at the end the illumination of the Kingdom will overwhelm the darkness of the world....

The friends will find reflection on this perspective helpful in freeing themselves from the natural distress that abuse of the Faith they love can at times arouse, as well as from any temptation to respond inappropriately. In correcting misrepresentations of the Faith made by those who are hostile to it, our obligation is to set forth Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings cogently and courteously, but firmly, supporting them with rational proofs. Once this has been done, the challenge rests with our hearers, whatever their interests or motivations, to consider our responses in this same spirit of courtesy and objectivity. For Bahá’ís to go further than this, by engaging in acrimonious debate, much less by reflecting on the character of others, would be to cross the line that separates legitimate defence of the Faith from contention.

Because circumstances differ so widely, the responsibility must rest on each individual believer to determine, on the basis of the specific situation, where that line applies. Under most circumstances, it would seem worse than futile for a Bahá’í to attempt to defend the institutions or members of the Faith from the kind of reckless slander that has become an all too common feature of the moral deterioration of contemporary society, and that tends to characterize much of the language of the Faith’s current critics. Similarly, for believers to be drawn into discussion of subjects which the Writings themselves tell us will find clarification only through the passing of time, such as the wisdom of Bahá’u’lláh’s limiting membership of the Universal House of Justice to men, the full implication of the Will and Testament, and the process by

which the Bahá'í Commonwealth will emerge, would tend to divert attention from real and pressing issues. Such speculation may, indeed, be the real reason why such subjects are often so ardently pursued by opponents of the Cause.

Apart from the spiritual principles that must determine Bahá'í conduct in matters of this kind, it is important, too, to bear always in mind the reaction that the discussion of controversial issues, particularly in matters of religion, tends to arouse in those who are merely casual readers and listeners. While appreciating a lively discussion—and particularly the clarification of important issues—, most well-intentioned inquirers are understandably repelled by the spirit of argumentation.

(From a letter dated 22 November 1999 written by Universal House of Justice on the subject “Defending the Cause against its Opponents”) [26]

It is not surprising that individual Bahá'ís hold and express different and sometimes defective understandings of the Teachings; this is but an evidence of the magnitude of the change that this Revelation is to effect in human consciousness. As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse—with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds—a deepening of comprehension should take place. The strident insistence on individual views, however, can lead to contention, which is detrimental not only to the spirit of Bahá'í association and collaboration but to the search for truth itself.

(From a letter dated 8 February 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [27]

The House of Justice notes that you have been disturbed by some of the postings made to the email discussion group of which you have recently been a member. Email discussion groups are a new phenomenon; they can provide immense benefits for communication between people and for the teaching of the Faith, but, as you have seen, they can also give rise to far-reaching problems. The use of email requires an adjustment of perception. In the past, discussions among Bahá'ís would take place orally among groups of friends in private, or at summer schools and other Bahá'í events, or in letters between individuals. Inevitably, many erroneous statements were made; not all comments were as temperate as they should have been; many statements were misunderstood by those who heard them. After all, not all Bahá'ís have a profound knowledge of the teachings, and it is clear that even academic eminence is no guarantee of a correct understanding of the Revelation of God. Before email such extravagances had a limited range and were of an ephemeral nature. Now, the same kind of discussion is spread among a hundred or more people, who often do not know one another, in a form more durable than speech, and can be disseminated to a vast readership at the touch of a button. A new level of self-discipline, therefore, is needed by those who take part. Such discussions among Bahá'ís call for self-restraint and purity of motive as well as cordiality, frankness and openness.

(From a letter dated 16 February 1996 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [28]

Most important of all, as with any exploration by Bahá'ís of the beliefs, and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members only as it is conducted within the framework of the Bahá'í Teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these Teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1995 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [29]

As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Bahá'ís to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion.

The ease and relative impersonality of the electronic medium require in some ways an even higher level of self-discipline than is the case in situations where a spirit of unity is reinforced by the opportunity for direct personal contact and social interaction. In the pursuit of such a spirit of unity, Bahá'ís will, without doubt, wish to assist the consultative processes by sharing and discussing relevant Bahá'í texts. This will itself have the further effect of drawing attention back to the framework of Bahá'í belief.

(From a letter dated 19 May 1995 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [30]

Bahá'u'lláh warns us that “the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison”. “Material fire consumeth the body,” He says in elaborating the point, “whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.” In tracing the framework of free speech, He again advises “moderation”. “Human utterance is an essence which aspires to exert its influence and needeth moderation”, He states, adding, “As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.”

Also relevant to what is said, and how, is when it is said. For speech, as for so many other things, there is a season. Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this understanding by drawing attention to the maxim that, “Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.”

Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgement, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences. Thus there exist in the system of Bahá'u'lláh checks and balances necessary to the beneficial uses of this freedom in the onward development of society. A careful examination of the principles of Bahá'í consultation and the formal and informal arrangements for employing them offer new insights into the dynamics of freedom of expression.

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in the United States) [31]

We return to the phenomenal characteristics of speech. Content, volume, style, tact, wisdom, timeliness are among the critical factors in determining the effects of speech for good or evil. Consequently, the friends need ever to be conscious of the significance of this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life, and they must exercise it judiciously. Their efforts at such discipline will give birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.

(From a letter dated 29 December 1988 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in the United States) [32]

Bahá'ís are called upon to follow the Faith with intelligence and understanding. Inevitably believers will commit errors as they strive to rise to this degree of maturity, and this calls for forbearance and humility on the part of all concerned, so that such matters do not cause disunity or discord among the friends.

(From a letter dated 7 October 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [33]