

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

24 April 1972

To the Continental Boards of Counselors and National Spiritual Assemblies

Beloved Friends,

Recently we have received queries from several sources about the nature of the Institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors and its relationship to the Institution of the Hands of the Cause, and we feel it is timely for us to give further elucidation.

As with so many aspects of the Administrative Order, understanding of this subject will develop and clarify with the passage of time as that Order grows organically in response to the power and guidance of Almighty God and in accordance with the needs of a rapidly developing worldwide community. However, certain aspects are already so clear as to require a proper understanding by the friends.

In the Kitáb-i-‘Ahdí (the Book of His Covenant) Bahá’u’lláh wrote “Blessed are the rulers and the learned among the people of Bahá,” and referring to this very passage the beloved Guardian wrote on 4 November 1931:

In this holy cycle the “learned” are, on the one hand, the Hands of the Cause of God, and, on the other, the teachers and diffusers of His teachings who do not rank as Hands, but who have attained an eminent position in the teaching work. As to the “rulers” they refer to the members of the Local, National and International Houses of Justice. The duties of each of these souls will be determined in the future.

(Translated from the Persian)

The Hands of the Cause of God, the Counselors and the members of the Auxiliary Boards fall within the definition of the “learned” given by the beloved Guardian. Thus they are all intimately interrelated and it is not incorrect to refer to the three ranks collectively as one institution.

However, each is also a separate institution in itself. The Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was brought into existence in the time of Bahá’u’lláh and when the Administrative Order was proclaimed and formally established by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will, it became an auxiliary institution of the Guardianship. The Auxiliary Boards, in their turn, were brought into being by Shoghi Effendi as an auxiliary institution of the Hands of the Cause.

When, following the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice decided that it could not legislate to make possible the appointment of further Hands of the Cause, it became necessary for it to create a new institution, appointed by itself, to extend into the future the functions of protection and propagation vested in the Hands of the Cause and, with that in view, so to develop the Institution of the Hands that it could nurture the new institution and function in close collaboration with it as long as possible. It was also vital so to arrange matters as to make the most effective use of the unique services of the Hands themselves.

The first step in this development was taken in November 1964 when the Universal House of Justice formally related the Institution of the Hands to itself by stating that “Responsibility for decisions on matters of general policy affecting the institution of the Hands of the Cause, which was formerly exercised by the beloved Guardian, now devolves upon the Universal House of Justice as the supreme and central institution of the Faith to which all must turn.” At that time the number of members of the Auxiliary Boards was increased from 72 to 135, and the Hands of the Cause in each continent were called upon to appoint one or more members of their Auxiliary

Boards to act in an executive capacity on behalf of and in the name of each Hand, thereby assisting him in carrying out his work.

In June 1968 the Institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors was brought into being, fulfilling the goal of extending the aforementioned functions of the Hands into the future, and this momentous decision was accompanied by the next step in the development of the Institution of the Hands of the Cause: the continental Hands were to serve henceforth on a worldwide basis and operate individually in direct relationship to the Universal House of Justice; the Hands ceased to be responsible for the direction of the Auxiliary Boards, which became an auxiliary institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors; the Hands of the Cause residing in the Holy Land were given the task of acting as liaison between the Universal House of Justice and the Boards of Counselors; and the working interrelationships between the Hands and the Boards of Counselors were established. Reference was also made to the future establishment by the Universal House of Justice, with the assistance of the Hands residing in the Holy Land, of an international teaching center in the Holy Land.

In July 1969 and at Ridván 1970 further increases in the numbers of Counselors and Auxiliary Board members were made.

Other developments in the Institution of the Hands of the Cause and the Institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors will no doubt take place in future as the international teaching center comes into being and as the work of the Counselors expands.

We have noted that the Hands, the Counselors and the Auxiliary Boards are sometimes referred to by the friends as the “appointive arm” of the Administrative Order in contradistinction to the Universal House of Justice and the National and Local Assemblies which constitute the “elective arm.” While there is truth in this description as it applies to the method used in the creation of these institutions, the friends should understand that it is not only the fact of appointment that particularly distinguishes the institutions of the Hands, Counselors and Auxiliary Boards. There are, for instance, many more believers appointed to committees in the “elective arm” than are serving in the so-called “appointive arm.” A more striking distinction is that whereas the “rulers” in the Cause function as corporate bodies, the “learned” operate primarily as individuals.

In a letter written on 14 March 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Istanbul, the Guardian’s Secretary explained, on his behalf, the principle in the Cause of action by majority vote. He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who “accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position” who caused division, and that it was those “who pretended to be the most distinguished of all” who “always proved themselves to be the source of contention.” “But praise be to God,” he continued, “that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centers and specified Assemblies. Even so, no Assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of one House of Justice, one divinely appointed Center, so that there would be only one Center and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division.” (Translated from the Persian.)

Having permanently excluded the evils admittedly inherent in the institutions of the “learned” in past dispensations, Bahá’u’lláh has nevertheless embodied in His Administrative Order the beneficent elements which exist in such institutions, elements which are of

fundamental value for the progress of the Cause, as can be gauged from even a cursory reading of the Guardian's message of 4 June 1957.

The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past. The newness and uniqueness of this concept make it difficult to grasp; only as the Bahá'í Community grows and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from past ages, will the vital interdependence of the "rulers" and "learned" in the Faith be properly understood, and the inestimable value of their interaction be fully recognized.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]