

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

25 July 1988

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your letter of 30 March 1988 has been received by the Universal House of Justice and we have been asked to respond as follows.

It is abundantly evident, from innumerable passages in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that His Message is intended for the whole of mankind and that every nation and race in human society should regard Him as a Manifestation of God Whose teachings are directed to their upliftment and happiness. He has written that "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only." The people of minority backgrounds who have experienced oppression and subjugation might well contemplate the words of Bahá'u'lláh in which He states that "The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty." The Bahá'í community should regard itself as having been commissioned by Bahá'u'lláh to deliver His Message to the whole of humankind, in obedience to His injunction to "Proclaim the Cause of thy Lord unto all who are in the heavens and on the earth." Such considerations should guide the Canadian Bahá'í community in disabusing the Native people of the misconception that the Bahá'í Faith represents one of the "outside agencies" which are perceived as not having the best interests of the Native community at heart.

Your letter raises the issue of cultural diversity within the Bahá'í community. The Faith seeks to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. Indeed, such diversity will enrich the tapestry of human life in a peaceful world society. The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings. The general attitude of the Faith towards the traditional practices of various peoples is expressed in the following statement of Shoghi Effendi's, published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, U.S. 1982 edition, pages 41-42.

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the worldwide Law of Bahá'u'lláh.... It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.... Its watchword is unity in diversity such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained:

"Consider the flowers of a garden.... Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof...."

Of course, many cultural elements everywhere inevitably will disappear or be merged with related ones from their societies, yet the totality will achieve that promised diversity within world unity. We can expect much cultural diversity in the long period before the emergence of a world commonwealth of nations in the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh's new world order. Much wisdom and tolerance will be required, and much time must elapse until the advent of that great day.

A Bahá'í community in a Native area of Canada, seeking to maintain the distinctive features of the Native culture, must doubtless find it on many occasions confronted with the question of

whether or not it should participate in traditional activities, such as festivals, which may be regarded as having a religious origin long ago....

When a Spiritual Assembly is faced with questions of possible conflict between tribal practices and Bahá'í law, it should distinguish between aspects of tribal community life which are related to fundamental laws (such as monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the friends can and should extricate themselves gradually. Furthermore, the House of Justice has offered the advice that the institutions of the Faith should be careful not to press the friends to arbitrarily discard those local traditions which are harmless and often colorful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes. Were a new Bahá'í suddenly to cease following the customs of his people, it is possible that they might misunderstand the true nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Bahá'ís could be regarded as having turned against the traditions of the land. However, Bahá'ís should exercise vigilance, with the aid of the institutions of the Faith, to avoid inadvertent involvement in events which appear at first sight to be purely cultural and traditional in nature, but which are, in fact, held as a cover for politically oriented gatherings. The weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions which have been established among communities for centuries takes time and is a gradual process. While an Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake.

You have also raised a number of questions concerning the rights of indigenous people such as the Natives of Canada. It is quite clear that Native persons are fully entitled to all the human rights accorded to the majority population; for example, they should be guaranteed the full rights of citizenship, and all acts of discrimination against them, which may have developed over the years, should be eliminated. However, the freedom for indigenous people to exercise their rights carries with it the corollary need to recognize the rights of all others to the same expression. The implications for indigenous people also include: realization of the virtues of cross-cultural influences; appreciation of the values of other cultures as accruing to the wealth of human experience and the freedom of all to share in such values without necessarily giving up their respective identities; avoidance of parochial attitudes which degenerate into ethnic and cultural prejudices; and, above all, appreciation of the necessity to maintain a global perspective within which the particulars of indigenous expression can find an enduring context. From a Bahá'í perspective it would not be proper for indigenous people to make a special claim to exclusive rights and privileges which exceed the necessity to redress injustices. The Bahá'í attitude is guided by the statement of Bahá'u'lláh's that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

The Bahá'í approach to eradication of the multitude of problems afflicting mankind, including the oppressive treatment of indigenous people, is outlined in the enclosed letter of 15 June 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple in ... , a copy of which was sent to you at that time. Your attention is directed to the emphasis upon the achievement of unity as a basis for an enduring resolution of the problems of mankind. It should also be noted that while Bahá'ís are called upon not to take partisan political action in their quest for their rights or for the correction of injustices they have experienced, they are free to take legal action or to appeal to administrative agencies for their rights. It is the responsibility of the Bahá'ís, in their contact with the Native people, to explain that the Bahá'í approach, far from being indifferent to the real needs of disadvantaged peoples, represents a fundamental solution derived from the diagnosis by the All-Knowing Physician of the manifold ills of human society....

In addition, enclosed is a letter of 14 January 1988 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Mariana Islands, which addresses a number of issues arising from their concerns about the relationship with an indigenous rights movement in the Mariana Islands. Your attention is directed to the third paragraph of this letter, which deals with the question of Bahá'í statements on issues associated with indigenous rights, and which relates directly to some questions raised in your letter of 30 March 1988.

The final point made in your letter concerns the use of the Bahá'í system of administration as an example of how an Indian community should conduct its affairs, in light of the fact that the Bahá'ís may soon be the majority of the people in some Native communities. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out, in response to questions from Bahá'í communities in which there has been large-scale growth in village areas, that Bahá'í administration and the civil administration are two separate entities; the Local Spiritual Assembly does not automatically become the village council even though most, or even all, of the citizens of a village are Bahá'ís. However, the Bahá'ís in a village, irrespective of their numbers, can well offer, by precept and by their own practice, the model of consultation as an ideal means by which human beings may carry out their collective decision-making within the framework of the oneness of mankind.

When the Bahá'í community in a village is a significant proportion of the population, it has a wide range of opportunities to be an example and an encouragement of means of improving the quality of life in the village. Among the initiatives which it might take are measures to foster child education, adult literacy and the training of women to better discharge their responsibilities as mothers and to play an enlarged role in the administrative and social life of the village; encouragement of the people of the village to join together in devotions, perhaps in the early morning, irrespective of their varieties of religious belief; support of efforts to improve the hygiene and the health of the village, including attention to the provision of pure water, the preservation of cleanliness in the village environment, and education in the harmful effects of narcotic and intoxicating substances. No doubt other possibilities will present themselves to the village Bahá'í community and its Local Spiritual Assembly.

The House of Justice commends the diligent efforts being made by your Assembly to address the issues associated with presentation of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to the dearly loved Native people of Canada and the consolidation of their communities. It will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines for the success of your endeavors.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat