

The Universal House of Justice

Department of the Secretariat

4 March 1998

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter ... inquiring about your review of music and special materials.... We are to convey the following reply.

The memorandum on Bahá'í publishing dated Riḍván 1971, which the House of Justice sent to National Spiritual Assemblies, states that

At this early stage of the Cause all works by Bahá'ís which deal with the Faith, whether in the form of books, pamphlets, translations, poems, songs, radio and television scripts, films, recordings, etc. must be approved before submission for publication, whether to a Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í publisher. In the case of material for purely local consumption the competent authority is the Local Spiritual Assembly, otherwise the National Spiritual Assembly (through its Reviewing Committee) is the approving authority.

The obligation, as indicated in this statement, of Spiritual Assemblies to ensure the appropriateness of books, music and other items intended for dissemination in the interests of the Faith remains unchanged for the time being; but it will have to be carried out with flexibility in the light of changing circumstances. The House of Justice recognizes that the volume and variety of materials being created have greatly increased with the growth in size of the Bahá'í community and the rapid advance and ease of use of communication and other technologies.

Applying review standards to manuscripts is, of course, relatively straightforward, whereas doing so with respect to different types of music and the wide range of items categorized as "special materials" poses a particular challenge to those responsible for reviewing them. Since the form, expression and effect of music are, to a great extent, determined by the cultural norms of a society, the reviewing agency called upon to decide on the acceptability of proposed musical items must be sensitive and flexible in its judgment. The value of having National and Local Spiritual Assemblies exercise such judgment is obvious in the fact that what may well be accepted as appropriate in one place may have the opposite effect in another. Moreover, an aspect of the flexibility called for is recognizing that all acceptable musical items are not suitable for all Bahá'í occasions. For example, a distinction must be made between the music employed for devotional services and that used for other occasions in the Bahá'í community.

Special materials, such as those listed in your letter (i.e. art prints, tee-shirts, cards, automobile bumper stickers, book marks, calendars, jewelry, and art work that includes the Greatest Name and the Ringstone symbol), are so numerous, so varied and, in many instances, so ephemeral, that it would be impossible for any national agency to cope with the demands for review of them all. It is necessary therefore that your National Assembly determine what types of items must be reviewed and by what standard. As for the others, you will have to allow some latitude in their production, while continuing to educate the friends as to the principles that should guide their creation of such items.

The House of Justice applauds your intention to mount an effort to educate the friends concerning the standards to be upheld in creating, publishing and distributing all kinds of materials involving the Faith and its symbols. In time, as the friends themselves increasingly exercise wise discrimination in choosing between appropriate and inappropriate items in circulation, the exertions of the institutions in promoting these standards will bring about the desired results.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,  
Department of the Secretariat

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