THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

27 December 2017

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 24 March 2017 ... regarding a query you have received about the Bahá'í community's perspective on religious prejudice and what action it is taking to address this issue in the world. We have been asked to convey the following comments, which, it is hoped, will assist you in your response.

The Bahá'í teachings unequivocally proclaim the essential oneness of God and unity of all religions. "There can be no doubt whatever", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God." He explains that the Founders of the world religions, the great universal Educators of humanity, share a common purpose to unite humanity and ensure the advancement of civilization. "They all abide in the same tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech, and proclaim the same Faith." He urges the peoples of the world to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." And He further states:

> That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion. These principles and laws, these firmly established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.

At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh offers a stark warning about the pernicious effects of religious prejudice, stating that "religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction." He calls upon Bahá'ís to act so that "the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be completely obliterated."

'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that "the divine religions must be the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction." He furthermore observes that "religion must be the cause of fellowship and love. If it becomes the cause of estrangement then it is not needed, for religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary." The purpose of true religion, then, is to produce good fruits, and if, in the name of religion, conflict, prejudice, and hatred are engendered among humanity, this is due to fallible human interpretations and impositions that can be overcome by seeking the divine truth that lies at the heart of every religion. "May fanaticism and religious bigotry be unknown," He urges, "all humanity enter the bond of brotherhood, souls consort in perfect agreement, the nations of earth at last hoist the banner of truth, and the religions of the world enter the divine temple of oneness, for the foundations of the heavenly religions are one reality."

Religious prejudice forms a formidable barrier to the progress and well-being of humanity. This prejudice, along with many others, permeates the structures of society and is systematically

impressed on individual and collective consciousness. In fact, it is often deliberately fostered and exploited through manipulation and propaganda, using methods that ignore truth and promote self-serving agendas for political or other expediencies. A system of governance befitting a mature human race will, in time, abandon such ways of dividing people to obtain and consolidate power, of promoting agendas benefiting only certain groups or segments within society at the expense of others, and of directing the masses "toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization". It will instead unite people and channel capacities and resources to promote "the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race".

The destructive consequences of religious prejudice are thus of great concern to the Bahá'í community. The oneness of humankind is, after all, the pivot around which all of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve and is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal of the Bahá'í Faith. The betterment of the world, its ultimate objective, is retarded by this affliction. Further, the Bahá'í community itself has suffered the direct consequences of religious prejudice for nearly two centuries, particularly in the land of its birth.

Yet, Bahá'ís are confident that the peoples of the world can learn over time to weaken and eventually eliminate the scourge of religious prejudice. All people have the right to freedom of conscience and belief, the right to express those beliefs, and the obligation to have due regard for these same rights for others. They can then engage each other with mutual respect and find in their common values a common purpose and unity in action that contribute to the building of a better world. The Bahá'í community, for its own part, strives to foster patterns of tolerance, cooperation, and fellowship in a number of ways.

As individuals, Bahá'ís strive daily to live according to the teachings and to embody and express the principles of the Faith in action. "So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural", the House of Justice has stated, addressing the Bahá'ís of the world, "that even the stranger sees in you loving friends." Bahá'ís are taught from the earliest age about the common foundation of all the world religions, to accept and love the Founders of all of them as their own, and to embrace those of all religions or none with friendliness and fellowship.

In the affairs of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'ís are learning to transcend traditional barriers that divide people in the wider society and exacerbate tensions among people from different religious backgrounds. Shoghi Effendi explained that "every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it." One example is the way in which all minorities, including those from a religious minority background, are encouraged in their participation. "If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated", Shoghi Effendi has for instance stated when discussing the corrosive effects of prejudice, "it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise." The practice of Bahá'í elections is symbolic of this commitment to encouraging minorities—when a tie vote arises and one of those involved belongs to a minority group in that society, that person is unhesitatingly accorded the priority without the necessity of another vote to break the tie.

Furthermore, Bahá'ís are engaged in cities and villages across the globe in establishing a pattern of life in which increasing numbers, irrespective of background, are invited to take part. This pattern, expressive of the dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, includes classes for the spiritual education of children in which they also develop a deep appreciation for the fundamental unity of the various world religions; groups that assist young people to navigate a crucial stage of their lives and to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them; circles of study wherein participants reflect on the spiritual nature of existence and build capacity for service to the community and society; gatherings for collective worship that strengthen the devotional character of the community; and, in time, a growing range

of endeavours for social and economic development. This pattern of community life is giving rise to vibrant and purposeful new communities wherein relationships are founded on the oneness of mankind, universal participation, justice, and freedom from prejudice. All are welcome. The process which is unfolding seeks to foster collaboration and build capacity within every human group—with no regard to class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, and irrespective of gender or social status—to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.

Another area to which the Bahá'í community has been giving a progressively greater share of attention is participation in discourses which have a significant bearing on the well-being of humanity. Its efforts in this regard have been directed towards engaging in conversations in a widening range of spaces at the international and national levels, working shoulder to shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals, seeking, where possible, to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built. A number of these discourses, such as those on the role of religion in society, religious coexistence, and freedom of religion or belief, directly address the imperative of overcoming the challenge of religious prejudice.

In this light, the Bahá'í community has particularly been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities since the time of their inception, working alongside others to increase understanding and cooperation among religions. The achievements of the interfaith movement were highlighted in a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the world's religious leaders in April 2002. The letter also emphasized that the efforts of the movement to date, however constructive, were not sufficient to effectively address the growing challenge posed by religious prejudice and fanaticism; more was required. "With every day that passes," the letter stated "danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable", and the House of Justice urged earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership.

Fundamentally, a great share of the Bahá'í community's efforts has been directed at addressing the root cause of religious prejudice—ignorance. "The perpetuation of ignorance", the House of Justice has stated, "is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind.... Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities." This orientation has particularly manifested itself in the Bahá'í community's focus on education, which has been a central concern since the inception of the Faith; in its efforts to foster in individuals a growing consciousness and capacity to recognize prejudice and to counter it; in its practice of using consultative processes in all its affairs; and in its commitment to and upholding of the dual knowledge systems of science and religion as being necessary for the advancement of civilization. Moreover, the development of the life of the mind and independent investigation of reality, which are highly prized in the Bahá'í writings, serve to equip individuals to distinguish truth from falsehood, which is so essential if prejudices, superstitious beliefs, and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers the assurance in this respect that "once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past."

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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