



In our concern to join progressive and humanitarian movements, though, we need to keep in mind that political activism can take many forms. W.B. Yates and W.H. Auden thought that architecture and poetry were more fertile grounds for true activism than movements of the left. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard provide quite a different matrix for analysis of political relevance than Marx does. Going to meetings, carrying placards and writing letters can be irrelevant in or out of Bahá'í circles. Humanity is tired of noise. It is easy to be heavy; hard to be light.

Kalimat Press has brought a range of social issues before us. For the most part they are not new. What is new is that Bahá'ís are being encouraged to join movements, attempting to apply the Revelation to the resolution of socio-political problems. It's new for the Formative Age, at least since the end of the first epoch (1944). The tones of the essays in Circle of Unity are academic, sincere, concerned. It's hard to be light treating these subjects: a dash of satire, a sprinkling of wit and humour would have enlivened the essays. It's easier to be heavy. The Bahá'í Faith has a social activist tradition going back to 1844. With the launching of the first global plan in 1937 (or even before) this activist outreach took on a "teaching and consolidation" complexion that has characterized my entire experience as a Bahá'í. Until just the other day, it seems. Non-involvement in partisan politics has been a principle of the Cause ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. That principle won't change but our understanding of it certainly will and is. I don't want to dwell on that theme which I am sure other writers will be discussing ad nauseam.

But I would like to dwell on the evolutionary and revolutionary nature of the Bahá'í polity. The efflorescence of a global polity; the possession of the institutional base for the real revolution, may not give Mr. Joe Average Bahá'í from Jonesville (plodding his way through what he sees as an irrelevant LSA agenda) an experience of contemporary relevance. He may not feel part of the ultimate revolution. That is only natural. For the most part the wider society has not yet reached the stage of thinking in which it sees the multi-factorial nature of the issues that beset our planet. Working for peace, for human rights, for the environment, is intellectually and socially respectable. The Bahá'í trip is still utopian, visionary, in the main irrelevant.

A bored society trapped in habits of consumption and psychological restlessness is seduced by visual appeals. We have all acquired busy eyes but not necessarily lively minds. Fanatical spirituality and vicarious indulgence are society's great escapes. Convictions and passionate intensity are often far worse than apathy. After 40 years of Waiting For Godot some sit numb and apathetic; others put care into action and anxiety. Rumi said that "action was the meaning in a man." Some find meaning in "the party," what Swift defined as the madness of the many for the sake of the few. Others wait for Godot to come out of the sky, or out from the President's men or a cabinet decision. Rising up against all the insanity of the old is an awakening from

somnambulism. The time seems tight for a little respectable and sane social activism. Perhaps Circle of Unity may help decrease the gap between our thoughts and our words, between our desires and our achievements, may help to widen our contribution to the Cause and the world beyond the safe conventional gestures of traditional Bahá'í activity. It may help to hurl us into too much turbulence and too much distress. We need to be pushed to our limits. The images of fire and light in the Writings have paradoxical associations. We need to become aware of those "essential relationships emanating from the realities of things." These knowers, says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, are the wise ones. Not seeking postures of defense within our ideologies, not being anesthetized from turbulence or imprisoned in imitation, we must walk in the world of contradictions and deep dungeons.

So much of the secret of dealing with dilemmas is in reconciliation not elimination, the fusion of contraries in sympathy and understanding. Bahá'í activism is about yearning, striving, and trying. It is as much about silence and an inward state as it is about gestures and outward forms. In our time, the scales are shifting from vociferous demand and aggressive assertion to what we might call the feminine side, to qualities of silence, gentleness and compassion, in a way that has profound spiritual and socio-political implications. Bahiyyih Nakhjavani called this the language of compassion. This author has helped me to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of Bahá'í activism. She searches for linking lines amidst the world's contradictions.

The Bahá'í activist tempers his voice and trains his vision with compassionate tolerance and knowledge that arises from the ashes of his own vulnerability and weakness. When one becomes a born-again Christian, one goes around telling everyone. When one becomes politically involved, one either becomes familiar with the issues or gets party oriented. The Bahá'í life after conversion is not quite so simple. There are a multitude of "game plans." It seems to me that whatever strategy, tactic, or style we select, we need to steer clear of the passion for setting people right. It is an afflictive disease. Our concern for moral rectitude and principle can make us dreary. The world is up to its ears in high evangelism, and most of it not coming from the churches anymore.

But what pray tell, just what, is the Bahá'í game? To assume leadership of the antinuclear movement, to provide an integrating perspective to the strained voices coming increasingly from many directions? It has only been in the last few years that Bahá'ís have had a focus on social and economic development after decades of being solely concerned with the twin goals of teaching and consolidation. Circle of Unity has certainly stimulated discussion. For now, with Roger White and Jonah;

...in the dark,  
I ride the journey out  
And count truth's ribs, bemused that faith  
So multiplies my doubt.

Knowledge, as Rumi once said, has two wings, opinion one. Humanity has a long way to go before it starts to fly together. And middle class intellectuals, even those flying under a Bahá'í banner, have a long way to go before the synthesis, the vision, and the dream is articulated with the certainty that comes from knowledge and not simple enthusiasm and the heat of opinion. Intellect and wisdom are the two most luminous lights in the world of creation. Let us at least distinguish our debate with new and wonderful configurations. Let us keep our dirty laundry to a minimum. But let me close with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's more lofty metaphor:

“The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world. Thoughts are a boundless sea, and...not until the sea boils up will the waves rise and scatter their pearls of knowledge on the shore of life.”

Kalimat Press, the sea has only gone up a few degrees in temperature in recent years. Some like it hot! Ron Price  
Katherine, Australia

I would like to comment on one of the subjects discussed in the introduction to Circle of Unity and in two of the book's essays. That subject is, which activities are prohibited and which are permitted to Bahá'ís under the principle of the non-political character of the Bahá'í Faith? Some of the articles express the view that only partisan politics and sedition are prohibited to Bahá'ís, which I think is an incomplete explanation of this important teaching.

This discussion will be made more clear by realizing that the Bahá'í Writings set forth two related principles. The first and most important of these is that Bahá'ís may not interfere in the political affairs of any government; the second is that Bahá'ís may not participate in political partisanship. I will refer to the first of these as “the principle of non-interference” and the second as “the principle of non-partisanship.”

The most obvious form of partisanship is membership in a political party. The Guardian explained that there are two reasons why such membership is not permitted: First, no political platform is completely harmonious with Bahá'í principles, and party supporters would, to some degree, be working against Bahá'í principles. Secondly, if Bahá'ís belonged to different parties, the unity of the Faith would be compromised. (See “The Non-Political Character of the Bahá'í Faith,” pp. 537-538 of The Bahá'í World Volume XIII, and all succeeding volumes of The Bahá'í World). As we will see, different policies underlie the principle of non-interference, and help us to distinguish these two principles from each other.

Several passages in the writings of the Guardian show us that the area of proscribed political activity is much broader than non-partisanship, and has concerns other than focusing Bahá'í energies and insuring Bahá'í unity. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter entitled “Noninterference in Political Affairs,” quotes the Guardian as saying, “This love for their

country the Bahá'ís show...by working in the administrative channels of the government instead of through party politics or in diplomatic or political posts" (Messages from The Universal House of Justice 1968-1973, p, 47, emphasis added). In another connection, the Guardian advised the British Bahá'ís to support the "World Government Movement," but to keep a careful watch on it, and if it were to become "...in any way imperialistic, anti-Russian, or in any other field starts sponsoring attitudes partisan or political in nature," they were to withdraw their support (Unfolding Destiny, p. 213, emphasis added). Note that the Guardian distinguished "partisan" from "political" in both these quotations, implying that there are other aspects of political life, regardless of partisanship, that are off-limits to Bahá'ís. I submit that here are described activities that would violate the principle of noninterference.

What then of the following quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which is the foundation for much of the opinion expressed in the introduction to Circle of Unity, that Bahá'ís have misunderstood the prohibition against political involvement?

"...a Bahá'í may hold a political office and be interested in politics of the right type. Ministers, state officials and governor-generals in Persia are Bahá'ís, and there are many other Bahá'ís holding governmental positions; but nowhere throughout the world should the followers of Bahá'u'lláh be engaged in seditious movements" (Circle of Unity, p. xiv).

That statement was made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in July of 1912. It implies that Bahá'ís may be political policy-making officials, and may be involved in politics "of the right type," i.e., not seditious. However, is this the current position of the Bahá'í Faith? Let's contrast 'Abdu'l-Bahá's broad description of permissible political involvement in Persia with the much more restrictive statement of the Guardian made 18 years later: "The Bahá'ís in Persia avoid political posts and positions, abstain from any interference in matters pertaining to the policy of the state, but fill the more important administrative posts that have no political character" (Letter of 30 November 1930, Unfolding Destiny, p 428).

Note that there is no reference to partisanship; the focus is on non-interference. It appears that something has changed dramatically in the intervening years between 1912 and 1930. I submit that it is the fact that Shoghi Effendi had brought the principle of noninterference into force for the Persian Bahá'ís. Similarly, this principle was "purposely withheld" from the Bahá'ís of the West until the Guardian enunciated it in 1932:

"Dear friends: clear and emphatic as are the instructions which our departed Master has reiterated in countless Tablets bequeathed by Him to His followers throughout the world, a few...have been purposely withheld from the body of His occidental disciples....I feel it, therefore, incumbent upon me to stress, now that the time is ripe, the importance of an instruction which, at the present stage of the evolution of our Faith, should be increasingly emphasized,

irrespective of its application to the East or to the West. And this principle is no other than that which involves the non-participation by the adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, whether in their individual capacities or collectively as local or national Assemblies, in any form of activity that might be interpreted, either directly or indirectly, as an interference in the political affairs of any particular government (Letter of March 21, 1932, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 63-64, emphasis added).

This statement of Shoghi Effendi clearly abrogated the broad scope of permissible political involvement set forth by the Master. This principle obliges us to avoid not only acts that are clearly violations of the principle of non-interference, but those that might appear to be. This theme of non-interference occurs time and again in the Writings (e.g., *Gleanings*, p. 241, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 92, *Paris Talks*, p. 157, *Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 32). It is of the greatest importance that we come to terms with these passages and base our conduct on them. It is because of the urgency of tone in such statements, that I remain unconvinced that I should abandon what one article termed “overcaution” (*Circle of Unity*, p. xviii) in an area where the Guardian said that our involvement would be “infinitely dangerous to the Cause” (*Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 32).

The observation that Bahá'ís hold elective office as city planners and judges (*Circle of Unity*, p. xv) does not support the view that all forms of government service are open to Bahá'ís. Constitutionally, the judiciary is independent of the political branches of government, and in Bahá'í parlance the position of city planner is “purely administrative in character.”

There is a letter from the Guardian quoted in *Circle of Unity* (p. xvi) which encouraged the Bahá'ís to participate in a public protest against racial prejudice. It should first be acknowledged that this letter encourages a more public and vocal stance than is current among many Bahá'ís today. It is a critical distinction, however, that those Bahá'í were not protesting against the government; they were protesting the prejudice of people. There is a letter from the Universal House of Justice that makes this distinction clear: “However, as apartheid is identified with the South African government, the participation of Bahá'ís in the demonstrations and protest activities of the anti-apartheid group would be construed as opposition to the South African government, which would be tantamount to involvement in politics. On the other hand, Bahá'ís could, and indeed should, support groups advocating the abolition of all racial prejudices” (in *The American Bahá'í*, Feb. 1986, p. 18).

In this whole field of inquiry, we should look to the example of the representatives of the Universal House of Justice to the United Nations. They issue papers of a general nature on such questions as disarmament, mostly consisting of quotations from the Bahá'í Writings. This is in keeping with the Guardian's guidance that Bahá'í publications “bearing on the controversial and political issues of the day” should not contain “detailed

analysis,” lest any “direct reference” would create “suspicions or misunderstandings” in any “existing institution,” and “identify a purely spiritual movement with the...contentions of...factions and nations” (Principles of Bahá’í Administration, p. 32).

Another of the quotations from the Writings, relied on to support the view that Bahá’ís may incorporate anti-nuclear and other political activities into their Bahá’í work, is the following: “It should also be borne in mind that the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá’u’lláh, be safely embodied therein? (Circle of Unity, p, 32).

However, the Cause cannot embody any activity that violates the principle of non-interference, regardless of its progressive nature. For example, an activity that is clearly legal and generally non-partisan, is the signing of petitions; however, the Guardian wrote: “The Bahá’ís should refrain from signing petitions designed to bring pressure on the Government which may have any political character whatsoever. There are so many other people who can carry on progressive types of activity but only the Bahá’ís can do the work of Bahá’u’lláh.” (Unfolding Destiny, p 444)

Another opinion expressed in Circle of Unity is that we must take a stand on Bahá’í issues because non-Bahá’ís do, and if we don’t follow suit, they will view us as hypocrites (p. xvii). I do not think that we can “take a stand” on the political issues of the day, so that other people won’t think we’re hypocrites. This was not the way of the Guardian, and he was respected for his neutrality. We have to come to terms with the Bahá’í way of doing things, which does not include protests against government policies, even when those policies concern issues covered in the Bahá’í Writings.

I welcome comment from Bahá’ís who will more specifically address the arguments I have raised. Brent Poirier  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

I have read with great interest the article submitted to Dialogue by Brent Poirier which attempts to rebut some of the arguments made in articles in Circle of Unity concerning the involvement of Bahá’ís in politics. I appreciate the time and the obvious effort that he has taken to fully articulate his objections.

Mr. Poirier has certainly done Dialogue, and the Bahá’í community as a whole, a service in providing us with a clear and intelligent statement of a conservative Bahá’í position on this question. His essay no doubt expresses the feelings of a number of believers. In fact, his understanding of these matters seems to me to represent accurately the manner in which most Bahá’í communities have behaved and functioned until recently in relation to the larger society. And along these same lines, the arguments which he makes likewise reflect the confusion that has prevailed in the community concerning these matters.

It is certainly obvious to anyone who has read *Circle of Unity* that the authors are calling on the Bahá'ís to take a new look at the role that Bahá'ís can play in progressive social action. Many of the essays argue that because of the emerging position in world and national affairs that the Bahá'í Faith has found itself to now occupy, there is a need for a change in old attitudes.

The Universal House of Justice itself has in recent months called on Bahá'í communities around the world to become more fully involved in the life of society. That supreme body has noted that the Bahá'í Faith has emerged, at long last, from the unmitigated obscurity that has characterized its entire history up to now. Further, the House has declared that the community has now entered a new epoch in the Formative Age. It is little wonder then that some believers have expressed the view that new strategies and procedures may be called for to maintain the Bahá'í Faith “in the forefront of all progressive movements.”

The major problem that I find with Mr. Poirier's approach to the question of Bahá'ís and politics is that his essay leaves the reader with no clear understanding of what the prohibition on involvement in politics actually means in practice. He provides us with no workable definition of the word “politics” and fails to define what he feels is meant by “interference in political affairs” and other key words and phrases. One searches his essay in vain for a precise answer to the question he raises in his first paragraph: “...which activities are prohibited and which are permitted to Bahá'ís under the principle of the nonpolitical character of the Bahá'í Faith?”

I fear that his explanations can only lead the bewildered believer to the conclusion that, since nothing seems clear on this issue, it is best just to avoid all social involvement rather than run the risk of violating some Bahá'í principle and bringing harm to the Cause. Sadly, more often than not, this is exactly the position that Bahá'ís find themselves in when it comes to a greater involvement in society — confused, hesitant and fearful.

I will certainly agree with Mr. Poirier, as I am sure will all Bahá'ís, that it is not permissible for believers to retain membership in political parties — and that we should make every effort to avoid the appearance that we have identified with any one party or faction. But, we are told, this not enough. Bahá'ís must refrain from all “political” activity, whether it is partisan or not. Unfortunately, exactly what this means is not made clear.

But Mr. Poirier deduces that this must be the Bahá'í standard because Shoghi Effendi has sometimes used words “partisan” and “political” together when outlining the kinds of activities that Bahá'ís should avoid. This indicates to him that these words must, therefore, necessary refer to two different activities.

But I would submit that this argument simply does not follow. In fact, quite the contrary is the case. In the English language, the pairing of words in this manner most often indicates that the two terms are used to reinforce one another, and are intended to mean exactly the same thing. This is especially

the case in the use of legal language: we have such phrases as “null and void,” “plain and simple,” “cease and desist,” “will and testament,” etc., which are simply intended to emphasize one idea, not indicate two. I find this aspect of Mr. Poirier’s argument most unconvincing.

Moreover, Mr. Poirier’s interpretation of the instructions of Shoghi Effendi would seem to be contradicted by the recent policies and actions of both the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and the Universal House of Justice. These new policies are gradually moving the Bahá’í world community more fully into the arena of national and international affairs.

For example, the House of Justice has recently delivered a message to all heads of state urging that they take action to convene a congress of world leaders to establish world government and international peace. They continue successful lobbying efforts in parliaments and world councils to obtain resolutions condemning the persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran.

Beyond this, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States has pursued a vigorous lobbying campaign in the offices of Senators and members of the House of Representatives for the protection of Bahá’ís in Iran. There is also the recent signal success of the National Spiritual Assembly in organizing the Bahá’í community to join a letter-writing campaign to the members of the Senate urging ratification by that body of the United Nations Convention on Genocide. This action on the part of the Bahá’ís broke decades of resistance by conservative Senators to the ratification of any U.N. treaty. So important was the Bahá’í element that a representative of Amnesty International (which was also working for the ratification of the treaty), while sharing a public platform with a member of the National Spiritual Assembly, credited the Bahá’í with delivering up the final victory.

We are all aware that the chairman and secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly recently appeared on national media with the President of the United States on Human Rights Day to commend him for his human rights policies and his commitment to world peace.

By what definition are these acts to be regarded as nonpolitical, while local Bahá’í efforts for peace are not permissible? How is it possible for Mr. Poirier to accept these major steps into the political arena, while apparently continuing to regard the participation of individual Bahá’ís in nonpartisan movements dedicated to the establishment of world peace as “infinitely dangerous to the Cause”?

It is my understanding of the Bahá’í teachings that there exists no fundamental Bahá’í principle which requires either nonpartisanship or noninvolvement on the part of the community. The present Bahá’í practices in these areas, as far as I can see, are all based on instructions of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that were clearly intended as strategies and procedures appropriate to a particular stage of Bahá’í development. It is my understanding that these practices were always intended as temporary tactics adopted by an infant community, and that they were never elevated to the status

of sacred principle by any of the heads of the Faith. The application of our nonpolitical posture has varied with time and place in Bahá'í history. Its practice has always derived from the truly fundamental Bahá'í principle that the believers must never compromise their basic commitment to the universality of the Bahá'í Message.

As the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith has clearly explained in a number of his letters, some cited in Mr. Poirier's essay (though in passages further on), the need for Bahá'ís to abstain from partisan or political activity arises from our belief in the unity of mankind and from the all-encompassing nature of the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'ís stand for the interest of all mankind: we will not compromise the integrity of this belief to support one faction's interests over those of another; or to support the interests of one class over those of another; or one party over another; or one nation over another. Neither will we constitute our own community as a faction to fight for its own interests over the interests of humanity as a whole. Our basic commitment is the unity of the human race — we should do all that we can, as individuals and as a community, to further that ideal both within and outside of the scope of the Bahá'í community. And we should steadfastly refuse to bargain with this ideal, or to compromise its full implications, or to prejudice its eventual realization.

Within the context of this larger Bahá'í principle of universality, Bahá'í policies will change over time. For example, in the early days of the constitutional Revolution in Iran (1906-11), at a time when the country was organizing its first legislature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged the Iranian Bahá'ís to work for the election of the Hands of the Cause or other believers to the new parliament. Later, when the Master saw that this parliament was only to become a battleground for warring foreign interests as a whole, and when civil war broke out, he insisted that the Bahá'ís of Iran should withdraw from politics altogether.

In the West, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá never asked the Bahá'ís to withdraw from politics. On the contrary, he insisted that American Bahá'ís must vote and take part in the affairs of the Republic. It was Shoghi Effendi, as Mr. Poirier points out, who, much later in the 1930s, applied the earlier instructions of the Master to the Bahá'ís in Iran to the Western believers. Even here, American Bahá'ís have always been allowed to vote in elections, while in Iran Bahá'ís have always been forbidden by the institutions of the Faith to exercise their franchise.

Shoghi Effendi took great pains to explain his reasoning in applying a nonpolitical strategy to the Western Bahá'í communities in his letter "The Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh" (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 63-67). His letters concerning the need to "abstain from any interference in matters pertaining to the policy of the state" should certainly be understood in the light of these statements. He says:

Let them [Bahá'ís] 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 worldwide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster.

Bahá'ís, he warns, are not to be identified with any one state or faction against others — or any several states against others. We stand for the whole.

This does not mean, however, that the Bahá'í community must therefore refrain from condemning the evils it finds in any nation or society. Indeed, it is our precious independence which gives us the freedom to work against the wrongs found in all societies and to recognize and appreciate the good found in all.

Shoghi Effendi, in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, called upon the Bahá'ís of the United States especially to pursue a double crusade — first to strengthen and purify the Bahá'í community, and then to assail the long-standing evils of society as a whole.

That the current Bahá'í principle of nonparticipation in politics must be regarded as a temporary strategy, and not as a fixed and permanent feature of the Bahá'í Faith, should be obvious to anyone who considers the long-term future. Let us imagine, for example, a situation in which ninety percent of the population of a country — or a city, for that matter — has become Bahá'í. Are we to imagine that the Bahá'ís are to continue to refrain from participation in government affairs and leave the administration of the state to the minority of nonbelievers? Would Bahá'ís not then serve in the legislature, and indeed in all branches of the government?

The answer seems fairly obvious. But, let us now consider a case in which Bahá'ís make up only 50 percent of the population — or, say only 48 percent. Is it reasonable to maintain that such a community should refrain from influencing the laws and policies of the state in the direction of Bahá'í principles? Are we to be required, under such circumstances, to allow the (supposed less enlightened and less spiritual!) non-Bahá'ís unchallenged control of the laws and decisions of government?

Hardly so. But let us now imagine that the possibility of Bahá'ís making up only 10 percent of the population — a considerable number in any political arena, and perhaps the balance of power between progressive forces and unenlightened politicians. What are our obligations then?

It seems to me clear that the Bahá'í community has an obligation under all circumstances to influence society in positive directions whenever it is able to do so without compromising its own principles, or standards. Today, in most societies, however, Bahá'ís are in no such position since our numbers are so few and our influence so insignificant. Certainly in the 1920s and 1930s — at the time when Shoghi Effendi promulgated his instructions on political activity

— the Bahá'í communities of the West were miniscule — with less than 100 Bahá'ís in Britain, and less than 3,000 in the United States. Furthermore, the believers were generally uninformed about the fundamental teachings of their religion and weakly committed to its Founders. Clearly, the community might have been destroyed by any foray into the political arena or any alliance with a partisan group, no matter how fully in accord with Bahá'í principles, and beyond this, the Bahá'í teachings were unknown or misunderstood in the society as a whole. There was no chance whatever for the Bahá'í community to take an independent stance on any issue and have its independence as a community understood and respected.

Under such circumstances, for the believers to have made an effort to throw the weight of their community behind any progressive social cause would have been ridiculous — and more than that, disastrous in its consequences for the progress of the Cause. Priority, at that time, had to be given — almost exclusively — to the consolidation and expansion of the Faith. All the energy of the believers was needed to simply lift the Faith out of its utter obscurity.

But that goal has now been achieved! Today, with some 100,000 Bahá'ís in the United States, the Bahá'í Faith has finally emerged from its obscure position and attained wide recognition. Further, as demonstrated in our successful work on behalf of ratification of the United Nations Genocide Convention, we are in a position to have a considerable impact on the life of the nation. We have entered a new era.

In such a new circumstance, the sedulous and unthinking application of regulations and instructions laid down by Shoghi Effendi more than half a century ago — under entirely different conditions — would be a mistaken course for the community to follow, and would in any case soon prove unworkable. Certainly it is clear that the Guardian himself had no intentions of setting up these regulations for all time. Repeatedly he reminded the believers that the future progress of the Cause was in the hands of the Universal House of Justice, which would have to review and continually update all secondary rules and regulations.

The Bahá'ís of the world must now seek — under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice — new paths of independent action to exercise a positive influence on the course of human history. To remain trapped in old strategies, or to insist on the inflexibility of past policies, would indicate a tragic failure to come to terms with this new epoch of Bahá'í history. If we were to follow such a course, we would blind ourselves to the circumstances that are at hand and waste priceless opportunities that will never reoccur.

May I end my comments by pointing out three areas in which I feel that Mr. Poirier's comments are based on misinformation or misunderstandings:

He gives the impression that the demonstration in Chicago in which Bahá'ís participated, and which the Guardian later approved of, was abstractly directed at the prejudice “in the people.” This is not true. The demonstration was

organized by an early C.O.R.E. chapter in Chicago, had specific goals, and was (as I understand) directed toward the desegregation of campus housing.

The notion that high judicial posts in the United States are expected to function in an apolitical environment is simply untrue. Federal judges are directly appointed by the President of the United States, and never without political considerations (on his part) being carefully weighed. It is true that the judiciary is traditionally regarded as nonpartisan in this country. But even this time-honored tradition has now been brought into question by the standards for judicial appointments that are being applied by the present Administration.

The notion that Bahá'ís open themselves to charges of hypocrisy when we fail to publicly support certain issues while others are vocally expressing our own Bahá'í position, is not an opinion that should be attributed to Circle of Unity. This idea was first expressed by the Guardian himself in relation to the Chicago demonstration mentioned above. The full quote is “He does not see any objection to Bahá'í students taking part as Bahá'ís in a protest such as that mentioned in the clipping. On the contrary, he does not see how they could remain indifferent when fellow students were voicing our own Bahá'í attitude on such a vital issue and one we feel so strongly about.” (Circle of Unity, p. xvi)

Anthony A. Lee  
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Responses to Circle of Unity, in Dialogue 1:3, pp. 43-49 (1986)

This is our third and final forum on Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approaches to Social Issues published by Kalimat Press. Enough is enough.

I would like to take this opportunity to express a few of my thoughts regarding the book Circle of Unity, focusing particularly on the articles on world peace and Marxism.

Regarding the question of the Bahá'í community and the anti-nuclear movement, I think we must first pause for a moment to ask ourselves about the relationship between nuclear disarmament and world peace. Will disarmament cause world peace or will world peace cause disarmament? Is real disarmament possible without the establishment of a world government to oversee and maintain the disarmament in face of the inevitable tensions that constantly arise between nations?

As Bahá'ís, we recognize that armaments and war are the symptoms and that international disunity and lawlessness, as expressed in the system of unfettered national sovereignty, are the disease. Our international political machinery is antiquated. While admittedly having made some advances in the form of the League of Nations and the United Nations, it is basically operating on principles that belong to the early 19th century. In every other field, mankind has moved forward remarkably. The convocation of world leaders to establish a world government is, in the words of the Peace Statement, “long overdue.”

Some people would like to measure the sincerity of our desire for world peace by counting the number of times we join them in attacking the symptoms, i.e., in our attendance at nuclear disarmament rallies or our promotion of anti-nuclear campaigns. We should not allow their opinion to cause us to think that the disease can be eliminated by attacking the symptoms. World government must be established first. World peace and disarmament will immediately follow.

This is not to suggest that we should not associate with such movements. They are made up of sincere, peace-loving people who are often among the first to recognize the need for a world government. But we must not be led into thinking that nuclear disarmament can ever come about in the absence of a world government.

There are essentially two areas of endeavour which Bahá'ís can regard as fruitful in working for peace. One is in working toward the establishment of the Most Great Peace, which consists of proclaiming the unity of mankind and striving to eliminate the fears and hatreds between groups of people which are the seedbeds of war. Our primary tools in this effort can be found in our educating people about the oneness of mankind, in inviting them to accept the Faith itself, and in strengthening the Bahá'í institutions, which are destined to be “a pattern for future society.”

The second area is in working for the establishment of the Lesser Peace by promoting the idea of world government. We will undoubtedly be charged with being “dreamers” for suggesting such a concept. But if we are to be true leaders we must be willing to face such charges and to demonstrate that world government is not a dream for the distant future but rather a practical solution to the most vital problem of our age. In truth, the impossible dream is not world government; rather, it is the idea of establishing a disarmed world without a world government to maintain it. In spite of this, national leaders continue to dangle this dream of disarmament in front of their worried populations in order to calm their legitimate fears of a nuclear holocaust.

I feel that the article “A Worldwide Movement for Peace” addressed these two areas very well, and contained several insights that were soundly based on the Bahá'í Writings. It probed the roots of the problem and demonstrated the ways that the Faith is attacking the problem at its roots.

As to the article on “The Anti-Nuclear Movement and the Bahá'í Community,” I think that there are several points that could best be raised by simply referring to the Bahá'í Writings:

Is there any way of establishing world peace other than the unification of mankind?

“Every system, short of the unification of the human race, has been tried, repeatedly tried, and been found wanting. Wars again and again have been fought, and conferences without number have met and deliberated. Treaties, pacts and covenants have been painstakingly negotiated, conducted and revised. Systems of government have been patiently tested, have been continually recast

and superseded. Economic plans of reconstruction have been carefully devised, and meticulously executed. And yet crisis has succeeded crisis, and the rapidity with which a perilously unstable world is declining has been correspondingly accelerated.” (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 190.)

Regarding the statement on page 27 of Circle of Unity, is it reasonable to expect that the Lesser Peace and a world government will be established after a period of peace, or is it more likely that some form of catastrophe will be required to force mankind to take this step? After discussing the federation of the world, Shoghi Effendi says:

“That so fundamental a revolution, involving such far-reaching changes in the structure of society, can be achieved through the ordinary processes of diplomacy and education seems highly improbable. We have but to turn our gaze to humanity’s blood stained history to realize that nothing short of intense mental as well as physical agony has been able to precipitate those epoch-making changes that constitute the greatest landmarks in the history of human civilization....That the forces of a world catastrophe can alone precipitate such a new phase of human thought is, alas, becoming increasingly apparent.” (The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 45-6.)

Could the prophecies in the Writings concerning a world catastrophe have been fulfilled by World War II, or was World War II simply a prelude to a future catastrophe? In 1954, the Guardian wrote:

“Indeed a foretaste of that devastation which this consuming fire will wreak upon the world, and with which it will lay waste the cities of the nations participating in this tragic world-engulfing contest, has been afforded by the last World War, marking the second stage in the global havoc which humanity, forgetful of its God and heedless of the clear warnings uttered by His appointed Messenger of this day, must, alas, inevitably experience.” (Citadel of Faith, p. 125.)

Can we prevent these tribulations?

“The woes and tribulations which threaten it [the American nation] are partly avoidable, but mostly inevitable and God-sent....” (Citadel of Faith, p 126.)

In the same message, Shoghi Effendi speaks of one of the likely elements of this tribulation as being “fearful weapons of destruction, raining from the air, and amassed by a ruthless, a vigilant, a powerful and inveterate enemy,” which will fall upon the cities (Ibid. p. 126).

Will the United States be completely destroyed?

“...that great republic...will continue to evolve, undivided and undefeatable, until the sum total of its contributions to the birth, the rise and the fruition of that world civilization...will have been made, and its last task discharged.” (Citadel of Faith, p 38.)

Could the New World Order be “still-born” (p. 28 of Circle of Unity) i.e., would God allow humanity as a whole to perish?

“Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars, shall pass away, and the Most Great Peace shall come.” (Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 40, 1970 hardcover edition, emphasis added.) In addition to this there are a very large number of prophecies from the Holy Books of all religions concerning the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace that could never be fulfilled without people.

The Buddhist, Shinto and Christian beliefs were unable to help the survivors of Hiroshima to give any meaning to their experience (p. 29 of Circle of Unity). Why is this, and will it happen to the Bahá'ís as well? Or will a thorough understanding of the Faith enable Bahá'ís to comprehend the meaning of such destruction and give them the necessary hope and vision?

“Dear friends! The powerful operations of this titanic upheaval [referring to the whole period from 1844 to the coming of the Most Great Peace] are comprehensible to none except such as have recognized the claims of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. Their followers know full well whence it comes, and what it will ultimately lead to. Though ignorant of how far it will reach, they clearly recognize its genesis, are aware of its direction, acknowledge its necessity, observe confidently its mysterious processes, ardently pray for the mitigation of its severity, intelligently labor to assuage its fury, and anticipate, with undimmed vision, the consummation of the fears and the hopes it must necessarily engender.” (The Promised Day Is Come, p. 4, 1980 edition, emphasis added.)

At the end of World War II, the world failed to establish a true world government. What can Bahá'ís do to ensure that, at the end of the next phase of “this titanic upheaval” a similar failure will not recur?

“There is no reason why the Bahá'ís should not take the lead in advocating such a Federation of the world, towards which the world is driven by forces it cannot control.” (Cited in Establishing World Peace, compiled by the Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, August 1985.)

As to the articles on Marxism, I feel these articles were good insofar as they may help make the Bahá'í community more familiar with this very important modern philosophy, which now affects the lives of such a large part of humanity. Just as Bahá'ís should be well versed in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. in order to explain the Faith to the followers of these religions, so must Bahá'ís be well versed in Marxist teachings in order to present the Faith in a way that a Marxist will understand. And like all other religions and most philosophies, Marxism has some points of agreement with Bahá'í teachings. These are, of course, good starting points.

However, I don't think we can allow these points to occupy our attention to such an extent that we ignore Shoghi Effendi's clear explanation that both the Marxist and the capitalist ideologies “...are to be commonly condemned by the upholders of the standard of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh for their materialistic philosophies and their neglect of those spiritual values and eternal verities on which alone a stable and flourishing civilization can be

ultimately established.” (Citadel of Faith, p. 125) Similar sentiments are expressed by the Universal House of Justice in the first section of the Peace Statement (pp. 6-7). Both further condemn communism, along with nationalism and racism, as “false gods” which seek to exalt one class, nation or race of mankind above the others and thus find themselves at odds with the central principle of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings — the oneness of mankind.

Although it is good to find points of agreement with Marxism, I think that we must ultimately regard Marx, and so many other modern philosophers, as incompetent physicians for mankind who, however, well-intentioned they may have been, “...can neither discover the cause of the [world's] disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy.”

Bahá'ís may have much to learn about Marxism, but we have little to learn from it as suggested in the concluding paragraph on page 255 of Circle of Unity. It may give us some valuable insights as to what not to do, but only the Bahá'í Revelation, the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the interpretations of both the Master and the Guardian, and the continuing guidance of the Universal House of Justice, will teach what we really should do.

A few brief points must be addressed to Dr. Saiedi's “Dialogue With Marxism.” The author seems to view Bahá'u'lláh's teachings as being fairly fluid and changeable over the course of His thousand year dispensation (pp. 240-41). The reference he uses to support this idea, however, states that the concept of progressive revelation applies even within the “ministry” of each Prophet, not within His “dispensation,” as was stated in the book. If the Faith has no “fixed and unchanging definition” (p. 243) it most certainly has a fixed and unchanging framework, which is the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, together with the interpretations of the Master and the Guardian. It is our own understanding of this huge framework that changes, not the framework itself. Similarly, a much clearer understanding of the distinction between authoritative interpretation and individual interpretation (p. 244) can be found on p. 88 of Wellspring of Guidance. No one can claim that his own interpretation is “equally valid” with a differing interpretation of Shoghi Effendi's or 'Abdu'l-Bahá's.

Finally, I would like to address Dr. Saiedi's notion (p. 255) and Mr. Lee's notion (p. ix) that Bahá'ís should somehow be involved with tearing down the old world order. The House of Justice has said that this “Major Plan” will be accomplished by the world at large without our help, but that the “Minor Plan” of building a new order for mankind to live in after the old one has collapsed is the one to which “we must devote all our energies, for there is no one else to do it.” (Wellspring, p. 134) As I see the world today, it seems as if the forces of disintegration are moving swift enough. I wonder if the Bahá'í forces of creation are keeping pace?

In writing about the Bahá'í Faith and social issues, I feel that we would be wise to distinguish between two very different approaches. One approach is an attempt to synthesize the Bahá'í teachings with one's favorite outside

interest in hopes of obtaining a result that is better than either of the component parts. Obviously, to assume that one could “improve upon” Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation by adding something here or subtracting something there implies a basic misunderstanding of the station of man vis-a-vis the Manifestation, or at least a misunderstanding of the Lesser Covenant. Historically, Bahá'ís have been encouraged to avoid this approach. A new willingness to interact with outside ideas does not alter this position. Rather, it asks us to take the alternative approach, which is to explore thoroughly the Bahá'í teachings on a given subject, and then, in a manner detached from any preconceived outside notions, to shed the light of these teachings on the questions of this field. The former approach seeks to mix the Bahá'í teachings with others, while the latter sheds light without affecting the source of that light.

James Tyson  
Haifa, Israel

The publication and dissemination of Circle of Unity was something whose time had come. After reading only the introduction, I became convinced that the book filled a much needed gap in Bahá'í literature. The Bahá'í community can now turn to Circle of Unity to gain a clearer understanding and perspective on Bahá'ís' political role and career involvements and more short term political engagements as well. The introduction in pamphlet form should become “bedside” reading for every Bahá'í, since the word “politics” and the phrase “body politic” continue to be insurmountable obstacles for the typical Bahá'í, who must try to explain the Bahá'í approach toward current political issues.

While Circle of Unity is an important pioneering work, there seems to be no reason to have devoted 25 percent of the book to Marxism and only 20 percent to racism. To be sure, Shoghi Effendi cites communism, racialism, and nationalism (an issue not discussed directly in this book) as three false gods. However, racism is by far the most important issue for the American Bahá'í Community. As early as 1939 the Guardian called racialism the most challenging issue facing the American Bahá'ís — an issue which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily resolved. Not only is insufficient space devoted to this issue, but, in my opinion, the essays that were published did not deal with the issue adequately.

As a Bahá'í, who happens to be a black American, I found “A Long and Thorny Path: Race Relations in the American Bahá'í Community” to be a gigantic disappointment.

The path, as described by Richard Thomas, seems to be neither that long (dating back to Louis Gregory's visits with 'Abdu'l-Bahá around 1914), nor that thorny, merely treating either well known or generally accepted racially oriented events. I think it is particularly interesting that the author makes the point that Gayle Morrison's book, *To Move The World*, has paved the way for other scholars to address issues and topics heretofore considered off

limits, such as the racial attitudes, practices and policies of Bahá'í individuals and Bahá'í institutions. And yet, the author only half-heartedly addresses some of the more salient of these issues and topics and disregards others altogether.

In mentioning, for example, that the National Spiritual Assembly “showed its willingness to assume a more active role” (p. 49) in the race issue following the 1939 National Convention, the author neglected to point out that the events leading up to that Convention literally cried out for the attention given to racism. Moreover, he neglects to tell the reader that the same was true of the American Bahá'í Community generally. Nor does the author indicate that the situation had been at a particularly low ebb for seven years prior to the National Convention of 1939. Morrison's work indicates that by 1935-36 the fortunes of the Race Amity Committee were at a particularly low point. It sent out a questionnaire to all LSAs inquiring about the ease or difficulty of “race adjustment” in the local community, and the reasons for any difficulty. This proved to be most revealing. The San Francisco Assembly's response to the questionnaire typified the paradoxical stand of many Bahá'ís at that time. It said: “the Bahá'í Faith is not an interracial movement. It is a religious faith based on the oneness of humanity, one God and one universal world order through which mankind may progress. In this World Order, race is not recognized and therefore within the faith there is no such thing as race, or race consciousness.”

Despite the zeal and enthusiasm generated by the 1939 Convention that the author speaks of (p. 50), racism continued to dominate some LSAs after the Convention. The author describes the state of the racial situation in the Washington, D.C. Bahá'í Community at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit (p. 38) by asserting that the racial conflicts of that community were not much different from those in the rest of America. He could have also pointed out that nearly 30 years later the racial situation in the Bahá'í community of Atlanta, Georgia remained unchanged.

In Atlanta the newly elected all white LSA of 1940 seems to have been far from enthusiastic about putting racial unity into practice. About this time (November, 1940) the National Spiritual Assembly traveled to Atlanta for its first meeting in the Deep South. During the National Spiritual Assembly's visit there, public as well as Bahá'í-only meetings were open to both races. Morrison aptly makes the point that: “By meeting in Atlanta the National Spiritual Assembly helped to reinforce the movement toward racial unity among the Bahá'ís there. The whites were put on notice, even at the risk of their withdrawal from the Faith, that they had to come to terms with the principles of oneness in both their Bahá'í community life and in their approach to the public.”

The particularly low status of the Race Amity Committee and the forgoing expressed attitude about race and the Bahá'í Faith were not merely local in nature prior to the 1939 Convention. Again, as was the case a decade earlier, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed no Race Amity Committee in 1936. It

goes without saying, that the transfer of the amity work from the National level to the local level, in effect, guaranteed the demise of the work together. Thus, from 1936-1939, after the National Amity Committee was disbanded, the discontinuation of the annual race conference at Green Acre was soon to follow. Regarding this period of Bahá'í history, Morrison notes that the word "race" virtually disappeared from the pages of Bahá'í News.

It should be mentioned that the Race Amity work suffered a severe setback with the advent of World Unity Conferences. The National Spiritual Assembly seems to have given these conferences its full weight and support. But, throughout the period of enthusiasm for World Unity Conferences, letters from Louis Gregory and others involved in the racial amity work indicated a degree of frustration and dismay. Apparently this stemmed from the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had called for conventions on racial amity and had stressed the vital relationship of racial amity to the health and even the continued existence of America.

Inevitably, the World Unity Conferences, however well-intentioned and important in themselves, diverted attention and resources from racial amity work to a concern both less specific and less controversial. The world unity conferences thus offered any individual or Bahá'í community not fully committed to racial amity yet another opportunity to turn aside from the hard realities of racial adjustment.

Moving beyond the saga of the 1939 National Convention toward the end of the next decade, we find that just as racial ill-will had hastened the demise of the Race Amity Committee and its activities, it had a similar impact on the Race Unity Committee in 1947. In that year, the National Spiritual Assembly decided against appointing a Race Unity Committee. In fact, it was not until Hand of the Cause of God Dorothy Baker returned from pilgrimage in 1953 and in a talk at National Convention stated that the Guardian wished the appointment of a national Race Unity Committee immediately, that the Bahá'í Inter-racial Teaching Committee was formed. This committee remained in force from 1956 to 1963.

As we move to the present, we find that at times there has been no Race Unity Committee and recently the responsibility for race unity work was again placed, at least partially, in the hands of LSAs. Although a National Race Unity Committee was formed in 1982, one year later, via the "Campaign of Unified Action," the National Spiritual Assembly turned to LSAs and District Teaching Committees to assist the committee.

It should be mentioned that prior to 1982 either there was no National Race Unity Committee as mandated in the Nine Year Plan, or the committee was hopelessly ineffective and, at the same time, the American Bahá'í community's best kept secret.

Thus, we find that for at least three times within the brief period of slightly less than half a century, the "race unity" work has been shifted from the national to the local level, an action that has generally impeded the progress of the work. Some of this has taken place rather recently even though there was

substantial black representation on the National Spiritual Assembly.

In fact, blacks have consistently been seated on the National Spiritual Assembly since the mid-1950s, as Richard Thomas mentions in his essay (p. 50). In recent times as many as four of the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly have been black. If the Universal House of Justice had not appointed Dr. Sarah M. Pereira to the Continental Board of Counsellors for North America, there could possibly have been a majority of blacks on the National Spiritual Assembly. That blacks are on the National Spiritual Assembly in measurable strength, however, clearly does not determine policy. Nor does it end the need for minority representation in Bahá'í administration. Blacks should consistently be on all Bahá'í committees. Shoghi Effendi addressed this issue in 1927 when he expressly stated that “[e]very Bahá'í Committee should have at least one black member even if it means that the same individual had to be appointed ‘over and over again.’ ”

Richard Thomas' essay would have been strengthened by further details about the “Long and Thorny Path,” and would have been rendered more relevant by a more critical appraisal of the current situation.

The only other essay in the book that deals with racism is “The Continuing Struggle Against Racial Injustice in the U.S. (by Carlton Brown). This essay, is an improvement over the Thomas piece, but it does little to place the struggle for racial equality in a Bahá'í context. Thus, even collectively, these essays are an inadequate treatment of the racial issue.

Nevertheless Circle of Unity ministers to the need of the rank and file Bahá'í. By providing operational definitions to basic principles of the Faith, it enlightens the reader about some aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. Because of this, it will facilitate teaching efforts and will also help Bahá'ís relate to each other more easily amidst the complexities of American society. I look forward to the publication of similar books, and only hope that one of them may deal with the issue of racism in a more adequate manner.

Leon Jones  
Silver Spring, Maryland

The world situation is unprecedented. The threat of total annihilation, the increasing attention directed toward the victims of South African apartheid, and the efforts being made to reduce the sufferings caused by Ethiopian famine affect nearly everyone. It is impossible to escape the realization that our global village has been disequilibriated.

As a sociologist, I am familiar with the impact of social problems upon our society. Yet I have observed a growing tendency on the part of many Bahá'ís to focus on social problems under the banner of social issues. Many, but by no means all, of these social issues are euphemisms for partisan politics.

Anthony Lee rightly points out that there are numerous meanings of the word “politics,” and that not all of them are incompatible with the universal objectives of the Bahá'í Faith. In this regard, Shoghi Effendi wrote through

his secretary:

...the Guardian does not see how Bahá'í participation with other organizations and religious bodies, in a non-political meeting to promote civic unity and welfare along some line can be considered political. Much as the friends must guard against, in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote in entire accord with our teachings — such as, for instance, better race relations (Lights of Guidance, p. 318).

For a more balanced understanding of this subject, the preceding passage must be viewed in connection with others on similar themes. In a discussion of the Bahá'í attitude toward partisan political involvement, the Guardian wrote:

If a Bahá'í were to insist on his right to support a certain political party, he could not deny the same degree of freedom to other believers. This would mean that within the ranks of the Faith, whose primary mission is to unite all men as one great family under God, there would be Bahá'ís opposed to one another. Where then would the example of unity and harmony which the world is seeking?

...By becoming involved in political disputes, the Bahá'ís instead of changing the world or helping it, would themselves be lost and destroyed. The world situation is so confused and moral issues which were once clear have become so mixed up with selfish and battling factions, that the best way Bahá'ís can serve the highest interests of their country and the cause of true salvation for the world, is to sacrifice their political pursuits and affiliations and wholeheartedly and fully support the divine system of Bahá'u'lláh (Ibid., p. 334).

As both a Bahá'í and an academic, I value the right of individuals to express their views. Bahá'ís, armed with the insight provided them by the new Revelation, have a responsibility to demonstrate, in their words and actions, the applicability of the Bahá'í teachings to the problems facing the world. However, this freedom of individual expression is, like everything else in the life of a Bahá'í, subject to the principle of moderation. For example, a Bahá'í is not free to engage in gossip and backbiting. Neither is he permitted to become involved in partisan political affairs. According to Shoghi Effendi: “We should — every one of us — remain aloof, in heart and in mind, in words and in deeds, from the political affairs and disputes of the nations and governments. We should keep ourselves away from such thoughts.” And again he explained in an even clearer passage:

Touching the publication of articles and pamphlets bearing on the controversial and political issues of the day, I desire to remind my dearly-loved 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

unfavourably on the Cause (Directives from the Guardian, pp. 56-57).

There is a distinction between Bahá'ís protesting against the religious persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís or opposing racial prejudice, on the one hand, and supporting either the nuclear freeze or peace-through-strength movements, on the other. The first set of problems addresses questions of the unity of the believers. The act of protesting the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran demonstrates the universality of the Faith. Likewise, racial prejudice must be opposed because it is fundamentally antagonistic to the principle of unity. However, while world peace is an issue of unity, nuclear policy is a partisan political issue. 'Abdu'l-Bahá counselled all religious leaders, not just Bahá'ís, to stay clear of partisan politics. Politics is the very antidote of unity. The two are essentially incompatible.

I do not object to the majority of papers included in Circle of Unity. But I am concerned about the essay "The Antinuclear Movement and the Bahá'í Community," by Robert T. Phillips. Although the editor, Anthony A. Lee, notes that the papers represent only the respective opinions of the individual authors, are not authoritative statements, and that the authors disagreed among themselves on the same topics, this allowance does not, in my opinion, resolve the problem. The fact is that Phillips' article is published in a Bahá'í book. According to the late Chicago sociologist W.I. Thomas, when a situation is defined as real, it is real in its consequences. Moreover, it is often the case that the definition of the situation is more potent than the situation itself. What if those reading Phillips' article believed it expressed the authoritative "Bahá'í view" on the subject. This perception could reflect adversely on the Bahá'í community.

Phillips directly advises Bahá'ís to play a leadership role in the antinuclear, or nuclear freeze movement. He argues that it represents a nonpartisan issue and suggests that Bahá'ís attend meetings of groups such as Ground Zero, Physicians for Social Responsibility, etc. Every group he mentions is politically liberal. Furthermore, they are all vehemently opposed to the policies of the Reagan administration. Even some formerly non-partisan organizations, like Planetary Citizens and the World Policy Institute (formerly, the Institute for World Order), have identified with the nuclear freeze movement. Objectively, the Democratic Party supports the nuclear-freeze and Republican Party opposes it. Such political involvement could polarize the Bahá'í community.

Phillips also questions the need for a cataclysmic shock to move humanity toward a new world order: "This idea of a 'manageable catastrophe' is not alien to Bahá'ís. Along with their fellow citizens, many Bahá'ís have assumed that nuclear war is survivable and that social existence as we know it would continue. In fact, it would not be unreasonable to assume that there are some Bahá'ís who look to nuclear war as the necessary precursor to mass enrolment in the Bahá'í Cause. They believe that only such a cataclysmic shock would qualify as the event necessary to create the Lesser Peace of Political peace envisioned in the Bahá'í Sacred Writings. Such thinking, to

the degree it exists, leads to a dangerous passivity regarding the responsibility of the Bahá'í Community to work aggressively to transform the political consciousness and the accompanying public policies that lead us toward nuclear war" (Circle of Unity, p. 27)

First of all, it seems to me that the Bahá'í model of social evolution is one of progress through crisis. Secondly, Shoghi Effendi has explained that mass conversion will come about as a result of a catastrophic chain of events.

Phillips has adopted the view held by American scientist Carl Sagan and others that, following a nuclear war, the earth would be made uninhabitable because of a nuclear winter and other factors. Phillips uncritically accepts this position. Moreover, he makes the axiological assumption that nuclear war would be an evil in itself to be avoided at all costs. While devastating in its outward effects, should there be a nuclear war, and certainly the possibility is suggested in the Sacred Texts and in the writings of the Guardian, it would not be the end of the human race, notwithstanding Phillips' claims to the contrary.

Phillips' contention that Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities must be stimulated in their "thinking and activities...in response to the unprecedented challenge posed by the issue of nuclear war" is flawed. Shoghi Effendi wrote that the "woes and tribulations which threaten the American nation are partly avoidable, but mostly inevitable and God-sent." Only through the efforts of Bahá'ís to propagate the message of Bahá'u'lláh, not through political involvement, can the coming catastrophe be mitigated, though not eliminated.

No political party or faction has ever been in complete harmony with Bahá'í principles. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to waging war for a "righteous purpose," and Shoghi Effendi praised America for over-throwing "the exponents of ideologies fundamentally at variance with the universal tenets of our Faith" during the first and second world wars. This notion of a just war is totally alien to the mainstream of the nuclear freeze movement. While I am not suggesting that a nuclear war would necessarily be righteous, I do propose that the antinuclear movement, in opposing all war, is not in total agreement with the Bahá'í teachings on the subject.

Whatever its nature, the coming calamity is mostly outside the control of human society (including the Bahá'ís). It is a part of God's Major Plan in which He uses "the mighty and lowly as pawns in His world-shaping game...for...the eventual establishment of His Kingdom on earth." One way or another, His purpose for the planet will be accomplished.

Mark Foster  
Wise, Virginia

"Poirier's Counterpoints," in Dialogue 1:4, p. 7 (1988)

I am writing in rebuttal to Anthony Lee's letter which took issue with my own letter printed in the vol. 1, no. 2 issue of dialogue.

Lee's letter implies in a number of passages that I am calling for a general retreat of Bahá'ís from all social involvement, and that I took issue with the general direction of Circle of Unity. I intended no such thing, and do not feel that it was implicit in my letter. Perhaps I should have made that explicit; I now do so.

His letter argues that the times have changed, and that the old prohibitions no longer apply. The main reason I disagree is as explained by Lee himself: the House of Justice decides which of the Guardian's policies and applications of the teachings are appropriate for the times. I submit that on this question, the House has not changed or updated the basic direction set forth in the Guardian's letters. It is not that these teachings were appropriate only during the days of the Guardian and the Master; I quoted from the Letters of the House published within the last decade or so. Further, these same passages from the Guardian are included in each and every edition of *The Bahá'í World* that issues from the World Center, including those edited under the direction of the House at the present time.

I feel that the weakest argument Lee propounds is that when the Guardian said "partisan or political," such a phrase should be understood to be a repetition such as "null and void." I have decided to accept this for purposes of argument, and, to test its validity, have applied it to Lee's letter. Lee has used the following phrases: "clear and intelligent," "confused, hesitant, and fearful," "policies and actions," "national and international," "time and place," "recognize and appreciate," "understood and respected," "sedulous and unthinking." If Lee were correct that "the pairing of words...most often indicates that the two terms...mean exactly the same thing" (emphasis added), one would expect to find at least one good example of this in his own letter.

I could go on; there are dozens of places where I believe that my position was misstated and the misstatement was challenged by Lee's letter, or where faulty logic and rhetoric was used, or where my point was missed entirely. But I'd like to keep this letter short enough to have a chance to be published.

Brent Poirier  
Las Cruces, NM

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Response by Lawrence Miller, in dialogue 1:3, pp. 33-36 (1986)

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Responses by James Tyson, Mark Foster, and Leon Jones, in dialogue 1:3, pp. 43-49 (1986)

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Response by Brent Poirier, in dialogue 1:4, p. 6 (1987)

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