

# Nature and Challenge of Tests, The

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Dear Friends,

I speak for both Janet and myself in expressing our boundless happiness to back here in the bosom of the American Bahá'í Community. We lived here for 12 years in the state of Michigan. They were 12 very formative, very happy years where we learned so much about the Faith and about the nature of the Bahá'í community.

And in returning to the United States on this occasion, our hearts are filled with the memory of those years and of the energy, the dedication and the wonder of the American Bahá'ís we had the pleasure of knowing at that time.

I speak to you, of course, tonight as an individual. I do not speak for the Universal House of Justice. I speak simply as an individual Bahá'í who happens at this time to be a member of that body. So the remarks I offer you this evening are mine alone.

I begin by directing my attention and yours to a theme given emphasis by the beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, from the earliest years of his ministry as Guardian of the Cause. In fact, in the very first message sent by the Guardian to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, on January 21, 1922, the Guardian drew attention to this point, and reiterated it in subsequent messages. And what was the point?

Shoghi Effendi, 73 years ago, told the believers in America that at some time in the future they would be tested. He said that they would receive tests--intellectual rather than physical. He said that they would be sent to purify the American Bahá'ís and to make them brighter than ever.

A few years later Shoghi Effendi returned to that theme. He said, "and yet how often we seem to forget the clear and repeated warnings of our beloved Master, Who, in particular during the concluding years of His mission on earth, laid stress on the severe mental tests which would inevitably sweep over his loved ones of the west. Test that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life."

Inevitable mental tests

This theme, that the American Bahá'ís were being prepared for what Shoghi Effendi describes as the inevitable coming of mental tests, appears again and again in his writings and was further emphasized by the Universal House of Justice in its lengthy letter of May 19, 1994, in which the House of Justice offered the hope and the prayer "may

they, the American Bahá'ís, be granted the celestial strength to pass over and over again the mental tests which 'Abdu'l-Bahá promised He would send to them to purify them."

There are many other passages in the writings of the Guardian which refer to these mental tests. For example, in the last of the published messages from Shoghi Effendi to the American Bahá'ís, he foreshadowed what the future would hold. He indicated at that time that there would be intellectual rather than physical tests from outside the Bahá'í community. He referred to the fact that the Faith would be subject to the onslaught of ecclesiastical leaders, the traditional defenders of religious orthodoxy, and that these would be powerful detractors aiming at the extinction of the Faith from without.

But in addition, in that last message of September 1957, Shoghi Effendi clearly and unambiguously referred to the fact that there would be mental tests to the American Bahá'ís from within their community. He listed a number of forces at work in American society and said the administrative strongholds of the Faith were bound to be subjected to a severe spiritual challenge from within due to the impact of those forces, and he urged the friends to strengthen the Bahá'í community in preparation for the combat with the "nefarious elements seeking to undermine it from within."

These statements are part of the heritage of the American Bahá'í community. They are statements which foreshadow periods of challenge, periods of difficulty, periods of testing and also foreshadow great victories.

As one of the statements I have read points out, Shoghi Effendi describes these tests as having the purpose of making the friends "shine ever brighter," of being "ever more luminous," of "enabling the American Bahá'í community to fulfill the glorious destiny laid down for it in the Writings of the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá."

The point I make tonight is that I have, over a period of time, come to the conclusion that we live now in that time of mental tests. That the time of mental tests is not off in the distant future but it is now.

The nature of mental test

Why do I say this? I say this because of the nature of mental tests. We are well experienced and well knowledgeable about physical tests. Our dear friends from the Cradle of the Faith, many of whom are in the audience tonight, are well versed in physical tests. For 150 years this infant Faith in various countries of the world has had to contend with physical tests--with torture, imprisonment, martyrdom, the disruption of homes and families. We are not experienced in mental tests.

The Universal House of Justice, in a message of January 1986, referred to the fact that the Cause of God was emerging from obscurity. In other words, it was leaving the first of the seven stages of its evolution laid down by the Guardian and entering the second stage, and that second stage is that of persecution or repression. We are now entering and have entered the stage where we, as a worldwide Bahá'í community, will learn more and more about mental tests.

And my perception, my view, is that tonight as we gather here, my belief is that we are now experiencing these mental tests. What do I mean by mental tests? Tests which lead to an erosion of faith and belief and which can give rise to disorder in the Bahá'í community. One of the features of mental tests is that we may be blinded by the standards and values of a non-Bahá'í society and by being blinded thereby may fail these tests.

We may run the risk of underestimating the danger of such tests, of being complacent, of not becoming aware of these tests until it is too late. We may be like the warrior in his armor plate waiting for battle, waiting too late while the battle rages and is decided in front of him while he stands there waiting.

I believe that there are elements to the mental tests which we, as part of the American Bahá'í community--and I think Janet and I still think of ourselves as being American Bahá'ís in many ways--and I hope no tape of this reaches Australia!--there are three elements of the mental tests which I feel are pertinent to us tonight. And I'd like to mention these three and then discuss them in detail.

The first is this. I believe we are tested now by the need to develop spirituality in a materialistic environment. This is our test. Second, we are tested in our level of commitment to the betterment of humanity in an environment which is increasingly characterized by apathy and lethargy. And third, we are tested by the need to acquire an entirely new attitude toward social organizations and institutions.

I believe that it is in these three areas that we, who live in this glorious country, who are part of this vibrant community, we are tested. Will we pass or will we fail. The community will pass. The American Bahá'í community is destined to go through great and wonderful things. But we, as individuals, are subject to tests.

Developing a sense of spirituality

Let me take up the first of these. The first mental test that I think is upon us today is the challenge to develop a sense of spirituality in an environment which is increasingly preoccupied and, indeed, obsessed with the materialistic dimensions of life. The writings of the Guardian, the statements of the House of Justice in recent years, repeatedly call upon the friends to spiritualize their lives, to

develop a world view which accommodates the all-important, the vital spiritual dimension of existence together with and, indeed, with priority over its material dimension.

We are urged to do this. We are told in our Teachings that our duty as believers in Bahá'u'lláh is to commit ourselves to the spiritualization of our lives. We are promised that if we do this, we will augment our powers and capacities and that we will, only in this way, find happiness and fulfillment.

When this does not occur--and who is to say that we will pass this test--when this does not occur, religion degenerates to a mere creed; a set of rituals and empty practices. When this does not occur, we will find ourselves drawn inevitably into the materialistic perception of the world events and course of world history. WE will be obsessed with the fears, the anxieties, the preoccupations, the apprehensions and suspicions of those around us and our world view of the spiritual progress of humanity will be lost. Our community life will degenerate into ritualistic practice if this process of spiritualization is not embarked on and energetically pursued.

Why do we find it so difficult? I think it is because we--no matter how many Bahá'ís there are in any location, we are relatively few. We spend most of our lives interacting with people who are not Bahá'ís, some of whom are wonderful people of fine and exalted values and others are not. WE are subject to forces and influences and inclinations and advice and ideas which are essentially materialistic. And this unconsciously molds our world view.

For decades, and indeed centuries, it was commonly held that in order to spiritualize our lives, we should forsake the material world. We should discard material possessions. WE should embrace asceticism in the pursuit of the spiritual development of ourselves. This erroneous conception has been put to rest by the Revelation by Bahá'u'lláh of the Law of Huququ'llah.

In giving us the mercy and the benefit of the Law of Huququ'llah, Bahá'u'lláh has, in essence, told us this part of your surplus, of your accumulated assets, this part belongs to God. The rest of it, the other 81 percent, is yours.

You may wish to offer it sacrificially for the welfare of mankind. You may wish not to do so, that is your business. Part of it belongs to God. We are called upon as a matter of conscience to pay our Huquq. We don't speak of contributing to Huququ'llah. One contributes to the national, local and international Funds but one pays Huququ'llah.

The wisdom of Huququ'llah

The concept of spiritualization as involving necessarily the total abandonment of material comforts, pursuits and benefits, that concept

has been overthrown by the insight and wisdom provided by the Law of Huququ'llah. I want to share with you my perception of spirituality, of how it is that we may attain spirituality. Because this is our challenge. This is a challenge to every one of us--how to attain a spiritualized development of ourselves.

I believe that the process of spiritual development rests upon three principles. The first is this: that certain actions which we carry out in this world prescribed by the Manifestation of God attract a mysterious but vital spiritual power to them.

That there are certain prescriptions given in the Teachings of our religion which we accept with faith on the understanding that if we follow these prescriptions, we will attract in a mysterious, incomprehensible manner a great spiritual power. This is a complex and difficult point for us to understand.

Fortunately, during the course of the Dispensation preceding the coming of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh, scientists began the systematic study of magnetism. And as a result, human society learned something about magnets and about the magnetic principle and magnetism as a phenomenon. We know now that magnetism is a phenomenon whereby atoms are arranged in little systems of organization called dipoles which are pointing in the same direction, and associated with it is something we call magnetic force--a force which acts at a distance which is invisible but which is very strong.

As a result, one finds that this first of the three principles that I see underlying the process of spiritual development, that this principle is illustrated in the Bahá'í Writings repeatedly by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian by use of the analogy of the magnet. The analogy of the magnet has enabled the central Figures of our Faith to vividly convey to us the vital principle that certain actions carried out, according to the prescription of God, attract a powerful invisible force.

Let me read some examples. One place, "Faith is the magnet which draws the confirmation of the Merciful One." 'Abdu'l-Bahá saying, "the commemoration of God attracts confirmation and assistance like unto a magnet." Again, "unity and harmony is the magnet which draws the confirmations of God," and so on. "Directing mankind in the right path is the magnet which attracts the help of God."

The magnet which attracts

Shoghi Effendi says, "Today, as never before, the magnet which attracts blessings from on high is teaching the Faith of God." In another place, the Guardian says, "consecration to the glorious task of spreading the Faith and living the Bahá'í life creates the magnet for the Holy Spirit." And so it goes on.

So the first of the three principles which I see as underlying spiritual development is the principal of magnetism--the principle of certain actions carried out in a spirit of devotion and consecration attracting a great spiritual force just as in the mundane world certain arrangements of atoms attract the force of magnetism. This principle of magnetism carries right through the Bahá'í Writings. You find, for example, that Bahá'u'lláh speaks of His Revelation and describes it as a "magnet" or "lodestone."

He says His revelation will act as a "lodestone for all the nations and kindreds of the earth." In another place, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God in these terms: "The Lord has manifested the Magnet of the souls and hearts in the Pole of the existing world."

So this first principle underlying the spiritualization process, I believe, is that of the attraction of powerful spiritual forces through prescribed actions. A so-called magnetic principle.

The second principle, I see, in the process of spiritual development is that of constructive interaction. The first one is that if we pray, if we fast, if we teach the Faith, if we practice unity, if we hold spiritual meetings, we attract spiritual forces and powers.

The second principle of constructive interaction is illustrated by a simple example.

We know in our Writings that prayer attracts spiritual forces. Let us say I pray a little bit that I will attract a certain amount of the spiritual forces. This will reinforce my endeavors. This will make me stronger. I will pray more. It is a very simple model, but it is enough for our purpose. I will pray more. This will attract a greater measure of spiritual powers. I will pray even more. This will attract even further spiritual powers. I will pray even more and so it will build up.

So I speak of this second principle as one of what I call constructive interaction. You start off with a little bit. It attracts some forces, makes you stronger. You do more which attracts even more forces and so it builds up. And, in that sense, we are called upon to practice these spiritual virtues, to carry out these devotional practices--the practice of teaching and contributing to the Fund, of participating in the work of the Faith--confident that they will attract spiritual forces which will reinforce our endeavors and make us do even more and more.

'The Temple is already built'

It is in this light--this principle of constructive interaction --this is the only way in which I can comprehend a strange and mysterious statement which appears in our Writings and which is

attributed to the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, here on this very spot in the year 1912. On that occasion, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá had laid the cornerstone of this magnificent edifice in which we are sheltered tonight, He made a very strange remark. Having laid the cornerstone, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said to the friends gathered on that occasion, "The Temple is already built."

"The Temple is already built." In 1912 there was a stone that they put in the ground, none of this structure was here. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "The Temple is already built." How can we understand a statement such as that? I believe it was simply an expression of this principle of constructive interaction. That what He was saying as He explained at that time, "You have only to begin. Everything will be all right."

Telling the dear friends gathered in 1912, "Make a start, make a beginning. You will attract spiritual powers. This will reinforce your endeavors. You will do even more, attract even greater spiritual powers, and a time will come when the Temple will come into physical existence. It is already built by virtue of the efforts you have embarked upon in 1912." It is in that sense that I see this principle of constructive interaction as vital to the process of spiritualization.

As I mentioned, I think there are three elements of the spiritualization process. The principle of magnetism, by which we carry out certain actions and attract spiritual forces, and the principle of constructive interaction by which we make an effort that attracts even more powers and so it builds up form there.

If only there were these two principles--how much simpler life would be. It is a source of great regret to me that I have to tell you that there are not two principles but three. Because the third principle is that of testing.

The testing is inevitable. The testing is a source of drama, the source of success and failure in our personal and collective lives. But when we make efforts, when we attract spiritual forces, when we build up in strength, and so on, we are tested.

We are subject to tests again and again. We are told that the testing process is intrinsic to that of spiritual development. There are not two principles, there are three, and the third is that of testing.

We are tested to see if we really have the fortitude, the strength, the determination to persist in the face of adversity, in the face of distraction, in the face of ridicule, in the face of the desire to relax, to avoid the hardship and the effort that is involved.

The Guardian tells us that this process of testing is necessary, as he describes it, so that inner spiritual forces become stimulated, and that tests are gifts of God to enable one to grow and develop. But let

us also be aware that tests are not automatically passed. The very fact that we, as believers, are subject to testing implies no guarantee that we will successfully traverse that test. The history of our Faith repeatedly demonstrates that there are some who pass and there are some who fail, and the Cause of God proceeds toward its glorious destiny.

I have tonight chosen as my theme, mental tests. And the first of the mental tests that I have drawn attention to is that of spiritualizing our lives in a materialistic environment. To do this, we need to identify the dangers which confront us.

We need to commit ourselves with determination to the pursuit of acts of devotion, to the implementation of the great moral and ethical laws of our Faith. And we need to realize clearly and definitely that the principles to which we subscribe as Bahá'ís are in many ways radically different from what have become the standards and generally accepted norms of American society around us.

We are not here for the purpose of condemnation. We are here for the purposes of finding our paths to God, of finding our way forward during a time of great turmoil and testing and hardship and suffering for all elements of humanity. We will only do so by a full realization that we have chosen the path of Bahá'u'lláh--and the path of Bahá'u'lláh is in many ways quite distinctly different from that of society around us.

To take but one example: our concept of chastity as an indispensable element of the moral life of a Bahá'í is that sexual relations are permissible only between two people of the opposite sex who are married to each other. This is our standard. It is not the standard of our society. It is described in some areas as homophobic. It is described in many other ways. But this is our standard. This is what our religion tells us, and we are committing ourselves to a spiritual path in the pursuit of the law of Bahá'u'lláh irrespective of whether or not it conforms to the society around us.

We differ from the people around us very much in certain concepts. For example, we differ in the concept of duty. The concept of duty has in many ways become unpopular. But we are people of duty. We are people who do things we don't particularly want to do out of a sense of duty. We are people who do things we find difficult, which we find uncomfortable, which we find disconcerting. Why? Not out of a desire for martyrdom, but out of a sense of duty.

We Bahá'ís are a people of duty. We are a people of discipline. We are a people of responsibility. We are a people who revere and honor such concepts as honesty and trustworthiness. We need to pass the test of spiritualization in a materialistic environment.

We need, above all, courage; the courage and the willingness to be different, to persevere, to persist in the work of the spiritualization of our lives irrespective of other considerations and the forces and influences of the people around us.

The second of the three tests that I feel are upon us in the United States today is that we are tested to develop ourselves as committed human beings concerned about the future of humanity and the changing world. The Cause of God today requires more and more such committed human beings.

The future of America

Shoghi Effendi, in a passage written not long before his passing, referred to the future of the American nation. And one of the things he mentioned as being within the future of the American nation has arrested my attention in recent years. He said, at that time, that the Bahá'ís of America faced a future challenge. And what was that challenge? In the message published in the book *Citadel of Faith*, Shoghi Effendi refers to a number of challenges before the American friends, one of which was that "apathy and lethargy [would] paralyze their spiritual faculties in the future."

We, today, face that test--the test of overcoming apathy and lethargy. The test that those around us increasingly lack zeal and idealism and a passion for changing the world. Society around us has lost its vision. It lacks heroes and heroines. They have become discredited. Exposes have been written about them. They have been found to have feet of clay. There are no heroes. There are no heroines. There is no vision.

It is a matter of making it through day by day, being concerned only for one's self because no one else is interested in us. You survive or not. It is a hard, cruel world out there.

The creation of a new society

That is not the Bahá'í way. We are people committed to the creation of a new society. We are summoned to heroism. We are summoned to sacrifice. We are summoned to idealism and to altruism. We are people creating a new society, a new civilization. We are people who love and are concerned about generations yet unborn and we are prepared to dedicate our lives that those generations to come, in decades and centuries into the future, may have a better life; may have a life of peace and unity and harmony and the possibility for the full development of their potential.

This is the idealism to which we are summoned as Bahá'ís. We need to overcome the apathy and lethargy of society and stand apart as people dedicated to the creation of a new world.

What does this mean? How do we achieve this? How will it come about? I believe that we, as believers, need a far deeper understanding of the role of the Faith in the redemption of mankind.

We are not simply spreading one religion to clutter up a world full of religions. We are not simply seeking to elbow our way into the community of the faiths of mankind. We are not simply content to make the Encyclopedia Britannica Year Book and become known as a religion that has spread around the world. We are not simply content to assemble an array of national and local assemblies and prestigious events and gatherings. Our religion is that of the Promised One of All Ages. Our religion is that of the World Redeemer Who has come after thousands upon thousands of years of toil and turmoil and suffering during the whole of recorded history.

We stand at a break point in the history of human civilization and we, as Bahá'ís, are the vehicle for the implantation of spirit into the body of mankind which is now being molded through great difficulty and suffering into a unified entity.

In my present functioning as a member of the Universal House of Justice, I find myself at times meditating on a statement which appears in the writings of the Guardian and it appears without conditionality--I find no conditionality attached to it. It is rather a definite statement without any maybes or possibilities or perhapses.

And in that statement, the Guardian refers to the institution of which I am a member, the Universal House of Justice. And he says that "this House is one which posterity will regard as the last refuge of a tottering civilization."

When I read that passage, I say to myself, "What does it mean about the future condition of mankind?" I sometimes sit in the council chamber in the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, I look at my eight colleagues seated around the table, I realize that we nine are no the House of Justice. It is a great, magnificent spiritual entity of which we are simply the weak and feeble outward expression.

The great changes to come

But I say to myself, "This institution, this Universal House of Justice with which I have to some extent become familiar over these years, it, the Guardian tells us definitely, categorically, without conditionality, will be such that posterity will look upon it as the 'last refuge of a tottering civilization.'"

I offer this passage to you simply as an indication of the great changes that are coming to humanity.

When they will come--in which decade, in which century--we

know not. But we do know that they will come--that the Cause of which we are all members is destined to play a major transforming, revolutionizing role in the history of humanity on this planet.

And I think if we can revive in our minds the vision of the magnitude of the aims and objectives of the Cause--aims which are far beyond human comprehension, which are feasible only because of the power of God which we believe animates Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation --if we do this, then we will revive that vision and we will become once more committed human beings dedicated to the welfare of humanity in this generation and countless generations yet unborn into the future.

Finally, I come to the third of the three mental tests to which I have wanted to draw attention tonight. And it is a challenge and a test which the Bahá'í friends in many parts of the world are experiencing. I address my remarks to you as American Bahá'ís but I have made similar remarks in other countries that I have visited recently.

My concern--and what I see to be a very dangerous and pressing mental test to the Bahá'ís in the western countries as well as other parts of the world--is that the believers in these countries live in a society which has developed certain attitudes about social organizations and institutions.

These attitudes are firstly that people are suspicious and distrustful of their government and its bureaucracy. They have found through bitter experience that their governmental leaders have become corrupt, that the bureaucracy of their social organization suffocates them, restricts their freedom and, in many ways, is a source of their suffering.

People today do not have a sense of community. They have learned, at bitter cost, not to trust each other, not to trust those who appear honest and upright and of good character because, so often, they have been found to be opposite. They have, therefore, developed a sense of extreme individualism, of worship of unfettered personal freedom.

#### Attitudes of society

People in our society increasingly feel a sense of powerlessness in relation to their authorities. They find themselves insignificant, unable to change the system, doomed to suffer its adverse and oppressive circumstances and consequences. Therefore, they often resort to radical actions outside the system. They become terrorists. They become anarchists. They seek the overthrow of the system. They seek its destruction. They say, often with a certain justification, anything is better than what we've got.

These are increasingly the attitudes of society around us. They were foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh in His Tablets to the kings and religious

leaders. Shoghi Effendi described in detail the evolution of society during what he called this "age of critical transition." It is now upon us. People in our society have developed those attitudes and, if we were to question those people, they would offer us ample justification for the attitudes which they display.

The great mental test we face as believers is test that we may, unconsciously and inadvertently, transfer those attitudes from the larger society which is manifestly in decline into the Bahá'í administrative system.

That is our test. Because if we bring those attitudes in with us, without even realizing it, we will disrupt and damage the administrative system ordained by Bahá'u'lláh.

Shoghi Effendi wrote on this theme some years ago. He said, "Our present generation, mainly due to the corruptions that have been identified with organizations, seems to stand against any institution. Religion as an institution is denounced. Government as an institution is denounced. Even marriage as an institution is denounced."

"We Bahá'ís should not be blinded by such prevalent notions. If such were the case, all the Divine Manifestations would not have invariably appointed someone to succeed Them. Undoubtedly, corruptions did enter those institutions but these corruptions were not due to the nature of the institutions, but to the lack of proper directions as to their powers and the nature of their perpetuation."

"What"--this is still the Guardian's words--"What Bahá'u'lláh has done is not to eliminate all institutions in the Cause, but to provide the necessary safeguards that would eliminate corruptions that caused the fall of previous institutions." What those safeguards are is most interesting to study and find out and most essential to know.

The challenge of detachment

In other words, we are challenged to detach ourselves, to emancipate ourselves from the prevailing, and indeed, not just prevailing but rapidly increasing sense of suspicion, of distrust and disfavor which characterizes attitudes of people in our society toward their institutions and avoid such attitudes coming into the relationship of the believers to the Bahá'í institutions.

They are not the same. They are radically different. This is a system ordained by Bahá'u'lláh, by the Manifestation of God. It has characteristics. It has a system to it which enables it to purify itself of any adverse attitude and behavior. It stands quite different from the way of the world. If we bring the way of the world into the Bahá'í Administrative Order, all we will do is temporarily disrupt it. All we will do is irreparably damage our own personal spiritual

development.

We need to develop new attitudes. We need to develop a far deeper understanding of the Covenants of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It is not enough to sign the card to say, "I believe there is a Covenant. There are these people around with a variety of titles. Whatever they are I accept them. Fine, that's it." This is not enough, friends.

We will be swept away because there are dangerous forces in our society. There are insidious influences. We have to protect ourselves now, and our protection is deepening in the Covenant.

Let me read to you a very, very difficult and challenging paragraph from the Guardian. In this paragraph the Guardian makes statements which I would never dare to say. I read them because it is the Guardian. I am safe. You can't attack me for reading them. The Guardian is writing. I would never had the courage to stand before you and make the kind of statements I am going to read to you now.

Shoghi Effendi says that "the believers need to be deepened in the knowledge and appreciation of the Covenants of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is the stronghold of the faith of every Bahá'í, and that which enables him to withstand every test and the attacks of the enemies outside the Faith." So far it's not too bad. I would have said that. Now comes the difficult part.

"This is the stronghold of the Faith of every Bahá'í, and that which enables him to withstand every test and the attacks of the enemies outside the Faith and the far more dangerous, insidious, lukewarm people inside the Faith who have no real attachment to the Covenant, and consequently uphold the intellectual aspect of the teachings while at the same time undermining the spiritual foundation upon which the whole Cause of God rests."

The Covenant: our protection

Now do you understand why I said I would not have had the courage to make these remarks? It is simply the words of the Guardian telling us that only through deepening in the Covenant will we withstand not only the attacks of people outside the Faith but what describes as the "far more dangerous" attacks, the "insidious" attacks of those he describes as "lukewarm people inside the Faith who have no real attachment" to the Cause, who uphold the intellectual aspect of the teachings while undermining its spiritual foundation.

Friends, we do not have the right to judge. As individuals we cannot judge. I cannot say this person is one of those lukewarm people who upholds the intellectual, undermines the spiritual. I have no right to make such a statement. You cannot make that statement about me or about anybody else in this room or in this country.

We are not here to categorize or to judge. But Shoghi Effendi tells us that the Bahá'í community includes those elements. We are not here to engage in adversarial actions against those we categorize in that way. We are here to make ourselves spiritually healthy and strong so that whoever they are, wherever they are, we are not to judge, but we will be immune to their dangerous, insidious influence.

So our task is not to engage in witch hunts. Not to go searching and to put labels on this one, that one or the other. Our task is to do exactly as Shoghi Effendi said--to deepen ourselves in the Covenant so we will be spiritually strong and healthy and withstand these adverse attitudes toward the institutions of the Faith.

We need also in dealing with this test, the test of acquiring a new attitude toward our social organizations and institutions, we need to rethink what is criticism. There is criticism and there is criticism. There are passages in the Writings which refer to criticism as being an appropriate measure, an appropriate element of Bahá'í consultative and community practice, and nobody is disagreeing with that. But what we also have in our Writings are references to the extremely dangerous character of what the Guardian refers to as "vicious and negative" criticism.

"Criticism and discussions of a negative character, which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body, should be strictly avoided." And I think most people are smart enough to know what is the difference. They are also smart enough to find ways of worming around whatever rule you lay down. Because it is a question of attitude rather than a question of mere words of speech.

Freedom from negative criticism

We look toward a constructive, developmental Bahá'í community which doesn't pretend it is immune from any means of further development and refinement of its practices and conduct but which is free from what the Guardian refers to as criticism of a negative nature which has the effect of undermining the authority of the Assembly.

One of the favorite and most wasteful and destructive practices in Bahá'í community life in certain quarters is that of speculation about calamity. I am sure you've all had experiences at certain times of spectacular remarks about the evaporation of skyscrapers and submarines off the coast and so on.

There is a passage--there are many passages in the Bahá'í Writings--where Shoghi Effendi says we don't know in what form the calamity will occur. Calamity is occurring now and so on and so forth. There is one passage and I am going to read it you where the Guardian says this is calamity. Finally, we found it.

The letter, written on behalf of the Guardian, December 18, 1949, was

published in the Bahá'í News in July 1950--and what does he say? He defines a calamity. He says:

"Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh (i.e. the administrative order) and lack of obedience to Him--for He has forbidden it. If the Bahá'ís would follow the Bahá'í laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by assembly decisions, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into cooperation."

So one of the elements of acquiring the new attitude toward social organizations is deepening in the Covenant, a second one is that of rethinking the nature of criticism because it is a constructive element of Bahá'í consultation, and the third and final element that I mention is quite revolutionary. It is a statement where Shoghi Effendi was asked to define what were the parameters for the Cause in bringing in large numbers of people. And he set out four parameters; three of them are obvious and the fourth is very unusual. He said these were the requirements without which the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. He said:

"Without the spirit of real love for Bahá'u'lláh, for His Faith, and its institutions, and the believers for each other." Three of those are obvious, the fourth one isn't.

We would expect the believers to have real love for Bahá'u'lláh. We would expect them to love His Faith. We would expect them, in fact, hope that the believers would love each other.

But Shoghi Effendi defines as one of the four requirements for bringing in large numbers of people that we develop a sense of love, a sense of real love for the institutions of the Faith. This is radically new in the Bahá'í Dispensation.

Where do you find individuals who, since we are in the state of Illinois, who will come to you and say, "I love the Illinois state legislature." Where do you find somebody who says, "I love the House of Representatives," or "I love the Senate." Maybe you'll find a few who say "I am in love with the Supreme Court," particularly if it has gone their way. Where do you find people who say, "I love the executive branch of government; I love the city council; I love our district administration." This is foreign to western thought. This is inimical. This is radical.

The prevailing thought is that less government is better. The more government, we should get these rascals out of our hair, and so on. We go off in an entirely different direction.

We are not just 60 degrees away. We are not 90 degrees or 150 degrees away. We are 180 degrees away. We are in entirely the opposite direction, because our religion tells us that without the spirit of

real love for the institutions of the Cause, we cannot bring in large numbers of people.

I have almost reached the end of my remarks but not quite because it is easy to love institutions which one perceives as functioning marvelously well. It is easy to love institutions that function marvelously. If you are in a community and your local Spiritual Assembly is doing magnificent, wonderful things, sure you can love it. I love them also.

But can you love an institution which is functioning in an incomplete developmental way, which is making mistakes, which is having trouble with its unity, with its activity, with its executive action, which forgets to advise you of important events and the like? This is our challenge. How can we do it without hypocrisy?

We can do it the same way a parent loves a child. When the child is stumbling, is behaving badly, is filled with some illness, or is grappling with some social grace, the parent loves the child because the parent sees in that child the potential for development. Through love and nurturance, the child will develop and fulfill its potential. Through criticism and a lack of love the child's growth will be stunted; its development will never be realized.

So it is we are called upon to love our institutions, not in a sense of artificiality, not in a sense of hypocrisy, but in a sense of perfect faith that these are institutions ordained by Bahá'u'lláh with a glorious, magnificent future ahead of them. Through our love, our nurturance, our support, our compassion, our understanding, they will develop. They will evolve. It is this kind of love we seek--radically different from the attitude of criticism, suspicion, disorder, corruption which informs the attitude of people in the society around us toward institutions which are in decline and dissolution.

The Plan's triple theme

As you know, the Three Year Plan, now hastening to its conclusion, revolves around a triple theme--enhancing the vitality of the faith of individual believers, greatly developing the human resources of the Cause, and fostering the proper functioning of the local and national Bahá'í institutions. It is in striving to overcome the three mental tests that I have called attention to tonight that I believe we can best fulfill the responsibilities laid upon us in pursuit of the Three Year Plan in our role as Bahá'ís.

I bring my remarks to conclusion. It is well known that the American Bahá'í community is a community endowed with great potential. 'Abdu'l-Bahá blessed these shores with His footsteps. He lavished love and care on this country.

Shoghi Effendi wrote his major messages to the American Bahá'ís. He called upon the American believers as the chief executors of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. And I can assure you that the Universal House of Justice loves the American Bahá'í community and its institutions in no less a way than the love that was showered upon the friends in this country by the Master and the Guardian.

We turn to the American Bahá'í community with a great deal of trust and confidence and, if you will allow it, with pride at the potential and the greatness of what this community can achieve.

There is no doubt in my mind that all the promises in the Writings about the future glory and destiny of the American Bahá'í community will be fully and completely realized. Everything that 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about it will come true. It will occur. It is inevitable. There is no doubt about it.

But what there is doubt about is, where will you and I be? Will we be part of this great development? Will we be part of these victories? Will we survive these dangerous and challenging mental tests to which I see we are subjected now? Will it be our lot to ride on the crest of this wave of victories or will we be swept aside? Will we, in fact, join those in Bahá'í history who failed the tests when the tests came upon them? The choice is ours. The choice is ours, friends. The choice is ours.

— Nature and Challenge of Tests, The (Used by permission of the curator)