

DOES BAHÁ'U'LLAH WANT US TO GET INVOLVED IN CHANGING SOCIETY?

I WAS ASKED TO DISCUSS THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLAH ON THIS SUBJECT:

I was wondering if you would be available to lead the discussion at 11 AM this Sunday on an important and timely topic. Specifically, we're looking to explore what the Bahá'í writings say about political partisanship and our societal responsibilities for helping and serving one another, the discourse during this past feast and among the public has touched on activism, particularly the limited roles Bahá'ís usually play in it. For example, there's been discussion about extreme forms of activism, like chaining oneself to a tree or more concerning actions, such as the murder of the United Healthcare CEO. From the public standpoint, This raises questions about why Bahá'ís might seem to sit on the sidelines—or whether that perception is accurate. Your insights into how the Bahá'í teachings guide us to navigate these complex issues would be incredibly valuable, especially in fostering a deeper understanding of our approach to service and societal betterment within the framework of the Faith. Please let me know if you're available, and I'd be happy to provide any additional context or support for your preparation.

RESPONSE

Baha'u'llah discouraged His followers from being involved in government, calling for them to establish the Kingdom of God on earth by teaching the Faith, living according to its laws and principles, and building its institutions. How do we know that? Read the many references to these themes in the passages translated by the Guardian and included in Gleanings and Epistle to the Son of the Wolf.

'Abdu'l-Baha continued this approach, while praising certain kinds of secular governmental laws, principles and institutions. How do we know that? Read His talks published in Promulgation of Universal Peace, Paris Talks, 'Abdu'l-Baha in London, Star of the West.

Shoghi Effendi continued this approach, calling for Baha'is to focus on building the New World Order and not trying to fix the Old World Order. How do we know that? Read his letters published in The World Order of Baha'u'llah, The Promised Day is Come, Citadel of Faith, The Advent of Divine Justice.

The Universal House of Justice has continued this approach, calling for us to concentrate on society-building in our local communities rather than trying to make changes through secular

institutions and at the national and international levels. The External Affairs and Public Affairs departments of the NSAs and the International Baha'i Council engage in representation of the Baha'i teachings in formal liaisons with secular government. Collaboration with like-minded social justice organizations has occurred at various intervals and seems to be on the rise at the present.

Baha'is should unilaterally reject the use of force in bringing about any change as counterproductive and in violation of Baha'i standards.

Baha'is should unilaterally reject the engagement in illegal activity in order to bring about social justice as contrary to Baha'i standards.

Baha'is should not assume that whatever is popular among young people, or among advocates for those who perceive themselves to be victims of society is automatically in harmony with the Baha'i teachings and particularly with the Baha'i approach to societal transformation.

Baha'is should not align themselves with specific political and other ideological movements because the Baha'i teachings are not identical to any of these movements. While we can and should empathize and dialogue with others, we must not subordinate our ideals in order to win their approval and endorsement.

Examples:

While Baha'is are in favor of international peace, it is not peace at any price. Baha'u'llah called for the nations of the world to protect national borders and to collectively resist any nation that violates those borders. As 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote: "In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained. In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited, for if the preparations for war and the military forces of any nation should be allowed to increase, they will arouse the suspicion of others. The fundamental principle underlying this solemn Pact should be so fixed that if any government later violate any one of its provisions, all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission, nay the human race as a whole should resolve, with every power at its disposal, to destroy that government." (Secret of Divine Civilization)

While Baha'is are in favor of cherishing the planet, it is by implementing spiritual teachings and moderating material development rather than by adopting whatever platform is adopted

in the name of reason, tradition or science. As ‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote: “Know, therefore, that what the people possess and believe to be true is liable to error. For if in proving or disproving a thing a proof drawn from the evidence of the senses is advanced, this criterion is clearly imperfect; if a rational proof is adduced, the same holds true; and likewise if a traditional proof is given. Thus it is clear that man does not possess any criterion of knowledge that can be relied upon. / But the grace of the Holy Spirit is the true criterion regarding which there is no doubt or uncertainty. That grace consists in the confirmations of the Holy Spirit which are vouchsafed to man and through which certitude is attained.” (‘Abdu’l-Baha, SAQ, chapter 83)

While Baha’is are in favor of harmony between men and women, it cannot endorse the demands of those who seek to completely reinvent gender identity and to deem traditional masculinity and femininity to be inherently toxic. As ‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote: “The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.” (Tablet to The Hague, in SWAB #227)

While Baha’is are in favor of assisting the poor, the uneducated, the handicapped, the sick, abolishing all traces of coerced labor and service, and liberating those who are captives of oppression, they do not favor the abolition of rank, of individual initiative, of diversity for a homogenized global society. As Baha’u’llah wrote: “To transgress the limits of one’s own rank and station is, in no wise, permissible. The integrity of every rank and station must needs be preserved. By this is meant that every created thing should be viewed in the light of the station it hath been ordained to occupy.” (Gleanings XCIII)¹

Baha’is do not endorse passive aggressivity, nor avoidance of interaction with those with whom we are not in agreement, and, most importantly, we should not assume that our

¹We see amongst us men who are overburdened with riches on the one hand, and on the other those unfortunate ones who starve with nothing; those who possess several stately palaces, and those who have not where to lay their head. Some we find with numerous courses of costly and dainty food; whilst others can scarce find sufficient crusts to keep them alive. Whilst some are clothed in velvets, furs and fine linen, others have insufficient, poor and thin garments with which to protect them from the cold.

This condition of affairs is wrong, and must be remedied. Now the remedy must be carefully undertaken. It cannot be done by bringing to pass absolute equality between men.

Equality is a chimera! It is entirely impracticable! Even if equality could be achieved it could not continue—and if its existence were possible, the whole order of the world would be destroyed. The law of order must always obtain in the world of humanity. Heaven has so decreed in the creation of man.

Some are full of intelligence, others have an ordinary amount of it, and others again are devoid of intellect. In these three classes of men there is order but not equality. How could it be possible that wisdom and stupidity should be equal? Humanity, like a great army, requires a general, captains, under-officers in their degree, and soldiers, each with their own appointed duties. Degrees are absolutely necessary to ensure an orderly organization. An army could not be composed of generals alone, or of captains only, or of nothing but soldiers without one in authority. The certain result of such a plan would be that disorder and demoralization would overtake the whole army.

(Paris Talks #46)

opinions are right and those of others are wrong, nor that we have nothing to learn from those who disagree with us. As 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote: "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions." (SWAB #44)

Baha'is do not have clergy, so we should not feel compelled to parrot or even to agree with everything our fellow believers including our leaders say and write. However, we should treat every person, believer or not, leader or not, with respect and honor, we must exercise moderation and wisdom in the expression of our views, and avoid disputation, discourtesy and dissembling. As Baha'u'llah wrote: "In this Day, We can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behavior of the avowed believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this Cause. Both should observe the dictates of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the Faith." (Gleanings CLXIV)

Baha'is are to embrace those values that replace war with peace, conflict with reconciliation, hatred with love, estrangement with fellowship, sectarian fanaticism with universal inclusiveness, rejection with dialogue.