

# Relationships with Political and Religious Organizations

## INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

In a world fraught with problems and difficulties, it is natural and normal for people to organize themselves in favor of or in opposition to certain social issues. Movements are formed, social and political organizations are founded, protests, marches, referendums, measures, and campaigns are organized to remedy the wrongs or protect the rights of the people.

It is common for Bahá'ís to feel passionate about certain social wrongs or zealous over specific rights and freedoms, causing us to engage in the betterment of local, national, or international conditions. Since Bahá'ís have very high ideals and a vision of how things *could* be beyond most people's expectations, they are often targeted for membership or recruited by various groups and political organizations.

These passions, incited by various social conditions, raise questions as to how, with whom, and to what degree Bahá'ís should get involved in the issues and organizations around them. With whom should we associate? With whom can we affiliate? Is it acceptable for Bahá'ís to march on a given issue? Should we be involved in protests? If I like a certain political party's philosophy, may I join that party? Some churches teach some of the same things we believe; is it right for me to attend their services?

Such questions confront the individual Bahá'í daily. The following study helps the believer identify certain Bahá'í principles to employ when answering questions about proper relationships with other organized groups.



Continental Bahá'í House of Worship for the Pacific Islands, near Apia, Western Samoa

## OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

### Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding appropriate relationships for Bahá'ís with social or political organizations and other religious groups.

## THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

### Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations that follow, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud in its entirety.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:

  - A. Each participant **choose a word** from the quotation and **state it** for the whole group to hear. (Like a fun game – pick a word!) Then...
  - B. Read out loud the sentence that contains the **word** you selected, **while substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes below the quotation.
  - C. Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud again in its entirety.
  - B. Take turns **stating each basic fact or truth** you can find in the quotation about **appropriate relationships for Bahá'ís with social or political organizations and other religious groups**.

## QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. ...my first admonition is this: Associate most kindly with all; be as one family; pursue this same pathway. Let your intentions be one that your love may permeate and affect the hearts of others so that they may grow to love each other and all attain to this condition of oneness. —`Abdu'l-Bahá  
*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 107.8, pp. 336-37.

**admonition:** counsel or warning against fault or oversight  
**affect:** influence the feelings of  
**associate:** be closely connected in common interests and activities  
**attain:** succeed in achieving  
**condition:** desired state  
**intentions:** aims or plans  
**kindly:** with a sympathetic, generous, tenderhearted, gentle, and loving nature

**love:** warm-hearted affection, compassion, and concern for the good of all, fostered by an unconditional, vulnerable willingness to be spiritually intimate  
**one:** a single unit  
**oneness:** unity, harmony, and agreement of mind, feeling, and purpose  
**pathway:** way of life or course of action  
**permeate:** penetrate and spread through  
**pursue:** proceed eagerly along

2. Formal affiliation with and acceptance of membership in organizations whose programs or policies are not wholly reconcilable with the Teachings is not permissible to the friends.

—The Universal House of Justice

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 192, p. 54.

**acceptance:** receiving willingly and favorably  
**affiliation:** closely connected as a joined member  
**formal:** the use of forms, rules, or ceremony [for being]  
**friends:** Bahá'ís  
**membership in:** enrollment or belonging as a member [to]  
**organizations:** systematically arranged groups of people  
**permissible:** anything that may be allowed or permitted

**policies:** courses of action embracing general goals and acceptable procedures  
**programs:** plans or systems under which action may be taken towards a goal  
**reconcilable:** able to be brought into agreement or harmony; compatible  
**teachings:** specific beliefs, concepts, perceptions, principles, standards, morals, ideals, and truths taught [in the Bahá'í Faith]  
**wholly:** to the fullest extent; completely

3. ...no loyal believer should under any circumstances commit himself in any way to a political program or policy formulated and upheld by a political party. For affiliation with such a party necessarily entails repudiation of some principles and teachings of the Cause, or partial recognition of some of its fundamental verities. The friends should, therefore, keep aloof from party politics.

—written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 1446, p. 444.

**affiliation:** being closely connected as a joined member  
**aloof:** removed or distant, either physically or in interest  
**Cause:** Bahá'í Faith  
**circumstances:** accompanying events and conditions  
**commit:** obligate, pledge, or promise  
**entails:** involves as a result  
**formulated:** expressed in a systematic way or statement  
**friends:** Bahá'ís  
**fundamental:** basic and essential  
**loyal:** faithful and true  
**necessarily:** as a logical result or consequence; inevitably; unavoidably  
**partial:** incomplete or fractional  
**party:** group(s) of persons organized for the purpose of promoting shared theories and

principles  
**policy:** course of action embracing general goals and acceptable procedures  
**political:** organization or action of individuals or parties that attempt to control the appointments, decisions, or elections of those who manage the affairs of government  
**politics:** [that] attempt to control the appointments, decisions, or elections of those who manage the affairs of government  
**principles:** basic governing truths or standards  
**program:** plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal  
**recognition:** admission to the truth or validity  
**repudiation:** rejection as untrue or unjust; denial  
**teachings:** specific beliefs, concepts, perceptions, principles, standards, morals, ideals, and truths  
**upheld:** aided by approval or encouragement  
**verities:** truths and facts

4. Very much the same reasons motivate us in withdrawing from all political movements, however close some of their ideals may be to ours. We Bahá'ís are *one* the world-over, we are seeking to build up a New World Order, Divine in origin. How can we do this if every Bahá'í is a member of a different political party—some of them diametrically opposed to each other? Where is our unity then? We would be divided because of politics, against ourselves, and this is the opposite of our purpose.

—written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

*The Light of Divine Guidance*, (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982) vol. I, p. 123.

**diametrically:** completely opposite and adversely  
**divided:** disunited in opinion and interest  
**Divine:** God-inspired; holy; sacred  
**ideals:** standards of perfection or moral excellence  
**member:** person who belongs to an association  
**motivate:** stimulate active interest in  
**movements:** activities of a person or group of persons  
**New World Order:** future “Divine Civilization, the establishment of which is the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith.” (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 3-4)  
**one:** a single unit in harmony and agreement  
**opposed:** set to resist or be antagonistic  
**opposite:** position in conflict and opposition  
**origin:** the source of its beginning

**party:** group of persons organized for the purpose of promoting shared theories and principles  
**political:** organization or action of individuals or parties that attempt to control the appointment or decisions of those who manage the affairs of government  
**politics:** the attempts to control the appointments, decisions, or elections of those who manage the affairs of government  
**purpose:** main reason for existing  
**unity:** heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations, free of conflict, contention, dissension, and the struggle for dominance  
**withdrawing:** removing oneself [from] participation and affiliation

5. ...there is no Christian church [or, in principle, denomination of any Religion] today whose dogmas we, as Bahá'ís, can truthfully say we accept in their entirety—therefore to remain a member of the Church is not proper for us, for we do so under false pretences. We should, therefore, withdraw from our churches but continue to associate, if we wish to, with the church members and ministers.

—written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 530, p. 159.

**accept:** agree with  
**associate:** be closely connected in common interests and activities  
**dogmas:** authoritative formal doctrines or a body of doctrines stating beliefs or principles  
**entirety:** totality or completely  
**false pretences:** untrue and deceitful representation of facts or events  
**member(s):** person(s) who belong(s) or is an ↗

enrollee  
**ministers:** ones authorized or licensed to conduct Christian services  
**proper:** in conformity with suitable standards  
**remain:** stay with the same group [as]  
**truthfully:** with conformity to fact or reality  
**withdraw:** remove oneself from participation in membership

6. ...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 some activity in entire accord with our teachings...

—written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 1815, p. 535.

**accord:** agreement and conformity  
**bodies:** groups of individuals functioning as a unit  
**Cause:** Bahá'í Faith  
**civic:** concerns for public or community affairs, not including military or ecclesiastical  
**committees:** bodies of persons appointed or elected by agencies to consider, investigate, take action upon, and report on some particular matter  
**conferences:** meetings of two or more persons discussing matters of common concern  
**considered:** thought of as  
**designed:** planned with the intention  
**entire:** whole or complete  
**extreme:** opposite position  
**friends:** Bahá'ís  
**Guardian:** One appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi.

**identify:** consider combining or uniting  
**organizations:** systematically arranged groups of people  
**participation:** partaking in common  
**party:** group of persons organized for the purpose of promoting shared theories and principles  
**political:** organization or action of individuals or parties that attempt to control the appointment or decisions of those who manage the affairs of government  
**progressive:** making use of or interested in new ideas, findings, or opportunities; advancing  
**promote:** further or advance  
**seeming:** appearing as though  
**teachings:** specific beliefs, concepts, perceptions, principles, standards, morals, ideals, and truths taught [in the Bahá'í Faith]  
**unity:** harmony, agreement, peace, and accord  
**welfare:** well-being in respect to prosperity, happiness, and good fortune

7. There should be no confusion between the terms affiliation and association. While affiliation with ecclesiastical organizations is not permissible, association with them should not only be tolerated but even encouraged. There is no better way to demonstrate the universality of the Cause than this. Bahá'u'lláh indeed, urges His followers to consort with all religions and nations with utmost, friendliness and love. This constitutes the very spirit of His message to mankind.

—written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 1386, pp. 421-22.

**affiliation:** closely connected as a joined member  
**association:** joint action in common interests or activities  
**Cause:** Bahá'í Faith  
**confusion:** failure to tell the difference  
**consort:** harmoniously associate or keep company  
**constitutes:** makes up or forms  
**demonstrate:** illustrate and explain, especially with examples  
**ecclesiastical:** a formally organized religion or church  
**encouraged:** supported and fostered  
**friendliness:** kindly interest and goodwill  
**indeed:** with emphasis

**love:** warm-hearted affection, compassion, and concern for the good of all, fostered by an unconditional, vulnerable willingness to be spiritually intimate  
**organizations:** systematically arranged groups of people  
**permissible:** anything that may be allowed or permitted  
**spirit:** disposition, outlook, and attitude  
**tolerated:** put up with; allowed  
**universality:** all-inclusive quality or state  
**urges:** advocates and strongly advises  
**utmost:** the greatest or highest degree of

## SHARING EXERCISE: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

### Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, one thing that was outstanding or inspiring and what spiritual feelings it enkindled. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

One thing from the quotations that was outstanding or inspiring to me was \_\_\_\_\_

It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_

I felt this way because \_\_\_\_\_

## SOME QUESTIONS: *A cup from the showers of confirmation...*

### Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

- The Universal House of Justice wrote: "Formal affiliation with and acceptance of membership in organizations whose programs or policies are not wholly reconcilable with the Teachings is not permissible to the friends." What does reconcilable mean? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Can you think of an organization, other than a political party or religious group, that Bahá'ís **could** join? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Can you think of an organization, other than a political party or religious group, that Bahá'ís **should not** join? \_\_\_\_\_
- From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian: "...we, as Bahá'ís, must not have any affiliations with churches or political parties. But he feels certain that when you meditate on this matter you yourselves will see the wisdom of it."<sup>1</sup> What do you think is the wisdom of this basic Bahá'í teaching? \_\_\_\_\_
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated: "Our party is God's party; we do not belong to any party."<sup>2</sup> When Bahá'ís register to vote in city, state, or national elections, they should register as
  - democrats.
  - non-partisan.
  - republicans.
  - independents.
  - members of God's party.
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
- We are advised by Bahá'u'lláh to "*Consort ye then with the followers of all religions.*"<sup>3</sup> Does "*consort*" suggest we "associate" or "affiliate" with people of other religious backgrounds?
  - associate
  - affiliate

Continued on next page...

<sup>1</sup> Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 530, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 1449, p. 445.

<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), par. 75, p. 47.

5. Which five of the following are true? (not all answers are found in the quotations or introduction)
- a. Holding membership in any other religion is not acceptable for Bahá'ís.
  - b. Bahá'ís must give up all relationships with religious clergy and politicians.
  - c. A Bahá'í cannot be a minister, pastor, or clergy member for another religion.
  - d. Bahá'ís cannot be involved in community service activities with other religious groups.
  - e. Bahá'ís can attend worship services of other religions.
  - f. Bahá'ís cannot run for public office as a representative of a party.
  - g. Bahá'ís risk losing sacred Bahá'í rights and privileges if they do not eventually give up membership in ecclesiastical organizations or political parties.
6. The Guardian wrote: “Such a rectitude of conduct must ... characterize the attitude of every loyal believer towards nonacceptance of political posts, nonidentification with political parties, nonparticipation in political controversies, and nonmembership in political organizations and ecclesiastical institutions.”<sup>1</sup> How might “nonparticipation in political controversies” play out in your day-to-day life? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
7. Bahá'ís can work for the government, but not hold a *political* post. They can work in government to promote programs and policies consistent with Bahá'í teachings, but not those specifically associated with a political party. Bahá'ís can hold public office, but cannot campaign for civic or governmental positions. Bahá'ís can vote for candidates and on issues during elections, but cannot register with any political party. Which of the following are true?
- a. Bahá'ís just don't like parties!
  - b. Party politics promotes disunity, the very opposite of what the Bahá'ís are working for.
  - c. Bahá'ís do not campaign for positions as it promotes egoism and pride, which are detrimental to spiritual development.
  - d. “Non-involvement in politics” essentially means Bahá'ís avoid promoting disunity.

**APPLICATION: Showing forth divine light...**

**Facilitator**

Read through #1 together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action in #2. (these are not shared) When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

**1. IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES:** *Visions of radiant lights...*

**Bahá'u'lláh wrote:** “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....” Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: “**One could**....” Suggest as many ideas as you want.

**2. DECIDING ACTION:** *Mirroring forth a beam of light...*

From your experience in this study class on “Relationships with Political and Religious Organizations,” describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**My next step will be...** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, (Evanston: Bahá'í Publishing, 2006), par. 41, pp. 39-40.

## CLOSING MEDITATION: *A heart song...*

**On the subject of affiliation verses association by Shoghi Effendi, 11 March 1936.**

Their Faith, Bahá'ís firmly believe, is moreover undenominational, non-sectarian, and wholly divorced from every ecclesiastical system, whatever its form, origin, or activities. No ecclesiastical organization, with its creeds, its traditions, its limitations, and exclusive outlook, can be said (as is the case with all existing political factions, parties, systems and programs) to conform, in all its aspects, to the cardinal tenets of Bahá'í belief. To some of the principles and ideals animating political and ecclesiastical institutions every conscientious follower of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh can, no doubt, readily subscribe. With none of these institutions, however, can he identify himself, nor can he unreservedly endorse the creeds, the principles and programs on which they are based.

How can a Faith, it should moreover be borne in mind, whose divinely-ordained institutions have been established within the jurisdiction of no less than forty different countries, the policies and interests of whose governments are continually clashing and growing more complex and confused every day—how can such a Faith, by allowing its adherents, whether individually or through its organized councils, to meddle in political activities, succeed in preserving the integrity of its teachings and in safeguarding the unity of its followers? How can it insure the vigorous, the uninterrupted and peaceful development of its expanding institutions? How can a Faith, whose ramifications have brought it into contact with mutually incompatible religious systems, sects and confessions, be in a position, if it permits its adherents to subscribe to obsolescent observances and doctrines, to claim the unconditional allegiance of those whom it is striving to incorporate into its divinely-appointed system? How can it avoid the constant friction, the misunderstandings and controversies which formal affiliation, as distinct from association, must inevitably engender?

These directing and regulating principles of Bahá'í belief the upholders of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh feel bound, as their Administrative Order expands and consolidates itself, to assert and vigilantly apply.

—Shoghi Effendi

*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 198-99.

## ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. reconcilable: able to be brought into agreement or harmony; compatible
  - a. all answers are valuable
  - b. all answers are valuable
2. all answers are valuable
3. b
4. a
5. a, c, e, f, and g
6. all answers are valuable
7. b, c, and d

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