

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

29 November 2017

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Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 21 June 2017 raising questions about the involvement of the Bahá'í community in addressing the issue of anthropogenic climate change. You express your views about the contemporary discourse surrounding climate change, observing that there is pressure to accept an extreme position about the causes and predicted catastrophic results of climate change and to support associated economic and social policies. You also share your perception that some Bahá'ís have taken a position strongly aligned with such an extreme position, promoting its arguments and suppressing the views of other believers and, as a result, you fear that they may be raising the requirement to act on this issue to the level of a religious principle and involving the community in a partisan political debate. We have been asked to convey the following.

The House of Justice appreciates your turning to it for clarification of matters that have been a source of concern to you. It welcomes the opportunity not only to address the issue of climate change itself but, more broadly, to clarify certain ideas about the way in which Bahá'ís are to understand and contribute to the betterment of the world.

Your letter reflects thoughtful concern about the practical limits of scientific knowledge, its implications for public policy, and its possible misrepresentation in an argument warning about catastrophic anthropogenic climate change that you feel is extreme, political, and unjustified by the facts. Although you do not mention it, you are surely aware that your measured skepticism is largely overshadowed in the public debate by another extreme perspective, promoted by political and vested interests, that goes as far as denying climate change and attempting to dismiss or contend with relevant scientific findings. Specific concerns about possible extremes on one side of the debate, therefore, must be addressed without appearing to advocate the other extreme. On the matter of climate change and other vital issues with profound implications for the common good, Bahá'ís have to avoid being drawn into the all too common tendencies evident in contemporary discourse to delineate sharp dichotomies, become ensnared in contests for power, and engage in intractable debate that obstructs the search for viable solutions to the world's problems. Humanity would be best and most effectively served by setting aside partisan disputation, pursuing united action that is informed by the best available scientific evidence and grounded in spiritual principles, and thoughtfully revising action in the light of experience. The incessant focus on generating and magnifying points of difference rather than building upon points of agreement leads to exaggeration that fuels anger and confusion, thereby diminishing the will and capacity to act on matters of vital concern.

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources. Certain biological realities present themselves when an organism negatively affects or exceeds the capacity of its ecosystem. The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war. And particular arrangements of human affairs can have devastating consequences for the environment. The question of the impact of climate change, and to what extent it is man-made and its effects can be ameliorated, is today a major aspect of this larger problem. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh directly and indirectly touches on a range of such concerns in a manner that speaks to a harmony between society and the natural world. It is essential, therefore, that Bahá'ís contribute to thought and action regarding such matters.

Among the Bahá'í teachings are those concerning the importance of science. “Great indeed is the claim of scientists ... on the peoples of the world,” Bahá'u'lláh observed. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the “sciences of today are bridges to reality” and repeatedly emphasized that “religion must be in conformity with science and reason.” Significantly, on an occasion when a scientific question was asked of Shoghi Effendi, he responded in a letter written on his behalf that “we are a religion and not qualified to pass on scientific matters.” And in reply to scientific issues raised on a number of occasions, he consistently advised Bahá'ís that such matters would need to be investigated by scientists.

Scientific inquiry into the question of human contributions to global warming has gradually unfolded over a century of investigation and, more recently, with intense scrutiny. While there will naturally be differences of view among individual scientists, there does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change. Sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon; ultimately, the outcomes of action must stand the test of further scientific inquiry and the objective facts of the physical world. In the spectrum of issues under discussion—which includes the extent of human contribution, projections of the possible future consequences, and alternatives for response—some aspects are, of course, less supported than others by scientific findings and hence subject to additional critical analysis.

A phenomenon as complex as climate change cannot be reduced to simple propositions or simplistic policy prescriptions. Even when there is agreement on some underlying facts, there may be a diversity of views about what to do in response to those facts, and the problem is compounded when uncertainty exists or when basic facts are contested for partisan reasons. But while there may indeed be a localized and highly charged political component to the public discussion, more remarkable is the fact that at a time when nations have difficulty reaching agreement on many important issues, the governments of nearly every country on earth have reached political consensus on a joint framework, in the Paris accord, to respond to climate change in a manner that is anticipated to evolve over time as experience accumulates. More than a century ago, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá referred to “unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed.” The recently adopted international agreement on climate change, irrespective of any shortcomings and limitations it may have, offers another noteworthy demonstration of that development anticipated by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. The agreement represents a starting point for

constructive thought and action that can be refined or revised on the basis of experience and new findings over time.

While as a fundamental principle Bahá'ís do not engage in partisan political affairs, this should not be interpreted in a manner that prevents the friends from full and active participation in the search for solutions to the pressing problems facing humanity. Given that the question of climate change gives rise to social, economic, and environmental concerns across the world, interested Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions and agencies have naturally addressed it, whether at local, regional, national, or international levels. However, this does not mean that conclusions about scientific findings on climate change associated with such initiatives should be construed or presented as matters of religious conviction or obligation. Different Bahá'ís will, given their range of backgrounds, understand ideas about science and climate change in different ways and feel impelled to act differently, and there is no obligation for them to have uniformity of thought in such matters. Whenever Bahá'ís do participate in activities associated with this topic in the wider society, they can help to contribute to a constructive process by elevating the discourse above partisan concerns and self-interest to strive to achieve unity of thought and action. A range of Bahá'í concepts can inform these efforts; the letter of the House of Justice dated 1 March 2017, for example, addresses moral questions of consumption and excessive materialism that are associated with the exploitation and degradation of the environment. At the start, there are no doubt many uncontroversial areas of overlap where the effort to address the question of anthropogenic climate change corresponds with widely accepted approaches to improving the environment. Areas for collaboration with others could broaden as experience and learning unfolds.

In those parts of the world where discussions surrounding anthropogenic climate change have indeed fallen prey to an almost intractable divide, Bahá'ís must be sensitive to the danger of this divisive partisan approach taking root in the community. This may well mean that some individuals or agencies have to consider to what extent their views about action required on climate change reflect a posture that is too extreme, whether in exaggerating the problem or minimizing it. Concepts and principles associated with Bahá'í consultation inform how the friends should interact among themselves and how they participate in social discourses and social action. Consultation provides a means by which common understanding can be reached and a collective course of action defined. It involves a free, respectful, dignified, and fair-minded effort on the part of a group of people to exchange views, seek truth, and attempt to reach consensus. An initial difference of opinion is the starting point for examining an issue in order to reach greater understanding and consensus; it should not become a cause of rancor, aversion, or estrangement. By acting in unity, a conclusion about a particular course of action may be tested and revised as necessary through a process of learning. Otherwise, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, “stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.”

Also relevant to such participation is greater appreciation and application of Bahá'u'lláh's insights on moderation. “In all matters moderation is desirable,” He states. “If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil.” This call for moderation includes in particular the manner of speech if a just conclusion is to be achieved. “Human utterance is an essence which aspires to exert its influence and needeth moderation,” Bahá'u'lláh writes. “One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison,” He explains. “It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may

induce everyone to attain that which becometh man's station." By moderation, Bahá'u'lláh is in no way referring to mere compromise, the dilution of truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus. The moderation He calls for demands an end to destructive excesses that have plagued humanity and fomented ceaseless contention and turmoil. Moderation in deliberation and action stands in contrast to the arbitrary imposition of views through power or insistence upon ideological aims, both of which obstruct the search for truth and sow the seeds of continuing injustice. A moderate perspective is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice. "Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation," Bahá'u'lláh states. "He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing."

The House of Justice trusts that, in pursuing the many facets of their work of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society, individuals, communities, and institutions will continually grow in their capacity to make a distinctive and effective contribution to addressing the multitudinous problems afflicting society and the planet, including those associated with climate change.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat