**Withdrawal from the Faith**

**by / on behalf of Universal House of Justice**

2001-04-04

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The International Teaching Centre has sought elucidation of issues concerning the attitude of Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions towards those who have withdrawn from the Faith. In response, we have provided the following comments, which are being sent to you for your information and guidance. You are free to share this letter with the believers under your jurisdiction as you wish.

One's beliefs are an internal and personal matter; no person or institution has the right to exert compulsion in matters of belief. Since there is a wide range of meanings in the Sacred Scriptures, there are bound to be different ways in which individuals understand many of the Bahá'í teachings. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the viability of the Bahá'í community that its members share a common understanding of essentials. This implies a commitment by each member to function within the framework established by such an understanding.

This framework includes, for example, cognizance of the existence of a Divine Revelation brought by Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God for this age, and acceptance of the two primary duties prescribed by God, as expressed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Revelation. These are: "recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws," and observance of "every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties," the Aqdas firmly states, "are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other."1

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Whom Bahá'u'lláh appointed as the Interpreter of His writings, reaffirms these fundamentals of Bahá'í belief. In His Will and Testament He writes: "This is the foundation of the belief of the people of Bahá (may my life be offered up for them): ‘His Holiness, the Exalted One (the Báb), is the Manifestation of the Unity and Oneness of God and the Forerunner of the Ancient Beauty. His Holiness the Abhá Beauty (may my life be a sacrifice for His steadfast friends) is the Supreme Manifestation of God and the Dayspring of His Most Divine Essence. All others are servants unto Him and do His bidding.'"2

It is within the context of these statements of basic belief and practice that membership in the Bahá'í Faith is determined. Acknowledging that the matter of ascertaining the qualification of a true believer is a delicate and complex question, Shoghi Effendi, the appointee of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá as Guardian of the Cause and authorized interpreter of its teachings, set down for Spiritual Assemblies the principal factors that must be taken into consideration before deciding whether a person may be regarded as a true believer or not: "Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the True Exemplar of the Bahá'í Cause, as set forth in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present day Bahá'í administration throughout the world...."3

Viewed in the light of these texts, a statement that one wishes to withdraw from the Bahá'í community, but not from the Faith, is seen to be self-contradictory. The Bahá'í community must be seen in its proper light. The necessity for its existence as an inseparable element of the Faith itself is explained by the stated purpose of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: to bring about a Divine Civilization. The embodiment of that purpose and of the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh into the world is the Order He has ordained, to which He refers in the Most Holy Book in asserting: "The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System - the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."4

Normally, a Spiritual Assembly is called upon to make a decision in such matters only as the result of an action by an individual, either in declaring his belief in Bahá'u'lláh, or in stating that he wishes to withdraw from the Faith, or, very rarely, in persistently promoting concepts which are clearly inconsistent with the essentials of membership outlined above.

Acceptance of the Faith is the voluntary act of an individual and is registered by the appropriate Bahá'í institution unless it has good reason not to do so. Likewise, a Bahá'í is free to leave the Faith voluntarily. When a member of the community informs the Assembly of his wish to withdraw, it would try to help him overcome whatever problems seem to be the cause of his desiring to take such a step. If he persists in his intention, the Assembly would normally accept the withdrawal unless there were grounds for suspecting that he is acting insincerely out of some ulterior motive, such as to violate a Bahá'í law with impunity.

In spite of loving encouragement given by their Assemblies, not all Bahá'ís are active in the work of the community. This does not, of course, necessarily indicate withdrawal. An Assembly should carefully distinguish between those who are not active but still identify themselves with the Faith, and those whose inactivity indicates complete lack of interest and a wish to have nothing more to do with the Cause.

Once a person's resignation from the Faith has been accepted, his status is that of a non-Bahá'í and - except as noted below - his relationship with Bahá'í institutions and individual believers is the same as that of any other non-Bahá'í. As in all human relationships, the closeness of this connection, and the warmth of friendship, depend upon personal factors.

Sometimes, after a person's withdrawal from the Cause has been accepted, it becomes evident that his statements were insincere and were made merely in order to evade Bahá'í law. The Assembly need not take any overt action in such a case, but would note the matter in its records. In other words, it would have to be cautious about accepting a subsequent declaration of belief from this individual until satisfied that it is made in good faith. Also, depending upon the circumstances, the Assembly might require him to rectify the action, taken in violation of Bahá'í law, which was the motive for his withdrawing from the Faith.

An analogous situation arises when a person who is engaged in some activity which he suspects would result in his being declared a Covenant-breaker withdraws from the Faith under the impression that this step would prevent such an outcome. The Universal House of Justice may conclude that the withdrawal provides adequate protection of the community from the individual in question. However, if he persists, following his withdrawal, in trying to undermine the Covenant or joins forces with Covenant-breakers, he may be judged to have broken the Covenant, and the friends would be told to have no association with him. Each such case would be considered in the context of its specific circumstances.

There is one other condition which should be mentioned. There are certain former Bahá'ís whose actions do not necessarily constitute Covenant-breaking, but are seriously destructive. Where such people have shown that they are impervious to explanations or exhortations from the Bahá'í institutions, continued association with them can be burdensome and can exert a spiritually corrosive effect on the faith of believers. In such cases the Head of the Faith may simply advise the Bahá'ís to leave them to their own devices.

Thus, there are exceptional cases in which a former believer's spiritual attitude to the Faith may, to various degrees, create an estrangement between him and the Bahá'ís. In general, however, a person who has withdrawn from the Faith is regarded as being among the generality of humankind with whom the Bahá'ís are enjoined to associate "in joy and fragrance".

With loving Bahá'í greetings
(signed: The Universal House of Justice)

**Notes:**
1. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Para. 1.

2. The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 19.

3. Bahá'í Administration (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 90.

4. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Para. 181