

**YOUR EXPERIENCE
AS A BAHÁ'Í**



4.457.03

YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A BAHÁ'Í

1948

Bahá'í Publishing Committee
WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

Copyright, 1948, by the
BAHÁ'Í PUBLISHING COMMITTEE

Printed in U.S.A.



YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A BAHÁ'Í

WHEN you declare your faith in Bahá'u'lláh and enroll in a Bahá'í community, you begin a great spiritual adventure. In the Faith you will find all kinds of people. There will be people of wealth and people with little money. You will find believers from all races. You will meet believers who are highly educated; some are leaders in their professions and in business. Some have little education. But all these Bahá'ís possess in common their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. All these types of people have found a clear basis of unity.

How this unity works is important. For the Bahá'í Faith is not a church. It does not have a formal creed to be recited, or sacraments, or a clergy. It is not a denomination of Christianity or Islám or Judaism. The Bahá'í Faith is a religious community. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave us laws, principles, and institutions for our community life. Learning to live and function in a Bahá'í community will be a new and vital experience for you. It will help you in living with your neighbors and in achieving greater harmony with friend and stranger.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY?

1. **GROUP LIFE.** 'Abdu'l-Bahá taught us that God loves those who work in groups. From your study of the Bahá'í teachings, you know that the chief purpose of God in this age is to create unity. This unity is to make the nations into a single nation. It is to unite the races so that all men and women are equally citizens of one world. To do our part in building the World Order of Baha'u'lláh, we must constantly rid our minds and hearts of prejudices and habits which are "imitations of the past." We need new qualities of character to do this.

Community life in the Faith is based on the spirit of cooperation. Cooperation means that two attitudes, very strong in American life,

are harmful in the Faith. The first harmful attitude is that of "having to run the show." An Assembly should function by frank and loving consultation, followed by group decision. It should not function by the wishes and desires of one or two people. The second harmful attitude is that of "letting George do it." In churches the minister is paid to do the study and spiritual reflection for the members; he is also largely responsible for many practical affairs. In the Bahá'í Faith you have a continuing responsibility for deepening your knowledge of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. If you are a member of a Local Assembly, you share with eight other people the administrative responsibility for the Faith in your town or city. If you are appointed on a committee, you again have the opportunity of sharing responsibility with others. Under all circumstances, there is always opportunity for you to cooperate and do your share in the great Bahá'í enterprise of building the Kingdom of God upon earth.

To joyfully accept responsibility is to place trust in God to assist you in His service. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favored angels." (*Gleanings*, p. 139).

2. You will find that there is no sharp distinction in the Bahá'í Faith between the individual spiritual life and the social life of the believers. The Guardian wrote: "To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause..."

A person cannot be a real Bahá'í if he separates himself from his fellow believers. He might be a man or woman of good character. But he cannot be a real Bahá'í unless he is actively associated with other Bahá'ís in building the divine institutions which Bahá'u'lláh created to safeguard the development of mankind in our time.

Religions in the past have placed great emphasis on individual salvation. A Bahá'í is interested in mutual salvation. By building a new World Order on this earth, all men and women will have greater opportunity to prepare themselves for their life in the future worlds of God.

In the *Hidden Words* Bahá'u'lláh says: "The best beloved of all things in My sight is justice." Individuals may love each other, but justice is a social quality. Only social institutions can establish justice between individuals and groups. We best serve humanity by building the social institutions which Bahá'u'lláh has given us. Through them, world justice will come for all men and women.

The Guardian wrote a few years ago: "The believers are building a refuge for mankind. This is their supreme, sacred task and they should devote every moment they can to this task." (*Bahá'í News*, Nov., 1944, p. 2).

3. GETTING RID OF THE PARTISAN SPIRIT. Our culture is full of the partisan spirit. Anyone is free to form a group or party to attack some person or idea which he dislikes. This is the partisan spirit; it is the spirit of division. It is directly contrary to the Bahá'í spirit of love, fellowship and unity. Also, we have noticed all our lives that an individual is praised if he can push himself forward and dominate other people, making them accept his ideas or his methods for doing something. This practice is directly contrary to the Bahá'í spirit.

We need to get clear in our minds the negative and dividing ideas and practices which have no place in Bahá'í community life.

Special groups and cliques are a non-Bahá'í practice, belonging to corrupt political life but not in our Faith. A real Bahá'í will never organize a group of people around himself on any pretext or purpose. This would be to violate the spirit of unity. This would be to violate the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. "To insure unity and agreement He (Bahá'u'lláh) has entered into a Covenant with all the peoples of the world including the Interpreter and Explainer of His teachings so that no one may interpret or explain the religion of God according to his own view or opinion and thus create a sect founded upon his individual understanding of the divine words." (PUP, p. 451).

In this Faith there are no self-appointed leaders or authorities. Thus there is no basis for the individual, egotistic exploiter who can rise to uncontrolled power in other types of society. In the Bahá'í Faith leadership lies in the assemblies which are elected by the be-

lievers and in the Guardian who was appointed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We never elect a single person to do the executive work of the community; we always elect a group.

We do not organize and nominate people for election. This is a political method which cuts down the freedom of choice of the electors. Agitation, direct or indirect, to elect a certain person, or not to vote for a certain person, is a political method which should have no place in the Faith. This is the partisan spirit which we must eliminate. Instead, it is our right as individual believers not to be influenced one way or another in our voting. Our secret ballot must be cast, free from all outside pressure and influence. Our Bahá'í elections should always be in a spirit of fellowship and prayer.

Modern newspapers devote a great deal of space to scandal. Such news appeals to the baser instincts of men and women. The discussion of scandal has no place in the Bahá'í community. In the corrupt, divided world about us, slander and scandal play a large part. Bahá'u'lláh has forbidden us to utter slander against anyone. If we are to be real, responsible Bahá'ís, we must also be responsible in our speech. If we feel a person is doing something harmful to the Faith, we should discuss this only with the Local or National Assembly. This prevents us from spreading gossip and slander, and puts the problem in the hands of responsible, elected body. Frequently we do not know all the facts, even when we think we do. If we indulge in backbiting and useless criticism, we violate the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and imperil our own souls. Also we prevent the individual concerned from making an unhindered effort to develop true Bahá'í character. The Assembly is responsible for seeing that justice is done and for handling personal problems confidentially. The final appeal is to the Guardian of the Faith. No believer has the right to appeal a personal matter to the believers at large.

4. CONSULTATION. Consultation is a testing of the spiritual quality of the individuals involved. Probably of all parts of community life, here is where we show our best or our worst. Each individual is called upon to practice restraint, that prime quality of a mature and poised individual. We exercise restraint when we refrain from saying anything which comes into our heads, when we

speak briefly and to the point—not as orators with long introductions and lengthy embellishments of the point; when we listen respectfully to the opinions of others; when we do not speak unless or until we have a definite contribution to make; when we keep undue emotion out of our comments and suggestions; when we do not make comments aimed at individuals. Such a restraint (or self-discipline) helps to build that atmosphere and practice of group thinking which is the mark of true consultation.

Independence of judgment is an important characteristic. Each of us tends somewhat to lean on the opinions of the particular person who first introduced us to the Faith or the one with whom we have studied most. If a Bahá'í always looks to another person to see how that person is going to vote or what he is going to say, he is falling into the pattern of leader-disciple. This is a false relationship for a Bahá'í community. Personality is not the basis on which a true Bahá'í community can be built. We do not have any division of people into leaders and followers, leaders and disciples.

We are all disciples of Bahá'u'lláh, followers of Him and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant, and of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian. Other than that, the only leadership we recognize is that of the assemblies we elect, and in the case of the assemblies, it is not the leadership of one person—not in a healthy Bahá'í community. In a healthy Bahá'í community, the elected assembly—making its decisions through consultation—provides the leadership. For groups and isolated believers, the Regional Teaching Committee has responsibility for leadership and teaching assistance.

Therefore, inexperienced though we may be, new in the Faith as we may be, in consultation we simply and directly offer our ideas, our opinions, and our judgment as the best we have to offer at the time. Through our continued study of the teachings, freed of dependence upon any dominant personality, our inexperience and lack of knowledge will be replaced by experience and knowledge drawn directly from the teachings.

To do these things, to grow in character, to gain spiritual poise, to learn to think and act together with fellow-believers, each of us needs to be patient and to practice faith. We need patience with ourselves lest we become discouraged with our shortcomings; we need

patience with others lest we be a source of discouragement and hindrance to them. Patience can open the door to growth and understanding.

5. **THE GUARDIAN.** The center and heart of our Faith is Shoghi Effendi, our Guardian. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, in His Will and Testament, that Shoghi Effendi is the "sign of God" among us.

Our age is the fruition of the labors and sacrifices of the past Manifestations of God. Baha'u'lláh has taught us that this is the Day of God and that the Kingdom of God would grow from His teachings until it embraces all the people of the earth. Bahá'u'lláh not only gave us the institution of the House of Justice, the law of consultation, and other laws and principles needed to build the promised Kingdom. He also provided a divine continuity for the unity and guidance of the believers and the interpretation of His teachings. In the Guardian we have that divine center of interpretation and inspiration.

Ruhíyyih Khánum has written: "What the Guardian possesses to an outstanding degree (and no doubt is divinely endowed with) is the vision of the Cause. That which might seem essential to us he would see as a purely secondary issue and what might appear in our eyes as a trivial matter might to him be the pivot of far greater decisions. He is the balance of the Cause; he weighs and classifies the problems, the requirements, the tasks of the hour, and keeps the entire Faith in every part of the world functioning as efficiently and as satisfactorily as our individual frailties and deficiencies will permit."

Year by year since 1921 the Guardian has patiently enlarged our vision. In the letters which he has written to the American Bahá'ís you will see the steps by which he has led us into deeper understanding and a realization of our world mission. He is the center, the point of balance, the "sign of God" upon earth.

DEEPENING OUR SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING

Our object should always be to become better Bahá'ís. Let us always remember the words of the Báb: "You are the bearers of the Name of God in this Day." Our constant ambition should be to

develop a deeper understanding of the Faith and a better Bahá'í character.

There are many ways to do this, but if we just try four ways, we will notice a growth in our inner life.

1. Study the teachings with regularity.
2. Use one of the obligatory prayers daily. Pray for the unity of the believers, pray for the growth of the Faith, pray for the healing of the sick, pray for greater love and understanding, pray for strength and means to serve the Faith, pray for the Guardian.
3. Make daily efforts to show forth love and fellowship to believers and non-believers alike. "Good deeds bear witness to the truth of words. It is hoped that the righteous will illuminate the world through the light of deeds." (Bahá'u'lláh, BWF, p. 177).
4. Teach the Faith in some way continually. As long as a person makes an effort to teach the Faith, the confirmations of God will come to him.

TESTS

No one can live in a Bahá'í community without meeting tests of his sincerity. Each Bahá'í is a slightly different degree of spiritual growth. Our backgrounds differ widely, and so does the amount of knowledge which we have of the Faith.

We may notice at times the shortcomings of other believers. Our friends or relatives may criticize us for becoming Bahá'ís. They may utter slander about the Faith, or they may use the merciless and unkind weapon of sarcasm to undermine our faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Such tests as these can be a strengthening process if we calmly act as Bahá'ís and do not fear or run away. Bahá'u'lláh taught us that the true lover of God welcomed tests of his sincerity in the path of service to the Beloved. Through obedience to the teachings, love, a firm faith, prayer, and constant efforts to serve, tests are victoriously surmounted.

"Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed the promise of the oneness of humanity. Therefore we must exercise the utmost love toward each

other. We must be loving to all the people of the world. We must not consider any people the people of satan, but know and recognize all as the servants of the one true God. At most it is this: some do not know, they must be guided and trained. They must be taught to love their fellow-creatures and be encouraged in the acquisition of virtues. Some are ignorant, they must be informed. Some are as children, undeveloped; they must be helped to reach maturity. Some are ailing, their moral condition is unhealthy; they must be treated until their morals are purified. But the sick man is not to be hated because he is sick, the child must not be shunned because he is a child, the ignorant one is not to be despised because he lacks knowledge. They must all be treated, educated, trained and assisted in love. . . ." (PUP, p. 264).

BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Bahá'í Administration is the pattern for the future World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. And His World Order is the fulfillment of Christ's prayer that the Kingdom of God be established on earth.

Shoghi Effendi has written: "If the believers could properly evaluate the work they are doing they would be astonished at its importance, but they are in the position of not being able to see the forest for the trees; they are too close to it to realize its true import." (*Bahá'í News*, Nov., 1944, p. 2).

In attending the 19-day Feasts, in participating in consultation, in going to the Summer Schools, in serving on committees, in contributing to the Local and National Funds, in supporting the Local and National Assemblies, we are building the structure of the future Kingdom.

This Faith has been born through sacrifice. Our early Persian brethren gave their lives by the thousands that this Faith might grow and be given to the peoples of other countries. Through sacrifice the finer qualities of character unfold and the world can see our sincerity as Bahá'ís. The American believers are now engaged in a world teaching mission given them by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Through the National Fund this work is carried forward in many countries. The sacrificial and regular support which each believer gives to the National Fund hastens the world triumph of the Faith. Regular con-

tributions to the National Fund demonstrates the faith of each believer.

"We must be like the fountain or spring that is continually emptying itself of all that it has and is continually being refilled from an invisible source. To be continually giving out for the good of our fellows undeterred by fear of poverty and reliant on the unfailing bounty of the Source of all wealth and all good—this is the secret of right living." (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í News*, Sept., 1926, p. 1).

WE ARE NEVER ALONE

If you are an isolated believer, sitting down to read prayers in observance of the 19-day Feast, remember that you are not alone. In thousands of cities and towns, in over ninety countries, other believers are gathering for the same sacred meeting. In some places thousands will be gathered together. But you are not alone. In the spirit of prayer and service, the love of Bahá'u'lláh binds us all together. He stands always ready to guide, protect and assist us. Among the spiritual adventures open to us in our Bahá'í life, are the loving confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh. As we make effort, so will He assist.

"Arise to further My Cause, and to exalt My Word amongst men. We are with you at all times, and shall strengthen you through the power of truth. We are truly almighty. Whoso hath recognized Me, will arise and serve Me with such determination that the powers of earth and heaven shall be unable to defeat his purpose." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 137).

No matter where we may be, no matter how few may be gathered together, we have this majestic assurance from Bahá'u'lláh: "Blessed is the spot, and the house, and the place, and the city, and the heart, and the mountain, and the refuge, and the cave, and the valley, and the land, and the sea, and the island, and the meadow where mention of God hath been made, and His praise glorified."