

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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July 5, 2006

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The National Spiritual Assembly received – via both email and surface mail – your articulate and manifestly heartfelt letter of \_\_\_\_\_ in which you expressed feelings of unease with our annual request for information on the racial composition of each newly-formed Spiritual Assembly and affirmed your desire to be designated simply as “a member of the human race.”

We have taken pains in our communications on this subject to make it clear to the friends that their providing a racial designation for themselves – whether on the Assembly Formation form or on any other – is a matter of choice and is not compulsory. Though we would be most pleased to have a designation for each registered Bahá'í – for reasons we hope to clarify in the paragraphs that follow – the friends may elect not to supply one if they so choose.

As to the case you make against the use of racial designations at all: you are correct that your soul – like the souls of all humanity – “resists classification.” But it is equally true that during the eight or nine decades that we participate in the adventure of earthly life, we live subject to its customs and practices.

Contemporary scientific inquiry has successfully demonstrated the fallaciousness of the notion of “pure” races that to such an absurd and tragic extent preoccupied Western thinking in past centuries. However, scientists still consider the traditional racial categories to be a useful tool in studying the peoples of the planet and their divergent histories and cultures and are not opposed to their use for these purposes.

While forcefully championing the oneness and wholeness of the human family, the Bahá'í teachings do not deny that the various races and ethnic groups that comprise that same human family exhibit characteristics – the product of thousands of years of evolution in widely separated regions of the globe and the development of distinctive cultures – that are unique and different. As the beloved Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, so patiently and so perfectly explained, it is these very differences that make the variegated “garden” of humanity vibrant and interesting, pointing out that if all were the same, the garden would be exceedingly dull and boring!

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It was the beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, who continually reminded the friends that the “watchword” of the Bahá'í Faith was the principle of “unity in diversity.” The aim of the world civilization we are striving to create is not to homogenize the human family but to educate its differing elements such that every member – while recognizing the underlying oneness of the family – respects, honors, and celebrates its rich diversity.

Who better understood and more completely embodied in every fiber of his being the principle of the oneness of humanity than Shoghi Effendi? Yet – so Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum informs us in *The Priceless Pearl*, her account of his life and achievements – the Guardian, throughout his ministry, kept careful track of the numbers of various races, ethnic groups, and tribes that were represented in the Bahá'í community:

He was not only eager to welcome as many different ethnic groups into the Faith as possible but constantly urged the Bahá'ís to reach people of different races so that within the communities that cardinal principle of unity in diversity might be exemplified. This was reflected in two of his statistics, the second one significantly emphasizing the great importance he attached to this aspect of our teachings; the headings of these statistics speak for themselves: “Races Represented in the Bahá'í World Community”, which were listed by name. In 1944 there were 31 races; in 1955 there were about 40 races. “Minority Groups and Races with which contact has been established by Bahá'ís”, likewise listed by name: in 1944 these were 9, but in 1952 they had risen to 15 – 12 of which were American Eskimo and Indian tribes. In 1952 a new caption was added, in spite of the insignificance of the figures involved: “African Tribes Represented in the Bahá'í Faith”; the names of 12 tribes were given – proudly. . . . His keen interest in the racial questions of our day, his strong sense of the value of the different qualities with which God has endowed different peoples, made him eager to share what he considered to be substantial triumphs.

– Rúhíyyih Rabbání, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 393

Why the importance of such data? Rúhíyyih Khánum supplies the answer in her further account of the Guardian's efforts to marshal statistics:

To understand the statistics better one must understand what was in Shoghi Effendi's mind behind the statistics. One cannot argue with facts; one can disagree with ideas, pooh-pooh claims, belittle historic happenings, but when one is shown in cold print that such and such a thing is worth five-and-a-half-million dollars, or that seven National Bahá'í Assemblies have been incorporated, or that the Bahá'í Marriage Ceremony is entirely legal in fifteen states, or one reads the names of the African tribes who are represented in the Faith, the languages in which its teachings have been translated, one is forced to accept that this Faith exists in a very concrete way. Facts were part of Shoghi Effendi's ammunition with which he could defend the Faith against its enemies and through which he could not only encourage the Bahá'ís but stimulate them to greater effort.

– Rúhíyyih Rabbání, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 390

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The National Spiritual Assembly's reasons for gathering data on the racial and ethnic composition of the American Bahá'í community are consistent with those of the Guardian for the Bahá'í world. The United States has one of the most diverse populations of any nation on earth: the diversity of the Bahá'í community must resemble that of the American community that surrounds it.

To give a concrete example: if, as the projections of the Census Bureau suggest, the size of the Hispanic population of the United States is fast approaching 20 percent of the total, the composition of the American Bahá'í community must reflect this development. How, otherwise, is our assertion that Bahá'u'lláh's teachings have the power to attract and unify diverse, estranged, and even antagonistic peoples to have any credibility in the eyes of a skeptical American public? To extend the same example further, how is the National Spiritual Assembly to obtain accurate and reliable information on the ratio of Hispanic believers in our community to the total except through the compilation of statistics that can only come from the friends' honest reporting of their racial and ethnic origins?

We hope the foregoing will satisfactorily speak to your discomfort with the National Spiritual Assembly's continuing requests for the friends to specify their racial and ethnic origins and will assuage your concerns. In closing, we wish to again thank you for your sincere and well-written letter and to assure you of our deep and abiding affection and our prayers that your wholehearted efforts to serve this sacred Cause will be ever blessed, guided, and sustained by the King of Glory, Bahá'u'lláh.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Robert C. Henderson  
Secretary-General