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Letters to the Editor



Dear Editor,

“TRANQUILLITY ZONE” CANDLES...SHOULD THEY BE EXTINGUISHED LEST THEY BURN US?

The April edition of Bahá'í Journal UK contains both the very wise and timely guidance by the National Spiritual Assembly on “Tranquillity Zones and Safety” and a detailed description, by Mr S Maund, of the origin of what to me looks very much like a dangerous budding – if not rapidly mushrooming – Bahá'í ritual. Hence, I felt impelled to write my view on this delicate issue.

Firstly let me assure everyone, especially the TZ enthusiasts that I am no less enthusiastic than them about the momentary calming effect such “Zones” produce within certain people. All my serious concern and worries arise from the real danger of letting this appear in non-Bahá'í eyes as veritable ritualistic stuff of the Bahá'ís or the Bahá'í Faith. Here lies the great danger not only from the outsider's point of view, but alas, to the budding Bahá'í generation who might easily grow to associate the Bahá'í Faith and its practice with ancillary material means or tools as being the normal or better way to “spiritualise” oneself... and perhaps to better “garnish” a Bahá'í meeting!

Let we Bahá'ís guard our beloved Faith lest, unwittingly, we start growing certain trends which could ritualise it as happened in previous religions. The beloved Guardian of our Faith cautions us, in many of his illuminating communications, to “keep from any set of forms”(1), though the subject in question is related to Bahá'í music.

May I close by reiterating that I am not against Tranquillity Zones.

Fuad A Abbas

Dr John Parris reponds:

In its letter of January 9, 2001, the Universal House of Justice identified “devotional meetings open to all”(2) as a central feature of the Five Year Plan. This allowed for the further development of a range of devotional activities which had been encouraged by the National Spiritual Assembly over the preceding four years. The aim of all of these had been to create devotional environments in which people from diverse backgrounds can be put directly in touch with the creative power of the Word of God.

The following guidance, written on behalf of the beloved Guardian, outlines many of the features of worship in a Bahá'í temple but applies equally well to such meetings:

“The nature of these gatherings is for prayer, meditation and the reading of writings from the Sacred Scriptures of our Faith and other Faiths. ... The gatherings should be simple, dignified, and designed to uplift the soul and educate it through hearing the Creative Word.”
(3)

It is apparent that a wide range of activities fall within the purview of this guidance. For

For example, individuals and institutions have arranged the following:

- simple prayer meetings in their own homes and Bahá'í Centres
- unity feasts
- prayer meetings in public places such as libraries, hotels etc.
- Sacred Space meetings
- Tranquillity Zones

The National Spiritual Assembly is not advocating one particular approach over another but rather encourages creative experimentation with a wide range of activities.

Viewed from this perspective Tranquillity Zones have made two major contributions to the development of devotional gatherings: firstly, a recognition of the importance of adequate preparation, and secondly, the benefits from increased attention to the aesthetic aspects surrounding worship. Their success as a means of conveying the spirit of the Faith has recently been noted by the World Centre in their summary of the international achievements of the Four Year and Twelve Month Plans.(4)

That is not to say that Tranquillity Zones are everyone's cup of tea – whether Bahá'ís or seekers – far from it. They do, however, appeal to a significant proportion of believers as well as those without any specific religious affiliation.

The National Spiritual Assembly is as keen to guard against rituals creeping into Bahá'í practices as it is to encourage a diversity of approaches. The aim is to keep rituals to an absolute minimum. This principle is summarised in a letter written on behalf of the beloved Guardian:

“Bahá'u'lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith. The few forms that there are – like those associated with the two longer obligatory daily prayers – are only symbols of the inner attitude.” (5)

Hence there is a balance to be struck between creative experimentation, on the one hand, and introducing set forms and rituals on the other. The National Spiritual Assembly is confident that the friends throughout the UK are capable of achieving this balance whilst trying to align their pursuits with the Will of God.

1. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, July 20, 1946 quoted in Lights of Guidance, No 1364, p. 412.
2. Message of the Universal House of Justice to the conference of the Continental Counsellors, January 9, 2001
3. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, April 11, 1947, quoted in Lights of Guidance, No 2061, p. 608.
4. Four Year & Twelve Month Plans.
5. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer dated June 24, 1949, quoted in Lights of Guidance, No 1573, p. 477

Dear Friends,

IMPROVEMENT OF STUDY CIRCLES

I would like to endorse the view of Poppy Villiers-Stuart in the June journal about study circles. A study circles' page in the journal sounds good; new ideas may be around but we haven't heard them.

There are facts which should be made clear to everyone attending a study circle:

(1) The Universal House of Justice did not specify which material to use for study circles; we are using Ruhí books in the UK because they are available now and it will take a lot of time and effort to produce alternatives.

(2) The Bahá'í Faith is a religion of peace and unity. It is not a religion of war and conflict. It is a religion of love and service. It is a religion of justice and equity. It is a religion of truth and honesty. It is a religion of knowledge and wisdom. It is a religion of peace and harmony. It is a religion of unity and brotherhood. It is a religion of love and service. It is a religion of justice and equity. It is a religion of truth and honesty. It is a religion of knowledge and wisdom. It is a religion of peace and harmony. It is a religion of unity and brotherhood.

(2) The Rumi books are aimed at new Bahá'ís, whereas many current participants have been Bahá'í for a long time; thus the facilitator has a very difficult task, even after extensive training, so we must be patient.

It would be nice to aim at producing our own material for UK study circles. For this we would need several people to write new material/adapt existing material, together with an editorial team. Who has the necessary experience and time available? Who would like to volunteer? In the meantime, both facilitators and participants must be flexible. Experienced Bahá'í participants must realise that they are not just there to learn; they are also there to help others, either on this course or on a future one. Facilitators must find out fairly quickly the background of each participant and vary the material accordingly; e.g. on page 17 of Ruhí book 1 The Hidden Words is suggested for daily reading, but experienced Bahá'ís could be given some other challenge.

With loving Bahá'í greetings, Alan Woodhurst

Dearly Loved Friends,

PASSING OF GEORGE BOWERS

My apologies for not being able to write and thank you all separately for your prayers, condolences, contributions and loving support during the sad period of George's illness and passing to the Abhá Kingdom.

He would have been (and probably was) happy to see so many of his loving friends coming to give him a great "send off". It was truly a celebration of his life, which was his wish.

We send our deepest love and thanks to you all.

God bless,
Elsie, Eric and Joan,
Jackie and Simon, and families.

BJUK welcomes letters on any topic of general interest, which may be printed at the Editor's discretion. Letters may be edited for brevity or clarity. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the National Assembly or the Editor. Editor: Patrick Morrissey, e-mail: p.morrissey@ntlworld.com , fax: 0870 136 3730

