

Service in Bahá'í Temples

by Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

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From letters and cables written by and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

From an article based on instructions of the Guardian

Directives concerning the Temple

• Questions Submitted to the Guardian and his replies

From letters written by the Universal House of Justice

From letters and cables written by and on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

1. As to the character of the meetings in the auditorium of the Temple, he feels that they should be purely devotional in character, Bahá'í addresses and lectures should be strictly excluded. For the present he feels that there would be no objection to having Bahá'í meetings, including addresses and the business sessions of the Convention, held in the Foundation Hall. Shoghi Effendi would urge that choir singing by men, women and children be encouraged in the auditorium and that rigidity in the Bahá'í service be scrupulously avoided. The more universal and informal the character of Bahá'í worship in the Temple the better. Images and pictures, with the exception of the Greatest Name, should be strictly excluded. Prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master, as well as the sacred writings of the Prophets, should be read or chanted, as well as hymns based upon Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í sacred writings.

(From a letter dated 11 April 1931 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

2. Slight alterations in the text of the prayers are permissible, and I would advise you to give a musical form to the revealed word itself which I feel will be exceedingly effective ...

(In the hand writing of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, dated 8 April 1931)

3. He sincerely hopes that now that the Temple is completed it will be filled to the full with pure seeking souls. It should be different from the other houses of worship which even if they are filled, their source of attraction is the music heard. Here the spirit should be so powerful as to awaken the heart of everyone that enters it to the glory of Bahá'u'lláh ...

(From a letter dated 31 May 1931 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, cited in "Bahá'í News" 55, (May 1931), p. 4)

4. As regards the chanting of Tablets in the Temple, Shoghi Effendi wishes in this connection to urge the friends to avoid all forms of rigidity and uniformity in matters of worship. There is no objection to the recital or chanting of prayers in the Oriental language, but there is also no obligation whatever of adopting such a form of prayer at any devotional service in the auditorium of the Temple. It should neither be required nor prohibited. The important thing that should always be borne in mind is that with the exception of certain specific obligatory prayers Bahá'u'lláh has given

us no strict or special ruling in matters of worship whether in the Temple or elsewhere.¹

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, June 15, 1935)

5. Prayer is essentially a communion between man and God, and as such transcends all ritualistic forms and formulae.

(From a letter dated 15 June 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

6. MEETINGS IN TEMPLE AUDITORIUM CONFINED READING HOLY SCRIPTURES AND PRAYERS AVOID RIGIDITY MANNER CONDUCT MEETINGS. AUDIENCE SEATED IN MAIN AUDITORIUM SHOULD FACE EAST. SEATS IN SURROUNDING SPACE SHOULD FACE CENTRE AUDITORIUM .. . AVOID ASSIGNING FIXED POSITION OR FORMAL PROCEDURE FOR SINGERS ...

(From a cable dated 1 July 1946 sent by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

7. He is not sufficiently informed about western musical composition to give you any guidance on this subject; all he can tell you is that from the Master's instructions it seems there will be no use of any kind of musical instruments in the Bahá'í Temples. Chanting or singing will be the only sound (aside from reading) and what forms this will take must depend on the artists who create the music itself.

No doubt prayers and parts of the Tablets, "Hidden Words", etc., will be suitable, but he does not feel it would be advisable to abridge any given part, in other words to leave out parts of a paragraph or a meditation and foreshorten it in this manner.

(From a letter dated 3 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

8. NOT PERMISSIBLE²

(From a cable dated 10 February 1953 sent by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

9. It is permissible and satisfactory to use the Prayers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the devotional services in the Temple. His public talks and Tablets should not be used, but His prayers may be used.

It is understood of course that there is to be no talking in the auditorium of the Temple. However, the Guardian does feel that in an emergency it may be necessary to carry on a conversation for a very limited period, in a subdued tone of voice. The Guardian feels that in matters of this type, careful judgment must be used.

(From a letter dated 3 October 1953 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

10. As regards producing a book of Bahá'í songs, your understanding that there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time (distinctive music, literature, art, architecture, etc., being the flower of the civilization and not coming at the beginning of a new Revelation), is correct. However, that does not mean that we haven't Bahá'í songs, in other words, songs written by Bahá'ís on Bahá'í subjects. There is no objection to getting out a compilation of these, but he does not think money should be spent in printing it, in view of the state of the National Fund, and the much more important work in the teaching field which needs to be undertaken this year. If you can get out such a book in a mimeographed form, he feels this would be sufficient to meet the needs at this time,

(From a letter dated 21 September 1957 written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

1 In reply to a question whether minor changes, such as the addition of a word, or the repetition of an important passage, are permissible when adapting prayers to music. The letter also asks if prayers could be set to music, and whether the music should conform only to the Persian idea of the chant.

2 In reply to a question whether it was permissible to use appropriate recorded a cappella music in the auditorium.

From an article based on instructions of the Guardian

Directives concerning the Temple

• **Questions Submitted to the Guardian and his replies** (To the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

11. **Question:** On what schedule are meetings of public worship to be held in the auditorium: daily, weekly, or at other intervals, or at stated periods during the day?

Reply: Weekly, or more often, if your Assembly deems advisable.

Question: Are such meetings, if weekly, to be held on Sunday and if so noon?

Reply: Left to your discretion.

Question: Should the auditorium be open daily from dawn for individual prayer and meditation?

Reply: Yes.

Question: Can photographs be taken, for historic record or publicity, of any meeting of worship held for Bahá'ís only, and of any meeting open to the public?

Reply: Yes.

Question: The present plan is to hold a meeting of dedication for Bahá'ís only, followed by a public dedication on the same day. Is this plan approved?

Reply: Yes.

Question: Should an order of service or program be printed with the list of readings selected for each service?

Reply: Left to your discretion.

Question: Are the present weekly public lectures to be continued in Foundation Hall?

Reply: There is no objection to this until such time as we have a suitable meeting place at our disposal.

Question: As there is no trained Bahá'í choir or chorus for singing, shall we begin to train a choir? Can non-Bahá'ís be included among the singers? Are soloists permitted, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í?

Reply: By all means prepare a choir. There is no objection to non-Bahá'í singers or to soloists, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í.

Question: Is the auditorium to be open for special prayer by Bahá'í Committees meeting in the vicinity, or by visiting groups who may arrive at times when no general meeting is scheduled?

Reply: The auditorium may be used for such purposes.

Question: In preparing the readings, shall we use only Holy Books extant and available in English for religions listed by you in the series of recognized Revelations?

Reply: Yes. But if occasionally a reading is in another language there can be no objection, as long as the text is from a Holy Scripture. Persian, Arabic and Hebrew are all very beautiful when chanted.

Question: At the opening of a meeting of worship is any reader to explain the nature of Bahá'í worship or are the readings to proceed without any announcement?

Reply: This is not permissible: there must be no speeches in the auditorium.

Question: Can meetings of worship be broadcast over the radio or television? Can special

meetings be recorded for reproduction by believers locally?

Reply: There is no objection to this.

(October 1952, published in Bahá'í News" No. 260 (October 1952), pp. 1-2)

From letters written by the Universal House of Justice

12. We have given careful consideration to the questions you have raised in your letter of January 23, 1964 about the use of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.

Your Assembly is free to use its discretion in choosing excerpts from the generally recognized scriptures of the older religions.

With reference to your query about the use of several readers in unison, this is permissible provided it does not seem, or become theatrical in the view of your Assembly. Concerning the placement of the reader, the beloved Guardian has already indicated, "the reader should stand where he or she will best be seen and heard by all."

Music in the House of Worship is to be vocal only, whether by singers or a singer. It does not matter if a guest a cappella choir, or soloist is used, provided such use is not made the occasion to publicise services of Worship and the precautions you mention are taken. No doubt the excellent recordings available today would assure the highest quality of performance at low cost, but all references to vocal music in the central Edifice imply the physical presence of the singers.

In a letter through his secretary to a Chicago believer in 1931, "Bahá'í News", No. 55, page 4, Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope that "... now that the Temple is completed it will be filled to the full with pure seeking souls. It should be different from the other houses of worship which even if they are filled, their source of attraction is the music heard. Here the spirit should be so powerful as to awaken the heart of every one that enters it to the glory of Bahá'u'lláh ..."

In conclusion, a review of the closing paragraphs of the beloved Guardian's illuminating message of October 25, 1929, addressed to the American Bahá'í Community, clearly reveals the true nature of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. In them he decries the trappings of elaborate and ostentatious ceremony and warns against any inference "that the interior of the central Edifice itself will be converted into a conglomeration of religious services" offering "a spectacle of incoherent and confused sectarian observances and rites." In his concluding words, Shoghi Effendi links Bahá'í worship and service arising from the Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as vital to the regeneration of the world, and the secret of the unique position occupied by this lofty, potent and outstanding institution.

We understand and commend your wish to fully utilize the House of Worship in service to humanity. We feel the Guardian's letter alluded to above offers the necessary guidance you desire.

(13 March 1964 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States)

13. With reference to your letter of August 2, 1964, and the questions you have asked concerning services at the House of Worship, we have now had opportunity to study your questions in the light of available texts, and we are glad to share with you our conclusions.

We will set forth your questions, which fall under five categories and then make our comments at the end of each section:

- A. Is congregational singing the same as congregational worship? Is it permissible to have singing in which anyone can join? If so, is it permissible for "Alláh'u'Abhá" or "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá" to be sung?

Singing by a congregation present at a service in the House of Worship should not be confused with congregational prayer prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh for the dead. As the Guardian in a letter written on his behalf by his secretary pointed out: "When the Aqdas is published the form of congregational prayer prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh will be made clear to all the friends." (Bahá'í Procedure, 1942, page 5.) Regarding singing in the Temple, we must bear in mind the reference made by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to the need for the person who enters the Temple to sit silent and listen to the chanting of the verses of God, as well as the statements made by the Guardian regarding "the reader" or "a number of readers" or a

“choir”.

In connection with the desire of the Africans to sing, this aptitude in them should be encouraged. The Guardian elucidated this principle in a letter written on his behalf by his Secretary: “Shoghi Effendi would urge that choir singing by men, women, and children be encouraged in the Auditorium, and that rigidity in the Bahá'í service be scrupulously avoided.”

(Bahá'í News, September 1931).

- B. Could we develop musical programmes with words not necessarily from Sacred Scriptures? Could Christian hymn tunes with Bahá'í words be used?

We feel that the first question is covered by the following instruction given by the Guardian: “Prayers ... should be read or chanted, as well as hymns based upon Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í sacred writings.” (Bahá'í News, September 1931). As regards using hymn tunes of other religions there is no objection to this. As the Guardian once pointed out, we do not have at this time distinctive music which could be called Bahá'í, as such a cultural expression is the flower of the civilization and does not come at the beginning of a new Revelation.

- C. Is it necessary at the present time to uphold at all costs a standard of excellence in Temple singing? If so, should it be a Western or an African standard?

In everything we do we should always try to attain a standard of excellence. Bearing in mind the basic principle of unity in diversity and the undesirability of attempting uniformity, the National Assembly should do all possible to ensure the dignified presentation of whatever is sung in the Temple, African, Western, or other.

- D. In view of current difficulties in having a printed programme available, may the reader preface his reading by “This reading is from ...” or words to that effect? Is it permissible to make short comments which might add to the understanding and effectiveness of the readings, such as: “The following readings are on the subject of humility ...” or “the following healing prayer is for ...”

There is no objection to the reader very briefly stating at the beginning of his reading, the reference and source of the passage he is about to read. Beyond this, any other comment regarding the passage to be read is inappropriate. If in the future, your Assembly is able to overcome the difficulty of making a printed programme available, it would be far better to have such a programme.

- E. May the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá be used in the Temple as these are most easily translatable and many are already prepared in the most common local language—Luganda?

The Guardian's advice on this point is: “Prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master, as well as the sacred writings of the Prophets, should be read or chanted ...” (Bahá'í News, September 1931). In response to a specific question put to the Guardian regarding the Public Talks and Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Guardian advised that these should not be used in the devotional services in the Temple.

We hope the above comments will prove useful to your National Spiritual Assembly in working out the programmes and arranging the services at the Mother Temple of Africa. The Bahá'í House of Worship is one of the most mighty institutions of our beloved Faith. It is the privilege of your National Assembly to administer such an institution “wherein”, in the words of the beloved Guardian, “spirit unconquerable Faith can dwell within whose walls African adherents Faith Bahá'u'lláh can congregate, from which anthems praise glorifying Most Great Name can ascend Concourse Abhá Kingdom.”

(19 August 1965 to the National Spiritual Assemblies of Uganda and Central Africa)

14. In your letter of 4 October 1965 we note your request for further clarification of points (a) and (b) of your August 2nd communication concerning services at the House of Worship.

With reference to point (a), it would be undesirable to include in the program singing by the congregation in unison. However, if the congregation should spontaneously join in singing with the

choir or solo singer they, of course, should not be stopped. This is not a matter that should be circulated among the friends in your news bulletin.

With reference to point (b), the nature of the hymns sung in the House of Worship we leave to your discretion for the time being. Whatever policy you have currently adopted in this matter you should continue to follow. Should we in future make any specific rulings on this subject we will advise you.

(8 November 1965 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda and Central Africa)