

CHANTING AND SINGING PRAYERS IN UNISON

Some Bahá'í references

1. "It would be good to sing prayers in unison if this could be done with a sweet melody that touches the heart." 'Abdu'l-Baha, Bahá'í Writings on Music, p. 6
2. "...if they chant supplications together, in a good and effective voice, that is very good." 'Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. II, p. 464 (Lights of Guidance, p. 465)
3. I am straining my ears toward the East and toward the West, toward the North and toward the South that haply I may hear the songs of love and fellowship chanted in the meetings of the faithful. (H.M. Balyuzi, Abdu'l-Baha - The Centre of the Covenant, p. 405)
4. {It is} . . . advisable that the believers should make use, in their meetings, of hymns, poems and chants as are based on the Holy Words." Bahá'í Writings on Music, p. 6
5. "Lift up your voices and sing the blissful anthems of the spirit." Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, 11
6. "Intone, O My servants, the verses of God, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul and attract the hearts of all men." Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 295
7. "It is entirely proper to set prayers to music, and the friends are free to sing prayers in unison... always keep in mind that whether read, chanted or sung, prayers should be uttered with proper sense of reverence." (From letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, February 6, 1973) (Lights of Guidance, p. 411)
8. "Set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer." 'Abdu'l-Baha, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 378
9. In regard to the main question you have raised in connection with the singing of hymns at Bahá'í meetings: He wishes me to assure you that he sees no objection to it whatsoever. The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings. The Master Himself has emphasized its importance. But the friends should in this, as well as in all other things, not pass beyond the limits of moderation, and should take great care to maintain the strict spiritual character of all their gatherings. Music should lead to spirituality, and provided it creates such an atmosphere there can be no objection against it. A distinction of vital importance should, however, be clearly established between the singing of hymns composed by the believers

and the chanting of the Holy Utterances. (17 March 1935 to an individual believer) (The Compilation of Compilations, Volume II, p. 80)

10. "You have asked whether it is permissible for the friends to chant a prayer collectively. There is a difference between chanting a prayer collectively and congregational prayer. The latter is a formal prayer usually led by an individual using a prescribed ritual. Congregational prayer in this form is forbidden in the Faith except in the case of the Prayer for the Dead. While reciting prayers in unison and spontaneously joining in the recitation of the Words of God is not forbidden, the friends should bear in mind the advice of the beloved Guardian on this subject when he stated that: "...although the friends are thus left free to follow their own inclination, ... they should take the utmost care that any manner they practice should not acquire too rigid a character, and thus develop into an institution." (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, February 6, 1975) (Lights of Guidance, p. 460)
11. "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 Baha'i, as such a cultural expression is the flower of the civilization and does not come at the beginning of a new Revelation." (UHJ, Multiple Authors: Lights of Guidance, P. 610)
12. "All those who were struck down by the storm that raged during that memorable year in Tihiran were Our fellow-prisoners in the Siyah-Chal, where We were confined. ...We had taught them to repeat certain verses which, every night, they chanted with extreme fervour. 'God is sufficient unto me; He verily is the All-sufficing!' one row would intone, while the other would reply: "In Him let the trusting trust.'" Baha'u'llah quoted in The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative, pages 631-632
13. "It is permissible to use selections from the Holy Writings as lyrics to be accompanied by musical compositions and to repeat verses or words. The following quotations provide further clarification concerning these matters." [From Baha'i Writings on Music, compiled by the Universal House of Justice, p. 9 & 10]

In response to a question from a believer concerning minor alterations of words for the sake of correct accent or the addition of a word for the sake of perfect meter, the beloved Guardian stated the following: "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. I will pray that the Beloved may inspire you to accomplish this great service to His Cause." (In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter date 8 April 1931 written on his behalf to an individual believer.)