

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 March 1987

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 8 February 1987 in which you inquire about the role of the individual in interpretation of the Writings: specifically whether given the existence of interpretations by the Master and the Guardian of passages from the Writings, there remains room for personal interpretations of these same texts. We are instructed to convey the following points in reply.

The interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian are divinely guided statements of what the Word of God means and as such these interpretations are binding on the friends. However, the existence of authoritative interpretations in no way precludes the individual from engaging in his own study of the teachings and thereby arriving at his own interpretation or understanding. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh invites the believers to "immerse" themselves in the "ocean" of His "words," that they "may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."

Far from knowledge being limited, Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Muslim tradition that "every knowledge hath seventy meanings," and asserts that the "meaning" of the Word of God "can never be exhausted." This potential richness of meaning is underlined by the provision whereby future Guardians, while not abrogating the "interpretations of former Guardians," may "elaborate and elucidate former interpretations," as set out in the extract from a letter dated 19 February 1947 which was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer:

... regarding future Guardians: they cannot "abrogate" the interpretations of former Guardians, as this would imply not only lack of guidance but mistakes in making them; however they can elaborate and elucidate former interpretations, and can certainly abrogate some former ruling laid down as a temporary necessity by a former Guardian.

Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a more complete understanding of the Faith. Such views, however, lack authority. The believers are, therefore, free to accept or disregard them. Further, the manner in which an individual presents his interpretation is important. For example, he must at no time deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, but rather offer his idea as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that his views are merely his own.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat