

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

25 September 1989

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 7 June 1989, concerning a writing project which you had been contemplating in collaboration with a professional filmmaker and writer who is not a Bahá'í, and we have been asked to send you the following reply with an expression of regret for the delay due to pressure of work.

Given the long history and overwhelming current examples of repression in the world, it is not surprising that in a country like the United States, which upholds freedom of speech as a cardinal principle, the non-Bahá'í collaborator in a filmmaking project, such as you have described, would be concerned about any perceived, or misperceived, notion of censorship. As you know, review of manuscripts before publication is a discipline which the Bahá'í community applies to its own members as a temporary necessity, for it is anticipated that in due time this practice will cease. The reason is simple: At this early stage in the development of the Bahá'í Faith, which is striving against great odds to establish itself in a world that is highly critical, often antagonistic towards new ideas, and whose communications media tend to emphasize negative information, it is important that Bahá'í authors, scriptwriters and filmmakers endeavor to present the Faith with accuracy and dignity. It is one thing for a non-Bahá'í to make erroneous statements about the Faith; this can be excused on the basis of ignorance. But for a Bahá'í to make such errors is quite a different thing, because he is considered to be knowledgeable about that which he espouses.

Therefore, a Bahá'í author is expected to ensure to the extent possible a correct representation of the Faith in his work; as an aid he draws upon the reviewing facilities provided by Bahá'í institutions. A great many authors spontaneously and informally submit their manuscripts to a type of review, although they would not necessarily call it that, when they request the comments and criticisms of persons whose expertise and judgment they respect. Submission to Bahá'í review is no greater a requirement, and may well be less demanding in most cases, than the rigorous review of scientific papers before their publication. In the same way that scientists have acceded to the discipline of review in the interest of ensuring the precision and integrity of their dissertations, Bahá'í authors respect the function of review in the Bahá'í community.

The Bahá'í Faith makes very serious claims and has a rich and complex history, but it is as yet a young religion whose precepts are not widely understood. It has been undergoing severe persecution in the land of its birth and is experiencing serious opposition in other places where its detractors have no compunction in misrepresenting its purposes. Until its history, teachings and practices are well known throughout the world, it will be necessary for the Bahá'í community to make efforts within itself to present correct information about the Faith in books, films or other media. This can and must be done without violating the principle of freedom of expression, which, according to the teachings of the Faith, is a vital right of all persons.

It is not necessary for Bahá'í authors to make an issue of the function of review with others with whom they wish to collaborate, because it is not required of non-Bahá'ís, though they can, if they wish, call upon Bahá'í reviewing facilities when dealing with Bahá'í topics. Although the function of review in the Bahá'í community is concerned with checking an author's exposition of the Faith and its teachings, this function is not to be confused with evaluation of the literary merit of a work or of its value as a publication, which are normally the prerogative of the publisher.

With or without review, the work presented by a Bahá'í to a non-Bahá'í collaborator will, it is presumed, be judged by that collaborator on its merits.

The House of Justice hopes that these points will clarify your thoughts on the function of review in the Bahá'í community.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat