

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

28 October 1991

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

... The House of Justice was deeply touched by the spirit of your letter, warmly congratulates you on the status you have attained as an academic, and appreciates your efforts to make use of your scholarly training in lending expression to the Faith in academic circles.

The requirement that materials about the Faith authored by Bahá'ís must be reviewed by Bahá'í institutions before publication is imbedded in a Bahá'í administrative policy which originated with the explicit instruction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi included this instruction in his outline of the duties of National Spiritual Assemblies, and the duty of reviewing Bahá'í material is included in the constitution of these institutions with his approval. The requirement is temporary and is meant to protect the interests of the Faith at the early stages of its development.

You are, of course, entirely correct that only the Guardian had the prerogative of interpretation; it is not a prerogative that he could have devolved on other institutions. Yet in a number of letters written on his behalf, the importance of reviewing manuscripts about the Faith was repeatedly emphasized, such as in a letter dated 15 November 1956 written to an individual, in which the following is stated:

Any Bahá'í book presenting the Faith should be reviewed by a competent body. This only means that they should ascertain whether there is any misrepresentation of the Teachings in it. Sometimes the friends think they have to go into literary reviews and interfere with the author's style etc., which of course is wholly unnecessary....

Clearly, then, there is a distinction between the function of interpretation for which Shoghi Effendi was solely responsible and the function of Bahá'í review, which is essentially a matter of judgment. Literary review is, of course, a separate matter.

The House of Justice feels certain that it is possible for scholars to abide by this requirement without undermining the academic standard of their work, since the purpose of review is not inimical to academic excellence. Your concerns as an academic certainly deserve careful attention. But the Bahá'í community also has immense concerns about the consequences of dispensing too quickly with this requirement. 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 published material. 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.

Even in the world of journalism where the most libertine excesses of expression are stoutly defended on the grounds of constitutional protection, as is the case in the United States, serious questions are being raised about the accuracy of nonfiction books being published these days. An article in a recent issue of *Columbia Journalism Review* (July/August 1991), that bastion of freedom of expression, devoted attention to such questions, querying the responsibility of publishers and editors and commenting on the sloppiness of some writers. It encourages reviewers of inaccurate

books to take the publishers to task and to expose the authors' transgressions, pointing out, by quoting one such reviewer, that: "A newspaper can report one thing one day and revise or revoke the report the next day; a book makes a promise of much longer duration and far greater authority. The scale and presentation make a vital difference." But this has to do with review after publication. Among its suggestions for prepublication solutions to inaccuracy, the article offers the following thought to publishers: "They could pay in-house or outside researchers to request documentation from the author, then judge its worthiness. At the very least, they could pay for a spot check, then decide whether a full-scale review is necessary."

The positions you have taken in the third paragraph of your letter indicate an overreaction and a misconception of the real purpose of Bahá'í review. Is it not possible for Bahá'í academics to acknowledge the merit of the intention of this temporary requirement and, recognizing the sensitivity of the matter in view of the attitudes of the academic community, assist themselves and the Bahá'í institutions to find a balance between both academic and Bahá'í expectations? Bahá'í review is not an exercise in censorship; it is in large measure a benefit offered to an author by the Bahá'í institutions, which are, in fact, the major repositories of the source materials that ordinarily constitute the wellspring of the author's work and are for other reasons the channels of elucidation for a wide range of obscure questions relating to the Faith. Certainly, a dispassionate exploration by Bahá'í scholars of the issues concerning both the academic community and the Bahá'í institutions in this matter could result in the formulation of a rationale appropriate to aiding understanding in academic circles as to the nature and necessity of Bahá'í review. Bahá'í academics, after all, are, first and foremost, believers in the Cause of God and upholders of divine law.

The House of Justice has acknowledged in the past that the process of review is often irksome, frequently takes far too long and is subject to many problems in implementation. Nevertheless, it is convinced that this is not the time to remove this temporary procedure. National Spiritual Assemblies responsible for administering the reviewing procedure have been urged to do all they can to improve and expedite its operation, and efforts are continually being made to this end. The House of Justice looks forward to the day when this requirement will be definitely removed; in the meantime it may well be modified as conditions change.

With regard to your particular concerns, there is nothing in the current regulations that would prevent a scholar who has written a work to recommend to the National Spiritual Assembly one or more individuals whom he would like to see included among the reviewers selected by the Assembly. This approach offers the author a way of satisfying himself that he has had a direct part in the arrangement for review, and he can take confidence that some measure of peer review has been invested in the procedure.

The House of Justice trusts that this procedure will reduce your concerns and assures you of its prayers on your behalf in the Holy Shrines.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat