

The Universal House of Justice

Department of the Secretariat

15 December 1994

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your letter of 20 September 1994 to ... , concerning the degrees of authority possessed by Bahá'í historical sources, the process by which translations are authorized, the development of a “canon of Bahá'í doctrine,” the status of documents prepared by the Research Department, and your request for various materials, was forwarded to the Universal House of Justice for its consideration. We are instructed to make the following reply to your questions numbered two, three and five. The remaining questions were referred to the Research Department for study. The enclosed memorandum and attachments represent the result of the deliberations of that Department.

Your questions concerning translation revolve around two major issues: the process by which new translations into the English language are authorized and the authority of the translations of Shoghi Effendi. We are asked to state that a translation is regarded as authorized when it is approved by one or more translation committees appointed by the Universal House of Justice. While members of the Research Department may well, from time to time, be appointed to serve on such a translation committee, the authorization of new translations is currently not one of the responsibilities assigned to the Research Department by the House of Justice. Further, the approval of a translation does not mean that improvements or amendments cannot be made to it in the future. As you, yourself, note, even Shoghi Effendi described his translation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán as

... one more attempt to introduce to the West, in a language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation. The hope is that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's matchless utterance.

As to the policy concerning the publication of new translations of the Writings made by individual Bahá'ís, we are instructed to convey the fact that translations into English and revisions of earlier translations in that language must be checked by a translation committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and officially approved for publication. While individuals are permitted to paraphrase or describe the contents of the passages they have translated and to include them in their manuscripts, without reference to the World Center, new translations need to be submitted to the Universal House of Justice for checking and approval prior to publication. The importance of this policy lies in the fact that translations into most other languages are based on the approved English texts and are not made directly or solely from the original texts. There have been, however, occasions when the House of Justice has permitted the publication of provisional translations made by individuals whose work is known to it. In these cases the translations usually appear in scholarly or other publications of limited distribution and are not likely to be used as a basis for translations into other languages.

You ask whether the translations of Shoghi Effendi should be considered as the “standard” and whether, because of his function as infallible interpreter, the Guardian's translations provide “the true interpretation of the Writings.” We are asked to call attention to the Introduction to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* where the Universal House of Justice describes the essential qualities of the Guardian's translations and

the fact that they “are illumined by his uniquely inspired understanding of the purport and implications of the originals.”

In view of your observations that “the chain of interpretation is unbroken, from the Báb to Bahá’u’lláh to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Shoghi Effendi,” and that “the ‘authorized’ interpretation of the Writings ends with the Guardian,” you ask about the possibility of establishing a “canon of Bahá’í doctrine which could then be regarded as ‘authorized’ and ‘official,’” and which would serve as a means by which “truth could be separated from falsehood according to the divinely revealed and interpreted standard.” In this regard, the House of Justice asks us to state that, while it would be possible to codify and cross-reference the Bahá’í teachings, it would also be important to take into account such functions assigned to the Universal House of Justice in the Bahá’í Writings as its role in elucidating all matters “which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book” and in ensuring the essential flexibility of the Cause.

The elucidations of the Universal House of Justice stem from its legislative function, and as such differ from interpretation. The divinely inspired legislation of the House of Justice does not attempt to say what the revealed Word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the sacred Text, and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable.

As to your question concerning whether the translations, compilations and other works prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre should be considered as partaking in the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice and, therefore, constituting the “final word,” the House of Justice indicates that such materials, though prepared at its direction, represent the views of that Department. While such views are very useful as an aid to resolving perplexities or gaining an enhanced understanding of the Bahá’í teachings, they should never be taken to be in the same category as the elucidations and clarifications provided by the Universal House of Justice in the exercise of its assigned functions. However, the House of Justice chooses to convey the materials prepared by the Research Department to the friends because it wishes them to be thoughtfully attended to and seriously considered.

We are asked to assure you of the prayers of the Universal House of Justice that your services to the Cause will be confirmed.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat