

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

21 February 2016

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter dated 19 June 2015 including your thoughtful questions about a paragraph regarding evolution in the foreword to the 2014 edition of *Some Answered Questions* has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which has asked us to convey to you the following in reply. The delay in our response, which is due to the pressure of work at the Bahá'í World Centre, is regretted.

As you have observed, the purpose of the paragraph in question, which the House of Justice approved for inclusion in the foreword, does not limit how a Bahá'í, as an individual, may personally choose to interpret the Sacred Writings. Yet, the paragraph does not insist that science is “absolute truth”, nor, as you seem to conclude, does it attempt to “apologize” for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements. Rather, recognizing that He would not make a statement that contradicts reality, the paragraph encourages the friends to use all of the relevant texts on the subject as well as the most accurate and reliable picture of reality that science can provide to try to understand what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá actually is conveying.

It is evident that there are instances throughout history when statements made in the Sacred Scriptures that conflicted with the scientific views of the time were confirmed by science itself centuries later. There also may well be statements in the Writings about the material world the veracity of which will be proven by science in future. The notion of scientific “truth” does not encompass every claim or theory asserted in the name of science. But while a great deal of scientific discourse is tentative and subject to change, some scientific statements are accurate and reliable descriptions of reality, and those findings are not in conflict with true religion, that is, with the Revelation and its authorized interpretations. It is for this reason that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes that religious beliefs should be weighed in the light of science and reason, so that personal interpretations of the meaning of the Revelation, which are also fallible and subject to change, do not lead to incorrect conclusions.

The Master’s statements on evolution are subtle and complex and must be understood within the context of the entirety of the Bahá'í teachings, because His statements are both predicated upon and coherent with those teachings. In the passages found in *Some Answered Questions*, as well as in numerous other Tablets and talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates upon the principle of the harmony of science and religion, observes that human beings and animals have in common the same physical nature, emphasizes that it is the mind and the soul that distinguish humanity, and rejects the idea that human beings are merely animals, a haphazard accident, and captives of nature trapped in the struggle for existence. In light of all such statements, it is possible for a Bahá'í to conclude that one can disagree with the materialistic philosophical interpretation of scientific findings—that man is merely an animal and a random expression of nature—without contesting the scientific findings themselves, such as those in genetics which are incompatible with a concept of “parallel” evolution.

Of course, different individuals, using their rational powers to reach personal interpretations of scientific findings and the meaning of Sacred Texts, may come to different conclusions on different questions. This is the inevitable outcome of the independent investigation of truth. On certain matters, there may for a time be a degree of ambiguity; on others, an exchange of views conducted in a consultative spirit may make the truth evident. Yet, in their efforts to explore the

ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the House of Justice hopes that the friends will guard against two extremes. The first is to simply dismiss the truths found in the Revelation owing to a dogmatic attachment to materialistic interpretations of scientific findings. The second is to assume that in every instance where one's personal understanding of the teachings conflicts with scientific findings, it is these findings that must change in future, for such a posture would place Bahá'ís in the position of constantly contending with science. Both of these extremes are incompatible with the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion.

As you consider this matter, you may find of interest the work of those believers who have attempted to correlate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements with contemporary science, such as the article "Religion and Evolution Reconciled: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Comments on Evolution" by Courosh Mehanian and Stephen R. Friberg, published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, volume 13, number 1/4, pages 55–93, which may be found at bahai-studies.ca/past-issues.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat