

Authority and Centrality of the Universal House of Justice

(Translation from Persian)

Extract from a letter dated 7 April 2008 to the Friends in Iran from the Department of the Secretariat

7 April 2008

Transmitted electronically

The Friends in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Further to the letter to you of 18 February 2008 concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, we have been requested to provide the comments below on a related matter. It seems that questions have arisen regarding the infallibility of the House of Justice, in light of the presentation of the topic by Dr. Udo Schaefer, a well-known Bahá'í in Germany, whose publications have been translated and circulated in Iran.

In his book “Making the Crooked Straight” and in other publications, Dr. Schaefer offers his personal views on infallibility as it pertains to the Universal House of Justice. In an effort to defend the Faith and explain the concept in a manner acceptable to a sceptical world, he suggests that the infallibility of the House of Justice is confined to the sphere of legislation. He argues further that, as far as he can discern, the House of Justice has legislated only a small number of times, in each case, according to him, on an issue of “universal relevance” through a decision-making process that did not need to draw on any information obtained from fallible sources.

Unfortunately, some have taken his conclusions another step, suggesting that believers are obliged to obey the House of Justice only in matters that fall within the narrow range of such enactments.

In general, the House of Justice wishes to preserve the widest possible latitude for the friends to explore the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to share their individual understanding of the Teachings. Yet it must be remembered that, with regard to deductions drawn from the Texts, the Master clearly states:

...the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith of God would be shaken.

The Universal House of Justice does not intend at this time to elaborate further on previous explanations given of its duties and powers. That the House of Justice itself does not find it necessary to do so should alert the friends as to the unwisdom of their attempting to define so precisely its sphere of action. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, while there are explicit passages in the authoritative texts that make reference to the infallibility of the House of Justice in the enactment of legislation, the argument that it is free from error only in this respect is untenable. Surely, the many emphatic statements found in the Writings, such as the following excerpt from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, should suffice to dismiss any claims of this kind:

The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His

Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God...

Apart from the question of infallibility, there is the matter of authority. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states: "It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgment. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism." In regard to the Universal House of Justice, the same understanding applies.

Infallibility is a profound spiritual concept inherent in the Bahá'í Writings. In meditating upon the relevant passages, the believers will naturally reach their own understanding of the subject. Individual opinions, however, should not be imposed on others, nor so promoted as to crystallize into doctrines not found in the explicit Text. When exchanging views about the Universal House of Justice — the body to which all things must be referred — the friends should exercise care lest they go to extremes, by either diminishing its station or assigning to it exaggerated attributes. What better admonition to heed in a matter of this nature than that given by the beloved Master, when some believers fell into disagreement about His own station:

These discussions will yield no result or benefit: we must set all such debates and controversies entirely aside — nay, we must consign them to oblivion and arise to accomplish that which is enjoined and required in this Day. These are mere words bereft of inner meaning; they are mere superficialities devoid of all reality.

That which is true and real is this: that we become united and agreed in our purpose and arise to flood this darksome world with light, to banish all enmity and foreignness from among the children of men, to

perfume and revive the world with the sanctified breezes of the character and conduct of the Abhá Beauty, to cast the light of divine guidance upon East and West, to raise the tabernacle of the love of God and gather all people under its sheltering shadow, to confer peace and composure upon every soul beneath the shade of the blessed Tree, to show forth such love as to astonish the enemy, to turn ravenous and bloodthirsty wolves into the gazelles of the meadows of the love of God, to cause the oppressor to taste the sweet savour of meekness, to teach them that kill the submission and acquiescence of those that suffer themselves to be killed, to spread abroad the verses of the one true God, to extol the virtues and perfections of the all-glorious Lord, to raise to the highest heaven the cry of "O Thou the Glory of Glories!", and to cause the call of "The earth will shine with the light of her Lord!" to reach the ears of the denizens of His Kingdom.

The House of Justice appeals to the friends not to become embroiled in the kind of fruitless theological discussions that caused conflict and contention in past dispensations, lest they lose sight of their responsibility to promulgate the oneness of humanity and of the role of the Covenant established by Bahá'u'lláh in uniting minds, hearts, and souls.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Infallibility of the Universal House of Justice

(Translation from Persian)

Extract from a letter dated 20 May 2007 to the Friends in Iran from the Department of the Secretariat

Your letter dated 15 January 2007, containing two questions, one regarding the correspondence received from the Bahá'í World Centre and the other concerning the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, has been received and submitted to the House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following.

As to whether there is a distinction between correspondence from the World Centre that has been signed “The Universal House of Justice” and that signed on behalf of the Department of the Secretariat, in brief, the manner in which each of these letters is prepared depends upon the contents of the letter. On some occasions the Universal House of Justice communicates directly over its own signature. It generally communicates with the institutions of the Faith and the believers through its Secretariat on the basis of decisions and policies determined in its consultations. Hence, communications conveyed over the signature of the Department of the Secretariat are authorized by the House of Justice.

You have stated that believers have asked, “Are the decisions of the Universal House of Justice free from error even if incorrect information has been provided to it?” The infallibility of the House of Justice, like that of the Guardian, is “conferred”, as distinct from the infallibility of the Manifestation of God, which is “innate”. The House of Justice, like the Guardian, is not omniscient; when called upon to make a decision, it wants to receive information and facts and at times consults experts on the subject. Like him, it may well change its decision when new facts emerge or in light of changed conditions.

In the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this matter, there is no reference to the nature and extent of the information to which the House of Justice should have access when making its decisions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit.

Again, He says:

Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance, and care of the one true Lord. He shall guard it from error and will protect it under the wing of His sanctity and infallibility.

Bahá'ís, of course, may seek the views of the House of Justice about its decisions if they feel they have new information or that conditions have changed but in doing so should avoid the temptation to use this as an excuse to evade their obligation to obey and thus deprive themselves of the bounty of full obedience.