

Providence, RI, 02906

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Bahá'i Universal House of Justice
Haifa, Israel

BF = Bahai Faith
BWA = Bahá'u'lláh

Dear Sirs:

If Bahá'u'lláh is somehow the Teacher of the Absolute, then opening my heart to his influence would be the most desirable thing to me. Bahá'u'lláh as Truth, as the Unknown, the Unreachable, towards Whom we transcend; Who impells the ceaseless flow of our evolution towards limitless degrees of perfection, the infinitude of which is assured by the Inaccessibility of their Source and Goal; Who makes us reconsider our assumptions and preconceptions ad infinitum...it is to help me decide whether or not he is That, that I ask the following rather pointed questions, and raise the following rather critical concerns.

At times I am sure I demonstrate some impatience, even some anger, in this letter. But I feel as though I may have been deceived by the Bahá'i Faith--though I am not absolutely sure of it (hence, this letter, in hopes of a response I can admire and respect)--and so it has not always been easy to remember that "love is patient and kind." But considering the rather severe criticisms of the Faith which I make in this letter, I am surprised by how little real hostility I feel towards Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Universal House of Justice. Perhaps it has to do with feeling clear, feeling something of the truth. Truth has been said to make one free, after all. Believing that I have made even just a little progress in that direction makes me feel surprisingly whole.

— And please forgive the length of the letter. I have found that Bahá'is, in general, resist understanding my concerns, and rather quickly raise small technical objections to issues much broader in scope and import than they seem to realize--they often miss the forest for the trees, as the saying goes. I have therefore felt it necessary to deal in some detail with many of the potential objections to my arguments. Furthermore, I have felt the Universal House of Justice so particularly lacking in straightforwardness in its treatment of Shoghi Effendi's passing that I have felt obliged to go to a much greater length than would otherwise seem necessary to me, in order to point out what I consider rather grave problems with the House's discussions of the issue. And please don't hold me to absolutely perfect quoting, referencing (references may sometimes be to different editions of the same book I'm afraid), and understanding of the Writings--I admit I am quite

fallible; but I think that I have discussed the writings fairly enough to make my concerns valid.

Much of what follows hinges on the idea that to doubt any part of the Faith is to seriously call into question the whole thing: so much either stands or falls with the authority and infallibility of Bahá'u'lláh, and with the authority and infallibility of his appointed successors. As a Bahá'í I would have to submit, for example, without reservation, to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of John 14, verse 30: he says, "The Prince of this world is the Blessed Beauty" (Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 170). It is not absolutely impossible for me to accept this interpretation; but, indeed, I do not underestimate the degree of allegiance which is demanded of a Bahá'í.

Though my investigation of the Faith prior to signing the membership card a couple years ago was as complete and profound a one as was possible for me at the time, I was a Bahá'í for only a short while before turning in my card (though there was considerable delay in its being mailed by the LSA to the NSA). In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi I read: "Either we should accept the Cause without any qualification whatever, or cease calling ourselves Bahá'ís. The non-believers should be made to realize that it is not sufficient for them to accept some aspects of the teachings and reject those which cannot suit their mentality in order to become fully-recognized and active followers of the Faith" (Lights of Guidance, #192). I found I could not accept the Cause without qualifications, so I stopped calling myself a Bahá'í.

I find that I cannot--without spiritual loss--embrace unqualified intellectual assent to any idea, doctrine, or world view. Certainly there is great value in *conviction* and in the will to act on the basis of conviction. But I think conviction--faith--arises not from the intellect, which can always see another side to things (and perchance--if it ruled absolutely--would never let us get anything done), but rather from the totality of oneself--one's body, one's experiences, one's heart, soul, *and* intellect. In the realm of intellect--say, anything open to scholarly debate--I have the conviction that any belief, any doctrine, any point of view, is, and ought to be, open to question. I speak of intellectual freedom, the freedom to question, and thus to know, or find one cannot know--not the freedom to disobey. One may question and yet obey; indeed, one may not question--and yet disobey.

I have difficulty understanding what "unqualified acceptance" of doctrine even means. Shoghi Effendi himself affirms that "The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous" (Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968, pp. 87-89). And yet, if, for example, today I accept the Faith with the understanding that Bahá'u'lláh as Manifestation means that he is God Incarnate (as many Bahá'ís apparently did earlier in the century), and then later discover that He is not, but rather more like a Mirror of the Divine Essence, what would have been the point of professing "unqualified

acceptance" in the first place? "Unqualified acceptance" of *what*, exactly? of a doctrine I did not understand? Or, for another hypothetical example, which I hope is not too unfair: what if, 30 years ago, someone had said, "I believe it possible that the World Order of the future could function without a Guardian." I suspect that his fellow believers might have thought him on the brink of breaking the Covenant, and might have said to him, "Now look here, friend, there will always be Guardians, for Shoghi Effendi portrays, in what he himself calls 'clear and unambiguous language,' an Administrative Order consisting of two pillars, one of which will be a living Guardian; besides, haven't you read where he says that 'Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be 'mutilated' and 'the means required to enable it to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking'? No, the Covenant of *this* Dispensation is unbreakable, for this is the Day which shall not be followed by the Night!" Indeed, David Hofman, in his commentary on the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the part he wrote *before* Shoghi Effendi's passing), reveals the same assumptions when he speaks of the future extension of the Guardianship's activity "from the inspirer, champion and beloved guide of a small and struggling world community, to the full exercise of its duties and prerogatives as one of the twin pillars sustaining the single social order of the planet"; as on the next page, when he explains that from the "complementary functions of the two main institutions...the flexibility of the Administratative Order is derived" (pp. 7-8).

And yet, as fate would have it, today there is a World Order without a living guardian. And so Bahá'is have had to re-evaluate and modify fundamental assumptions about some very basic aspects of their Faith. So, when one's understanding of scripture can change so dramatically as to become nearly the complete contrary of what one previously understood, what, then, can "unqualified acceptance" of the Faith mean? In practice, each Bahá'í has his own understanding of the Faith. To what, then, has each given his unqualified acceptance? To his own understanding, merely? Certainly not; but perhaps rather to his own understanding, *and* to the commitment to open his understanding--with the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh's spirit--to the possibility, the inevitability, of growth, of change, sometimes even radical change, in that same understanding.

It may be said that the relativity of one's understanding, and the inevitability of change, is in itself one of the Bahá'í teachings to which one gives unqualified assent. But, again, this makes those times when Shoghi Effendi challenges the Bahá'is to doctrinal purity even more difficult to understand. I am reminded a little of sessions of the Soviet Communist Party Congresses (at least, of those sessions before Gorbachov!), where each man publicly pledges conformist allegiance to the principles of Marx and Lenin for the sake of party unity, though each man in fact has his own ideas

about what those principles mean. Perhaps party unity is exactly what Shoghi Effendi has in mind..."In this way...the organic unity of the Cause will be preserved" (Lights of Guidance, #192). Is this what "unqualified acceptance" "means"?

Surely unity is of the heart. Can enduring peace and understanding ever really be established on the basis of intellectual assent to doctrine; can unity of doctrine ever be established without force--that is, force applied, from within or from without, against the intellect of man, by nature free, questioning? Certainly history would seem to indicate that it can not. Naturally, the BF does not claim that unity can be established by means of doctrine alone: the Faith is by no means so superficial. And yet it does seem to require at times a kind of unnatural intellectual conformity to doctrine, and, if you will, a kind of party-line purity, at the expense of truth.

I do not see conviction, or faith, as requiring intellectual conformity, nor even 'tenacious clinging' "to the revealed Word" (Compilation on "The Establishment of the Universal House of Justice", Compiled by the World Center's Research Department, p. 50, from here on merely "comp.") or to any given level of understanding of doctrine. Life seems to teach me that mistakes and ignorance are just the flip side of knowledge, and that each side leads to the other, through unity and the willingness to share a common humanity, back and forth, like night and day and the turning of the earth, flowing on, *towards* perfection. Or perhaps fallibility and forgiveness, together, *are* perfection. Whatever the case may be, I am not questioning the value of conviction, nor of belief that enables one to act and grow and expand the limits of joy and understanding; I am only questioning the value of making conviction a matter of unqualified intellectual assent to words or propositions which cannot be proved by the intellect, one way or the other, and which would, I think, be more realistically accepted as tentative, working assumptions that can be, that must be, changed--if reality demands it.

— I have seen the hurtful effects that the identification of concepts, of understandings, and of world views with absolute Truth (even if it is only with "the Truth for this age") can have in people's lives: the sudden panic when doubts enter through a crack in some conceptual wall, the indigestion when religion is discussed at dinner tables, the burning crosses and private crusades against infidels who dare to live in a space that exists outside of some sacred doctrinal borders, the emotional fire-power the believer can deliver against his less certain neighbor.... I realize that Bahá'ís believe their religion heals these very kinds of hurt. But I am less certain.

And so it is that when claims of infallibility are made, I examine them closely, for I fear their ability to put up walls between people. Claims of infallibility made for one's religious leader, one's own scriptures--well, I

rarely hear them made without seeing manifested some sense of pride and arrogance, sometimes gross, sometimes more subtle and insidious. Pride is a natural human liability, of course--and it is perhaps one of the chief manufacturers of opportunities to exercise our forgiveness muscle--but when associated with religion, especially with concepts like "infallibility," it becomes especially ugly. The doctrine of infallibility seems more often than not to disrupt unity and to prevent the establishment of the kind of dialogue which begins by saying, "Let us, together, consider, and follow the truth-- wherever it may lead." If people are committed before hand to the infallibility of their spiritual leader or scripture, as, for example, a fundamentalist Christian is committed to an inerrant Bible, dialogues with "unbelievers" are apt to be somewhat strained, and the truth is bound to become more elusive.

I believe Shoghi Effendi somewhere speaks of listening to others while remaining unshakeable in one's point view. There is something to this: one mustn't be entirely spineless. And of course, if absolute Truth is really on my side, then I suppose I can't be blamed for holding my ground no matter what. But can any point of view really be identified with absolute Truth? Is true security ever to be found in a point of view? Take the Book of Certitude, for example. Is not the reading of that book an exercise in opening one's mind, in leaving behind what one previously thought to be essential beliefs? In that book, Bahá'u'lláh goes out of his way to challenge static, conceptual, doctrinal certitude, and brings the focus instead to the challenge of faith in a Person, who, like any person, is essentially unknowable, ungraspable, unpossessible. And, in practice, is it really possible to listen, to understand--to "stand-under"--another point of view if one is pre-committed to remaining "unshakeable" in one's own?

Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani offers a human, flexible understanding of the station of prophethood and the interpretation of revealed words when he says that "It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal." He continues, "They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists....Therefore, the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these" (Miracles and Metaphors, pp. 7-11). And BH himself has said, "The outer form of the Word of God acts as a channel through which the stream of God's Holy Spirit flows. It has its limitations inasmuch as it pertains to the world of man" (The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 1, pp. 21-2). It seems possible perhaps to understand infallibility in terms of effect, then, rather than in terms of historical accuracy, or some one-to-one correspondance between the sayings of the prophets and physical realities. This is the view that many modern critical

scholars take of scripture, the idea being that the "inspired" nature of the Bible does not imply the "inerrancy" of the same, for example.

And at times Shoghi Effendi, too, comes close to suggesting a way of thinking about faith and scripture that resembles the way of any good scholar: "These statements must be taken in conjunction with all the Bahá'í teachings; we cannot get a correct picture by concentration on just one phrase" (Arohanuia: Letters of Shoghi Effendi to New Zealand, pp. 85-6), and, "We must not take many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements as dogmatic finalities, for there are other points which when added to them round out the picture" (Arohuani, p. 88), etc. But when such a "rounding out" process so obviously involves the fallible human intellectual processes of comparison and contrast, of interpretation, the idea that the writings are, in principle, nevertheless somehow in and of themselves "infallible" becomes less intelligible. And as for those few statements we apparently are to take as "dogmatic finalities"--again, what can that mean, in light of the fact that understanding grows with time? When it gets down to practice, to the actual process of living, such notions as dogmatic finality and infallibility seem to have little meaning, to do little good, and, perhaps, to do a little bit of harm as well

That Shoghi Effendi is infallible when it comes to matters of the Faith is Bahá'í doctrine. And yet it seems to me that he "infallibly" interprets the doctrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's and Bahá'u'lláh's "infallibilities" in ways so often literal, welding doctrinal conformity unnaturally to reason, like a lead weight attached to the foot of a swimmer, that it cannot help but make the exploration of the ocean of faith and knowledge more difficult.

For example: "...Shoghi Effendi wishes to emphasize that what is truly authoritative are the words of the Master. In all such cases we should try and find out what He has said and abide by His words, even though they seem in conflict with the findings of modern scholars" (Lights of Guidance, #979). But in Foundations of World Unity (chapter on "The Foundation of Religion") we find the following words attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá: --

"It is a historical fact that during a period of fifteen hundred years the kings of Israel were unable to promulgate broadcast the religion of Judaism. In fact during that period the name and history of Moses were confined to the boundaries of Palestine and the torah was a book well known only in that country....It was through Christianiy that the torah reached Persia. Before that time there was no knowledge in that country of such a book....Throughout the length and breadth of Persia there was not a single volume of the Old Testament until the religion of Jesus Christ caused it to appear everywhere."

He urges his audience (a Jewish congregation I believe) to "Refer to history." So I did.

I looked in Encyclopedias and some other books about Judaism before the time of Christ to see if they could corroborate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertions, though I already found them somewhat disconcerting since I was already familiar with the reference found in Acts 15:21 to the law of Moses having been "preached in every town"--this, in the context of a discussion about the Gentiles--and with the story of Pentecost found in Acts 2:5 where it says, "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven."^{**}

I found that history does not corroborate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertions at all. In fact, apparently the Jews and their religion were very well known throughout the whole ancient world (their well-known frequent Dispersions making this not at all unlikely), and even conversions to Judaism were at times very numerous, before the time of Christ. It seems that much of the Old Testament was even *written* outside of Palestine, and colonies of Jews whose populations ran into the millions were to be found in Persia, Babylon, Egypt, Rome, etc. And in some instances Jews were apparently very influential in the government and commerce of their respective lands. In this same talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself refers to the "edict of Cyrus, king of Persia," which allowed great numbers of Jews living under his power to

^{**} Though I understand that for Bahá'is "The Bible is not wholly authentic, and in this respect is not to be compared with the Qurán, and should be wholly subordinated to the authentic writings of Bahá'u'lláh" (Lights of Guidance, *998, emphasis his); and I myself could agree with this in principle (that is, as a principle of "authenticity" in its strictest sense of "undisputed origin"); but I have as yet not been able to fully understand Shoghi Effendi's assertion in light of the following statements made by Bahá'u'lláh in The Book of Certitude: "...Gabriel inspired Muhammad's illumined heart with these words: 'They pervert the text of the Word of God.' ...Verily by 'perverting' the text is not meant that which these foolish and abject souls have fancied, even as some maintain that Jewish and Christian divines have effaced from the Book such verses as extol and magnify the countenance of Muhammad, and instead thereof have inserted the contrary. How utterly vain and false are these words! Can a man who believeth in a book, and deemeth it to be inspired by God, mutilate it? Moreover, the Pentateuch had been spread over the surface of all the earth, and was not confined to Mecca and Medina, so that they could privily corrupt and pervert its text. Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God's holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires.... We have also heard a number of the foolish of the earth assert that the genuine text of the heavenly Gospel doth not exist amongst the Christians, that it hath ascended unto heaven. How grievously they have erred!...How could God, when once the Day-star of the beauty of Jesus had disappeared from the sight of His people, and ascended unto the fourth heaven, cause His holy Book, His most great testimony amongst His creatures, to disappear also? What would be left to that people to cling to from the setting of the day-star of Jesus until the rise of the sun of the Muhammadan Dispensation?"

return to Palestine. Now, one would think that if the king of Persia wrote an edict concerning a religious minority in his land, it might safely be assumed that he and many other people in his kingdom would at least know the name of the minority religion's Prophet. And in Townsend's Heart of the Gospel we also find confirmation that the Jews, and therefore, one would think, the religion which they practiced and to a very large extent came to embody, were far from confined to Palestine: "But to the Jews of the Dispersion as to those (fewer in number) who remained at home, there was only one true God, the God Who spoke to them through Moses" (parenthesis his).

Far from suggesting that his audience take his words with a grain of salt, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said rather: "I now wish you to examine certain facts and statements which are worthy of consideration...I wish you to be very just and fair in your judgment of the following statements....It is a historical fact....In fact during that period....This is self-evident...." and so on. Must we follow Shoghi Effendi's advice and "abide by" 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words "even though they may seem in conflict with the findings of modern scholars"? But 'Abdu'l-Bahá told us to "refer to history"--that is, to "modern scholars," is it not?

Elsewhere Shoghi Effendi writes, "We as Bahá'is are not influenced by the categorical assertions of scholars. We believe that what Bahá'u'lláh has revealed and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written is from God, and divinely inspired" (Bahá'í Institutions, pp. 116-20). And, in a similar vein: "As to the question...concerning the sacrifice of Ishmael; although His statement does not agree with that made in the Bible, Genesis 12:9, the friends should unhesitatingly, and for reasons that are only too obvious, give precedence to the sayings of Bahá'u'lláh" (Directives from the Guardian, p. 12). What then of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani's suggestion that "the prophets have indulged the people in regard to their historical notions, folk stories, and scientific principles, and have spoken to them according to these"? Bahá'u'lláh spoke primarily to Muslims who, I think, claim descent from Ishmael. Why make such apparent "indulgence"--even if it happened to be historically true--into a kind of touchstone of orthodoxy?

So Shoghi Effendi encourages the pursuit of Bahá'í scholarship, and at the same time asserts that Bahá'is "are not influenced by the categorical assertions of scholars." What kind of dialogue between Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í scholars does he propose, then? What kind of scholarship is he advocating? He writes:

"As regards your study of the Hindu religion....He would urge you...to carry on your studies in that field...with the view of bringing the Message to the Hindus....the friends should do their best to make as many converts among the Hindus as they possibly can" (Dawn of a New Day, p. 198).

It would seem a rare soul indeed who could simultaneously attempt both to convert and to understand an entire complex people. "Scholarship" for the purposes of promoting conversion to a faith is usually called "propaganda."

As far as I know, in the realm of scholarship, any and every assumption or presupposition must be open to question. Certainly there is value in holding onto and pursuing the implications of a set of premises or doctrines, to-see where they might lead or what truths they might reveal. This is what the process of reason consists of. But problems arise if a scholar won't let go of a premise, or belief, even if evidence indicates that it is unsound. This is not to say that that same premise might not later be found true after all, when more evidence is collected--such is the game of reason; but danger lies in the unwillingness to let go. Such clinging to belief can cripple the intellectual function. This kind of scholar is only apparently playing by the rules. And no matter how objective he hopes to be, the fundamental philosophical position that reality must somehow fit in with his religious paradigm will almost certainly cause bias to creep into his observations, data collection, and analyses.

Problems that arise when one feels bound to attribute some kind of factual inerrancy to a set of written words may be illustrated with the following selection from "The American Bahá'í," November 1986, "Bahá'ís and the space age" (p.3):

"These and other areas are in need of the illuminating guidance that the Bahá'í Writings can offer. We know from the Writings that 'every fixed star hath its own planets; and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can reckon.' (Bahá'u'lláh) How will we reconcile the apparent sterility of the known planets with this verse? One of the friends...disclaimed belief that the other planets...could have life on them. I am reluctant to conclude this yet; but the verse continues to puzzle me....Could it be that every fixed star goes through a 'life-cycle' of its own during which different planets appear...with their inherent life at optimum times? Or could it be that one planet out of the group...produces a facile race...which utilizes the resources of every available body...? Bahá'u'lláh says 'its own creatures,' implying indigenous to that planet. This is only one of the questions begging clear answers."

Now, the author of the letter, a Mark Townsend, speaks of "illuminating guidance that the Bahá'í Writings can offer." But it seems clear that, at least in this case, what the Writings offer is not so much "guidance," as what might better be called "stimulation to reflect": the written word, because it is always open to interpretation, especially when the "rounding out" process is involved, always stimulates debate. And, naturally, debate can be a very creative thing. In the attempt to understand a verse from scripture, one can

arrive at some very creative alternative hypotheses that science can then test; but one might also be tempted to overlook some possible explanations that do not seem to harmonize with one's scripture. One might also waste time and energy better spent on finding ways to actually get to the stars than on trying to understand what someone has said we'll find when we get there.

— Meaning, as far as I can tell, does not exist in black ink on white paper. Meaning is gleaned from written words by human consciousness, and "all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision" (The Seven Valleys, p. 18). It seems to me that, in practice, the intermediary and final determiner of the significance of written words is human reason and human experience--that is, human interpretation. The Revelation Itself may have some sort of objective existence "out there," and the Source of the words may be in some way infallible, but in what meaningful, practical sense can the actual *written* words be considered infallible?

Shoghi Effendi says, "We cannot prove man was always man for this is a fundamental doctrine....You see our whole approach to each matter is based on the belief that God sends us divinely inspired Educators; what they tell us is fundamentally true; what science tells us today is true, tomorrow may be entirely changed to better explain a new set of facts" (Arohani, p. 85). Shoghi Effendi makes clear here the fundamental nature of premises--they cannot be proved by the intellect at all, except indirectly through appeal to entire world views. But what I don't understand is the seemingly absolute distinction he makes between the words of science and the words of the Prophets. To a believer, there may seem to be some value to this distinction: perhaps choosing to cling to the teachings of the "true" Prophet assures one of at least starting down the right, or most direct, road to Truth. But in actual practice I see no real distinction.

Obviously scientific paradigms change--that is part of science. To cling to an outmoded paradigm is unscientific, for one would be denying the impulse to more fully understand which gave rise to the paradigm, and to science, in the first place.

But so it must be with interpretation of scripture as well. Not only are the prophets said to speak to each generation according to their level of development, and so what the prophets say may change as humanity deals with "new sets of facts," but also "Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings" (Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-68, pp. 87-89). Nevertheless, the Universal House of Justice has said that Shoghi Effendi's interpretation of Scripture is "a statement of truth which cannot be varied," and that "the Interpreter of the Word is an extension of the centre which is the Word itself" (comp. 41, 59). Here again we have the same tendency to entertain notions of some kind of

literal infallibility. But the disparity between the World Order portrayed in Shoghi Effendi's The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, with its twin, essential, inseparable pillars, and the World Order that exists today, is rather great: must not the Universal House of Justice now, like scientists, explain the significance of the World Order in light of a "new set of facts"?

In some sense, then, it seems the prophets don't "tell us" anything at all--we read them and then tell ourselves what "they mean." Sure, the words are "out there"--we didn't write them--they have some objective existence; and it may be possible to overstate the role that subjectivity plays in life (though I'm not sure of that); but the fact that the words of scripture mean so many different things to so many different people suggests rather strongly that human interpretation plays a very large part indeed in determining their "meaning." That there is a Truth "out there" which we can come to know is perhaps the most basic faith assumption one can make--and I do not take issue with it. I merely point out that it is a faith assumption, perhaps a necessary one, too. But the idea that the words of scripture are themselves, even if only in some vague sense, inerrant, must, I think, promote resistance to a more fluid, ongoing evolution of understanding.

In the Bahá'í Faith, Absolute Truth is defined as Unknowable, Inaccessible. This belief paves the way to the opening of hearts and minds, to the liberation of intellect, to understanding, and to transcendence. When the Object of all knowledge is essentially unknowable, does not this make all else--people, words, and things--"relative," in every healing sense of that word? Whence, then, the insistence upon "dogmatic finalities" and "unqualified acceptance" of all doctrine? In the face of a universe so evidently pouring forth from some absolutely still Point beyond all possible comprehension, why the 'tenacious clinging' to doctrinal purity (as if scripture could be defined once and for all) so often advocated in the Bahá'í writings? I wonder if--in the absence of a living Guardian who could be the focus of doctrinal unity and yet preserve the authoritative *flexibility* of the same--insistence upon the absolute truth value and inerrancy of a particular set of written words is nothing more than an unjustifiable attempt to concentrate all validity and truth within the Bahá'í religious system.

Shoghi Effendi has asserted that "if each person reserves the right to obey his own conscience, the logical conclusion is we don't need any spiritual authority to guide and protect us, the authority of our own conscience is sufficient!" (Unfolding Destiny, pp. 443-4, Mar. 4, 1964). This is an example of the kind of all-or-nothing thinking so characteristic of fundamentalist religious movements. I do not know the context of this quote--the way Bahá'ís make compilations, it is often difficult to know the context--but is there, in practice, any real alternative to the kind of knowing of which Bahá'u'lláh speaks when he says of justice, "By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine

own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor"? Certainly guidance is welcome. I can understand the need to be educable, to be open to learning from those both more *and* less knowledgeable than oneself; education is inherent in creation...stimuli elicit responses in all things and their potentialities are thereby made to unfold. But when it comes to choosing a spiritual leader, must one not first ascertain the "skill of the doctor" (as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says in *Some Answered Questions*, somewhere in pp. 171-174)--and must not this be a decision of conscience? And the decision to continue following whatever guide one has chosen--is this also not a decision of conscience? Would any Bahá'í really follow some Bahá'í law or believe any Bahá'í doctrine he sincerely felt, to the very best of his knowledge and after giving it every possible benefit of the doubt, to be in fact wrong? Would not Shoghi Effendi himself in some way have relied upon his own intuition and conscience had he, for example, ever had the opportunity to fulfill his function, as member and head of the Universal House of Justice, to "insist upon reconsideration by [the elected members] of any enactment he conscientiously believes to conflict with the meaning and to depart from the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's revealed utterances" (Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, 58)? I realize that Shoghi Effendi was appointed the authoritative interpreter of the Writings, but does that imply that he was some kind of unthinking loudspeaker transmitting the words of God directly, verbatim? Or, like the rest of us, must he not have used his own conscience and consciousness in determining the meanings of Scripture?

And so, in the absence of a living guardian (and Shoghi Effendi was speaking as a living Guardian), to whom an ongoing, interactive, *personal* allegiance is possible, I'm not sure I can understand the doctrine of infallibility and the clinging to a set of written words as representing anything but a form devoid of content, perhaps even a kind of unintelligible propaganda that may be used at will, and rather arbitrarily too, to maintain exclusivity in the realm of authoritative spiritual truth.

Bahá'u'lláh has said somewhere, "Know thou for a certainty that whoso disbelieveth in God is neither trustworthy nor truthful." But I am not sure believers are any more honest; in fact, because believers have doctrines that they have to protect, that have come to mean life for them, they may be especially inclined to meddle with the facts a bit, even if only unconsciously.

When I first read in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era of the tribute paid to Bahá'u'lláh by Professor Edward G. Browne, I was very impressed. In particular, I was impressed by the use of the capitalized letter "O" in the word "One" by which this western scholar referred to Bahá'u'lláh: "No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before One who is the object of a devotion...." It may seem a small thing, but to me it was significant that a scholar would be moved to capitalize this pronoun. You can

imagine my surprise when I recently read the following in The Bahá'í Faith: "No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion...." Where was the "One" which had so impressed me? Perhaps there has been a typographical error. The version in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era had left me with the impression that Professor Browne was either a Bahá'í, or almost one. I have since done a little reading up on Professor Browne. He may have been impressed by Bahá'u'lláh, but he did not capitalize the "O".

The Writings, severed from notions of literal infallibility, may open our heart and mind. And I can understand the role a living authority figure can play in maintaining the unity of the Cause. But now that the living blood of "infallible" interpretive guidance has ceased to flow, and interpretation can no longer be adapted to the changing times--and who can really doubt that "meaning" changes with time and place and audience?--and what has been written has become "a statement of truth which cannot be varied" (Compilation, 41) (even though the author is no longer there to say, "I didn't mean it to be taken quite that way," or, with a smile and a wink, to let us know that maybe he's overstating the case a bit)....how much more of an obstacle to dialogue and to the search for truth must the doctrine of infallibility pose now?

Shoghi Effendi says of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "He is, and should for all times be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal..." (Dispensation, 42), and the list of titles goes on. These are very, very big claims to make about any man. The language is, to a believer, lofty; but to an "unbeliever" it may appear, perhaps, rather inflated.

I obviously have never met 'Abdu'l-Bahá personally. Accounts written by Bahá'ís portray him in such a way as to substantiate Shoghi Effendi's assertions about his grandfather. Accounts written by his enemies paint a different picture. And accounts of those neither especially for, nor against, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, reveal a whole spectrum of impressions. Anyway, so much for second-hand reports; predictably, they are about as useful as the movie reviews. And so what about things 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself has written, or talks of his recorded authentically, such as those to be found in Some Answered Questions and Foundations of World Unity?

I have read things attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that, if spoken or written by a human being considered by all to be fallible like the rest of us, would elicit from me a nod of appreciation for some insight, and a shrug of the shoulders over the kinks to be found, as in most human endeavors, in his arguments. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá is called "unerring" and "perfect" and "stainless". Most importantly, he is considered the perfect role model for Bahá'ís. A man with claims to such titles, I think, requires closer scrutiny, and is entitled to less benefit of the doubt, than we would give to our neighbor, or to the guy we see in the mirror. I find very little indeed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings to motivate me to accept his claims of infallibility. His ideals are high, but they are no higher than many other men and women, and his devotion to the Cause may have been very great, but it is no more impressive than, say, a Mother Theresa. And I am not a Bahá'i, so the assurances of Shoghi Effendi and even of Bahá'u'lláh do little to reassure me. All I have to go by is a set of treatises and recorded talks that, in every way, sound fully as fallible, sometimes even strikingly more so, than things written by any number of religious leaders.

To return to the chapter on "The Foundation of Religion" from Foundations of World Unity quoted above (p. 6 of this letter). If this were just any wise man making the very general point that through Christianity the Old Testament was spread along with the New to numbers of people it might never have reached otherwise, I would find it mildly interesting, and would simply shrug off the all too human instances of wildly overstating the case. But this is the perfect Exemplar.

He introduces his talk with noble words: "My...intention is to remove from the hearts of men the religious enmity and hatred which have fettered them....the reality of religious unity will appear when...misunderstandings are dispelled." But I find it difficult to understand how the incorporation of the torah into the New Testament and its subsequent dispersal throughout the world could be expected to warm the hearts of Jews who, throughout the centuries of the Christian era, have been killed, maimed, and tortured in the name of Christ and for the sake of that same Bible. The New Testament hardly paints a flattering picture of the Jews. At one point Paul calls the Mosaic dispensation a "dispensation of death." This is supposed to arouse the appreciation of the Jews? Maybe the Bahá'i interpretation of the New Testament, which is to take it all with a little more than a grain of salt (if the Resurrection story must be interpreted allegorically, for example), might appeal to the Jews, but certainly not the argument for the value of the Christian Bible he presents here. And, in all honesty, how can such sweeping generalizations and historical untruths presented as historical fact go very far in the direction of dispelling "misunderstandings"? I personally would certainly not find my heart warming to a man who hoped to convert me by

making statements about me or my present religion which reveal that he doesn't even know who I am, or what my religion is, or has been.

I think it was in Paris Talks that I read 'Abdu'l-Bahá referring to the Native Americans as "savages," comparing them to the pre-Muslim Arabs, whom he describes as "barbarous in nature and blood-thirsty" in "The Foundation of Religion." Naturally, I was shocked by such references. I think I was a Bahá'í at the time, as I remember wondering how I could possibly defend such remarks to nonbelievers. I asked a prominent Native American Bahá'í how he felt about such statements. He responded as follows (accurately quoted, I believe):

"I'm no apologist, but at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's having said such things, there was no other way people could think of the Indians except as 'savages'...Yes, those remarks really bother me...But what really keeps me going in the Faith is that the Faith is the only thing that can bring people together...Sometimes when I'm tested by such verses, I think that maybe I just don't know, that maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm wrong...." [wrong about what, exactly, he didn't say] "Everyone has their favorite writings. What I like to do is read Bahá'u'lláh and the Bab."

By the 1900's there were certainly many other ways in which Americans were thinking about the Indians. Even if there weren't, would it be right for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to lower himself to the prejudices of the people he found around him? Rightly or wrongly, this Native American man believed that the Bahá'í Faith was the only hope for the world. His acceptance was apparently not quite "unqualified" ("Everyone has their favorite writings"...), but what talking with him confirmed for me was a growing realization that many, perhaps very many, people who call themselves Bahá'ís, do not necessarily accept the whole Bahá'í package--some quite openly reject certain aspects of it (they are perhaps the most honest ones)--and are willing to bear the burden of internal and external inconsistency for the value that they do see in the Faith. I'm not sure allegiance to truth should be partial, but at least people like this Native American are for me examples of how Bahá'ís are often better, truer, more honest and more loving than the Faith they profess--certainly than the scriptures they read.

In Some Answered Questions 'Abdu'l-Bahá deals at length with the questions of reincarnation and pantheism. While I generally favor the Bahá'í views of these subjects--as well as I can understand these views (the treatment of them in Some Answered Questions is a bit obscure, I find)--I nevertheless concede a certain beauty and poignancy to the theories of reincarnation and pantheism as well. And I certainly do not find them so clearly refuted as 'Abdu'l-Bahá claims his arguments leave them. I also find a certain spirit of unfairness in his treatment of these subjects.

'Abdu'l-Bahá begins his treatment of reincarnation with fair enough sounding words: "The object of what we are about to say is to explain the reality--not to deride the beliefs of other people; it is only to explain the facts; that is all. We do not oppose anyone's ideas, nor do we approve of criticism." This is the promise of a very noble and considerate approach to the question. But does he stick to it?

— He says he means "not to deride the beliefs of other people," but later we read: "this also is mere imagination," and, "consider what a puerile imagination this is which is implied by the belief," and, "This is child's play." He says "We do not oppose anyone's ideas," but later we read: "This theory has no proofs nor evidences; it is simply an idea," and "What an ignorant supposition!". He says "nor do we approve of criticism," but later we read: "Such were the limited minds of the former philosophers...Consider how greatly their thoughts were limited and how weak their minds." How can I respect such treatment of the former philosophers?

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "This theory has no proofs nor evidences; it is simply an idea. No, in reality the cause of acquiring perfections is the bounty of God." But it seems that "evidences" can be admitted only if they are Bahá'í evidences. Surely there is an abundance of scriptures testifying to the reality of reincarnation; but perhaps we should assume that such scriptures must either be interpreted in such a way as to harmonize with the Bahá'í paradigm, or that they have suffered from textual alteration over the ages. And certainly there are many thousands of people willing to testify to the reality of reincarnation from personal experience of past lives; but there is always what Shoghi Effendi says, namely, "this is what the followers of Bahá'u'lláh must accept, regardless of what experiences other people may feel they have" (Lights of Guidance, #1134) (one wonders how Bahá'í scientists are to investigate the nature of such claims if they refuse before hand to consider the possibility of their being valid). And certainly, too, there must be other philosophical views of man and nature and God which might provide an internally consistent world view that could include reincarnation as a possibility; but perhaps this cannot be, for it would be inconsistent with Bahá'í doctrine.... Is 'Abdu'l-Bahá *considering* here, or merely propagandizing?

It seems to me that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is only apparently playing by the philosopher's rules. He uses words like "conjecture," "supposition," "proof," etc., and yet--apart from being anything but lucid--his argument often resorts to the appeal to authority (the authority of his father and of Bahá'í premises), to attacks ad hominum, and to distortion of the opponents point of view. What to 'Abdu'l-Bahá appear "ignorant suppositions" may seem quite sound when embedded in the overall world view of the reincarnationists; and what to 'Abdu'l-Bahá appear truths flowing from the mouth of his father

may not appear quite so self-evident to the opposition. Must I believe that Ptolemy had a weak mind, just because 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said so?

No, I cannot admire 'Abdu'l-Bahá's methods, and I certainly do not wish to emulate them.

In his discussion on the Trinity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks, "how can the mind be forced to believe a thing which it cannot conceive? A thing cannot be grasped by the intelligence," he says, "except when it is clothed in an intelligible form; otherwise, it is but an effort of the imagination" (Some Answered Questions, 115). He uses similar language in his discussion on pantheism, the idea that all is One and One is all, or that God is like the ocean and the creatures are like the waves of the ocean--or, in other words, that three is one and one is three--which he calls "a pure imagination which one cannot conceive." He must be speaking of intellectual conceivability, for as far as *visualizing* pantheism goes, we just did it--God is like the sea, and His creatures like the waves of that sea. But certainly, there is some logical necessity in three not being one, and vice versa. That is, perhaps, why the Church has always called it a "mystery"; in other words, the truth of the doctrine is said to lie beyond the intellect, to be understood--stood-under--perhaps only by a soul "calmed and quieted...like a child quieted at its mother's breast" (Psalm 131). Since when are mysteries banned from the realm of religious, even scientific, truth?

I wonder if this 3 in 1 and 1 in 3 might not be more a part of everyday life than "one" might think. What about "self knowledge"? Am not "I" an "individual"--that is, a unity? And yet, when I am "thinking about" myself--that is, when I am looking at myself from the point of view of my intellect--I find that I am knower, process of knowing, and object of knowledge, all at the same time. It would seem then, that I, a unity, am also--*from the point of view of the intellect*--three. And yet, from the point of view of the intellect, this cannot be. So what's knew? Hasn't man always been required to take a leap of faith--beyond, not in spite of, the intellect--in his search for knowledge? I say beyond the intellect, and not in spite of it, for it seems to me that to discover the nature and limits of intellectual knowledge is in itself the highest form of intellectual knowledge. As Bahá'u'lláh himself says in a similar vein: "This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding" (Gleanings, 166). But I do not think therefore that "anything goes."

And so, back to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of the Trinity and pantheism. It would seem that "inconceivability" is a poor argument for "impossibility" or "unacceptability." Even "I" am, in some sense, "inconceivable," for how can my mind comprehend that which surrounds it, namely, "me" (and I know I am more than my mind). And after all, in Bahá'í doctrine, God Himself is

"incomprehensible" (Some Answered Questions, 146)--and yet he is to be believed in, is he not? And, in all honesty, is there anything so truly "inconceivable" as a God absolutely disconnected in essence from the universe? And, on the other hand, is a God essentially at one with the universe really so inconceivable? 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares God to the sun, and creation to the rays of the sun. But, if anything, this metaphor is even less consistent than the pantheist metaphor of sea and waves, for in fact the sea is both of one substance and of many forms simultaneously, whereas it is not true that the sun fails to enter into its rays: $E=mc^2$, after all--the sun will one day burn itself "out". Another analogy for pantheism, and quite a "conceivable" one too, I think, may be offered. Say God is like a writer: we know from experience that, in fact, it is possible for a writer to momentarily "forget himself" and become "absorbed in" his characters (essentially his brain "waves" are they not?), his "creation"; but, by virtue of his very nature as writer--and not creation (which has no real existence in comparison to Him, "who alone has immortality" as the New Testament similarly affirms of God)--he inevitably "returns to himself," or "remembers his true nature." Why should this be an inconceivable impossibility when it comes to God and creation? Why could not the "I" of all creatures be in fact the "I Am" of God Himself, as the Bhagavad-Gita would suggest, for example, and "enlightenment" be the realization of the truth that "I am and always have been I, though I have dreamed otherwise, have dreamed of being many"?

True, Bahá'u'lláh seems to suggest otherwise, though it may be important to note how in the first few pages of Gleanings, when he speaks of the inaccessibility of God, he emphasizes almost exclusively the inadequacy of "words" and of intellectual functions--measurement, comparison and contrast, analysis, formulation, etc.--when it comes to comprehending the sphere of Unity:

"How can I *make mention* of Thee....If I *describe* Thee.....Exalted, *immeasurably* exalted, art Thou above the *strivings* of mortal man to *unravel* Thy mystery, to *describe* Thy glory, or even to *hint* at the *nature of* Thine Essence....Nay, forbid it...that I should have uttered such *words* as must of *necessity imply* the existence of any direct *relationship*....All *comparisons and likenesses fail*..." etc. (emphasis mine)

Indeed, the intellect is powerless even to "unravel" (as it is wont to do to things essentially unified) the "nature of" its own self! How much more so must it refrain from trying to claim for itself comprehension of The Self, as the pantheist would have it, or of God, as the Bahá'is would.

Now, there may be a real difference between Bahá'u'lláh's vision and that of the pantheists--but that is not relevant to the issue at hand. All I mean to point out here is that, as religious leaders are wont to do, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems

to attempt to distinguish his religion from other religions by means of what amounts to be a double standard: for the Catholics or the Fundamentalist Christians or the Hindus it is not right to believe in what cannot be conceived by the intellect, while for the Bahá'is, it is. In fact, though, both Catholics and Bahá'is believe in That which they cannot conceive, in That which has, rather, *conceived them*: they call Him the Unknowable. And the exponents of the Vedas call Him Brahman.

With what would appear to be a similar intent, elsewhere in Some Answered Questions 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "the Buddhists and Confucianists now worship images and statues" and "are entirely heedless of the Oneness of God." In The Bahá'í Proofs, Mirza Abul-Fadl says, "If ye should question any Buddhist...he will...answer that he believes in one God...and that idols and images are no other than the visible representations of that Holy Essence" (p. 139); and elsewhere, "the plurality of the gods of the idolaters does not contradict their acknowledgement of the Oneness of God" (p. 140). (Later Mirza makes a distinction between the "knowledge of God" and the mere "knowledge of the existence of God," on the basis of which distinction he maintains that some peoples are not "believers in Unity" despite their acknowledgement of the oneness of God.) Is Mirza's "Unity" what 'Abdu'l-Bahá means by Oneness of God? Even if so, are the Buddhists really "entirely heedless"? Perhaps the Buddhists may have missed the benefits of knowledge that later Prophets came to bestow upon them--assuming, of course, that Buddha was a Prophet from God (which many Buddhists do not believe), and assuming that Buddhists have ignored the teachings of Jesus and other Prophets since Buddha (which of course is not true in many cases). And perhaps they fail to appreciate the profundity of the Bahá'í doctrine of the Unity of God expressed in a diversity of Prophets. Perhaps, by failing to recognize the Prophet for this day, the Buddhists miss the opportunity to participate most directly in the establishment of heaven on earth. Perhaps. But there is always God's "Major Plan" (Lights of Guidance, #856) to consider.

—Or are 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Mirza really just saying that if you are not a Bahá'í, you are bereft of understanding? When what they say is actually closely examined--unless of course they don't mean exactly what they say--it is difficult to find any other real consistent meaning in their words, I would say in their propaganda, than: "Convert and become a Bahá'í".

'Abdu'l-Bahá, again and again, uses words like "entirely" and "never" and "all" and "always," and continually makes sweeping generalizations: "So it is with religions; through the passing of time...the truth of the Religion of God entirely departs"--really, "entirely"? (and I also imagine that those present day Christians who claim a personal relationship with Jesus would be very hard pressed indeed to verify this assertion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá); "it is therefore clear and evident that the Religion of God...has gradually changed and altered until it has been entirely destroyed and annihilated"--now,

"clear and evident"? is there no possibility of seeing it otherwise? And, "entirely destroyed and annihilated": does he mean that, or doesn't he? And if he doesn't, what does he mean?

As cited above, Shoghi Effendi writes, "We must not take many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements as dogmatic finalities, for there are other points which when added to them round out the picture." He continues with an example: "When He calls the philosophers of the West materialistic this does not for a moment mean he includes all Western philosophers for, as you truly point out, many of them have been very spiritual...." Now, we must ask, is Shoghi Effendi saying his grandfather doesn't mean "all" because it is in *fact* not so (that is, in spite of what Abdu'l-Bahá has said), or because his grandfather did not in fact *say* so? In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussions about evolution and materialism in Some Answered Questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does indeed say things like "some European philosophers" and "Certain European philosophers agree", etc. "some", "certain"--I find my heart opening to him here, for in these words I hear the voice of an unbiased man, not the rhetoric of some TV evangelist. But I'm not sure this is at all the same as "I now wish you to examine certain facts and statements which are worthy of consideration," followed by "In fact...the name and history of Moses were confined to the boundaries of Palestine," or phrases such as "entirely heedless," "entirely destroyed and annihilated."

Considering the human tendency to get dogmatic and literal-minded, and to think in terms of "us" and "them," such statements may be--and, I have seen, sometimes are--used to fuel prejudice and to justify lack of consideration for other points of view. 'Abdu'l-Bahá may *say* he does not approve of criticism or opposition to other points of view, but it is common knowledge that children, like disciples, do not do so much what their parent, or spiritual leader, preaches, but what he *practices*. I have found very, very many instances in which Bahá'ís do in fact seem to practice what 'Abdu'l-Bahá practices in talks such as he gave on reincarnation and on the Buddhists.

One relatively minor example, though I think it telling, and it did really bother me as well, comes from Leo Tolstoy and the Bahá'í Faith by Luigi Stendardo. I think the book was recommended to me by a Bahá'í who insisted that Tolstoy was a Bahá'í. Referring to some epoch in Tolstoy's life, Stendardo states (p. 38), "Tolstoy often contradicts himself during this period." I would say, "so what?" But Stendardo says, "We must not forget that Tolstoy was a being in evolution. Only then can we justify his radical changes of opinion." We are all beings in evolution, are we not? Who are we to "justify" anybody else's changes of opinion? Only someone who has in some way, however subtle, identified himself with some kind infallibility and absolute standard of truth--either directly, as the embodiment of that infallibility itself, or indirectly, as the "humble" devotee of some such

embodiment--only such an one would speak of the need for such justification.

The whole thing smacks of a hypocrisy of the worst kind--worst, because it is subtle and clothed in the sheep skin of religious consideration. We all make mistakes, and we all get proud and say things we don't mean. But I'm not at all sure religion always helps us see that. If one is confident that one has identified the Truth and is certain that It is to be found within the conceptual confines of one's own religion, then one may be seriously tempted to view with a kind of contempt (often very subtle) others' intellectual graspings after truth, which necessarily involve the creation and sorting out of "contradictions." Furthermore, what *little* I have read about the Bahá'í Faith during Tolstoy's life and the decades following it suggests that Bahá'í doctrine was very often misrepresented abroad; Tolstoy's alleged confusion might be even more understandable in light of this. But Stendardo, apparently true to the pattern set by Shoghi Effendi, seems more intent on propaganda than on scholarship and considered judgement. (Another, more personal, note: at the time I read this, I was a Bahá'í, and in my naiveté about the propagandistic nature of much Bahá'í literature, I gave this book--and other Bahá'í books--to my father and mother to read, even before I had read all of them as carefully and critically as I should have. I can relatively easily accept being subjected to propaganda myself; but that members of my family should also be subjected to it seriously angers me.)

But another, more striking, example of the way in which Bahá'ís have followed the lead of their Exemplar in stretching the facts to fit the propaganda, is to be found in "The Power of the Covenant," part three, p. 49, where the NSA of Canada, apparently trying to paint a picture of history more distinct and favorable to the Bahá'í view of progressive revelation than the facts warrant, says the following remarkable things:

"So today, through the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, yet another *entirely new element* has entered man's religious experience, an element which non-Bahá'í society regards as being unconnected with matters spiritual. This new element is social order. Present-day society, in virtually any part of the world, does not accept that a Revelation from God can or should determine the way in which the social, economic, and administrative life of our world should be constructed. The Bahá'í community is called upon to pioneer this staggering truth" (emphasis mine).

Without exaggerating too much I can say that these assertions of a rather pep-rally quality make me wonder if I live in the same world that the NSA of Canada lives in. True to the Bahá'í style, there's that word "entirely" again!

As far as I know, there is in fact virtually no part of the world in which the idea that a Revelation from God should determine social order is *not* to be found. Fundamentalist movements, both Christian and Islamic, are to be found in every part of the world, and many factions of them are in fact very vocal in their desire to see their State an Islamic one, or to see America "Christian again." And how could a Bahá'í NSA overlook Iran? It borders on the ludicrous. And as for "entirely new element": what about the state religions of Athens and the other Greek city-states, each with their own god or goddess and rites attending them; or what about the theocracy of ancient Israel--indeed, how can one even separate religion from Hebrew society? What about the Puritans in the New World? The "divine right" of kings in the Middle Ages? What about the ancient Native American societies and the myriad other cultures in which no thought is even given to there being two distinct worlds, one secular, one religious? If anything, it would seem that not the *merging* of state and religion, but rather that the *separation* of the two is the truly new thing. It seems to me that the modern mind, accustomed to the search for compromise among contending ideologies, must instinctually find such inflated attempts to concentrate all truth in one ideological camp basically repellant.

In a somewhat similar vein, I often hear statements like "We are told in the Writings that the American nation and the American Bahá'ís have a spectacular and dazzling destiny" (quoted in excerpts from a talk by counselor Peter Khan). Now, I wonder if such assertions are based on a literal, once-for-all kind of reading of scripture such as are found in the Bahá'í prayer book: "This American nation is worthy of Thy favors and is deserving of Thy mercy." That may indeed be true, but elsewhere I have read 'Abdu'l-Bahá speak of the USA as a nation at peace with all nations, and as a friend to all (I cannot find the exact quote). That, of course, has almost never been true, and is certainly not true now. If Bahá'u'lláh has even threatened to raise up a new race of servants in the event that the Bahá'ís fail to fulfill their duties, might not the favors bestowed upon the USA likewise be subject to revision if the USA were to fall from the high pedestal upon which 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed it when he called it a "just government" and "revered nation"? As a man who loves America, I find such slogans un-American indeed: the survival of this "E Pluribus Unum" country depends on the commitment to look at our own shortcomings...and to transcend private ideologies.

Even 'Abdu'l-Bahá's attempt to distinguish, in some absolute way, man from the animals, is questionable--both in terms of motivation, and in terms of evidence. In terms of motivation: well, that would depend on one's world view; if one is a pantheist, for example, to deny essential identification with the animals ("We are many selves looking at each other through the same eye," as the Native American saying goes) is not only to deny one's own clay

feet, and turn one's back on "enlightenment," but it also opens the door to exploitation of other beings (yes, I know, 'Abdu'l-Bahá *says* to be kind to animals...). In terms of evidence: well, at one time scientists thought that only man used tools; now, even man's monopoly on language and self-consciousness is being sorely challenged by research on dolphins and gorillas. True, one cannot just ignore New York City, Sputnik, and flights to the Moon--but there really may be something more like a difference of *degree* than of kind between "us" and "them." Then again, there may not be. But again, why not "let us, together, consider, and follow truth--wherever it might lead"?

Sooner or later, those human attempts to explain reality, to understand life, which try to make it all fit into some neat and tidy conceptual package--be it stages of undeniably "progressive" revelation, or the indomitable onward and upward march of scientific socialism--must, it seems, be given up when Reality, like the shore of Walden, Thoreau's famous mystic pond, by the "rise and fall" of its waters, "asserts its title to a shore, and thus the shore is shorn, and the trees cannot hold it." Reality, like the pond, "licks its chaps from time to time" and keeps us, the trees, from entirely comprehending its often unpredictable depths.

To me it seems that when the Guardian passed on, leaving no appointed successor, Reality did in fact intervene in the neat and tidy package of the Bahá'í Plan. It is to this that I wish to turn now, though necessarily my letter has touched upon it already--when considering the validity of Bahá'í Faith, it is indeed difficult to avoid.

In a letter, the Universal House of Justice quotes Shoghi Effendi as saying,

"Leaders of religion, exponents of political theories, governors of human institutions...need have no doubt or anxiety regarding the nature, the origin, or validity of the institutions which the adherents of the Faith are building up throughout the world. For these lie embedded in the Teachings themselves, unadulterated and unobscured by unwarranted inferences of unauthorized interpretations of His Word" (comp. 50).

This *may* have been true at the time Shoghi Effendi wrote this, when there was a functioning Guardianship, and the system of checks and balances that was to distinguish the future system from all other "man-made" systems seemed likely one day to come into being; but now that there is no functioning Guardianship, I do not see how the Universal House of Justice can seriously believe the Guardian's words still hold true. The validity of the

present World Order is very far from clear, for the World Order "embedded in the Teachings" (and Shoghi Effendi "is an extension of...the Word itself" (comp. 59)) is clearly not the World Order of today.

Shoghi Effendi claims that the Administrative Order represents "the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fulness of time the whole of mankind" (Dispensation, 52). "The pillars that sustain its authority and buttress its structure," he says, "are the twin institutions of the Guardianship and of the Universal House of Justice" (ibid., 65). These pillars, he says, are "essential in their functions" and "inseparable" (ibid, 56). So essential are these two pillars, in fact, that, "Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh would be mutilated.... Its prestige would suffer, the means required to enable it to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking, and the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its elected representatives would be totally withdrawn"; and "Severed from the no less essential institution of the Universal House of Justice this same System...would be paralyzed in its action and would be powerless to fill in those gaps which the Author of the Kitab-i-Aqdas has deliberately left in the body of His legislative and administrative ordinances" (ibid, 56). "mutilated," "completely lacking," "necessary," "totally withdrawn": indeed, as Shoghi Effendi himself asserted, this is "clear and unambiguous language" (ibid, 56). The whole vision Shoghi Effendi gives us is one of organic growth based on two central, essential organs. Indeed, deprived of an "essential" organ, an organism, a "new-born child" (ibid. 52), must of necessity be "mutilated" and deprived of certain vital functions. Either an organ is essential, or it is not. When one of the two pillars "that sustain its authority and buttress its structure" is removed, in all honesty, can the people of the world still be expected to "have no doubt or anxiety" regarding the validity of the present World Order?

To take it from another angle, consider, for example, a World Order without the equally (but certainly no more?) essential pillar--the Universal House of Justice. Again, Shoghi Effendi's words are no less clear: the "System...would be *paralyzed* in its action and would be *powerless* to fill in those gaps...."

When the specially appointed, authoritative, infallible interpreter of the implications of scripture has already interpreted the meaning of the World Order without a Guardian, and in such clear language, I find it difficult to understand the Universal House of Justice's attempts to reassure the believers that the World Order is still, nevertheless, essentially intact. What do such attempts imply about the reliability of Shoghi Effendi's guidance?

As the Universal House of Justice admits, "Future Guardians are clearly envisaged and referred to in the Writings" (comp. 57). Indeed, not only that, but Shoghi Effendi makes the very distinction of the Bahá'í World Order

dependent upon the presence of such Guardians: "It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men...have contrived for the government of human institutions" (Dispensation, 60). I find Shoghi Effendi's claims to the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Order questionable enough with a living Guardian involved; without one, I see no substance to the claim at all. For example, he says, "The Administrative Order...must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character," in part because "by virtue of the actual authority vested" in him who "symbolizes the hereditary principle," the guardian "ceases...to be the figurehead...associated with...constitutional monarchies" (ibid., 61). And how can he make it any clearer than the following?

"The hereditary authority which the Guardian is called upon to exercise, the vital and essential functions which the Universal House of Justice discharges, the specific provisions requiring its democratic election...-- *these combine* to demonstrate the truth that this...Order, which can never be identified with any standard types of government..., embodies and blends with the spiritual verities on which it is based the beneficent elements which are to be found in each one of them" (ibid., 62, emphasis mine).

Today the World Order consists of nothing but a set of authoritative writings (scripture) and a democratically elected legislative, or administrative, body. How is this unique? It sounds rather like many religious institutions with which I am familiar. Now, it might be claimed that this particular Order--as it stands--is "divinely" ordained, whereas the others are not (though of course this assertion is full of internal inconsistencies and contradictions, as I hope I have been able to point out); but this is rather like begging the question of its validity, is it not? Without exaggeration, I can truly say that it seems to me the claims of the Universal House of Justice regarding its relationship to other religious bodies boils down to essentially the following: "We are no different from you [though the House never really admits even this]; but we are valid, and you are not, because we say our scriptures say so." But, then again, that's what the Catholics, the Mormons, and the Southern Baptists say too, isn't it? Strangely enough, with its administrative organizations, its scriptures, and its Pope--and the increasingly ecumenical, even universal, nature of its message--the Catholic Church of today seems more like Shoghi Effendi's World Order than the Bahá'í World Order itself. Of course, the Catholic Church does not yet accept Krishna as divine--but, in all honesty, is this really so different from the Bahá'í Faith's position? After all, it is the *Bahá'í* interpretation of Krishna, Buddha, and Christ, that the Bahá'í Faith accepts--not the Krishna of Hindu interpretation (or the Krishna of the Bhagavad-Gita as it is usually interpreted), nor the Buddha of most

Buddhist interpretation, nor the Christ of, say, the Southern Baptists. Rather, it seems the Bahá'í Faith, like all other contending missionary faiths, seeks essentially to convert, not to accept.

The Universal House of Justice says that there is "nowhere any promise or guarantee that the line of Guardians would endure forever; on the contrary there are clear indications that the line could be broken. Yet, in spite of this, there is a repeated insistence in the Writings on the indestructibility of the Covenant and the immutability of God's Purpose for this Day" (comp. 57). That there is "nowhere any promise...that the line of Guardians would endure forever" is a matter of interpretation. Many passages to me imply that it was in fact promised. But the only "clear indication that the line could be broken" with which I am familiar is that passage in the Aqdas regarding "endowments dedicated to charity" (comp. 57). This is indeed a "striking passage which envisages...such a break." But this passage could be interpreted to mean something quite different than what the UHJ appears to be suggesting indirectly (namely, that a House elected after the passing of the guardianship has been foreseen), could it not? "House of Justice...should it be established in the world *by then*" (emphasis mine)--could not this suggest a Universal House of Justice established in the time of a living guardian, or at least just before his passing? We can only speculate on the difference that might make. The constitution of the Universal House of Justice would have been written with the help of the guardian, for one thing. And, "Otherwise the endowments should be referred to the people of Bahá"--some provision even seems to be made here for a "Covenant" and "Purpose" that can survive in the absence of a House of Justice, does it not? Yes, these verses do indicate the possibility of a break in the line of the guardians, but it is less clear what they imply about a Universal House of Justice established after the ending of the hereditary guardianship.

But be that as it may, these verses are from the writings of *Bahá'u'lláh*. In SE's writings on the other hand, we find much less ambiguous passages about the future existence of Guardians, such as the following: continuing on the theme of the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Order, he says, "The admitted evils inherent in each of these systems being rigidly and permanently excluded, this unique Order, however long it may endure and however extensive its ramifications, cannot ever degenerate into any form of despotism, of oligarchy, or of demagoguery which must sooner or later corrupt the machinery of all man-made and essentially defective political institutions" (Dispensation, 62). Now, he clearly made the hereditary guardianship part of his argument for the inviolability of the system. So, either the Order has already ceased to "endure" (he didn't *exactly* say here that it would endure forever, just as he didn't *quite* say that the Order outlined in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá would actually come to an end if it were ever

divorced from the institution of the Guardianship--he just said that *that* Order would be "mutilated and deprived" of certain essential functions)--or, Shoghi Effendi was mistaken about there being future guardians, and Bahá'u'lláh, with a broader vision of the thing, was right about that; *or*, there is the possibility of some other World Order besides that defined by the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Or....?

– Something, it seems to me, has to give, somewhere.

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi explains that "what is meant by 'this is the day which will not be followed by the night'" is that "In this Dispensation, divine guidance flows on to us in this world after the Prophet's ascension, through first the Master, and then the Guardians" (Lights of Guidance, #626). Now, either the night has fallen after all, or, again, Shoghi Effendi was mistaken in his understanding that there would be future Guardians. But if Shoghi Effendi was so mistaken about something so fundamental to the future of the Faith as the guardianship, in all honesty, how reliable is his guidance?

True, in the writings there is "repeated insistence...on the indestructibility of the Covenant and the immutability of God's Purpose for this Day"; but I'm not sure I see the connection of these assurances to the World Order as delineated by Shoghi Effendi. "Covenant" and "Purpose for this Day" are certainly broad terms. After all, there is always God's "Major Plan" to consider, proceeding "in ways directed by Him alone" (*ibid.* #856). True, Shoghi Effendi has said, "To what else if not to the power and majesty which this Administrative Order...is destined to manifest, can these utterances of Bahá'u'lláh allude: 'The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order'" (*Dispensation*, 54). But Shoghi Effendi has clearly defined what he means by "this Administrative Order": a dynamic interaction between two living pillars. If I draw up a blueprint specifying two pillars for a building, is a building made of only one pillar the same building I designed? But perhaps Bahá'u'lláh does in fact mean something more than the Bahá'í Administrative Order when he speaks of "new World Order" and "wondrous System."-- Perhaps the Covenant is much broader than Bahá'ís living before the passing of Shoghi Effendi could have thought. I don't know. But, like I said, it seems to me that *something* has to give.

In spite of all this, the Universal House of Justice still seems to feel that it has dealt with the issue of Shoghi Effendi's passing with sufficient care to reassure the Bahá'ís of the world, perhaps even the peoples of the world, that the Ark is riding secure. This being the case, I feel obliged to examine the Universal House of Justice's treatment of the issue in more detail, however tedious--and, I would have thought, unnecessary--this must be.

In The Bahá'í World 1963-1968, under the section "The Authority, Powers and Functions of the Universal House of Justice," we read:

"One of the ways in which the friends will come to a fuller understanding of the authority, powers and functions of the Universal House of Justice will be through elucidations and statements made from time to time by that supreme body itself."

Now, Shoghi Effendi explained that, in the absence of the Guardianship, "the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its [the Universal House of Justice's] elected representatives would be totally withdrawn" (Dispensation, 56). The Universal House of Justice itself says, "the Interpreter of the Book must also have the authority to define the sphere of the legislative action of the elected representatives" (comp. 59). But certainly, then, definition of the "authority, powers and functions of the Universal House of Justice" is outside the "clearly defined sphere" (comp. 21) of the Universal House of Justice's jurisdiction, is it not?

The Universal House of Justice reassures the Bahá'ís that the possibility that the House "might stray beyond the limits of its proper authority...would conflict with all the other texts referring to its infallibility, and specifically with the Guardian's own clear assertion that the Universal House of Justice never can or will infringe on the sacred and prescribed domain of the Guardianship" (comp. 60). For Bahá'ís, appeal to "infallibility" may hold some weight; for "Leaders of religion, exponents of political theories," and "governors of human institutions," I doubt it would. But, in the face of all the other "texts" defining the Universal House of Justice in terms of an overall system involving a dynamic interplay between it and its head, the Guardian, how can the Universal House of Justice expect the few words "Neither can, nor will ever" (Dispensation, 58) to carry much weight at all? This is to fly in the face of the whole thrust of SE's explanation of the World Order. And in view of the fact that the overall rhetorical style to be found in the Writings is so inflated--with all the "always" and "nevers" and "Most Greats"--I would say these few words have even less value.

The Universal House of Justice says that it "is well aware of the absence of the Guardian and will approach all matters of legislation only when certain of its sphere of jurisdiction, a sphere which the Guardian has confidently described as 'clearly defined'" (comp. 47).

However, the Universal House of Justice also states that the Guardian "had the authority to state whether a matter was or was not already covered by

the Sacred Texts and therefore whether it was within the authority of the Universal House of Justice to legislate upon it" (comp. 47). But the Guardian not only "had" the authority; he was also *intended to have* such authority in the future, in his "necessary" interaction with the Universal House of Justice. Are we to seriously believe that there is no issue that may arise in the future that the Guardian has not already covered? 1000 years is a long time, after all. And what of all the Tablets as yet untranslated and uncollected ("We must remember that not only are all the teachings not yet translated into English, but they are not even all collected yet. Many important Tablets may still come to light which are at present owned privately," Unfolding Destiny, p. 445)? With these, won't the need for authoritative interpretation be as crucial as ever?

Is the Universal House of Justice referring above to the phrase "clearly defined" to be found in the Compilation on page 39? Indeed, its sphere of jurisdiction is in fact "clearly defined": over and over again, the powers of the Universal House of Justice are defined as confined to those of legislating on those "gaps" left in the laws and ordinances having to do with "civic affairs" and "material laws" and the like. Even in those few places where the Universal House of Justice is apparently given broader powers to "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book" (comp. 14), such powers are, I think, always to be found in the immediate context, again, of "civic affairs" and the like. For example, immediately following the words just quoted (from comp. p.14), we find "And inasmuch as this House...hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same....This it can do because that law formeth no part of the Divine Explicit Text" (14). "Laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions"--there isn't even any comma between "not expressly recorded in the Book," and, "and bear upon daily transactions."

—Even where the writings apparently give the Universal House of Justice certain leadership powers, it must not be forgotten that such writings assumed a living Guardian as head and functioning member of that House: "By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved and the guardian of the Cause of God is its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body. Should he not attend in person its deliberations, he must appoint one to represent him" (comp. 13). Again, note, there is no comma between "difficult problems are to be resolved," and, "and the guardian...is its sacred head and distinguished member." To the same effect, elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that it is incumbent upon the Guardian to "appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing" (Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 12) (perhaps it is passages such as this one that Shoghi Effendi was interpreting when he

explained that, in the absence of the Guardianship, "the integrity of the Faith would be imperilled, and the stability of the entire fabric would be gravely endangered" (Disp. 56)). And likewise, "should the first-born of the guardian...not inherit of the spiritual...then must he, (the guardian...) choose another branch to succeed him" (Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 12).

The point I am trying to make is simply that the version of the World Order about which even non-Bs are to "have no doubt or anxiety" (Comp. 50) clearly, and in no uncertain terms, included a living Guardian. Perhaps Shoghi Effendi really could not have appointed anyone as his successor; but even if "another branch" could be interpreted in no other way except "blood relative," why--unless they were already committed to the inerrancy of the Writings and of the Universal House of Justice--why should non-Bs be expected to "have no doubt or anxiety" about the validity of the World Order as it exists today, deprived as it is of the guardianship?

All that about "commas" may seem too much. But it is certainly no more pedantic than the Universal House of Justice has to get in its attempt to salvage the validity of the Order they represent. Furthermore, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, it is written that "This written paper hath for a long time been preserved under ground, damp having affected it. When brought forth to the light it was observed that certain parts of it were injured by the damp, and the Holy Land being sorely agitated it was left untouched" (15). What does this mean? Even if the assurances "embedded in the writings" were originally clear, it appears that the writings themselves might not be as legible as one would hope. I have heard that, in Arabic and Persian, a small dot here and there can make a big difference in meaning; in English, too, a comma can drastically change the implications of a sentence. Might not a few dots or commas have been lost, due to "dampness"? How much less are we to be assured of the inerrancy of texts when they have even suffered from physical damage? Doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy must breed pedants, it would seem--be they for the doctrines, or against them!

— But to continue [Shoghi Effendi urges us to "critically examine" (Dispensation, 54) the thing, after all]...

Just as it does with "clearly defined" and "can and will never," the Universal House of Justice generally quotes only those portions of passages like those just cited above (comp. 13, 14) which appear to give the Universal House of Justice nearly unlimited power in deliberating upon, say, "questions that are obscure," while it ignores the overwhelming thrust of the surrounding context, sometimes even the rest of the sentence.

In his Will, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states "Unto this body [the Universal House of Justice] all things must be referred." This can seem to mean one thing, when taken out of context. But of course, in context, this does not mean matters of interpretation--as the Will as a whole makes clear. And indeed, as usual, this statement is followed immediately by "It enacteth all ordinances and

regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text." "ordinances and regulations," yes--but surely not definition of the sphere of its own legislative action? And in his Will, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also states, "He [the Guardian] is the expounder of the words of God and after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendents." "will succeed"--again, out of context, and in conjunction with those passages that imply some divine protection of the Guardian, this word "will" could suggest assurance of the continuation of the line of Guardians. True, "neither can, nor will ever" is stronger than simply "will succeed," but really, isn't it rather too fine a point to base so much "reassurance" on?

'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, "Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice" (comp. 47). Are we to believe that the meaning of the government of the Bahá'í world without the Guardian is not a matter of major importance?

Nevertheless, the Universal House of Justice implies that Shoghi Effendi has already somehow performed his definitive function: "The writings of the Guardian and the advice given by him over the thirty-six years of his Guardianship show the way in which he exercised this function in relation to the Universal House of Justice" (comp. 59). And yet, even the constitution of the Universal House of Justice was not written before SE's passing. How can the House take it upon itself to write, independently of the Guardian's active advice, its own constitution? If this is not defining its own sphere of legislative action, I do not know what possibly could be. And what, after all, could Shoghi Effendi have meant, then, when he said, without the Guardianship, the means for the Order "to take a long, uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking" (Disp, 56)? The membership of the Universal House of Justice changes frequently; only the normal span of a man's life encompasses more than one generation. Obviously, Shoghi Effendi was referring to the vital role the guardianship would play in the *future*.

The Universal House of Justice has said that "we stand too close to the beginnings of the System ordained by Bahá'u'lláh to be able fully to understand its potentialities or the interrelationships of its component parts" (comp. 60). It seems to me that the House too frequently uses this appeal to the alleged "mystery" of it all in order to side-step the real issues. (Though, indeed, it *is* difficult to understand the relationship between one pillar and no pillar.)

The Universal House of Justice is echoing Shoghi Effendi: "We stand indeed too close to so monumental a document to claim for ourselves a complete understanding of all its implications" (comp. 21). Of course Shoghi Effendi said we could not claim *complete* understanding: who could, before the second pillar of the Order had even been established? He said, rather,

that it would be the job of future generations (and, one would presume, future guardians) to "define with accuracy and *minuteness*...and to analyze *exhaustively*..." (Dispensation, 55, emphasis mine) the nature of the World Order. But he also said, in his introduction to his interpretation of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "My present intention is to elaborate certain salient features of this scheme which, however close we may stand to its colossal structure, are already so clearly defined that we find it inexcusable to either misconceive or ignore" (Dispensation, 55).

He made "certain salient features" very clear indeed; but now the Universal House of Justice must find ways to get around this. Why has the World Order suddenly become so mysterious?

In the preamble of the constitution of the Universal House of Justice, the House states,

"The Universal House of Justice is the supreme institution of an Administrative Order whose salient features, whose authority and whose principles of operation are clearly enunciated in the Sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith and their authorized interpretations. This Administrative Order consists, on the one hand, of a series of elected councils, universal, secondary and local, in which are vested legislative, executive and judicial powers over the Bahá'í community and, on the other, of eminent and devoted believers appointed for the specific purposes of protecting and propagating the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh under the guidance of the Head of that Faith" (elsewhere in the Declaration: "There being no successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God, the Universal House of Justice is the Head of the Faith"....Is this a legislative body without its own head asserting its right to be head of the Faith itself? Or, in the writings, has the House been given the right to assume Headship?)

These certainly are not the "salient features" mentioned by Shoghi Effendi whose writings represent some of those "authorized interpretations" of which the House speaks.

Speaking of the Covenant, the House asserts in the "Declaration of Trust" that "It continues to fulfil its life-giving purpose through the agency of the Universal House of Justice whose fundamental object, as one of the twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is to ensure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of the Faith, *to safeguard the unity of its followers, and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings,*" (emphasis mine). The last few words are taken from Shoghi Effendi's Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh (56), the surrounding context of which, as usual, is speaking of an integrated functioning of the two--not of the division of power in an Order "Divorced from the...Guardianship" or "Severed from the no less essential...Universal House of

Justice" (56). The "integrity" and "flexibility" of the teachings obviously were to arise out of the "*complementary*" (56) functioning of the twin pillars.

In the "Declaration of Trust" of the constitution, the House asserts the following:

"Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested are:

To...defend...the Cause of God...To advance the interests of the Faith of God...To promulgate and apply the laws...to administer the affairs...to...coordinate...its activities;...to provide for the enforcement of its decisions;...to found institutions;...to be responsible for ensuring that no...institution within the Cause abuse its privileges...."

(The text is indented in a way similar to the way a quote from Shoghi Effendi is indented on the following page. Is the text quoted from somewhere, and are the quotation marks left out? Or is this a summary written by the House itself?)

Shoghi Effendi has written, on the other hand: "*Acting in conjunction with each other* these two *inseparable* institutions administer its affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions" (56, emphasis mine). He even contrasts this with the powers that each does in fact hold separately: "Severally, each operates within a clearly defined sphere of jurisdiction....Each exercises, within the limitations imposed upon it, its powers, its authority, its rights and prerogatives" (56). If he wanted to make it any clearer, I'm not sure that he could. If the Universal House of Justice wanted to obscure his writings any more, I'm not sure that they could.

It certainly seems to me that the waters of Walden have--as they are so wont to do--once again shorn the shore. It's never easy for trees who would have inerrant roots.

The NSA of Canada claims that the Universal House of Justice has "been given unique powers in the field of deduction" (The Power of the Covenant, part. 1, page 26). But I am forced to wonder.

The Universal House of Justice says, for example:

"As you point out with many quotations, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly stressed the inseparability of these two institutions. Whereas he obviously envisaged their functioning together, it cannot logically be deduced from this that one is unable to function in the absence of the other. During the whole thirty-six

years of his Guardianship Shoghi Effendi functioned without the Universal House of Justice. Now the Universal House of Justice must function without the Guardian, but the principle of inseparability remains. The Guardianship does not lose its significance nor position in the Order of Bahá'u'lláh merely because there is no living Guardian" (comp. 49).

Certainly this is rather odd reasoning? The institution of the guardianship necessarily existed before the Universal House of Justice; whereas the Universal House of Justice--as defined by Shoghi Effendi--necessarily did not exist before Shoghi Effendi. The Universal House of Justice is defined in part in terms of the Guardian. If a playwright writes a play, and puts himself and his descendants into it as a central character, can the play go on without him, without them? Or must it become a different play? (Besides, how could any of the *NSA*'s needed to establish the House of Justice have been established if there were no Guardian around to spread the Faith first?) And, "The Guardianship does not lose its significance nor position in the Order of Bahá'u'lláh merely because there is no living Guardian." It doesn't? What then is its significance and position? But if the Universal House of Justice tells us, is that not interpreting the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in much the same way as Shoghi Effendi has done? Can the Universal House of Justice define the World Order by which it itself is defined? And "merely"--doesn't this fly in the face of all that Shoghi Effendi said about "Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship...." etc.? And in what sense is the present Order not now "separated" from the hereditary guardianship? The "principle of inseparability," as the Universal House of Justice refers to SE's more emphatic characterizations of "inseparable" (no "principle" here) and "essential," was defined in terms of an ongoing, dynamic interaction between a living Guardian and a Universal House of Justice, of which he was to be member and head. A body without a head is what we must apparently conclude the Universal House of Justice consists of today. Is this really the **same** House to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have asked the whole world to submit?

The Universal House of Justice says, "In attempting to understand the Writings...one must first realize that there is and can be no real contradiction in them, and in the light of this we can confidently seek the unity of meaning which they contain." But surely the "unity of meaning," the overall gist, even the metaphorical integrity, of Shoghi Effendi's writings must be abandoned if we must so closely scrutinize every word and split every hair in order to come up with some interpretation that salvages the idea of scriptural inerrancy, must it not?

The Universal House of Justice says, "There is a profound difference between the interpretation of the Guardian and the elucidations of the House of Justice." Indeed, the distinction had better be clear, for it represents the

difference between the theoretically "clearly defined" spheres of the Universal House of Justice and the Guardian, upon the alleged certainty of which the Universal House of Justice bases a lot of its arguments. But if there is anything that must be difficult to "clearly define," it must be the difference between "interpretation" and "elucidation." And, after all, how can the Universal House of Justice assure the unity of the faith--when, for example, even passages such as that quoted above relating to the "endowments dedicated to charity" (comp. 57) may be interpreted in such a way as to imply that the Universal House of Justice may not be essential to the "Covenant," and when the body of Bahá'í literature taken as a whole casts great doubt upon the validity of the present Order--without assuming some kind of authoritative interpretive role? I do not think it can. Nor do I think it has refrained from taking this role upon itself.

Now, to get pedantic, but, again, it seems I must, the dictionary (Webster's I think) defines "interpret" as follows: "1. to explain or tell the meaning of; translate into intelligible or familiar language or terms; expound, elucidate, translate." But the Universal House of Justice says, "when considering the references to the Guardianship in the writings of the Faith, and especially when *striving to understand how these references apply* at the present time, you should realize that the word 'guardianship' is used with various *meanings* in different contexts" (Lights of Guidance, #629, emphasis mine). They go on to explain that "In certain cases it indicates the office and function of the Guardian himself, in others it refers to the line of Guardians, in still others it bears a more extended meaning embracing the Guardian and his attendant institutions." Clearly the "line of Guardians" ended with the first one, though, as is typical, the Universal House of Justice words it in a way that might give the uninitiated reader the feeling that the guardianship was still going on as planned (when I first started reading Bahá'í literature--even recently written literature--I myself assumed this). As for the "more extended meaning," the Universal House of Justice explains, "it would be quite incorrect to state, at the present time when there is no Guardian, that the Hands of the Cause are members of the Institution of Guardianship. Nor would it be correct to so designate the International Teaching Center, the Counsellors, the members of the Auxiliary Boards and their assistants." If there is any other body that could be so designated, they do not say; again, there is almost the feeling that there could be, that there has been no irreparable loss here. And, "In the specific sense of referring to the office and function of the Guardian himself, the House of Justice finds that the prerogatives and duties vested in him are of three kinds." These are, first, those "which the Guardianship shares with the Universal House of Justice and which the House of Justice must continue to pursue." Fair enough. "Secondly, there are" those "which, in the absence of the guardian devolve upon the Universal House of Justice." Perhaps fair enough, though

considering the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his Will and Testament gave to the Guardian--not to the Universal House of Justice (for obvious reasons, one would think)--the right to expel members of the House, it seems difficult to understand how the Universal House of Justice can now take over this duty, as it has done. "Thirdly, there are those...which lie exclusively within the sphere of the Guardian himself and, therefore, in the absence of a Guardian, are inoperative except insofar as the monumental work already performed by Shoghi Effendi continues to be of enduring benefit to the Faith. Such a function is that of authoritative interpretation of the Teachings." Indeed.

It is possible to become too pedantic, of course, but, after all, it is not I who wish to maintain the inerrancy of scripture and yet live in the real world too. The World Order as laid out by Shoghi Effendi I could at least understand and have some faith in. But, with the checks and balances gone, with the dynamic interaction of its component parts missing, I just cannot feel comfortable pledging my allegiance to the Order such as it is today.

The Universal House of Justice asserts that its own infallibility is not made dependent upon the presence of the Guardian (comp. 46). But the House itself admits that "It is, after all, the final act of judgment delivered by the Universal House of Justice that is vouchsafed infallibility, not any views expressed in the process of enactment" (comp. 56). Yes, and as the House also says, "It is...as a member of that body that the Guardian takes part in the process of legislation" (comp. 55-6). Precisely--the *process*. Final products are guaranteed by the process used to produce them. Final judgements are no different. The Guardian was to be involved in the legislative process of the Universal House of Justice: infallibility was only *clearly* "vouchsafed" final judgements arrived at through *interaction with* the Guardian. The assurance of infallibility as things stand now is little more than speculation.

The Universal House of Justice says it is "inconceivable that the other members would ignore any objection he [the Guardian] raised in the course of consultation or pass legislation contrary to what he expressed as being in *harm*ony with the spirit of the Cause" (56). Again, the same Bahá'í rhetorical style--"inconceivable"...really? But if Remey, hand-picked I believe by Shoghi Effendi himself, could turn into such a Covenant-breaker, why not a member of the Universal House of Justice elected by the people at large? And why have the power to expell at all if the need to wield it could never even possibly arise? With only nine members in the House now, even just one person's vote can determine a majority. With a Guardian, that is, with ten members in the House, at least there would have to have been *two* members to determine the majority in a close vote: not much of a guarantee, but still, it is more than the Universal House of Justice can offer the world today.

True, Shoghi Effendi says of the World Order, "We must trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and

fuller understanding of its provisions and implications" (comp. 16). But, again, the Universal House of Justice of which Shoghi Effendi speaks is the one defined by him and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the one that was to be in constant consultation with either him, his successor, or his appointed substitute. And "guidance" need not mean "elucidation"; it may mean simply administrative guidance, through which "implications" might indeed become apparent. But if it does mean some kind of authoritative "elucidation," then, again, where the clear distinction between the "spheres"?

True, it is said that "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...and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone" (comp. 48).

But, in the Writings themselves, is a Bahá'í really ever asked to accept the invariable truth value of some set of written words and the innate goodness of the people elected to the House, or even to accept the infallibility of the elected body as a whole, or is he rather asked to accept the *overall* system outlined in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and elaborated upon by Shoghi Effendi, which in fact would have provided a lot more checks and balances, and consequently a lot more assurances of its reliability?

Does the Universal House of Justice make questioning its own authority into virtual heresy by claiming that to question the authority of the House is, indirectly but no less assuredly, to question the authority of Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and even Bahá'u'lláh himself? Given enough time and unlimited freedom to edit and justify, any set of writings can be made to appear internally consistent--or, true, the opposite as well. To hold firmly to the idea that there is always a unity of meaning and never any "real contradiction" may be necessary as an approach to life in general, if one wishes to seek with openness of mind and heart the meaning of a creation so fundamentally built up of contrasts and polarities. But I am not so sure that such an approach is always wise when it comes to evaluating the writings of men. Of course, Bahá'ís do not believe all of their sacred Writings to have been written by ordinary men; but must the inerrancy of the Writings nevertheless be defended at all costs?

Or might we perhaps not heed a little more carefully the rise and fall of Walden Pond....

"It is precisely in this connection that the believers must recognize the importance of intellectual honesty and humility. In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid" (from the Universal House of Justice, comp. p. 50)

I couldn't agree more.

It may fairly be asked, "what else could the Universal House of Justice have done?" I could speculate, but will not. I have made my decision (by no means irrevocable, as I hope nearly all my decisions to be, pending future life experiences): I have turned in my card. The "Book itself" may be "the unerring Balance established amongst men" (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p.128), but, in practice I must follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá's advice: "weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!" I have done so, to the best of my ability; and though, as I have said, my decision is not irrevocable, I must decide to reject the Bahá'í Faith, as it has been presented to me by the present Bahá'í World Order.

As I mentioned above, that the fundamental doctrine of the Bahá'í Faith is belief in a God and a Prophet who are in essence unknowable seems to me one of the truest and potentially most liberating aspects of the Faith; liberating, because perhaps it provides a key to attain to the essence of wisdom as summed up by the ancient Greeks: "Know thyself". Bahá'u'lláh puts a remarkable amount of emphasis on the need to affirm the unknowability of God in order that people "may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves" (Gleanings, 5). When I look into the eyes of someone I love, I see, in the heart of those "windows of the soul," not the familiar color of the iris or the distinctive fold of the eyelid, but a blackness upon blackness, an endless night, dilated, opened even wider, by love: it is both familiar and strange, known and unknown, beautiful and awesome. I can even see my own face reflected there. And when I look at my face in the mirror of those eyes, I find that same beautiful, awesome night--both known and unknowable--looking back out at me from the center of my own eyes, my own soul. Indeed, it seems we *maybe*--strangely, familiarly enough--many selves, with one eye, after all.

In the face of the Unknown, because of the Unknown--within and without--I find compassion flowing. Uncertainty--honestly shared--is a kind of faith; and perhaps it is a missionary one, too, like all the others. I do not know. But it is, at present, the only oasis I can find in a world that so often seems a wasteland full of conflicting ideologies all fighting for the right to claim the allegiance of my soul.

When asked "What is truth?" Jesus merely stood his ground and continued breathing, thinking, feeling, being. Beyond doctrine, beyond definitions, beyond easy answers and conceptual certainties, he offered no other answer than his own person.

I can believe that Truth is a person. But how to know if, or for whom, I should capitalize the "P"--this still remains for me my question.

Thank you for taking the time,
sincerely,

Arthur Peña

