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The Universal House of Justice
Bahá'í World Center
Haifa, Israel

To the members of the Universal House of Justice:

I want to know the truth.

This is not always easy, of course. There is so much that can get in the way--a bad night's sleep, passion, misinformation, lies, ignorance, etc. And, when the truth I want to know happens to be the truth about God, then there enter the elements of revelation, human limitation, faith, grace, prayer, humility, sincerity (do I *really* want to know the truth?--I sometimes wonder), testing, stages of understanding, *kinds* of understanding, mere *time*, and much, much more.

Why don't I give up?

Well, sometimes I have moments of vision that keep me going. I also believe that the search for truth is inevitable--it is something I think all people must and do undertake...even if they do not realize that that is what they are in fact doing, even if they do it in the name of "the truth is that there is no truth". And so I think that the search for truth is simply part of life--a law of being human from which I cannot escape. I also believe that this sometimes bewildering search for truth somehow serves the often inscrutable purposes of Love and Love's judgement--in other words, I (usually) trust the unseen, motivating Power behind all the world's tragedy, drama, comedy. And I can be stubborn. That's also one reason I don't give up.

And so I want to know truth--to whatever degree and in whatever form I am capable of knowing it, and to whatever degree and in whatever form God is willing to show it to me.

Why am I once again writing to you, the members of the Universal House of Justice? I am no longer a Bahá'í, as you know from my last letter dated August 1988. And yet the influence of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on my life continues. I find myself in a bit of a quandry: I don't see how I can accept the Bahá'í World Order as it is presented to me by the Universal House of

Justice--that is, by you and your predecessors--and yet my whole world outlook owes so much to the Bahá'í Faith. This is, of course, not necessarily a problem, for there are other people, and institutions, and traditions, which claim to be infallible, and to which my world outlook owes much, but whose claims of infallibility or inerrancy I have rejected. I could therefore leave it at that--i.e. take from the Bahá'í Faith what I find to be of value, and leave the rest.

Why don't I do that? Well, in part it is because of fear. What if I am wrong? Do the warnings found in the Writings then apply to me? Am I doomed to be of "the outcast and rejected", "the defeated" ("The Establishment of the Universal House of Justice", a compilation, hereafter "Comp", p.10, 12)? You, it appears, would have me think so, since you include these words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the compilation you, or your predecessors, have produced to explain your claims to represent the Bahá'í Faith as its infallible Head. And so I wonder. And sometimes I *feel* outcast, rejected, and defeated, it is true.

One of the reasons I haven't quite made my peace with the Bahá'í Faith, then, is fear. But what if I am right? Then I want to exorcise this fear from my life and to do what I can to prevent it from entering other people's lives. And so that is another reason why I want to confront the Bahá'í leaders. I feel they need to explain their position much more clearly than they have--and if they cannot, then I want them to stop spreading their belief system, or at least the part which instills fear and which plays on people's awe of and apparent need for authority. Contrary to the more or less liberal image many Bahá'ís (sincerely, I think) have of themselves and which they usually like to project, they know how to wield the stick of authority and the threat of ostracism quite well--too well, in my opinion.

Another thing is simply uncertainty. That is, I sometimes find it hard to believe that Bahá'u'lláh might *not* be "the son of man come in the glory of the Father". After all, I was at one time convinced that he was indeed the Promised One; and I still often *feel* that this is so. And so I still wonder.

And I still wonder what relation there is between Bahá'u'lláh and all that came after him in his name. The things in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that might seem necessarily false to me are rather few and far between; and, if I do not weld his teachings to a doctrine of literal inerrancy, and if I take seriously the idea that Bahá'u'lláh's knowledge might be on a totally different level than my own, I do not usually find serious problems there. With 'Abdu'l-Bahá it is a different story. I have explained that in my previous letter. With Shoghi Effendi, the tension between reality and the doctrine of his infallibility becomes, for me, simply impossible to resolve--and his infallibility I find impossible to find *meaningful*. And as far as the Universal House of Justice is concerned, I can find no real validity at all in its attempts

"to preserve the truth of the Guardian's statement that '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" (Comp 50).

That is, the claim that the Faith as interpreted and explained by Shoghi Effendi is still somehow essentially intact, and that the nature of the present Universal House of Justice and the structure of the present Bahá'í World Order is still somehow to be found

"embedded in the Teachings themselves, unadulterated and unobscured by unwarranted inferences or unauthorized interpretations of His Word" (Comp 50)--

this claim I have found impossible to really understand. As far as I know, it is simply untrue.

In other words, putting this all together, "the nature, the origin, (and) validity of the institutions which the adherents of the Faith are building up throughout the world" *today*--since the death of Shoghi Effendi--do not, in my opinion, "lie embedded in the Teachings themselves, unadulterated and unobscured by unwarranted inferences or unauthorized interpretations of His Word" in such a way as to ensure that "leaders of religion, exponents of political theories, governors of human institutions...need have no doubt or anxiety" about them.

Of course, to anyone *precommitted* to the House's interpretation of "the indestructibility of the Covenant and the immutability of God's Purpose for this Day" (Comp 57), or to "the principle that the teachings do not contradict themselves" (Comp 56), or to Shoghi Effendi's "infallible guidance" (Comp 45), or to the infallibility of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or the Universal House of Justice itself, or to anyone who feels obliged to "cling tenaciously to the revealed Word" (Comp 50)--i.e. to a committed *Bahá'í*--it *may* seem possible to see how the present Bahá'í World Order is the same one to be found in the teachings, plain for all to see. Perhaps.

But what I still find very difficult to understand is how the Universal House of Justice can really believe that this would be true for "leaders of religion, exponents of political theories, governors of human institutions", or for those "bewildered followers of bankrupt and broken creeds" who--Shoghi Effendi says, or rather *said*--"might well approach and *critically examine*" (emphasis mine) the "structure" in question (Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, hereafter Disp. p. 54). How can the Universal House of Justice believe this?

Can they believe this because the Bahá'í Faith makes converts from among these people? But I would ask, how many of these converts have

examined the issues raised in my letter, for example? (I became a Bahá'í after a rather in-depth investigation, and yet was basically unaware of the issues when I signed the card.) How many have read different points of view on these issues? How many even want to look at these issues? How many of these converted leaders of religion, exponents of political theories, governors of human institutions or followers of bankrupt creeds really fulfill Shoghi Effendi's command that "either we should accept the Cause without any qualification whatever, or cease calling ourselves Bahá'ís"?

No. I do not understand how the Universal House of Justice can believe that the world need have no doubt or anxiety about the institutions the Faith is building up *today*. Actually, perhaps I do. If one wants to believe something, then one finds ways to do so. And, after all, perhaps the members of the House feel they really have no choice but to believe that they are in fact members of *The* Universal House of Justice--the one referred to in the Writings.

That Bahá'ís might believe that their System is intact does not--or at least should not--surprise me. The experience of grace does not seem to be limited to any one belief system. In fact, it seems that almost *any* belief system can provide its adherents with the experience of grace. Does it seem this way to you? I think it is quite natural for the adherents to then associate that grace experience with the belief system which in some way helped them have it. I imagine this is even more true for those who have adopted their new belief system (or who have become re-born within the belief system of their fathers) after a period of struggle--either a struggle to believe it, or a struggle against belief. Powerful, life-changing conviction can arise from such an experience. And I think it is also quite natural for such a person to want to share the experience with others; and, since he supposes that it was the belief system itself that gave it to him, or at least that he somehow received grace *through* that belief system, or that the belief system was somehow essential to that experience, it is, I think, quite natural for him to then try to convince others of the "truth" of his new faith.

~~In~~ John E. Kolstoe's book called Consultation, I think a very important point is made in chapter nine, "The search for truth". He speaks of the "illusion of knowing", and says (truly, I think) that "the sensation of knowing is genuine and can be just as exhilarating whether the understanding is true, partial or one of the counterfeits" (p. 117); elsewhere he says similarly that "the 'feeling' of understanding may or may not be indicative of any real understanding" (p. 114).

It is not surprising to me, therefore, that the world is full of different people believing many different things--some of which absolutely contradict each other--and yet *feeling* quite sure about what they believe. This 'feeling' slips in quite easily. It may, in fact, be good for us, as a general sense of confidence, as opposed to a general sense of doubt, or cynicism. But

if it is taken as some kind of *support* for one's *belief system* when other factors start to build up which indicate that some error is being made on the conceptual level--or when confronted with someone who disagrees with you--this, I think, is a mistake. It confuses the *feeling* of understanding with true understanding, and fails to honor the fact that the neighbor who disagrees with us might very well have the same *feeling*.

I, then, *feel* quite sure that the passing of Shoghi Effendi and the ending of the-line of Guardians (indeed, the ending of the line before it even really began) means that something has really gone quite *wrong* in the Bahá'í Faith, as it is represented by the Universal House of Justice today; that it is *not* just a matter of standing "too close to the beginnings of the System ordained by Bahá'u'lláh to be able fully to understand" (Comp 60) the problems of the absence of the Guardianship; that it is *not* true that "once one grasps certain basic principles of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh such uncertainties ['questions perplexing some of the believers'] are easily dispelled" (Comp 34); that we are *not* dealing here with "mysteries" (Comp 34), but rather that we are dealing with issues of quite "clear and unambiguous language" (Disp 56) that deal with "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" (Disp 55).

It is, I *feel* quite sure, on the level of "fundamental verities" (Disp55) and things *truly* "clearly defined" (Comp 21) that the problems exist--and *not* on the level of "questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book" (Comp 14) and so given to the Universal House of Justice to legislate upon; and *not* on the level of simply being unable to "define with accuracy and *minuteness* the features, and to analyze *exhaustively* the nature of the relationships which, on the one hand, bind together these two fundamental organs of the Will of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and connect, on the other, each of them to the Author of the Faith and the Center of His Covenant" (Disp 55, emphasis mine); and *not* on the level of standing "too close to so monumental a document to claim for ourselves a *complete* understanding of *all* its implications" (Comp. 39, emphasis mine). No. The problems for the Bahá'í Faith implied by the passing of the Guardian are basic, major, structural, clear, unambiguous, straightforward, etc. etc. The problems deal with big, clear things--not intricacies, or things we can relegate to "mystery" or "limited understanding".

This is how I *feel*. Usually. And some of my *reasons* for feeling that way I have outlined in my previous letter, some of which I have printed out again and have enclosed, along with a response to the letters which the House has written to believers in its attempt to address some of the same issues that I have raised. Enclosed you will also find copies of what I believe to be the complete correspondence between me and the person you assigned

to talk to me about the issues I raised in my 1988 letter (it's been a few years, so I'm not sure that those were the only letters sent, though I think they are; I'm fairly certain, however, that all of the letters enclosed were in fact sent and received). I found that exchange quite unsatisfactory--as the letters themselves make apparent. So I am writing to you again.

Obviously, you see things quite differently. And I assume you *feel* quite sure of your perceptions too. Shall we, then, engage in consultation? Obviously, it can't quite be *Bahá'í* consultation, as I am not a Bahá'í. But the focus on consultation which the Bahá'í Faith provides, and the insights the Bahá'í Faith offers on the value and the mechanics of the process, is one of the things I cherish most about the Bahá'í Faith. Though I am fully--sometimes quite painfully--aware of the myriad obstacles to consultation that exist, both within myself as well as without, the possibility of engaging in consultation with others is nevertheless one of the greatest hopes I have for a meaningful and rewarding "search for truth"--and I believe that consultation offers one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, hope for the future of mankind.

This, then, is perhaps the most fundamental answer to the question I raised above, namely, why don't I give up searching for truth? The answer: I believe in the possibility of true consultation, and the grace which flows from it.

Consultation, anyone?

An admittedly challenging friend, I hope, though challenging someone's faith assumptions strains even the best of intentions on *both* sides....



Arthur M. Peña