

10 December 1992

The House of Justice understands that there are certain Bahá'í scholars, such as yourself, who experience difficulties with the policy of review, but it finds the cause of the difficulties to lie in areas that are different from those you identify. It would point to the following as being the principal roots of the problem:

1. Too narrow and limited understanding of the Faith and its Teachings on the part of certain Bahá'í scholars. There has been a tendency to specialize in certain narrow areas and neglect the wider understanding of the Teachings which would not only enrich their souls but illuminate their perception of the specific areas of their study.
2. An attitude to the Faith and the Administrative Order which is strongly coloured by an assumption that the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is similar to other religions and organizations, is afflicted by the attitudes which have too often characterized them, and is motivated by unethical considerations. The institutions of the Cause are regarded with the same suspicion as the traditional "establishment". This produces a failure to understand, let alone accept, the points which the Universal House of Justice itself is striving to convey.
3. An assumption that only a person equipped with conventional academic training is capable of an unbiased attitude and of truly understanding the points at issue, leading to disdain of questions raised by "unqualified" individuals.
4. Failure to use the appeal processes of the Cause by scholars who are faced with what they regard as improper and unjustified questioning of their writings by Bahá'í reviewing committees. It is natural that, in the present stage of the development of the Cause, the members of reviewing committees will, from time to time, err in their views or be unreasonably obtuse. Such errors and attitudes should be overcome through discussion between the author and the members of the committee. If this does not lead to a satisfactory outcome, the author can appeal to the National Spiritual Assembly itself and, if even that does not solve the matter, to the Universal House of Justice.
5. The above attitudes, in turn, lead to an inability on the part of those scholars to describe the review process to their non-Bahá'í colleagues in terms that would not be unacceptable in an academic environment.

Your suggestion that an "imprimatur" system such as used by the Roman Catholic Church would be preferable to the present system of review was considered by the House of Justice, and it has asked us to explain to you the problems that this would present.

First of all, it would convey to the reader the false impression that the attitude of the Faith was similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, summoning up visions of an "index" of prohibited reading, and all the other associations which you can undoubtedly imagine for yourself.

Secondly, it would give force to the erroneous concept that there are two kinds of Bahá'í literature: books which present the "official" view and those which are the free personal

opinions of individual Bahá'ís, thus obscuring the essential Bahá'í differentiation between the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the letters of the Guardian and the decisions of the Universal House of Justice, which are authoritative, on the one hand, and all other writings by Bahá'ís on the other, which have no authority at all apart from their own internal reasonableness. That a book has passed review in no way guarantees its correctness; it is merely an assurance by the National Spiritual Assembly concerned that, in its view, the book does not seriously distort the Faith or its Teachings.

Thirdly, it would obscure the important fact that the process of review in the Bahá'í Faith is temporary, being limited to this stage of its development when books published by Bahá'ís could seriously mislead the public if they too gravely distort its message.

Your proposal that a National Spiritual Assembly which detected major inaccuracies in an article published by a Bahá'í in an academic journal could have the Research Department “write a letter to the concerned journal pointing out and listing these inaccuracies, giving the requisite textual evidence in footnotes”, that journal editors would be “quite willing to entertain such correspondence” and that it would be found that Bahá'í scholars would be “grateful for chance to discuss such issues freely” introduces a new kind of discrimination and interference. Bahá'í institutions very seldom write to journals to correct their statements about the Faith; not only do they not wish to promote public disputes with those who write about the Cause, but the correction of such errors is seldom worth the time and effort necessary. In the coming years there will be numerous non-Bahá'ís, ranging from those who are bitter enemies of the Cause to those who are its warm advocates, publishing articles about it. There is no way in which Bahá'í institutions could write corrections of the multitudinous errors that will be published; how, then, would they be justified in writing to correct only the errors perpetrated by Bahá'í authors?

The House of Justice suggests that you consider the following steps through which the scholars of the Faith can overcome the problems which some of them perceive as presented by review of their publications.”

- Let them accept unreservedly that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was right in instituting the temporary system of review, and that the decisions of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice to not yet eliminate the system are in accordance with the Divine will.
- Let them recognize the fundamental difference between errors propagated by Bahá'ís from those issuing from non-Bahá'í sources. The review system is not an attempt to prevent errors or attacks on the Faith from being published; it is an attempt to prevent Bahá'ís from promulgating them in their published writings.
- Let them strive to understand the wisdom of this policy and its true nature, and to present it in its proper light to their fellow-academics....
- Let Bahá'í scholars look upon their fellow Bahá'ís with trust and affection, not with disdain as to their qualifications and suspicion as to their motives. Let them regard them as devoted Bahá'ís striving to perform a service which the policies of the Faith require of them. And let them not hesitate to discuss openly with such reviewers the points which they raise. If it appears that a National Spiritual

Assembly does not permit such open discussion, let them appeal to the Universal House of Justice for clarification of the situation. It is well understood by the Universal House of Justice that in some cases the process of review works inefficiently and with problems. These deficiencies could be overcome if the scholars themselves would collaborate with the process and openly raise questions about its functioning, rather than fostering an atmosphere of antagonism and mutual mistrust.

- If the question of review is raised by non-Bahá'í academics, let the Bahá'í academics say that in this early stage in the development of the Faith this is a species of peer review which they welcome, since it is primarily among their fellow-Bahá'ís that they would find at this time those who would have sufficiently wide and deep understanding of the Faith and its Teachings to raise issues of importance which they would want to consider before publication. Of course, to be able to say this with sincerity, the scholars must have been able to accept the other steps mentioned above.

You cite the case of Bahá'ís in other fields of expertise, such as Bahá'í physicians who, you say, “may pursue their professions as Bahá'ís with no prospect of interference by Bahá'í institutions”. This is hardly the case. All Bahá'ís are subject to Bahá'í law and Bahá'í standards. It would clearly be unacceptable for a Bahá'í doctor to advocate abortion as a method of birth control and set up a clinic for that purpose, or for a Bahá'í psychiatrist to publicly advocate sexual intercourse before marriage.

Bahá'u'lláh was addressing all of us when He wrote: “Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness” and “Whoso hath inhaled the sweet fragrance of the All-Merciful, and recognized the Source of this utterance, will welcome with his own eyes the shafts of the enemy, that he may establish the truth of the laws of God amongst men.”

Finally, the House of Justice wishes us to say that it fully agrees with your statement that it is important for the Faith to attract intellectuals and, indeed, all people of capacity in any field. Bahá'ís who themselves are intellectuals can contribute signally to this process, but not by ignoring the basic standards of faith and conduct that apply to all believers or by depicting the Bahá'í administration as a bureaucratic hindrance to freedom of thought and expression.

The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, Issues Related to Study of the Baha'i Faith