

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 6 March 2002

From: Research Department

‘Alíyu’l-láhi and Nuṣayrī Sects and the Infallibility of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The Research Department has studied the questions raised by Mr. ... in his email message of 16 October 2001 to the Universal House of Justice. He states that in chapter nine of H. M. Balyuzi’s *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days*,¹ “Mr. Balyuzi establishes that the guards who escorted the Báb from Iṣfahán to the northern region of Iran were members of the ‘Alíyu’l-láhi sect”. Mr. ... points out that Mr. Balyuzi indicates that in *A Traveller’s Narrative*,² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “affirms that those who escorted the Báb were followers of the Nuṣayrī sect”. Mr. ... writes that, “Although Mr. Balyuzi highlights the similarity between these two sects..., as far as beliefs are concerned”, the two sects are very different from one another. He asks, “If ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s infallibilities include the power to know of far-off or remote historical events such as, for example, His affirmation that Helena, mother of Constantine, knew the actual resting place of Jesus Christ’s mortal remains, then would it not be more appropriate to omit other historical references in favor of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assertion of the identity of the horsemen who escorted the Báb?”

Mr. ... further asks, “If it were the case that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s infallibility is relative as concerns historiographical knowledge, then in which aspects is it for certain? Is the infallibility conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (al-‘iṣma al-ṣifātiyya) comparable in its scope to that of the Guardian of the Faith?” We provide the following response.

1. ‘Alíyu’l-láhi and Nuṣayrī sects

The sources that Mr. ... referred to were perused. We provide both references below. On page 11 of *A Traveller’s Narrative*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

A period of four months passed in this fashion, and the Mu‘tamid passed away to the mercy of God. Gurgín Khán, the Mu‘tamid’s nephew, was aware of the Báb’s being in the private apartments, and represented the matter to the Prime Minister. Hájí Mírzá Āqásí, that celebrated minister, issued a decisive command and gave instructions that they should send the Báb secretly in disguise under the escort of Nuṣayrī horsemen to the capital.

The passage on page 118 of *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days* reads as follows:

Following the instructions of Muḥammad Sháh, Gurgín Khán gave the custody of the Báb to Muḥammad Big-i-Cháparchí (the chief courier). Muḥammad Big belonged to the sect of Ahl-i-Ḥaqq (the People of Truth), commonly known as

¹ H. M. Balyuzi, *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973).

² *A Traveller’s Narrative* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980).

the ‘Alíyü’l-láhi, who have had a long tradition of tolerance, liberalism and rectitude. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in *A Traveller’s Narrative* that the guards who escorted the Báb, on this journey to the north, were Nuṣayrî horsemen. Nuṣayrîs and ‘Alíyü’l-láhis are almost identical.

It is the view of the Research Department that in the above quotation, Mr. Balyuzi is providing additional historical information that may be of interest to the reader rather than disputing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the horsemen being of the Nuṣayrî sect.

Mr. ... may already know that both the Alíyü’l-láhi (also referred to as Ahl-i Ḥaqq, ‘Alí Íláhís) and Nuṣayrî (also referred to as the Namíriyya, Nuṣayriyya, ‘Alawiyya) sects trace back to the Twelver Shí’ih sect of Islám.³ Both sects are called *Ghulát* (those who exaggerate or the Extremists). In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* under the section “Ahl-i Ḥaqq” (Ahl-i Ḥaqq), written by V. Minorsky, it states that “The religion of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq has in common with those of the Druzes and the Nuṣayrîs the worship of ‘Alí.”⁴ ‘Alí is in reference to the first ‘Ímám, ‘Alí Ibn Abí-Tálib.

We also refer Mr. ... to *Muḥammad and the Course of Islám*,⁵ in which Mr. Balyuzi, in discussing the Ghulát sects, writes:

Only two esoteric sects, which can be traced back to them, have survived the extravagances of their progenitors, and have settled down to a quiet meditative existence: the Nuṣayrîs of northern Syria and the *Ahl-i Ḥaqq*⁶ of Írán. In their day, the *Ghulát*, because of their particular and peculiar attachment to ‘Alí or his descendants, not only caused confusion and heart-searching amongst devoted *Shí’ahs*, but brought also upon the head of the *Shí’ahs* much adverse and undeservedly bitter comment from rival denominations.

Alessandro Bausani, in *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Bahá’u’lláh*, describes these two sects as “...the Persian ‘Alí Íláhís and the very similar Syrian sect of the Nusairís.... In their traditions and texts both the Alí Íláhís and the Nusairís speak of twelve imáms....”⁷

2. The Infallibility of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

In his email message Mr. ... uses the phrase “al-‘isma al-ṣifátiyya” in relation to the infallibility of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and asks whether the infallibility conferred on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is comparable “in its scope to that of the Guardian of the Faith”.

³ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam, The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism*, (Oxford: George Ronald), pp. 46, 58.

⁴ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition, ed. H. A. R. Gibb, et. al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), vol. I (A–B) p. 263.

⁵ H. M. Balyuzi, *Muḥammad and the Course of Islám* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1976), pp. 223–224.

⁶ In Balyuzi’s book, *Muḥammad and the Course of Islám*, the following footnote is inserted: “‘The People of Truth’—the name which they apply to themselves. Others have called them ‘Alíyü’l-láhi—those who equate ‘Alí with God. They are known for their tolerance, charity and compassion.” (p. 224)

⁷ Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Bahá’ulláh*. Translated by J. M. Marchesi (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000), p. 321.

It might be helpful to Mr. ... to examine a general principle expounded by Bahá’u’lláh in the *Ishráqát*. Here He states that the term “Infallibility” has “numerous meanings and divers stations”. One of its general meanings is “the One Whom God hath made immune from error”.⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá expands upon this principle in *Some Answered Questions*, where He distinguishes between the stations of “essential” (*dháti*) and “acquired” (*ṣifátiyyih*) or “conferred” (*mawhúbí*) infallibility.⁹ He states that whereas essential infallibility “is peculiar to the supreme Manifestation, for it is His essential requirement”, acquired infallibility “is not a natural necessity” but is granted to souls. He also emphasizes that those souls who have acquired infallibility are “under the protection of God”, that is, “God preserves them from error”. We read,

...it is a ray of the bounty of infallibility which shines from the Sun of Reality upon hearts, and grants a share and portion of itself to souls. Although these souls have not essential infallibility, still they are under the protection of God—that is to say, God preserves them from error. Thus many of the holy beings who were not dawning-points of the Most Great Infallibility, were yet kept and preserved from error under the shadow of the protection and guardianship of God, for they were the mediators of grace between God and men.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes this passage with a statement that has clear implications for His Own station, as follows:

If God did not protect them from error, their error would cause believing souls to fall into error, and thus the foundation of the Religion of God would be overturned, which would not be fitting nor worthy of God.

As to the extent of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s infallibility in relation to historical matters, we suggest that Mr. ... examine the overall context of the uniqueness of the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as set out by Shoghi Effendi in “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh”.¹⁰ For example, Shoghi Effendi states that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “incarnates an institution for which we can find no parallel whatsoever in any of the world’s recognized religious systems”.¹¹ He notes that Bahá’u’lláh designated the Master as:

the “*Mystery of God*”—an expression ... which ... indicates how in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.¹²

⁸ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 108.

⁹ *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994), pp. 171–172.

¹⁰ See *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 97–206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Further, while underlining the differences in Their stations, Shoghi Effendi calls attention to aspects of that special continuity which exists in the relationship between Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In this regard, he indicates that the Master

gets His light, His inspiration and sustenance from the Fountain-head of the Bahá’í Revelation; that He reflects even as a clear and perfect Mirror the rays of Bahá’u’lláh’s glory ...; that His words are not equal in rank, though they possess an equal validity with the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh....¹³

While letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi specify clear limits to the Guardian’s infallibility, the Research Department has not found any statements in the Bahá’í Writings to suggest that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s infallibility only operates within certain defined areas.¹⁴ With regard to the statements of the Master (and Bahá’u’lláh) on scientific matters, for example, the following extract from a letter dated 14 March 1955, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in response to concerns expressed by an enquirer, pertains to this issue:

Considering that a century ago nobody knew the nature of matter, and couldn’t split any kind of an atom, it should not surprise the scientist that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that copper can be transmuted into gold.

There may come a time, for all we know, when the mass of many atoms can be changed by scientists. We have no way of proving, or disproving, at present the statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Just because we cannot demonstrate a contention in the Bahá’í Teachings does not mean the contention is not true.

The same holds true of the statement of Bahá’u’lláh in the “Íqán”, regarding transmutation of copper into gold after seventy years, under certain conditions.

We as Bahá’ís must assume that, as He had access to all knowledge, He was referring to a definite physical condition which theoretically might exist. Because we don’t know what this condition is in scientific terms does not refute Bahá’u’lláh’s statement at all....

The principle of faith is to accept anything the Manifestation of God says, once you have accepted Him as being the Manifestation. That is really the crux of the whole matter. It is a question of confidence.

We also draw Mr. ...’s attention to the following extract from a letter dated 3 June 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, in which the question was raised about the authority of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concerning subjects not directly related to the Bahá’í Faith or to religion in general:

¹³ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁴ For example, the Guardian’s secretary, writing on his behalf, refers to the fact that he is not “omniscient at will”, that his infallibility “is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings”, and that “he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.”

There is nothing in the Writings that would lead us to the conclusion that what Shoghi Effendi says about himself concerning statements on subjects not directly related to the Faith also applies to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Instead we have assertions which indicate that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position in the Faith is one for which we find “no parallel” in past Dispensations. For example, Bahá’u’lláh, in addition to His reference to the Centre of His Covenant as the “Mystery of God”, states that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should be regarded as God’s “exalted Handiwork” and “a Word which God hath adorned with the ornament of His Own Self, and made it sovereign over the earth and all that there is therein....” And from Shoghi Effendi we have the incontrovertible statement that the Guardian of the Faith while “overshadowed” by the “protection” of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Báb, “remains essentially human”, whereas in respect of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Shoghi Effendi categorically states that “in the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized”.

Further elucidation on the subject of “infallibility” is provided in the following passage from the same letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

In considering the whole field of divinely conferred “infallibility” one must be careful to avoid the literal understanding and petty-mindedness that has so often characterised discussions of this matter in the Christian world. The Manifestation of God (and, to a lesser degree, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi) has to convey tremendous concepts covering the whole field of human life and activity to people whose present knowledge and degree of understanding are far below His. He must use the limited medium of human language against the limited and often erroneous background of His audience’s traditional knowledge and current understanding to raise them to a wholly new level of awareness and behaviour. It is a human tendency, against which the Manifestation warns us, to measure His statements against the inaccurate standard of the acquired knowledge of mankind. We tend to take them and place them within one or other of the existing categories of human philosophy or science while, in reality, they transcend these and will, if properly understood, open new and vast horizons to our understanding.

Some sayings of the Manifestation are clear and obvious. Among these are laws of behaviour. Others are elucidations which lead men from their present level of understanding to a new one. Others are pregnant allusions, the significance of which only becomes apparent as the knowledge and understanding of the reader grow. And all are integral parts of one great Revelation intended to raise mankind to a new level of its evolution.

It may well be that we shall find some statement is couched in terms familiar to the audience to which it was first addressed, but is strange now to us. For example, in answer to a question about Bahá’u’lláh’s reference to the “fourth heaven” in the “Kitáb-i-Íqán”, the Guardian’s secretary wrote on his behalf:

As to the ascent of Christ to the fourth heaven, as revealed in the glorious “Book of Íqán”, he (the Guardian) stated that the “fourth heaven” is a term used and a belief held by the early astronomers. The

followers of the Shí‘ih sect likewise held this belief. As the “Kitáb-i-Íqán” was revealed for the guidance of that sect, this term was used in conformity with the concepts of its followers.

(Translated from the Arabic)

In studying such statements, however, we must have the humility to appreciate the limitations of our own knowledge and outlook, and strive always to understand the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh in making them, trying to look upon Him with His own eyes, as it were.