

EXCERPT FROM A LETTER DATED 3 JANUARY 1982 WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF  
THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE TO AN INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER

You express the fear that the authority conferred upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice could lead to a progressive reduction in the "available scope for personal interpretation", and that "the actual writings of the Manifestation will have less and less import", and you instance what has happened in previous Dispensations. The House of Justice suggests that, in thinking about this, you contemplate the way the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has actually worked and you will be able to see how very different its processes are from those of, say, the development of the law in Rabbinical Judaism or the functioning of the Papacy in Christianity. The practice in the past in these two religions, and also to a great extent in Islám, has been to assume that the Revelation given by the Founder was the final, perfect revelation of God's Will to mankind, and all subsequent elucidation and legislation has been interpretative in the sense that it aimed at applying this basic Revelation to the new problems and situations that have arisen. The Bahá'í premises are quite different. Although the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is accepted as the Word of God and His Law as the Law of God, it is understood from the outset that Revelation is progressive, and that the Law, although the Will of God for this Age, will undoubtedly be changed by the next Manifestation of God. Secondly, only the written text of the Revelation is regarded as authoritative. There is no Oral Law as in Judaism, no Tradition of the Church as in Christianity, no Hadíth as in Islám. Thirdly, a clear distinction is drawn between Interpretation and Legislation. Authoritative interpretation is the exclusive prerogative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, while infallible legislation is the function of the Universal House of Justice.

If you study the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the Guardian, you will see how tremendously they differ from the interpretations of the Rabbis and the Church. They are not a progressive fossilization of the Revelation, they are for the most part expositions which throw a clear light upon passages which may have been considered obscure, they point up the intimate interrelationship between various teachings, they expound the implications of scriptural allusions, and they educate the Bahá'ís in the tremendous significances of the Words of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather than in any way supplanting the Words of the Manifestation, they lead us back to them time and again.

There is also an important distinction made in the Faith between authoritative interpretation, as described above, and the interpretation which every believer is fully entitled to voice. Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions.

The legislation enacted by the Universal House of Justice is different from interpretation. Authoritative interpretation, as uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, is a divinely guided statement of what the Word of God means. The divinely inspired legislation of the Universal House of Justice does not attempt to say what the revealed Word means -- it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not

explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the sacred Text, and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable. Moreover, the attitude to legislation is different in the Bahá'í Faith. The human tendency in past Dispensations has been to want every question answered and to arrive at a binding decision affecting every small detail of belief or practice. The tendency in the Bahá'í Dispensation, from the time of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, has been to clarify the governing principles, to make binding pronouncements on details which are considered essential, but to leave a wide area to the conscience of the individual. The same tendency appears also in administrative matters. The Guardian used to state that the working of National Spiritual Assemblies should be uniform in essentials but that diversity in secondary matters was not only permissible but desirable. For this reason a number of points are not expressed in the National Bahá'í Constitution (the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of National Assemblies); these are left to each National Spiritual Assembly to decide for itself.