

Elucidations

Infallibility of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith

Universal House of Justice letter to one of the believers

25 July, 1974

Dear Bahá'í friend,

We have received your letter stating you were disturbed by statements made in your deepening class regarding the infallibility of the beloved Guardian, and we appreciate your concern.

According to your letter, this question arose in connection with Shoghi Effendi's references in "God Passes By" to historical events, and his descriptions of the characters of opponents of the faith, particularly that of Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí. Letters written on behalf of the guardian by his secretary to individuals who asked similar questions clearly define the sphere of the Guardian's infallibility. We quote from two of these, one written in 1944, the second in 1956.

The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.

The Guardian's infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word, and its application. Likewise, any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith, or its well-being must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly reveals.

Now, in the matter of accuracy of historical fact, Shoghi Effendi had to rely on available information. For example, on page 5 of "God passes By", he refers to Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí as "... the idolized tutor of Muḥammad Sháh, a vulgar, false-hearted and fickle-minded schemer..." An appropriate and pertinent quotation supporting that characterization can be found in P. M. Sykes's "A History of Persia", Volume 2, pages 439-440, which appears as a footnote on page 233 of "Nabíl's Narrative":

The state of Persia, however, was not satisfactory; for Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, who had been its virtual ruler for thirteen years, 'was utterly ignorant of statesmanship or of military science, yet too vain to receive instruction and too jealous to admit of a

coadjutor; brutal in his language; insolent in his demeanour; indolent in his habits; he brought the exchequer to the verge of bankruptcy and the country to the brink of revolution ...' Such – to adopt the weighty words of Rawlinson – was the condition of Persia in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Guardian was very meticulous about the authenticity of historical fact. One of the friends in Yazd wrote to him stating that the account given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in one of His tablets about events related to the martyrdom of some of the believers in that place was in conflict with known facts about these events. Shoghi Effendi replied saying that the friends should investigate the facts carefully and unhesitatingly register them in their historical records, since 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had prefaced His recording of the events in His Tablet with a statement that it was based on news received from Yazd.

It is a great pity if some of the friends fail to recognize the matchless prose to be found in the Guardian's writings. Shoghi Effendi's masterly use of the English language makes the meaning abundantly clear, and that is an essential quality of great works.

We are delighted that you and your dear wife are conducting classes for the benefit of the friends, and we will remember you both in our prayers at the Holy Threshold.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The Universal House of Justice

The quotation from Abu'l-Fazl Gulpáygání, taken from *Miracles and Metaphors*, pp. 9-10 reads as follows:

It is clear that the prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and bring people nearer their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers or natural scientists. Their position in the world of creation is like that of the heart in the body: it has a universal position with a general effect. The position of the learned in the world of earthly dominion is like that of a specific organ. That is, they have a particular position and a special effect. 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.... But from the point of view of science, it is impermissible for the historian to depend on the literal meaning of these verses. This is because he cannot discount the very real possibility that they possess a higher significance and are subject to sublime, figurative interpretations which differ from the understanding that might be gained from their external sense.