

Interpretation and the Guardianship

A talk given by Ian Semple at a seminar in Haifa on
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The subject “Interpretation and the Guardianship” may seem to be very straight-forward, but the more I have thought about it, the more I have become aware that the Bahá’í concept of interpretation is very different from that prevalent in earlier Dispensations and that, even within the Faith, there are many misconceptions, and that these can give rise to tests for the believer.

Here I would like to digress from the subject for a moment, to make a personal comment about the coexistence of divine authority and individual freedom of expression, which is such a characteristic feature of the Faith. Someone — I think it was a pilgrim — once commented to me that he thought that if the Guardian had been sitting in the meeting of the Universal House of Justice it would have been impossible for the members to say frankly what they thought. I have had the privilege of only a few hours in the presence of the Guardian, but I do not agree with that point of view. I believe that in his presence one would not have *dared* to do anything *but* say exactly what one thought. I am also confirmed in this view by the actions of the Hands of the Cause of God since the coming into being of the Universal House of Justice — the Hands who worked so closely with the beloved Guardian. They have always demonstrated absolute loyalty and also absolute frankness in all their consultations with the Universal House of Justice, and this combination has been a tremendous source of strength and inspiration to the Universal House of Justice.

So I believe that the presence of a source of divine guidance in the Faith, while being a guarantee of its unity and preserving the purity of its teachings, is no contradiction to the principle of freedom of thought. I doubt if it is possible to obtain a totally clear understanding of the subject of interpretation, but perhaps we can clarify it to some extent.

I propose to divide the subject into three main topics:

1. The distinction between the interpretation that we all do when discussing any subject, and Authoritative Interpretation as exercised by the Guardian
2. The distinction between authoritative interpretation, and divinely guided legislation

3. Aspects of the function of Interpreter as exercised by Shoghi Effendi This part of the subject is our main concern in this talk, and therefore I shall divide it also into a number of aspects, although I must emphasize that this is a purely arbitrary division, and each type of interpretation shades into the others. They are:
 - 3.1. Defining the meaning of specific Texts.
 - 3.2. Explaining what is the thought conveyed by the Texts, i.e. expounding their meaning.
 - 3.3. Development of seminal statements in the Sacred Text.
 - 3.4. Examples of refusal to comment further on a Text or make statements on matters not covered in the Text.
 - 3.5. Definition of the sphere of authoritative interpretation.
 - 3.6. Illumination of the overall significance of the Revelation.
 - 3.7. The power to take a long and uninterrupted view over a series of generations.

Let us go back to the first of the three main topics.

1. Aspects of Interpretation, Individual and Authoritative

It is, of course, impossible to understand or speak about any statement, whether written or oral, without interpretation. The Manifestation of God has the superhuman task of conveying to mankind truths that it does not yet understand and training it in modes of behaviour that it has not yet risen to. To do this He has to use the limited languages that are spoken around Him, with all their accumulated meanings and connotations. He not only uses words and metaphors and similes with consummate skill, but in using old forms and old concepts, He transforms them and breathes into them new meaning. So, in trying to educate ourselves in the Revelation, we need to study three meanings in each text we read: the meaning of the words themselves; the meaning they will have had for the particular person or persons that the Manifestation was addressing; and also the new meaning or meanings that He will be trying to convey. In other words, we must avoid three pitfalls: one is that of ignoring the obvious meaning of the words (in the past people were sometimes so keen on extracting the esoteric significance of a text that they were blind to the clear meaning of the words); the second pitfall is that of taking the words out of their historical and social contexts; the third is that of thinking that the social and historical contexts will, in themselves, give us an understanding of the obvious meaning and of what the Manifestation is saying.

A good example to show this is Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to a Physician. Some passages are quite straightforward. To understand others we need to remember the caution of the Guardian that this Tablet was addressed to a physician of the old school of medicine, and that without an understanding of the terminology of that school, we could not understand what Bahá'u'lláh was saying. However, it is clear that Bahá'u'lláh was not merely recounting to the physician what the physician already knew; He was explaining to him, in terminology that he could understand, certain truths that He wanted to convey about health and healing.

The historical and social context is not the only context of a passage. There is also the context of the other teachings. In *Gleanings* we find the following words of Bahá'u'lláh:

If it be your wish, O people, to know God and to discover the greatness of His might, look, then, upon Me with Mine own eyes, and not with the eyes of anyone besides Me. Ye will, otherwise, be never capable of recognizing Me, though you ponder My Cause as long as My Kingdom endureth, and meditate upon all created things throughout the eternity of God, the Sovereign Lord of all, the Omnipotent, the Ever-Abiding, the All-Wise. (GWB 272)

This, I think, implies among other things that the most important keys to understanding the Writings are the Writings themselves; that we must read them not merely from our point of view, trying to see what we can understand, but consider them from Bahá'u'lláh's point of view: what is *He* trying to convey? And for what purpose? It is no good taking one text and trying to understand it in isolation from all the other teachings which might bear upon it. Therefore we must relate every statement to all the rest of the Revelation and try to understand what Bahá'u'lláh is striving to *convey*. The consequence of this realization is to accept that, since we can *never* encompass the whole Revelation we must always be tentative in our understanding even when it may seem to us to be absolutely clear. A striking example of the importance of this occurs in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, where we find the verses: "*God hath enjoined upon you marriage*" and "*Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me: this is My commandment unto you, obey it as a succour to yourselves.*" One would think that these are very clear statements not susceptible of any interpretation. It seems, on the face of it to be an unambiguous and binding command. Yet one of the believers asked Bahá'u'lláh Himself about this passage, and whether it meant that marriage was compulsory. Bahá'u'lláh replied: "This is not compulsory." I instance this because it is quite a temptation sometimes for Bahá'ís, during discussion of a

subject, to assert dogmatically (and sometimes heatedly!): “You can’t say that! Here are the words of the Text and they are quite clear!”

Individual interpretation of this kind, that is, striving to understand the full meaning of a text, is not only inescapable, it is essential if we are to increase the depth of our understanding and also recognize its permanent limitations. I believe the combination of encouragement of individual thought with the existence of an infallible centre of authoritative interpretation is one of the unique strengths of this Dispensation, the effects of which endure even in the absence of the Guardian. The very fact that there is in principle in the Cause a centre of such guidance, and that all other interpretation is deprived of authority, teaches us a humility in our thinking that is one of the strongest cements of unity.

Although individual interpretation has no authority, we should not be led to the extreme of concluding that the explanations given by individuals can never be inspired. In a Tablet which is published in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* the Master wrote:

The Blessed Beauty hath promised this servant that souls would be raised up who would be the very embodiments of guidance, and banners of the Concourse on high, torches of God’s oneness, and stars of His pure truth, shining in the heavens where God reigneth alone. They would give sight to the blind, and would make the deaf to hear; they would raise the dead to life. They would confront all the peoples of the earth, pleading their Cause with proofs of the Lord of the seven spheres. (SWAB 250)

It would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that the Bahá’í Revelation will be deprived of believers who can give us profounder insights into the meaning of the Teachings of the Faith. But none of these kinds of interpretation, no matter how learned the believer who expresses them, are authoritative. Although, they *may* enlighten us there is *always* the inevitability of some degree of error. Let us never forget the example of the Christian Dispensation. The Gospels are filled with prophecies and warnings given by Jesus about His Second Coming. Christians have laboured to understand these for some 2,000 years. Their scholars have worked out many interpretations and understandings of what would happen, but I do not know of *any* who came to the correct conclusion, namely, that it signified the appearance of another Manifestation of God.

Authoritative, divinely-guided interpretation is of a wholly different order to what we have just been considering and is exclusively the function of the Master and the Guardian.

2. Authoritative Interpretation and Divinely Guided Legislation

The prerogative of authoritative interpretation conferred by Bahá'u'lláh, first upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá and, after Him, upon the Guardian, lies at the heart of the Covenant.

In previous Dispensations no clear distinction was drawn between interpretation and legislation. The two functions were subsumed under one process of deducing conclusions and guidance for new situations from the study of the Holy Word. Because these deductions were believed to be the process of making explicit what was implicit in the Text, they were virtually unalterable and turned into a massive accumulation of dogma, ritual and laws. In Judaism it became primarily a multiplicity of minute regulations governing every moment and aspect of a person's life, obedience to which was conceived as identical with obedience to the Law of God. Christianity, to a large extent, broke free of this, but replaced it with the erection of a formidable structure of dogma, belief in which was understood to be essential for the eternal salvation of the soul, and which led to such abuses as the sale of indulgences, which precipitated the rebellion of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

In this Dispensation we have two separate divinely-guided authorities, one to provide authoritative interpretation, and one to provide supplementary legislation. The essential distinction between these two functions is explained by the Universal House of Justice in its letter dated 9 March 1965:

The Guardian reveals what the Scripture means; his interpretation is a statement of truth which cannot be varied. Upon the Universal House of Justice, in the words of the Guardian, 'has been conferred the exclusive right of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the Bahá'í Writings.' Its pronouncements, which are susceptible of amendment or abrogation by the House of Justice itself, serve to supplement and apply the Law of God. Although not invested with the function of interpretation, the House of Justice is in a position to do everything necessary to establish the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth. (MUHJ63 ¶23.20)

One important consequence of this distinction is that when we have a question about what we should *believe*, or what the Text *means*, and this is not answered for us in the Text itself, there is no one, in the absence of the Guardian, who can answer it authoritatively and bindingly. If, however, we wish to know what we

should *do* in any instance, the Universal House of Justice is fully empowered to convey the divine guidance on the subject.

Two other important consequences are the prohibition of the formulation of dogmas or creeds in the Faith (these are, after all, but man's attempt to tie the truths of God up in a parcel and are forever doomed to inadequacy), and the recognition of the profound difference between the Laws actually given by the Manifestation of God, which can be changed only by another Prophet, and those which the Universal House of Justice is inspired to make, which are repealable by the House of Justice itself. This gives an unprecedented degree of elasticity to the Bahá'í system of law.

There is, of course, a hierarchical relationship between the Guardian's interpretation and the legislation of the Universal House of Justice. The supreme authority in the Faith is the Word of God and all legislation is bound by that authority. The Authoritative Interpreter is the living mouthpiece of that Word, the Expounder of its true meaning. He therefore naturally has the authority to define the sphere of the legislative action of the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi has stated categorically that neither the Guardian nor the Universal House of Justice would ever usurp the function of the other. Both, after all, are under the protection and unerring guidance of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore we can be confident that, even in the absence of the Guardian the Universal House of Justice is not going to legislate outside its sphere of authority. I suspect, however, that in its care not to step beyond its boundaries, the House of Justice may well refrain from legislating in areas which, if we had the Guardian with us, he could have told us were within its sphere. There are two very interesting examples of what I mean.

As you know, in both Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith, murder is prohibited. The question then arises as to whether abortion and euthanasia are permissible or not. The Catholic Church has concluded that the law is clear, "Thou shalt not kill", and therefore both are prohibited. In the Bahá'í Faith, however, we have statements by the Guardian on both issues. In both cases he states that there is nothing explicit about them in the Writings – which implies that they are not quite the same thing as murder. The following are three statements made on his behalf relating to these subjects:

On 25 August 1939: *The practice of abortion – which is absolutely criminal as it involves deliberate destruction of human life – is forbidden in the Cause. Regarding 'mercy*

killings' ... this is also a matter which the Universal House of Justice will have to legislate upon.

On 13 November 1940: *Regarding the practice of abortion; as no specific reference has been made to the subject in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, it devolves upon the International House of Justice to definitely pronounce upon it. There can be no doubt, however, that this practice, involving as it does the destruction of human life, is to be strongly deprecated.*

On 20 October 1953: *As there is nothing specific in the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of abortion, it will consequently have to be dealt with by the International House of Justice, when that Body is formed.*

On the basis of these statements the Universal House of Justice has ruled that to have an abortion just for the sake of getting rid of an unwanted birth is absolutely forbidden, but that there may be cases in which abortion would be permissible, and this is for the Universal House of Justice to legislate on. Pending such legislation the decision is left to the consciences of the individuals concerned in the light of the above principles and of expert medical advice.

Another area concerns the obligatory prayers. In the thirteenth Glad-Tidings Bahá'u'lláh states: *"All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book."* On one occasion when one of the believers asked the Universal House of Justice to designate a prayer which could be said for the House of Justice it referred to this Text and refused to make any such designation. One could have assumed, likewise, that this Text would have made it impossible for the House of Justice to answer any questions about the Obligatory Prayers, but the Guardian has written that matters of detail that are obscure in relation to the Obligatory Prayers are to be decided by the Universal House of Justice, specifying, therefore, just what aspect of these matters do lie within its sphere of legislation.

3. The Function of Interpretation

The way in which Shoghi Effendi exercised his function of Interpreter is highly illuminating, both in regard to our understanding of what Authoritative Interpretation implies and in regard to our understanding of the infallibility of the Sacred Text, a subject which has been badly misunderstood in earlier Dispensations. All these quotations immediately following are from letters written by the Guardian's secretaries on his behalf.

3.1 In some cases Shoghi Effendi simply gave clear statements about what a particular passage meant, for example:

In regards to your questions: What the Master meant in the words you quoted is simply that joy gives one more freedom to create; if the Prophets, the Master Himself, and the Guardian, had less problems and worries, They could give forth a great deal more creatively to the Cause. When He said that “grow to be as a fruitful tree” he meant that, by lifting burdens from the Guardian and trying as much as possible to do our share of the work of the Faith, we would help Shoghi Effendi to develop his full powers as Guardian and, thru the Covenant, the Cause would spread its shadow over all men. This we have seen happen in the last 30 years, but that does not mean we must not try to our utmost to help him by our lives and our services (1952.10.5 - Sec)

The “rheum” mentioned in the Tablet of the Master is symbolic. He means that the people have a spiritual cold and cannot smell the Divine Fragrance and that the believers must be the physicians to heal men of these conditions. He is not referring to physical ailments. (1950.3.26 - Sec)

The Master uses this term “the Divine Reality is sanctified from singleness” in order to forcibly impress us with the fact that the Godhead is unknowable and that to define It is impossible; we cannot contain It in such concepts as singleness and plurality which we apply to things we know and can experience. He uses the method of exaggerated emphasis in order to drive home his thought that we know the sun indirectly thru its rays, the Godhead indirectly thru the Manifestations of God. (1950.2.20 - Sec)

The human soul is a “harbinger” [GWB 160] in the sense that it gives us a faint idea of the existence of the other worlds, an inkling of the spiritual worlds beyond. (1938.05.25 - Sec)

The “flame of fire” in the Tablet of Aḥmad should be taken figuratively. In other words, we must not tolerate the evil of Covenant-breakers or enemies of the Faith, but be uncompromising in our loyalty, in our exposure of them and in our defense of the Faith. (1955.07.21 - Sec)

What Bahá'u'lláh means by the faculty of sight and hearing is the physical faculty, not a spiritual abstraction. He means that we have been given eyes and ears to

appreciate what goes on in this world, by Almighty God; in other words, we can read the Teachings and listen to the Message of the Prophet. This is to be taken literally. (1954.04.22 - Sec)

“Him Who is at the distance of two bows” [GWB 70] should not be taken literally, but it has an allegorical meaning, indicating nearness or close proximity. (1938.04.12 - Sec)

The expression “tend my raven locks, and not wound My Throat” [HW] is an allegorical warning by Bahá'u'lláh against the misuse of anything bestowed by Him on the world. (1937.09.06 - Sec)

In the Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih Bahá'u'lláh states:

We have formerly ordained that people should converse in two languages, yet efforts must be made to reduce them to one, likewise the scripts of the world, that men's lives may not be dissipated and wasted in learning divers languages. Thus the whole earth would come to be regarded as one city and one land. (TB)

A believer asked the Guardian how this related to Bahá'u'lláh's command that an auxiliary international language should be chosen and taught in all the schools in addition to one's mother tongue. The reply was:

What Bahá'u'lláh is referring to in the Eighth Leaf of the Exalted Paradise is a far distant time, when the world is really one country, and one language would be a sensible possibility. It does not contradict His instructions as to the need immediately for an auxiliary language. (1946.03.16 – Sec)

From these specific interpretations we learn not only what the particular passages mean, but we receive an object lesson in studying the Writings. We see that some passages are to be taken literally, others allegorically. Some are even stylistic exaggerations to produce an intended effect, and some relate to a different stage in the development of the Dispensation than do others.

3.2 Sometimes the Guardian would go considerably beyond a brief interpretation of the passage in question, such as in this beautiful description of the Short Obligatory Prayer:

The meaning of the short prayer mentioned by Mr. Lacey in his letter is simply that Bahá'u'lláh has put into one brief sentence the very essence of life, which is that we come from one Father, and pass, on the road of life, through

tests and trials and experiences, so that our souls may grow; and that the reason for our existence is to learn to know and understand our Creator. As we do this, we will increase our love for Him and will worship Him.

This is really the deepest joy that comes to any soul. All others are merely reflections of this happiness, the happiness that comes when we worship the God Who made us, our Heavenly Father. (1953.10.05 - Sec)

3.3 Sometimes, he would develop an entire concept from just a seminal reference in the Writings. There is, for example, his definition of the *Námús-i-Akbar* (the Greater Law) as the constitution of National Spiritual Assemblies, and the *Námús-i-A'zam* (The Most Great Law) as the constitution of the Universal House of Justice. The development of the institution of the Hands of the Cause of God, with their Auxiliary Boards is undoubtedly another example of the same process.

3.4 On the other hand, there are many examples of matters on which he refused to give an interpretation because there was nothing specific in the texts. For example:

We have no way of knowing what science Bahá'u'lláh meant when he said it would largely eliminate fear; as no further mention of it was ever made in the teachings, the Guardian cannot identify anything with this statement. To do so would depart from his function as interpreter of the teachings; he cannot reveal anything apart from the given teachings. (1952.08.30 - Sec)

Concerning the points you mention in "The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf", page 32: These were never, so far as we know, further elaborated by Bahá'u'lláh; they remained hidden within the realms of His infinite knowledge, just as did the universal language which, in that same book, He mentions. (1942.08.15 - Sec)

As to your question regarding the possibility of an artificial production of life by means of an incubator; this is essentially a matter that concerns science, and as such should be investigated and studied by scientists. (1937.12.31 - Sec)

3.5 This leads us to the Guardian's own definition of the limitations of the sphere of his infallibility as Interpreter.

Shoghi Effendi is infallible only when interpreting the words. He considers it heretic to attribute to him a station equal to Bahá'u'lláh or even to the Master. His station is

Guardian of the Cause of God and the President of the House of Justice, and the interpreter of the words and nothing more. He absolutely disclaims any other station that the friends may, through their great love, wrongly attribute to him. (1938.09.18 - Sec)

The Guardian's personal powers are not unlimited and are different from those possessed by the Master. But the degree of guidance which God may choose to vouchsafe him is unlimited, as it comes from Bahá'u'lláh and not himself. Any extraordinary manifestation of knowledge or intuition he might on some occasions demonstrate must not be attributed to his possession of powers akin to the Master's, but rather to a manifestation of the will of Bahá'u'lláh guiding him for His own reasons on that occasion. The Guardian is infallible interpreter of the Word of God. His words are not the Word of God itself. But his interpretation is as binding as the Word. (1941.11.20 - Sec)

He likes to be provided with facts by the friends, when they ask his advice, for although his decisions are guided by God, he is not, like the Prophet, omniscient at will, in spite of the fact that he often senses a situation or condition without having any detailed knowledge of it. (1948.03.04 - Sec)

Anything that is not in the Teachings, the Guardian does not pass upon. These are matters for scientists and specialists. (1953.09.29 - Sec)

An implication of the Will and Testament that must not be lost sight of is the injunction on the friends to obey the Guardian and the House of Justice. This may be related to their functions of divinely-guided interpretation and legislation, but it is not necessarily the same thing and can apply in other contexts, as is shown from the following explanations from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi.

As to the Master's injunction concerning obedience to the Guardian it should be made clear that the question of deciding what matters require the obedience of the Guardian is one which the latter alone has the full right to conscientiously decide. In other words, it is for the Guardian to say whether a certain action is injurious to the Cause or not, and whether it calls for his personal intervention. It is not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject

his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism. The Guardian being the appointed interpreter of the Teachings, it is his responsibility to state what matters which, affecting the interests of the Faith, demand on the part of the believers complete and unqualified obedience to his instructions. (1933.11.27 - Sec)

The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc. When he feels that a certain thing is essential for the protection of the Cause, even if it is something that affects a person personally, he must be obeyed, but when he gives advice, such as that he gave you in a previous letter about your future, it is not binding; you are free to follow it or not as you please. (1944.10.17 - Sec)

Future Guardians ... cannot 'abrogate' the interpretations of former Guardians, as this would imply not only lack of guidance but mistakes in making them; however, they can elaborate and elucidate former interpretations, and can certainly abrogate some former ruling laid down as a temporary necessity by a former Guardian. (1947.02.19 - Sec)

3.6 Now I find it very interesting that all the quotations that I have given so far, which are, for the most part what previous dispensations have regarded as comprising "interpretation" are all in the words of the Guardian's secretaries. He himself devoted his main attention in this field, not to the elucidation of obscure passages or the definition of terms used in the Scriptures, but to the illumination of the overall significance of the Revelation. He would take certain themes, such as the nature and significance of the Bahá'í way of life, the theory and functioning of Bahá'í institutions, the relationship of the Cause to current events and its place in the history of mankind, the station of the Manifestations of God and Their interrelationships, the station of the Master, the destiny of certain Bahá'í communities, the proper way of teaching the Faith, and, with his own hand, write long letters which, like the string of a necklace, would thread together quotations from the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and the Master, showing the sources from which the ideas were welling up, the implications and importance of those passages and the actions that they called for from the believers.

This, to my mind, is the greatest aspect of the Guardian's function as Interpreter. This Revelation is so enormous, so profound, that the believers would be struggling like

minnows in the shallows of a vast ocean. He it was, following in the footsteps of the Master, who drew together those aspects of the Cause that require our immediate attention, showed their relationship to the vast implications of the entire Revelation, the riches of which we are only beginning to taste, and gave us a vision of our work far into the future, even to the end and beyond the end of this Dispensation.

3.7 In “The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh” Shoghi Effendi wrote that “Without such an institution” as the Guardianship “the means required to enable” the Faith “to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking.” I have heard friends relate this statement to the fact that the Guardianship is a hereditary institution, and that it was this hereditary factor that would provide the means to the Faith to take this long view. I have not seen this point made in any of the Guardian’s writings, however, and it seems to me that although, of course, there is an element of truth in the assumption, the mere fact that each Guardian would have succeeded his father in office does not seem an adequate basis for the exercise of such an exclusive function. The function of inspired interpreter, however, does imply it. As interpreter the Guardian is able to understand not only the outward meaning of the Writings but their inner implications. Although others, by studying the Writings and the progress of human affairs, can gain some idea of the way society will develop, the Guardian alone could clearly see the whole panorama of Bahá’u’lláh’s intention and could delineate for us the course that the Manifestation of God sees as lying before us. This, indeed, Shoghi Effendi has done in his World Order letters and also in *God Passes By*. The latter is not only a history book, magnificent though it may be in that respect, it is also an inspired commentary on the events it recounts, illuminates the past, challenges us in the present and gives us a vision of the future.

NOTE

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