

Comments on: “Infallible Institutions?” by Udo Schaefer and
“Dialogue on Infallibility: A response to Udo Schaefer's 'Infallible Institutions?’” by Peter Terry

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Amongst some of my Bahá’í friends, a discussion has developed regarding the conferred infallibility of the Universal House of Justice. Thus far, there has been consensus that it is restricted rather than unrestricted. The exact parameters of its restricted infallibility continue to be a topic of investigation and dialogue. Recently I came across the late Udo Schaefer’sⁱ highly insightful article, “Infallible Institutions?”¹ (accessible at: http://bahai-library.com/schaefer_infallible_institutions) and Peter Terry’s thought-provoking comments on this same article (accessible at: https://bahai-library.com/terry_schaefer_dialogue_infallibility)

Udo Schaefer concludes with a statement which, in his opinion, provides a justifiable stance for the followers of Bahá’u’lláh—“We have a divinely guided body that is infallible in the sphere of legislation.” The broader statement, “We have an infallible body,” according to his research, is not justifiable. Personally, I have no problem with the former statement and it does not detract from my wholehearted obedience to and love for the Universal House of Justice.

Regarding the possibility of unrestricted infallibility, Udo Schaefer states:

To claim infallibility for virtually everything that has been decided by the Universal House of Justice, without exception, would be, in my opinion, extremely risky and utterly unwise. Such an interpretation of the infallibility of the House of Justice is untenable and indefensible and could easily become its Achilles heel. There are undoubtedly many people zealously searching and taking great pains in order to find one single evident error [this author’s emphasis added] which would suffice to disprove empirically and for all time the infallibility of the House of Justice. One single error would suffice for a “falsification” of the claim to infallibility. I am sure that an extensive interpretation of this concept would lead to never-ending queries and unresolved discussions, and Bahá’ís would constantly feel obliged to refute the ongoing accusations. (This article at bahai-library.com does not contain page numbers.)

Peter Terry states, “There are no cases of erroneous decisions which have been corrected by the Universal House of Justice, so this is really a moot point.” (p68) In my opinion, this is not so. Leading up to the year 2000, there was a very well-known and conspicuous error made and later corrected by the Universal House of Justice in its interpretation or elucidation of the fifth candle (or light) of unity set forth by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The fifth candle is the unity of nations—a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.²

ⁱ See: <http://www.udoschaefer.com/news.html>

Before the year 2000, the House of Justice considered that the “unity of nations” referred to “the Lesser Peace” which would be brought about after “catastrophic events” and would lead to a “world government.”³ It also considered the phrase “in this century” to mean the year 2000 of the Gregorian calendar.⁴ In 1995 this interpretation was communicated to Bahá’ís in Europe and the United States via a series of presentations given by a representative of the Universal House of Justice, Mr. Ali Nakhjavani. And because the Lesser Peace, according to the Guardian, was to synchronize with the completion of the “Edifices” of the Arc on Mount Carmel and the “the evolution of Bahá’í national and local institutions,”⁵ the House of Justice considered that its “hands were tied” and that, therefore, they needed to complete the Arc by the year 2000. At the time of Mr. Nakhjavani’s conferences, forty million dollars needed to be raised in order to complete both the Arc and the terraces below and above the Shrine of the Báb.ⁱⁱ

In 1999 the Universal House of Justice, in a statement to the press, confirmed that “the political unity of nations” referred to the “Lesser Peace” and, in the accompanying cover letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, inferred that it would be the result of “catastrophic events.”⁶ The press release clarified that this Lesser Peace was not to be brought about by the efforts of the Bahá’í community.

Within the Bahá’í community, there has been an expectation that, based on a 1953 letter from the Guardian, “a chain of events, momentous and possibly catastrophic in nature” would be preceded by the “entry by troops” into the Faith and would be followed by “mass conversion.”⁷ Hence, “promoting entry by troops” has been a constant theme in the teaching plans even to this day.⁸

After the year 2000 ended, there was no “entry by troops,” “catastrophic events,” “Lesser Peace,” “world government,” or “mass conversion” on a large scale. Consequently, the Universal House of Justice needed to reconsider / revise / change / correct its mistaken interpretation / elucidation / understanding of the terms “unity of nations” and “Lesser Peace.” The House requested its research department to investigate these concepts. In April of 2001 a ten-page document titled “Attainment of the Unity of Nations and the Lesser Peace” was provided that clarified the misunderstanding.⁹

To my knowledge there was no announcement by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’í world that it had changed its mistaken / erroneous interpretation or understanding of these concepts. The decision that resulted from the misunderstanding--to complete the construction of the edifices of the Arc by the year 2000—could not be changed, but, perhaps it would have been, if the misinterpretation had been realized sooner.¹⁰ And, unless the Arc is considered incomplete until the International Baha’i Library is constructed,¹¹ what has been permanently lost is the synchronization of the three events: completion of the Arc, the Lesser Peace, and the evolution of local and national assemblies. However, this would require another change in the understanding of The Universal House of Justice.

ⁱⁱ See the video recording “For Love of His Beauty” with Mr. Ali Nakhjavani, minute 26:45) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZG0Zprpgp0&t=1719s>

In 2012 Mr. Nakhjavani, during a question and answer period during a summer school session, stated that it was thought “by many friends and so on” that the “unity of nations” to be established in “this century” meant that the “Lesser Peace” would be established by the year 2000. He did not clarify that “and so on” included The Universal House of Justice.¹²

Regarding the judicial function of the Universal House of Justice in relation to personal situations (in contrast to its legislative function), I have heard of cases in which the House, when requested by an individual to reconsider a decision, not only did so, but changed its decision. This was probably due to the presentation of new facts or other types of information. The action of “changing” the first decision, depending on one’s point of view, could also be considered as an “abrogation” or “correction” of the earlier decision. It could also be said that the earlier decision was not “free from error.” The change in decision simply confirms that the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient. It also supports the idea that, in the House of Justice’s judicial function, as it has stated, the quality of its decisions depends on the quality of the information received from external sources.¹³

In summary, I agree with Peter Terry’s statement, “The House [of Justice] is not infallible in its interpretation of the divine Word, nor in a host of other actions which are not covered by its revealed mandate” (p70). When the Universal House of Justice decides to further clarify the parameters of its infallibility and possible fallibility (based on its own analysis of the 57 years of its functioning), I believe that, psychologically, it would help the friends to avoid the error of believing that the House of Justice has unlimited, unrestricted infallibility in all of its decisions. This, in turn, would help the friends to not be unnecessarily tested, as was my generation after the above occurred, when an obvious mistake is made. And when this happens, I believe that a transparent admission by the House of Justice would be wise.¹⁴ If God is forgiving, we can be forgiving also. It does not mean that we will not continue to deeply cherish the “light of guidance” that we receive from this divinely ordained institution.

¹ Udo Schaefer, “Infallible Institutions?” in Reason and Revelation: Studies in the Babi and Bahá’í Religions, (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press) 13, pp3-37.

² Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), 38-39.

³ Office of Public Information of the Universal House of Justice, “Peace among the Nations,” (with cover letter addressed to all National Spiritual Assemblies, March 8 1999).

⁴ Ruhíyyih Khánum held this same expectation. I recall her once stating that she hoped to live to the year 2000 so that she could witness the calamity. It was just like her to be simply curious about what it would be like. (She left this world on January 19, 2000. I am glad she didn’t have to witness it.)

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Bahá’í World, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), 73. (See: <https://bahai-library.com/writings/shoghieffendi/mbw/sec-43.html>)

⁶ Bahá’í International Community, Office of Public Information, Bahá’í World Centre, “Peace among the Nations,” (with cover letter addressed to all National Spiritual Assemblies, March 8 1999).

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 13 May 1953, Citadel of Faith: Messages to America/1947-1957, (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1965), 117.

⁸ See: “Promoting Entry by Troops: A Compilation of Extracts from Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice,” prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, October 1993.

⁹ Research Department, Memorandum to The Universal House of Justice, “Attainment of the Unity of Nations and the Lesser Peace,” 19 April 2001. See: http://bahai-library.com/uhj_unity_nations_peace. See also: Department of the Secretariat of The Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual, 19 April 2001.

¹⁰ Personally, I believe that it was divine guidance that led to the completion of the Arc. Even the realities that (1) the world situation was getting worse, (2) construction costs were increasing, and (3) supply chains might be interrupted provided enough justification to complete the arc by the year 2000.

¹¹ See: The Universal House of Justice, A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages, 1983-1992, (Riviera Beach, Fla.: Palabra Publications, 1992), 52.

¹² See on YouTube: “#3 Various Summer Schools Q&A - Priceless Reflections - Ali Nakhjavani – 2012” (See minute 58:54 [discussion of Lesser Peace begins at 52:43]) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kv2mouPODU>

¹³ “. . . the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient; like the Guardian, it wants to be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision, and like him it may well change its decision when new facts emerge....” (In a letter, dated 22 August 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual Bahá’í). “The Universal House of Justice in arriving at a decision needs to have before it all the facts involved in the matter. If, after making a decision, new facts emerge, it may well be changed” (Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 13 August 1981). “With regard to decisions taken by the Universal House of Justice itself, instructions it issues, and the relationship of these to the information supplied, it is obvious that the nature of a decision or instruction is affected by the information on which it is made” (Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 26 May 1993). “. . . the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient, and the friends should understand that there is a difference between infallibility and omniscience. Like the Guardian, the House of Justice wants to be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision, and like him it may well change its decision when new facts emerge, or in light of changed conditions at some point in the future. We have found nothing in the writings of Shoghi Effendi which suggests that the House of Justice would on any occasion reach a “wrong decision”.” (from a letter written by the Universal House of Justice, dated 14 June 1996, to an individual Bahá’í and circulated to National Spiritual Assemblies the world over) [In my opinion, any type of decision that needs to be changed is due to its being a wrong decision. In other words, if the decision was not wrong, it would not need to be changed.]

¹⁴ Personally, in relation to the error of “the Lesser Peace by the year 2000,” I made major life decisions regarding family finances (including sacrifices for the Arc Fund) and the future education of my four children. Fortunately, thanks to the grace of God, our lives have mysteriously worked out for the best!