

The Use of the Masculine Gender in the Bahá'í Writings

Extracts from Letters Written By and on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice ¹

prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

In many languages the use of the masculine gender, unless intended specifically to denote masculinity, is generic. For instance, in English we speak of the race of man, or mankind, in both instances meaning every member of the human race—men, women and children. There would be no reason to interpret “O Son of Being”, or “O Son of Man” as addressed only to males. It is the same with pronouns.

(5 April 1981, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [1]

The principle of the equality of men and women which is firmly established by the Author of the Faith and forms one of the basic tenets of our belief will be fully realized as the human race matures in its understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Equality will be achieved as a direct result of the adjustments the friends are required to make in their attitude towards this fundamental issue so essential to the establishment of the unity of mankind, and despite the exigencies of the languages in which the revealed Words have been received and in which they have been translated. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “...in His estimate there is no question of sex.” “In the estimation of God there is no gender.” ²

The translation of the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith must of necessity agree in full detail with the original in conveying the exact meaning of the Words as they have been revealed. The Guardian did not even approve the changing of pronouns in Bahá'í prayers when they are read. Therefore, no deviation in translation from the actual meaning of the words, to accommodate the general trend of thought and behaviour affecting a language, is conceivable, unless, of course, the equivalent of the original word does not exist in a given language. In one of His talks quoted in “The Promulgation of Universal Peace”, page 76, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

The truth is that all mankind are the creatures and servants of one God, and in His estimate all are human. “Man” is a generic term applying to all humanity. The biblical statement “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” does not mean that woman

¹ This compilation was first posted in plain-text at http://worldlanguageprocess.org/essays/uhj_on_gender.htm (2002). It was formatted and reposted at https://bahai-library.com/compilation_masculine_gender_writings (2021).

² “The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), pp. 174 and 374.

was not created. The image and likeness of God apply to her as well. In Persian and Arabic there are two distinct words translated into English as man: one meaning man and woman collectively, the other distinguishing man as male from woman the female. The first word and its pronoun are generic, collective; the other is restricted to the male. This is the same in Hebrew.

Concerning the English language, it is interesting that the 1983 edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary gives “human being” as the first meaning of “man”; and only as the fourth meaning “adult human male, opp. to woman, boy, or both.” Therefore, the use of “man” or “men” in translating the intent of the Revealer of the Words to embrace all humankind seems a good choice.

(20 May 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [2]

We have considered your memorandum of 6 June 1989 and appreciate the points you have raised concerning the sensitivity of women, both Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í, to the use of what are construed to be exclusively masculine words in the Sacred Writings of the Bahá’í Faith.

While we recognize that the problem of gender in language presents difficulties at the present time, we must also recognize that the problem varies considerably from language to language, depending on the number of grammatical genders that each language uses.

Since the immediate concern in the translations ... centres on usage in English, we shall concentrate on the problem as it exists in that language. English is fortunate in having a common gender. The problem of gender-specific nouns is, therefore, susceptible of two lines of solution. One is to change the usage of nouns, the other is to permit the consciousness of sexual equality to modify the meaning of nouns as now used. Undoubtedly both courses will be followed in the evolution of the language. The word “doctor” for example, is now clearly of common gender in English, although originally masculine. Our feeling is that, in general, it is preferable to permit the change of consciousness to change the meaning that people attribute to the words, rather than to press the use of forms of words that seem contrived and, to many people, ridiculous—a reaction that does not help the advancement of the cause of the equality of the sexes. Following this reasoning, as you will have noted, we used the word “chairman” in relation to the sessions of the International Convention, although all were women.

In respect to the Sacred Writings, the originals, clearly, cannot be changed, and we do not feel at liberty to change Shoghi Effendi’s usage of “man” or “mankind” to “humanity” or “humankind”.

(27 November 1989, from a memorandum from the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá’í Office of Public Information) [3]

There are, as you indicate, many conventions of expression in use at the present time which reflect the male dominance of human society in the past. We must hope that as the consciousness of human beings changes and as the equality of the sexes comes to be accepted in theory and in practice throughout the world, the meanings attached to certain words will change accordingly, as will the usage of words. Language is a living thing and changes as the culture which it reflects changes....

The important point here is that one will not persuade people to change their usage of language until one has convinced them of the true understanding of the reality of things; but when they once understand the truth, the meaning that they attach to words changes, and thus a change in usage becomes much less important, if not irrelevant.

(8 March 1990, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual) [4]

... the House of Justice is well aware that, at various times, the meaning attached to certain words becomes influenced by emotions and can assume overtones which are offensive to some segments of the population. In the case of the generic terms in the English translations of the Bahá'í Writings, the tendency to take such terms as being applicable only to males is a reflection of the male-dominated society which has prevailed for so long, and to which there is a reaction from women who are seeking legitimate recognition and equality. Bahá'ís can well sympathize with such concerns, while pointing out that language is a living thing and that the intended meaning of the generic terms will doubtless become more readily apparent as the influence of the Bahá'í commitment to equality of the sexes permeates human society more fully.

It is understandable that some non-Bahá'ís are initially disturbed by the use of those terms in our Writings which are associated conventionally with a male orientation. Seekers after truth should be assisted to determine the intended meaning of such terms through reference to the Bahá'í Teachings, rather than through assuming that these terms have the meaning now prevalent in the world; thus they will find that they should seek that meaning which is consistent with equality of men and women, and which also happens to be the primary meaning associated with classical usage of the English language to convey spiritual truths. A similar approach is called for when a seeker encounters a number of other terms and phrases in the Writings.

Members of the Bahá'í community should not fall unconsciously into the error of labelling the Bahá'í Writings as being “sexist” or “discriminatory”, or of feeling a need to apologize to non-Bahá'ís for the terms used. Such an attitude would be indicative of a lack of understanding of the Bahá'í approach to this issue, and a lack of confidence in the position adopted by the Faith in regard to use of generic terms.

(26 September 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [5]

We regret the very long delay in responding to your request ... for help in locating something in print regarding the use of the male pronoun in the Bahá'í Writings. In this regard we are enclosing a copy of extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to individual believers regarding the use of the masculine gender in the Writings. Related to this subject is the reference on page seven in the introduction to "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas" where it is stated that it is apparent from the writings of the Guardian that "where Bahá'u'lláh has given a law as between a man and a woman, it applies 'mutatis mutandis' between a woman and a man unless the context makes this impossible".

(26 June 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [6]

In relating the Teachings of the Faith to the discussion of contemporary social issues, Bahá'í publications are challenged by the need to adapt editorial policies to the ever-changing public perceptions of those issues, without compromising the fundamental Bahá'í principles and concepts involved. The question of "gender inclusive language" guidelines is a case in point. The editors of a publication like the Journal will certainly have acquainted themselves with the various points of view on the subject current among the readership which they and their authors are addressing, together with prevailing modes of expression. These factors will exercise an influence on Bahá'í editorial policy, but must do so within the context of the Teachings.

Clearly, the Scriptures of the Faith, as revealed by the Founders and interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, impose their own requirements on Bahá'í authors and editors alike. On the one hand, an editorial board will quite properly be concerned to take into account the preferences and convictions common to the great majority of the intended readers of its publication. On the other, Bahá'í authors must be left entirely free to discuss the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in its own terms and language as set out in the Bahá'í Scriptures themselves and in their authorized interpretations, irrespective of current fashions in academic and other public discourse. That is to say: the Sacred Writings of the Faith and those of the Guardian do not use the "gender inclusive language" now in vogue, and it would therefore not be appropriate for the Editorial Board to impose such current standards on Bahá'í authors.

(26 July 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [7]

Your letter of 19 September 1996 expressing your concern regarding the use of inclusive masculine terms in the Sacred Writings has been received by the Universal House of Justice, and we have been asked to reply.

The point you have raised regarding the sensitivity of women, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, to the use of masculine nouns and pronouns when referring to God is noted and your concern appreciated. It is recognized that the question of gender in language presents difficulties at this time; however, it must also be recognized that the problem varies considerably from language to language, depending on the number of grammatical genders that each language uses.

English is fortunate in having a common gender. Therefore, the issue of gender-specific nouns may be resolved either by changing the usage of nouns, or by permitting the consciousness of sexual equality to modify the meaning of nouns as they are now used. No doubt both courses will be followed in the evolution of the language. It is generally considered preferable to permit the change of consciousness to change the meaning that people attribute to words, rather than to press the use of forms of words, which may seem contrived.

Likewise, when considering the manner in which masculine nouns and pronouns are used to refer to God, it is important to bear in mind that when Bahá'u'lláh was revealing His Scriptures He had to use language and forms of expression which could be understood by those whom He was addressing. This is the case with every Prophet; He is compelled to use old forms through which He will raise humanity to a new level of understanding. In Arabic and Persian, as in English and most European languages, it has been customary to refer to God as "Lord" and "Father", rather than "Lady" and "Mother". While using the conventional wording Bahá'u'lláh approached the matter on two levels. In relation to God He devoted vast numbers of Tablets to conveying the truth that God is not only neither male nor female, but is far above all human understanding. If you study deeply the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that portray both the transcendence and immanence of God you will find that the entire question of sex in this context falls into total insignificance.

On the human level, the Bahá'í Teachings stress again and again the equality of men and women. They do not ignore the differences between the sexes, but repeatedly emphasize their equality. This is a universal concept, irrespective of the language in which it is expressed. Regarding the pronouns which refer to the Deity, in Arabic there is a distinction between the masculine and feminine; however, the Persian language does not make such a distinction in pronouns between the sexes. As you have noted in your letter, the style of translation into English was set by Shoghi Effendi. In respect to the Sacred Writings, the originals clearly cannot be changed, and the House of Justice does not feel it appropriate to change Shoghi Effendi's usage of certain nouns in his translations. The Guardian did not even approve the changing of pronouns in Bahá'í prayers when they are read. Therefore, no deviation in translation from the actual meaning of the words, to accommodate the general trend of thought and behavior affecting a language, is permissible, unless, of course, the equivalent of the original word does not exist in a given language.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “...in His estimate there is no question of sex.” “In the estimation of God there is no gender.”

The challenge, therefore, is to accept the use of pronouns in their generic sense, which will lead one to view the matter in terms of a spiritual response, rather than one of semantics.

The principle of the equality of men and women, which is firmly established by Bahá’u’lláh and forms one of the basic tenets of our Faith, will be fully realized as the human race matures in its understanding of the significance of His Revelation. Equality will be achieved as a direct result of the transformations the believers make in their attitudes toward this fundamental issue, and despite the exigencies of the languages in which the revealed Words have been received and translated.

(24 October 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [8]

In response to your email of 21 August 1998 requesting guidance concerning the use of “gender-sensitive language” for use in your “discussions with potential authors and in the editing of their work”, we are able to provide the following comments.

The Universal House of Justice has previously stated in response to a similar query that the use of “gender inclusive language” is one of the many contemporary issues which challenge Bahá’í publications to adapt editorial policies to the ever-changing public perceptions without compromising the fundamental Bahá’í principles and concepts involved. It is the responsibility of authors and editors to acquaint themselves with the various points of view on the subject current among the readership which they are addressing, together with the prevailing modes of expression. These factors will exercise an influence on Bahá’í editorial policy, but must do so within the context of the Teachings.

Clearly, the Scriptures of the Faith, as revealed by the Founders and interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian, impose their own requirements on Bahá’í authors and editors alike. On the one hand, an editorial board will quite properly be concerned to take into account the preferences and convictions common to the great majority of the intended readers of its publication. On the other, Bahá’í authors must be left entirely free to discuss the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh in its own terms and language as set out in the Bahá’í Scriptures themselves and in their authorized interpretations, irrespective of current fashions in academic and other public discourse.

It is not surprising that the struggle to achieve such a balance during an era of unprecedented social and intellectual turmoil is very challenging to Bahá’í publishers. Inevitably,

there will be certain segments of the public who will object in some degree to whatever resolution is arrived at in any given case, but this should not unduly distress either Bahá'í authors or Bahá'í editors.

(16 September 1998, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í Publisher) [9]

The Universal House of Justice has received your email message of 17 September 1999 requesting guidance on the question of gender as it relates to the Deity and the use of gender specific pronouns when referring to God.

When considering the manner in which masculine pronouns are used to refer to God, it is important to bear in mind that when Bahá'u'lláh was revealing His Scriptures He had to use language and forms of expression which could be understood by those whom He was addressing. This is the case with every Prophet; He is compelled to use old forms through which He will raise humanity to a new level of understanding. In Arabic and Persian, as in English and most European languages, it has been customary to refer to God as “Lord” and “Father”, rather than “Lady” and “Mother”. While using the conventional wording, Bahá'u'lláh devoted vast numbers of Tablets to conveying the truth that God is not only neither male nor female, but also is far above all human understanding. If one studies deeply the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that portray both the transcendence and immanence of God it becomes clear that the entire subject of sex in this context is essentially irrelevant....

The style of translation into English was set by Shoghi Effendi, and in respect to the Sacred Writings the originals clearly cannot be changed. The Guardian did not even approve the changing of pronouns in Bahá'í prayers when they are read. Therefore, when translating the Sacred Writings it is not possible to alter the actual meaning of the words to accommodate the general trend of thought and behavior affecting a language.

The challenge, therefore, is to accept the use of pronouns in their generic rather than gender sense, which will lead one to view issues in terms of a spiritual response, rather than one of semantics. The Bahá'í Teachings stress again and again the equality of men and women. They do not ignore the differences between the sexes, but repeatedly emphasize their equality. This is a universal principle of the Faith, irrespective of the language in which it is expressed.

(7 October 1999, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [10]