

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

Department of the Secretariat

20 June 1991

Mr. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice referred to the Research Department your letter of 17 April 1991 in which you asked for guidance in the matter of capitalization of pronouns referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and other questions that came to your attention while you were working on the translation into Portuguese of "The Secret of Divine Civilization".

We are now able to send you the enclosed copy of the memorandum dated 23 May 1991, and its two attachments, prepared in response.

The House of Justice commends you on the valuable contribution you have made to the range of Bahá'í literature in Portuguese and wishes you well in your continuing efforts in this important field of service to the Faith.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Ethna Archibald

For Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure (with two attachments)

M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 23 May 1991

From: The Research Department

"THE SECRET OF DIVINE CIVILIZATION"

The Research Department has studied the questions raised by Mr. [redacted] in his letter of 17 April 1991 to the Universal House of Justice. Mr. [redacted] is engaged in translating "The Secret of Divine Civilization" into Portuguese. Many of the questions he poses in his letter result from a close study of this book. We provide the following response.

1. Capitalization of Pronouns

Mr. [redacted] lists a number of places in "The Secret of Divine Civilization" where the pronouns that refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá are capitalized. Mr. [redacted] indicates that he is aware that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was known as the Master during the Ministry of Bahá'u'lláh and he enquires whether His station, at that time, was "already so special that He should refer to Himself with [a] capital letter"?

In contrast to many European languages, in Persian, personal pronouns are never capitalized. 'Abdu'l-Bahá followed this established rule and did not capitalize the pronouns that refer to Him. When the book was translated into English, the particular translator employed the convention, common in English, of capitalizing pronouns. It is interesting to note that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá signed His name in English, He used a combination of upper and lower case letters. He, typically, wrote "abdul Baha abbas" -- the reference to Bahá'u'lláh being the only word He capitalized.

On the same principle it is the policy of the Universal House of Justice when approving translations of Tablets written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, generally to have "me" and "my" and "mine" in lower case, following the example given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the writing of His own name in Roman letters. Pronouns used in referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by someone else, however, are normally capitalized. This policy can be seen in "Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982).

With regard to English usage, Shoghi Effendi endorsed the capitalization of all pronouns referring to the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as a mark of respect for the Stations of the Central Figures of the Faith. A letter dated 22 November 1949 written on his behalf states:

In regard to your question about capitalizing the pronouns: the Guardian realizes this looks a little strange to non-Bahá'is, but he feels we, being believers, and having the full sense of the Stations of the Central Figures of our Faith, should do this as a sign of respect under all circumstances.

It can, nevertheless, be noticed in the Guadian's translations of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets and Prayers, that sometimes he capitalizes "Me" and "My" and sometimes not, depending upon the context in which Bahá'u'lláh was referring to Himself; in humility towards God or in majesty towards mankind.

As to translations of the Bahá'í Writings and literature written by Bahá'ís in other languages, Shoghi Effendi in letters written on his behalf, extracts from which are cited below, stressed the importance of conforming to the rules of the particular language:

It is not necessary to use capital letters, as we do in English, for the personal pronouns of the Master, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, as long as there is no comparable usage of them in Norwegian. The same applies to the word Bahá'í. We do not try to introduce new forms into a language, but in English the precedent exists in the Bible and in good usage.

(24 August 1949 to an individual believer)

He is interested in accomplishing two things -- he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

If the possessive and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns in French are never capitalized where they stand for "God", then this should not be done in the Bahá'í literature. If there is a precedent for doing so in the French language, however, they should be. The same is true of the attributes of God.

(15 February 1957 to the French National Translation and Publication Committee)

2. Reference to "we (i.e., Muslims)", p. 43

Mr. [redacted] enquires whether the insertion of the parenthetic term "(i.e., Muslims)" could convey the idea that 'Abdu'l-Bahá considered Himself a Muslim or rather, if, in this sentence, the Master might be referring to the Persian people. The parenthetic insertion does not occur in the original Persian text. It has been added by the translator. The Research Department has not been able to locate any authorized interpretation of this particular passage. From a study of the context, however, it appears that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is comparing the energetic activities of the Protestants in raising up the "Word of God" and in increasing "the number of believers" with the failure and inactivity of the "Muslim religious authorities". The "we", in this case, might well be a reference to such Muslims as have failed in their duty as defenders of their faith.

It is also useful to consider that "The Secret of Divine Civilization" was addressed to a non-Bahá'í audience at a time when modernization and reform were important contemporary issues in Iran. The book was first published

anonymously. It is, therefore, suggested that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of "we" and "us" throughout the text might well have intended to communicate the fact that He was writing as a concerned citizen who was offering constructive ideas pertinent to the ultimate well-being of His native land.

3. Identity of "the ruler", p. 61

As to the identity of "the ruler who is fostering peace and tranquillity and at the same time devoting more energy than warmongers to the accumulation of weapons ... on the grounds that peace and harmony can only be brought about by force", the Research Department has not, to date, been able to identify this ruler. It is interesting to note that, when the Persian text of this passage is studied, it could also be read in such a way as to represent a generalization about rulers who engage in this type of hypocritical behaviour, rather than necessarily specifying a particular contemporary "ruler". An earlier English translation, published in 1918 under the title of "Mysterious Forces of Civilization" reflected the more general sense. A photocopy of the page is attached. With regard to this translation, please note that the inverted commas around part of the text are not found in the original text.

It is the view of the Research Department that, if the Master intended a particular "ruler", it will be difficult to identify him since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description could well have applied to most of the kings who were addressed, individually, by Bahá'u'lláh. One possible candidate could be Napoleon III, who was characterized by Shoghi Effendi in "The Promised Day Is Come" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), pp. 49-50, as "the most outstanding monarch of his day in the West". As such, Napoleon would, no doubt, have also been well known in the East. However, in the absence of an authoritative text, this suggestion remains in the realm of speculation.

4. Bahá'í View of Capital Punishment, p. 100

Mr. [redacted] enquires about the Bahá'í position on the death penalty. We provide for Mr. [redacted]'s study, passages from the Writings and letters of the Universal House of Justice, from which a number of relevant principles can be drawn. For example:

- The community has the right to defend and protect its rights, but not to seek revenge, by the imposition of a legal punishment (extract 1)
- The power of the divine Revelation to transform human behaviour is a powerful means of preventing crime (extracts 1 and 3)
- While the "Kitáb-i-Aqdas" invokes capital punishment, it also provides for the alternative penalty of life imprisonment (extracts, 2, 3, and 4)
- The punishments for murder and arson mentioned in "A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh" (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1973), are intended for a future condition of society and will have to be supplemented and applied by the Universal House of Justice (extracts 3 and 4)

- Capital punishment could be prescribed for wilful murder and arson depending on the degree of the offence and extenuating circumstances (extracts 3 and 4)

5. "... a second volume", p. 106

With regard to the "second volume" anticipated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which He would further elucidate important "subjects which today are neglected", the Master did not write "a second volume" addressed to the people of Persia. He did, however, write "A Treatise on Statesmanship" in 1893. This work which, to date, has not been translated into English, is addressed to the Bahá'í community of Persia.

6. Works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Revealed during the Ministry of Bahá'u'lláh

Mr. [redacted] notes two examples of works revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the life-time of Bahá'u'lláh -- the Tablet concerning the Tradition of the "Hidden Treasure" and "The Secret of Divine Civilization" -- and he poses a number of questions. He asks whether "The Secret of Divine Civilization" was revealed at the request of Bahá'u'lláh, whether other works were written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during this time period and, if so, whether they have been translated into English. He also enquires whether it would be correct to say that during Bahá'u'lláh's ministry, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would only write a book or a Tablet at the request of His Father.

In a Tablet, quoted in Persian in the book "The Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1986), p. 42, by Muḥammad-'Alí Faizi, Bahá'u'lláh explains the circumstances under which "The Secret of Divine Civilization" came to be revealed. He states that one day, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in His presence, He asked the Greatest Branch ('Abdu'l-Bahá) to write a number of pages on the causes of the world's destruction and of its prosperity and salvation, as a means both of reducing the resistance of those who were inflexibly opposed to change and of preparing them to listen to the Call of God.

The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are the fruit of over fifty years of prolific labour, from His early twenties to the end of His life. They consist of personal correspondence, general Tablets, Tablets on specific themes, books, prayers, poems, public talks, and recorded conversations. (See the article, "The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" by Amín Banání in "The Bahá'í World", vol. XV (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976) for additional information). One other major work which was written during the life-time of Bahá'u'lláh, which has been translated into English, is "A Travellers Narrative" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980). This book, written around 1886, was published anonymously. It is a history of the episode of the Báb. It presents a brief and dispassionate account of that portentous Dispensation in a simple and moving narrative.

With regard to whether 'Abdu'l-Bahá only wrote at the instruction of His Father; while in certain instances Bahá'u'lláh specifically instructed 'Abdu'l-Bahá to write on designated topics, it would not be accurate to say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote only at Bahá'u'lláh's explicit bidding. It is useful to consider Shoghi Effendi's descriptions of the degree of rapport and unity of purpose that existed between Bahá'u'lláh and His Son. For example, in "God Passes By" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), pp. 325-326, he states that Bahá'u'lláh's "purpose" had been "thoroughly infused into the mind of

'Abdu'l-Bahá" and that "His Spirit" had "profoundly" permeated "His being". And, in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh", Shoghi Effendi writes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá "gets His light, His inspiration and sustenance direct from the Fountainhead of the Bahá'í Revelation" and that "He reflects even as a clear and perfect Mirror the rays of Bahá'u'lláh's glory". Based on the foregoing, it is inconceivable that, in the absence of any specific instructions from His Father, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's actions could have, in any way, run counter to Bahá'u'lláh's will and purpose.

7. The First Person to Recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God

Mr. [redacted] refers to several sources in the literature of the Bahá'í Faith where the first person to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God is identified. Those named include 'Abdu'l-Bahá (see Balyuzi's book "'Abdu'l-Bahá The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh" (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), p. 13), Mirzá Áqá Ján and Shaykh Ḥasán-i-Zunúzí (see "Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory" (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980, p. 109 and pp. 67-68). He asks how this apparent contradiction is to be resolved.

It is evident that the term "the first" to recognize Bahá'u'lláh had different meanings according to the context of its use. For example, given 'Abdu'l-Bahá's designation as "the Mystery of God" and His unique relationship with His Father, it is possible that the reference is to the spiritual realm, a realm which transcends time. While, in the case of Mirzá Áqá Ján and Shaykh Ḥasán-i-Zunúzí, the application of the term is necessarily in the context of the human plane of existence.

In relation to Mirzá Áqá Ján, Shoghi Effendi in "God Passes By", p. 115, clearly affirms that Mirzá Áqá Ján was "the first to believe" in Bahá'u'lláh, and that

to him, Bahá'u'lláh, more than to anyone else, was moved to disclose, at this critical juncture, a glimpse of the as yet unrevealed glory of His station.

Hence, one possible distinction between Mirzá Áqá Ján and Shaykh Ḥasán-i-Zunúzí could well relate to the degree or extent of their recognition, with primacy being accorded to Mirzá Áqá Ján.

8. Designer of the House of Worship in 'Ishqábád

Mr. [redacted] refers to statements concerning the designer of the House of Worship in 'Ishqábád, which are contained in "The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh", vol. 4, p. 122, by Mr. Taherzadeh and in Mr. Balyuzi's "'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant", pp. 109-110. In the former, mention is made of the fact that 'Abdu'l-Bahá conceived a plan for a nine-sided building and that the main features of the design were prepared by Ustád 'Alí-Akbar-i-Banná, while in the second book, the general design is attributed to the Master. Mr. [redacted] enquires whether both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Ustád 'Alí-Akbar-i-Banná can be described as the authors of the general design of this House of Worship.

'Abdu'l-Bahá defined the essential architectural character of the Bahá'í House of Worship as consisting of a nine-sided, circular building. All Houses of Worship, therefore, incorporate these design features and the Master's instructions guide the architects in the preparation of their unique, individual designs. The design of the first 'Ishqábád Temple, prepared by Ustád 'Ali-Akbar-i-Banná, was likewise influenced and inspired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's archetypal design. Shoghi Effendi, in "God Passes By", p. 300, refers to the Master's intense personal interest in the construction of the 'Ishqábád House of Worship. He affirms that it was "fostered by Him at every stage in its development".

Attachments 2

"The Mysterious Forces of Civilization" (Chicago:
Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1918)

Translated by Johanna Dawud

MYSTERIOUS FORCES

without inward moral advancement, may be likened unto confused dreams which cannot be interpreted; and sensual enjoyment, apart from spiritual perfection, is like unto the mirage which he that is athirst believes to be water.

For, the fulfilling of the will and pleasure of God, and the advancement of the peace and well-being of the people cannot be perfectly achieved by external civilization alone. That the nations of Europe, indeed, have not yet progressed to any great height of moral civilization is manifest from the thoughts and acts of them all.

Reflect, for example, that the principal design of the various states today is to seize possession of each other's territories and to destroy one another, and that, although they are thus moved by intense inward hatred, they yet make a great show and profession of extreme friendliness, love and brotherhood. It is commonly said that "the king, who makes peace and loves reconciliation, is aiming more than those kings who have war in their hearts at the building of huge battleships and the increase of military forces, because reconciliation and peace cannot be attained without large armaments."

Under cloak of this, they are continually stirring, both by day and by night, with great efforts to make vast provision and preparation for war. The poor people, the poor subjects of these kings, those who gain their livelihood by the sweat of

EXTRACTS ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Extract 1

He is God!

O thou handmaid who art a captive of the beauty of the All-Glorious:

I have received thy letter, including thy question as to the wisdom of capital punishment, it being the most odious of all things in such a holy Dispensation as this, that hath come down as a mercy to all mankind.

Know thou, it is an established principle that man hath not the right to seek revenge, for vengeance is verily a thing blameworthy and detestable in the sight of God. He chastiseth whomsoever He willeth, with whatsoever means He chooseth. But legal punishment, far from being an act of vengeance, is in reality a bounty, and kindness itself. Although to outward seeming it is vengeance, it is like the requital by a father who punisheth his son for the son's wrongdoing: seemingly infliction, but truly benediction. For this kind of torment proceedeth from the father's tender and pitying heart, warding off from his child all that is base, driving him on to all excellence; and from it, step by step, will the cherished son be led into perfections and all good ways of life.

The community of man hath the right to defend and protect its rights. Furthermore, this is defined as the imposition of a legal punishment, not as the wreaking of vengeance.... It is incumbent upon human society to expend all its forces on the education of the people, and to copiously water men's hearts with the sacred streams that pour down from the Realm of the All-Merciful, and to teach them the manners of Heaven and spiritual ways of life, until every member of the community of man will be schooled, refined, and exalted to such a degree of perfection that the very committing of a shameful act will seem in itself the direst infliction and most agonizing of punishments, and man will fly in terror and seek refuge in his God from the very idea of crime, as something far harsher and more grievous than the punishment assigned to it.

O handmaid of God! Once the hearts of men are purified, and their secret thoughts are cleansed, and their perception hath been freed of taint, then none will venture to perform any deed except such deeds as please the Lord. Nay rather, any action that is inconsistent with the high, God-given dignity of humankind, will seem to him an anguish more afflictive than hellfire, more terrible than eternal punishment in the bottomless pit.

At whatever time the heavenly Teachings are spread abroad, and their pillars are set firm and deep, and their walls raised up, and their rule is well established over the hearts, it is certain that man will not raise his hand against man to the point where such punishments as imprisonment, flogging, torment or the forfeiture of life would ever be called for. "And God sufficeth the believers in their fight."¹ This verily is peace for all mankind, and complete tranquillity, and the highest perfection destined by God for man.

1. Qur'án 33:25

As for thee, thou must blaze out with the fire of God's love, and sway and dance from drinking the wine of His knowledge, and tremble with joy in the streaming winds of grace from Heaven, and cry out in the name of the Lord. In the meetings of the friends, speak thou eloquent words, and fluently expound the truth, and set forth proofs that are brilliant as the rising sun.

Greetings be unto thee, and praise.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet to an individual believer - translated from the Arabic)

Extract 2

...according to the explicit text of the Aqdas, capital punishment is permitted, but also an alternative has been definitely provided whereby the rigours of such a condemnation can be seriously mitigated. Bahá'u'lláh has given us a choice, and has, therefore, left us free to use our own discretion within certain limitations imposed by His law.²

(From a letter dated 19 January 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Extract 3

One of the purposes of divine Revelation is to educate human beings in the right way of living, so that they will know how they should behave and will refrain from criminal acts because the very thought of performing them would be horrifying. However, we are at the present time far from the attainment of this goal, and Bahá'u'lláh has provided in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas those basic laws which He knows mankind will need during this Dispensation in order to establish the unity of mankind and upraise the standard of justice in the world. If you read Chapter 77 of "Some Answered Questions" you will see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has developed this theme more fully.

Bahá'u'lláh warns mankind in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself not to forget that these are the laws of Him Who is the Most Merciful of the Merciful. It is God Who knows what mankind needs and we should never imagine that we can be more merciful than He.

You say that you were particularly disturbed by the punishments prescribed for certain offences, presumably those for theft, murder and arson. As is explained in Note 42 on page 64 of the "Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", these punishments are intended for a future condition of society and will have to be supplemented and applied by the Universal House of Justice. The punishment for theft, for example, says that for the third offence a mark must be placed on the thief's forehead (nothing is said about branding), so that people will be warned of his proclivities. All details of how the mark is to be applied, how long it must be worn, on what conditions it may be removed, as well as the seriousness of various degrees of theft have been left by Bahá'u'lláh for the Universal House of Justice to decide when the law has to be applied. Similarly, only the fundamental principles of the punishments for murder and arson are given in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Wilful murder is to be punished either by capital punishment or life imprisonment.

2. The alternative is life imprisonment.

Such matters as degrees of offence and whether any extenuating circumstances are to be taken into account, and which of the two prescribed punishments is to be the norm are left to the Universal House of Justice to decide in the light of prevailing conditions when the law is in operation. Arson, as you yourself can see from the newspapers, is becoming an increasingly frequent offence -- scarcely a day passes without some building being burned or blown up, often causing agonizing death to innocent people. Bahá'u'lláh prescribes that a person who burns a house intentionally is to be burned or imprisoned for life, but again, the application of these punishments and the fixing of degrees of offence are left to the Universal House of Justice. Obviously there is a tremendous difference in the degree of the offence of a person who burns down an empty warehouse from that of one who sets fire to a school full of children.

(From a letter dated 1 September 1975 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Extract 4

The law of Bahá'u'lláh prescribes the death penalty for murder and arson, with the alternative of life imprisonment. This, however, is a law designed for a future state of society, and the various details of the law, such as degrees of offence, etc. have been left for the Universal House of Justice to decide upon when the time comes. You can say, therefore, that in principle the Bahá'í Faith accepts the correctness of capital punishment for murder, but the details of the Bahá'í law on such matters have not been specified as this is not a matter of practical importance to Bahá'í communities at the present time. Whether capital punishment should be applied specifically in cases of terrorism when murder is not involved is also a matter for future legislation by the Universal House of Justice.

(From a letter dated 20 June 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Local Spiritual Assembly)