

Epistemological Implications of the Gradated Claims to Divine Authority in the Bahá'í Writings & Reflections on Infallibility

William S. Hatcher

Introduction

Historically, claims to divine authority, and in particular to infallible authority, have been most often associated with such things as power politics (for example, the supposed divinity of the Roman emperors or, in modern times, of the Emperor of Japan), religious dogmatism (as in the Catholic claim to papal infallibility), the preservation of privilege (as in the “divine right” of the European kings), or with psychopathic and manipulative cult leaders. In the light of this history, it would be very easy to dismiss all possible claims to divine authority as *prima facie* false and, when such claims are made, to consider them extravagant and exotic.

However, this history only shows that claims to infallible authority should be closely scrutinized and critically examined. It does not exclude that *de facto* infallibility (accompanied or not by a claim to such authority) has played a role in the rise of human civilization. Indeed, as we show in the second of the following two essays, the facts attending the negentropic rise of civilization suggests that such “external truth referents” may well have been an essential and periodic feature of humanity’s forward movement.

That such external truth referents have indeed existed is the fundamental premise of the theory known as “progressive revelation,” first fully articulated by Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. According to Bahá'u'lláh, it is only God’s periodic intervention into history through an infallible Manifestation (or Prophet) that has generated human progress. If left to his own natural devices, and absent such divine intervention, man would inevitably have erred not merely frequently but continually. The human rational faculty is like a perfect mirror in a dark room. Unless illumined by the light of valid inner experience, it cannot be truly effective.

Based on explicit texts from the Bahá'í writings and also on certain considerations arising from the modern philosophy of science, the two essays which follow attempt to show the compatibility and complementarity between autonomous scientific and rational thought, on one hand, and reference to valid divine texts, on the other. Indeed, according to Bahá'í teachings, it is God Himself who has ordained science as a source of knowledge, independent of and complementary to religion. Thus, science is seen by Bahá'ís not just as the fruit of human striving after truth, but as a divinely given means of truth seeking which, from the beginning, was meant to function in conjunction with religion. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has said, “. . . science or the attribute of scientific penetration is supernatural” (*Foundations* 61).

Thus, recognition and acceptance of the fact that there are and have been valid sources of divine authority in history does not negate science and rationality, but rather enables them to function more efficiently for the good of all.

William S. Hatcher
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Abstract

Shoghi Effendi has stated that “the whole theory of Divine Revelation rests on the infallibility of the Prophet.” It is elsewhere explained (e.g., the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and *Some Answered Questions*) that the infallibility of the Manifestations is “essential” in that, among other things, They are “omniscient at will.” However, the Bahá'í teachings complete the theory of Divine Revelation with a (complementary) theory of the Bahá'í Covenant that clearly rests on the attribution of various graded forms of infallibility to other Persons ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi) and Institutions (the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice). These forms of “conferred infallibility” are based upon the spiritual authority of Bahá'u'lláh as Manifestation. They endow the conferees with freedom from error without presuming them to possess the essentialist attribute of omniscience. This paper undertakes to examine the epistemological implications of these various forms of infallibility for the scientific study of the phenomenon of revelation in general, and of the Bahá'í Revelation in particular. We also examine the complementarity between those truths derived from systematic application of the scientific method of empirical verification, on one hand, and those derived from systematic exegesis of the texts of Bahá'u'lláh within the framework of the Covenant, on the other.

Résumé

Shoghi Effendi a écrit que «toute la théorie de la révélation divine repose sur l'infaillibilité du Prophète». Ailleurs (notamment dans le *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* et *Les leçons de Saint-Jean-d'Acre*), il est expliqué que l'infaillibilité des Manifestations est d'ordre «essentiel» en ce que ces Manifestations sont, entre autres, «omniscientes à volonté». Toutefois, les enseignements bahá'ís ajoutent à la théorie de la révélation divine une théorie (complémentaire) de l'alliance bahá'íe, qui repose clairement sur l'attribution de formes graduées d'infaillibilité à d'autres personnes ('Abdu'l-Bahá et Shoghi Effendi) et institutions (le Gardiennat et la Maison universelle de justice). Ces formes «d'infaillibilité conférée» reposent sur l'autorité spirituelle de Bahá'u'lláh en tant que Manifestation. Les personnes et institutions détentrices de ces formes d'infaillibilité conférée sont ainsi exemptées de l'erreur, sans qu'il soit présumé qu'elles possèdent cet attribut essentialiste qu'est l'omniscience. L'auteur se penche sur les implications épistémologiques des diverses formes d'infaillibilité aux fins de l'étude scientifique du phénomène de la révélation, en général, et de la révélation bahá'íe, en particulier. Il examine également la complémentarité qui existe entre les vérités qui découlent de l'application systématique de la méthode scientifique de la vérification empirique, d'une part, et celles qui découlent de l'exégèse systématique des textes de Bahá'u'lláh dans le cadre de l'Alliance, d'autre part.

Resumen

Shoghi Effendi ha escrito que “toda la teoría de Revelación Divina descansa en la infalibilidad del Profeta.” En otros escritos se explica (por ejemplo en el *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* y *Contestación a unas preguntas*) que la infalibilidad de las Manifestaciones es “esencial” en cuanto, entre otras cosas, Ellos son “omniscientes a voluntad.” Sin embargo, las enseñanzas bahá'ís completan la teoría de Revelación Divina con una teoría complementaria de la Alianza bahá'í que claramente presupone la atribución de varias formas graduadas de infalibilidad a otras Personas ('Abdu'l-Bahá y Shoghi Effendi) e Instituciones (la Guardianía y la Casa Universal de Justicia). Estas formas de “infalibilidad conferida” están basadas en la autoridad espiritual de Bahá'u'lláh como Manifestación. Confieren el don de estar libre de error sin presumir que los recipientes poseen el atributo esencial de omnisciencia. Este ensayo pretende examinar las implicaciones epistemológicas de estas varias formas de infalibilidad para el estudio científico del fenómeno de revelación en general, y de la Revelación bahá'í en particular. También examinamos la complementariedad entre aquellas verdades derivadas del uso sistemático del método científico de verificación empírica, por un lado, y aquellas derivadas de la exégesis sistemática de los textos de Bahá'u'lláh dentro del marco de la Alianza, por el otro.

Introduction: The Human Enterprise

The essence of the human enterprise is the progressive actualization of the full range of human spiritual potential through the acquisition of accurate, useful, and adequate knowledge of the structure of reality and the application of

that knowledge to the fulfillment of legitimate human needs, both tangible and intangible. We fulfill our needs by matching our knowledge of the structure of reality with our knowledge of the inner structure of the self (that is, God-created human nature) in such wise that need-satisfying configurations become accessible to us, both individually and collectively.¹

Science, Revelation, and Bahá'í Scholarship

According to the Bahá'í teachings, God has provided two sources of valid knowledge of reality: science and revelation. The object of knowledge is the same in both cases, but the methods are different. Science operates by systematizing the otherwise spontaneous experience of concrete reality and, by inductive generalization coupled with creative conceptualization, moving upward toward abstract, general principles (laws), which are then tested through further experience by the systematic application of certain *verification procedures*. The language of science is deliberately *linear* (extensive using metaphor and multiple meaning) and *minimalist*—accepting the objective existence of only those nonobservables strictly necessary to an explanation of observable configurations (which, as it turns out, is still considerable). Thus, the strengths of science are clarity, precision, and applicability (practicality). Its limitations derive primarily from its partialness (specialization, fragmentation), relative incompleteness,² and general lack of a global vision.

The Bahá'í Faith is explicitly based on the presumption of the divine authority of the Manifestation or Prophet (Messenger) of God. This presumption, in turn, participates in a general theory of revelation which explicitly ascribes infallibility to those who are recognized as valid Prophets of God. As Shoghi Effendi has stated,³ “. . . the whole theory of Divine Revelation rests on the infallibility of the Prophet, be He Christ, Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh, or one of the others. If They are not infallible, then They are not divine, and thus lose that essential link with God which, we believe, is that bond that educates men and causes all human progress” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Issues* 6).

If one accepts the premise of the divine infallibility of the Prophets, then it follows we have a priori knowledge that the logical content of any historically authenticated revelatory text is true. Under such a hypothesis, the application of the (mostly a posteriori) verification procedures of science to revelation are superfluous, except as part of an initial overall scientific metaverification that a given claim to divine revelation is indeed valid.

In contrast to the language of science, the language of revelation is *nonlinear* (extensively using metaphor and multiple meaning) and *maximalist* (as rich as possible, freely referring to nonobservables). Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly affirms that His revelation is a complete (though nonlinear and inexhaustible) description of reality.⁴

“Every single letter proceeding from Our mouth is endowed with such regenerative power as to enable it to bring into existence a new creation—a creation the magnitude of which is inscrutable to all save God. He verily hath knowledge of all things. . . . It is in Our power, should We wish it . . . to infuse into every letter such a force as to empower it to unfold all the knowledge of past and future ages” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 80–81). “Within the treasury of Our Wisdom there lies unrevealed a knowledge, one word of which, if we chose to divulge it to mankind, would cause every human being to recognize the Manifestation of God and to acknowledge His omniscience, would enable every one to discover the secrets of all the sciences, and to attain so high a station as to find himself wholly independent of all past and future learning” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 109).

That Bahá'u'lláh is speaking objectively and not in metaphorical hyperbole is made clear by such passages as the following: “Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God—exalted be His glory—is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. . . . It is God's all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate. It is an entity far removed above all that hath been and shall be” (*Tablets* 140–41). Further, with regard to the completeness of His Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh has said, for example: “Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted” (*Gleanings* 175).

In a similar vein Shoghi Effendi has stated straightforwardly that “There is an answer in the teachings for everything” (qtd. in *Scholarship* 10), and the Universal House of Justice has stated that “It is evident that the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavour and all academic disciplines” (qtd. in *Scholarship* 16).

In contrast to the language of science, the language of revelation tends to be “top-down”—beginning with certain very general and universal principles and then moving by specification and individuation toward the application of these principles to concrete human experience.

Thus, from the Bahá'í point of view, the strengths of revelation are its adequacy and its completeness, but its challenges lie in its complexity and the consequent frequent lack of an obvious linear meaning for a given portion

of the revelatory text. The student of revelation must be prepared to struggle in order to understand the different levels of meaning enfolded in the revelation.

To sum up: the study of science consists in confronting our experience of the phenomena of reality, formulating certain propositions whose meaning is a priori clear (because of the linearity of scientific language), and applying appropriate verification procedures to determine the truth or falsity of these propositions. We call this whole process *verification* for short. Studying the revelation consists in confronting various portions of the text of revelation, focusing on certain statements whose truth is presumed a priori, and then striving to determine various linear meanings of these statements. We will give the name *explication* (i.e., to “make explicit” the meanings of the text) to the process. Thus, for science, clarity of meaning is given a priori but truth is determined a posteriori. For the texts of revealed religion, truth is presumed a priori, but meaning is determined a posteriori.⁵

From the Bahá’í point of view, the respective methodologies of science and of prophetic religion are essentially complementary. Scientific knowledge provides us with “anchor points”—a reservoir or stock of highly verified linearized understandings (meanings) to serve as possible explications for the revelation. Revelation provides us with certain universal laws and principles, which guide us in pursuing science itself, as well as in matching up a given portion of the text of revelation with appropriate linearized meanings. The persistent, conjoint application of scientific verification on one hand and of careful and prayerful explication of revelation on the other yields the very thing we need for the successful prosecution of the human enterprise: truth, i.e., accurate, useful, and adequate knowledge of reality. One can hardly imagine a more succinct and pregnant statement of the Bahá’í view of this complementarity than the following passage from the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Know then that those mathematical questions which have stood the test of scrutiny and about the soundness of which there is no doubt are those that are supported by incontrovertible and logically binding proofs and by the rules of geometry as applied to astronomy, that are based on observations of the stars and careful astronomical research, and are also in conformity with the principles of the universal themes expounded in the divine sciences” (“Tablet of the Universe” 7). We will therefore define Bahá’í scholarship as the systematic, judicious, and disciplined application, to the data of reality, of the twin processes of scientific verification and explication of the texts of the Bahá’í revelation.

Infallibility and Textual Explication

Any attempt at the exegesis of Bahá’í texts must deal effectively not only with Bahá’u’lláh’s claim to be a valid Prophet of God, and thus intrinsically infallible, but also with the various other ancillary claims to divine authority connected with the history of the Bahá’í revelation.

In His Most Holy Book, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá’u’lláh asserts that the Manifestation is endowed with an essential infallibility which is the unique endowment of the station of Manifestation (36–37). In *Some Answered Questions*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicates this passage, affirming that the Manifestation is freed from error because He has all knowledge.⁶ Shoghi Effendi likewise describes the Manifestation as “omniscient at will” (*Unfolding Destiny* 449). Thus, in the Bahá’í revelatory paradigm, the Manifestation is not just a passive human channel through which divine knowledge flows (as in the Muslim paradigm of revelation) but is personally endowed with the essentialist attribute of divine omniscience.⁷ Another aspect of essential infallibility, explicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is the sinlessness or perfect virtue of the Manifestation (*Some Answered Questions* 173). We can thus reasonably take the conjunction of omniscience at will and perfect virtue as the logically defining attributes of essential infallibility from the Bahá’í standpoint: “. . . the supreme Manifestations certainly possess essential infallibility, therefore whatever emanates from Them is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality. . . . Whatever They say is the word of God, and whatever They perform is an upright action” (*Some Answered Questions* 173).

Conferred infallibility is the name given in the Bahá’í texts to any form of infallibility which is not essential but which is explicitly derived from the authority of the Manifestation. Since Bahá’u’lláh has clearly stated that only Manifestations have essential infallibility, conferred infallibility must necessarily derogate either omniscience at will or perfect virtue, or both. In the case of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, infallibility and perfect virtue are maintained in the absence of omniscience at will. These points are made quite clear in the “Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,” where Shoghi Effendi describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “unerring Interpreter of [Bahá’u’lláh’s] Word,” and the “incarnation of every Bahá’í virtue” but as one who “does not inherently possess that indefinable yet all-pervading reality the exclusive possession of which is the hallmark of Prophethood” (*World Order* 134, 139).⁸

Thus, already with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we have the phenomenon of a person whose infallibility is not presumed to be based on omniscience at will. This is epistemologically important because it illustrates the fact that infallibility (freedom from error) is viewed as logically independent from omniscience. In discussions of these issues, these two notions are in fact frequently confused with each other.

In the case of Shoghi Effendi, we have the assertion of infallibility without either perfect knowledge or perfect virtue, and in the case of the Universal House of Justice, we have the ascription of institutional infallibility

without individual or personal infallibility, again without either omniscience or perfect virtue. Moreover, in the latter two cases of conferred infallibility, we have a further distinction between two qualities of infallibility. The Guardian is held free from error in interpreting the text, while the House of Justice is textually guaranteed infallibility in making “deductions on the basis of the revealed Texts and their authorized interpretations” (Universal House of Justice, *Authority and Functioning* 39). Likewise, the House of Justice is textually designated as infallible in “‘elucidating’ all matters which are obscure and which are not explicit in the Sacred Texts” (nonlinearity again) (39). To simplify terminology, let us agree to designate the combined process of deduction/elucidation by the term “eduction” (from the Latin “to derive from”).

It is quite difficult at first to see the practical difference between the notions of error-free interpretation and error-free eduction. Each process starts with a nonlinear portion of the divine text that requires explication, and ends with a linear (logical) statement which infallibly explicates the text. The difference, as the House of Justice has made clear, is that interpretation yields “a statement of truth which cannot be varied,” whereas the deductions and elucidations of the House of Justice, although infallible, are always “susceptible of amendment by the House of Justice itself” (*Authority and Functioning* 39). In other words, the Guardian’s interpretation may possibly, in some instances, exhaust the logical meaning of a given portion of the text, whereas the eductions of the House of Justice can never be considered exhaustive, since the possibility of further elaborations (eductions) can never be excluded.⁹

There seems to be a sentiment in some quarters that the educative infallibility of the House of Justice is, in some sense, weaker than the interpretive infallibility of the Guardianship. The psychological roots of this perception probably lie in the fact that the infallibility attributed to the Guardian was both institutional and personal, whereas the infallibility of the House of Justice is only institutional. However, from a strictly logical point of view, the infallibility function of the House of Justice is, in some respects, even more robust than that of the Guardian. Let us examine this question briefly.

On the one hand, the conferring of infallibility on a single individual (in this instance, Shoghi Effendi as Guardian) undoubtedly endows that person with a distinct charisma. On the other hand, there is a greater fragility and vulnerability in that the death of this individual without blood descendents terminates forever the line of Guardians. In contrast, the purely institutional infallibility of the House of Justice certainly confers less personal charisma on individual members of the institution, but there is a tremendous gain in flexibility: the institution literally cannot be destroyed by any human or material conditions. Even if, God forbid, the entire membership were destroyed in a catastrophe, another election suffices to reconstitute the institution with its infallibility intact, according to explicit texts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The House of Justice is thus, at least in this particular way, more robust and flexible than the Guardianship.

The “forward openness” of eduction, in contrast to the “closedness” of interpretation, can likewise be viewed as an advantage. After all, infallibility is always absolute; there are no degrees of infallibility. A given statement is either free from error or it is not. Whatever eduction the House of Justice makes at a given time is just as free from error and just as authoritative as if made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi. However, the possibility of future amendments by the House of Justice itself reflects the inexhaustible character of revelation, referred to by Bahá’u’lláh (as quoted earlier).

Since the body of the authorized interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi is forever fixed, they are available for use by every individual scholar as he or she pursues the study of the Bahá’í writings. Of course, the extant texts of the Universal House of Justice are similarly available, but there is clearly another dimension in the relationship between Bahá’í scholars and the Supreme Body, which derives from the fact that the latter is the active, ongoing head of the Faith. Let us explore this more carefully.

Because Shoghi Effendi has clarified that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s intent in his Will and Testament was to separate the functions of authorized interpretation and legislation, investing the former in the Guardianship and the latter in the Universal House of Justice, some students of the Faith appear to assume that the House of Justice has no active or direct involvement in the process of scholarship itself (whether Bahá’í or not). Some have tried to define explicit limits to the questions that can potentially be addressed infallibly by the House of Justice, attempting to exclude whole areas of endeavor such as history, science, or even the day-to-day governance of the affairs of the Faith.¹⁰

Such views rest upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the logical nature of conferred infallibility in general and of the quality of infallibility of the House of Justice in particular, as articulated in explicit Bahá’í texts. Infallibility means absolute freedom from error for all authoritative pronouncements of the House of Justice.¹¹ As we have already noted above, such freedom from error is not presumed based upon omniscience. Conferred infallibility derives from the essential infallibility of Bahá’u’lláh and His explicitly stated Will to inspire the House of Justice and protect it from error in its decisions.

Since the House of Justice is not omniscient at will, it cannot simply pronounce itself in those cases when it is not inspired by Bahá’u’lláh to arrive at a unanimous or majority view of the matter. This is the case regardless of

the nature of the question involved or the area of human concern which has generated the question. But in those cases when it does arrive at a decision, its pronouncement is just as infallible as if made by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, as is clear in the text of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament: "Whatsoever they decide is of God" (11); "the House of Justice which God hath ordained [is] the source of all good and freed from all error" (14); "Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself" (20).

Moreover, since the basis of the deductions/elucidations of the House of Justice is the Holy Texts and their authorized interpretations, and since Bahá'u'lláh has made it clear that He regards His revelation as a complete description of reality, we cannot a priori exclude any human question from the domain of the House of Justice.¹² We cannot suppose, for example, that the House of Justice could never make an authoritative statement about, say, quantum mechanics, because the Supreme Body could be inspired to make a deduction/elucidation from some text related, however indirectly, to the subject.¹³ What we can say is that, lacking such an inspiration, the House of Justice could not willfully set out to resolve a scientific debate and be certain in advance of being able to do so. To act in this manner would presuppose omniscience at will, which the House of Justice is fully aware it does not have.¹⁴ Thus, from the point of view of the Bahá'í texts, there is a complementarity between science and revelation, but not a Cartesian duality with an explicitly defined boundary between them.

Conclusion

Let us again recall that the goal of all scholarship is to find the truth, not just express different opinions. Clearly the interplay between individual scholarship undertaken in a scientific spirit, on one hand, and the application of universal spiritual principles to the full range of human problems, on the other, must be carefully and systematically developed over the coming years, decades, and centuries. With the establishment of the Centre for the Study of the Texts, we have clearly entered a new and exciting phase in this ongoing process. Who knows to what summits human learning and human accomplishment will soar when once this process will have been fully developed?

Notes

1. For an expanded discussion of this paradigm, see the essay "Myths, Models, and Mysticism," in William S. Hatcher, *Logic and Logos*, pp. 19–59, as well as "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Causality Principle in the World of Being" in John S. Hatcher and William S. Hatcher, *The Law of Love Enshrined*, pp.113–57.

2. The original program of modern science, as conceived by Descartes and his successors, was to generate a complete description of reality in exact, mathematical language. The initial success of Newton's *Principia*, followed by the nineteenth century successes of Maxwell and Darwin, raised expectations that such a daring program might in fact succeed. However, Heisenberg indeterminacy in physics, followed by Gödel incompleteness in mathematics and logic and, finally, Penrose indeterminacy of the human brain have utterly destroyed any faintly reasonable hope of the program's success. There is an inescapable trade-off between exactness, on one hand, and completeness on the other. In choosing exactness, science has thereby renounced completeness.

3. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, January 11, 1942.

4. Here and in the following sections of this paper, I am deliberately using the term "revelation," in a somewhat restrictive sense, to refer to the totality of the extant body of text authored by Bahá'u'lláh. Revelation in this sense is thus an objectively specifiable textual entity. This text generates or contains (but is certainly not reducible to) a propositional theory. Following others (for example, Steven Phelps, *Divine Philosophy*, p. xix) we call this theory "divine philosophy." When we say that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is a complete description of reality, we mean precisely (1) that the theory of divine philosophy is logically complete, and (2) that every proposition of the theory is true. Completeness in this sense does not imply that absolutely all possible truth is contained in divine philosophy since, as Bahá'u'lláh Himself has said, there are many truths that cannot ever be stated in human language, linear or nonlinear.

5. There is no implication here that the sacred Text can ever be totally linearized, whether in principle or in practice. Indeed, the Text stands forever as a creative universal in relation to which any given interpretation is particular and limited.

6. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 171–74.

7. See *ibid.*, pp. 138 and 173.

8. However, Shoghi Effendi does make it quite clear that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was endowed with "superhuman knowledge" (*World Order* 134). It is perhaps not possible or even necessary fully to comprehend all of the subtle implications of "superhuman knowledge" in this context. However, we do know that this special quality of

knowledge was not intrinsic to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s nature but rather was conferred upon him by Bahá’u’lláh. See the discussion of this point in the author’s companion paper, “Reflections on Infallibility.”

9. Before the passing of Shoghi Effendi without a designated successor, it was likewise the prerogative of future Guardians to elucidate and elaborate on interpretations of former Guardians: the “richness of meaning [of the sacred Texts] is underlined by the provision whereby future Guardians, while not abrogating the ‘interpretations of former Guardians,’ may ‘elaborate and elucidate former interpretations’” (Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual believer, March 9, 1987).

10. One such highly restrictive view of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice has been articulated in an article by Udo Schaefer, “Infallible Institutions.” The article applies a somewhat secular, legalistic view of the functioning of the House of Justice, inferring, among other things, that the lack of omniscience of the House of Justice makes it dependent on empirical facts, of which it always has only relative knowledge, and thus precludes its being able to make truly infallible decisions where any matter of fact is involved. Here the article tries unsuccessfully in my view) to create a special, fact-free category comprising only issues of “universal relevance” (30). If taken to its logical limit, this view would effectively exclude any form of conferred infallibility since only the Manifestation is held to be omniscient. Confusing infallibility with immutability, the argument contends, for example, that the infallibility of the House of Justice does not extend to decisions regarding “*ad hoc* executive/administrative or judicial decisions,” but only to decisions which Schaefer qualifies as being of “general, universal relevance” (34). This last interpretation seems extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s clear statement that the House of Justice is infallible with regard to those decisions which “bear upon daily transactions” (*Will and Testament* 20), a statement not quoted or discussed in Schaefer’s article.

11. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Universal House of Justice “will be under the protection and the unerring guidance of God. If that House of Justice shall decide unanimously, or by a majority, upon any question not mentioned in the Book, that decision and command will be guarded from mistake” (*Some Answered Questions* 172).

12. Commenting on the logical status of his own conferred infallibility, Shoghi Effendi has made a similar point: “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 judgment” (qtd. by the Universal House of Justice, *Authority and Functioning* 2)

13. This is consistent with the statement of the Universal House of Justice, already cited in the foregoing, that “It is evident that the Bahá’í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavor and all academic disciplines.”

14. Of course, on the basis of our current understanding and experience of the role and function of the Universal House of Justice, it seems unlikely that it would ever, in fact, put forth an authoritative pronouncement on something like quantum mechanics. But this should not obscure the purely logical point at issue here: that we have no basis upon which to exclude a priori and forever that such a thing could happen.

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