

ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error.”⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament further provided: “That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself.”⁵ The Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are protected and unerringly guided by Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb: “The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice . . . , are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One Whatsoever they decide is of God.”⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá likewise made evident that the House of Justice “is under the protecting power of Bahá'u'lláh Himself.”⁷ “A universal, or international, House of Justice shall . . . be organized. Its rulings shall be in accordance with the commands and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh”⁸

B. The Nature of the Infallibility of the Universal House of Justice

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “infallibility is of two kinds: essential infallibility and acquired infallibility.”⁹ “Essential infallibility is peculiar to the supreme Manifestation, for it is His essential requirement, and an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself. The rays are the essential necessity of the sun and are inseparable from it.”¹⁰ Whatever emanates from the Manifestations of God “is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality.”¹¹ “Whatever They say is the word of God, and whatever They perform is an upright action.”¹² Thus, Bahá'u'lláh, like all the Manifestations of God, possessed essential infallibility.

In contrast to essential infallibility, “acquired infallibility is not a natural necessity; on the contrary, it is a ray of the bounty of infallibility which shines from the Sun of Reality upon hearts, and grants a share and portion of itself to souls. Although these souls have not essential infallibility, still they are under the protection of God - that is to say, God preserves them from error.”¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirmed that the Universal House of Justice possesses “acquired infallibility”:

For instance, the Universal House of Justice, if it be established under the necessary conditions - with members elected from all the people - that 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.¹⁴

Infallibility has been conferred on the body of the Universal House of Justice, not its individual members: “Now the members of the House of Justice have not, individually, essential infallibility; but the body of the House of Justice is under the protection and unerring guidance of God: this is called conferred infallibility.”¹⁵

It should be noted that there exists a difference between omniscience (possessing all knowledge) and infallibility (being guarded from mistake). The Manifestations of God are “omniscient at will.”¹⁶ The following excerpt

from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings illustrates this truth: “[W]hensoever We desire to quote the sayings of the learned and of the wise, presently there will appear before the face of thy Lord in the form of a tablet all that which hath appeared in the world and is revealed in the Holy Books and Scriptures.”¹⁷ Unlike Bahá'u'lláh, “the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

C. The Scope of the Infallibility of the Universal House of Justice

Because, as human beings, we are limited by finite understandings and traditional knowledge,²⁰ it may well be impossible for us to fully comprehend the character and scope of the Universal House of Justice's infallibility - a divine bounty that transcends human experience. In an analogous context, Shoghi Effendi stated that it is “not for individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority.”²¹ Nevertheless, although a complete and exact understanding of the infallibility of the House of Justice may be beyond the reach of our minds, by examining the authoritative Writings of the Faith, it may still be possible to gain some sense of the general features of this infallibility.

The Bahá'í Writings addressing the issue of infallibility indicate that the Universal House of Justice is infallibly guided in any decision it makes in the discharge of its responsibilities. Referring to the Universal House of Justice (as well as the Guardian), 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared: “Whatsoever they decide is of God.”²² He further wrote: “Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance and care of the one true Lord. He shall guard it from error and will protect it under the wing of His sanctity and infallibility.”²³ Moreover, the House of Justice is “the source of all good and freed from all error.”²⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá specifically confirmed that the Universal House of Justice is divinely guided in legislating on matters not outwardly revealed in the Book: “Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself.”²⁵ Likewise, “[i]f 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.”²⁶

Although the Writings at times refer to the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice in the context of its legislative function, the House of Justice's infallibility is not strictly limited to making laws. Several reasons suggest this. As noted above, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated “[w]hatsoever” the House of Justice decides “is of God,”²⁷ and “[w]hatsoever will be its decision . . . shall be the real truth.”²⁸ In these passages, 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed no

limitations on the types of decisions in which the House of Justice would be divinely guided.

Moreover, that the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice extends to the discharge of all of its responsibilities is confirmed by examination of the purposes of the Covenant. “The essence of the Covenant is the continuation of divine guidance after the Ascension of the Prophet through the presence in this world of an institution to which all the friends turn and which can indisputably state what is the Will of God. After 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice are such institutions.”²⁹ The “continuation of divine guidance” through the Universal House of Justice and its expression of “the Will of God” are manifest, for example, as it acts to “administer” the Faith's “affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions.”³⁰ The Universal House of Justice itself has explained, in a letter written on its behalf, that as one of the “infallible Institutions which lie at the heart of the Covenant,” it has the task of “applying the laws,” in addition to “making laws.”³¹ The House of Justice is “invested” with the “inspiration required to enable it to guide the Cause of God.”³² It receives “divine guidance” in formulating teaching plans³³ and is conferred “unerring guidance” as it directs the development of the Administrative Order.³⁴ In “The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh,” Shoghi Effendi clearly implied that the divine guidance received by the Universal House of Justice extends to “the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith.”³⁵

Further, one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings specifically refers to the infallibility of the House of Justice not only in establishing laws, but also in making decisions:

Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty³⁶

One of the areas in which the Universal House of Justice may make decisions is in solving problems that have caused difference. 'Abdu'l-Bahá made clear that the House of Justice is unerringly guided in the discharge of this responsibility:

Beware, beware lest anyone create a rift or stir up sedition. Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems. Whatever will be its decision, by majority vote, shall be the real truth, inasmuch as that House is under the protection, unerring guidance and care of the one true Lord.³⁷

The above references demonstrate that the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice extends to “any decision” it makes. The House of Justice has “found nothing in the writings of Shoghi Effendi which suggests that the House of Justice would on any occasion reach a 'wrong decision'.”³⁸

Furthermore, “although National and Local Spiritual Assemblies can receive divine guidance if they consult in the manner and spirit described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, they do not share in the explicit guarantees of infallibility conferred upon the Universal House of Justice.”³⁹ As the House of Justice has observed, “'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Shoghi Effendi in his 'Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh' have both explicitly stated that the elected members of the Universal House of Justice in consultation are recipients of unfailing Divine Guidance.”⁴⁰

D. Obedience to the Universal House of Justice

Bahá'u'lláh commanded His followers to obey “the Ministers of the House of Justice”: “It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them.”⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá expanded upon the significance and dimensions of such obedience. He explained that obedience to the decisions of the Universal House of Justice “is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone.”⁴² God “has commanded the firm believers to obey that blessed, sanctified and all-subduing body, whose sovereignty is divinely ordained and of the Kingdom of Heaven and whose laws are inspired and spiritual.”⁴³

In relation to both the Universal House of Justice and the Guardian, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament pronounced:

Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God. May the wrath, the fierce indignation, the vengeance of God rest upon him!⁴⁴

Not only must believers obey the Universal House of Justice, but they are also enjoined to seek its guidance: “All must seek guidance and turn unto . . . the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error.”⁴⁵ With regard to Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order, Shoghi Effendi wrote: “We must trust to time, and the guidance of God's Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications.”⁴⁶

“The unchallengeable authority and assurance of divine guidance conferred upon the Universal House of Justice in the sacred Scriptures make it, at this time, the supreme and central institution of the Faith to which all must turn, and also the one body invested with the authority and inspiration required to enable it to guide the Cause of God and maintain unbroken the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.”⁴⁷ Bahá'ís “can have complete confidence in the ability of the Universal House of Justice to function 'under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One.”⁴⁸

ENDNOTES:

1. Shahin Vafai, *The Essence of the Covenant: Features, History, and Implications* (Palabra Publications 2005) (www.palabrapublications.com).
2. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 68.
3. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 27.
4. *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14.
5. *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 19.
6. *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 11.
7. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 455.
8. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 455.
9. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
10. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
11. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 173; see *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 108-09 (“[T]he Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions. Indeed He is a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error. Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt would there be about it; and unto no one is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore. . . . Were He to pronounce right to be wrong or denial to be belief, He speaketh the truth as bidden by God. This is a station wherein sins or trespasses neither exist nor are mentioned.”).
12. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 173.
13. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
14. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
15. *'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions*, pp. 172-73; see on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, quoted in Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, *Advancement of Women: A Bahá'í Perspective*, p. 132 (“A vital distinction between the opinions and perceptions of the individual members of this body and the decision of the Universal House of Justice, is emphasised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the statement: 'Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty’”).
16. On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 449.

17. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 149.

18. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 312.

19. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 312; see on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, quoted in Udo Schaefer et al., Making the Crooked Straight, pp. 181-82 n.212 (“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.”).

20. See Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 100 (“An exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds.”); the Universal House of Justice, quoted in The Covenant: Its Meaning and Origin and Our Attitude Toward It, p. 51 (“[N]o human being can have a full and correct understanding of the revelation of God”); the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 87 (“In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.”); on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations, vol. III, p. 258 (“[D]ivine Revelation is infallible and proceeds from an all-encompassing knowledge of the Truth, but when individual Bahá'ís attempt to apply Sacred Texts to any specific problem or situation they do so using their own minds which are of limited understanding.”); on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 547 (“In considering the whole field of divinely conferred 'infallibility' one must be careful to avoid the literal understanding and petty-mindedness that has so often characterized discussions of this matter in the Christian world. The Manifestation of God (and, to a lesser degree, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi,) has to convey tremendous concepts covering the whole field of human life and activity to people whose present knowledge and degree of understanding are far below His. He must use the limited medium of human language against the limited and often erroneous background of His audience's traditional knowledge and current understanding to raise them to a wholly new level of awareness and behavior. It is a human tendency, against which the Manifestation warns us, to measure His statements against the inaccurate standard of the acquired knowledge of mankind. We tend to take them and place them within one or other of the existing categories of human philosophy or science while, in reality, they transcend these and will, if properly understood, open new and vast horizons to our understanding.”).

21. On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 312.

22. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 11.
23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 53.
24. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 14.
25. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 19.
26. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 172.
27. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 11.
28. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 53.
29. The Universal House of Justice, quoted in The Covenant: Its Meaning and Origin and Our Attitude Toward It, p. 39.
30. See Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 148; see the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 15 (“The two unique features which distinguish it [the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh] from all religious covenants of the past are unchanged and operative. The revealed Word, in its original purity, amplified by the divinely guided interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, remains immutable, unadulterated by any man-made creeds or dogmas, unwarrantable inferences or unauthorized interpretations. The channel of divine guidance, providing flexibility in all the affairs of mankind, remains open through that Institution which was founded by Bahá'u'lláh and endowed by Him with supreme authority and unfailing guidance, and of which the Master wrote: 'Unto this body all things must be referred.'”).
31. See on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 448.
32. The Universal House of Justice, quoted in David Hofman, A Commentary on the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 44.
33. See the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 51.
34. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, February 16, 1996 (“The Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh is in the process of growth and unfoldment. . . . As the Bahá'í communities grow, the Universal House of Justice will ensure that this divinely-founded system will unfold in accordance with the unerring guidance of which it is the recipient.”).
35. See Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 153.
36. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 85 (emphasis added).
37. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the

Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 53.

38. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual believer, June 14, 1996.

39. The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 161.

40. The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 157; cf. on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, to an individual, October 22, 1996 (“As to whether there is a distinction between correspondence from the World Centre that has been signed 'The Universal House of Justice' and that signed on behalf of the Secretariat: In brief, the manner in which each of these letters is prepared depends upon the contents of the letter. Drafts of letters which contain newly formulated policies are consulted upon and approved during a meeting of the House of Justice; correspondence dealing with previously enunciated policies, or with matters of a routine nature, are prepared, as delegated by the House of Justice, by its Secretariat and initialed by at least the majority of the members of the House of Justice before being dispatched. All letters written over the signature of the Department of the Secretariat are authorized by the Universal House of Justice. [¶] As to whether the materials prepared by the Research Department constitute the authoritative word of the Universal House of Justice on a particular subject . . . , the House of Justice indicates that such materials, though prepared at its direction, represent the views of that Department. While such views are very useful as an aid to resolving perplexities or gaining an enhanced understanding of the Bahá'í Teachings, they should never be taken to be in the same category as the elucidations and clarifications provided by the Universal House of Justice in the exercise of its assigned functions. However, the House of Justice chooses to convey the materials prepared by the Research Department to the friends because it wishes them to be thoughtfully attended to and seriously considered.”).

41. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 27.

42. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 85.

43. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in the Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 85.

44. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 11.

45. Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 26.

46. Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 62.

47. The Universal House of Justice, quoted in David Hofman, A Commentary on the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 44.

48. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, The Covenant, # 39.

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