

M E M O R A N D U M *

To: The Universal House of Justice
Date: 25 July 2002
From: Research Department

Use of Masculine Pronouns and Images

The Research Department has studied the questions on the above-mentioned subject raised by Mrs. ... in her emailed letter dated 22 June 2002 to the Universal House of Justice. Mrs. ... observes that in the authorized English translations of the Bahá'í Scriptures and in the English writings of the Guardian, God is invariably termed “Father”, masculine pronouns are used in reference to the Divinity, and the term “man” is used to represent humanity as well as individuals. From her study of the Bahá'í teachings Mrs. ... is aware that “this usage is a product of convention and the images are generic and intended to be inclusive”. She is also cognizant of the fact that “these practices nevertheless raise certain questions because of the importance of language in the formation of worldview”. In this regard she states that “according to [her] understanding, two important spiritual features of this age will be the deanthropomorphization of God in the minds of human beings and the equality of the sexes”. However, it is her view that the present “language of the Bahá'í scriptures ... can be seen to repeat and reinforce the sense that the Divine is somehow male”, and the “consistent use of ‘man’ and masculine pronouns in the Writings to represent humanity and individuals contributes to an image that the human archetype is male”. In light of these observations, Mrs. ... poses a number of detailed questions concerning the work of translation—the implications of present practice for future translations, whether “Bahá'í English with regard to gender was crystallized at the point of the Guardian’s translations”, whether the universal auxiliary language will need “to retain masculine imagery in order to be true to the message or will it be able to establish new forms”, and whether “there are spiritual implications to sex-specific imagery ... being fixed in holy Scriptures for all time or at least until the end of this dispensation”. We provide the following comment.

By way of introduction, we wish to note that the Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate detailed guidance concerning the specific technical issues raised by Mrs. ... about the practical implications of present translation practices for the future work of translation, especially as they relate to gender issues. To assist Mrs. ... in thinking about the questions she poses, we attach the following four compilations:

* This memorandum 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/uhj_masculine_pronouns_images (2021).

- “**The Use of the Masculine Gender in the Bahá’í Writings**”, a compilation of extracts from letters written by and on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. The extracts in the compilation set out a number of general principles in relation to this subject and the Bahá’í perspective on it. We note, for example, the House of Justice indicates that:
 - “In many languages the use of the masculine gender, unless intended specifically to denote masculinity, is generic” (extract 1, see also extracts 2 and 6).
 - “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” (extracts 2, 8 and 9).
 - In addition, the Universal House of Justice indicates that it “does not feel it appropriate to change Shoghi Effendi’s usage of certain nouns in his translations” (extract 8). Indeed, “The style of translation into English was set by Shoghi Effendi” (extract 10).
 - “... the Sacred Writings of the Faith and those of the Guardian do not use the ‘gender inclusive language’ now in vogue...” (extract 7).
 - In relation to images of God, while using “conventional wording” Bahá’u’lláh “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” (extracts 8 and 10).
 - With regard to the English language, “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” (extract 8).
 - “The challenge ... 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” (extracts 8 and 10).
- “**Literary Style—Translation**”, a compilation of materials that was prepared some time ago. The compilation includes a statement from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about translation, extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, and a description of the writings of Shoghi Effendi excerpted from Rúhíyyih

Rabbani's "The Priceless Pearl" (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pages 196–204.

- **"The Difficult Art of Translation"** — Selected Extracts from Letters Written By and on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice Concerning the Translations of Shoghi Effendi". Extracts in the compilation address such issues as:
 - The status of Shoghi Effendi's translations (extracts 1 and 6). The importance of his translations as a starting point for translations into other European languages (extract 1).
 - The Guardian's approach to translation (extracts 2, 4, and 7).
 - The interpretative aspect to Shoghi Effendi's translations (extracts 1, 5, and 6).
 - Translators are encouraged to "strive to render the words of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá into English in a way that reproduces as accurately as possible the meaning of the originals, that is as beautiful as possible, and that harmonizes closely with the style used by Shoghi Effendi" (extract 4).
- **"Importance of and Guidance on Translating the Bahá'í Writings into Indigenous and Other Languages"**. This compilation, consisting mostly of the correspondence of the Universal House of Justice, was prepared some time ago. Despite the fact that there is a degree of repetition in the content, it is included because of Mrs. ...'s interest in the importance and use of language.

As to Mrs. ...'s question concerning whether "the universal auxiliary language needs to retain masculine imagery in order to be true to the message or will it be able to establish new forms", the Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate any references to this subject in the authoritative literature of the Faith. However, we call attention to the following statement of the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 8 December 1964, which is included in extract 1 of the attached document "The Difficult Art of Translation":

We also feel that it is still premature to decide upon the question of the International Auxiliary Language. It is quite clear from the Texts that any living or invented language may be chosen, but the time and manner of its choosing and propagation are not yet decided.