

Representation of the Manifestations of God and the Master in Portraits, Photographs, and Dramatic Presentations

by Shoghi Effendi and Universal House of Justice

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REPRESENTATION OF THE MANIFESTATION

A. In Portraits or Copies of Photographs

Question: 'Being eager to present the supreme infallible Body with a beautiful portrait of the Blessed Perfection and being in possession of the Blessed Perfection's photograph...I commissioned...one of the most famous velvet painters in the world, to make a large portrait so that It [sic] would be available to take

to Haifa in 1968...

‘I have not been aware of any writing or instructions concerning the possession of this most sacred picture of the Blessed Perfection and have... asked two esteemed Hands of the Cause...’

Response:...We have studied the instructions of the beloved Guardian and he has stated categorically that the making of copies or paintings from the photograph of Bahá'u'lláh is not permitted.

(From a letter dated 1 August 1967 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Question: ‘Also I have heard that it is against Bahá'í Law to portray either Bahá'u'lláh or the Báb in art.

‘I do however feel the need for some form of symbol or representation...at times. Please acquaint me with the Laws on this matter.’

Response: Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in works of art is forbidden, is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God; photographs, or reproductions of portraits, of the Master may be used in books, but no attempt should be made to portray Him in dramatic or other works where He would be one of the ‘dramatis personae’. However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent.

(From a letter dated 3 December 1972 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Question: The writer explains that he is a school teacher of ‘Religious Education and Drama’ and as such is ‘often called upon to represent or use representations of Manifestations of God’ in the form of ‘books and posters’. He is aware of the guidance about not representing Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb and the Master in drama, and enquires, ‘Does this command...hold good for the other Manifestations of God, and if so, what should a Bahá'í teacher’s standpoint be on this matter’

Response: The prohibition on representing the Manifestation of God in paintings and drawings or in dramatic presentations applies to all the Manifestations of God. There are, of course, great and wonderful works of art of past Dispensations, many of which portrayed the Manifestations of God in a spirit of reverence and

love. In this Dispensation however the greater maturity of mankind and the greater awareness of the relationship between the Supreme Manifestation and His servants enable us to realize the impossibility of representing, in any human form, whether pictorially, in sculpture or in dramatic representation, the person of God's Manifestation. In stating the Bahá'í prohibition, the beloved Guardian pointed out this impossibility.

(From a letter dated 9 March 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Question: 'We are going to publish some study material for children. Each chapter will be about one of the Manifestations of God... Each chapter will start with a drawing presenting a special situation in the life of the prophet.

'We have been told that drawings of prophets are not permissible. We are very thankful for guidance on this question.'

Response: The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of 25 March 1976 in which you ask if it would be permissible for you to include drawings of the Manifestations of God in some study material for children that you are preparing, and has instructed us to say that this would not be permissible.

(From a letter dated 16 May 1976 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

B. In Dramatizations

Question: 'The National Spiritual Assembly refers to you the question whether the figures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh should be made to appear as characters in dramatic works written by the believers. It is our impression that you have instructed the friends not to attempt to dramatize the Manifestations, but this impression is based upon secondhand knowledge and we would very much like to have it verified.'

Response: With reference to your question whether the figures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh should be made to appear as characters in dramatic works written by the believers, Shoghi Effendi's opinion is that such an attempt to dramatize the Manifestations would be highly disrespectful, and hence should be avoided by the friends, even in the case of the Master. Besides it would be practically impossible to carry out such a plan faithfully, and in a dignified and befitting manner.

(From a letter dated 27 January 1935 written on behalf of the Guardian to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: Unavailable

Response: As to your question concerning the advisability of dramatizing Bahá'í historic episodes; the Guardian would certainly approve, and even encourage that the friends should engage in such literary pursuits which, no doubt, can be of an immense teaching value. What he wishes the believers to avoid is to dramatize the personages of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that is to say to treat them as dramatic figures, as characters appearing on the stage. This, as already pointed out, he feels would be quite disrespectful. The mere fact that they appear on the scene constitutes an act of discourtesy which can in no way be reconciled with their highly exalted station. Their message, or actual words, should be preferably reported and conveyed by their disciples appearing on the stage.

(From a letter dated 25 July 1936 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

Question: The writer describes a media event and indicates that, though the dignity of the Faith had been upheld, there were differences of opinion about the appropriateness of the activities involved. Among other things, he asks, "May and how is the Faith to be dramatized"

Response: As to your questions: the Faith can certainly be dramatized, but two things must be remembered: no personal presentation of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh or the Master, only Their words can be used, but no figure must represent Them; great dignity must be the keynote.

(From a letter dated 19 August 1951 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

Question: I think I read...that the Bahá'í Faith forbids to put on the stage the Figure of a Manifestation of God. Is this true?

The writer describes her ideas about how the Manifestation might be represented by means of lights of different colours and intensities and seeks comment on these ideas. Finally, she asks, "Can 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, eventually, be shown on stage as they are not Manifestations of God"

Response: In reply to your letter of June 17th, an examination of the letters of the beloved Guardian makes it absolutely clear that it is not permissible to portray on the stage the figure of the Manifestation of God, nor even of the Master....

The Universal House of Justice considers it inappropriate to represent the Guardian of the Faith as a character in a play.

The use of light, either of great intensity or in different colours, needs your careful consideration. If the use of light in any way at all suggests a personification of the Manifestation of God it should not be used, but if it can be done without in any way giving the impression that the Prophet is being represented or personified then there is no objection to its use.

(From a letter dated 12 August 1975 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Question: A National Spiritual Assembly refers to a statement from the beloved Guardian to the effect that the three Central Figures of our Faith may not be portrayed by any actor on stage or in a movie. The Assembly states, 'We should be most grateful for your advice, whether or not this also applies to radio plays, where an actor would speak the part of one of the Central Figures'

Response: ...it would not be proper for an actor to speak the part of one of the three Central Figures of the Faith in a radio play.

(From a letter dated 3 April 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: A National Spiritual Assembly states, '...we have informed the committee that no pictorial image should be used for the Manifestation. However you may have some ideas of how it can be achieved without any human image.'

Response: We are to call to your attention the beloved Guardian's instruction that while no personal representation of the Holy Ones should be made on stage or in pictorial form, there is no objection to Their words and utterances being reported.

(From a letter dated 15 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: Is it acceptable...to write a novel...based on The Dawn-Breakers?

His Holiness the Báb would not, of course, be portrayed. But is there an element of blasphemy involved in fictional portrayals of the great heroes, particularly Quddús?

Response: There is no objection to Bahá'ís writing novels portraying historical events and figures of the nature described in your letter. However, in view of the impossibility of ever portraying adequately the Manifestation of God as a character in a novel, and of the disrespect implicit in such an attempt, no such portrayal involving any of the Central Figures of the Faith should be attempted.

(From a letter dated 10 June 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

REPRESENTATION OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

A. In Portraits or Copies of Photographs

Question: The writer sends a photograph of a painting of 'Abdu'l-Bahá copied from photos of the Master by a non-Bahá'í. He states: 'If it is a true likeness I should like the believers to enjoy its beauty, as I have. These pictures could be printed [at] a very small cost.'

Response: He was pleased to receive the picture of the Master which your friend made, and though he sees no objection to people having portraits of the Master in their homes, if it gives them pleasure, he prefers that for distribution and for purchase, they should confine themselves to His photographs, as these are, of course, a much more perfect likeness of Him.

(From a letter dated 11 July 1942 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

Question: 'A number of friends have requested photographs [of a portrait of the Master] and suggested the possibility of their being made available through the National Spiritual Assembly. Mr. Holley told me the N.S.A would like to do this but naturally require your permission.'

Response: The portrait of the Master, which you painted with obviously so much care and love, he has placed in the Western Pilgrim House, where it can be enjoyed by the friends. He has no objection to your giving friends photographs of your portrait, but he feels it should not take the place on their walls of photographs of the Master if they prefer to keep their own, particularly the one taken in Paris which 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself chose as being the best of Him.

(From a letter dated 28 March 1947 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer)

Question: Refer to the section, 'Representation of the Manifestation'. A second question.

Response: ...photographs, or reproductions of portraits, of the Master may be used in books...

(From a letter dated 3 December 1972 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Question: A National Spiritual Assembly forwarded to the Universal House of Justice a copy of a publication. Based on its study of the material the House of Justice made the following response.

Response: In the same issue of 'Child's Way' there are drawings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on pages 22, 23, and 24. Although the House of Justice does not wish to prohibit the use of photographs and drawings of the Master they should be used most sparingly and always in a dignified context in keeping with the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It is felt that drawings of the Master executed in cartoon style and showing rays of light emanating from His head are not appropriate and should be discouraged.

(From a letter dated 27 November 1978 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: A National Spiritual Assembly sent the Universal House of Justice a copy of a recent publication. Following its study of the material the House of Justice made the following comment.

Response: ...It is, of course, permissible to publish photographs or portrayals of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, if they are properly and respectfully treated.

(From a letter dated 7 June 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: 'We should like to request your kind advice and any information pertaining to the reproduction of paintings and photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá ... and to know whether or not there are any copyright laws and Bahá'í principles

which may pertain.'

The National Spiritual Assembly explains that a non-Bahá'í faculty member at the...School, the art master, is painting pictures of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from photographs, when commissioned by Bahá'ís. They are well done and reasonably priced. The Assembly states: 'The question has arisen in the community...as to whether or not it is proper for the Bahá'ís to be commissioning and purchasing these paintings.'

'This Assembly finds nothing incorrect or offensive in this practice, especially since they are so well done and since there are relatively few of the paintings being commissioned.'

Response: The Universal House of Justice has no objection if the friends commission skillful artists to paint from photographs portraits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for their own personal use. The mass production of such works for commercial purposes, however, should be avoided.

(From a letter dated 14 September 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Question: A National Spiritual Assembly writes about a book it is publishing and states: 'some of the...believers who have read the manuscript have expressed a desire to have a photograph of the Master on the front outside cover of the book...we are wondering if this would be permissible.'

Response: The photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá should not be published on the outside cover of the book.

(From a letter dated 26 February 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

B. In Dramatization

'Abdu'l-Bahá: As in above section on the representation of the Manifestation in dramatizations

Shoghi Effendi: 'The Universal House of Justice considers it inappropriate to represent the Guardian of the Faith as a character in a play.'

(From a letter dated 12 August 1975 from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

THE GREATEST HOLY LEAF

Question: 'I would like to put together a play on the life and passing of the Greatest Holy Leaf.

'Would such an endeavour be acceptable...and is such an endeavour in keeping with Bahá'í standards of religious reverence toward the Holy Family?"

Response: While the House of Justice realizes that biographies of the Greatest Holy Leaf will be written, it feels that it would not be befitting to portray her in any dramatic or fictional form.

(From a letter dated 22 September 1986 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

THE HOLY FAMILY

Question: The writer seeks guidance to assist in the process of reviewing an artist's conception of events inspired by The Dawn-Breakers, and lists the guidelines with which he is familiar. One aspect of these guidelines includes statements from the House of Justice 'regarding the inappropriateness of fictionally portraying members of the Holy Family'.

Response: ...the objection to portrayals of members of the Holy Family mentioned in copies of two communications of the House of Justice was directed in both cases against irreverent portrayals of these figures.

(From a letter dated 5 October 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)