

9 June 1996

Mr. [REDACTED]
...

Dear Baha'i Friend,

Your email message of 15 May 1996, regarding the station of Arius, was received at the Baha'i World Centre and referred to the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice for further study. That Department has now completed its work, and we enclose a copy of the memorandum it produced, with three attachments, in response to your queries. We hope that this information will be of assistance to you.

With loving Baha'i greetings,
(signed) Janet Smith
For the Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure with three attachments

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 9 July 1996

From: Research Department

Station of Arius

In his email of 15 May 1996 to the Universal House of Justice, Mr. [REDACTED] refers to statements from the Tablets by 'Abdu'l-Baha in Star of the West, vol. 10, no. 5, concerning Arius and the violation of the Covenant of Christ. He explains that when these statements were posted on a BBS inter-religious discussion, it resulted in a degree of controversy:

The conservative Christians in the discussion area with whom we... and other religionists communicate have taken a surprising interest in this mention of Arius. As they put it Arius' view "should" be like what Baha'is claim, as they see it, about the station of the Manifestation.

Mr. [REDACTED] believes that this interest in the Baha'i view of Arius might well provide an opportunity for him to set out, more explicitly, the Baha'i perspective on the stations of Christ and of the Manifestations of God. He, therefore, seeks other references concerning Arius and the Covenant of Christ. And, he raises the following specific questions:

...is it what Arius claimed about the station and nature of Christ that is the basis of his standing in Abdu'l-Baha's estimation as an enemy of Christ's Covenant or was it some other factor of Arius' claims or behavior? Would it be proper to speak of Arius as a Covenant-Breaker? Are his works and point of view under similar censure as Covenant-Breakers of the Baha'i Faith?

We attach for Mr. [REDACTED] interest the following materials:

- A brief compilation of extracts from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha concerning Arius. These are the only references to Arius and to his activities we have, to date, been able to locate in the Baha'i teachings.
- An extract from Mirza 'Abdu'l-Fadl's The Brilliant Proof (Chicago: Press of Baha'i News Service, 1912), pages 24-28, which refers, briefly, to the activities of Arius and calls attention to the unique provisions of Baha'i law which preserves the unity of the Faith of Baha'u'llah.
- A copy of a memorandum dated 11 June 1991, prepared by the Research Department in response to earlier questions about 'Abdu'l-Baha's assessment of Arius. See pages 2-4. In relation to this memo, we wish to note that:
- The untranslated Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha referred to at the bottom of page one have now been translated and included in the brief compilation mentioned above.
- Mr. [REDACTED] might wish to contact ... to request a copy of his paper entitled, "The Creed of Arius vs. the Creed of Athanasius", referred to on page one of the memorandum. Mr. ... can be contacted through the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. [i am withholding his name.]

Furthermore, another Baha'i who has, in the past been interested in Arius is Mr. Mr. ... can be contacted through the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada.

Attachments 3

ARIUS -- EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHA

Some time after Christ, Arius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, founded a new sect. He was an orator, articulate of speech and a very audacious and powerful person who succeeded in bringing one and a half million people under his influence. He even secured the allegiance of the Emperor Constantine. But since he deviated from the Covenant of Christ, at the end he faded away and perished. This Covenant was based on words addressed to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church".(1) And though these words attributed to Christ are based only on the report of some of His disciples, nevertheless Christian unity was preserved for eight hundred years though this implicit Covenant.

(Translated from the Persian)

Refer to the history of the Church and read the details of the activities of Arius, the Patriarch of Alexandria.

Notwithstanding the fact that his followers numbered a million and a half, and the support of the mighty emperor was extended to him, eventually he was completely destroyed and no trace of him whatever remained...

(Translated from the Persian)

Consider thou, at the time of Christ and after Him, how many childish attempts have been made by different persons! What claims they have advanced and what a multitude have they gathered around themselves! Even Arius attracted to himself a million and a half followers and strove and endeavored to sow the seeds of sedition in the Cause of Christ. But eventually the sea of Christ surged and cast out all the gathering froth and nothing was left behind save everlasting malediction.(2)

(Translated from the Persian)

There were several eminent personalities during the Dispensation of Christ, such as Arius and others who had millions of followers. These leaders tried to make a breach within the Cause upheld by Simon, The Safa (Cephas, Peter, The Rock).(3) After creating much tumult and commotion they became helpless and disappointed. But Simon glowed like unto a candle and Safa (The Rock) shone as a radiant, faithful star.

(Translated from the Persian)

1. Matthew 16:18
2. Published in Star of the West, vol.10, no.5, p. 96.
3. Simon, Safa, Cephas and Peter are the same person.

[extracts from The Brilliant Proof (Bunhane Lame), written Dec. 28, 1911, in Syria by the pen of Mirza Abul Fazl Gulpaygan, pub. at Chicago, 1912, Press of Baha'i News Service, pp 24-29. From the library at the Baha'i World Center.]

Strange! John the Evangelist, the beloved of Christ, in his first epistle says: "He who doeth righteousness is righteous;" but these (opponents) say: "He who doeth a righteous deed, verily he is a murderer and an impostor." Likewise in this epistle he says: "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him and he is in God;" but they say that one who, according to their own admission has convinced three million souls and made them believe Jesus was the Son of God and the Word of God, is deprived of the knowledge of God and has no portion of the fragrance of God. Is it not always clearly shown and positively proven that in this day we should understand by the words: "Ye shall know a tree by its fruit," in the Sermon on the Mount, that the purpose of His Holiness Christ was that we should not pay heed to false accusations or listen to that which the people of prejudice spread among men? Nay, we should consider the deeds of every person the correct criterion, and through this balance differentiate between truth and falsehood.

In short, let us return to the original matter, which refers to Peter Z. Easton's question: "What has Baha'o'llah [translation schemes of the time translated Baha'u'llah in this manner then- Steven] brought which is not found in the Christian religion?" Although the great function of the Revelation of Baha'o'llah in solving the intricacies of the Heavenly Books, facilitating the removal of difficulties from among the nations and establishing unity and harmony among the sections of the human world is sufficient proof of the greatness and thoroughness of the Baha'i religion, nevertheless we will now consider the laws and ordinances of this religion, explain their specific virtues, their benefits and good results.

First, a command which is particularly a feature of the Baha'i religion and is not found in the other religion is "abstaining from crediting verbal traditions." It is well known to men of learning that it was verbal tradition which divided the Jews into two great sects. Such traditions are the basis of the book of Talmud, and caused the division of that one nation. One of the two schisms called the Rabinim looks upon the teachings of the Talmud as the law which needs to be followed and considers it the greatest means for the preservation and permanence of the Israelitish people. But the other sect, Gharraim looks upon the Talmud as sheer heresy and conducive to perdition. Thus these two sects cannot be harmonized or cease mutual opposition.

Similarly in the Christian religion the main cause of schism and division were these verbal traditions which were termed "authoritative." Each one of the Christian churches, such as the Catholic, the Orthodox, the Jacobite, the Nestorian and others consider it obligatory to follow these traditions inherited from and handed down by the fathers of the Church, as the very text of the Holy Book.

Thus when in any of the great Councils the question of the unification of the Christian people would be at issue, they would avail themselves of these inherited traditions which were opposed to union and harmony, Likewise in the religion of Islam, claiming these verbal traditions which were related of the Founder of that religion, subsequent to His death, was the cause of the division and separation into various principle sects, such as the Sunnite, the Shi'ite and the Kharajite, or into the secondary schools of Hanfite, Malakite, Shafiite, Haubilite, etc.

Each of these hold to a set of traditions considered as authentic by their own sect.

But Baha'o'llah closed to the people of the world this door which is the greatest means for sedition; for He has clearly announced that "in the religion of God all recorded matters are referable to the Book and all unrecorded matters are dependent upon the decision of the House of Justice." Thus all narrations, relations and verbal traditions have discredited among the Bahai people and the door of dissension, which is the greatest among the doors of hell, has been closed and locked.

Second: One of the laws and ordinances peculiar to the Bahai religion is the law prohibiting the interpretation of the Word of God. For interpretation of the Words and exposition of personal opinion has been one of the greatest means of dissension in the former religions. the cause of darkening the horizon of faith and concealing the real meaning of the Book of God.

It is an evident fact that learned men differ in their minds, and the natural gifts of sagacity and intelligence or the lack of understanding and comprehension vary in degrees among them. Thus when the door of interpretation and perverting of the Words from their outward meaning is opened, strange opinions and curious contradictory interpretations will result and different sects will arise among the one people and one religious community.

Consequently Baha'o'llah has explicitly commanded His followers to wholly abandon the door of interpretation and follow the Words revealed in the Tablets according to their outward meaning, so that the events which have transpired among the past nations should not recur among the Bahai people, and the unwelcome happenings which appeared among the various sects due to difference in mentality and viewpoint should not become manifest in this new auspicious day, which is the day of the glorious Lord.

Thus one of the explicit commands of this great Manifestation is the ordinance abrogating differences which separate men. It is because one of the occasions of dissension is difference of scholars with regard to the station of the Manifestation of the Cause. In former religions, even as testified by history, it has become evident that when in a question of this kind a difference has arisen between two of the doctors of religion, both parties were firm in their standpoints and held tenaciously to their sides,

while the laity, according to their usage, would adhere some to one and some to another, thus closing the doors to agreement and unity to such an extent that religious fraternity was changed into deep and bitter enmity, scientific dissension terminating in bloody strife and warfare. This is illustrated by differences which arose between Arius the priest and Alexander the Bishop of Constantinople, regarding the Trinity, in the fourth century AD; also the Nestorian differences which took place in the fifth century between Nestorius the Bishop of Constantinople and other bishops, which caused terrible wars and the shedding of precious blood. The effect of these sad dissensions has lasted until the present day. These are clear proofs and evidences for the point at issue.

Time does not allow us to make mention of the numerous sects and divisions of the Gnostics and others, of which the church historians have counted more than thirty, and incorporated them under the term: "Born of philosophy." All seekers of full accounts are referred to authoritative books on the subject, in order that they may clearly realize that all these divisions and sects came from the disagreements of the doctors as to the degree and station of His Holiness Christ, and their persistence in their respective opinions. The subject of disagreement by the doctors as to the station of the Manifestation of God has been one of those abstruse and difficult questions to solve which proved beyond the power of great minds and baffled a mighty king like Constantine the Great. For notwithstanding the assistance and co-operation of the great bishops of the East and West he could not reconcile the various parties to the Aryan controversy. Nay, during this long time the power of local councils, the sword of European powers and the verdicts of Inquisitorial Boards failed to remove divisions and schisms caused by metaphysical discussions. But the removal of this indissoluble knot and incurable disease by the easiest of means has been announced in the holy Bahai literature, for Baha'o'llah in one of His holy Tablets has clearly revealed the following: "Since men differ in their degree of knowledge, if two persons should be found to possess different viewpoints as regards the degree and station of the Manifestation of God, both are acceptable before God, for, in accord with the blessed verse: 'Verily, we have created souls different in degrees;' God has created men different in understanding and diverse in manners. But if those having two points of view engage in conflict and strife while expressing their views, both of them are rejected. For, by knowing the Manifestation of God it is intended to unify the hearts, cultivate souls and to teach the truth of God, whereas conflict and strife of two persons with two different points of view would do harm to the Cause of God. Consequently both of them are referred to the fire." This was the purpose of the blessed Tablet in brief. Accordingly in the Holy Cause no one has power to create inharmony, and because of fear of falling, no one dares to persist in his own opinion at the expense of harmony.

Fourth: Among the specific laws clearly laid down in the Cause of Baha'o'llah is the law "prohibiting slavery." No mention is made of this in other religions. As none of the former Heavenly Books has forbidden this traffic all the humanitarian instincts which actuated the Great Powers to abolish and destroy it could not withhold the common people from this abominable practice, which has cost the governments and nations great trouble and expense. For instance, freeing of the slaves constitutes one of the important responsibilities of the Egyptian government. This necessitates a heavy drain upon the state treasury. Furthermore, the trial and indictment of those guilty of this nefarious traffic brings great affliction and often ruin upon many noted families.

Fifth: Among the laws peculiar to this Great Cause is the law making it "obligatory upon all to engage in allowable professions as a means of support, and obedience to this law is accepted as an act of worship." Were a man of insight to consider this strong command, he would testify to great benefit it contributes towards regulating the affairs of civilization and removing impediments and calamities from human society. For it is evident how in this present day innumerable souls designated as monks, anchorites, hermits, religious devotees, dignitaries and others, although sound in body and limb, abstain from occupation and trade, passing their time in indolence and idleness and living upon the proceeds of other men's labor. In reality such men are as atrophied limbs upon the body of humanity and a heavy burden to the men of industry and agriculture. When by a law of religion these innumerable souls abandon idleness and indolence and engage in useful occupations, one can well realize how much this will contribute to the common wealth and remove the difficulties of the body-politic.

Sixth: The law making the education of children of both sexes compulsory. This law is also one of the commands explicitly revealed in this most great Cause, and concerning which no mention is made in any of the other religions. For in the other religions the education of the masses is made dependent on the law of the government. If in former times a government would fail to issue a decree providing for compulsory education, and the failure would result in the decadence of learning and knowledge, the nation would take no thought of it, nor would the people consider themselves and the government responsible. For no law concerning this subject has been revealed in the Heavenly Books. But when a law is laid down in the Heavenly Books of a nation, every individual member will....

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 11 June 1991

From: Research Department

Arius

In his letter dated 7 January 1990 to the Research Department, Mr. ... requests clarification of 'Abdu'l-Baha's assessment of Arius, the early Christian theologian. Mr. ... cites a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha to Louise R. Waite published in "Star of the West" vol. 10, no. 5 (5 June 1919), p.96, in which He refers to the career of Arius as an illustration of the inevitable failure of Covenant-Breakers:

Consider thou, at the time of Christ and after Him, how many childish attempts were made by different persons! What claims they have advanced and what a multitude have they gathered around themselves! Even Arius attracted to himself a million and a half followers and strove and endeavored to sow the seeds of sedition in the Cause of Christ. But eventually the sea of Christ surged and cast out all the gathering froth and nothing was left behind save everlasting malediction.

Mr. ... asks why 'Abdu'l-Baha would condemn Arius as a leader of sedition and a cause of disunity when his view of the relationship between the Manifestation and God, as Mr. ... understands it, is "remarkably similar to both the teachings of Muhammad as well as the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith." Mr. ... notes that this question is of particular importance insofar as the theological agreement between Arius and the Baha'i Faith could be a means of attracting Christians to the Baha'i teachings. However, he is concerned that Christians might read the Tablet to Louise Waite, see that 'Abdu'l-Baha condemns Arius, draw the conclusion that the Baha'is reject Arian theology, and therefore criticize the Baha'is for being self-contradictory with regard to the relationship between the Manifestation and God. We provide the following.

As is pointed out by Mr. Keven Brown in his paper, "The Creed of Arius vs the Creed of Athanasius", "The problem of reading Arius' position accurately is compounded by the fact that only three authentic letters from him remain as well as fragments cited in the works of other writers. His most important theological work, the "Thalia", has never been retrieved whole, and that we possess of it are those pieces that Athanasius cites in his works in order to refute Arius."

Arius is referred to in several of `Abdu'l-Baha's Tablets which are as yet unpublished and untranslated. These references confirm the assessment of Arius given in the Tablet published in the "Star of the West". One of these Tablets refers to the very large following Arius attracted and of the influence he exerted even in the Imperial household, and continues "But since he deviated from the Covenant of Christ, at the end he faded away and perished."

It is clear that the main subject of these Tablets is not Arius himself, nor his doctrinal views, but the question of Covenant-breaking dissension, and the importance of firmness in the Covenant in the Baha'i community. `Abdu'l-Baha's references to the history of Christianity and to Arius seem merely to be given as examples to Western believers of what happened in the past and of how the Covenant of Christ preserved His Faith, even in the face of such a major challenge as that presented by Arius.

The questions posed by Mr. ... raise, however, a number of very interesting issues, such as the following:

- Is there a significant difference between the rise and fall of Arianism and that of other early heresies?
- What relationship does this question have to major later splits in Christendom such as that between Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, or that precipitated by the Protestant Reformation?
- Why does `Abdu'l-Baha repeatedly single out Arius as an example? How do the teachings of Arius compare to those of the Baha'i Faith?

It is clear from many passages in the Baha'i Writings that the Covenant of Baha'u'llah is unique in its strength and power and in the degree to which it was formally and explicitly established in the body of the Sacred Writings themselves. It is also clear, however, that there were Covenants of succession in earlier Dispensations, but these were successfully violated by virtue of the fact that there were no clear documentary evidence that could be adduced by the appointed Centre to defeat the attacks of its opponents. In relation to the Covenant of Jesus Christ, `Abdu'l-Baha wrote in one of His Tablets:

This Covenant was based on the words addressed to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church". And though these words attributed to Christ are based only on the report of some of His disciples, nevertheless Christian unity was preserved for eight hundred years through this implicit Covenant.
(from a previously untranslated Tablet)

In the seventh century the Christian Dispensation was brought to an end by the Revelation of Muhammad, and it was only after that time that the great schism between the Eastern and Western Christendom took place, precipitating a division far more serious and enduring than had been caused by any of the many splinter groups and heresies which arose up during the preceding centuries, but involving less radical questions of doctrine. In the light of history one can see how the most serious of the early threats to Christian unity was the Arian controversy.

The point of the example adduced by `Abdu'l-Baha, therefore, would seem to be to show how, in spite of its inexplicit formulation, and in spite of the fact that in the early centuries there were many who put forward their own ideas about the doctrine of the Faith, causing disputes and giving birth to short-lived heretical groups, the Covenant of Jesus was able to maintain the essential unity of Christianity until the end of the Dispensation, when its inherent weaknesses became apparent. Thus we have the following comment on the Reformation made in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer on 28 December 1936:

What contribution the Reformation did really make was to seriously challenge, and partly undermine, the edifice which the Fathers of the Church had themselves reared, and to discard and demonstrate the purely human origin of the elaborate doctrines, ceremonies and institutions which they had devised. The Reformation was a right challenge to the man-made organization of the Church, and as such was a step in advance. In its origins, it was a reflection of the new spirit which Islam had released, and a God-sent punishment to those who had refused to embrace its truth.

As to the doctrines of Arianism, it is difficult at this time and in light of the paucity of documents remaining, to ascertain exactly what Arius taught, but in "The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church" we find the following description:

ARIANISM. The principle heresy which denied the true Divinity of Jesus Christ, so called after its author, *Arius (q.v.)

Arianism maintained that the Son of God was not eternal but created by the Father from nothing as an instrument for the creation of the World; and that therefore He was not God by nature, but a changeable creature, His dignity as Son of God having been bestowed on Him by the Father on account of His foreseen abiding righteousness.

In light of the Baha'i teachings about the nature of the Manifestation of God, of `Abdu'l-Baha's elucidation of the doctrine of the Trinity, and of the Guardian's statement that:

As to the position of Christianity, let it be stated without any hesitation or equivocation that its divine origin is unconditionally acknowledged, that the Sonship and Divinity of Jesus Christ are fearlessly asserted, that the divine inspiration of the Gospel is fully recognized, that the reality of the mystery of the Immaculacy of the Virgin Mary is confessed, and the primacy of Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, is upheld and defended....
(*"The Promised Day is Come"* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980), p.109)

it would be difficult to maintain that the teaching of Arius is closer to that of the Baha'i Revelation than that of the Church.

However that may be, the principle theme of `Abdu'l-Baha's reference is not the nature of the teachings of Arius but the damage caused by his attempt to raise a following which divided the Church in defiance of the Covenant of Christ, and the ability of that Covenant to maintain the essential unity of the Church even in the face of so formidable an opponent.

No doubt in the future Baha'i scholars will be able to examine this question in greater detail and draw many illuminating conclusions.