

13 March 1995

Transmitted by fax: 7-095-2837472

The Regional Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of Russia, Georgia and Armenia

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms
into the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets

Your letter of 31 January 1995, with its enclosed letter to your Assembly from the Ad Hoc Committee of your Bahá'í Publishing Trust, dated 25 January, was received by the Universal House of Justice which has instructed us to send you the following reply.

The letter of 25 January 1995 written to your Assembly by Messrs. Yuli Isonessayen and William Hatcher, on behalf of an ad hoc committee of your Bahá'í Publishing Trust, outlines certain problems arising from the procedure currently used for representing Arabic and Persian terms in Russian Bahá'í publications. It then raises three queries, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Since the English-language versions of Bahá'í texts are the standard for translations into Russian (and most other languages), does this decision of the Universal House of Justice “implicitly (or explicitly) confer any special status on the English-language transliterated version of Persian and Arabic terms as a basis for transcription into other alphabets such as Cyrillic”?
2. Even if the answer to the above question is negative, would it be more or less appropriate “to use the transliterated English as a basis, on the one hand, or to use the original Persian and/or Arabic as a basis, on the other hand”?
3. In the event that the Publishing Trust is entirely free to choose, and it decides to use the “original Persian/Arabic terms as a basis for transcription into Russian, should [it] use the Persian or the Arabic pronunciation as a guide”?

It would seem that these questions arise from a misunderstanding of the nature of the standard transliteration system, which is not an “English-language” transliteration, but rather a system of transliteration from the Arabic/Persian alphabet into the Roman alphabet.

The congress of orientologists which originally approved the system was an international congress comprising experts of various linguistic backgrounds, including English, French and German. Their task was to devise a system of transliteration into the Roman alphabet for the

various languages using the Arabic alphabet, such as Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Moreover, at the same time it was studying a similar transliteration system for the Sanskrit alphabet because many place-names in India (which was of particular practical concern to the French and British members of the congress) were written in either the Arabic or Sanskrit alphabet, depending upon whether the writer was using Urdu or Hindi. It was clearly desirable that, to the degree possible, the transliterated form should be the same, whether it was based on the Arabic or the Sanskrit.

These characteristics of the system are particularly valuable for Bahá'ís because our Scriptures are written in both Persian and Arabic—indeed in some Tablets the expression moves back and forth between the two languages. Moreover, many Arabic terms and names are used in Persian. It would clearly be highly undesirable for a familiar word like “Riḍván” to be spelled differently in the Roman alphabet depending upon whether the original text was in Persian or Arabic. There are, of course, certain spellings even in the standard system which differ depending upon the original, such as “Kitáb-i-Aqdas” and “Kitábu'l-Aqdas”, but they are not such as to be disturbing to the reader.

The system, therefore, is basically a transliteration system. In other words, each letter of the Arabic/Persian alphabet is represented by a separate symbol in the Roman alphabet. The reader will not know how to pronounce the words unless he learns the pronunciation of the original languages—just as an English speaker cannot pronounce a French word unless he learns French pronunciation. Once the system is learned, however, the reader can apply either the Persian or the Arabic pronunciation to the letters, as he would do when reading the original.

It has to be recognized that it is seldom possible to write the pronunciation of one language in the orthography of another, the most one can do is arrive at a very inadequate approximation.

The ideal solution for Russian and all the other languages using the Cyrillic alphabet would be a system of the transliteration of the Arabic/ Persian alphabet in which each letter of the original is represented by a separate cyrillic symbol. Such a system would be universal for all users of the Cyrillic alphabet. The House of Justice was informed that no such generally accepted system exists, even in scientific circles, and it was because of this that it gave the guidance conveyed in our email of 20 July 1993, with which, presumably, your Bahá'í Publishing Trust is familiar.

This guidance was clearly a temporary expedient adopted in order to permit the speedy publication of Bahá'í literature in Russian and similar languages. To hold up publication pending agreement on a proper transliteration system would be most undesirable.

In due course, however, it would be excellent if Bahá'í linguists were to study the many languages using the Cyrillic alphabet (including Tajiki, which is closely akin to Persian) and devise a transliteration system for the consideration of the various National Spiritual Assemblies affected. Although such a system would be based on the Arabic/Persian alphabet, it might be helpful to the linguists concerned to examine how the transliteration system for the Roman alphabet has been devised and applied. Like the Roman transliteration system, a Cyrillic one should be capable of carrying both Arabic and Persian. Thus, separate characters would be required to represent the letters which are written in the Roman alphabet as d, dh, z and z, since these represent four different consonants in Arabic although all are pronounced

identically in Persian. Similarly, there would need to be three different symbols for the letters transliterated in the Roman alphabet as h, ħ and kh, even though the average Russian reader would pronounce all of them as if they were kh.

The House of Justice asks us to emphasize that this endeavour should not be permitted to delay the publication of Bahá'í literature, nor should it absorb too much time and energy at this stage of the development of the Cause in Russia.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

For Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre
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