



ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

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Alesia Lopatina leads a workshop on moral education, attended by some 50 teachers, in Penza.

PENZA, Russian Federation — In United States dollars, the books don’t cost very much: about \$2 each. But on a teacher’s salary in contemporary Russia, it is a considerable sum, and the decision to buy requires a bit of sacrifice.

“I had the choice to buy some clothing or the books,” said Irina Melnikova, a 35-year-old pre-school teacher at Public School No. 48 in this medium-sized industrial city on the Sura River. “But I decided that to grow as a professional, I need the books more than other material things.”

Ms. Melnikova is not alone. Since the first edition of *The World of Love and Unity* was published in 1996, it and subsequent titles in a series of books by Maria Skrebtsova and Alesia Lopatina have sold more than 120,000 copies in Russia and other CIS-member states.

The books, which offer step-by-step classroom lessons in moral education and other topics, have been purchased mostly by primary school teachers, who nearly always pay for them out of their own pockets.

Teachers and school officials who have begun to use the books say nothing else compares to them in Russia. “These books are very much needed by Russian society,” said Tamara Tkatchova, director of the Ozarenie School (Reflections School), a public school in Kazan, Russia, with about 250 students in grades 1 through 11. “They stand in contrast to everything else like them.”

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The Family and Development

Throughout recorded history, in every culture, the family has been the fundamental building block of society. And throughout history, the main factor in the cohesion of the family has been religion.

Today, by many yardsticks, the family is in crisis.

In industrialized countries, changing economic conditions and new patterns of consumption have increased the number of families where both parents work, leaving less time for children and family life. High divorce rates have created a culture of marital insecurity. Other social forces have served to decrease support for families from extended kin, the workplace, neighbors, and society at large.

In the developing world, such trends are compounded by overarching problems of poverty, environmental degradation, inequalities between women and men, and the rise of global pandemics, in particular HIV/AIDS.

During 2004, the United Nations will commemorate the 10th anniversary of the 1994 International Year of the Family (IYF). The UN, its specialized agencies, governments, and non-governmental organizations will hold conferences, promote activities, and undertake studies in an effort to strengthen planning and policies in support of strong families.

During the great global conferences of the 1990s, the family emerged as a major theme — even though it was not central to any one of those conferences in particular. While each conference had a distinct focus, such as sustainable development, human rights, women, social development, or habitable cities, all emphasized the importance of the human person as the agent and beneficiary of development, stressing the importance of empowerment, participation, and inclusiveness.

Central to this new concept of development is an understanding that the family is the basic unit of society — and that its strength is integral to development.

All of these conferences, for example, stressed the need for intra-familial as well as public family support systems. They also

made specific references to family-sensitive policies and family support systems, such as flexible working hours, part-time employment, work sharing, public or publicly subsidized child care, parental leave, social security, disability benefits and assistance to families to care for dependents, and family welfare.

Strong families are indeed central to the overall effort to improve social and economic development, create sustainable communities, and increase global prosperity.

For the individual, of course, strong families have many benefits. The family is a bulwark against hard times, the most basic of support systems for its members. People in strong families are healthier, happier, and better adjusted.

In terms of social development in general and the overall advancement of civilization, the family is likewise of primary importance. For it is in the family that basic values and morality are formed. It is in the family that the essential capacities for learning, self-confidence, and positive social interaction are acquired. And it is from the base of a strong family that individuals are best able to contribute to society as a whole.

As noted, religion has historically been among the most important factors in family cohesion. Laws about marriage, divorce, the rearing of children, the values to be transmitted — all have traditionally come from religion.

Today, however, the connection between religion and the family is under assault. First and foremost, the male-dominated, authoritarian model for the family structure has become widely discredited — and rightly so. Associated with the oppression of women, inflexible child-rearing practices, and the preservation of masculine power, this model of family life is now seen as unhealthy and unjust.

Yet many religious traditionalists believe that the male-dominated, authoritarian family model is mandated by their sacred scripture. And, indeed, some feminists see religion as against the family, inasmuch as men

in many cultures and places have used religious arguments to maintain a status quo that is based on the subordination of women.

The failure of the male-dominated, authoritarian model has given rise to an alternative in many Western countries. More liberal — and secular — in its orientation, it wisely gives women a more equal role in family decisions. At the same time, however, this model has largely discarded the firm sense of morality offered by religious teachings, opening the door to a kind of permissiveness in child-rearing that all too often leaves children with no firm sense of values or ethical construct — other than self-gratification.

Psychiatrist Hossain Danesh has described the consequences in a book entitled *The Violence-Free Family: Building Block of a Peaceful Civilization*. Such permissive families “give primacy to gratification of personal needs and desires over all other issues,” he writes. “In such families pursuit of knowledge and truth do not have relevance except for personal gain. Love in indulgence-based families is viewed as identical to gratification; the powers of human will are expressed in promiscuous and anarchic ways. Children in these families grow up to be immensely self-centered, intolerant, and undisciplined. They demand instant gratification of their desires from their parents and society, and when their demands are not met, they often resort to violence and crime. These individuals are highly prone to develop addictions and to relate to others as though they have automatic and unlimited privileges.”

It is hard to imagine building a successful world civilization on such values.

So what is the alternative? There is a new model for family relationships, one that has emerged from the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith.

That model, says Dr. Danesh, is built around the principle of unity and human oneness. It seeks to establish equality and mutuality in the relationships between husband and wife, while at the same time outlining a well-defined understanding of the rights and responsibilities between parents and children.

“In these families, the power- and indulgence-based practices of control, competition, and excessive individualism and independence give way to those of equality, cooperation, universality, and interdependence,” writes Dr. Danesh.

At the same time, the unity-based family has a firm grounding in ethics and values. It

combines a progressive social outlook with a strong sense of individual morality. The Bahá’í teachings, for example, stress the equality of all races and ethnic groups and the importance of justice in the distribution of wealth. They also firmly uphold the need for absolute honesty, complete trustworthiness, and the highest standards of personal conduct.

Of overwhelming importance in this discussion is the principle of equality between women and men. Alone among the independent world religions, the Bahá’í Faith explicitly calls for the equality of women and men in its sacred scripture — a fact that negates any claim to exclusive or superior power for men within the family structure (and society at large).

“And among the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is the equality of women and men,” wrote ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “The world of humanity has two wings — one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.”

More significantly in terms of the connection between the family and development, the unity-based family paradigm offers a matrix from which can emerge human beings who are truly empowered as potential contributors to the advancement of society as a whole.

In the unity-based family, writes Dr. Danesh, children become aware of their essential unity with all other people and attain the courage to be truthful and truth seeking. They also learn that the highest level of human freedom is obtained when one engages in acts of service to others.

“Humanity is now in the final stages of its collective adolescence,” continues Dr. Danesh. “As we mature, we leave behind the mindsets based on power and pleasure because evolution and transition from one stage of development to another is an inevitable aspect of life. The most important dimension of this transition is the development of a new mindset. The nature of this new mindset is directly related to the oneness of humanity, which attains its highest expression in the all-important state of unity. It will be impossible for humanity to advance on its path of growth unless humankind establishes a life of unity — inner, interpersonal, and international unity.”*

The male-dominated, authoritarian model for the family structure has become widely discredited — and rightly so. Associated with the oppression of women, inflexible child-rearing practices, and the preservation of masculine power, this model of family life is now seen as unhealthy and unjust.

From literature to peace: a scholar who strives to be a bridge between cultures

Professor Suheil Bushrui in his office at the University of Maryland.



Selected for the 2003 Juliet Hollister Award in recognition of "exceptional service to interfaith understanding," Suheil Bushrui joins the ranks of Nelson Mandela, Queen Noor, and Mary Robinson, among other recipients.

COLLEGE PARK, Maryland, USA — On one level, life for Suheil Bushrui would seem to be a jumble of contradictions.

An Arab by birth and affirmation, he is nevertheless one of the world's foremost experts on Anglo-Irish literature.

A man of deep religious faith, he nevertheless makes his base at a state-run, secular university, the University of Maryland.

And, with the self-professed heart of a poet, he has nevertheless chosen a life of the mind — and won high regard for his thoughtful scholarship and insights as a world-class lecturer.

Yet those who know Prof. Bushrui say his diverse experiences and wide-ranging preoccupations — far from being antithetical — are in part what has made him so effective as a teacher, as a scholar, and, most recently, as an advocate for peace and interfaith understanding.

In September, Prof. Bushrui received word that he would be the recipient of the 2003 Juliet Hollister Award. Given by the Temple of Understanding in recognition of

"exceptional service to interfaith understanding," the Hollister award has been bestowed on international luminaries such as South African President Nelson Mandela, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, Queen Noor of Jordan, the Dalai Lama, Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai, and theologian Thomas Berry.

Underlying the award to Prof. Bushrui is a long record of work spent promoting intercultural and interreligious understanding. And in large part, this work has been built on two main themes — the commonality of all religions and the essential oneness of the human family — themes which have given Prof. Bushrui's message a substance and practicality that has won wide acceptance.

"He has a global vision for all of mankind," said David Cadman, the former Chairman of The Prince of Wales' Foundation and a trustee of the Temenos Academy. "And in particular what I like about Professor Bushrui's writings is that he not only has a global vision but he proposes structures and mechanisms that would make this com-

mon community come together.

“There are many people who profess this as a good idea, but not so many who point to a practical path,” added Prof. Cadman.

For the last ten years, Prof. Bushrui’s platform for the promotion of such ideas has been the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace here at the University of Maryland. In 1992, Prof. Bushrui became the first incumbent of the Chair, which is located in the University’s Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) and was endowed largely with contributions from members of the worldwide Bahá’í community.

Prof. Bushrui has used the Chair to great effect. Drawing on the Chair’s resources, he has organized a number of conferences aimed at promoting international and interfaith dialogue. He has traveled widely, lecturing in the United States and Europe on topics ranging from globalization to human rights. And he has sponsored prominent guest lectures at the University here.

“His contributions to the cause of world peace are profound and significant,” said Dorothy Nelson, a senior judge on the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and the liaison between the Chair and the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States.

“His commitment to the concept of the oneness of humanity and his belief in the emergence of a world civilization which transcends all racial, religious, and social barriers are the energizing foundations of his work,” said Judge Nelson. “I know of no other scholar who has contributed more to the debate on values and the need for moral transformation and spiritual regeneration.”

Prof. Bushrui is also known for the quality of his teaching — which was another factor in the Hollister Award.

“Many teachers are good,” said Maynard Mack, director of the Honors Program at the University of Maryland. “But Suheil is life-changing. We hear this over and over again, that students’ whole attitude towards education, their whole attitude towards life, changes in his class.”

“Just a camel driver”

For his part, Prof. Bushrui projects a deep sense of humility. “I’m just a camel driver,” he often says, with a twinkle in his eye, almost as if to remind himself as much as others of his origins.

He was born 74 years ago in Nazareth. His primary education was in Arab schools, but he went on to secondary school in Jerusalem at

the age of 12, entering St. George’s College.

“I had a foundation in Qu’ranic, Arabic studies, but then I moved to an English school, and the literature fascinated me,” said Prof. Bushrui in an interview here. “In particular, I was fascinated by the romantic poets, Keats, Shelley, and Byron. They appealed to my Arab imagination, I think.”

After receiving a university education in Alexandria, he went on to teach English in the Sudan for five years. In 1959, he applied to and won the chance to study English literature at the University of Southampton with Prof. Frank T. Prince.

“It was very difficult for anyone other than an Englishman or an American to get to study English there,” said Prof. Bushrui. “And until Prof. Prince was convinced I was able to cope with the work, he was very reluctant. So I was admitted on probation.”

But Prof. Bushrui proved quite capable — to the extent that he completed his doctorate six months early and was offered a temporary teaching position to fill the time. “I was stunned,” he said. “Here was an Arab boy who found himself teaching English students their literature, something that was unbelievable for the time.”

It was in the junction of those two worlds — of his Arab childhood and of his English education — that Bushrui found a great resource for intercultural harmony.

“The link between the two cultures is that tremendous area — where I think many cultures meet — that is commonly referred to as the ‘perennial philosophy,’” said Prof. Bushrui. “My whole work on Yeats has al-

“He has a global vision for all of mankind... and he not only has a global vision but he proposes structures and mechanisms that would make this common community come together.”

– David Cadman,
Temenos Academy

HRH The Prince of Wales, left, with Suheil Bushrui, foreground, right, at a special Temenos Academy function at Highgrove, the Prince’s estate, in July 2002. In the background are Nicholas Parson, left, and David Cadman, right, both of the Temenos Academy.



Photo courtesy Suheil Bushrui



Photo by Couroush Mehanian

Professor Suheil Bushrui addressing the Association for Bahá'í Studies at its annual conference in 2003.

“For me, the Bahá'í religion — which does not emphasize a narrow religious perspective — opened up tremendous vistas of acceptance of other traditions in such a way that it emphasized the commonalities between the various cultures and religions of the world.”

– Suheil Bushrui

ways been about the perennial philosophy, about his search for a universal religion.”

Popularized by Aldous Huxley, the term “perennial philosophy” encompasses the idea that there is one Divine reality underlying all religions and cultures, even though it has been revealed to humanity at different times and in different forms.

Vistas of acceptance

The other main influence on Prof. Bushrui's thinking has been his practice of the Bahá'í Faith. Born into a Bahá'í family, he has lived by the Bahá'í teachings since childhood, and its themes of religious and human oneness are clearly found throughout his writings and lectures as the holder of the Bahá'í Chair.

“For me,” said Prof. Bushrui, “the Bahá'í religion — which does not emphasize a narrow religious perspective — opened up tremendous vistas of acceptance of other traditions in such a way that it emphasized the commonalities between the various cultures and religions of the world.”

After receiving his doctorate, Prof. Bushrui taught first in Nigeria, at the University of Ibadan, and then in Canada at the University of Calgary. In 1968, he went to Lebanon, taking a position on the English faculty at the American University of Beirut.

“In part, my return to Lebanon stemmed from a tremendous desire to publish in Arabic and to express myself in the language I have loved from childhood,” said Prof. Bushrui. “It was in Lebanon that I began to work assiduously on Gibran.”

As with Yeats, Prof. Bushrui found in the work and life of Kahlil Gibran a profound repository of universal thinking that he

believed could be a great source of healing in the world.

“Gibran was perhaps one of the foremost promoters of world unity and the unity of religions,” said Prof. Bushrui. “And he has been unfortunately neglected by academia.”

Prof. Bushrui sought to remedy scholarly neglect of Gibran with publication of several books on the Lebanese poet, including, most recently, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, which Prof. Bushrui coauthored with Joe Jenkins and published in 1998.

“He was one of those rare writers who actually transcend the barrier between East and West, and could justifiably call himself — though a Lebanese and a patriot — a citizen of the world,” wrote Bushrui and Jenkins. “His words went beyond the mere evocation of the mysterious East but endeavored to communicate the necessity of reconciliation between Christianity and Islam, spirituality and materialism, East and West...”

In many respects, those same comments could be applied to the life and work of Prof. Bushrui himself, who, through efforts to translate English poetry into Arabic and Arabic poetry in English — and through scholarship and commentary on poets in both cultures — has likewise sought to bring East and West closer together.

One of his recent projects, a book entitled *The Wisdom of the Arabs*, which compiles traditional sayings and aphorisms from throughout Arab culture, takes a popular approach to promoting cross cultural understanding.

“It's a critically important book,” said Mounzer Sleiman, a specialist in Arab cultural and security affairs and frequent broadcast commentator, who calls Prof. Bushrui a “super ambassador” for Arab culture. “He really captures the essence of the philosophy of the Arabs for a Western audience. And he shows how the Arab heritage is wholly connected with the human experience.”

Although known primarily as a literary scholar, Prof. Bushrui also has “real world” experience at promoting cross-cultural harmony. In Lebanon, one of his students was Amine Gemayel, who later became president of the country. As President, Gemayel appointed Prof. Bushrui as his non-partisan cultural advisor. It was a position that brought Prof. Bushrui directly into the field of international politics and conflict resolution.

“In Lebanon at the time, of course, the main concern was how do you create understanding and resolve conflict between the

various religious groups there, especially between Christians and Muslims,” said Prof. Bushrui. “I believe that it was possible to do this through the arts, through the great works of literature, and particularly through the works of Gibran himself.”

The point is an important one, for it underpins much of Prof. Bushrui’s work as holder of the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace.

“You see, what most people don’t appreciate is that literature is a holistic study,” said Prof. Bushrui. “It encompasses psychology, history, culture, and politics. And what has interested me is how culture and religion have interacted towards one another. And how they can be reconciled.”

“In poetry, for example, whether the poet is aware of it or not, there is a sacred knowledge, which is transmitted from generation to generation,” said Prof. Bushrui. “And that sacred knowledge, which is the basis of all great poetry, is what makes poetry universal.”

In speeches, conferences, and classroom lectures, Prof. Bushrui has made this insight central to the work of the Chair.

In one of his most widely reproduced speeches, “The Spiritual Foundation of Human Rights,” Prof. Bushrui argued that since all religions recognize “the existence of individual souls and the relationship between that soul and its Creator,” every religion in essence agrees that “human beings enjoy certain inalienable rights that no worldly authority may capriciously or systematically abrogate.”

And as is typical, he salted his speech not only with quotations from the world’s sacred scriptures but also with quotations from great poets, from Yeats to Donne to Gibran.

Over time, Prof. Bushrui has been invited to speak to increasingly prominent audiences. In 2000 and 2001, he addressed the House of Lords, and in 2001 he spoke at the US Library of Congress on the topic of “Globalization and the Bahá’í Community in the Muslim World.”

Skepticism at first

Although Prof. Bushrui’s successes are now widely acknowledged at the University, there was some doubt at first among faculty and administrators about placing a literary specialist like Prof. Bushrui into a data-oriented research center like the CIDCM when the Bahá’í Chair was first proposed.

“My own background is the empirical branches of social science, so quite frankly it took me a while to figure out where a person with Suheil’s particular résumé fits into

a research center like this,” said Jonathan Wilkenfeld, director of the CIDCM, who is himself trained as a political scientist.

“But I’ve come to see that there is more to peace building than moving in United Nations peacekeeping forces or signing treaties,” said Prof. Wilkenfeld. “I’ve come to see that there is also this need for people at the grassroots level to be communicating and understanding each other’s cultures and ideas and religions. And Suheil is really a unique sort of bridge builder in that way.”

Prof. Bushrui also has the ability to connect with students. In 1999, he was chosen “teacher of the year” at the University, a significant honor on a campus with more than 2,800 full time faculty.

Elie Teichman, a 21-year-old senior at the University, said that Prof. Bushrui’s honors seminar on “The Spiritual Heritage of the Human Race” was “one of my most treasured academic experiences in college.”

“We delved into ancient Egyptian religions, into African religions, into Christianity and Islam, and we talked about the commonalities that exist between all of them, and common ethics and morals,” said Mr. Teichman, who says he is thinking about entering rabbinical school after graduation. “It provided a very optimistic vision about the way the future could be.”

It was partly because of the success of the Spiritual Heritage course that the Temple of Understanding gave Prof. Bushrui the Hollister award for 2003 — an award which will be presented in ceremonies scheduled for 1 March 2004.

“The Temple’s mission is interfaith edu-

“Literature is a holistic study. It encompasses psychology, history, culture, and politics. And what has interested me is how culture and religion have interacted towards one another. And how they can be reconciled.”

– Suheil Bushrui

Amine Gemayel, former president of Lebanon, was a guest speaker in May 2001 at one of Suheil Bushrui’s classes at the University of Maryland. President Gemayel is second from left in the first row.

Bushrui, continued on page 14



In Russia, teachers embrace new ideas about moral education

Students at Ozarenie School, a public school in Kazan, Russia, hold up copies of books by Maria Skrebtsova and Alesia Lopatina, which are used as a regular part of the curriculum. In all, Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina have sold more than 120,000 of their books in Russia and other CIS states.



Russia, continued from page one

Relying on donations from parents, Ms. Tkatchova has purchased a full set of books for each classroom. She and her staff have built a major portion of the school's curriculum around the books, developing a series of "positive thinking" lessons from them, which are used at the start of every school day.

"I want my children to be compassionate and loving and wise, and these books help us to develop those qualities in the children," said Ms. Tkatchova.

Authors Skrebtsova and Lopatina say the secret behind the series' success is the incorporation of universal moral and spiritual principles, principles that they have drawn from the wisdom literature of all cultures, and especially from the world's great religions.

"We start from the premise that what is 'good' comes from the prophets of the great religions — and also from our common human heritage," said Ms. Skrebtsova, a 36-year-old former teacher of French and now full-time author.

And while the books are not specifically

religious in their orientation, they also draw extensively on the moral and spiritual principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

Those principles, say Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina, who are both Bahá'ís, suggest a new direction in education where the child is viewed not merely as an empty vessel to be filled up with knowledge and information but rather a unique individual with an innate sense of right and wrong, a sense that must be brought forth and properly developed if true learning is to be achieved.

"The Bahá'í writings speak of the human being as a 'mine rich in gems of inestimable value' that can be revealed only through education," said Ms. Lopatina, a 53-year-old former pre-school teacher, who also has degrees in mathematics, physics, and psychology. "Our books seek to 'open the soul' of the child to bring out the gems that lie hidden within."

The concept is finding favor among the many educators who have discovered the books. They say the current educational system in Russia lacks any overall direction in

Authors Skrebtsova and Lopatina say the secret behind the series' success is the incorporation of universal moral and spiritual principles drawn from the wisdom literature of all cultures, and especially from the world's great religions.

terms of moral education, and the approach offered by Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina is sorely needed.

"Under Communism, there was a lot of ideology," said Larissa Roguleva, 35, another pre-school teacher in Penza. "There was the Party, the Young Pioneers, the Young Communist League (Komsomol), all the rituals of the State. And in all that were moral examples to teach our children, like about wartime heroes and sacrifice.

"But now that is all gone and there is nothing to replace it," Ms. Roguleva continued. "But, for me, these are the first books that fill that gap."

Ms. Melnikova, the teacher in Penza who bought the books instead of new clothing, said she has seen a distinct improvement in the behavior of her students in the classroom since using them — a change that has been confirmed by the childrens' parents as well.

"Parents have told me that their children pay more attention to their advice, and that their children have started thinking and analyzing their own behavior more," said Ms. Melnikova. "The children don't behave just out of obedience, but out of their own reflection on what is good."

The methodology of the books is sophisticated but easy to use. Each book is divided into a series of classroom lessons. Each lesson begins with a preface for the teacher, suggesting a goal or purpose for the lesson. This is followed by a fable or legend, which is read to the class or by the class. That is followed by discussion questions. Finally, the lesson is reinforced with a list of creative activities, such as the playing of a classroom game, an artistic exercise, and/or a short written assignment.

For example, in one of the books, a lesson entitled "Cooperation" begins with a series of questions, such as "What kinds of things does your family do together?" and "What qualities does a person need to be called a good co-worker?"

It then offers a short tale, titled "The Forest Singers," written by Ms. Skrebtsova. The story tells of rehearsals among forest musicians — a fir tree, a cricket, a nightingale, and a bluebell flower plant — that goes poorly because each is "singing his own song." But the sun urges them to work together.

After a successful concert, the sun observes that the best present the forest ever received was when everybody learned to think "about someone else before himself."

The lesson then offers more discussion

questions and lists some suggested activities. These include a game in which children try to tie a knot first with one hand, and then with two; a written assignment to list tasks that people can't do by themselves (such as building a house, steering a ship, etc.); and an assignment in which children talk about what kinds of laws might make life better for everyone around the world and then draw a picture of a new world that shows what would happen if such laws were put into effect.

In contemporary Russia, where tight budgets for education have left few resources for new instructional materials, the books by Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina stand out as highly innovative and appealing.

"These are very practical books," said Galina Gerasimova, a teacher of grades 1-4 in Public School No. 7 in Orsha, Belarus. "I knew everything I should teach the children, but I didn't have concrete tools to do it. I was like a musician who knew how to play, but just didn't have sheet music."

Ms. Gerasimova started using the books three years ago and has been so taken by them that she has bought nearly 100 copies and given most of them to her fellow teachers and friends. "Every time there is a holiday, I present one of my friends with one of the books. I think these books are the best gift. So that kindness would disperse over the world."

Another thing that sets the books apart from other volumes on moral education in Russia and, perhaps, around the world, is their extensive use of myths and legends — more commonly known as fairy tales. The authors have used both traditional tales and



Cover image of The Wisdom Alphabet by Maria Skrebtsova and Alesia Lopatina.

In Moscow, a group of teachers discusses the results they have obtained using the books on moral education by Maria Skrebtsova and Alesia Lopatina. On the floor is a series of drawings done by students in response to the books.





Maria Skrebtsova, left, and Alesia Lopatina, in Kazan, Russian Federation, on a recent tour.

composed new ones themselves.

“In old times, many people enjoyed fairy tales in Russia, and Russian people continue to like them very much,” said Alexander Tkatchov, a teacher at the Ozarenie School in Kazan, where the books are used extensively, “because wisdom was given from people to people through fairy tales.”

Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina say that the legends and tales not only have universal appeal but also offer an easy medium for moral instruction, which they see as the heart of their project.

“We believe it is not possible truly to educate children unless there is a moral basis underlying the process,” said Ms. Lopatina, adding that attempts merely to teach “knowledge” — such as science, mathematics, and history — become a fruitless exercise in memorization unless the students see a purpose for learning.

“Teachers spend years of their lives getting children to assimilate knowledge, while the children make every effort to repulse that knowledge, to avoid lessons they neither like nor understand,” she said.

So Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina decided to collect legends and tales that recount humanity’s spiritual accomplishments. The purpose is to “stir the mind and heart of the pupil from the very beginning, to impart to him the thirst for knowledge,” said Ms. Lopatina.

Teachers say that approach works. “When I started my teaching, I thought just giving information — just pure knowledge — was the most important point,” said Alla Markova, 33, vice director at Public School No. 151 in Penza. “But after a while, I realized that moral issues and development of character

were also very important. If a person has very good logic and very good grades, but no ethics, that can be dangerous.

“But if you work with the system that is in these books, you can achieve very good results. It is a system that you can use in every subject. If you teach ethics first, you can teach the logical aspects of any science afterwards,” said Ms. Markova.

In their effort to promote their method of moral education, Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina have founded the Center for Moral Education and Creative Development of Personality, which is based in Moscow, where they both live.

The Center, with them as principals, serves as both a publishing house for the books and an agency for their promotion. And to that end, Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina have crisscrossed Russia and the CIS member-states over the last nine years, giving workshops and lectures based on the books and their principles.

So far, they have published 14 books, expanding beyond titles that simply present lessons in moral principles to volumes that also include elements of biology and language development. For example, one book, *Tales of Words and Letters*, includes more than 100 stories, games, and activities about letters and words. They are currently working on a book using the same methodology to present mathematical concepts.

Nevertheless, the presentation of moral concepts remain the lynch pin of their approach. “For example, our stories about letters and words not only help children to learn reading and writing quickly, but also teach them to be friendly and kind,” said Ms. Lopatina. Other moral principles stressed in the books include the equality of women and men, the importance of service, and the concept of world citizenship.

In 1998, the Russian Association of Book Publishers awarded an honorary diploma for the books, designating them the “Best Books of the Year.”

But teachers who have discovered the books — and who use them in their classrooms — are in fact the biggest supporters of Ms. Skrebtsova and Ms. Lopatina.

“These books are a mine of wisdom, of parables and legends, in which all the world’s wisdom is concentrated,” said Elena Morozova, a 26-year-old primary school teacher at Public School No. 38 in St. Petersburg. “They prepare the children for the future, for all problems of life that people must deal with.”*

“We believe it is not possible truly to educate children unless there is a moral basis underlying the process.”

– Alesia Lopatina

In Africa, four communities celebrate 50 years of progress



Photo by Violetta Zein

At golden jubilee celebrations in the Democratic Republic of Congo in September, members of the Dawn of Carmel Choir were among the performers who entertained participants.

LILONGWE, Malawi — Fifty years ago, the first two members of the Bahá'í community here would meet in the bush at night. There they would say prayers together, discuss plans, enjoy biscuits, and then go their separate ways.

"This was done because in those days, blacks and whites could not meet openly," said Enayat Sohaili, describing the first Bahá'í gatherings in Malawi during commemorations of the community's 50th anniversary in August.

Mr. Sohaili, of Persian background, had arrived from India in 1953 and was considered white. The first Malawian Bahá'í, Dudley Smith Kumtendere, was black. And colonial policy at the time discouraged racially mixed gatherings.

But much has changed in the 50 years since the Bahá'í Faith was first established here. Since Malawi gained its independence in 1964, Bahá'ís have been able openly to express their commitment to the basic principles of their Faith, such as the oneness of humanity.

Today, there are more than 15,000 Bahá'ís in Malawi — along with other signs of a

flourishing community life: a handsome national headquarters, 15 local centers, and the existence of some 101 local-level governing councils, known as Local Spiritual Assemblies.

There have been similar signs of progress for Bahá'í communities in the three other African countries where Bahá'ís also celebrated 50th anniversaries in August and September 2003.

In Cameroon, there are now some 40,000 Bahá'ís. In the Republic of the Congo, some 20 Local Spiritual Assemblies have been established. And in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the national Bahá'í governing body, the National Spiritual Assembly, was recently able to meet in the capital for the first time in five years, since the outbreak of civil war in 1998.

All of these accomplishments and more were commemorated in gala celebrations held in the capital cities of each of the four countries last summer.

It is no coincidence that four African Bahá'í communities celebrated their 50th

In 1953, Bahá'ís embarked on a ten-year plan to spread the principles of their Faith to every land. During that period, the Faith was established in some 131 new countries and territories. Hence, many Bahá'í communities are now celebrating their golden anniversaries.

Bahá'ís from around the southern region of the Republic of the Congo gathered with guests of honor at 50th anniversary commemorations in Brazzaville. In the front row, starting from the left, are: Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community; Joan Lincoln, an International Counsellor; Violette Nakhjavani; and Ali Nakhjavani, former member of the Universal House of Justice, the international Bahá'í governing council.



“If the Bahá'í model that our national community is striving to build, can in some way contribute to the renewal and construction of the infrastructures of our country, we humbly submit it for [the nation's] consideration.”

– Nshisu Nsunga, chairman, the Bahá'í community of the Democratic Republic of Congo

anniversaries this summer. In 1953, Bahá'ís around the world embarked on a ten-year plan aimed at spreading the principles of their Faith to every land. During that period, Bahá'ís carried the Faith to some 131 new countries and territories, raising to 259 the places where the Faith was established — including many countries and territories in Africa.

In all this year, Bahá'í communities in some 17 countries will observe their golden anniversaries. In addition to the four mentioned here, they include: Cyprus, Guinea-Bissau, Kiribati, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Senegal, Seychelles, South Africa, Togo, Vanuatu, and Zimbabwe.

In the African countries celebrating their jubilees in August and September, the commemorations were marked by visitors from around the world, significant media coverage, and ceremonies featuring song, dance, and prayer.

In Cameroon, more than 560 Bahá'í from all regions of the country attended the jubilee celebrations, which were held in Yaoundé on 22–23 August 2003. Guests also came from Australia, Botswana, Canada, Equatorial Guinea, France, Morocco, Rwanda, Uganda, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

In addition to talks by visiting dignitaries, the celebrations included cultural per-

formances by some 15 ensembles from a diversity of Cameroonian ethnic groups.

Speakers also extolled the contribution of the Cameroon Bahá'í community in the field of social and economic development. The Bahá'ís there have founded a national development agency, which has sponsored or coordinated various projects in recent years.

The Cameroon Bahá'í Agency for Social and Economic Development has, for example, worked with the United Nations Development Fund for Women on a program in the eastern province aimed at improving family life and the lives of women. It has also promoted family education projects in central and northwestern provinces, and assisted in programs to eradicate river blindness.

In Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo, the Bahá'í community celebrated its 50th anniversary 29–31 August 2003. The festivities were marked by some 28 theatrical and musical performances, as well as the showing of a documentary film on the progress of the Faith in the Republic of the Congo.

The commemoration emphasized the importance of peace and unity — the Republic of the Congo has been torn by two civil wars in the past decade — and participants celebrated the freedom that the Bahá'í community has enjoyed since 1992, when a

new democratically elected government gave it legal recognition.

The national Bahá'í center, the venue of the jubilee festivities, had been seized by the former Communist regime and occupied for 14 years. During that period, the Bahá'í community was forced to stop its organized activities. Bahá'ís supported one another through mutual encouragement and informal family contacts, but without their elected administrative bodies.

The Bahá'ís of the Republic of the Congo have since reinstated their administration, regained use of the national center, and energetically resumed their activities. And despite years of oppression, there are now more than 3,500 Bahá'ís and some 20 Local Spiritual Assemblies.

In Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the jubilee celebrations were held 6–7 September 2003. They began with the reading of a message from the National Spiritual Assembly.

“Today our country is entering a crucial phase of its future,” said Nshisu Nsunga, chairman of the Assembly. “If the Bahá'í model that our national community is striving to build, can in some way contribute to the renewal and construction of the infrastructures of our country, we humbly submit it for [the nation’s] consideration.”

Attending the jubilee festivities was a senior Government representative, Jean Baptiste Nsa Lobete, Political and Diplomatic Counselor of the Governor of Kinshasa. He linked the jubilee to the rising climate of hope in the nation.

“Because the social development and the various economic endeavors of your Faith across the country constitute a point of pride for all its members and leaders,” Mr. Lobete said, “all of these wonderful results justify the respect that the authorities of this country feel towards the Bahá'í community in particular when it comes to answer one or another of your concerns.”

Some of the activities Mr. Lobete referred to include social and economic development field projects such as adult literacy initiatives in Kasai and Western and Eastern Kivu, community health projects in Southern Kivu, and community farming projects in Katanga and Southern Kivu.

Mr. Lobete particularly praised the Bahá'í contribution to national education. The Bahá'ís have established primary and secondary schools in Katanga and throughout the country, and centers for the promotion

of the status of women and the education of children in Kinshasa and Katanga.

Currently, there are about 30,000 Bahá'ís in the DRC, and they have established some 541 local governing councils.

In Malawi, Bahá'ís came from all over the country — from Nsanje to Karonga, from Mchinji to Nkhotakota — for the golden anniversary, which was celebrated on 9 August 2003. They were joined by participants from as far away as Bermuda, Australia, and Mauritius, and from nearby African countries like South Africa, Zambia, and Lesotho.

The celebrations were in great contrast to the early days. Julius (Robert) Kasakula, one of the first Malawian Bahá'ís, recalled that indoor Bahá'í meetings had been just as secretive as the encounters in the bush.

“Because the blacks and whites could not meet openly, we used to have meetings at our house at night,” Mr. Kasakula said.

Mr. Sohaili, who now lives with his wife, Iran, in Zimbabwe, recounted the time when he asked a restaurant owner to provide a table to allow visiting Americans John and Val Allen (Bahá'ís living in Swaziland), to meet with him and Mr. Kumtendere.

“When the owner was approached, he asked us to come after 2 p.m. when there would be few customers. He put us right at the back where we had our lunch.” *

– Bahá'í World News Service reports

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, development activities of the Bahá'í community includes adult literacy initiatives in Kasai and Western and Eastern Kivu, community health projects in Southern Kivu, and community farming projects in Katanga and Southern Kivu.

At 50th anniversary celebrations in Malawi, the group “BABY” (Blantyre Active Bahá'í Youth) was among the many that performed.



New representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations joins New York office

NEW YORK — Bahiyiyh Chaffers, a 33-year-old attorney from Canada, has been appointed as a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

Appointed on 26 August 2003, Ms. Chaffers will focus initially on issues related to global prosperity and sustainable development. In September, she represented the Community at the World Summit on the Information Society Prepcom in Geneva.

Before coming to the Community in August, Ms. Chaffers worked in New York as an associate producer at CNN and, before that, at ABC News.

Ms. Chaffers hopes to bring her experience as a corporate attorney and media specialist into the Community's work at the UN.

"As the United Nations becomes more engaged with both the corporate world and civil society, there are opportunities for new ideas," said Ms. Chaffers. "One of my goals is to bring my knowledge and understanding of the private sector, along with the perspectives of the Bahá'í International Community, into the world of the United Nations and the general field of development," said Ms. Chaffers.

Born in Toronto, Ms. Chaffers has an undergraduate diploma in French literature and history from the Sorbonne University



in Paris and a degree in civil law at the University of Paris. She completed her legal training with an L.L.L. degree from the University of Montreal and an L.L.B. degree at the University of Ottawa.

After her education, Ms. Chaffers worked as a corporate attorney at Goodmans, one of Canada's top law firms. She later came to New York and worked as a television news producer.

She will be based in the Community's New York office, where she joins Bani Dugal, who is the Community's Principal Representative to the United Nations.*

A scholar strives to be a bridge between cultures

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cation and we have always been very focused on educators," said Alison Van Dyk, executive director of the Temple, which is based in New York. "What we are looking for are people who carry the interfaith message to a large audience, and Prof. Bushrui has certainly done that."

Cynthia Roberts Hale, assistant dean in the College of Behavior and Social Sciences, where the Bahá'í Chair resides, said Prof. Bushrui has had an "enormous impact" on the University of Maryland.

"That's significant because this is a huge,

secular institution and when he came in, a lot of people approached it with skepticism," said Dr. Hale, who has worked closely with Prof. Bushrui since he arrived. "But he has developed relationships all over the campus, and he has won the respect of many people, first because he is a scholar in his own right and second because he is a citizen of the world.

"So often, academics have a message that is only for each other. But Suheil has the capacity to communicate with everyone, whether a child, a student, a scholar, or the House of Lords," said Dr. Hale. "And Suheil wants you to know that he believes in God, that there is a world order, and that there is a code of human behavior — and he is constantly translating that into a formula for world peace.*"

Critical Consciousness

Review, continued from page 16

that underlies and empowers those who have achieved it. “Knowing and being, mind and heart, center round a caring, increasingly interconnected, justice-and-equity-oriented view of life,” she writes.

And such moral motivation, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt writes, is essentially spiritual in nature. “The most central finding of this work has been that empowered, resilient moral consciousness is a function of the extent to which the individual’s spiritual capacities to know, to love, and to exercise free will are fully awakened and harmoniously developed.”

More specifically, in her studies of 26 ordinary people in the USA and Bulgaria, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt found that those who had reached or were about to reach critical consciousness were in large part guided by love.

“Love for truth, beauty, and goodness is the missing link that brings together moral values, character, sincerity, moral reasoning, critical discernment, responsibility, empathy, and compassion into a qualitatively different consciousness — empowered, resilient, and authentically moral,” she writes. “Love is the depth dimension of human existence.”

As well, in developing new theories about critical consciousness, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt calls into question a number of current directions in society, the social sciences, and, most acutely, education.

“Educational practice is split between behavioristic socialization and an emphasis on the development of skills,” she writes. “Lacking are significant models of authentic moral authority or any truly integrative spiritual conversation.”

While this approach has spurred tremendous material development in much of the world, she writes, it must also be associated with some of the worst features of modern civilization, from environmental degradation to widespread social injustice.

What is missing, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt writes, is the comprehension of humanity’s spiritual dimension in the fields of education and social science — a comprehension that she believes many researchers are coming to on their own. She cites the work of Ken Wilber, Robert Emmons, and Martin Seligman, among others, in outlining new directions in psychology and beyond.

“Many individual thinkers have already anticipated the gradual shift to a spiritualized

civilization, able to muster its collective will to solve the economical and ecological problems facing the planet, on the basis of an understanding of the universal spiritual principles that govern life,” she writes.

In that regard, while drawing on a wide range of contemporary psychological research, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt also makes clear that she has been inspired by the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith in her search for the components of and pathways to critical consciousness.

She suggests that the Faith’s modern rearticulation of traditional spiritual wisdom, its concept of progressive revelation, and its vision of individual and collective evolution in the context of an ever-advancing global civilization, offer new perspectives on the nature and development of critical consciousness.

“Bahá’í philosophy emphasizes the need to direct the mirror of consciousness from the beginning to the divine center of all life and to nurture and cultivate transcendent awareness in children,” said Dr. Mustakova-Possardt. “Such awareness can become a solid foundation on which developing brain-based consciousness can then erect the edifice of knowledge, and ultimately, knowledge and understanding can become one in the fully developed and fully awakened mind.”

Moreover, she establishes the convergence between Bahá’í-inspired psycho-spiritual understandings about the nature of knowledge, love, and will, as well as authentic morality, and the latest and most progressive strands of contemporary psychological thought and research.

The infusion of spirituality into the discussion of critical consciousness does not contradict Dr. Freire’s original concepts. Dr. Freire himself drew greatly on his own experience as a Christian in developing his ideas — ideas that without question have had an enormous impact on thinking around the world about education, empowerment, and development.

In extending the concept — and in infusing its underpinnings with insights drawn from the newest independent world religion — Dr. Mustakova-Possardt likewise opens a very wide door to still more insights and applications.

In particular, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt’s emphasis on the fundamental importance of possessing a global vision, as one of the milestones of critical consciousness, suggests a new framework for moral empowerment in an era of globalization.*

“Empowered, resilient moral consciousness is a function of the extent to which the individual’s spiritual capacities to know, to love, and to exercise free will are fully awakened and harmoniously developed.”

– Elena Mustakova-Possardt

Is there a roadmap to critical consciousness?

*Critical
Consciousness: A
Study of Morality
in Global,
Historical Context*

By Elena
Mustakova-
Possardt

Praeger

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Coined by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the 1960s, the term “critical consciousness” was at first applied mainly in the field of adult education. Translated from the Portuguese word *conscientizadora*, critical consciousness was defined by Dr. Freire as a state of in-depth understanding about the world and resulting freedom from oppression.

Dr. Freire explored liberating educational methods that he believed could promote the development of critical consciousness, especially among poor and illiterate people, a process that would lead to their emancipation and fruitful advancement. His theories have greatly influenced thinking about participatory development.

Over time, however, the term has taken on an expanded meaning, describing a state of mental and spiritual development that confers upon its subject a morally progressive, engaged, and holistic view of life.

It is within this expanded conception of “critical consciousness” that Elena Mustakova-Possardt operates in her wide-ranging and highly original new monograph *Critical Consciousness: A Study of Morality in Global, Historical Context*.

Indeed, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt takes the concept of critical consciousness to the next level, redefining it as a “way of being” that fully integrates the heart and mind and so creates in the individual a sense of highly principled morality, philosophical expansion, and historical and global vision that represents the acme of human consciousness.

“[E]very chapter of human history has had its individuals who have exhibited this empowered unity of rational mind and inner vision,” Dr. Mustakova-Possardt writes. “The most outstanding among these people have become known as moral and spiritual leaders, whom the rest of humanity has viewed as people of a different quality. Their names and stories fill the world’s treasury of the human heritage.”

Within that framework, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt then asks a couple of crucial questions: What are the psychological components of this state of consciousness? And is it possible to create an educational system

that would help greater numbers of people to reach critical consciousness?

In seeking answers to these questions, she follows two paths. First, she surveys the latest developments in modern psychology, especially in the emerging area of so-called “positive” or “holistic” psychology.

Second, she draws on a series of field interviews with 26 individuals in the United States and in her native Bulgaria and offers a series of moral vignettes that analyze the degree to which her subjects are on the path to (or have reached) critical consciousness.

This two-track approach gives both a theoretical and empirical underpinning to the 218-page book. The result is a sweeping and thought-provoking work that challenges com-



Elena Mustakova-Possardt

mon perceptions about the development of morality, the purpose of education, and prevailing directions of thought in social science.

Starting with Dr. Freire’s definition of critical consciousness, Dr. Mustakova-Possardt carefully dissects and analyzes its components. It involves, she writes, elements of critical thinking, an understanding of causality, a grasp of the processes of history, and the ability to translate thought into action.

Ultimately, however, critical consciousness stems from authentic moral motivation

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