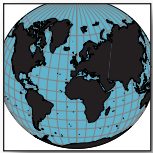




ONE COUNTRY

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International Community
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At the UN, governments and civil society try a new mode of interaction

Historic “Informal Interactive” hearings with civil society focus on core issues of UN reform, poverty, human rights, and security; the advancement of women emerges as a critical theme.

UNITED NATIONS – Policy-makers at the United Nations are increasingly talking about the links between three core issues: poverty reduction, human rights, and peace and security.

But at an historic series of hearings with civil society in June, representatives of non-governmental organizations also reminded UN diplomats of another critical theme: the advancement of women.

The three core areas were still seen by NGO representatives as important, to be sure, and very much linked. But over two days of “Informal Interactive Hearings with Civil Society” on 23-24 June 2005, the issue of women was brought up repeatedly.

“Poverty is a function of human rights violations and a source of conflict,” said Betty Murungi of the Kenya-based Urgent Action Fund for Africa. “Unequal gender and power relations exacerbate poverty and violence against women.”

The hearings were designed to solicit input from global civil society in advance of the Millennium Plus Five World Summit meeting scheduled for September’s General Assembly opening. The Summit will review progress made towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Attended by about 200 active participants and 1,000 observers, the hearings were divided into four sessions, each covering one of the four broad issue areas outlined in UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s recent report on UN reform, “In Larger Freedom.”

Those four sessions were “Freedom to live in dignity” (human rights), “Freedom from

Civil Society, continued on page 10



An overflow crowd in the main hearing room forced many civil society representatives to watch the historic “Informal Interactive Civil Society Hearings” on video monitors in other UN conference rooms.

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Cultural liberty and freedom of belief

[Editor's note: The following Perspective is adapted from a statement titled "Freedom to Believe," which was recently issued by the Bahá'í International Community.]

The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development. It is the individual's search for meaning and the desire to know who we are as human beings that distinguish the human conscience.

We applaud the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for its 2004 Human Development Report, "Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World." For the first time in the Report's fifteen-year history, it acknowledges cultural liberty as a "vital part of human development" and affirms the "profound importance of religion to people's identities."

Human Development Reports have evolved dramatically from a purely materialist approach centered on wealth and income to embrace the concept of development as the expansion of human freedoms. By including cultural freedom in its analysis — including the freedom of religion or belief — the UNDP has once again broadened the conceptual framework underpinning the evaluation of progress in human development.

The UNDP's focus could not be more timely. Human development and security — two issues at the heart of today's global agenda — have refocused the attention of the international community on the question of human freedom. And the 2004 Report has set the stage for an earnest re-examination of the role of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in human development.

As a worldwide religious community that regards the human conscience as sacred and believes in the independent search for truth, the Bahá'í International Community urges the UNDP to give serious consideration to four critical issues intimately related to its Report: (1) the right to change one's religion or beliefs; (2) the right to share one's beliefs with others; (3) the responsibilities of the international community and national governments vis à vis marginalized and peacefully organized religious communities; and (4) the responsibilities of religious lead-

ers vis à vis the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

1) *The right to change one's religion or beliefs.* The Human Development Report defines cultural liberty as the "capability of people to live and be what they choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options." The Report, however, focuses primarily on cultural exclusion based on "external" manifestations of one's religion or belief while omitting from its discussion the core dimension of cultural exclusion — namely a denial of the "internal" right to change one's religion or belief. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly affirms:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

The individual's search for truth and meaning is an activity most intimately linked with the human conscience and with the desire to see the world through one's own eyes and to understand it through one's own faculties of perception and intelligence. As such, it is inextricably linked with all facets of human development.

Due to pressure from dissenting States, however, subsequent United Nations treaties have used weaker language to define this right, failing to uphold the unambiguous standard set by the Declaration.

The Human Rights Committee has identified the freedom to change religion or belief, freedom to manifest beliefs, non-coercion in matters of religion, and non-discrimination on the basis of religion as core components of this right. As signatories to the Universal Declaration and subsequent treaties and global commitments, governments bear the primary responsibility to create, safeguard, and promote the necessary conditions for the enjoyment of the freedom of conscience, religion, or belief for all of their citizens.

2) *The right to teach one's religion or beliefs.* Intimately connected with the freedom to hold and to change one's religion or belief is the freedom to share those beliefs with

others. Within the broad range of activities potentially encompassed by the freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs, the right to teach one's religion or beliefs has been particularly contentious.

While the Declaration calls for the unconditional protection of the "internal" right to freedom of religion, the "external" right to manifest one's beliefs is subject to limitations: Governments are permitted to place restrictions on this right for purposes of "meeting the just requirements of morality, public order, and the general welfare in a democratic society." This has too often been abused in efforts to quell minority populations and has raised questions about what constitutes legitimate governmental interference in manifestations of religion or belief.

States argue that limiting the teaching of religions and the sharing of beliefs is necessary to preserve particular traditions and to protect the rights of the targeted populations; yet the right to freedom of religion or belief is necessarily contingent on the exposure to new ideas and the ability to share and receive information. Limitations on the basis of "maintaining public order" and "morality" have also been applied with considerable latitude and in a manner inconsistent with the principle of non-discrimination.

Non-democratic and theocratic States in particular have repeatedly issued such reservations without the burden of proof, calling into question not only their interpretation of this right but also their protection of related rights and freedoms such as the right to employment and education, and the freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.

Ultimately, a long-term preventive strategy must be rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike, equipping them with literacy skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief. Within a culture of education, people who can read the writings of their own religion as well as those of others, who are free to question and discuss, and who are able to participate in the generation and application of knowledge will be better prepared to counter the forces of ignorance and fanaticism.

3) *Marginalized religious minorities.* The challenge before States, and one of their central concerns as addressed in the Human Development Report, is the maintenance of social cohesion and national unity in the face of increasing cultural pluralism. The report cites the threats of social instability and violent protest as a primary imperative for States'

need to accommodate minority claims.

States must discard outmoded notions of cultural homogeneity and ideological uniformity as a guarantor of peace and security and come to embrace a plurality of identities and beliefs.

4) *The responsibilities of religious leaders.* The responsibility to uphold universal principles of freedom of religion or belief also rests with religious leaders. In a world harassed by violence and conflict in the name of religion, leaders of religious communities bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers towards a peaceful coexistence.

Too often, those acting in the name of religion have fanned the flames of hatred and fanaticism, themselves serving as the greatest obstacles in the path of peace. Yet the religions and faiths of the world with which the majority of the earth's inhabitants stand identified have imparted a vast spiritual, moral, and civilizing legacy, which continues to succor and guide in these troubled times.

Indeed, religions have reached to the roots of human motivation to lift our vision beyond purely material conceptions of reality to embrace higher notions of justice, reconciliation, love, and selflessness in the service of the common good.

Given the weight of culture and religion in shaping motivation and behavior, it is clear that legal mechanisms alone will not engender the commitment and mutual understanding required to sustain an ethos of peaceful co-existence. The role of religious leaders as partners — in word and deed — in the promotion of respect for human dignity and freedom of conscience, religion, or belief cannot be understated.

Urgent action is now needed to reaffirm the vision of equal rights for all without discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. As a first step, the United Nations must unequivocally affirm an individual's right to change his or her religion or belief under international law.

Concrete actions — investigative, legal, and operational — must follow. Research and analysis are needed to clarify minimum standards for compliance with international law and to develop indicators marking the presence or absence of freedom of religion or belief. An annual world report prepared by the United Nations assessing the state of this freedom throughout the world would provide further substance and facilitate comparisons over time and across geographic regions.*

States must discard outmoded notions of cultural homogeneity and ideological uniformity as a guarantor of peace and security and come to embrace a plurality of identities and beliefs.

Veteran actor Earl Cameron brings a sense of world citizenship to UN role

Earl Cameron acting in the movie *The Interpreter* as president of an African country who is addressing the United Nations. At left in this scene is Oscar-winning actor Nicole Kidman. [Photo courtesy of Universal Studios]



LONDON – When veteran actor Earl Cameron stood at the lectern in the United Nations General Assembly hall, portraying an African despot for the film *The Interpreter*, he had one of those strange moments where the larger reality of things snaps into focus.

On the one hand, the 87-year-old British actor was playing the corrupt and unsavory president of a fictional African country — a role he had no hesitation in accepting.

“I feel that an actor must portray life, and despotic characters need to be portrayed and shown up,” he said.

On the other hand, as a Bahá’í, the scene reminded him very much of the Bahá’í belief in the need for world unity.

“There I was,” said Mr. Cameron, “standing at the lectern in front of 2,000 extras playing all the ambassadors. Seeing the names of all the countries on the desks in front of me, I got a real sense of the importance of the UN.”

“The world is desperate for peace and there’s no other way it can go but towards greater cooperation at a global level,” he said. “Solutions have to be found at a level above national interests — and so far there isn’t any other organization which can establish these first steps towards lasting peace.”

Before becoming a Bahá’í, Mr. Cameron rose to considerable fame in the United Kingdom as one of the first black actors to break the “color bar,” winning acclaim for early roles about race relations in England.

After becoming a Bahá’í, he continued his career — but coupled it with service to humanity at large, as exemplified by a 15-year stint in the Solomon Islands in the 1980s, where he sought to teach principles of human oneness.

“He had the choice of going on with his career and becoming a stronger actor, but he decided to work for the Faith, because that was more important to him,” said his daughter, Serena Cameron. “Because he was at a stage where he could easily have gone the same route as Sidney Poitier.”

Mr. Cameron is quite satisfied with his career choices, but he was nevertheless very happy when he was called out of retirement to play the role of Edmund Zuwanie in *The Interpreter*.

It was in early 2004, while he was taking part in a Bahá’í community activity in the United Kingdom, that he received a surprising phone call from his agent.

His agent told him that Sydney Pollack,

Long before his role in *The Interpreter*, Earl Cameron rose to considerable fame in the United Kingdom as one of the first black actors to break the “color bar,” winning acclaim for early roles about race relations.

director of *Tootsie* and the Oscar-winning *Out of Africa*, was considering him for a part in a new political thriller.

"I had to rush to test for the role," Mr. Cameron said. "I turned up late...but they liked what I did."

The film tells the story of a translator, played by Nicole Kidman, who overhears a plot to assassinate Mr. Zuwanie as he addresses the UN General Assembly. The film also stars Sean Penn, who plays a secret service agent assigned to protect Ms. Kidman's character.

The Interpreter is the first film ever to be shot inside the United Nations building in New York. When Alfred Hitchcock made *North by Northwest* in 1959, he built a replica of the UN's interiors. For *The Interpreter*, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan allowed the movie to be filmed in the UN building after office hours.

The critics have unanimously praised Mr. Cameron's performance in *The Interpreter*.

The Baltimore Sun wrote: "Earl Cameron is magnificent as the slimy old fraud of a dictator..." *The Rolling Stone* described Mr. Cameron's appearance as "subtle and menacing." Philip French in *The Observer* referred to "that fine Caribbean actor Earl Cameron."

The film's UK premiere at the Empire Theatre in London's Leicester Square was a glamorous occasion. Mr. Cameron was called to the stage by Sydney Pollack to be presented to the audience along with Nicole Kidman. "It's the first time I had been to a premiere for many years," Mr. Cameron said. "I've never experienced anything like that. There were thousands of cameras."

Mr. Cameron moved from Bermuda to England during World War II and there became a pioneering black British actor. In London in 1963 he became a Bahá'í.

"I never felt there was any conflict between being a Bahá'í and being an actor," he said. "From time to time I managed to get certain lines in the script changed by the director if I felt uncomfortable saying them."

"Very occasionally I turned a part down. There was a period when black actors tended to get the villain parts. But I often got sympathetic character roles. Perhaps I have a sympathetic look about me."

His breakthrough role was in *The Pool of London*, a 1951 film set in postwar London involving racial prejudice, romance, and a diamond robbery. He won much critical acclaim for his role in the film.

"From then on, I became the best known black actor in England, for quite a number of years," said Mr. Cameron, adding that the part in *Pool* led to a number of other roles.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, he appeared in many films including *Sapphire*, *The Message* — the story of the Prophet Muhammad — and the James Bond movie *Thunderball*.

Mr. Cameron also became a familiar face on television in such popular shows as *Danger Man*, *Doctor Who*, and *The Prisoner*. A 15-year career break followed when Mr. Cameron went to the Solomon Islands with his family to assist the Bahá'í community there.

He recounted his decision to go to the Solomons with considerable humility, saying he almost came back immediately after being shown sleeping quarters that were also home to several families of rats.

"I can't stand being near rats," said Mr. Cameron. "And I thought, 'No way am I going to sleep there!'" Fortunately, an American Bahá'í couple also living in the Solomons offered him a room in their home.

He went on to buy a local ice cream shop, which he renovated with new equipment and

"The world is desperate for peace and there's no other way it can go but towards greater cooperation at a global level."

— Earl Cameron

Actor Earl Cameron and his wife, Barbara, with a photograph taken on the set of *The Interpreter*. [Photo courtesy of Kenilworth Weekly News]



décor into the “BCool Dairy,” which quickly became a focus of social life in Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands.

Mr. Cameron left the Solomons in 1994, shortly before his first wife, Audrey, passed away from breast cancer. He had met Audrey in the early 1950s when both were working in the theater in Halifax, Yorkshire, UK. They married in 1954 — another step which was unusual at the time, inasmuch as she was white and Jewish.

“In England, they don’t make a big deal about mixed marriages,” said Mr. Cameron. “But, in any event, I met with a lot of prejudice before I was married. When I first arrived in England in 1939, for example, it was just impossible for a black person to get a job.”

He ultimately found employment as a hotel dishwasher, and later began working in the theater, after getting a walk-on part in a musical show, *Chu Chin Chow*.

Both he and his wife became Bahá’ís in 1963, after a Bermudian friend invited him

to a major Bahá’í conference. “I went very reluctantly, to tell the truth, but my wife said, ‘He is from Bermuda and so why don’t you just be polite and go.’”

He found himself immediately attracted by the great diversity of people — and their sense of commitment to humanity at large.

“I saw that many of the Bahá’ís were African, and that made me feel very good,” said Mr. Cameron. “I came to think that this is what humanity needed. Because I felt that people in Africa needed an up-to-date religion. In fact, the whole world needs an up-to-date religion.”

“I had seen and experienced all the mess that the world is in, the prejudice and sickness of humanity,” he said. “I just felt there had to be some solution to it all. So when I eventually read the Bahá’í writings, with their teachings of oneness, it didn’t take me long to say: ‘This is it, this is what I have been searching for all my life.’”*

— Reported by Robert Weinberg

HUMAN RIGHTS

Upsurge in arrests in Iran raises concern

NEW YORK – In a striking upsurge in persecution, some 37 Bahá’ís were arrested and taken into custody in Iran during the months of March, April, and May 2005.

Most were arbitrarily detained without any charge being filed against them. Some of the prisoners were held incommunicado, in unknown locations, while their families desperately searched for them. Most were released only after having posted significant amounts of money, property deeds, or business licenses as bail.

Moreover, government agents conducted prolonged searches of many of the homes of those who were arrested, confiscating documents, books, computers, copiers, and other belongings.

Those arrested included not only prominent members of the community in Tehran, but also six Bahá’ís in Shiraz, nine in the city of Semnan, and nine Bahá’í farmers whose homes and land had previously been confiscated in the village of Kata.

“While most of those arrested were held less than a week, others were jailed for up to three months in a kind of ‘revolving door’ detention apparently aimed principally at creating terror and repression,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the

United Nations.

“Short-term imprisonments of this kind have long been used as a means of oppression against Bahá’ís, but there have been far more this year, increasing greatly the sense of insecurity,” said Ms. Dugal.

All of those arrested were picked up solely because of their religious beliefs, added Ms. Dugal.

“The Bahá’í community in Iran poses no threat to the Iranian authorities,” said Ms. Dugal. “The principles of the Bahá’í Faith require its followers to avoid partisan political involvement, subversive activity, and all forms of violence.

“While defending their right to worship and practice their religion freely, as promised by international law, Bahá’ís seek only to be peaceful, law abiding, and productive contributors to the advancement of Iranian society,” she said.

The wave of arrests in spring 2005 follows a number of other incidents earlier this year. In the city of Yazd, starting in late December and continuing through January, a number of Bahá’ís were arrested, detained, and interrogated. Several were beaten in their homes, at least one Bahá’í-owned business was set afire, and the Bahá’í graveyard there was desecrated.*

“While most of those arrested were held less than a week, others were jailed for up to three months in a kind of ‘revolving door’ detention apparently aimed principally at creating terror and repression.”

– Bani Dugal, Bahá’í International Community

Chile temple design wins architectural acclaim even before ground is broken



A model of the Bahá'í House of Worship for South America superimposed on a photograph of its planned site north of Santiago, Chile.

SANTIAGO, Chile — Though ground has not been broken and its projected completion is still three years away, the Bahá'í House of Worship planned for this city has already drawn accolades from more than 40 international architectural and design journals from as far as Italy, Germany, Australia, and Russia.

Reviews in journals ranging from *The Architectural Review* to *Civil Engineering* to *Metropolis* to Canada's *Architecture and Ideas* cite the temple's innovative design and spiritual purpose.

The *Architectural Review*, for example, recently noted that the House of Worship "should become a gentle and welcoming beacon to the whole of South America."

In April 2005, it was announced that the site for the new temple had been acquired. The first Bahá'í House of Worship in South America will be built on a 100-hectare site in the Andean foothills in Chacabuco Province, about 35 minutes by car north from the center of Santiago.

The building will be located on the top of a hill there, with a panoramic view of the mountains in three directions.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the US\$27 million temple will be held on a date to be announced, and the building should be

completed in about three years, said Douglas Moore, director of the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community.

Mr. Moore also noted that the Bicentennial Commission of the Chilean government has designated the Bahá'í House of Worship as one of a limited number of official projects in the private sector to commemorate Chile's 200 years of independent nationhood.

"We are glad to see the civil authorities' recognition of the significance of this edifice and their confidence in the benefit the undertaking will bring to Santiago and to Chile as a whole," he said.

Mr. Moore added that the project would be financed entirely by voluntary contributions from Bahá'ís around the world.

Representatives from all national Bahá'í communities in the Western Hemisphere will be invited to attend the groundbreaking ceremony, with a special emphasis on the countries and indigenous peoples of South America.

The temple, designed by Canadian architect Siamak Hariri, will be clad in forged glass and Spanish alabaster. The translucent stone will allow sunlight to filter through during the day and the temple to emit a warm glow from the interior

The Chilean government has designated the Bahá'í House of Worship as one of a limited number of official projects in the private sector to commemorate Chile's 200 years of independent nationhood.

lighting at night.

The design also features nine distinctive “wings” or “blades” that torque gently upwards, forming the temple’s dome.

The highest praise so far has come from *Canadian Architect*, which honored the design with one of its 2004 Awards of Excellence. One judge noted that “while the spiritual aims of the building are not clearly articulated, this project represents a rare convergence of forces that seem destined to produce a monument so unique as to become a global landmark, or one of the ‘wonders of the world.’”

“One can only marvel at the architects’ commitment to originate this form, the energy with which it has been developed, and the power of religious belief in motivating artistic achievement,” said the judge.

Widespread coverage of the design was sparked by a story that ran in the influential *Wallpaper* magazine in November 2003. Since then, Hariri Pontarini Architects has been fielding enquiries from journals around the world, some fascinated by what Toronto-based artist Gary Michael Dault has described as “a soap-bubble that has alighted, momentarily, on the ground — an evanescent architectural grace-note come to rest in a rugged, sublime setting.”

Mr. Hariri, co-founder of Hariri Pontarini Architects and project leader for the temple, said the widespread interest in the design can partly be attributed to its break from the traditional function of places of worship associated with the world’s other major religions.

“It’s hard for people to get the fact that it’s not a church,” said Mr. Hariri, “and it’s

not a mosque and it doesn’t have a pulpit and it doesn’t have a clergy. And so they say, ‘What do you do in there?’ It’s quite alien to them. A synagogue is a synagogue. Architecturally, the fact that it isn’t embedded in ritual somehow makes it challenging — and interesting. So really, it’s about the form and the fact that it’s something a little new in the architectural world.”

Houses of Worship were prescribed by the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh, to be places of worship in which people of all backgrounds and beliefs could gather, without ritual, to meditate and to read and sing the sacred scriptures of the world’s religions.

Designated as the “dawning-place of the praise of God,” the House of Worship is a spiritual center around which in the future will be established institutions of social service, including a hospital, a pharmacy, a school for orphans, a home for the aged, and a university for the study of the sciences. There are currently seven Houses of Worship in the world. The Chile temple will be the eighth, putting one on each inhabited continent.

Like the Chile temple, all of the other Houses of Worship have nine sides. The number nine has symbolic value in the Bahá’í Faith, being the highest digit and representing completion and unity.

Nestled in the space between the wings on the ground floor of the temple in Chile will be nine alcoves for individual, private meditation. Plans also call for a lily pool enclosed by a large garden outside of the building.

The architectural team made a conscious effort not to rely on any existing architectural styles or traditions in its design of the temple. Instead it looked to objects and phenomena of nature: the experience of looking up at slivers of light through a canopy of trees; the play of light diffracted through icicles; woven baskets; swirling skirts.

“People find it compelling on so many different levels,” said Naomi Kriss, communications liaison for Hariri Pontarini Architects, “whether it’s the architecture or the engineering or the technology that we’re using, or the spiritual side of it. Whether the building is Bahá’í or not, people are asking, ‘How do you design a House of Worship in this secular age?’”

Drawing this much media attention in the architectural world so early on is unusual, “but then again,” added Ms. Kriss, “so is the design.” ❁

“One can only marvel at the architects’ commitment to originate this form, the energy with which it has been developed, and the power of religious belief in motivating artistic achievement.”

—Canadian Architect magazine



In Cuba, Bahá'ís celebrate a renovation

HAVANA, Cuba — Government officials and representatives of diverse religious groups in Cuba gathered with Bahá'ís in May to celebrate the opening of a newly reconstructed Bahá'í Center here.

First acquired in 1956, the central Havana Center had recently been completely rebuilt, and the 23 May 2005 celebration was held to open it to other religious communities.

In attendance were not only representatives from the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and African Yoruba religious communities but also Caridad Diego Bello, the chief of religious affairs in the Cuban government, and two other officials from her office.

Ms. Diego expressed her gratitude to the Bahá'í community for bringing together the diverse group and then spoke on the theme of interreligious harmony and about the major social principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

“These are principles that even I as a non-follower of any religion would agree with,” said Ms. Diego, who is a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba.

Among the Bahá'í social principles that Ms. Diego enumerated were the equality of women and men, racial equality, and the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty.

The secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Havana, Ernesto Santirso, welcomed all the guests and read extracts from a 2002 letter to the world's religious leaders from the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith.

That letter strongly endorses interfaith dialogue but also calls on religious leaders to recognize the “over-arching truth that called the [interfaith] movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.”

After Bahá'í speakers read quotations from Bahá'u'lláh on religious harmony, the representative of the Jewish community, Jose Miller, addressed the gathering.

“Salvation comes from deeds and not from beliefs alone,” Dr. Miller said. “We

should have deeds that will improve the condition of the world today and bring peace to our society.”

A representative of the Institute for Bible and Theological Studies said the three Bahá'ís currently studying Christian theology with the Institute were an important asset to the school.

Among the other guests were the chairman of the Islamic Association, Pedro Linares, and a high priest (babalao) of the African Yoruba religion, Stanislav Berboa.

Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Cuba also hosted Ms. Diego and her staff on a tour of the center.

The Bahá'í community of Cuba has five Local Spiritual Assemblies and has another center in Camaguey. The community has regular children's classes, devotional meetings, and study circles where guests are welcome.

The first Local Spiritual Assembly in Cuba was established in Havana in 1941. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Cuba was formed in 1961.*

— From the Bahá'í World News Service



Caridad Diego Bello, the chief of religious affairs in the Cuban government, speaks at the Havana Bahá'í Center on 23 May 2005.



The newly reconstructed Bahá'í center in the heart of Havana.

At the UN, governments and civil society try a new mode of interaction

Roberto Eghrari of Brazil represented the Bahá'í International Community at the Informal Interactive Hearings, speaking on 24 June 2005 about United Nations reform.



Civil Society, continued from page one

“A key theme that emerged in all the interactive sessions was the emphasis on a human rights-based approach to development, peace, and security and the need to elevate human rights within the United Nations.”

– UN Summary

want (poverty reduction), “Freedom from fear” (peace and security), and “Strengthening the United Nations” (UN reform).

The focus of civil society representatives, however, was largely on the draft “outcome” document for the Summit, which world leaders will discuss and finalize in September.

Moreover, it quickly became clear that the division of the hearings into four topical sessions was almost superfluous, inasmuch as the remarks of civil society representatives quite frequently ranged widely over all of the issue areas, demonstrating that all of these issues are interconnected.

In the “Freedom from fear” session, for example, Catherine Barnes of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict said that human rights “must be at the center of all efforts to promote peace and security.”

“We believe that the sustainable security of the state can only be based on the security of people,” said Ms. Barnes. “We therefore welcome the recognition given by the Secretary-General and the General Assem-

bly in its draft outcome document to the interconnectedness of threats and the need to simultaneously advance development, security, and human rights.”

Diverse range of views

Unlike many previous encounters between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the UN, which were often limited to the creation of a consensus statement or declaration, the June hearings were designed to allow civil society groups to express a diverse range of views.

Each three-hour session opened with five-minute statements by about seven or eight representatives chosen to reflect geographic and issue-area diversity. That was followed by a free-ranging “discussion” in which a select group of 40 to 50 “active participants” were allowed to raise their hands and make two-minute statements or points. UN diplomats, too, were encouraged to make “interactive” statements — and over the course of the two days ambassadors from some 22 countries did so.

As might be expected from such a format, the points and counterpoints that were

made covered a wide range of topics, from the role the global business community can take in post-conflict reconstruction to the concerns of indigenous groups.

Overall, however, it was clear that many participants felt strongly about the importance of human rights, not only for their own sake, but also as the key to development and the promotion of peace and security.

The UN's own report of the hearings, issued about a month after they took place, said: "A key theme that emerged in all the interactive sessions was the emphasis on a human rights-based approach to development, peace, and security and the need to elevate human rights within the United Nations. Human rights are binding obligations on Governments and encompass political, economic, social and cultural rights."

Numerous organizations backed the creation of a UN Human Rights Council as a means to strengthen the UN's emphasis on human rights. As well, the importance of the advancement of women was a recurrent theme in all of the sessions.

"Another major message was that gender equality, empowering women and protecting the human rights of women, including ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and ending violence against women, were prerequisites for achieving the Millennium Development Goals," said the UN in its 21 July summary report on the hearings.

Indeed, the importance of considering the needs and rights of women was emphasized repeatedly by civil society groups. This theme also gave the hearings perhaps their most emotional moment, when a woman from the Philippines representing the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women broke down and wept as she talked about the problems faced by women who have been forced into prostitution.

"Prostitution is one form of violence against women that threatens the security of women and all human beings," said Alma Bulawan of UNANIMA International and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, her voice wavering as she gave a two-minute intervention.

"Our collective hope is for freedom from fear, freedom from violence, and freedom from prostitution," said Ms. Bulawan, who then stopped, in tears and unable to continue.

Ms. Bulawan's statement prompted comments from several UN ambassadors about the need for a greater understanding of human needs in the work of the UN.

"These organizations have reminded us throughout the morning of something which is critical," said a member of the UN delegation from Cameroon. "They have reminded us that all of our actions must deal with human beings — that human beings must be at the center of all of our concerns."

Historic opening for NGOs

UN officials said the hearings were historic in that they represented the first time that the UN General Assembly as a body has held a meeting solely for the purpose of hearing directly from such a large number of civil society and non-governmental organizations on such a wide range of issues.

"It is not the first time the General Assembly has heard the civil society perspective," said Zehra Aydin, chief of the New York office of the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), which helped to organize the event. "But it is the first time that the term 'General Assembly hearing' was applied to this scale of a meeting, and this kind of a process."

In the past, Ms. Aydin said, the General Assembly held various types of hearings or meetings that were open to and/or solicited the opinion of civil society.

"But the opinions that were heard were more or less like a panel discussion, and it didn't have a massive selection process behind it," she said, explaining that NGLS worked for months with a committee of NGO representatives to solicit applications from around the world, striving then to choose participants who would reflect global diversity of opinion and activity.

Moreover, noted Ms. Aydin and others, the hearings were set up in an "interactive" format that, in theory at least, allowed UN diplomats to reply and respond to points raised by civil society representatives.

"Again, at various UN Summits, such as Johannesburg, multi-stakeholder dialogues have been held," said Ms. Aydin. "But officially, at a proper meeting of the General Assembly, there has never been an interactive dialogue of this length, with so many participants. That is a first."

Many of those who participated said they also felt the hearings were historic. "There is an overwhelming sense that it has been an historic breakthrough and that these types of meeting should continue," said Pera Wells, acting Secretary-General of the World Federation of United Nations Associations, who served on the joint NGO-UN committee that

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– Zehra Aydin, UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service

organized the hearings.

Ms. Wells and others said one key feature of the hearings was that they allowed participants to express a diversity of opinions.

Often in the past, NGO and civil society interactions with the UN have taken the form of some kind of joint declaration by NGOs. In May 2000, for example, representatives of more than 1,000 NGOs from more than 100 countries spent five days here at the Millennium Forum to draft and approve an NGO Declaration for presentation to world leaders at the 2000 Millennium Summit.

"I think that while we felt the Millennium Forum was an interesting meeting to be at, it is not the way we want to regularly interact with the UN system," said Rik Panganiban, communications coordinator for the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with ECOSOC (CONGO), which played an active role in helping to organize both the Millennium Forum and the June 2005 hearings.

"But this hearing allowed NGOs to come and really reflect their diversity," said Mr. Panganiban. "A group on indigenous issues can bring up their legitimate concerns based on their own experience, and there was no need to fit that into another group's concerns, say, about climate change or youth issues."

Not everyone who participated in the hearings, however, felt that they necessarily represented an advance in NGO-UN relations.

In his statement before the General Assembly, William Pace of the World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy said he disagreed with those who called the hearing unprecedented.

"[I]n all due respect, the Millennium Summit and now the Millennium Plus 5 processes for NGO participation in the summits have been mostly symbolic, superficial, and are a retreat from the major advances we achieved in UN treaty and world conference processes over the last 17 years," said Mr. Pace.

In a subsequent interview Mr. Pace elaborated, saying his concern was that the Millennium Summit and the upcoming Millennium Plus Five Summit lacked the kind of preparatory committee meetings that marked the global conferences of the 1990s. Those preparatory meetings were characterized by extensive civil society involvement, often leading to dramatic changes in government outcome documents, he said.

"To say, in a summit process where there have been no preparatory meetings and no

arrangements for NGOs, that this hearing is 'unprecedented,' that is a pretty weak compliment," said Mr. Pace. "This is a retreat from the progress we've made since the end of the Cold War where we had a much more effective preparatory process, which was much more inclusive of hearing the voices of NGOs, international organizations, and others, and integrating them into the decision-making process."

Bahá'í Participation

For its part, the Bahá'í International Community had two representatives who were chosen to participate in the hearings.

On Friday, 24 June, Roberto Eghrari, from Brazil, gave a five-minute statement at the session on "Strengthening the United Nations," saying Bahá'is believe that the guiding principle that should animate UN reform "is the oneness of humanity, a spiritual principle that underpins the very nature of human reality."

"We are one human family, and each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole," said Mr. Eghrari. "It is on the basis of this recognition of our essential oneness that a process of reform can be successful."

Mr. Eghrari also said that advancement of the role of women is an essential element in strengthening the effectiveness of the UN; that the Human Rights Commission should be greatly strengthened by creating a standing "Human Rights Council"; and that the capacities and diverse experiences of civil society must be included in all aspects of UN work — from decision making to on-the-ground implementation.

Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, was also chosen as an "active participant" in the hearing on human rights, which was held 23 June.

In her two-minute statement, Ms. Ala'i also said the Bahá'í International Community supports the creation of a Human Rights Council. She added that such a council should continue to utilize so-called "special procedures" by which the current Human Rights Commission can create special rapporteurs who can monitor human rights in specific countries.

Ms. Ala'i also stressed the importance of maintaining the understanding that human rights are universal, as outlined in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

"We are one human family, and each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole. It is on the basis of this recognition of our essential oneness that a process of reform can be successful."

**– Roberto Eghrari,
Bahá'í International
Community**

At the UN, governments and religious NGOs convene a peace conference

UNITED NATIONS – At its heart, the United Nations is a secular institution. The UN Charter, for example, does not mention religion, other than to encourage nations not to discriminate on religious grounds when it comes to human rights.

And for many years, in both official and unofficial activities, the UN kept its distance from religion, preferring to deal with other ideologies and challenges that seemed more directly related to the UN's basic mission of promoting world peace.

More recently, however, and especially since the 9/11 attacks, many at the UN have come to recognize that religion is a force in world events that must be addressed.

Perhaps the most significant recent evidence of this trend can be seen in the coming together of an unusual group here on 22 June 2005 to discuss the increasing need to address interfaith harmony in world affairs.

Held in Conference Room Four at UN headquarters, the day-long “Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace” brought together three distinct groups — governments, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Sponsors said it was the first time ever that representatives of those three groups have convened a substantive interfaith event at the United Nations.

“Religions lie at the heart of each culture and civilization,” said Alberto G. Romulo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, who opened the event. “We look forward to a more proactive approach of religious NGOs, in partnership with governments, in promoting sustainable peace and security, not only at the global but also at the national and community level.”

At the end of the day, participants produced an “outcome document” that urged the UN to take steps to encourage greater interreligious dialogue and cooperation, suggesting in particular that world leaders gathered for the September Millennium Plus Five Summit “should recognize that dialogues among civilizations, cultures, and religions constitute vital contributions towards the

promotion of a just and sustainable peace.”

“The 2005 September Summit should call for an expansion and deepening of the relationship between the United Nations and civil society, including religious NGOs,” said the outcome document, which also called for the formation of an “open-ended tripartite consultative group” to continue the work of the Conference.

“Part of the solution”

“There is a clear recognition at the UN that if religion is part of the problem, it must now be a part of the solution,” said Jeffery Huffines, a member of the Committee of Religious Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the UN who served on the planning committee for the Conference.

“Part of what makes this event unique and unprecedented is that, rather than coming from the religious community or even from the UN itself, this conference was driven by the concerns of member states, who are suggesting now that the most effective solution to religious extremism and terror is to encourage interreligious dialogue,” said Mr. Huffines, who is a representative of the Bahá’í community of the United States to the UN.

An historic “Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace” brings together three distinct groups — governments, UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

Among the high-level participants in the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace were, left to right, Ambassador Munir Akram of Pakistan, president of ECOSOC; Jean Ping, President of the UN General Assembly; and Alberto G. Romulo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines.



Bani Dugal of the Bahá'í International Community said that persistent religious intolerance requires "a fundamental change in the way that believers of different religions relate to one another."



Co-sponsors of the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace were:

- Argentina
- Bangladesh
- Ecuador
- The Gambia
- Germany
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Kazakhstan
- Malaysia
- Morocco
- Pakistan
- Philippines
- Senegal
- Spain
- Thailand
- Tunisia

- The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs
- UNESCO
- The World Bank

- The Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN
- The Bahá'í International Community
- The International Public Policy Institute
- Soka Gakkai International
- The Temple of Understanding
- The United Methodist Church
- The United Religions Initiative
- The World Peace Prayer Society

The event brought together participants from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines, from high-level United Nations ambassadors to academic experts on religion and conflict resolution to representatives from religious organizations themselves.

By and large, speakers focused on the overall need to recognize the importance of religious cooperation and understanding in any overall global effort to promote peace — especially in the context of religious conflict in many parts of the world.

“If religions have contributed to the peace of the world, we have also to recognize that they have been used to create division and fuel hostilities,” said Jean Ping, President of the UN General Assembly. “It is important that in building our civilizations, we enhance interfaith cooperation among governments, civil society, and the United Nations system.”

Ambassador Munir Akram of Pakistan, president of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), said that while there had been clashes between various faiths and cultures throughout history, such conflicts arose mainly because of competing political and/or economic motivations, not from the fundamental precepts of any religions.

“The basic tenets of all faiths and cultures are fundamentally similar, prescribing indivisible peace, dignity, honesty, equality, harmony, tolerance, cooperation, patience, and fortitude,” said Ambassador Akram.

Katherine Marshall of the World Bank shared the Bank’s experience with the World Faiths Development Dialogue, saying that the mere discussion of religion at international institutions like the World Bank and the UN can be controversial. She said there was a common perception among many in the development field, particularly, that religions are problematic because they are “divisive, dangerous, and defunct.”

“There is a sense of ‘Why would we want

to engage in dialogue with people whose views are so fundamentally different?’” said Ms. Marshall, adding that she believes dialogue between secular groups and religions is essential. Among other things, she said, religions and religious groups have a huge role to play in ending poverty.

Ambassador Gunter Mulack, Germany’s Commissioner for Dialogue with the Islamic World, called for all countries to uphold the right to freedom of religion, as expressed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“Despite national legislation and internationally binding covenants, many states continue to actively deny their citizens the right to freedom of religion, including the right to observe, practice, or change religion or belief. Many states fail to protect their citizens’ right to freedom of religion or belief or to promote tolerance for others’ religion or belief,” said Ambassador Mulack.

“Germany believes that interfaith and intercommunity dialogue, along with education and consciousness-raising initiatives, holds the key to unlocking many of these problems,” said Ambassador Mulack.

The Bahá'í view

Bani Dugal, principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, said that persistent religious intolerance requires “a fundamental change in the way that believers of different religions relate to one another.”

“The remedy for the repeated crises plaguing our communities today is to center our efforts and frank deliberations on that which we hold in common rather than that which sets us apart,” she said.

The key to interfaith harmony and cooperation is to focus on the essential oneness of all religions.

“It is this essential unity of religion, across the tremendous diversity of history, culture, tradition, philosophy, and practice, that should now become the operating principle of religious discourse,” said Ms. Dugal.

Ms. Dugal said that growing numbers of people are already coming to realize that the truth underlying all religions is, in its essence, one. “This recognition arises not through a resolution of theological disputes but through an awareness of the reality that there is only one human family and that the Divine Essence, from which all life has sprung, has also been the impulse behind the principles and laws of the great religions of the world,” she said.*

The Last War

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“My family was illegal in 16 states of the United States until 1967,” he writes, noting that laws forbidding marriage between blacks and whites were common throughout US history. “These laws characterized people of mixed racial background as social and legal abominations. Yet we, as children of African American and European American parents, were very fortunate, for we knew the unity of the human race as a reality, not as an abstract concept or ideal.”

Dr. Perry focuses mainly on the United States — because “as the leader of democratic nations...there is no better place to begin.” But he delves far back into world history in an effort to understand racism’s roots.

He undertakes his exploration using a somewhat unusual rhetorical device: he compares his exploration to archeology, digging ever more deeply through the layers of culture, religion, politics, and history as he tries to understand what could possibly have allowed one group of human beings to treat another with such inhumanity for such a long period of time.

He ultimately lays blame for racism, in America at least, to a mercantilist, Protestant culture that allowed early American colonists to rationalize that Africans were somehow subhuman and therefore exempt from a Christian application of the Golden Rule.

He describes a process of “despiritualization,” whereby “whiteness itself, like material success, became a sign of spiritual election and God’s favor. Possession of white skin absolved the individual and the community of the duty to practice Jesus’ teachings to love the other without regard for material qualities of body or social status.”

To succeed at maintaining this deception, he writes, slavery required the segregation of churches (so that slaves could not become free by converting to Christianity), laws against intermarriage, and laws allowing the violent restraint of slaves.

In peeling away such layers of rationalization and history, Dr. Perry offers some keen-sighted observations. He notes, for example, that although slavery was brought to America by Europeans, in Europe itself it was outlawed — something he attributes to a greater sense of spiritual law in Europe at the time. And, seeking to understand the relationship of slavery to racism, he observes

that although Islam allowed trade in slaves, this was not so much connected to race as it was to conquest.

“In Islam, as in the Greco-Roman world, slaves were of all skin colors, races and ethnicities and were able to rise to the highest levels of society,” writes Dr. Perry, adding that “a significant number of black African slaves rose to the highest ranks in the Islamic world.”

In the end, he concludes, racism is essentially a spiritual disease, fueled by a materialistic view of the world that is largely a Western, Protestant Christian construct.

“By focusing so obsessively on humanity’s physical traits — by not only speaking and writing of these traits but by creating for them laws, philosophies, sciences, elaborate institutions and complex cultural traditions — we have created another heaven, another ‘spiritual’ world, contrary to the heaven described by the religions,” Dr. Perry writes.

Accordingly, he believes, the lingering effects of racism can only be eradicated through a process of “respiritualization.”

“The problem of racism does not lie in the intellect or the mind but rather in this soul world wherein one’s true beliefs are created and maintained,” he writes.

The antidotes Dr. Perry offers to such ingrained beliefs include a process of widespread education in which “schools, organizations, companies and communities must declare themselves strictly in favor of the concept of the oneness of humankind and vigorously uphold that principle.”

Ultimately, he writes, eliminating racism will require action on a global level, necessitating a “new leap of consciousness” in which our “traditional, materialistic concept of humanity disappears and in its stead we find ourselves to be a reality of transcendent power.”

To the Bahá’í reader, many of the proposals put forward by Dr. Perry will be familiar. The Bahá’í Faith emphasizes racial equality and stresses especially the oneness of humanity. However, Dr. Perry’s arguments do not hinge on Bahá’í theology or scripture. Rather, he carefully supports his points with extensive citations from various philosophers, theologians, and social scientists, not to mention his own analysis and observations.

The Last War is an important book, one that is dense with ideas and replete with insights into a subject about which humanity must remain vigilant.*

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– Mark L. Perry

Some “impolite” conversation about racism

**The Last War:
Racism,
Spirituality, and
the Future of
Civilization**

By M. L. Perry

George Ronald

Oxford

In the minds of some, racism may seem a bygone issue. Most countries now have extensive antisegregation laws. Apartheid in southern Africa has collapsed. And human rights groups around the world remain on guard, ready to call attention to any ugly appearance.

But then along comes a book like Mark L. Perry's *The Last War: Racism, Spirituality and the Future of Civilization* with a powerful challenge to any such complacency.

In a work that is at once thoroughly researched, profoundly philosophical, and at times almost painful in its piercing observations, Dr. Perry asserts that although racism has outwardly been legislated away, it has in many cases simply gone underground, where it remains hidden (often unconsciously) in the minds of many people.

“Racism is not in our vocabulary,” Dr. Perry writes, laying out his case for a deeper examination of the issue. “It is not brought up in polite conversation because, like UFOs, it causes embarrassment among mature, well-educated realists and rational thinkers. Racism is a myth.”

Yet, he observes, there are nevertheless numerous signs that a “covert” form of racism remains in many places around the world. He sees such hidden prejudice in coded comments that connect race and crime, in corporate decisions that market certain clothes, cars, and foods to certain racial groups, and in housing policies that subtly include or exclude certain groups.

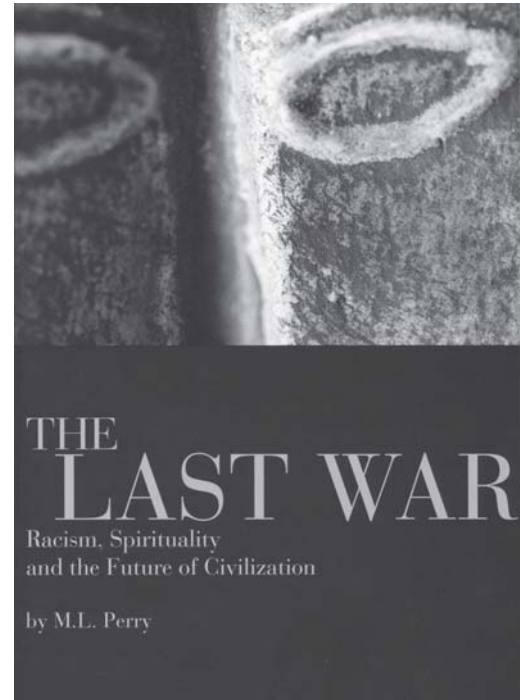
The subconscious bias against people with dark skin remains strong enough that, he writes, “[e]ven today skin bleaching has become the rage in parts of Africa itself, causing people to scrub themselves with special soap and shampoo and apply several powerful creams. The results lighten the color of the skin quite dramatically but also weaken the skin to the point where it cuts easily and cannot hold stitches.”

The Last War, however, is much more than a polemic about lingering discrimination. Rather, it is an examination of how deeply racism, and more specifically, the institution of slavery, has cut across the face of Western civilization — leaving scars that must be fully

examined if they are to be completely erased.

In the process of such an examination, Dr. Perry thinks deeply and explores widely, covering ground from the importance of Calvinism in “enabling” slavery in the colonial United States to the far more universalist thinking that existed in early Christianity; from the failure of secularism in the social sciences to “cure” racism to the possibilities for a new kind of urban design that would help banish prejudice.

Above all else, Dr. Perry brings to the fore a new tool for analysis in social science: spirituality and religion as a means for understanding the historical and current realities of a phenomenon like racism.



Dr. Perry also brings a distinctive background to his investigation. Although born in America, he teaches social science and cultural studies at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. He is a member of the Bahá'í Faith. Further, as he notes in his introduction, Dr. Perry comes from a multi-racial family, with one parent an African American and the other a “European American.”

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