

ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" — Bahá'u'lláh

Newsletter of the
Bahá'í International Community
January-June 2009
Volume 20, Issue 2

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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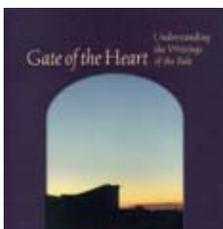
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Historic series of conferences aims at stirring the grassroots

UVIRA, Democratic Republic of the Congo — Located on the northern shore of Lake Tanganyika in the war-torn province of Sud-Kivu, this small and underdeveloped African city might seem an unlikely place to start building a new global civilization.

But for some 800 people attending a historic Bahá'í conference here in November 2008, the idea that anyone, anywhere, can contribute to building a more peaceful and prosperous world was front and center in their deliberations.

"Being at this conference has been very fruitful," said Kashindi Lubachu of South Kivu province. "We have been encouraged to continue the core activities for the progress of the nations."

The "core activities" mentioned by Ms. Lubachu are a set of simple, locally initiated actions being undertaken by Bahá'ís around the world in an effort to contribute to the development of their local communities.

The idea — which was also analyzed and discussed with great enthusiasm at 40 other Bahá'í conferences held around the world in late 2008 and early 2009 — is that such activities are the key to grassroots change.

"In simple terms, we have been learning to build a world civilization based on the Divine Teachings," said Joan Lincoln, a member of a Bahá'í institution who helped organize the 41 conferences. "We are encouraging the masses of humanity — adults, youth, and children — to assume responsibility for the spiritual and social development of their world."

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Nearly 800 people attended the conference in Uvira, Democratic Republic of the Congo, with some passing through the war zone just to the north.

“Animal spirits,” spirituality, and the economic crisis

IN BRIEF

- Economists increasingly study psychological factors, dubbed “animal spirits”
- The spiritual reality underlying human nature must also be considered
- The Bahá’í writings offer distinctive spiritual insights into economic issues
- Among them is that human beings are not wholly driven by self-interest

In the economic sphere, the Bahá’í writings offer hope that altruistic or other socially minded impulses can be brought to bear in encouraging material well being – and that such impulses can be encouraged through spiritual practice.

Events over the course of the last year have made economics a prime topic everywhere, from the global commons to the village square.

Traditionally, economics has been a dry subject. Defined as a social science, its practitioners have largely sought to reduce forces that govern the material well-being of human society to mathematical formulas.

The prevailing view was that economic behavior was driven by an “invisible hand” that stemmed from a rational human response to incentives.

More recently, however, economists have increasingly examined the psychological, sociological, and other “human” factors that drive economic processes.

The current crisis — with its excesses of debt, risk, and selfishness — has only accelerated this examination. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks put it recently, how was it that “so many people could be so stupid, incompetent and self-destructive all at once?”

The idea that rational self-interest is not the only factor in describing economic behavior was long ago discussed by John Maynard Keynes. In the 1930s, he used the term “animal spirits” to describe emotions or factors beyond self-interest that affect economic behavior, such as optimism.

But as experts and laymen alike ponder the new directions in economic science — not to mention the causes of and remedies to the current crisis — it may be helpful to give extended consideration to yet another factor: the spiritual side of economic reality.

Bahá’ís understand that virtually all aspects of human behavior and interaction are in part governed by the fact

that human nature has two aspects: a material side and a spiritual side.

Commonly referred to as the soul or spirit, the spiritual aspect of human nature is that within us that seeks to know and to love, that engenders bonds of affection and cooperation, and that encourages self-sacrifice and other kinds of altruistic behavior that are, in fact, at the foundation of successful human society.

Such ideas are found in virtually all of the world’s religions — and those religions have often sought to apply them to the economic sphere, in ways that range from Islamic teachings on the charging of interest to Christian teachings on charity.

Yet, among the independent world religions, the Bahá’í Faith is distinctive for the degree to which its sacred writings offer manifold and often quite specific teachings on economics and economic concerns.

Foremost, is the Faith’s emphasis on global interdependence — a subject that has been extensively written about on these pages. Like so many of the problems facing humanity, the economic crisis demonstrates once again the overriding interconnectedness of all peoples and nations.

Not just self-interest

Another teaching that relates to economics is the idea that human beings are not wholly driven by self-interest.

“It is in the glorification of material pursuits... that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive,” wrote the Universal House of Justice in 1985. “It is here that the

ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants.”

The Bahá'í writings offer hope that altruistic or other socially minded impulses can be brought to bear in encouraging material well-being — and that such impulses can be encouraged through spiritual practices, such as prayer, reflection, and community service.

“The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity,” wrote Abdu'l-Bahá. “The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity. Without cooperation and reciprocal attitude the individual member of human society remains self-centered, uninspired by altruistic purposes, limited and solitary in development...”

But more than just broad principles, the Bahá'í writings also offer concrete suggestions about how to bring such ideals into practice.

One example is the idea that work should be elevated to the level of worship.

Bahá'u'lláh writes: “We have graciously exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God, the True One. Ponder ye in your hearts the grace and the blessings of God and render thanks unto Him at eventide and at dawn. Waste not your time in idleness and sloth. Occupy yourselves with that which profiteth yourselves and others.”

This designation is unique in religious scripture and has manifold economic consequences. It affirms, for example, that motives beyond material self-interest must be considered — and can be encouraged. As well, the idea that excellence in one's work or craft is also a means for spiritual growth in many ways more effectively addresses problems of quality, output, or corruption than regulation or other “materialistic” incentives and methods.

The Bahá'í writings also promote profit-sharing between the owners and the workers in any enterprise. Again, that such an idea is encouraged in the sacred writings of a religion elevates it to a new social and spiritual level, opening the door to greater cooperation and harmony not only in the field of labor relations but in society generally.



Economists have already observed that profit-sharing and employee ownership not only create more justice in the workplace but also result in improved business performance. Elevating it to a matter of spiritual principle gives the employers a new incentive to share corporate success with their employees.

A further issue is how moral values and practices affect economic decisions. The Bahá'í writings — like those of all the world's major independent religions — stress the overriding importance of trustworthiness, honesty, justice, and purity of motive.

Lack of morality at heart of crisis

Indeed, economists have also long acknowledged that issues of trust, integrity, and fairness are at the foundation of efficient transactions — and their absence lies at the heart of the current crisis.

In their recent book *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why it Matters for Global Capitalism*, economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller argue that issues of corruption and fairness — among other psychological and sociological factors — are far more important to economics than is widely acknowledged, and that such factors are hugely responsible for the current economic crisis and must be understood to effect a full recovery.

Research has shown, they say, that an individual's concern for fairness has a major effect on his or her economic decision-making, beyond the simple monetary value of a particular transaction.

“Considerations of fairness are a major motivator in many economic decisions and are related to our sense of confidence and our ability to work effectively together,” write Akerlof and Shiller.

Other economic ideas promoted in the Bahá'í writings include advocacy of a single global currency and unfettered international trade. They stress moderation in all things, including the charging of interest on loans.

It is important to point out that Bahá'ís don't interpret their sacred writings as offering some kind of new economic system. Rather, they believe that application of spiritual principles to economic systems can provide critical insights in adjusting economic relationships in the world.

Beyond the realm of economics, the Bahá'í writings offer a broad vision of how to create a just, prosperous and sustainable future for all of humanity.

They emphasize the importance of economic justice, stressing the spiritual necessity of working to eliminate extremes of wealth and poverty. They also outline a new system of global governance that takes the welfare of all humanity into account, stress the importance of efforts to promote moral leadership at all levels, and emphasize the need to eliminate prejudice against women and minorities, which beyond their innate injustice are an economic drag on everyone.

The way out of the economic crisis, then, might be summarized by this quote from Bahá'u'lláh: “Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.”

Young people give input to UN Sustainable Development session

IN BRIEF

- **This year's CSD focused on the food crisis, agriculture, and Africa**
- **Youth delegates warned against "old practices and cheap fixes"**
- **Side events looked at the moral dimension of climate change**
- **Theater can also be used to communicate social messages**

UNITED NATIONS — As one of the youngest representatives from a non-governmental organization to attend this year's UN Commission on Sustainable Development, it was natural that 19-year-old Alicia Cundall would participate in the Youth caucus.

But she didn't expect to be appointed by the group to deliver its main statement to the plenary session of governments, which she did on 14 May 2009.

"I didn't want to read it but the people in my group said it would make sense for me to do it because I had worked really hard on it," said Ms. Cundall, who is an environmental science student at the University of Toronto and one of six youth delegates from the Bahá'í International

Community (BIC) to this year's session of the commission, held 4-15 May.

The youth statement sought to emphasize the commission's responsibility to take future generations into account as it grapples with this year's agenda, which focused on the food crisis, agriculture, and Africa.

"In times of crisis we're often urged by convenience or panic to fall back on old practices and cheap fixes," said Ms. Cundall, reading the youth statement.

"But we cannot continue along this road," the statement said. "We must ensure that wherever possible, even if it's hard, even if it costs more now, we prioritize truly sustainable practices that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

"In times of crisis we're often urged by convenience or panic to fall back on old practices and cheap fixes."

— Alicia Cundall,
youth caucus representative



Alicia Cundall, 19, one of the Bahá'í representatives at the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development, read the statement prepared by the youth caucus for the plenary session of governments on 14 May 2009.



“Climate Ethics” was a Learning Center side event sponsored by the Bahá’í International Community during the 17th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. The event was held on 4 May 2009.

Tahirih Naylor, a BIC representative to the UN, said that the goal in sponsoring so many young people at the meeting was to emphasize the role of education and capacity building as an essential component of sustainable development.

“Youth, with access to quality education and training, can be the protagonists of their own development,” she said.

“Youth, with access to quality education and training, can be the protagonists of their own development,”

— Tahirih Naylor, Bahá’í International Community

In addition to the Youth caucus, Bahá’í delegates — 12 in all — participated in the Women’s caucus, the NGO caucus, and the Indigenous Peoples caucus.

The Bahá’í International Community sponsored and participated in several side events at this year’s session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. These included:

- A Learning Center program on “Climate Ethics.” The interactive course intended for policy makers and others sought to enable participants to identify key ethical and moral responsibilities that should guide decision-making in the area of climate change.

The discussion focused on how the threats of climate change to agriculture, rural development, and land productivity should be addressed within an ethical framework that allows nations to move beyond national interest to consideration of the common good.

Facilitators included Donald A. Brown, associate professor of environmental ethics, science and law, Penn State University; Marilyn Averill, an attorney and doctoral candidate in environmental studies in the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado at Boulder; and Peter Adriance, NGO liaison for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States.

- A panel discussion on “Poverty and the Climate Crisis” organized by the Working Group on Poverty and Climate Change of the NGO Subcommittee on Poverty Eradication. The event featured Fred Matwang’a of the Kenyan mission to the United Nations; Kiara Worth, a specialist in sustainable development from South Africa; Dessima Williams, ambassador of Grenada to the United Nations; and Ms. Averill of the University of Colorado. The event was moderated by Anita Wenden, convener of the Working Group on Poverty and Climate Change.

Ms. Worth, 25, who was one of the Bahá’í delegates, presented a one-woman dramatic presentation titled “Theater of Survival: Grassroots Climate Change Communication.” She appeared as an old and wizened village *songoma* who

tells the story of scientists coming to her village with complicated charts and numbers, demanding that the people change the type of crops they grow.

“It’s often difficult to communicate scientific concepts without taking into account the existing cultural realities,” said Ms. Worth, explaining why she chose to use theater for her contribution — a technique she often employs in her work with Golder Associates in promoting sustainable development in South Africa.

“The beauty of theater is that anyone can do it and it can be adapted to various social messages,” she said.

[The Web site of the United Nations Office of the Bahá’í International Community at <http://www.bic.org/> has additional information, including links to video with portions of some of the presentations.]

“Learning to be a Girl” strikes a chord at UN women’s conference

IN BRIEF

- **Annual UN Commission on the Status of Women focused on HIV/AIDS caregiving**
- **“Learning to be a Girl” workshop looked at role men and boys can play**
- **BIC statement emphasized justice, “equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women**

Panelists and participants at a workshop titled “Learning to be a Girl: Care Giving in the Context of HIV/AIDS,” held during the CSW in UN Conference Room C on 3 March 2009.

UNITED NATIONS — Addressing the main theme of this year’s Commission on the Status of Women, the workshop “Learning to be a Girl” focused on how cultural norms, social roles, and the gender stereotypes associated with them determine household roles for women and men and girls and boys — especially in relation to the worldwide HIV/AIDS crisis.

The discussion focused specifically on the caregiving responsibilities of women and girls, who provide the majority of care when families and individuals are affected by HIV/AIDS.

Engaging boys and men

“Men and boys need to be engaged,” said Dan Seymour of the Gender and Rights Unit at the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), explaining that girls and women bear disproportionate responsibility for care-giving.

That causes girls and women to miss school, face stigma and discrimination, and to be at increased risk of sexual exploitation.

So engaging boys and men “are a crucial part of the response,” he said.

The workshop was one of nearly 300 parallel events sponsored by non-governmental organizations, missions, and UN agencies. They addressed a wide range of topics affecting women and girls, from reproductive health to peacebuilding, but most focused on this

“Promoting universal education for girls is essential. These are all things that are at the heart of partnership.”

— Dan Seymour, UNICEF

year’s theme: “Equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS.”

Held 2-13 March 2009, this year’s annual meeting drew thousands of representatives of non-governmental organizations, the news media, and UN agencies — along with participation by 45 member states.

The “Learning to be a Girl” workshop, held on 3 March in UN Conference Room C, was sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations, along with the



Working Group on Girls of the NGO Committee on UNICEF, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and the Bahá'í International Community.

In addition to Mr. Seymour of UNICEF, panelists for the discussion included: Nell Stewart, First Secretary for Human Rights and Social Affairs, Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN; Jacqueline Eccles of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan; Mitra Deliri, Director of the Chipua Institute for Girls in Tanzania; Shufaa Hussein Masanja of the Chipua Institute for Girls; and Christine Ricardo, Co-Director of Promundo in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Mr. Seymour of UNICEF said there are more than 15 million children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS, of which some 12 million are in sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to greater engagement with men and boys, community-based homecare is another part of the response, he said. As well, social welfare ministries need to be adequately resourced.

"Promoting universal education for girls is essential," said Mr. Seymour. "These are all things that are at the heart of partnership."

The equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women is an integral component of the establishment of relationships rooted in justice – relationships which underlie the well-being and development of individuals, families and communities.

– Bahá'í International
Community statement

Dr. Eccles said gender stereotypes tend to force girls into such caregiving. She said girls need to be provided with an expanded view of what a woman can be and offered greater opportunities, and communities need programs which challenge gender attitudes and include vocational training.



Thirty Bahá'ís from 18 countries participated in the 53rd annual UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Mitra Deliri of the Bahá'í-inspired Chipua Institute for Girls offered the experience of one such program. Chipua, she said, is a training center for disadvantaged youth in Tanzania which offers access to education, economic empowerment, information on health including HIV/AIDS, business training and credit, character building and moral education.

Moral education essential

The moral component is fundamental, Ms. Deliri said. It gives youth a new way to view themselves, and to envision their future.

"They learn that people in the community are connected, and in order to improve their own lives, they need to be of service to the community," she said. "They learn that service is not demeaning; it is an honor."

Shufaa Masanja was present to offer a living illustration of the program's success. Ms. Masanja, 21, lost both parents to AIDS when she was five years old. She and her five siblings were raised by their grandmother alone. The skills Shufaa learned at Chipua have helped her discover her rights and her talents and she has started a small restaurant business with some friends and family members. The moral training she received affected her deeply.

"Before joining Chipua, I thought to survive was to abandon all principles and get your way in any way possible. So lying or cheating was not considered shameful to me," said Shufaa, who was invited by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women to participate in this year's CSW. "It was only after I had gone through the training that I realized empowerment means applying the principles of ethics and living with conviction."

For its part, the Bahá'í International Community also presented a statement to this year's Commission. Titled "Striving Towards Justice: Transforming the Dynamics of Human Interaction," the statement emphasized that the importance of "equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women is an integral component of the establishment of relationships rooted in justice — relationships which underlie the well-being and development of individuals, families and communities."

The full statement can be read at <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/09-0228.htm>

UN conference on racism overcomes controversy with concrete suggestions for change

“The reality is that there is only one human race. We are a single people, inhabiting one planet: one human family bound together in a common destiny and obligated to ‘be even as one soul.’ Recognition of this truth is the antidote to racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.”

— Bahá’í International Community statement to Durban Review Conference



Sarah Vader, a representative of the Bahá’í International Community, reads a statement to the Durban Review Conference.

GENEVA — A United Nations conference held here in April strongly reaffirmed the world’s commitment to “prevent, combat and eradicate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.”

Held 20-24 April 2009, the Durban Review Conference sought to review and accelerate the progress made since the 2001 World Conference against Racism, which was held in Durban, South Africa.

In its final document, delegates representing 182 nations declared “that all peoples and individuals constitute one human family, rich in diversity, and that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” They “strongly” rejected “any doctrine of racial superiority along with theories which attempt to determine the existence of so-called distinct human races.”

In advance, many aspects of the conference were surrounded by controversy. Among the concerns was a feeling that countries with poor human rights records might use the Conference as a public relations event to divert attention from rights violations. The Bahá’í International Community, for example, joined others in expressing concern over Iran’s record. [See page 10.]

Finally, the outcome document successfully avoided becoming mired in such controversies and kept to the goal of mobilizing the international community against racism, xenophobia, and intolerance.

“Despite the misgivings of some critics, the conference has proved to be what it was intended to be all along: a celebration of tolerance and dignity for

all,” said Navanethem Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The outcome document combined elements of high principle with concrete suggestions for change. For example, it expressed concern over delays in the submission of reports by the States parties to the international Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

“In many respects, the outcome document removed some of those issues that caused many to say the 2001 Durban conference was flawed,” said Sarah Vader, a Bahá’í International Community representative to the United Nations.

“There is no mention of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor is there mention of the defamation of religion. It focused on racism and intolerance. And so the outcome document can be used as a further instrument by the international community in the fight against racism and intolerance,” said Ms. Vader.

For its part, the Bahá’í International Community presented a statement stressing the importance of the recognition of the oneness of humanity as the key to achieving the Conference’s goals.

“The reality is that there is only one human race,” said the Bahá’í statement. “We are a single people, inhabiting one planet: one human family bound together in a common destiny and obligated to ‘be even as one soul.’ Recognition of this truth is the antidote to racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.”

Egyptian court removes barriers to ID documents for Bahá'ís and others

CAIRO — In a ruling that opens the door to a new level of respect for religious privacy in Egypt, a court here has removed all grounds for preventing Bahá'ís from receiving proper official identity documents.

The decision, issued in March by the Supreme Administrative Court, was quickly followed by a decree from the Ministry of Interior specifying that individuals can now obtain government documents without identifying themselves as belonging to a particular religion.

The Court's ruling and Ministry's decree cleared the way for an end to deprivation for Egyptian Bahá'ís, who have in recent years been unable to get

“The final ruling is a major victory for all Egyptians fighting for a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights regardless of their religion or belief.”

— Hossam Bahgat, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

identification cards, birth certificates and other documents essential for access to things like education, financial services, and even health care in government hospitals.

The ruling goes beyond the issue of rights for Egyptian Bahá'ís, said Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR).

“This is the first time that the Supreme Administrative Court has found that any Egyptian has the right to keep their religious convictions private, even if the state does not recognize their belief system,” said Mr. Bahgat,

whose organization handled legal representation for Bahá'ís in court.

“The final ruling is a major victory for all Egyptians fighting for a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights regardless of their religion or belief,” he said.

Mr. Bahgat said that because the Supreme Administrative Court is the highest court on such matters, there can be no further appeal to this case.

“The government policy that justified mistreatment of Egyptian Bahá'ís has now been firmly and finally struck down,” he said.

For nearly five years, since the government began introducing a computerized identity card system that locked out all religious classifications except Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, Bahá'ís have been unable to get ID cards and other documents.

In April 2006, a lower administrative court upheld the right of Bahá'ís to be explicitly identified on official documents. But in December that year, the Supreme Administrative Court reversed that decision.

Bahá'ís then proposed using a dash or the word “other” on documents, instead of being forced to list themselves as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. On 29 January 2008, a lower court again ruled in their favor. But then two Muslim lawyers filed an appeal.

The Court's ruling on 16 March 2009 rejected the appeal by the Muslim lawyers. It was issued over the case of 16-year-old twins Imad and Nancy Rauf Hindi who have been deprived of birth certificates and were unable to legally attend school in Egypt.

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International

Community, said the court's decision was exceedingly welcome, as was the Ministry's quick move to change the law.

“We are now hopeful that officials will begin granting proper identification cards and other documents for Bahá'ís and any others who have been deprived under the previous policy,” said Ms. Dugal.

On 8 August, the two young Bahá'ís at the center of the court cases were granted new computerized ID cards, showing a “dash” on the back in the field reserved for religion.



On 8 August 2009, the Egyptian government recently issued a national ID card for Nancy Rauf Hindi. Note the “dash” on the back in the space usually reserved for religion.

Bahá'ís express concern over turmoil in Iran as their co-religionists remain in prison

IN BRIEF

- Bahá'ís gave support to July non-partisan Global Day of Action on Iran
- Seven Bahá'í leaders still in prison, trial pending
- International concern about Bahá'í prisoners from Canada, Australia, EU, USCIRF, and Amnesty International

“It is with aching hearts that Bahá'ís around the world have watched events unfold in Iran. Iran is, of course, the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith, and that country is very dear to Bahá'ís. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of others, through whatever legal means are available to them.”

— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

NEW YORK — Against the backdrop of growing turmoil in Iran since the disputed national elections there in June, Bahá'ís around the world have sought to express their concern over reports of increasing human rights violations in that country.

In July, for example, many Bahá'ís around the world gave support to the Global Day of Action on Iran, a non-partisan effort organized in some 110 cities around the world to “condemn the widespread and systematic violations of the Iranian people’s human rights and to call for full restoration of their human and civil rights.”

The Global Day of Action was sponsored by a number of prominent individuals and organizations, including Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian League for Defense of Human Rights (LDDHI), Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders, Amnesty International, the Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme (FIDH), and 42 Arab Human Rights Organizations. It was also supported by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC).

“It is with aching hearts that Bahá'ís around the world have watched events unfold in Iran,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the BIC to the United Nations. “Iran is, of course, the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith, and that country is very dear to Bahá'ís.

“In whatever country they reside, Bahá'ís strive to promote the welfare of society. They are enjoined to work alongside their compatriots in fostering fellowship and unity and in establishing peace and justice. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of

others, through whatever legal means are available to them,” said Ms. Dugal.

Durban Review and Iran

Another expression of general concern about human rights in Iran came in April, when the BIC joined the FIDH and the LDDHI in issuing a press release urging Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to “address the severe forms of discrimination faced by minority groups in his own country” when he spoke at the Durban Review Conference in Geneva that month.

“By coming to the Durban Review Conference, President Ahmadinejad signals a commitment to the conference’s goals of eliminating all forms of discrimination and intolerance,” said Diane Ala’i, the BIC’s representative to the United Nations in Geneva. “His first move on returning home, then, should be to address the severe discrimination and persecution that have flourished under his tenure.”

That press release took note of Iran’s ongoing discrimination against the Kurdish minority and others, of the manner in which Iran denies women basic rights, and of the widespread religious discrimination affecting Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, and other minorities.

In a letter to Iranian Bahá'ís on 26 June, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith urged them to avoid the partisan politics surrounding the election but to respond to by helping friends and neighbors where possible.

“Decades of hardship have prepared each of you to stand as a beacon of strength in the circle of your family and friends, your neighbors and acquaintances, radiating hope and

compassion to all those in need,” wrote the Universal House of Justice.

“Keep alive in your hearts the feeling of confidence that the future of Iran holds bright promise, the certitude that the light of knowledge will inevitably dispel the clouds of ignorance, the conviction that concern for justice will protect the nation from falling prey to calumny, and the belief that love will ultimately conquer hatred and enmity.”

Status of Bahá'í leaders

Of concern to the worldwide Bahá'í community, as well, is the situation of the more than 300,000 members of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, that country's largest religious minority, who have faced increasing oppression in recent years.

Of special concern has been the status of seven Bahá'í leaders, who were arrested more than a year ago and who have since been held in Tehran's Evin Prison. For more than a year, they had no access to lawyers. Iranian press reports say the seven face accusations of “espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic.”

In early June, family members were unofficially told that the seven were to be put on trial on 11 July. In late July, however, officials sent notice to defense lawyers that it would be held on 18 August. On 17 August, however, the trial was postponed until 18 October 2009.

The seven are Ms. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Ms. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. All but one of the group were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. Ms. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad.

Their ongoing imprisonment — and pending trial — is particularly alarming because of their leadership position as former members of a national-level coordinating group known as the “Friends in Iran.” Some 25 years ago, other Bahá'í leaders were executed after being rounded up in a manner similar to the way in which these seven were arrested last year.

International concern

The situation of the seven has been highlighted in recent months by governments and human rights organizations, who, even before the current turmoil in Iran, began to voice concern over their long and unjust imprisonment.

On 14 May, the one-year anniversary of the imprisonment of six of the seven, Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lawrence Cannon issued a statement calling “upon the Iranian authorities to immediately release the seven Bahá'í leaders and to cease the harassment of members of the Bahá'í Faith.”

On 25 May, the Presidency of the European Union issued a statement expressing “deep concern about the increasing violation of religious freedom in Iran.” The statement specifically named 13 individuals — five Christians, seven Bahá'ís, and one Shiite — who the EU said are currently imprisoned for legitimate expression of religious belief.

About the Bahá'ís, the EU said “evidence suggests that the persecution deliberately aims to suppress Bahá'í religious identity and legitimate community activities.”

Also on 25 May, the Australian Parliament called on the government of Iran to release seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders “without delay.” The Parliament also called on Iran to “respect rights to freedom of religion and the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and

association, in accordance with international human rights conventions.”

On 9 July, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) demanded the release of the seven, saying in a press release that their possible trial was “just one manifestation of the much broader pattern and practice of the theocratically supported repression that marks Iran's current electoral crisis.”

The Presidency of the European Union said “evidence suggests that the persecution deliberately aims to suppress Bahá'í religious identity and legitimate community activities.”

The Commission's statement came in response to a letter sent to it by Roxana Saberi, the Iranian-American journalist who spent almost four months in an Iranian jail. She wrote requesting US government intervention in the Bahá'í case, noting that “In addition to the hundreds of Iranians who have been detained in the context of Iran's disputed presidential poll, many other ‘security detainees’ arrested long before the June election remain behind bars.”

On 10 July, Amnesty International issued a press release calling on Iranian authorities to release the seven, saying it considered them to be “prisoners of conscience.”



An undated photograph of the seven Bahá'í leaders currently held in Evin prison, taken before their imprisonment, with their spouses.

Historic series of conferences aims at stirring the grassroots

IN BRIEF

- **The 41 conferences were historic for the Bahá'í community, reflecting both its diversity and dynamism**
- **Deliberations focused on neighborhood activities that anyone, anywhere can use to contribute to "civilization building"**
- **Dramatic efforts to attend overcame bad weather, poor transportation, and the threat of violence**

Some 1,300 participants attended the Kuching, Malaysia, conference. Shown below is a cultural dance group from Sarawak, performing at the December event.

41 Conferences, continued from page 1

Historic by any measure

By any measure, the 41 conferences were historic for the worldwide Bahá'í community, reflecting both its diversity and dynamism. They also may well stand as a milestone in any accounting of religious efforts to inspire and invigorate believers and their friends on a global scale.

Held over a span of four months, from 1 November 2008 to 1 March 2009, the series drew nearly 80,000 people to meetings in 41 cities in 31 countries on every continent but Antarctica.

"There is only a handful of religious communities in the world in the position to attempt a series of worldwide conferences as widespread, diverse, and focused," said Robert Stockman, who teaches comparative religion at DePaul University in Chicago.

Moreover, the efforts made by many to attend the conferences at times bordered on the heroic, with participants overcoming the barriers posed

by economics, limited transportation options, bad weather, and, as noted, travel through regions beset by violent conflict.

On the way to Uvira, for example, some Bahá'ís had all their belongings

"In simple terms, we have been learning to build a world civilization based on the Divine Teachings. We are encouraging the masses of humanity – adults, youth, and children – to assume responsibility for the spiritual and social development of their world."

– Joan Lincoln, member International Teaching Center

taken. Yet, despite the ongoing conflict in North Kivu, 21 people from that province managed to get to the conference. The gathering had been scheduled to take place in Bukavu, near North Kivu, but was moved south to Uvira because of security concerns.





In New Delhi, India, some 2,800 people gathered in late November. At one point, they spread out in some 68 workshops on the grounds of the Bahá'í House of Worship.

“At the time, there were rebels from Rwanda in the area and the situation was quite tense,” said Ahmad Parsa, who serves as a member of the Continental Board of Counselors in Africa. “They were killing people and taking their goods and raping women.”

Even with the change in venue, said Mr. Parsa, some Bahá'ís traveling through the area were beaten and robbed of their belongings and money. But they still came.

“Wars don't stop them from continuing to try to serve humanity and to advance the plan for the good of everyone,” said Mr. Parsa, who noted that most of the conference participants were from small villages.

In Latin America, about a dozen Bahá'ís from Colombia were involved in a bus crash on their way to the conference in Quito, Ecuador. Although the bus was destroyed in a head-on collision with a truck, the group managed to continue their journey, after a stop in the Cali area where other Bahá'ís helped them clean up and recover.

To get to the meeting in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, participants braved -30C temperatures. Some of the Bahá'ís from eastern Mongolia had to get special permission from the government to travel during a major snowstorm, but they made it safely. In all, more than 1,800 people from Mongolia, Russia, and other nations attended.

“One of the things that was so striking was the determination to become a source of hope,” said Stephen Birkland, who, like Ms. Lincoln, is a member of the international group of Counselors charged with organizing the events,

speaking of efforts that Bahá'ís made to attend. “In some cases, people had 10 days or two weeks to prepare. And yet the response was unbelievable.”

The conference series was called for by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, in a letter dated 20 October 2008. The purpose was set clearly in the context of growing problems in the world at large, noting that “financial structures once thought to be impregnable have tottered and world

“Wars don't stop them from continuing to try to serve humanity and to advance the plan for the good of everyone.”

— Ahmad Parsa, member
Continental Board of
Counselors, Africa

leaders have shown their inability to devise more than temporary solutions.”

The charge put to the worldwide Bahá'í community was to respond with “the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together.”

Core activities the key

The letter also touched on how the set of simple core activities undertaken in recent years by Bahá'ís around the world can address some of society's wider problems. Those activities are: small group study circles that seek to train people for community service, local devotional gatherings that help promote spiritual and social cohesion,

neighborhood children's classes that emphasize moral development, and empowerment training for youth.

“All of these core activities are about civilization building,” said Ann Boyles, who serves as a member of the Continental Board of Counselors in the Americas, and who attended the conference in Vancouver, Canada. “And they are all based on a highly participatory model.”

Dr. Boyles explained that it is not that Bahá'ís are taking these activities into neighborhoods and “delivering services.” Rather, she said, “we are inviting others to join with us in contributing to the building of a new civilization.”

Selam Ahderom, a Counselor in Uganda, said the process extends from “creating new social spaces in local communities” where people are encouraged to devote more time to the education of children, to the moral development of youth, and “praying together and thinking about each other.”

As Bahá'ís discussed this system at the conferences, they responded with enthusiasm and new ideas.

“The processes of disintegration have to be dealt with by the development of human resources capable of resisting them,” said Joy Mboya, a participant at the Nakuru, Kenya, conference. “This conference has given us a clear direction in which we can now act...”

Azer Jafarov, who attended the conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, said: “The vision and knowledge I got from the conference will stimulate our activities for long time.”

Although the conferences were sponsored by Bahá'ís, people from other



A small discussion group at the Stamford, USA, conference.

religious backgrounds also attended, whether family members, friends, or others who are interested in grassroots efforts at community building.

Official support

At some conferences, as well, government officials attended or participated.

In Bangui, Central African Republic, officials approved the use of the national parliament building for the conference there. Organizers had planned for 200 or 300 people but realized early on that they might get double or triple that number. They quickly approached the government to rent the main hall of Parliament, which was the only venue in the city capable of accommodating so many people. Officials readily agreed.

“The unity of religion and the harmony of its followers is essential for peace. Your gathering here is proof that this is possible.”

—Aem Thoeurn, Cambodian government representative

In Battambang, Cambodia, Aem Thoeurn, a representative of the provincial government, addressed the gathering.

“[T]he unity of religion and the harmony of its followers is essential for peace. Your gathering here is proof that this is possible,” said Mr. Thoeurn, saying he wished “each one of us will bring this [spirit] back to our own people.”

In Ulaanbaatar, Samdan Tsedendamba, the religious affairs adviser to the president of Mongolia, addressed the conference twice. He said the program of activities launched by

the Mongolian Bahá'ís fit well into the country's overall plan for development.

Mr. Tsedendamba also said that Bahá'ís could be an example to others in developing a new standard of high moral conduct. He added that he had read many of the Bahá'í writings and was very impressed by the teachings. He ended his talk by encouraging Bahá'ís to propagate those teachings.

Indeed, one of the main themes of the gatherings was how to spread more widely the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, which outline a peaceful path to unity for the human race, stressing the underlying oneness of all peoples, the common spiritual roots of all religions, and the reality of a single, All-merciful Creator.

A number of religious statisticians have identified the Bahá'í Faith as among the world's fastest growing religions, and one aim of series was to consult about how the core activities can facilitate and consolidate the community's expansion.

“There is no doubt that one aspect of the conferences was the discussion of a program of expansion,” said Counselor Birkland. “But what we understand this to be is a way to increase the participation of more people in the world in this new community-building enterprise.”

Acts of service

At the conference in Stamford, Connecticut, USA, Counselor Rachel Ndegwa explained how a series of study books produced by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, which are currently in wide use by Bahá'ís around the world, show how the core activities can be used by almost anyone to get involved in a “path of service.”

“The first act of service is the devotional meetings,” said Ms. Ndegwa. “We can hold devotional meetings ... in

our homes. As more and more people choose this as a path of service, our homes become houses of worship.

“Another element of a healthy pattern of growth is ... the children's class,” Ms. Ndegwa continued. “If our mission is to reconstruct society, let's start at the roots. Let's go to the children.”

Using the methods outlined by the Ruhi books, the number of new Bahá'ís in the northeastern United States has increased by 500 percent over the last two years.

As was the case at other conferences, participants in the Stamford event spent time in small workshops discussing how they can take such ideas back to their local communities.

“Now we are in the position of exploring what we've heard repeatedly — that we are building a new world civilization,” said Hooshmand Sheshbaradaran of Hoboken, NJ.

For Bahá'ís, what they are working for is quite concrete. The structure and principles for a “new world order” are clearly outlined in the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith. The writings state that humanity must recognize its essential oneness and establish a global commonwealth on principles of justice, non-violence, and universal suffrage, undergirded by principles like the equality of women and men, the elimination of prejudice, and education for all, along with the highest standards of morality.

The conferences also discussed how Bahá'ís must work to create a new type of religious culture, one based on a mode of learning that includes a pattern of consultation, action, and then reflection on results.

In this way, Mr. Sheshbaradaran said, Bahá'ís are not trying to re-create traditional churches or congregations. “We are not about expanding and re-creating patterns of old,” he said. “It is about evolving, it is about stepping out and building a new world order. It is about asking: ‘How will you focus on a neighborhood?’”

Review: *Gate of the Heart*

Gate, continued from page 16

With that theme as a backdrop, Dr. Saiedi plunges into a deep, detailed, and lucid analysis of the major works of the Báb, which by any reckoning stand as one of the most prolific outputs in religious history. One of the Báb's books, Dr. Saiedi notes, is 3,000 pages long.

Among the Báb's works are extensive commentaries on specific chapters of the Qu'ran, expositions on the fundamental principles of religion, and epistles in which the Báb quite boldly

"In the writings of the Báb, religion is characterized as the product of the interaction between the divine effulgence and the current stage of human spiritual and social development."

— Nader Saiedi

proclaims his own mission as a new messenger of God.

The Báb's writings also contain numerous references to the imminent coming of another new messenger, long promised in all the world's religions, who Bahá'ís recognize to be Bahá'u'lláh.

On this point, Dr. Saiedi offers near the book's beginning an extensive discussion of the prophetic expectation — strongly felt in the Báb's era and still a factor in Iran today — about the coming of the 12th Imam. He explains why Bahá'ís believe this expectation has been fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith.

In the book's main thrust, Dr. Saiedi endeavors to show how the Báb's writings, despite their wide range of topics, frequent references to the Qu'ran, and extensive use of symbolic and often veiled language, nevertheless form a coherent, consistent and forward-looking whole.

This comes in part as a rebuttal to some among those few religious scholars who, studying the Báb's writings in a limited way in the past, have argued that his works often seemed at odds

with one another, or that he looked too much backward, at Islam.

But Dr. Saiedi says the Báb wrote in three distinct stages, and five "modes" — which, among other things, account for the seeming inconsistencies.

"[S]tatements which may appear to be contradictory assertions are actually diverse expressions of a single underlying principle that is expressed in a particular manner in accordance with the capacities of differing audiences," Dr. Saiedi writes. "A careful analysis of the Báb's writings discloses that throughout the three stages, all his writings are animated by a common fundamental principle which has multiple dimensions and forms."

That principle, Dr. Saiedi writes, is "metaphysical unity." And in that framework, the Báb has explored a vast range of topics that explain how God, revelation, and religion operate in and influence the world.

The Báb's writings, for example, clearly outline the principle of "progressive revelation," which is more fully developed in Bahá'u'lláh's writings and stands as a core principle of the Bahá'í Faith.

"In the writings of the Báb, religion is characterized as the product of the interaction between the divine effulgence and the current stage of human spiritual and social development," writes Dr. Saiedi. "In this view, if all the religions represent the progressive revelation of the same Primal Will, then all religions are valid and true because they are in fact one and the same reality."

These and other insights offered by the Báb are what open the door to a transformation for those Muslim thinkers who may be mired in the past, clinging to traditional interpretations that clash with the facts of modern life, he suggests.

Although the depth and detail of *Gate of the Heart* are clearly aimed at religious scholars or others, such as Bahá'ís, who wish to understand more about the Báb, the clarity and logic with which Dr. Saiedi approaches the subject make it accessible to a larger audience. Anyone concerned with the fundamentalist/modernist clash that has so divided the world will find much food for thought in this fine volume.



ONE COUNTRY is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

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© 2009 by The Bahá'í International Community / ISSN 1018-9300



Printed on recycled paper, 10 % post consumer waste, using soy-based inks



Paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as sustainable

Bridging the gap between traditionalist Islam and the modern world

Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb

— By Nader Saiedi
Wilfrid Laurier University Press
Canada

IN BRIEF

- The dramatic story of the Báb has been under researched
- Sociologist Nader Saiedi says the Báb's writings encouraged sciences, arts, and industry
- They also form a coherent, forward-looking whole, explaining that "all religions are valid and true"
- Emerging from the Islamic matrix, they offer a transformational worldview

For Bahá'ís, the story of the Báb is well known. The forerunner of their Faith, the Báb appeared in Iran in 1844 — and within six years he had established a new religion, attracted thousands of followers, and incurred the intense persecution of religious authorities. His mission was marked by heroic deeds, the revelation of scriptures that his followers believe fulfills and supersedes the Qu'ran, and his dramatic death by firing squad in 1850.

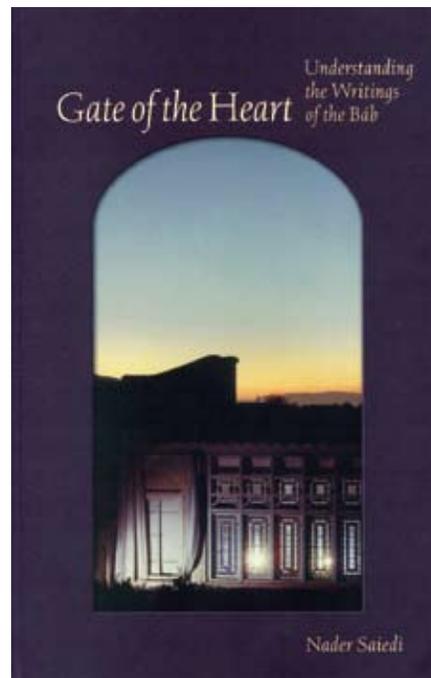
But for the world at large, and even most scholars of religion, this spectacular episode in history is largely unknown and little studied, especially in recent times.

Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb by Nader Saiedi is a significant effort at filling this void. In a wide-ranging scholarly study that draws on elements of sociology, psychology, and modern interpretation, Dr. Saiedi examines the Báb's major works with great depth and intellectual vigor.

Moreover, he puts that examination in a contemporary context, showing how the Báb's writings offer keen insights into the nature of the fundamentalist/modernist tension that so powerfully divides the world today, especially in the Islamic realm.

"The events of September 11 placed Islam at the center of Western cultural and political discourse as the West struggles to make sense of what seems a bewildering, medieval mindset, centering around holy war or jihad as a religious duty," writes Dr. Saiedi, who is a professor of sociology at Carleton College.

"A series of troubling but crucial questions have come to the fore: Is religion, particularly Islam, ultimately only conducive to conflict and hatred? Is the



'clash of civilizations' inevitable? What went wrong with the Middle East's encounter with modernity? Why has nothing comparable to Christianity's Reformation occurred with Islam?"

Dr. Saiedi says that the writings of the Báb offer a "novel solution to Islam's cultural and spiritual impasse." Specifically, he writes, their "creative spirit" offers a bridge between traditionalist Islam and the modern world view.

On the one hand, the Báb encouraged learning from the sciences, arts, and industries of the West. On the other hand, his teachings also reject the "particularistic, materialistic, and morally harmful aspects of modernity that obstruct the progress of human civilization."

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