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Bahá'í Scholarship Course, Art Academy 2001

'The world has ... caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound "new" to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men!' (Shoghi Effendi, 1949)

Atending a course on Bahá'í scholarship at the Arts Academy initially seemed somewhat embarrassing. Old friends and new acquaintances would all enquire as to what course we were doing. After incoherent mumblings and other attempts at avoiding the question, we would admit with a nudge and a wink that, yes, we had joined a flower arranging course. The reality of the situation, however, turned out to be much, much better...

The course was set up by the ABS(ESE) to train and inspire people - particular youth - to 'do' Bahá'í research. Bahá'í scholars have important work to do. Moojan Momen spoke of the unique opportunities to explore and develop Bahá'í thought, so early on in its evolution. Bahá'í scholarship also plays a key role in both teaching and defending the Faith, as discussed by Seena Fazel.

The course was also a careers-taster. We learnt about the variety of work done by the speakers, within the Bahá'í and academic communities. All the scholars who attended were extremely

colourful characters this dispelled the misnomer of the 'nerdy' scholar.

Stephen Lambden discussed the diverse fields of study in Bahá'í Scholarship, especially mentioning Bahá'í theology and dialogue with other established religions. Dominic Brookshaw spoke of the literary context in Bahá'í scripture with particular reference to the *Hidden Words* and the *Long Obligatory Prayer*. Sholeh Quinn vividly demonstrated the realities of looking at Bahá'í history within often less-than-encouraging mainstream academic settings. During Lil Abdo's sessions, models for studying early Bahá'í history were discussed, and she shared fascinating accounts of the early believers in the UK.

Bahá'í scholars face difficult challenges, both from within the Bahá'í community and outside. In particular, the

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small number of Bahá'í scholars can be a disadvantage. They all reiterated the urgent need for more Bahá'í scholars, especially amongst the youth. None of them tried to glamourise this form of service to the Faith, but all, with a twinkle in their eyes, mentioned the immense satisfaction they derived from profound and systematic study of the Faith.

The course was very inspiring, practically useful and groundbreaking. The great effort and huge sacrifices made by all the speakers were much appreciated by all who participated. The Arts Academy was a fantastic setting, and towards the end, we even dared to admit the true nature of the, uh 'flower arranging course', and sparked much interest – let's hope there are more of these courses to come! Thanks to all who made it happen: the ABS, the Arts Academy team and the NSA of the UK.

Shadi Doostdar and Jonneke Koomen

Two Papers from the ABS(ESE) Annual Conference 2001

An Examination of the Cultural Relativity of Human Rights

Introduction

The discourse between proponents of the universality of human rights and those of their cultural and religious relativity has taken on the fervour of a holy war. As Thomas Frank¹ puts it 'the fight is essentially one between powerful ideas, the kind that shake the pillars of history.' On the one hand are those claiming that the West has monopolised the articulation of 'human rights' and is adopting a neo-imperialism to roll out those rights to cultures and religions who adhere to a very different code of morality and a different system of values. Sharing such arguments, according to Frank are theocracies, kleptocracies, praetocracies and a mixed bag of western intellectuals, uncomfortable bedfellows for

sure and who share the argument for such divergent reasons that to summarise them in one statement would do justice to none. On the other hand are those (like Frank) who argue that the values embodied within 'human rights' are inherent and innate and are benign to all liberal cultures and religions.

In this essay I shall state in brief the arguments presented by Frank for the universality of human rights. I shall proceed to unpack them in order to demonstrate that far from being universal, 'human rights' are the contextual² articulation of a deeper universal morality. Human rights are very much an expression of values rather than the values themselves. For example, the 'human right' to life is an expression of the intrinsic value we place on life and a celebration of that value. The right to freedom of expression reflects the value we place on the free exchange of ideas and of self expression. However, as courts have seen the world over, such 'human rights' are not mutually exclusive nor do they adequately reflect the huge cultural and religious diversity of the world in which we live.

It is very much the thesis here that 'human rights' are the result of contextual discourses. They are not a body of substantive justiciable rules whose application is universal and whose language is determinate. Instead they comprise normative indicators of the collective will of humanity and whose impact on world order is profound and evolving. Such human rights reflect inherent and inalienable human values. However, their articulation and application are contextually bound and as such they should be regarded as reflective of moral values validated and interpreted by the community as a moral or sovereign body.

The Universalised Human Rights Debate

In his promotion of the universalisation of human rights, Frank uses the example of the Taliban in Afghanistan as his *bete noire*. Anti-democratic, unrepresentative, authoritarian and repressive, the Taliban Islamic fundamentalist regime is repressing the female half the population and imposing their (particularly virulent) version of Islamic Law on the population³. To give Frank credit he does compare, if not equate, the attitude of the Taliban to that of the US government which continues to execute prisoners in defiance of world opinion and often in ways most would find abhorrent⁴. However in

responding to his own argument Frank plays the nationalist card stating that 'the US is not Afghanistan. What the Islamic fundamentalist regime is doing there violates well established global law,'⁵ and leaves one wondering which international law specifically allows states to 'fry' its prisoners.

Briefly acknowledging the 'rights/responsibilities' discourse Frank however dismisses such arguments by simplifying and parodying the debate. The '... battle lines (are those) between forces of communitarian conformity and the growing network of free thinking autonomy-asserting individualists everywhere.'⁶ Who could possibly argue the case for 'communitarian conformity' when the alternative is a world of 'free thinking autonomy-asserting individualists'?

Frank outlines what he regards as the three key arguments against cultural relativism⁷.

First, Frank attempts to explain that human rights are the result of forces of global development (rather than any specific territorial or culturally or religiously bound initiative). If human rights are *sourced* in global factors (i.e. those which claim no common religious, regional or cultural source) then their *articulation* must surely be global too. Frank attempts to support his argument by detailing the human rights abuses that occurred in Europe prior to such global developments.

Secondly, in recognising the force of the rights/responsibilities discourse (see later) Frank denies that there is any inherent conflict between individual rights on the one hand and the common good, social responsibility and community on the other. Frank concludes his argument with the following, 'liberated from predetermined definitions of racial, religious and national identities, *people still tend to choose to belong to groups*'.⁸ What Frank is saying is that by focusing on the rights of individuals the rights of the community is effectively safeguarded. By attempting to dismiss one of the key arguments of the 'cultural relativists' Frank attempts to undermine their argument.

Thirdly, he argues that those advancing the claim of cultural relativism do not legitimately represent those for

whom the claim is being made, but cultural relativism is instead a shield behind which despots and tyrants hide. Citing 'liberal' third world leaders and activists⁹ Frank dismisses such arguments on what appears to be an attempt at empiricism. If 'Third World Leaders' and activists say it is true then it must be true. This is a seemingly powerful argument and one on which I will briefly dwell and which can be repackaged as the 'torture test'.

The 'Torture Test'

With a number of variations the 'torture test' goes something like this. The contextualisation of human rights argument is simply a tool of authoritarian regimes and despots who use the cultural relativity of human rights argument as a veil to shield their actions from external scrutiny and as validation of their (inhumane) treatment of citizens. If asked (and of course they invariably are not) those citizens would decry such treatment and plead for 'universal' human rights. Since the prohibition against torture is a fundamental human right, the argument that human rights are not universal is to suggest that the prohibition of torture is not universal. *Ipsa facto* human rights are universal and those defending their contextualisation are either despots or naïve western intellectuals.

The story of course does not end there. This argument is certainly an important one (if a little crude and populist) and any argument that proposes to contextualise human rights needs to deal with this argument. To do that it is important to unpack the 'torture test' which does contain several incorrect implicit assumptions. First it assumes that the diversity of human rights can be adequately summarised in one or a few rights. Torture (or whatever human right one chooses) cannot be used as a euphemism for all others. Each one needs to be taken in its own right and in context. Secondly, because of its emotive nature, the use of torture as an example is disingenuous in that it suggests that anyone who argues against 'universalised' human rights is, by implication defending despotic regimes. There is nothing in the contextualisation of human rights argument that precludes that some human rights *are* universal and as such the whole argument can be dismissed easily in agreeing that the prohibition against torture (or whatever universal human right used as a euphemism for other contextual rights) is

universal.

The Contextualisation Debate.

How difficult is it to elaborate an alternative view to that of Frank without losing any cogency or moral legitimacy? I present three examples of these discussions here.

Firstly, the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and People's Rights¹⁰ includes both rights of 'peoples'¹¹ and the duties of individuals. African rights (as articulated in the Banjul Charter) are bound up in obligations to family, village, tribe and state and are inseparable from them¹². Similarly Asian and Islamic values bind rights to obligations for the benefit of both the individual and society. Many Asian and Islamic societies share concerns that the individual has not only taken precedence over the needs of society but that the well being of society will be almost completely subsumed by an over emphasis on the individual. The mutual exclusivity of rights (as currently articulated) and the hypothetical and real conflicts between those rights¹³ further fuels the debate over the validity of 'human rights', certainly as rights justiciable under the law.

While it is unfortunate that frequently those arguing the case most forcefully for the contextualisation and culturalisation of human rights are the same people who can be found systematically and massively violating individual human rights, such findings should not be used to dismiss the cultural relativity of human rights. Despots will always use whatever tools they have to hand to repress their people and to justify that repression in the eyes of the world and the argument for the cultural relativity of human rights is unfortunately one such tool that despots find useful. The other and related argument against the inclusion of duties in any human 'rights' instruments is that collective rights might be used to 'trump' individual rights or that obligations be stressed over rights. Again, despots will use whatever means they have to oppress the populations of the states which they rule and such 'trump card' arguments are just one of many tools available. Indeed the tool despots rely on most frequently is the very notion of 'sovereignty' with its critical corollary of non-intervention. Most positivist

proponents of the universality of human rights argument do not advocate the dismantling of state sovereignty in their quest for universal application of human rights.

Secondly the source of human rights is another contested issue in the discourse. Whether sourced in divine¹⁴, moral, legal or political origins, human rights will also face the claim that the source is not valid for the context in which rights are to be applied or else will face equally valid counter-claims as to their origins. Many Africans will dispute the notion of a liberal political theory articulation of human rights while Muslims will dispute the notion of their origin in a Western secularism.

And finally the authority of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as the definitive articulation is a critical element in the discourse. While the UDHR is the most prominent articulation of human rights it is argued that it is certainly *not* the definitive articulation (if such a definitive articulation is indeed possible or desirable). The UDHR is founded in western theories of liberal politics focusing on the individual as the subject of rights and the object of state obligations. As such it fails to account for the rich history and rationale of the close linkages between rights and obligations. There surely can be no right to a family life if there is no corresponding willingness or ability to take responsibility for that family and the right to liberty is closely linked to the obligation to obey the laws of the state. And as our libertarian¹⁵ discovered to his cost there is a duty of respect for fellow humans before any rights of free speech can be exercised. Similarly the very interpretation of those articulated rights is bound by the western liberal tradition of the dichotomy if not outright hostility between the state and the individual. Rights are interpreted in a negative sense: in a *laissez faire* rather than in an *affirming* sense. Freedoms are freedoms *from* not freedoms *to* and are presumed to exist only in that sense. The freedom of thought, conscience and of religion is of limited use to an individual with limited intellectual, moral or spiritual capacity to exercise those rights. Only through the development of those capacities will he be able to enjoy those rights to the full. And the development of that capacity is not presumed to be a factor of that right nor a right in itself. The right to life is generally interpreted as a freedom from arbitrary execution by the state

rather than arbitrary murder on the streets of the capital or a right to good health to enjoy that right to 'life'. Such tensions are shared with the discourse on the regulatory functions of the modern liberal state being central to much political, philosophical and moral debate.

Towards an alternative framework

Almost all discourse on human rights is characterised by seemingly intractable dichotomies: inalienable versus socially constructed; absolute versus contingent; universal versus particular or culturally specific; duties versus obligations; eternal versus historicist; atomistic versus holistic; licensing versus affirming; based on human dignity versus based on utility or power.¹⁶ How do we begin to reconcile such exclusive notions of human rights? What is the model and what are the criteria we apply?

Are human rights so culturally and religiously bound and so poorly articulated (at least in the legal sense) as to render them meaningless as a tool for the development of humankind whether as substantive law or as normative values? The answer lies less in the articulation of those rights and the debate on their origins than in the discourse on the validation of those rights. Perhaps it is necessary to return to the origins of their purpose. Why do we need 'rights'? What utilitarian function do they serve in this utilitarian world society? The search for an answer must take us to look to their value as normative indicators of the consciousness of humanity.

Human rights language is steeped in inferences of self-realisation of the individual and society and in references to the conscience of humankind¹⁷. If no coherent articulation of that philosophy is evident then fault lies in the very discourse not necessarily in the flawed articulation. Every right carries with it a corresponding duty which can be encapsulated in the principle of reciprocity of actions and behaviour. The debate on the relationship between human rights and duties is essentially a debate on whether the individual is seen in the abstract or in context. The future of both the individual and society are so bound up together that it is ultimately impossible to separate them. The continuing debate as to the primacy of the individual or the group is a

futile one whose inherent contradictions will continue to be misinterpreted by scholars who claim that the lack of cogency and coherency renders the whole debate subject to either politicisation by the state or utopianism by romantic dreamers¹⁸.

A better alternative to this forced universalism which has only led to the sorts of intractable dichotomies examined above is provided by the Bahá'í Faith which believes in universalised human 'values' while allowing the contextualisation of those values into human 'rights'¹⁹. Bahá'ís see the source of human rights as the 'endowment of qualities, virtues and powers ... bestowed upon mankind without discrimination of sex, race, creed or nation.'²⁰ Such rights attain a social and legal status only after they have become rights, validated by the community as a moral or sovereign body²¹. Such validation processes might be through the democratic institutional processes (eg. parliament); custom and common law; principles of distributive justice or the purely hypothetical form of a social contract. The validation process will not only lend moral and sovereign weight to those 'human rights', but only through reasoned, consultative and determinate discourse will such 'rights' acquire a contextually determinate status rendering them justiciable - as appropriate. With the purpose of 'human rights' as the realisation of human capacities and potentialities firmly in mind, it is *ultimately* irrelevant through which validation process human rights travel until they contribute to human self-realisation so long as such a validation process is adhered to, concluded and lays claim to moral legitimacy.

Human rights are not exclusively legal concepts. They are sociological and economic concepts as well as physiological, medical and cultural. Human rights incorporate issues such as race, class, religion, politics, gender, disability, linguistics and others. The debate on the cultural relativity of human rights is in one sense sterile. Human rights incorporate culture. They also incorporate religion, gender and class. They incorporate all the characteristics that make us conscious, rational and spiritual human beings. Culture is but one.

In Conclusion

Human rights are bound up with distributive justice, with criminal justice and with poverty. They can not be separated from culture, class, race, gender, religion, politics,

ethnicity, language and other characteristics that define us as human beings. They are bound up in the moral philosophy of each of us and how we see our fellow humans. The application of human rights is part and parcel of world polity and world comity in which traditional notions of 'sovereignty' are increasingly being challenged by a collective consciousness and action.

Human rights however are not simply formulae to be ticked off on a sheet of paper against each country. Human rights are the contextual articulation of shared values that resonate within the consciousness of humankind and which derive their ultimate authority from God. They attain social and legal status only after they have become moral values asserted and maintained by members of the community whether local, state or international.²² They are life affirming and should be regarded as proactive on the part of those obligated to meet those rights. They can not be divorced from the social, spiritual and political context which gives substantive, moral, determinate and legal meaning to those rights.

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¹ Thomas Frank 2001 'Are Human Rights Universal?', *Foreign Affairs* (January-February): 191.

² Cultural, political, religious and sociological.

³ It must be noted that the vast majority of Muslims distance themselves from the theology and actions of the Taliban movement and consider Islam a much gentler and more accommodating faith.

⁴ Many were 'fried' through the use of a faulty electric chair. The practice was only discontinued on pressure from federal authorities who protested that the method was, not contrary to human rights law or any other basic norm or decent human behaviour, but rather against the US constitution. Frank *supra* n 1.

⁵ Frank, *supra* n 1: 191.

⁶ Frank, *supra* n 1: 195.

⁷ Frank, *supra* n 1: 191.

⁸ Frank, *supra*, n 1: 201 (emphasis added).

⁹ Chandrika Kumaratunga and Dato' Param Cumaraswamy the former chair of the Malaysian Bar Council and UN Special Rapporteur both of whom presumably do indeed legitimately represent those for whom they claim to speak. Frank, *supra* n 1: 194

¹⁰ African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted 27 June 1981, entered into force 21 October 1986 http://www.oau-oua.org/oau_info/rights.htm

¹¹ For example Article 20: '(1) All peoples shall have the right to existence. They shall have the unquestionable

and inalienable right to self-determination. They shall freely determine their political status and shall pursue their economic and social development according to the policy they have freely chosen.'

¹² *Supra* n 10: '(1) Every individual shall have duties towards his family and society, the State and other legally recognised communities and the international community. (2) The rights and freedoms of each individual shall be exercised with due regard to the rights of others, collective security, morality and common interest.'

¹³ As even the most ardent of libertarian human rights proponents will discover to his cost when testing his theory of absolute free speech in a crowded cinema with cries of 'Fire'.¹⁴ By its very nature any discussion on the origin of rights is ultimately reduced to matters of faith not objective verifiable reason and there is neither reason in a discourse on matters of faith nor proof in any conclusion.¹⁵ *Supra* n 12 ¹⁶ Steiner and Alston 2nd Ed. 2000 *International Human Rights in Context*. OUP: 1305. ¹⁷ See UDHR Preamble: 'Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ...' <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

¹⁸ Koskenniemi 1989 *From apology to utopia: the structure of international legal argument*. Helsinki: Finnish Lawyers' Publishing Company: Chapter One.

¹⁹ At least as we commonly understand them.

²⁰ Bahá'í Declaration of Human Rights and Obligations. <http://www.bahai.org/article-1-8-3-1.html>. This statement was presented by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada to the first

Pursuing Excellence

The Bahá'í writings are full of reference to excellence. But what is excellence? How do we know whether or not something is excellent? And how are we to achieve excellence, always assuming we know what it is. This paper will offer a few thoughts about excellence, its ineffability and how we might pursue it.

'Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations.' Thus Dickens's character in *Hard Times* introduces himself. In the schoolroom he demands of girl number twenty, Sissy Jupe, whose father 'belongs to the horse-riding' a definition of a horse. She, who lives her life with horses, is thrown in 'the greatest alarm by this demand'. Gradgrind reproves her lack of 'facts in reference to one of the commonest of animals' and calls upon the boy, Bitzer, to give the required definition. Bitzer obliges: 'Quadruped. Graminivorous, Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard but

requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bizter.

'Now girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'You know what a horse is.'

I have the strongest suspicion that excellence is as indefinable as Sissy Jupe's horse. No recitation of facts or definitions really gives us an understanding of what excellence is. We may be able to know it when we see, hear, smell, feel, intuit it, but we cannot reduce it to an exercise of ticking the boxes on a list of criteria. No such list could capture the spiritual reality of excellence.

The Bahá'í writings are replete with references to excellence. Even the most superficial glance at the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings and utterances, or at the letters of Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that the pursuit of excellence is an essential part of the struggle to realize one's divine qualities and thus become fully human.

Let me start with a story from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wonderful book, *Memorials of the Faithful*. Really every Bahá'í should read *Memorials of the Faithful*. It is full of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tenderness even for the very simplest and least educated of the believers. It has flashes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's humour and it shows, unequivocally, that the personal qualities that the Master values are not necessarily those that Bahá'ís might consider important for a 'good Bahá'í life'. Not all of those souls whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes about are outwardly pious, for example, but they are all devoted and seek excellence in their own ways.

Here is an excerpt from the story of Hájí Muhammad Khan:

'Another of those who left their homes and came to settle in the neighbourhood of Bahá'u'lláh was Haji Muhammad Khan. This distinguished man, a native of Sistan, was a Baluch. When he was very young, he caught fire and became a mystic—an arif, or adept. As a wandering dervish, completely selfless, he went out from his home and, following the dervish rule, travelled about in search of his murshid, his perfect leader....

'Far and wide, he carried on his search. He would speak to everyone he met. But what he longed for was the sweet scent of the love of God, and this he was unable to detect in anyone, whether

Gnostic or philosopher, or member of the Shaykhi sect. All he could see in the dervishes was their tufted beards, and their palms-up religion of beggary. They were "dervish"—poor in all save God—in name only; all they cared about, it seemed to him, was whatever came to hand. Nor did he find illumination among the Illuminati; he heard nothing from them but idle argument. He observed that their grandiloquence was not eloquence and that their subtleties were but windy figures of speech. Truth was not there; the core of inner meaning was absent.

'For true philosophy is that which produces rewards of excellence, and among these learned men there was no such fruit to be found; at the peak of their accomplishment, they became the slaves of vice, led an unconcerned life and were given over to personal characteristics that were deserving of blame. To him, of all that constitutes the high, distinguishing quality of humankind, they were devoid'.¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá shows us what excellence is *not* – clearly any kind of hypocrisy is, *ipso facto*, not excellent – and condemns as pointless learning that leads only to idle argument, grandiloquence and windy figures of speech and which is devoid of the pursuit of excellence. 'True philosophy,' says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, produces rewards of excellence, and I am sure that none of us here would wish to become 'slaves of vice' or be given over to 'personal characteristics that are 'deserving of blame'.

In another life and many years ago, when chalk was considered a wonderful new invention, I taught history and English in secondary schools. Assessment was – probably still is – an important part of the teacher's life. How well is young Naysan doing? Should Joan be in this maths set? Will Will be ready to take A levels this year? Should Alison be going on to CSYS? The marking of exams and the giving of grades, the writing of reports and the unavoidable tension between giving encouragement to children and giving a 'realistic' – whatever that might mean – evaluation of their prospects higher up the school or in other parts of the educational system are all part of the trade. As a teacher I was constantly engaged in making judgments, from the outside, of other people's relative excellence.

I started what might laughingly be called my 'teaching career' in an old-fashioned grammar school for boys in the carpet town of Kidderminster. In King Charles

I School, excellence was judged by the teacher's instinct (how wonderful to be able to write 'excellent work' on an essay; what fun to scribble angrily 'do this again by Friday!') and by performance in exams. When I moved to Shetland I found that excellence was, apparently, distributed on a Bell curve – most children were expected to receive grade C, fewer received Bs and Ds, and even fewer A and E grades. No matter how much I might wish to reward effort and improvement, the system was rigidly applied. This was so-called 'norm referenced assessment'. In an egalitarian society like Shetland's this merely encouraged children to give average performances. And then the bright new dawn of 'criterion referenced assessment' arrived; once we understood what the phrase meant, we had to begin to think in terms of learning targets and whether children had attained them or not. More complex to work with, but rather fairer to the children.

There's a serious philosophical point here. Who judges excellence and how? As in all such matters there are two views: that from the outside and that from the inside. Teachers, critics, university examiners, football crowds, TV audiences are all judges of excellence. We are all judges of excellence.

You are sitting there now judging the excellence or otherwise of my performance here. And, make no mistake, we are quick to judge in our daily lives. It doesn't take much to know that the English cricket team lacks excellence, that Henman is the best British tennis player but not the best in the world. OK, sport is fairly easy. What about the arts? What is the greatest symphony orchestra in the world? Is Damien Hirst's work 'better' or 'worse' than Rachael Whiteread's? Do you prefer to read a Jeffrey Archer or a Martin Amis? And so on and so on.

Do you see? We cannot help ourselves. We *have* to make judgements about other people's excellence. Yes, most of these judgements are superficial, ill-considered and unworthy – and they are often proved wrong – but it's an ineluctable part of the human condition to make these judgements. It may even be a moral duty to do so. In judging excellence we may often be going beyond the technicalities of skill and achievement to speak of a person's moral worth, as did

'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised the excellence of the Bahá'í women of Persia:

'Today among the Bahá'ís of Persia there are many women who are the very pride and envy of the men. They are imbued with all the virtues and excellences of humanity. They are eloquent; they are poets and scholars and embody the quintessence of humility. In political ability and acumen they have been able to cope and compete with representative men. They have consecrated their lives and forfeited their possessions in martyrdom for the sake of humanity, and the traces of their glory will last forever. The pages of the history of Persia are illumined by the lives and records of these women'.²

'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly links these women's abilities with their spiritual and moral qualities, their virtues. Excellence is not *just* a matter of being able to study and speak and write well; it is also a matter of humility and consecration and detachment. We should also note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes a comparative judgement about the women's excellence, commenting as He does that they are 'the very pride and envy of the men'.

Parenthetically, it is interesting indeed to take note of the fields of activity in which the Persian Bahá'í women excelled: poetry, political ability, scholarship. And the fields of excellence are interesting not just because 'Abdu'l-Bahá is speaking of Persian women.

I mentioned that there is also an inside view on excellence. Not only do we judge the excellence of others, we also judge our own. Frequently we experience tension as we try to reconcile the judgements of others with our own feelings about how we are doing. I may think I'm doing a grand job standing here reading this paper, but you may think that I'm not doing so well. Or vice versa.

If we are effectively to pursue excellence we have to take personal responsibility for our own spiritual reformation and, at the same time, we must consider how to establish a society that nurtures excellence. Our growth in spiritual virtues – through our reading, prayer, meditation, fasting, service, learning through tests – develops the spiritual acuity we require to recognize and nurture deep excellence in ourselves and others. Excellence is based upon a spiritual attitude, a recognition of our essential nobility, and upon our taking as our noble goal what is set out for us in the Sacred Texts. We have a spiritual

and moral duty to strive for excellence no matter what the rest of the world is doing. From this personal commitment all else follows: our striving for excellence in all the fields of human activity and our willingness to work collectively to establish a civilization that nurtures and thrives on excellence. It is clear that spiritual reformation is a prerequisite of reformation in other areas of life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments:

'In the unmistakable and universal reformation we are witnessing, when outer conditions of humanity are receiving such impetus, when human life is assuming a new aspect, when sciences are stimulated afresh, inventions and discoveries increasing, civic laws undergoing change and moralities evidencing uplift and betterment, is it possible that spiritual impulses and influences should not be renewed and reformed? ... If spirituality be not renewed, what fruits come from mere physical reformation? ... There must be reformation in the kingdom of the human spirit; otherwise, no result will be attained from betterment of the mere physical structure'.³

Shoghi Effendi, writing to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran in 1924, gives this exhortation:

'The chosen ones of God ... should not look at the depraved condition of the society in which they live, nor at the evidences of moral degradation and frivolous conduct which the people around them display. They should not content themselves merely with relative distinction and excellence. Rather they should fix their gaze upon nobler heights by setting the counsels and exhortations of the Pen of Glory as their supreme goal. Then it will be readily realized how numerous are the stages that still remain to be traversed and how far off the desired goal lies—a goal which is none other than exemplifying heavenly morals and virtues'.⁴

This is a clarion call to strive for the nobility which is our birthright as human beings. It also contains a salutary reminder that we can never reach the uttermost perfection.

That's the vision, then. What about the 'how'?

Speaking in Washington DC in April 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commended education in music.

'What a wonderful meeting this is! These

are the children of the Kingdom. The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words. The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect'.⁵

He had previously, in *Secret of Divine Civilization*, commended not only education, but also the development of 'useful arts and sciences':

'Let us consider this justly and without bias: let us ask ourselves which one of these basic principles and sound, well-established procedures would fail to satisfy our present needs, or would be incompatible with Persia's best political interests or injurious to the general welfare of her people. Would the extension of education, the development of useful arts and sciences, the promotion of industry and technology, be harmful things? For such endeavour lifts the individual within the mass and raises him out of the depths of ignorance to the highest reaches of knowledge and human excellence'.⁶

Clearly our efforts have to be both personal and social. Society and the community must also shape and reform themselves and make it possible for the individual to grow in excellence:

'Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization. Establish schools that are well organized, and promote the fundamentals of instruction in the various branches of knowledge through teachers who are pure and sanctified, distinguished for their high standards of conduct and general excellence, and strong in faith; scholars and educators with a thorough knowledge of sciences and arts'.⁷

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls for a systematic and structured approach to nurturing excellence. Again He links excellence in personal virtue with excellence in learning and knowledge. He exhorts the people of Bahá to strive to surpass all others, not – presumably – with a sense of their own superiority, but to help to elevate humankind in general:

'Make ye then a mighty effort, that the purity

and sanctity which, above all else, are cherished by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, shall distinguish the people of Bahá; that in every kind of excellence the people of God shall surpass all other human beings; that both outwardly and inwardly they shall prove superior to the rest; that for purity, immaculacy, refinement, and the preservation of health, they shall be leaders in the vanguard of those who know. And that by their freedom from enslavement, their knowledge, their self-control, they shall be first among the pure, the free and the wise'.⁸

Barney Leith

¹Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, pp. 91–2

²Abdu'l-Bahá, *PUP*, 136

³Abdu'l-Bahá, *PUP*, p. 278

⁴From a letter dated 30 October 1924 written by Shoghi

Globalization Conference

The Bahá'í and Globalization conference took place last August (22-24) at a very comfortable conference facility in a pleasant rural setting not far from Copenhagen. The subject of the conference was approached from a number of different but complementary perspectives (see list of contributors and presentations below) and the discussions were characterized by a very productive atmosphere of true consultation fostered by all participants. The event was a indeed a first in Bahá'í Studies since it was conceived and organized by academic, non Bahá'í institutions and persons. Chief amongst the planners of the event was sociologist Professor Margit Warburg of the University of Copenhagen. She is one of the few avowedly non Bahá'í scholars in the world to have devoted serious scientific attention to the Bahá'í community. She is also the author of a recent controversial study of the Faith (in Italian, *I Bahai*, Turin: Elledici, 2001; see the recent review by Daniela Pinna on H-Bahai: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-bahai&month=0111&week=e&msg=XxtZvJ8/XNSG4Woa69OamA&user=H-Bahai&pw=listpass>). Sponsors of the

conference included the the Danish Research Network on New Religions (RENNER) and the Department of the History of Religions, University of Copenhagen. As a postlude to the actual conference, the NSA of Denmark invited all participants to a special reception at the Danish National Baha'i Centre where they were welcomed into an atmosphere of gracious hospitality and inspired by the loving commitment expressed by the NSA to scholarship in general and Bahá'í scholarship in particular. It was undoubtedly such a long held commitment which contributed in no small measure to the success of this historic Bahá'í academic event.

Todd Lawson

'The Bábí-Bahá'í Religions and the Messianic Roots of Globalization' Stephen Lambden

'The Hidden Words and the Hidden Words: from the Parochial to the Universal' Todd Lawson

'The Concept of Bahá'í Globalism in Iranian Literature' Fereydun Vahman

'Bahá'í: an Islamic Response to Globalization' Denis McEoin

'Bahá'í and Ahmadiyya. Post-Colonialism and Globalism' Morten Warmind

'The Globalization of the Bahá'í Community: 1892-1921' Moojan Momen

'The Bahá'í Faith and Globalization, 1900-1912' Robert Stockman

Chairperson: Mikael Rothstein

'Globalization and Decentralisation. The Concept of Subsidiarity in the Bahá'í Faith' Wendi Momen

'Global Claims, Global Aims: Shoghi Effendi's Role in Making Bahá'í Global' Zaid Lundberg

'Abdu'l-Baha and Globalization' Juan Cole

'Bahá'í and the Post-Modern Identity' Per-Oluf Akerdahl

'The Dual Global Field' Margit Warburg

'Etching the Idea of Diversity in Bahá'í Community' Will van den Hoonard

'The Globalisation of Information: Bahá'í Constructions of the Internet' David Piff

'"Let your Vision be World Embracing": Constructions of Oneness and Mission, the Canadian Bahá'ís 1938-1960' Lynn Echevarria

'Bahá'í and Globalization: a New Wahlverwandtschaft' Sen McGlinn

West Cork Conference - a success

An ABS(ESE)-sponsored conference was held in a remote part of West County Cork on the south coast of Ireland on the weekend of 24-25 November. The remoteness and beauty of the venue was food for the spirit. Travelling to the Floyd's house (the gentle hosts of this event) along the road, which is as wide as one car and has grass growing in the middle, was like sitting on a slow-motion roller-coaster - weaving left and right, while simultaneously undulating up and down.

Undaunted by distance, a group of hardy souls gathered to hear and present papers on such diverse topics as Training Institutes; the crisis of faith in the late nineteenth century; Modernity and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; Multi-Cultural Immigration in Ireland; Aesthetics and Education; and International Governance. Each speaker was assigned 30-40 minutes to present his/her arguments. This was followed by lively discussion, which usually lasted longer than the paper presentation itself.

This was the second such conference held in Ireland and is expected to be an annual event. The previous conference was held in Letterkenny, on the far side of the country a year earlier. The proceedings of that conference, as well as a few additional pieces, were distributed in Ireland and are available on the ABS(ESE) website.

The conference in West Cork built on the success of the Letterkenny conference. Although the same number of papers were read at each conference, there were more attendees at this year's conference, as well as a lively evening of (post)prandial jollity with some of the local community to relax after the four hours of sessions that afternoon.

This fun, which continued a little late, did not hamper the participants from beginning the sessions bright and early on Sunday morning.

After more than another three hours of presentations and debate, there was a break for a delightful lunch, followed by a short discussion of the future of Bahá'í Studies in Ireland.

Watch out for proceedings of the conference on the ABS(ESE) website.

Iarfhlaith Watson

Courses from Wilmette Institute

Over the next few months the Wilmette Institute will offer three courses in the 'World Religions for Deepening and Dialogue' Series. We'll be starting a course on The Bible in December; one on Islam in January, and one on Hinduism in February.

Info. at <http://wilmetteinstitute.org>
Email info@wilmetteinstitute.org or call 1-877-WILMETTE ext.1 (877-945-6388 ext. 1, toll-free in North America) with any questions.

The Bible

Topic: The Bible consists of the sacred scriptures of the Jewish and Christian dispensations, revealed to humanity over almost 2,000 years through three Manifestations (Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) as well as the inspired utterance and writing of numerous prophets and compositions by often unnamed and unknown authors. The books include historical works, prophetic utterances, letters, sacred stories, poetry, hymns, and a variety of other material. It has brought hope to millions and nurtured spiritual journeys for millennia. It provides remarkable comparisons as well as contrasts with Bahá'í scripture and contains promises the meanings of which have been unlocked by the Bahá'í revelation. Studied in the light of the Bahá'í writings, the Bible confirms one's faith and provides numerous opportunities for sharing the Bahá'í revelation with others.

Dates: 1 December 2001 – 28 February 2002
Texts: The Bible (Revised Standard Version);
Compilation of Bahá'í references to The Bible (included at no extra charge with course materials).

Faculty: Dr. Iraj Ayman; Dr. Fereshteh Bethel; Mr. Ted Brownstein; Mr. Marc Greenberg; Dr. Susan Maneck; Mr. Dann May;

Mr. Michael Sours; Dr. Robert Stockman

Islam

Topic: The course will cover Muhammad and the religious tradition that sprang from His teachings; explore Islamic ideas, values, and practices; consider Islam's influence on civilization; and examine its foundational role in the Bahá'í Faith. Contemporary issues will also be explored. By studying Islam Bahá'ís should obtain a greater appreciation of the Bahá'í Faith and acquire experience in relating the Faith to Muslims in an informed and respectful manner.

Dates: 15 January to 15 April 2002

Texts: Compilation of readings on Islam (included at no extra charge with course materials); Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (not included); James Fieser and John Powers, *Scriptures of the World's Religions* (not included).

Faculty: Dr. Todd Lawson; Dr. Brian Miller; Dr. Fiona Missaghian; Dr. Moojan Momen; Mr. Jonah Winters

Hinduism

Topic: The course will briefly survey the origin of Hinduism, the source of its sacred texts, the nature of its teachings and rituals, and its current worldwide spread. The subjects will be studied for the purposes of deepening and dialogue, that is, understanding the basics of Hinduism as a divinely revealed religion (and by comparison, the Bahá'í Faith).

Dates: 1 Feb. 1 2002 to 30 April, 2002

Texts: Compilation of Bahá'í references to and discussion of Hinduism (included at no extra charge with course materials); Moojan Momen, *Introduction to Hinduism*; Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (not included); James Fieser and John Powers, *Scriptures of the World's Religions* (not included);

Faculty: Zaid Lundberg; Dann May; Ali

Bahá'í Bibliographic Database

- A**lmost 22,000 bibliographic entries, in ProCite 5.0 format, including:
- * all works cited in *Bibliography of English Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, 1844-1985*, including many revised entries
 - * Additional books, pamphlets and periodicals about the Bahá'í Faith, 1844 to the present
 - * Additional books and articles from non-Bahá'í journals that refer to the Faith from 1844 to the present
 - * Entries for individual articles in most major Bahá'í periodicals (*World Order*, *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, *Bahá'í Studies Review*, *Herald of the South*, etc.)
 - * Selected internet resources in electronic online journals
 - * Selected audiovisual materials, Compact Disks, etc.
 - * Selected materials in European languages.

The database is available on CD-ROM for a license fee of US\$75, plus \$10 for annual updates. Operation requires that the licensee own ProCite 5.0, available from ISI Researchsoft www.risinc.com (or purchased inexpensively through academic or other wholesaler).

Compiled by William P. Collins, 6819 Stoneybrooke Lane, Alexandria, VA 22306, USA

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Short-Term Academic Positions Vacant

Landegg International University is seeking applications for positions as Teaching Fellows in the BA program for Spring Semester 2002 (January - May). Applicants must be qualified at least at master's level, and preferably hold a PhD. Preference will be given to applicants who have experience in teaching across disciplines, and who are qualified in some of the following fields: political science, political economy, development studies, and education. For further information contact the Dean of Academic Affairs, Dr B. Sabet, at bsabet@landegg.edu

Joint meeting

Of the Irfan Colloquium and the ABS(ESE) Religious Studies SIG, the Old Hall of London School of Economics 19-21 July 2002, including a consultative session on translation of the Bahá'í Writings. Papers on topics related to the main theme of the colloquium; principles of Bahá'í theology; or specific items of the Bahá'í Writings are welcome. Abstracts should be sent to Oliver Scharbrodt, Friendship House, Room C33, Rectory Lane, 1 St. Nicholas Glebe, London SW17 9QH. E-Mail: scharbrodt@gmx.de

The Science of Morality

Royal College of Physicians, London, 8-9 February 2002
Details can be found on <http://www.thescienceofmorality.com>, or by e-mailing Graham Walker directly on jegwalker@cs.com

Call for Papers

[Out of date, but may be of interest - ed]

The Public Sphere: Models Of Civil Society For The Future
For Publication: May 2002.
Submission Deadline: 1 January 2002

The public sphere - an arena in which the actors of civil society can freely discuss and debate their collective undertakings and public life - has long been recognized as vital to the health of democratic life in the West. That recognition has only been heightened in the late twentieth century in the wake of the significant contributions made by nonstate actors to the global wave of democratization.

For this issue on the public sphere *World Order* welcomes submissions (articles, reviews, photo-essays, and the like) that explore ever-more humane models of governance and civil society, informed by spiritual principles, at all levels-whether local, national, or supranational.

World Order magazine has been published quarterly since 1966 by the NSA of the US, and is intended, 'to stimulate, inspire, and serve thinking people in their search to find relationships between contemporary life and contemporary religious teachings and philosophy.' e-mail WorldOrder@usbnc.org

ABS-ESE Religious Studies (SIG) Seminar

Friday 11th - Sunday 13th January 2002

A compact one day 'Introduction to Academic Bahá'í Scholarship' on Religious Studies lines by Moojan Momen, Stephen Lambden and others will be held on Friday 11th Jan. 2002 10am--5pm.

This will be followed by a session on Bábí-Bahá'í sources and book collecting in occidental and oriental languages. The bi-annual ABS-ESE Religious Studies (SIG) seminar will commence on Friday Jan 11th (7pm) and go on until Sunday Jan 13rd (5pm).

Venue: Bahá'í Centre, 30 Victoria Square, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne,

England. UK.

Persons wishing to embark upon academically oriented Bahá'í Studies are welcome to attend this one day event and the following seminar. Formal qualifications are not necessary though an openness to modern academic approaches will be expected. There is no age restriction or cost involved. Consultative instruction will include informal presentations about the field, history and current state of Bábí-Bahá'í scholarship; various academic methodologies; primary and secondary source materials and access to them; the study of the various scriptural languages; research needing to be done; computing, cyberspace and Bahá'í scholarship; and (among other things) Bahá'í scholarship and the Bahá'í community.

ABS-ESE Seminar January 2002

Immediately after this one day course and at the same venue will be the bi-annual ABS-ESE Religious Studies (SIG) seminar. It will last from Friday Jan 11th 2002 (7pm) - Sunday Jan 13th (5pm). During these 2-3 days academic papers will be presented and discussed.

Travel

Air travel can now be extremely cheap. Newcastle is easy to reach from London : it is a one hour [supplementary] plane flight; a 3-hour train journey - there are frequent trains from King's Cross - and an approximately 5-hour bus trip. Newcastle upon Tyne has a good International Airport. Direct flights are obtainable from many European countries and international locations.

Bed & Breakfast accommodation in Newcastle is plentiful and not too expensive. The 'Jesmond Park Hotel' for example, (quite close to the venue) provides reasonable B&B accommodation at around 25 GBP / \$35 per night (74-76 Queens Rd. Jesmond, Newcastle Tel. +44 [0]191 2812821). See their website at: <http://www.snowgoose.co.uk/jespark/> Other B&B places can be provided on request.

Over the last few decades the Religious Studies (SIG) seminars have to a considerable extent become internationalized. Leading Bahá'í scholars from many parts of the world have attended or presented papers and discussion has included many aspects of

Bahá'í scholarship and publication. Opportunity also exists for that human interaction which goes beyond philological or intellectual analysis into something like intimate Bahá'í fellowship. Bahá'ís and other empathetic persons are more than welcome to attend these informal academic seminars. Formal academic qualifications are not required though the papers and discussions are usually of a high academic standard. It is hoped that participants will be socially and spiritually invigorated as well as intellectually stimulated.

For details regarding these events contact Stephen Lambden, Tel. (+44) [0] 191.2818597 e-mail: hurqalya@blueyonder.co.uk or Moojan Momen, Tel/Fax: (+44) [0]1767 627626 e-



Report Page From the next issue onwards there will be a report page in *Associate* to keep readers informed of fellow-members' activities. Please let us know what you're doing - Doctorates, Research etc. - or of any awards, funding, new positions etc. you've received. Let us know of anything you think might be of interest. To *Associate*, address below.

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