AUSTRALIAN BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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# Contents

# Human rights: reflections from a Bahá'í viewpoint[1]

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## Introduction

From its inception in Iran in 1844, the Bahá'í Faith has developed into a global religion in both its geographical spread and in the diversity of the composition of its community. As of May 1995 the Bahá'í community worldwide numbered over five million. A total of 174 National Spiritual Assemblies had been established in separate countries and territories, each representing a well established Bahá'í community.[2] Today just under 90% of local Bahá'í communities are found in the developing world, approximately 10% in western countries, and less than 2% in the original Islamic heartlands where the Bahá'í Faith emerged[3] (although Bahá'ís in Iran constitute 6% of Bahá'ís worldwide]

Born in modern times, the Bahá'í Faith addresses human rights in the language of modernity. As well, however, we find traditional religious terminology employed through themes such as justice and care of the dispossessed with which religions have characteristically dealt with issues now falling within the human rights framework. In the earliest writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, we find rights themes addressed in terms of the spiritual journey of the soul. From this seed, references to rights evolve into a well-defined set of principles which form the foundation of the Bahá'í teachings, many of which have subsequently been championed by the modern human rights movement, and some of which suggest future human rights agendas.

The Bahá'í community has long undertaken activities which promote

1 This paper was first presented at a the conference "Human Rights, Faith and Culture", held by ABS Australia to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Canberra, 7-8 November 1998.

2 Statistics from *The Bahá'í World 1995-1996*, Haifa: World Centre Publications, 1996. Local communities sufficiently developed to possess Local Spiritual Assemblies numbered 17,148 with the following geographical spread: Africa: 4,828, Americas 4,515, Asia 5,954, Australasia 901, Europe 950.

3 Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

human rights, particularly in the fields such as the abolition of racial and other prejudices and the advocacy of the equality of men and women. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the community has also advocated human rights through its contribution as an non-government organisation represented at the United Nations, and in the work of national communities around the world.

A significantly increased focus on human rights issues since 1994 has resulted in the community developing a better understanding of the scriptural basis of the Bahá'í commitment to human rights, and to begin to develop methodologies for the effective advocacy of rights which are consistent with the community's non-political character and its emphasis on building unity between people. The focus on rights also raises the question of how to deal maturely with areas where the standards of the Bahá'í Faith and particular aspects of human rights may seem to be in tension.

## Bahá'í Scripture and Human Rights Principles

### Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings

In a 40 year period from 1852-1892 Bahá'u'lláh delivered a complex body of religious teachings directed to his followers, to enquirers, to leaders of society and to humanity in general. Although the following involves some generalisation, there are definite phases in those teachings which provide useful markers for highlighting the evolutionary way in which human rights are given expression in those teachings.

During the first phase, his Baghdád teachings from 1852 to 1863, Bahá'u'lláh's writings were largely mystical and theological in character, focusing on the relationship between man and God and on the nature of religion. Observance of human rights is regarded as an element of the soul's search for God. The second phase, from 1863 to 1872, during which Bahá'u'lláh was successively exiled to Constantinople, Adrianople and finally the prison city of 'Akká in Palestine, featured a key series of letters to various kings and rulers. Here observance of human rights is a divine obligation imposed on the rulers of society. The third phase is represented by the writing in 1873 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Bahá'í book of sacred law, in which human rights are foundational elements of the ordering of the 'divine' society. The fourth and final stage is expressed in a series of letters written to various followers in which Bahá'u'lláh provides his vision of an enlightened society, outlining a series of teachings designed to addressing the healing of social ills. As aspirations for the future, human rights are at the core of the healing of society's ills and the redemption of humanity

**'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Bahá'í Principles**

The second major element of the Bahá'í sacred corpus are the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was appointed by Bahá'u'lláh, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, as the interpreter of his teachings and as his successor as leader of the nascent Bahá'í community after his own death. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from nine years of age, shared his father's life of exile and imprisonment and indeed was not finally released from more or less vigorous forms of state control and detention until the Young Turk revolution in 1908. Again, although an over generalisation, it may be said of him that he played a role similar to that of St Paul in Christianity: in conveying the teachings he had received from its cultural homeland to a broader cultural setting. As Paul expressed Christianity to the gentiles, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed the Bahá'í Faith to the west, and through the west, to modernity. In 1911-1913 'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook extensive travels and public engagements in North America and Europe conveying the teachings of his father. His talks are collected in a number of works which have become core elements of Bahá'í scripture.[4]

In these travels, and in his written works, 'Abdu'l-Bahá focused on conveying a crystallisation of the teachings of his father which he would variously describe as "the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh" or the "principles of the Bahá'í Faith".[5] Later Shoghi Effendi described these principles as (together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas) "the bedrock" of the Bahá'í teachings and "the essential elements of that Divine polity which ['Abdu'l-Bahá] proclaimed to the leaders of public thought as well as to the masses at large".[6]

The following is a typical listing of the principles which 'Abdu'l-Bahá would describe:

- Independent investigation of truth
- The oneness of humanity
- The basic unity of religion
- The abolition of all prejudice, whether of race, sex, nationality, class or creed
- The equality of men and women
- Universal compulsory education
- The abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty
- The importance of justice as a ruling principle of society
- The establishment of international peace and world unity
- The adoption of a universal language
- The harmony of science and religion[7]

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4 *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (talks delivered in Canada and the United States), *Paris Talks*, and *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*.

5 e.g. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63 "The third teaching or principle of Bahá'u'lláh is ..." 107, 127, 169 - in answer to a questions about tenets of faith.

6 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944, p. 281-282.

7 This particular listing is derived from Shoghi Effendi's presentation of these principles in *God Passes By*, pp. 281-282.

A number of these are directly concerned with human rights or carry rights implications which were expressed by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and subsequently in the practice of the Bahá'í community. Their expression in the Universal Declaration and subsequent human rights declarations and treaties is striking.

For instance the abolition of racial prejudice is reflected in article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its realisation pursued through instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Similarly the equality of men and women is a principle championed by the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The right to education is given expression in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and half at least of the concept of the 'abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty' is found in article 25 of the Declaration. The 'independent investigation of the truth' is expressed as a 'duty' of every individual - to know and believe of their own knowledge and not through that of others. It implies with it a duty on others not to interfere with this independent investigation - the sacred task of each soul. The promotion of peace is of course intimately connected with the realisation of human rights and the Bahá'í insistence on the fundamental importance of the achievement of peace has been characteristic of its many decades of advocacy.[8]

Replete with human rights resonance is however the concept of the oneness of humanity, which in its expression by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh himself, symbolises complex ideas concerning the nature of the human person and society. This principle is central to the character of the Bahá'í teachings being regarded as the "pivot" around which the Bahá'í teachings are built.[9]

The oneness of humanity expresses the common spiritual origin - and thus equality - of all human beings:

> *"Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other"*[10]

It symbolises the "value" of the human person, in language which parallels the concept of human dignity in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

> *"Noble have I created Thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then to that for which thou wast created."*[11]

8 An instance is found in *The Promise of World Peace*, a document released by the Universal House of Justice for the International Year of Peace.
9 Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By*, p. 217.
10 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Arabic), number 68.
11 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Arabic), number 22.

It expresses the basic moral paradigm of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching, emphasising a vision of service to humanity as the highest moral order.

> *Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men.*[12]

It expresses the close bonds uniting all human beings together:

> *"Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship ... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth ... Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can ensure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations. So long, however, as the thick clouds of oppression, which obscure the day star of justice, remain undispelled, it would be difficult for the glory of this station to be unveiled to men's eyes ..."*[13]

Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that *"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens"* expresses yet another aspect. It concisely conveys not only the idea of oneness but also the idea of equality of all humans before one global law.

'Abdu'l-Bahá links the principle of oneness of humanity to the obligation to observe justice to towards our fellow human beings and to respect rather than denigrate any individual. Accordingly a division of humanity into 'believers' and 'unbelievers', with the social implications that division has carries, is profoundly rejected. The believers are called on to associate with all humanity and to treat all with equality.[14]

The foundational philosophies of the Universal Declaration - of dignity, equality, fraternity and non-discrimination, find expression in the idea of the oneness of humanity and the other core Bahá'í principles outlined above.

The strength of the resonance of the Bahá'í principles with human rights is striking. It is not surprising then to find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá sometimes explicitly included human rights among the basic principles of Bahá'u'lláh. Thus in a talk delivered in Philadelphia on 9 June 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

> *"Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognised and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal;*

12 "Lawh-i-Dunyá", *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 212-213.
13 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 288.
14 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63

*there is no distinction or preferment of any soul in his justice and equity".*[15]

The adoption of a document such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is thus at the level of central principle from a Bahá'í point of view, and its adoption represents a realisation of a basic aspiration of the Bahá'í Faith. The adoption of the Universal Declaration indeed in the light of this statement, can be seen from a Bahá'í viewpoint as carrying prophetic fulfilment.

As we explore the body of teachings on which the Bahá'í principles are based we see a deeper stream of reference to human rights expressed in traditional religious terminology - terminology drawn not from modern western political philosophy - rather from the traditions of the great prophetic traditions of the Middle East. The comprehensiveness of this reference to human rights underlines the centrality of rights in the Bahá'í Faith. The traditional language expressing rights concepts signals what can be deduced from a study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and indeed the other great faiths: that these systems of thought have contributed directly to the assumptions and ways of thought from which human rights and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have emerged.

## The journey of the soul (1852-1863)

As noted above, the earliest references to rights concepts in Bahá'í scripture are found in Bahá'u'lláh's mystical and theological writings. From a Bahá'í point of view rights are a far richer concept that mere legal prohibitions limiting the power of those governing society. They are enjoined on the believer, not only because they represent justice, but because the believer must express them to be able themselves to attain to God. The following passage from the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, in which Bahá'u'lláh discusses the religious path, is an example of this:

*When a true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days he must ... never exalt himself above anyone ... That seeker should regard backbiting as grievous error ... He should succour the dispossessed, and never withhold his favour from the destitute. He should show kindness to animals, how much more to his fellow man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance ... He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself ... These are among the attributes ... of the spiritually minded.*[16]

In the previous section we have reviewed a number of quotations from the

15 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 182.
16 Ibid., p. 264 (quoting from the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*).

*Hidden Words* which come from this period and which underline equality in spiritual terms. In the same works we find a range of other rights concepts such as adherence to justice, care for the poor and condemnation of injustice, in each case expressed in mystical language. These kind of references, as Bahá'u'lláh himself states, crystallise the teachings 'revealed unto the prophets of old'. To draw on one example the following passage from the prophet Isaiah talks of the kind of worship that is acceptable to God:

> *"The multitudes of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals ... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me ... I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me ... even if you offer many prayers I will not listen ... Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow".*

Sources such as this, which could be multiplied from a variety of religions, underline the universality and antiquity of philosophies which underline the modern human rights movement.

## The duties of the rulers of society (1863 - 1873)

The next phase of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is represented by letters to various kings and rulers of society in which he proclaims his divine mission. These letters include an active advocacy of rights expressed in terms of divinely imposed duties binding on the rulers of society. It is a theme that continues in subsequent periods of his teachings. Thus we find the core of civil and political rights: a condemnation of oppression and praise of just governance and the securing of rights.

> *God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the down-trodden and punish the wrong-doers.*[17]

We also find the basic outlines of the concepts of economic rights in repeated calls for economic justice. Thus Bahá'u'lláh calls on the Ottoman sultan to address the extremes of wealth and poverty under his rule:

> *Deal with ... undeviating justice so that none among [your subjects]*

17 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 11.

> *may either suffer want or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice ... for this is what we observed when we entered the City [Constantinople]. We found among its inhabitants some who were possessed of an affluent fortune and lived in the midst of excess riches, while others were in dire want and abject poverty. This ill beseemeth thy sovereignty, and is unworthy of thy rank.*[18]

In addition to these two major themes we find a number of specific rights references addressed to rulers of society. Religious discrimination is condemned in a reference to the persecution of the Jewish community by two governments.[19] In an allusion to the suffering of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh outlines the kinds of abuses of governmental power that are impermissible and which should be addressed by the world's leaders, including violation of life, property, and reputation. He emphasises the duty of kings (in modern terminology, governments) to prevent oppression.[20] The role of the will of the people in the process of governance is alluded to in an early letter to Queen Victoria: "We have heard that thou has entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well".[21] To these representatives he emphasises that they should regard themselves as "the representatives of all that dwell on earth",[22] a concept which emphatically suggests the duty to advance the rights of all people:

> *O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind, and bettereth the condition thereof.*[23]

A third major theme which dominates Bahá'u'lláh's message to the rulers is his encouragement for them to establish peace in the world. While examination of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that a full appreciation the promotion of peace was central in his writings to kings and rulers.

## The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and human rights

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh's book of sacred law, is the fundamental

18 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 235.
19 Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 255.
20 "Twenty years have passed, O Kings, during which We have, each day, tasted the agony of a fresh tribulation ... They that rose up against Us, have put Us to death, have shed Our blood, have plundered Our property, and violated Our honour. Though aware of most of Our afflictions, ye, nevertheless, have failed to stay the hand of the aggressor. For is it not your clear duty to restrain the tyranny of the oppressor, and to deal equitably with your subjects, that your high sense of justice may be fully demonstrated to all mankind." Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 11.
21 Ibid., p. 34.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 67.

source for the way of life practised by Bahá'ís. The *Aqdas* provides for prayer, fasting, religious institutions, places of worship and religious festivals. It deals with traditional religious subjects - morality, man's relationship with God and individual spiritual growth. It is concerned with basic social laws such as the prohibition of theft and murder It deals with basic matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. Within this overall context we find in the *Aqdas* basic human rights principles - dignity, equality, fraternity, non-discrimination - and the outlines of the concepts of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights. In addition there are a range of provisions bearing directly on human rights principles found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The idea of human unity is expressed in the *Aqdas* in a call to Bahá'ís to "consort with all religions in the spirit of amity and concord", with the added emphasis that "all things proceed from God and unto Him they return". Here we find both the idea of the human fraternity and the idea of the equality of human beings found in article 1 of the Declaration.[24] Its basic intent is reinforced in provisions such as the abolition of ritual impurity, a concept whose discriminatory impact and destructiveness to equality and dignity (particularly for women) requires no elaboration. In the context of this abolition Bahá'u'lláh again calls on his followers to "consort with the followers of all religions".[25]

Human dignity is expressed in passages which emphasise the sacredness of the human person - "the human temple", "temple of man" - and which encourage behaviour worthy of that dignity.[26] The way in which the prohibition of murder is expressed emphasises the sacredness of human life:

> *let no soul slay another ... What! Would ye kill him whom God hath quickened, whom He hath endowed with a breath of spirit through a breath from Him? Grievous then would your trespass be before His throne! Fear God, and lift not the hand of injustice and oppression to destroy what He hath Himself raised up.*[27]

From a religious viewpoint the "right to life" set out in article 3 of the Declaration could not be more strongly stated. The applicability of this prohibition to the agents of government is implicit in the condemnation of the abuse of power to take life expressed in this passage. The abolition of the slave trade and the practice of slavery set out in article 4 of the Universal Declaration is advocated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

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24 "God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of 'uncleanness', whereby divers things and people have been held to be impure." Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 144.
25 Ibid., para 75.
26 Ibid., para 120 and 154 dealing with intoxicants and mind altering substances.
27 Ibid., para 73.

> *It is forbidden to you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is a servant to buy another of God's servants ... Let no man exalt himself over another: all are but bondslaves before the Lord.*[28]

As well as forbidding both the slave trade and slavery the language emphasises the concept of human equality - including by implication the equality of men and women, an equality explicit in other of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. The right to social security found in articles 22 and 25 of the Declaration is expressed in a variety of provisions of the *Aqdas*:

> *All have been enjoined to earn a living, and as for those who are incapable of doing so, it is incumbent on the Deputies of God and on the wealthy to make adequate provision for them.*[29]

Other passages confirm the system of charitable contributions for relief of the poor known as Zakát, which was taught by the Muhammad.[30] The estate of a deceased who leaves no children and no will is to be expended "on the orphaned and widowed, and on whatsoever will bring benefit to the generality of the people".[31] These passages envision a society providing systems of social security.

The right to education found in article 26 of the Declaration is expressed in the *Aqdas*:

> *Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing ... He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice. Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy.*[32]

This passage provides successive mechanisms to ensure that all children receive an education. Like the passage dealing with slavery, where equality of men and women is implied, this provision promotes equal gender access to education.

The principles of protection of privacy and reputation found in article 12 of the Declaration are expressed in the *Aqdas*: "take heed that ye enter no house in the absence of its owner, except with permission." Believers are forbidden to commit "backbiting or calumny", a prohibition strongly emphasised in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

28 Ibid., para 72.
29 Ibid., para 147.
30 Ibid., para 146.
31 Ibid., para 21.
32 Ibid., para 49.

References in the *Aqdas* to the kings and rulers of society continue elaboration of the basic elements of civil and political rights, reinforcing statements addressing such rights in greater detail elsewhere. Bahá'u'lláh reminds the Kings that their power is not arbitrary: they are subject to a higher law and to divine sovereignty.[33] This concept reminds us of the non-secular sources of the concept of the "rule of law". He is contemptuous of the "throne of tyranny" in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.[34] In a paragraph specifically addressed to the rulers of America he calls on them to "Adorn the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and fear of God". He calls on them to "Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-wise."[35] In a reference to his native city of Tihrán he predict that eventually God will bless its throne "with one who will rule with justice" and that "erelong, the reins of power" would fall into the hands of the people.[36] In a later work he clarifies the intent of this reference:

> *Referring to the land of Tá [Tihrán] We have revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that which will admonish mankind. They that perpetrate tyranny in the world have usurped the rights of the peoples and kindreds of the earth and are sedulously pursuing their selfish inclinations.*[37]

Bahá'u'lláh later expresses support for constitutional monarchy, as it is "adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people".[38]

These provisions of the *Aqdas* establish a broad foundation for human rights. The significance of this scriptural foundation cannot be overemphasised. Bahá'í support of human rights is not a question of response to current social trends; it falls rather into the category of fundamental norm of Bahá'í community life. Advocacy of human rights is one aspect of aspiring and doing justice to the way of life inculcated in the Bahá'í teachings.

## An enlightened world society

The final phase of Bahá'u'lláh's writings was embodied in a series of major letters to the faithful and others which set out his vision of an enlightened world society. Here again we find the stream of human rights thought expressed. In the *Tablet of the World*, for instance, he defines societal evil in terms which only too well capture the depths of violations of human dignity in the twentieth century:

33 Ibid., para 81 and 82.
34 Ibid., para 89.
35 Ibid., para 88.
36 Ibid., para 91 and 93.
37 Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 212.
38 Ibid., p. 216.

> *The unbelievers and the faithless have set their minds on four things: first, the shedding of blood; second, the burning of books; third, the shunning of the followers of other religions; fourth, the extermination of other communities and groups.*[39]

A flavour of the writings of this period can be gleaned by an examination of the letter known as *Glad-Tidings* which, among others, abolishes the law of holy war, encourages association with the followers of all religions, promotes the adoption of a universal language so that "the whole earth will come to be regarded as one country", encourages loyalty to government, calls for the establishment of global peace, promotes freedom in dress, encourages service to the community, prohibits the destruction of books, promotes the sciences and the arts, regards work as worship, and promotes constitutional monarchy. Similar passages are found in other writings of the period.

It is also in this period that Bahá'u'lláh defines the distinguishing character of his teachings:

> *We have on one hand, blotted from the pages of God's Holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men, and have, on the other, laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity.*[40]

It is from passages such as this that the core principle of the oneness of humanity is drawn.

Again we find additional human rights elements represented in this period. For instance, the idea of fair reward for work: "The people of Bahá should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference".[41] The proper administration of justice is referred to: "Shed not the blood of anyone, O people, neither judge ye anyone unjustly."[42] Respect for the property of others is embodied in such passages as: "Deal not treacherously with the substance of your neighbour. Be ye trustworthy on earth".[43] The *Aqdas* instruction to ensure the education of children is reiterated as a central principle. The obligation to work is identified as a form of worship, which later we see elaborated as a right to work and as a duty on those who organise society to ensure work is provided for all.

39 Ibid., pp. 215-216.
40 Ibid., p. 217.
41 Ibid., p. 189.
42 Ibid., p. 328.
43 Ibid.

## Seen from the Bahá'í paradigm

Religions provide meaning to life, and in doing so they provide a conceptual world or paradigm within which the religion's principles and teachings are elaborated. Accordingly, though we have seen a powerful affirmation of rights themes in the Bahá'í teachings, those teachings cannot be seen as merely an expression of human rights philosophy or any other system of thought. The Bahá'í approach to human rights needs to be understood in its own context, if it is to be fully appreciated.

The difference in paradigm between secular modernism and a religious system such as the Bahá'í Faith inevitably gives rise to a number of areas of conceptual tension. These tensions need to be acknowledged and explored. In some cases the tension can be resolved by a better understanding of the nature of human rights, or of the Bahá'í teachings, and by better understanding what is essential to each.

Fundamentally the Bahá'í approach to human rights is one that balances communitarian approaches with individual interest. Unsurprisingly given its religious character, responsibilities are as important as rights from a Bahá'í point of view. This issue, of course, only becomes problematic if one views human rights as in any sense anti-communitarian or anti-responsibility. Such an interpretation must be regarded as highly questionable, certainly in respect of the principles of the human rights movement grounded in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If one looks to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, one finds that its very first phrase is a reference to a duty, not a right: the duty of the individual to know God and his prophets and to obey their teachings. Curiously, however, we can observe that the Universal Declaration itself begins with a duty rather than a right:

> *every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance".*[44]

In addition, every right implies duties. The "right to life", for instance, in an active sense is addressed to all mankind and only has meaning if we understand by it "thou shalt not abuse power to take human life". Article 29 of the Universal Declaration includes the idea of community responsibility, stating "everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible". The emphasis on rights as opposed to duties in the Declaration itself also needs to be understood in its historical context. The language, for very good reasons, is concerned to

44 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, preamble.

emphasise the limits of governmental power, because governments have so prominently been the principal violators of rights. The introduction of extensive reference to duties would potentially undermine this purpose. The same is true of the international human rights treaties, which are concerned to bind governments with legal obligations not qualified by ambiguities arising from duties which might be read by those minded to avoid human rights obligations as making rights conditional.

A second area of difficulty is presented by the revolutionary origin of human rights philosophy. To the extent that human rights can be interpreted as continuing to endorse the violent overthrow of government, they would not accord with Bahá'í principle. Violence is a methodology antithetical to the character of the Bahá'í Faith and is profoundly rejected. Bahá'ís are counselled to be obedient and loyal to government:

> *None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men's hearts.*[45]

In the last clause of this passage we see encapsulated the Bahá'í view that the true transformation of society depends ultimately on the transformation of the individual. The pacific character of the Bahá'í Faith is emphasised by other provisions such as the prohibition on carrying arms unless essential, and on engaging in conflict, striking another, or committing similar acts "whereby hearts and souls may be saddened".[46] These statements do not imply an acceptance of unjust rule, but they define a methodology based the peaceful and progressive transformation of such injustice.

Fundamental to an appreciation of the Bahá'í approach is its emphasis on unity as the prerequisite to social well-being and the Bahá'í Faith's own unifying mission which mandates that all its activities be directed to the achievement of unity in the human family. The foregoing is not necessarily outside the bounds of modern human rights thinking. The preambular paragraphs to the Declaration in fact note that one of the purposes of human rights is to obviate the necessity for individuals to resort to "rebellion against tyranny and oppression".

Further, the modernity of the Bahá'í Faith in its social principles does not equate to an acceptance of moral indifference or moral relativism in matters of personal conduct, which is a prominent characteristic of modern cosmopolitan society. Indeed the Bahá'í Faith expects high standards of morality from its followers including in areas such as personal ethics, chastity, and abstinence from alcohol, drugs and gambling.

45 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 95.
46 Ibid., para 159 and 148.

The Faith's emphasis both on peace and on high standards of conduct is reflected in Bahá'u'lláh's critical reference to liberty in the *Aqdas*. It is a reference which can be easily misunderstood if taken out of context. In the *Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to excesses of liberty as contrary to human well-being. As indicated by the Universal House of Justice such references cannot be construed as approval of oppressive governance:

> *A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to the high importance of [freedom of thought, expression and action] to constructive social processes. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of his Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it not indicate an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man such as has not yet been attained?*[47]

An analysis of the relationship between the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and human rights is found in a major essay in the 1996-1997 volume of *The Bahá'í World*.[48] The inclusion of this essay in an official publication of the international Bahá'í community reflects the significance of human rights in the current work of the community. Titled "The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective", the article addresses the philosophy of rights and makes a number of observations. First and foremost, it discusses the basic congruence between human rights values and the Bahá'í teachings. Secondly, it is concerned to critique moral relativism and thus to support the universality of human rights, commenting that relativistic statements about rights (such as in the Bangkok Declaration) "are often intended to insulate governments from international criticism regarding treatment of their citizens". Thirdly, the article discusses the various sources posited for human rights (nature, reason etc.) supporting the validity of arguments for a divine origin for those rights. Fourthly the article emphasises the communitarian character of the Bahá'í teachings which call for a balance between individual freedom and the promotion of the collective good.

Beyond these thematic issues are specific provisions of Bahá'í law that need to be considered in the overall context of the relationship between the Bahá'í teachings and human rights. The following examples illustrate some of the issues that arise.

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47 Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America*, 29 December 1988.

48 Matthew Weinberg, "The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective", *The Bahá'í World 1996-1997*, Haifa: World Centre Publications, pp.247-274.

1. A social law introduced by Bahá'u'lláh requires that once intending spouses have decided they wish to marry each other, they should seek and obtain the consent of their parents to the marriage. This might be seen as impeding free consent of the spouses as referred to in article 16.2 of the Universal Declaration. Yet Bahá'u'lláh's intent in introducing this provision furthers an aim of this article, which is the well-being of the family:

   *Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned [marriage], once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them.*[49]

2. The intestacy laws provided by Bahá'u'lláh provide for a complex series of inheritors who receive different portions of the inheritance. The first male child receives significant preference over other potential beneficiaries, and in other instances a greater proportion of inheritance is provided for male as opposed to female beneficiaries. Here again difficult issues arise, a full appreciation requiring consideration of the context of these inheritance laws.

3. The death penalty is allowed for in the case of murder and arson, as is its commutation to life imprisonment.[50] A significant body of work in the human rights movement is undertaken to bring about the full abolition of the death penalty, although there is an equally significant resistance to this aim.

Rather than creating a fundamental divergence, such issues need to be seen in the context of an evolutionary and diverse human rights system, whose basic provisions vary over both time and place, although its fundamental principles and intent remain in essence unchanging. Since 1948 new "generations" of rights have been created and different regions have emphasised different aspects of human rights. Work within the international system to elaborate rights continues largely unabated. Furthermore, rights are themselves not absolute and are balanced against each other. For instance, the "Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination" limits the right to freedom of expression in order to promote racial equality. Universality thus cannot be taken to mean uniformity: within limits there is scope for a diversity of approaches to achieving the minimum aspirations set out in the Universal Declaration.

49 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 65.
50 Ibid., para 62.

## Bahá'í aspirations for human rights

A review of the Bahá'í approach to human rights would be incomplete without reference to those areas where the Bahá'í teachings suggest the need for further development of human rights principles. Of central importance to unfulfilled human rights aspirations from a Bahá'í point of view is the concept of the oneness of humanity - a concept at the core of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and which he emphasises repeatedly. It is expressed in various ways including the idea of global citizenship. "The Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." This idea of universal human citizenship implies, in stronger terms than expressed in the Declaration, the equality of rights of all members of the human family. Citizenship is the organising principle that replaced hierarchical medieval society with egalitarian concepts of modernity. Yet, in today's world we still do not practice full equality of human rights. One's country of birth still determines whether one will live in abject poverty or in material affluence unimaginable to previous generations, whether one will experience peace or warfare, whether one lives in a democratic society or whether one is subject to tyranny. It is a reality implicitly endorsed by the Declaration, which in this respect gives priority to the rights of states as opposed to the rights of the individual. For instance articles 13 (freedom of movement, and the right to leave a country), 14 (the right to asylum) and 15 (the right to nationality) can be seen from a Bahá'í point of view as steps along the way to adopting the principle that all humanity are the citizens of a common homeland.

In this context article 28, which states that "everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realised", would be seen as an area of neglected human rights advocacy. From the point of view of the Bahá'í teachings, human rights will not be achieved until the unity of the human race is established.

The Bahá'í principle that extremes of wealth as well as the extreme of poverty need to be addressed suggest another area of human rights advocacy. In broader terms the attention given to economic rights in the Bahá'í writings contrasts with western approaches which in the past were primarily focused on civil and political rights. Thus far efforts towards the achievement of basic economic standards for all human beings, as called for in the Universal Declaration, have been notably unsuccessful; and extremes of poverty and wealth are increasing, both globally and within national borders.

The concept of the "oneness of religion" takes article 18 of the declaration one step beyond recognising the freedom of others to practice their beliefs - it implies the idea that all religions are from God and therefore sacred and worthy of reverence. It is an idea that promotes reconciliation and mutual respect between the followers of all faiths. Religious tolerance remains

an unachieved aspiration, as sadly evident in conflict between followers of different faiths in a number of countries.

## Bahá'í community advocacy of human rights

The Bahá'í teachings provide rich sources for action to promote human rights. Thus, as one would expect, the Bahá'í community has sought to translate these principles into practical action. In a general sense Bahá'í community life intrinsically involves the promotion of human rights. The practices of free and fair elections, the role of the community in the governance of its own affairs, the promotion of unity between people irrespective of race and background, the pursuit of gender equity are all inherent aspects of Bahá'í community life. In a Bahá'í International Community statement on human rights education the promotion of human rights principles in Bahá'í moral education classes is discussed: "Bahá'í communities in 173 countries are already both promoting and providing education, based on the principle of the oneness of humanity, which seeks to cultivate respect for the rights of others, a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the human family, and the moral attributes that contribute to a just, harmonious and peaceful world civilization. As a fundamental tenet of their religion, Bahá'ís are committed to the eradication of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnic origin, religion, sex or nationality — prejudices that fuel hatred and cause otherwise good people to deprive their fellow citizens of rights."[51]

As well as this general context there is an increasing body of specific human rights advocacy in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. Statements issued by the Bahá'í International Community, which represent some of its work at the United Nations, give an indication of the length of commitment to human rights at the international level. The Bahá'í community contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through its "Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights". From 1974 onwards there has been a steady stream of Bahá'í contributions to the human rights work of United Nations bodies, covering a broad range of topics including women's rights, racial prejudice, rights of minorities, religious tolerance, rights of indigenous people, economic social and cultural rights, human rights education, violence against women and combating racism.[52]

A 1974 document on the elimination of discrimination against women illustrates how the Bahá'í community, as a global entity, has worked over many years to promote human rights:

51 Bahá'í International Community, "Statement on the UN Decade of Human Rights Education delivered to the UN Commission on Human Rights", March 1996.

52 Statements of the Bahá'í International Community can be accessed via the Bahá'í World web site at www.bahai.org.

> *Since this is the first occasion we have had to report on publicity given to the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, we would like to mention that as far back as 1968 we were making available to our affiliates [national communities] information on the [Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women], as well as mailing supplies for United Nations Day or Human Rights Day meetings.*

This description is representative of the kind of global and grass roots activity that Bahá'í communities have pursued for many years.

During the International Year of Peace in 1986, the Universal House of Justice issued *The Promise of World Peace*, a document which focused on the prerequisites for the achievement of peace. It was shared with community leaders from the Secretary General of the United Nations to the chiefs and mayors of local communities, as well as the public in general. It continues to be distributed by the Bahá'í community. Its themes include the abolition of racism, the equality of men and women, the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, and the need for universal education.

In 1994 Bahá'í advocacy of human rights was given a greater focus through the adoption of an international policy for a Bahá'í contribution to the fostering of peace that focused on four thematic issues: human rights, advancement of women, global prosperity and moral development. This policy has had the effect of significantly increasing national and local Bahá'í focus on these issues. In 1997 the Bahá'í community launched a program of action to support the implementation of national measures pursuant to the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. In this campaign Bahá'í communities have been encouraged to undertake promotion of commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and steps to implement the UN plan of action for the decade.

In Australia the Bahá'í community has participated in such activities over many years. The community's work for peace was recognised by an award from the United Nations Secretary General in the International Year of Peace. Since 1996 there has been an increased focus on commemoration of Human Rights day, adding to routine activities in support of other international and national commemorations such as United Nations Day, International Women's Day, Reconciliation Week and Refugee Week. In its national work the community has sought to increase its contribution to non-government work in the field of human rights. A wide range of activities were organised to promote the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998, including local commemorations and the conference at which this paper was presented.

## Conclusion

As we explore the body of Bahá'í teachings we see a deep stream of reference to human rights expressed in traditional religious terminology - terminology drawn not from modern western political philosophy, but rather from the traditions of the great prophetic traditions of the Middle East. The comprehensiveness of this reference to human rights underlines the centrality of rights in the Bahá'í Faith. The traditional language expressing rights concepts signals what can be deduced from a study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and indeed the other great faiths: that these systems of thought have contributed directly to the assumptions and ways of thought from which human rights and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have emerged.

The very act of humanity gathering in 1948 to declare its global values and its aspirations for all human beings was profoundly spiritual in character. It remains a beacon towards a future worthy of human dignity - for all members of the human family.

# **Promoting a Culture of Human Rights :** The United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the Bahá'í community in the Islamic Republic of Iran

*Ladan Rahmani*

## Introduction

This paper examines one international organisation, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its actions in relation to the case study of the human rights situation of the Bahá'í community in Iran. In section one, the role of the CHR is discussed. I identify three main areas where it carries out its functions: direct collective action, direct diplomatic dialogue, and indirect action through influencing the international human rights regime and other regimes. Section two is a case study of the Commission in action. I analyse the nature of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is a discernible pattern in the area of civil and political rights, in the area of economic, social and cultural rights, however, there seems to be no apparent difference. I argue that although there have been slight changes in the situation they do not signify a change in the situation as a whole.

In the final section, the Commission's actions are discussed in the three areas of direct diplomatic action, collective diplomatic action and indirect mobilisation of the human rights regime. I argue that the case study confirms that the Commission's actions have to some extent influenced the Islamic Republic of Iran, as demonstrated in the slight changes that have occurred in the nature of the persecution of the Bahá'ís. In addition, the indications of change are discernible in the statements that have been made by the government of Iran to the international community. My case study indicates that the Commission's actions have within a normative framework influenced Iran to some extent.

## Section I:
## The role of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

### Direct collective function

In its collective capacity, the CHR is currently representative of 53 member states.[1] As an inter-governmental body, its voting and decisions are restricted to these member states of the CHR. A consequence of this restriction of membership to governmental actors is a highly politicised climate in the sessions and discussions of the CHR. The annual recrudescence of deep geo-political fractures is a common feature of Commission sessions, resolutions and decisions.[2] The deliberations are divided according to political interests, and it has been argued that the threat of bias has dominated the work of the Commission, as demonstrated by an empirical study carried out by Donnelly, [3] who refers to the inordinate amount of time spent on certain country cases and almost complete dismissal of other cases where the degree of human rights violations is similar, if not worse.[4] Nevertheless, the CHR also seeks input from Non-Governmental Organisations, enabling it to incorporate issues and interests that are not wholly motivated by political self-interest. The presence of NGOs at the Commission's sessions and their consultative capacity enable a wider cross section of the international community to be represented, and their interests to be integrated into the human rights system. It may seem that enhancing the non-political actors' role in the Commission may be a possible response to the challenge of politicization. However, it has also been argued that this may detract from the pressure that governments can exert through their own relations with other states. Indeed Suter views the political aspect of the membership of the Commission as a positive as it places increased pressure on states.[5]

The force of the resolutions and declarations made by the Commission is evident in their standard setting repercussions. Such instruments have been criticised as being merely rhetoric lacking any enforcement mechanisms, but

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "United Nations Commission on Human Rights Membership," United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "United Nations Commission on Human Rights Membership," http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/2/chrmem.htm#top (25 September 1999).
2. These geo-political divisions mainly pertain to North/South and East/West. See Joe W. Pitts III and David Weissbrodt, "Major developments at the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1992", *Human Rights Quarterly*, Feb 1993 15 n1 pp. 122-196; also see, International Commission of Jurists, *The Review*, which publishes reports on the Commission's sessions on an annual basis.
3. Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights at the United Nations 1955-85: The Question of Bias", *International Studies Quarterly*, 1988, 32, pp. 275-303.
4. Ibid., pp. 290-291. One example presented by Donnelly is the emphasis given to Israel's human rights record in the occupied territories and the disregard of Indonesia over East Timor. Donnelly states that "[w]hile genuine genocide in East Timor has been completely ignored, the brutal, the completely unjustifiable, but hardly genocidal massacre at the Sabra and Shantila camps has been labeled [sic] 'an act of genocide.'" He goes on to conclude that: "Palestinian Arabs have become a central concern of the United Nations. The people of East Timor have been abandoned. And politics is the only plausible explanation."
5. Keith D. Suter., "The UN Commission on Human Rights", *The Australian Outlook*, v.31, Aug. 1977, pp. 289-307.

in my view they are crucial moves in the process towards creating the status of international law. The collective aspiration of setting normative standards is a primary aspect of the CHR's mandate. Its first task was to establish an International Bill of Rights and then to formulate international declarations or conventions. These documents have provided the international community with a an embryonic form of international law; Ramcharan notes that certain norms have so permeated the international community's concerns that they have attained the: "[s]tatus of imperative norms of international law, or known in technical parlance, as norms of *jus cogens*."[6] As Burgenthal argues, one of the main powers proceeding from the normative foundations of human rights is its onus on states to confront their international obligations. He argues that this normative evolution is an irreversible process that sets in motion the: "[i]nternationalization of human rights and the humanization of international law."[7]

**Direct diplomatic function**

Another aspect of the promotional activities that the CHR carries out is through its direct mechanism that it enables it to interact and conduct dialogue with states. The direct diplomatic function of working with states to monitor their compliance was often initially taken by the Secretary-General. As the CHR's work has expanded and become more systematised it has appointed independent experts to take on the specific roles of direct diplomatic action. There are two different fields of work that these independent experts cover, thematic mechanisms and country mechanisms. The thematic mechanism presently covers 26 themes that includes a range of multifarious issues such as disappearances, executions, torture, mercenaries, religious intolerance, arbitrary detention, and children.[8] In the country cases, a Special Representative is often appointed to carry out diplomatic dialogue with the state concerned. A distinction has been made in this aspect of the work of the Commission is that it is 'inquisitorial' rather than 'adversarial'.[9] The distinction between these two approaches characterises the general nature of the Commission's work, that it is based on the long term prospects of building and strengthening a relationship between itself and a non-compliant state rather than short-sighted attempts to persuade compliance with a hope for immediate results. This reflects its emphasis on the normative standard-setting focus of its work.

6. B.G Ramcharan, *Keeping Faith with the United Nations*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, p. 26.
7. Thomas Burgenthal, "The Normative and Institutional Evolution of International Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 19 (1997), p. 705.
8. See United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Thematic Mandates," See United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Thematic Mandates," http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/tm.htm (16 October 1999).
9. B.G. Ramcharan, (ed.), *International Law and Fact-Finding in the Field of Human Rights*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982, pp. 1-26.

Another facet of direct diplomacy is through the establishment of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The establishment of this office is again reflective of the dilatory work of the Commission; Humphries notes that he first suggested that such a post be established in 1963,[10] but it was not until 1993 that its establishment was ratified.[11] This example demonstrates that though a proposal can be criticised and rejected initially, it does not signify that such a proposal is doomed to failure. The influence that this post exerts was evident at the most recent Commission session. The Office of the High Commissioner was able to form personal contacts with those suffering human rights abuse, bringing their voices and concerns closer to the attention of the Commission. During the 1999 session, Mary Robinson demonstrated the effectiveness of her post through her facilitation of a quick response from the Commission to the crisis in Kosovo.[12] A resolution was passed in the first few days of the CHR's session and weekly reports were provided, updating the developments in the situation. The High Commissioner has become the central diplomatic representative of the Commission's actions.

**Indirect mobilisation of the International Human Rights Regime**

My argument is that the work of the Commission is central both within the international human rights regime and also externally in mobilising other human rights regimes. According to Krasner, a regime can be defined as: "[p]rinciples, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue area."[13] Donnelly shifts the tone of this definition slightly by introducing the term "international actors".[14] He applies regime theory in his analysis of the global organisation of human rights, and sees the CHR as the central component of the overall international human rights regime.[15] The other agencies identified in this regime are: the General Assembly, the third committee, the ECOSOC, the Human Rights Committee, the Working Groups, the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. The first two strands of regime theory, the principles and norms, form a crucial aspect of the work of the Commission as I have discussed.

External to the international human rights regime, the CHR has been

10. John P. Humphrey, *Human Rights and the United Nations: A Great Adventure*, New York: Transnational Publishers, 1984, pp. 296-301.
11. Ibid.
12. Mr Peter Heyward of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade expressed this view. Mr Heyward was part of the Australian delegation at United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1999. He gave a report of his personal insights and experiences from working at the Commission a meeting *sponsored by the National Council of Churches* in Sydney, "Report Back on the 1999 United Nations Commission on Human Rights," 8 July 1999.
13. Stephen Krasner, (ed.,) *International Regimes*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 1.
14. Jack Donnelly, "International Human Rights: A Regime Analysis", *International Organization*, 40, 3, Summer 1986, p. 602.
15. Ibid., pp. 599-642.

instrumental in strengthening other regimes. The regional commissions set up and modelled after the CHR have been a testimony to its impact. These commissions have been established in North America, Europe and Africa.[16] In 1963, the CHR added an agenda item under the title of "Further promotion and encouragement of human rights."[17] The purpose of this agenda item was to encourage the creation of national and regional institutions. These institutions serve to strengthen the role of the CHR through reinforcement of the work that it has accomplished. They seek to interpret and translate the normative standards formulated by the CHR into domestic law. The advantage in this regard is that these regional commissions have been created in such a way that they are more approachable as they do not require a strict adherence to formal procedures.[18] They are also not confined to particular restrictions such as only taking into consideration situations of 'gross and systematic' human rights abuses. The Inter-American Commission is able to hear individual grievances and is less strict than its European counterpart in its criteria for admitting a petition.[19]

I have argued that the scope of the Commission's work has been strong in the creation and promotion of norms and weak in the area of implementation and enforcement. In the following section, I analyse the human rights situation of the Bahá'í community in Iran. This case study will then be used to reflect on the Commission's actions. I argue that the Commission had a limited impact in responding to this specific situation.

## Section II: The Persecution of the Bahá'ís

### Historical Background of the persecution of the Bahá'ís

Since the origins of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, its adherents have been continually persecuted for their beliefs, with the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh suffering numerous afflictions including imprisonment and exile.[20] The basis for these persecutions is embedded in Islamic theological interpretations of the concept of prophethood and finality in religious dispensation.[21] As the motives for these persecutions changed over time, the continued persecution of the Bahá'ís can be explained in part from the prejudicial attitude that these early attacks incited, which became ingrained in the

16. For a good overview and comparative analysis on regional human rights arrangements see Burns H. Weston, Robin Ann Lukes, Kelly M. Hnatt, "Regional Human Rights Regimes: A Comparison and Appraisal," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law,* Vol. 20, No. 4, 1997, p. 591.
17. Howard Tolley, Jr, *The U.N. Commission on Human Rights,* Boulder: Westview Press, 1987, p. 96.
18. Dina L. Shelton, "The Inter-American Human Rights System," Chapter 7 in Hurst Hanumm, ed., *Guide to International Human Rights Practice,* 2nd edition, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, pp. 119-132.
19. Ibid., p. 126.
20. Historical accounts of the life of Bahá'u'lláh can be found in many publications. For some notable works on this theme see, H.M.Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh*, London: George Ronald, 1972; J.E.Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, (fifth revised edition), Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980; Bahá'í International Community, *Bahá'u'lláh*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991.
21. According to an interpretation of Islamic doctrine, Muhammad represented the last in the line of

national consciousness and were cultivated from generation to generation,[22] with the Bahá'ís becoming a scapegoat to fulfil political motivations.[23] During the nineteenth century approximately 20, 000 Bahá'ís were killed.[24] It has been argued that another change in the motivations spurring attacks against the Bahá'ís was between 1921-1944, were the emphasis of the persecutions was to subjugate the Bahá'í institutions.[25]

During the formulation of the 1906 constitution and its subsequent establishment as the political system for Iran, the Bahá'ís faced another series of hostile assaults. Not only were they omitted from the Constitution and thus not recognised as receiving civil rights, they were also specifically targeted as national apostates. A particular aspect of this non-recognition was an emphasis on not permitting Bahá'ís to participate in elections.[26] The upheavals against the Bahá'ís escalated during the 1950s. A specific campaign initiated by leading clerics in 1955 established an "Anti-Bahá'í Society" with the sole purpose of planning and carrying out attacks against the Bahá'ís.[27] The government permitted access to national radio for public vilification purposes, and there followed a wave of violent assaults including physical abuse, executions and confiscation of property.[28] Indeed as Cottam notes, the Shah persecuted the Bahá'ís throughout his regime for political advantage.[29]

**The "Justifications" of Iran's actions against the Bahá'ís**

Often the social status of Bahá'ís has been the reason for fuelling enmity. The early Bahá'í community consisted of many individuals who belonged to the mercantile classes. The implications of this has been noted by Avery in

(footnote 21 continued) Prophethood, as he was recognised as the: "Seal of the Prophets". Any claims to Prophethood proceeding Muhammad according to this interpretation are a repudiation of the entire Muslim religion. See, Sandra Mackey, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of the Nation*, New York: The Penguin Group, 1998. Mackey states that: "From its inception, Bahaism enraged the Shia clergy. Its blasphemy denied Muhammad as the last prophet and the Koran as final revelation. A powerful corresponding issue for the clerics as well as the shah was that Bahaism, like Manichaeism in its time, posed a threat to the existing order." (p. 130). For other interpretations of this verse from the Qu'rán see Shaykh Sadúq, *Kamál ad-Dín wa Tamám an-Níma* (also called *Ikmál ad-Dín wa Itmám an-Ni'ma*) in 'Alí Akbar Ghaffari, ed., *Maktab as-Sadúq*, Tehran, 1390/1970, cited in Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'í Islam*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1985, p. 346.

22. Moojan Momen (ed.), *The Bábí and the Bahá'í Religions, 1844-1944 – Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1981.
23. Ibid., pp. 237, 257.
24. Bahá'í International Community, *The Bahá'ís in Iran – A Report on the Persecution of a Religious Minority*, New York: Bahá'í International Community - United Nations Office, 1982, p. 1.
25. Momen, *The Bábí and the Bahá'í Religions*, op.cit., "Introduction"
26. Ibid., p. 368.
27. Mackey, op.cit, p.210.
28. Peter Avery, *Modern Iran*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967, pp 46-67, 76, 121, 469. Avery notes in particular: "In 1955 observers were surprised when the Government suddenly instituted moves against the religious minority of the Bahá'ís; although there is religious toleration in Iran, action against the Bahá'ís was condoned on the grounds that their faith is not recognised as a separate religion. No less a person than the Army Chief of Staff took charge of the sequestration of the Bahá'ís' main centre in Tehran. The dome of this building was destroyed and the building itself made the headquarters of the city's military government." (p 469).
29. Richard W. Cottam, "Human Rights in Iran under the Shah", *Comment*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 1980. p. 128.

terms of economic factors and their influence on political strains.[30] It has also been noted by other scholars that Bahá'ís often represented the educated social classes and were hence on this basis especially singled out for persecution. However, this argument is not necessarily accurate as Bahá'ís were representative of a diverse range of social classes and backgrounds.

The charges of espionage, Zionist activities and corruption have been used as other justifications by the Iranian government against the Bahá'ís. It is often claimed that the Bahá'ís work on behalf of the state of Israel to collate confidential information. The basis for these accusations is unfounded and is a sign of the confusion that exists regarding the administrative centre of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í World Centre is located in Haifa, and the resting place of the founder of the Faith is in Akká; both were proclaimed as sites of holy significance to the Bahá'ís prior to the formation of the state of Israel.

**Civil and Political Rights**

The following analysis of the human rights situation of the Bahá'ís in post-revolutionary Iran is divided into specific time periods in the area of civil and political rights. The main reasoning behind the division into the three time periods is that each period is representative of where there has been a decisive decrease in the right to life. This can be accounted as one indication of change in the nature of the human rights abuse. I should make it clear that the break in the time-periods does not represent a change in the betterment of the overall situation for the Bahá'ís but rather is demonstrative of a change in the nature of the governments dealing with the Bahá'ís. In the area of economic, social and cultural rights no time periods are chosen as I argue that no real change has occurred, indeed in some cases it appears to have worsened.

**1979-1985**

The most visible atrocities against the Bahá'ís in the area of civil and political human rights abuse occurred during the period of 1979-1985. The administrative aspect of the Bahá'í community was wholly undermined.[31] Many local sites of administration were burnt and destroyed. The national office was confiscated and replaced by an Islamic University.[32] A total ban on the administration of the Bahá'í Faith was announced in 1983, and since that time has not been lifted.[33] Sites of holy significance to the Bahá'ís were

30. Avery, op.cit, p. 76, Avery notes for instance that: "The Bábí movement had itself sprung from among the mercantile classes, a fact which recalls us to the realisation that, as political strains can be symptoms of economic ills, so in a country like Iran can religious movements reflect the anxieties of classes engaged in commerce. In terms of a new religious hope, the Bábí movement was part of a syndrome indicating the stress of mounting economic and social tension."
31. This was particularly critical for the Bahá'ís in terms of the maintenance of their religious community life. The Bahá'ís do not have any clergy and priesthood and depend on the institutions of their administration to conduct their community affairs.
32. This was reported by Reuters World Press News Release 12 July 1979.

seized, burnt and destroyed.[34] Arrests were not only carried out by revolutionary guards, but also Muslims were invited to submit Bahá'ís to the authorities. *Le Monde* reported that: "[A]yatollah [Sadoughi] invited the mass of the faithful to 'hunt out the Bahá'ís throughout the public services and deliver them to the revolutionary prosecution department.'" This was advertised in the daily newspaper.[35] This and similar calls to subjugate the Bahá'ís led to arbitrary and frequent arrests and imprisonment. There were reports of torture and abuse in prison.[36] Executions numbered 184 during this time, the highest number in such a concentrated time throughout the twenty year period.[37] It was discovered that the revolutionary police were in possession of a list of names of 20,000 Bahá'ís.[38] Most of the attacks against the Bahá'ís in this first phase, such as the banning of administration and the demolition of sites of holy significance, had widespread ramifications. The unfortunate legacy of these attacks remained as a constant source of suffering for the Bahá'ís.

**1986-1991**

An apparent lessening in the persecution of the Bahá'ís took place during this time. Compared to the previous seven year period when 184 Bahá'ís were executed, there was a dramatic decline to 14 executions in this six year period, which suggests that Iran recognised some form of pressure. Apart from this visible evidence of persecution the remainder of offences against the Bahá'ís were much the same.

**1992-1998**

Persecutions within this period continued to occur and again there was a decline in executions, with only 6 executions taking place. The most recent was the hanging of Mr Ruhollah Rowhani in July 1998; Rowhani was charged in relation to apostasy, but no public trial was held and no sentence was announced prior to his hanging.[39] Two court cases demonstrate that the persecutions against the Bahá'ís had the same motives. An Islamic

33. 29 August 1983, The Attorney-General of Iran issued a statement announcing a ban on Bahá'í administration. It was a criminal act to engage in teaching and inviting others to join the Bahá'í Faith, forming assemblies or have anything else to do with administration. However, Bahá'ís were allowed to practise their beliefs privately.
34. Universal House of Justice, "Demolition of the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Tákur; Seizure of Cemetery in Tehran.", 10 December 1981, pp. 510-511 in *Messages from The Universal House of Justice*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1996. The Universal House of Justice is the governing institution of the Bahá'í Faith and consists of nine members who are elected in quinquennial terms.
35. *Le Monde*, No. 11009, Tuesday 24 June 1980, pp. 1 and 6. The quote from Ayatollah Sadoughi was taken from a daily paper in Iran entitled *Inguilab Islami* (this newspaper was an organ of President Bani-Sadr)
36. See Amnesty International, *Iran: Violations of Human Rights – Documents sent by Amnesty International to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, London, 1987.
37. Roger Cooper, *The Bahá'ís of Iran*, Minority Rights Group, London, 1985.
38. Voice of America Report on Campaign of Arrests against Iranian Bahá'ís, see, Universal House of Justice, *Messages from The Universal House of Justice*, op.cit., p. 507.

Revolutionary Court in Tehran prosecuted a Bahá'í in 1996, Mr Musa Talibi,[40] on charges of leading two Muslims astray, apostasy, and activities disrupting law and order. The court mentioned in its verdict only matters pertaining to his membership of the Bahá'í community and described these as "misguided"; it also quoted from a Muslim authority that; "it may be decreed that such infidels be murdered." The court sentenced Mr. Talibi to death. Also in 1996, Mr. Dhabihu'llah Mahrami was charged at the Islamic Court of Yazd for: "denouncing the religion of Islam and the beliefs of the wayward Bahá'í sect; national apostasy,"[41] and was sentenced to death for apostasy. These three cases are the most striking in this period and demonstrate little change. The fact that Bahá'ís are continually harassed and live under precarious conditions means that their standard of life is subversive and fraught with incalculable obstacles and perils. Bahá'í marriages continue to go unrecognised, and they are not allowed to bury their dead in accordance with their religious tradition. In October 1998 three Bahá'ís were arrested in the city of Damavand on charges of burying their dead without authorisation from the government.[42] Thus, in the area of civil and political rights the periods that have been outlined indicate a change in the lessening of the executions and imprisonment.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

### 1979-1999

In the sphere of economic, social and cultural rights there were attacks against the Bahá'ís. Within the first year of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Umana company owned by Bahá'ís was closed, a large company in which 15,000 Bahá'ís had invested their savings and assets.[43] Many bank accounts of Bahá'ís were frozen; specifically in 1981 Iran had asked for account details of all Bahá'ís to be submitted to the government authorities. As houses were seized, so too were furnishings and other property such as crops and livestock. Thousands of jobs were threatened and lost; for instance one circular letter sent to all Bahá'í employees of the Iranian National Oil Company notified them of their dismissal and the termination of their pensions.[44] Retirement allowances were also denied, trade and business licences were cancelled. Bahá'í marriages were not recognised under Iranian

39. U.S Department of State, "Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practises for 1998", released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, February 26, 1999.
40. Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran, Court Verdict 40790, File Number D/6412/75, 11 Murdad 1375 (2 August 1996).
41. Islamic Revolutionary Courts of the Province of Yazd, Court Classification Number: 74/2288/D, Appeal Number: 74/2312/D-R, 12 Day 1374 (2 January 1996). See also, Amnesty International, *Iran – Dhabihullah Mahrami: Prisoner of Conscience*, AI Index: MDE 13/34/96, London, October 1996.
42. U.S Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Iran, released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Washington D.C, September 9, 1999, p. 5.
43. International Commission of Jurists, "Persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran", *The Review*, No.34, June, 1985, p. 9.
44. Letter dated 13 September 1980 from the National Iranian Oil Company. The letter stated that the

law.

The consistency of the violations of rights can be demonstrated in reference to two incidents. Firstly, in 1993 a secret Government memorandum was uncovered concerning the "Bahá'í Question".[45] This document stipulates a calculated plan with the aim of gradually destroying the life of the community. The memorandum states: "The Government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked." The nature of approaching this task, as is apparent in the document is to cause far-reaching impact in as subtle a way as possible. Another incident, relating to the right to education demonstrates the uncertainty of the Iranian government's actions. In 1998, the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education was attacked through a series of raids, 36 faculty members were arrested and 532 homes raided and looted of property.[46] Such attacks against the Bahá'í community seem to confirm the statement of the Special Representative that the situation in some cases appears to have worsened.[47] One change that has taken place in regard to education has been the admittance to Bahá'í students to the pre-university level.[48] However, this in itself may be a form of persecution as there is no chance for these students to advance from this level into University.

## Section III: The Action of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

The action of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights can be categorised into three areas. These areas particularly signify the different ways in which the Commission has carried out its work. First, the collective action of the Commission has been effective in generating momentum. Second, through direct communication with the government of Iran, it has carried out some key steps that have been effective in certain ways. Third, I

(footnote 44 continued) reason for the termination of employment was: "illegal employment and affiliation with Bahá'í Religion." It further stated that: "If you ever deny your affiliation with the above-mentioned religious sect, acknowledge and report the case in written [sic] so that the above decision may be reviewed after study and consideration." A copy of this letter has been published in Bahá'í International Community, *The Bahá'ís in Iran – A Report on the Persecution of a Religious Minority*, op.cit., p. 78. Thousands of similar letters were sent to Bahá'í government employees terminating their employment.

45. The United Nations Special Representative on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran discovered this memorandum in 1993, see Appendix III for a translated copy of this document.
46. The Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) was established in Iran in response to the denial of University entry to Bahá'ís since 1980. The BIHE has operated since 1987 and its qualifications have been recognised by leading University's in North America. It is not known why the attacks were suddenly carried out in 1998 as the establishment of the University had been known by government authorities ever since its inception. See Bahá'í International Community, *The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education: A Creative and Peaceful Response to Religious Persecution in Iran*, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1999/NGO/14, 29 January 1999.
47. Mr. Maurice Copithorne, *Report on the Situation of the Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, submitted by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, pursuant to Commission resolution 1998/80*, UN. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/32 (28 December1998).
48. Mr Maurice Coptihorne, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, pursuant to Commission Resolution* 1998/80, E/CN.4/1999/32, 28 December 1998, paragraph 44.

argue that the Commission's activities in mobilising the international human rights regime have been significant in creating a slight difference. Lastly, I will focus on the larger measures of success that seem to be indications from Iran that some form of change is taking place.

**Collective Diplomatic Action**

The joint action in the form of annual sessions where the issues are deliberated and resolutions are ratified fortifies the work of the international community to focus collectively on the specific issues at hand. The annual deliberations at the sessions have yielded yearly inclusion of the Bahá'í situation in the resolutions calling for the Iranian government to respect human rights. These resolutions are for the most part weakly worded, repetitive and in many cases almost identical renditions of previous years' resolutions. For many years the Iranian government was "encouraged" or "called" to take action on their human rights issues and only rarely has the wording changed to "urge".[49] However, the resolutions are highly significant in one sense, in that their ratification allows for the continuation of the mandate of the Special Representative, whose work is of primary importance. The other indication of the importance of these resolutions is exemplified in Iran's permanent mission in Geneva. Human Rights Watch has reported that the work of the permanent mission demonstrates Iran's sensitivity toward international public opinion. This NGO noted that the permanent mission was working hard "to ensure that there would not be an embarrassing debate at the General Assembly over the resolution."[50] These are positive reinforcements of the promotional activities of the Commission. As Ruggie argues: "[c]ertain governments accused of violations have gone to considerable lengths to deny or excuse their behaviour, thereby implicitly accepting the legitimacy of the very rights they have been abusing."[51]

Apart from state participation, the Commission provides NGOs with a significant opportunity to participate in its deliberations. As NGOs represent a wider cross section of the international community, they are in a position to contribute decisively to the process of norm creation and promotion of these normative standards. This has been particularly so with the human rights situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. The role of the NGOs in this situation has been particularly significant in creating a platform for organisations to speak on behalf of the victims. In this case, the Bahá'í International Community has also been able to represent the concerns of the Bahá'ís in the country of Iran. Often, this NGO has access to information that no other agency has, and in bringing specific issues to the fore of the international community's

49. For instance see CHR Resolution 1990/79 as compared to CHR Resolution 1996/84.
50. Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 1990*, New York: Human Rights Watch, January 1991, p. 443.
51. John Gerard Ruggie, "Human Rights and the Future of the International Community," *Daedulus*, 1983, 112, 4, Fall, p. 100.

agenda it plays a vital role in the promotion of human rights issues. Such a cognitive contribution from non-state actors has greatly influenced the characteristics of the regime.

**Direct Diplomatic Action**

The role of the Special Representative of the human rights situation in Iran is the central mechanism of the CHR that can be utilized for direct diplomatic action.[52] Initially, the Secretary-General was mandated by the Sub-Commission to forge direct links with the government of Iran.[53] No substantive response and improvement in the situation occurred and a specific position was necessary to focus on this country case. The responses that emerged initially were in a demeaning tone towards the institution of the CHR. For instance, the Iranian representative was noted as stating that because the United Nations was a secular body, it did not have the authority to deal with religious matters.[54]

Since the appointment of the Special Representative in 1984, there have been some areas of action indicating a slight change in the situation or at least in the response from Iran. In the field of promotion, the Special Representative has uncovered sources of information hitherto unknown and has raised the awareness of the international community about specific violations of rights. A watershed in the fact-finding activities in relation to the Bahá'í situation was the discovery of a secret memorandum of the Iranian government in 1991, which dealt with the ways in which the Iranian government could resolve the "Bahá'í Question" particularly in reference to the cultural life of the community. The document was tacit proof that the persecution of the Bahá'ís was part of a systematic campaign to slowly strangle the life of the community. As I have discussed in section II of this paper this document confirmed the curtailment of the rights of the Bahá'í community.

The relationship between the UN Special Representative and the government of Iran reflects serious challenges facing the CHR. Far from implementation and enforcement of the CHR's decisions, the Special Representative has only reached a stage of weak diplomatic dialogue with this government. Only on a few occasions has the Iranian government permitted access to the Special Representative to visit the country; most often

52. Commission Resolution 1984/54 (14 March 1984). The mandate of the Special Representative is to establish contact with the government, to carry out a study of the situation and to submit recommendations from the conclusions reached through the investigative procedures.
53. The Sub-Commission attention to the situation on 10 September 1980 was in the Resolution on Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. It "[e]xpressed profound concern for the safety of recently arrested and all other members of the National Administrative Council of the Bahá'í Religious Community of Iran and requested the Secretary-General to transmit this concern to the Iranian Government, inviting it to express its commitment to the guarantees provided in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by that state." This was reported in the *United Nations Year Book*, 1980, p. 829
54. This comment was made at the 37th session of the Commission in 1981, reported in *United Nations Year Book*, 1981, p. 881.

the reports indicate the repeated denials of the Iranian government to such requests.[55] Even when a visit is permitted, there are serious challenges facing the Representative within the country. In one case it was reported that two Bahá'ís who had conducted an interview with a Special Representative were beaten and reprimanded for their cooperation. This is a serious setback for the Commission as it threatens the scope of work that it can cover without the threat of the state. The reports were criticised for being excessively mild in tone, which is in all respects a good indication of the limited capabilities of the Commission.

Some positive trends correlated with the work of the Special Representative can be made. In 1984 when the Special Representative was appointed, there was a dramatic decline in the number of executions carried out against the Bahá'ís. The representative made a reference to this by stating that the "[n]umber of alleged violations to the right to life had diminished over the last two years, and although allegations of executions continued, there were fewer than during the years 1979 to 1984."[56] Although no causal relationship can be made, these correlations are noteworthy. A positive indication of the impact of the work of the representative came from a comment made by the Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati: "International monitoring of the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran should not continue indefinitely. The country could not tolerate such monitoring for long."[57]

The other direct diplomatic mechanism relevant in this case is the Special Rapporteur on the Elimination of Religious Discrimination and Intolerance. This Rapporteur has investigated allegations against Iran and in carrying out his mandate has visited Iran,[58] and has also been significant in drawing attention to the situation of the Bahá'í community in Iran and in providing recommendations based on these findings. As a thematic mechanism of the CHR, it has been able to report more critically than the country representative. When considered in combination with the Special Representative it can be argued that together both these posts are important in promoting international standards.

**Indirect Action – a catalyst for the international human rights regime**

The actions of the CHR become mirrored in other institutions of the human rights regime. These are often a confirmation of the pivotal role of the CHR. As a functional agency of the ECOSOC, the CHR carries out its work in the prospect of approval by the ECOSOC. In every resolution and decision that

55. See for instance, Maurice Copthorne, *Report of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, E/CN.4/1997/63, 11 February 1997, paragraph 9 .
56. United Nations, *United Nations Yearbook*, 1987, p. 804
57. Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch World Report 1990*, New York, January 1991, p. 446.
58. Abdelfattah Amor, "The mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur," *Emory International Law Review*, Spring 1998, v 12, n 2, p. 947.

it has made regarding the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, the ECOSOC has expressed its approval. In this sense, other agencies of the International human rights regime such as the treaty-based bodies are empowered by the attention given to the issue by other agencies. For instance, the third committee has been successful in relating its work to the Commission's resolutions and in increasing the pressure on Iran to submit reports on time.[59]

The General Assembly, though not usually concerning itself with human rights issues, addressed the issue of human rights in Iran. This was a momentous step in the internationalisation of response for human rights issues as it was the third time in the General Assembly's history that a resolution was adopted on a human rights issue with specific references in one of the clauses to the situation of the Bahá'ís.[60] The decision of the General Assembly to continue revisiting the issue attests to the gravity of the situation. As the highest institution of the United Nations was concerning itself with this matter it was more in a position to exert influence on the international community. In its subsequent resolutions the General Assembly referred to the work of the Commission and the resolutions it had adopted.[61] The agenda item has remained on the General Assembly's agenda until the present.[62]

**Measures of success?**

There have been some indications that changes are taking place in Iran since the time the CHR took action on the situation. The Special Representative, Mr Maurice Copithorne, has referred to these changes as "straws in the wind", implying that "improvement could be on the way."[63] Although there is no evidence to attribute these changes to the actions of the CHR, it is evidence that there is a slow and limited move in Iran to meet some of the international norms and standards.

The changing nature of the Iranian rhetoric is a sign that international norms have made an impact and that Iran seeks to portray a reputable international image. The first concern that needs to be distilled in arguing this point is that the discussion of these changes, in no way implies that it is a praiseworthy achievement. It is in my view simply a measurement of the affect of international institutions. Afshari argues that when attention has been given to the positive developments within Iran, it is common that no

59. United Nations, "Consideration of human rights issues produces 30 decisions in Third Committee," *UN Chronicle*, February 1986, v23, pp. 82-92
60. General Assembly Resolution 40/141 (1985).
61. It is customary for each resolution of the General Assembly to cite the Commission's relevant resolution. This is to confirm the contents of the Commission's resolution and to add a further appeal.
62. The most recent resolution made by the General Assembly on this agenda item was A/RES/53/158, 9 February 1999.
63. Interim Report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, prepared by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 51/107 and Economic and Social Council Decision 1997/264, A/52/472 (15 October 1997), paragraph 67.

mention is made regarding the gravity of the human rights abuses taking place.[64] He notes that Western scholars partake in conferences and scholarly initiatives with Iran and in most cases completely neglect their responsibilities. He argues that the 'recognised' scholars participating in these initiatives have taken a "yes…but" approach, meaning that they accept that Iran has an appalling human rights records "but" that there are "positive political-institutional developments" on which they place an overriding emphasis. Afshari states that such an accommodationist approach: "[l]eads to the acceptance of the public pronouncements of the actors within the system at face value" and that "such studies offer a fig leaf of respectability to the Islamist regime by constructing the political discourse in terms of system building."[65] I accept the concerns that Afshari raises and have noted them in an effort to dissociate my focus on the Iranian statements with other similar studies that have been carried out that ignore human rights. My motive for analysing Iranian public statements is that they demonstrate (admittedly at face value) that Iran has altered its rhetoric to adopt an international human rights language. Focusing on this change in no way diminishes the gravity of the human rights situation. Rather, I view this as an important indication that the CHR has been successful in the diffusion of normative standards and this has begun to impact on Iran at a basic level.

The Iranian government's position on human rights issues demonstrates a distinct change in tone, particularly during the early 1990s. During the 1980s Iranian statements denigrated the CHR and the United Nations. One starkly denigrating statement against the United Nations in 1982 was the statement of an Iranian spokesperson that Iran: "rejected expressions of concerns for human rights, declaring that "[o]ur people have decided to remain free and independent and Islamic and not be fooled by the imperialist myth of human rights."[66] In 1986 Iran wrote to the Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights stating that the Commission's decisions lacked credibility as it was politically driven organisation, commenting that: "[s]uch politicization of humanitarian matters was totally unacceptable."[67] After the ratification of the Declaration against religious intolerance, Iran commented in what seemed to be a patronising tone that the CHR was a secular organisation and was not in a position to make decisions on religious matters. A stunning change of tone occurs in the 1990s, when it describes the Commission on Human Rights as an "august body".[68] In 1994, Iran makes a complete turnaround on its view of human rights, stating that: "[Human Rights] are thus universal, independent of conditions, transcend all boundaries, be they temporal or

64. Reza Afshari, "An Essay on Scholarship, Human Rights, and State Legitimacy: The Case of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 18, 1996, pp. 544-593.
65. Ibid., p. 581.
66. Martin Wright, ed., *Iran: The Khomeini Revolutution*, London: Longman, 1989, p. 35.
67. United Nations. *Yearbook for 1986*, New York: United Nations, 1987, p. 757.

geographical, and do not lend themselves to distinctions of race, sex or other superficial attributes and barriers."[69] This recognition and rhetorical acceptance of human rights standards continued. For instance in 1998 stating that: "The government of Iran is fully committed to the promotion of human rights." These statements at least are an indication of the adoption of the 'language of human rights' and this in my opinion demonstrates that the CHR can be considered as a variable in the normative influence that it has had on Iran.

Another sign that could be considered as part of the development towards the recognition of human rights standards is the government sponsored Human Rights Commission within Iran. As has been discussed, the CHR has passed resolutions encouraging governments to set up human rights national and regional institutions to more directly monitor the implementation of international human rights within states. It could be argued that the Islamic Human Rights Commission cannot be administered without the strict control of government, giving it somewhat of a farcical puppet role. Yet, despite this paramount concern I would argue that at least there is a skeletal institution that can over time develop its capability. On the same note, the international community should not be satisfied with this development as such appraisal could give the message to Iran that a limited response such as forming the Iranian Commission will satisfy its commitments to the regime. It is a difficult line to tread but the wrong message could create a hazardous approval of Iran's neglect in responding to concerns of human rights abuse.

The gradual integration of human rights rhetoric by the Iranian government is indicative of the normative influence of human rights. I argue that the conference on human rights, the articles published in its leading international journal regarding human rights,[70] the changing nature of its international rhetoric through its statements, the establishment of the Iranian Commission on Human Rights are all signs that the work of the Commission has had some sort of normative affect. As Mayer notes: "[t]he impact of human rights ideals is proving so potent that governments are increasingly trying to co-opt human rights, offering concessions, albeit only cosmetic ones. To demands that they show respect for rights."[71] Again, I want to stress that these signs are by no means congratulatory, lest we neglect the continuing suffering experienced daily by the Bahá'í community and other persecuted

68. Mr Mostafa Alaee, Member of the Delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran before the Third Committee on Agenda Item: 112 (c) Human rights situations and report of Special Rapporteurs and Representatives, New York, November 19, 1997. This document can be found on the internet: found on the internet: http://www.un.international/iran/statements/3ga/3ga52007.htmhttp://www.un.international/iran/statements/3ga/3ga52007.htm
69. Iranian government statement of 15 August 1994 to the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. This was cited in the report of the Special Representative in 1995, E/CN.4/1995/55, paragraph 76.
70. See, for instance, Hossein Mehrpour, "Islam and Human Rights," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. VIII, No.4, Winter 1996-97, pp. 729-760.

sections of the population. They are merely a means of accounting for the minimal impact that the Commission and the human rights regime has had in diffusing international human rights norms.

**Conclusion**

The U.N Special Representative suggested that a change could be on the way within Iran towards a recognition of human rights standards. I argue that there are indications, albeit at face value, that Iran is altering its international image. The internal conditions, however, continue to represent an unmistakably contradictory picture. The Commission generates an international climate through promoting and elevating human rights standards. Through direct and collective diplomatic action, the Commission on Human Rights has led the pressure in the field of norm promotion on the situation of the human rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran. Although at the stage of weak interaction, the Commission has been successful in receiving slightly improved responses from the government. In terms of the pattern of the persecution of the Bahá'í community there has been a clear decline in the number of executions, however the overall situation has been maintained and in some cases has worsened. I have argued that the CHR, through promoting a culture of human rights, should be considered as a variable in influencing Iran towards change.

71. Ann E. Mayer, op.cit., p. 183.

# Developing the Secretariat of a Local Spiritual Assembly

*Paul Friedman*

## I. Introduction

In His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh established the institution of local Houses of Justice:

> *"The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Baha..."*[1]

In their current embryonic stage of development, Local Houses of Justice are known as Spiritual Assemblies.[2] 'Abdu'l-Bahá has assured us that He will defend and protect Assemblies.[3] Shoghi Effendi has called Assemblies "the representatives and custodians of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" and the "chief sinews of Bahá'í society".[4]

Bahá'u'lláh explained that teaching was one of the key functions of the Spiritual Assembly:

> *"When in session it behooveth them to converse, on behalf of the servants of God, on matters dealing with the affairs and interests of the public. For instance, teaching the Cause of God must be accorded precedence, inasmuch as it is a matter of paramount importance, so that thereby all men may enter the pavilion of unity and all the peoples of the earth be regarded even as a single body..."*[5]

'Abdu'l-Bahá has clarified a number of the functions of an Assembly above and beyond teaching:

1 Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book*. Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa: 1993. P. 29.
2 Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, 1965. P. 331.
3 Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*, P. 332.
4 Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, 1965. P. 331.
5 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, Compilation by the Universal House of Justice. Quote from Bahá'u'lláh. P. 11.

*"Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word."*[6]

In a letter to several National Spiritual Assemblies the Guardian listed the principal duties of Spiritual Assemblies:

*"The matter of Teaching … constitute by no means the only issue which should receive the full attention of these Assemblies. A careful study of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets will reveal that other duties, no less vital to the interests of the Cause, devolve upon the elected representatives of the friends in every locality. It is incumbent upon them to be vigilant and cautious, discreet and watchful, and protect at all times the Temple of the Cause from the dart of the mischief-maker and the onslaught of the enemy. They must endeavour to promote amity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and whole-hearted cooperation for the service of the Cause. They must do their utmost to extend at all times the helping hand to the poor, the sick, the disabled, the orphan, the widow, irrespective of colour, caste and creed. They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for education of children, institute, whenever possible, Bahá'í educational institutions..."*[7]

The Assembly, much like a Board of Directors of a company, carries out its work on three levels:

- **Leadership:** Creating new and exciting directions for the Bahá'í community
  An example of leadership might be the creation of a Four Year Plan for the local Bahá'í community from the National and International Four Year Plan. The Guardian told us that:

  *"The first quality of leadership both among individuals and Assemblies is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exist in the rank and file of its followers."*[8]

6 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. Quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. P. 14.
7 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. Quote from Shoghi Effendi. P. 15.
8 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. Quote from Shoghi Effendi. P. 22.

- **Management:** Improving the system, policies or goals.
  An example of management might be the appointment, training and monitoring of an External Affairs Committee to handle public relations with the media and dignitaries.

- **Administration:** Carrying out the policies and decisions of the Assembly.
  Examples of administration include finding feast hosts, supervising cleaning of the Bahá'í centre and insuring that the librarian receives allotted funds to purchase books.

Many Assemblies become so bogged down in administration that they have insufficient time and energy to devote to the activities which can only be performed by the full Assembly: leadership and management.

This paper will describe the background for delegating administrative activities of the Assembly to a secretariat.

## II. Delegation by Assemblies and Bahá'í Institutions

The Guardian explained the necessity for Assemblies to delegate work when he said:

> *"In whatsoever locality the Cause has sufficiently expanded, and in order to insure efficiency and avoid confusion, each of these manifold functions will have to be referred to a special Committee, responsible to that Assembly, elected by it from among the friends in that locality, and upon whose work the Assembly will have to exercise constant and general supervision."*[9]

In a letter to the National Assembly of the United States, Shoghi Effendi described the benefits of strong and capable committees working under an Assembly:

> *"I very highly approve of the arrangements you have made for centralizing the work in your hands and of distributing it to the various committees, who each in its own sphere, have so efficiently and thoroughly undertaken the management of their own affairs."*[10]

Shoghi Effendi further described the functioning of national Bahá'í committees:

9 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, 1968. P. 39.
10 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. P. 28.

*"...the role of these [national] committees… is chiefly to make thorough and expert study of the issue entrusted to their charge, advise by their reports, and assist in the execution of the decisions, which in vital matters are to be exclusively and directly rendered by the National Assembly."*[11]

The Guardian warned National Assemblies against:

*"...the evils of overcentralization, which clog, confuse and in the long run depreciate the value of the Bahá'í services rendered shall on one hand be entirely avoided, and on the other the perils of utter decentralization with the consequent lapse of governing authority from the hands of the national representatives of the believers definitely averted. The absorption of the petty details of Bahá'í administration by the personnel of the National Spiritual Assembly is manifestly injurious to efficiency and an expert discharge of Bahá'í duties, whilst the granting of undue discretion to bodies that should be regarded in no other light than that of expert advisers and executive assistants would jeopardize the very vital and pervading powers that are the sacred prerogatives of bodies that in time will evolve into Bahá'í National Houses of Justice."*[12]

The Guardian spoke of his need for an International Bahá'í Secretariat with both advisory and executive capacities to assist him in his manifold duties.[13] He also alerted us to the limits of delegation by Local Assemblies:

*"The Local Spiritual Assembly cannot delegate to any one of the local committees the authority to exercise any control or supervision over any other committee which it has itself appointed. All local committees are directly and solely responsible to the Local Assembly which alone can exercise the power of supervision over them."*[14]

The Universal House of Justice has clarified the role of administrative committees of Spiritual Assemblies:

*"...The Local Spiritual Assembly could be authorized to appoint an administrative committee in each of a number of sub-units of the city; and these committees could deal with the urgent needs of the friends in these areas on behalf of the Assembly... In such a decentralized system, the*

11 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration.* P. 41.
12 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration.* P. 142.
13 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration.* P. 115.
14 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. 1993 edition. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 16 February 1939. P. 3.17.

*Local Spiritual Assembly would have to provide for the overall coordination of the efforts of the friends in all sub-units of the city."*[15]

Delegation to local Bahá'í committees often fails. Typical reasons for a committee to fail include:

- Members not sufficiently united; unable to agree on meeting dates, formats, roles of committee members.

- Lack of effective leadership on the committee: leader cannot get members working together.

- Insufficient commitment to tasks and objectives: committee members lack the initiative to sustain their work.

- Poor consultation skills: one member dominates the committee or several members argue.

The Assembly, as manager of its committees, must take ultimate responsibility for their success or failure. Often Assemblies merely re-appoint new members onto the same committee, hoping that this will solve the difficulties. Unfortunately the same problems re-emerge despite the new membership.

If local Bahá'í committees are functioning well, the need for a proper secretariat will be reduced because much activity will be planned and implemented outside of the Assembly.

## III. Role of the Assembly in Developing the Human Resources to Advance the Cause

The Guardian made it clear that Assemblies had to enlist the support of their communities to advance the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh:

*"...if genuine and sustained cooperation and mutual confidence cease to exist between individual friends and their local and national communities, the all-beneficent work of the Cause must cease and nothing else can enable it to function harmoniously and effectively in future."*[16]

Shoghi Effendi emphasized that close fellowship and consultation with individual believers is mandatory for Assemblies:

15 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. Letter from the Universal House of Justice. P. 3.18.

16 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. P. 28.

> *"...the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation... Their function is not to dictate but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent... They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel."*[17]

The Guardian specified that Assemblies "have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect and guide the believers...".[18]

## IV. Role of the Assembly Secretary

Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand lists a number of duties of the Assembly secretary.[19] Let us examine these one-by-one with respect to the estimated time commitment from each duty, the potential for delegation and possible methods for facilitating performance. Unless a quotation from the Writings is cited, the views expressed represent the opinions of the author.

This section applies to and is written for a large or rapidly-growing local Bahá'í community in which the duties for the secretary are expanding beyond the capacity of the current secretary. It may not be applicable to a small and static Bahá'í community.

### Duty 1: "Prepares agenda for the Assembly meetings usually in consultation with the Chairman."[20]

Preparing an agenda for meeting is relatively easy when the work of the Assembly is highly systematic; when action plans related to goals are accurate and executed on time and to the requisite quality.

Given the confidential nature of some Assembly business, the scope for delegation to non-Assembly members is limited.

### Duty 2: "Records all minutes of the Assembly meetings and the Annual Meeting (this may be done by a recording secretary)."[21]

For a fluent typist the time commitment to produce minutes for a single meeting is not great. If the secretary is not a fluent typist, a single set of minutes might take hours to produce. Dictation is more rapid than typing but it takes some practice to acquire dictation skills and any non-assembly members typing the minutes must be trustworthy to maintain confidentiality. Some

17 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. P. 63-64.
18 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. Quote from Shoghi Effendi. P. 16.
19 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
20 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
21 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

Bahá'í secretaries type minutes on portable computers during the meeting instead of taking notes with pen and paper; this represents a very efficient way to record the minutes. Not everyone, however, can type minutes while attempting to participate in the consultation. Likewise portable computers are more expensive than non-portable computers. The Assembly can meet in places equipped with computers to avert the need to access a portable computer. Minutes can then be taken on computer and recorded on a floppy diskette, which can later be edited by the secretary in his or her own computer.

In general many of the duties of the Assembly secretary lie in written communication. Hence a person elected secretary could justify investing time to improve her or his typing and word-processing skills, which could be used to advantage in many areas of life outside of service to the Faith. Computer-based typing training is an enjoyable and easy way to learn or improve typing skills.

The Guidelines clearly state that the Assembly can appoint a recording secretary to take minutes. This is a simple way to reduce the workload on the secretary.

The Guidelines state that Assembly minutes must be reviewed, if necessary corrected, and then approved by the entire Assembly.[22] The secretary should send a copy of every set of minutes to the National Spiritual Assembly.[23]

### Duty 3: "Receives mail for the Assembly and presents communications of all kinds to the Assembly at the next meeting."[24]

Bahá'í Assemblies are encouraged to use post boxes rather than private addresses of Bahá'ís. The chore of clearing a post box does not need to fall on the secretary. Anyone can clear the post box provided they deliver the correspondence promptly to the secretary without opening letters, some of which may be confidential. The task of clearing a letter box should be delegated if possible. It is also possible to delegate the filing of incoming correspondence to a non-Assembly member who observes confidentiality.

The ability to understand and action correspondence is an integral part of the role of a Bahá'í secretary; this cannot be delegated to non-assembly members. Other Assembly members, however, could assist the secretary.

### Duty 4: "Conveys all decisions of the Assembly, by correspondence or other prescribed means, under the direction of the Local Spiritual Assembly."[25]

Although outward correspondence should go through the secretary, other

22 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.23.
23 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.24.
24 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
25 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

Assembly members can be delegated to compose letters which are then edited, approved and signed by the secretary. Delegation can be according to portfolios; the member whose portfolio is new believer deepening could write letters to or about new believers.

People lacking practice in composing letters often find the task of writing letters for the Assembly to be time-consuming and difficult. Writing letters is an important skill which can be utilised both for Bahá'í activities and in one's occupation. Thus most Bahá'ís could easily justify investing their time in training in composition of letters.

Bahá'ís lacking access to word-processing on computer are disadvantaged with respect to writing letters. On a conventional typewriter editing is impossible, making it necessary to write or type a draft of the letter prior to typing the final version. With word-processing, the draft is easily transformed into the final copy without need for re-typing the text - only the changes are entered. Therefore, Bahá'ís writing letters for the Assembly require training and access to computer word-processing.

The Guidelines state that most correspondence from the Assembly should be written; this provides a permanent record of what has been said.[26]

> "*The Assembly should strive for accuracy, clarity and overall excellence in its communications. If the secretary does not fully understand the Assembly's intent, a draft of the letter should be brought to the Assembly for approval.*"[27]

Shoghi Effendi has warned secretaries to ensure their correspondence conveys the decision of the full Assembly:

> "*Generally speaking the Secretary of an Assembly must be careful to convey exactly what the majority decision or advice of the body was. There can surely be no objection to his putting it in proper terms and clarifying the matter according to the decisions or instructions of the Assembly. But he should of course not introduce his own personal views unless endorsed by the Assembly.*"[28]

In electing members to the Assembly, one of the desired qualities mentioned by the Guardian is a "well-trained mind."[29] The secretary of an Assembly requires a well-trained mind in order to write letters expressing the view of the Assembly using courtesy, wisdom and tact.

Irrespective of who composes outgoing letters, Guidelines state that "All

26 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.24.
27 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.25.
28 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. Quote from Shoghi Effendi. P. 3.25.
29 *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. Quote from Shoghi Effendi. P. 9.

correspondence from the Local Spiritual Assembly should be signed by the Secretary or, if approved by the Assembly, on behalf of the Secretary."[30]

### Duty 5: "Maintains a filing system for all correspondence, community bulletins and so on."[31]

On receiving inward correspondence the secretary reads each document and either records it in a log of inward correspondence or delegates this recording and filing to an assistant. Using the time-management principal of "handle each piece of paper only once if possible," it is important for the secretary to take immediate action on many items of inward correspondence. To do this requires access to a photocopy machine. Thus when the secretary receives a letter that pertains to the child education committee, she or he can immediately photocopy the letter and dispatch this copy to the appropriate people with a request ranging from "for your information" to "please read this letter and report back to the Assembly." The secretary can also enter information required by the wider Bahá'í community into a computer-based monthly report from the Assembly in the local Bahá'í newsletter. This fulfils the Assembly's responsibility to inform the community of important information and can reduce the amount of time spent at Feast making simple announcements.

By making an immediate decision on incoming correspondence and actioning that decision, the secretary can dramatically reduce the amount of time that the full Assembly needs to spend informing believers and committees of relevant information.

### Duty 6: "Advises members of the community where and when the Nineteen Day Feasts will be held (this job may be done by a Feast Committee, if the Assembly so decides."[32]

The secretary, in conjunction with Feast committee and newsletter, sets and announces dates and venues for Feasts. This is an easy task requiring very little time.

### Duty 7: "Prepares agenda and materials to be shared with or distributed to the community at Feasts."[33]

This task is tied in with the basic communication function of the secretary. It can be shared with other members, particularly the chairman. The time expenditure on this task is minimal. An assistant can photocopy materials for distribution to the believers attending Feast.

30 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.26.
31 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
32 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
33 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

### Duty 8: "Makes notes of recommendations made at the Nineteen Day Feast and presents them to the Assembly at the next meeting. The community should be advised of any action taken or consideration given to such recommendations."[34]

Since the secretary would ordinarily attend Feasts, no additional time is spent recording Feast recommendations. Likewise presenting Feast recommendations to the Assembly requires no additional time or effort. Either task could be delegated to another Assembly member. Perhaps the most challenging component of duty 8 is reporting back to the community when the Assembly has not approved a Feast recommendation - explaining the reasoning is often difficult and some of the friends may become upset that their ideas have been rejected. It is also difficult to explain why the Assembly has not reached a decision about a Feast recommendation; the Assembly can state that it is investigating the recommendation but in many cases the final result of this investigation is not reported back to the Assembly. A formal system of recording Feast recommendations and the dates on which the community is notified of the final Assembly decision may be helpful to keep track of the outcome of Feast recommendations.

### Duty 9: "Maintains an up-to-date list of the names, addresses and telephone numbers of all members of the community."[35]

### Duty 10: "Advises the Bahá'í National Office of all enrolments, transfers, changes of address and changes in personal status of believers (marriages, divorces, deaths, etc)."[36]

There is nothing confidential about a community address list, provided the list is not distributed to people for purposes outside of official Bahá'í use. Hence, the keeping of a community address list can be delegated to a person outside the Assembly; this could include a non-Bahá'í working for the secretary. The key feature is that information about changes in address and phone numbers are sent to the person maintaining the list, who then forwards information to the National Bahá'í Office and other Bahá'í communities receiving transferred members. Address changes should also appear in the local Bahá'í newsletter.

If an address list is computerised, it can be updated and reprinted easily. In addition computer-printed mailing labels can be created quickly, reducing the workload for the local newsletter editors.

34 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
35 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
36 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

**Duty 11: "Sends out written notices of the Annual Meeting so that they are received at least fifteen days prior to the date of the meeting on 21 April. Ballots and a list of believers eligible to vote must be enclosed."[37]**

This is a simple task which can be delegated. The person who maintains the address list is ideally placed to create a ballot listing eligible voters.

**Duty 12: "Keeps a permanent file of National newsletter and other Bahá'í periodicals to which the Assembly subscribes (this job may be done by the librarian if the Assembly so directs)."[38]**

This job is best delegated to a Bahá'í librarian - an Assembly member does not need to be involved.

**Duty 13: "Maintains a file or book of press clippings of all publicity on the Faith (this job may be done by the publicity committee, public information officer, archives officer or other assigned person, if the Assembly so directs)."[39]**

This task is best delegated to a non-assembly member such as the archives officer or office of external affairs.

**Duty 14: "Receives periodic reports from committees as well as expected responses to the Assembly's communications."[40]**

As the port of call for incoming correspondence, the secretary would naturally receive reports of this nature and reports these back to the full Assembly, making recommendations if further action is needed (e.g. to further train the committee).

**Duty 15: "Brings to the meeting files, correspondence, the *Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies*, and any other relevant Writings. A useful source of reference is *Lights of Guidance, 1988 edition*." [41]**

Given that the secretary generally keeps the files and correspondence in her or his home for easy access, it is no extra work to bring such information to Assembly meetings. If the Guidelines are available for a computer file then simply bringing a computer to the Assembly meetings will supply the Guidelines.

37 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
38 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
39 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
40 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
41 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

**Duty 16: "If possible, so that members can be well prepared to consult at the Assembly meetings, it is helpful for the secretary to prepare a report consisting of a list of items to be considered at the forthcoming meeting, with brief background information pertaining to each item, and a resume of correspondence handled by the secretary between meetings. This will be helpful both for the information of the Assembly members and for saving time at each meeting." [42]**

This function cannot easily be delegated to other Assembly members. The ability to prepare a concise summary of each agenda item is developed through experience both inside and outside the Faith. Secretaries lacking such experience will spend much more time and effort in preparing for a meeting than those with greater experience.

## V. From Assembly Secretary to Secretariat

Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand offers two options for assisting the secretary whose workload has grown and may be struggling:

> *"The Assembly may choose to divide the duties of the Secretary among more than one person. For example, the Assembly may elect a Recording Secretary to record the minutes and do the filing; to be responsible for recording births, deaths and marriages; and for communicating with the National Spiritual Assembly about address changes, enrolments and transfers of membership. Another option is to have a three-member Secretariat including the Chair, the Secretary and the Recording Secretary, which would assume many secretarial duties for the Assembly. Some duties may be delegated to a committee or individual, e.g. publicity. Each Assembly is free to determine the details of handling this work, the number of officers and the responsibilities of its officers."*[43]

Many local Assemblies have taken the first option of appointing recording secretaries; relatively few have taken the second option of appointing a secretariat. References to the term secretariat in the Writings of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are largely confined to the National Secretariats serving National Spiritual Assemblies. I was unable to find references to local Bahá'í secretariats in the Mars for Windows CD compilation of fifty Bahá'í books published by Crimson Publication in San Juan Capistrano, California.

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42 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.
43 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand*. P. 3.6-3.8.

## VI. Experience of the Hamilton, New Zealand Assembly Secretariat in 1993

The Hamilton Spiritual Assembly, like many others, faced the challenge of finding a member willing and able to serve as secretary. After the annual meeting at Ridvan 1993 the new Assembly developed a secretariat. Information about how this occurred and preliminary evaluation of the effects of the secretariat is beyond the scope of this paper but a summary of main points is now provided.

Our initial secretariat consisted of the Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer. Time pressure on the chairman forced him to leave the secretariat; he was replaced by another member.

The secretariat aimed to meet at least once a fortnight, depending on its duties. It would time its meetings to ensure that full assembly meetings did not need to address matters related to implementing assembly decisions and policies.

The first draft of terms of reference for the secretariat were:

- Ensure the timely implementation of assembly decisions and policies.

- Meet regularly with believers, particularly those holding key positions (e.g. deepening coordinator, children's class coordinator) to harness their energies and skills for service to the Bahá'í community.

- Train and supervise non-assembly members serving on committees or as officers of the assembly.

- Committee actions would be limited to carrying out local and national assembly decisions and policies, dealing with urgent situations that do not require consultation by the full assembly, encouraging, supervising and training believers.

Expected outcomes of the secretariat:

- Assembly decisions implemented fully and rapidly provided no unforseen obstacles arose (e.g. insufficient funds to carry out assembly decisions).

- Bahá'í events and projects carried out to a high spiritual and professional standard.

- Full assembly meetings focused on management and leadership rather than petty administrative matters.

- Non-assembly members develop their administrative capabilities, enabling them to achieve higher levels of service to the Faith. This may enhance the employment potential for Bahá'ís seeking paid employment.

- Major improvements in child education, deepening and teaching due to better planning and administration.

The secretariat soon developed modified terms of reference:

- Foster and monitor implementation of Assembly decisions

- Evaluate the effects of Assembly decisions

- Find the facts about situations so that relevant information is available to the full Assembly

- Cull the agenda

- Support the secretary

In July, 1993 the Assembly directed the Secretariat to bring together into one document the Hamilton Three Year Plan. As the secretariat met it became more capable of resolving issues over the telephone, thereby reducing the need for further meetings. The secretary felt empowered to take action to implement Assembly policies, which led to more expeditious handling of administrative matters. Other Assembly members not on the secretariat also were empowered to take on tasks to assist the Assembly.

## VI. Final Comments

Bahá'í administration remains in an embryonic phase. The Guardian's secretary explained that:

> *"...the existing imperfections in the administrative machinery of the Cause … should be attributed not to the administrative system itself, but to the administrators of the Faith, who by reason of their human limitations and imperfections can never hope to entirely fulfil those ideal conditions set forth in the Teachings. Much of the existing defects in the present-day activities of the believers, however, will as the Community develops and gains in experience be gradually removed, and healthier and more progressive conditions prevail".*[44]

We must all heed the Guardian's warning that:

*"...administrative activities, however harmoniously and efficiently conducted, are but means to an end, and should be regarded as direct instruments for the propagation of the Bahá'í Faith. Let us take heed in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause, we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created. Let us be on our guard lest the growing demand for specialization in the administrative functions of the Cause detain us from joining the ranks of those who in the forefront of battle are gloriously engaged in summoning the multitude to this New Day of God."*[45]

Shoghi Effendi told us that:

*"...prior to every conceivable measure destined to raise the efficiency of our administrative activities, more vital than any scheme which the most resourceful amongst us can devise, far above the most elaborate structure which the concerted efforts of organized Assemblies can hope to raise, is the realization down in the innermost heart of every true believers of the regenerating power, the supreme necessity, the unfailing efficacy of the Message he bears... naught else can provide the driving force and sustaining power that are both so essential to the success of vast and enduring achievements."*[46]

Local Bahá'í communities in New Zealand are ready to enter a new phase in the process of their maturation. To achieve this the Assemblies must reach greater heights of leadership, management and administration. The challenge is to implement a system which fosters the maturation of the Assembly and community. Developing the role of the secretary, which may be assisted by a secretariat, is an important step in this process.

44 *Guidelines for the Local Spiritual Assembly in New Zealand.* P. 1.5.
45 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. P. 103.
46 Shoghi Effendi. *Bahá'í Administration*. P. 111-112.

# Maturation and Learning in the Bahá'í Community[1]

*David Levick*

The Bahá'í Community has always been interested in the subject of learning, and recent emphasis on the institute process has heightened awareness of the need for both individuals and communities, as a whole, to become more knowledgeable about methods by which we learn. This paper examines a range of current thinking about how we 'come to know', and suggests some approaches that could prove useful, whether to the institute process, or to learning directed at other specific activities, such as service on a Local Spiritual Assembly.

Bahá'ís act in and make meaning of their personal and shared worlds from knowledge generated in many different paradigms, but when it comes to Bahá'í decision-making, it is a constructivist paradigm which seems most consistent with the theoretical description of consultation. For ease of decision-making then, it would be useful for Bahá'ís to become adept at moving from whatever paradigms they currently hold to a constructivist one during the process of consultation, rather than attempt to converse across paradigms.

To move comfortably and consciously from one paradigm-for-action to this constructivist paradigm-for-decision-making, and back, requires consciousness and learning about how we come 'to know', what influences this 'knowing' and what we value as 'knowledge', as opposed to 'vain imaginings' or 'idle fancies'.

Understanding this movement between paradigms and the tentativeness of our knowledge is suggested as a sign of maturity. This maturity is indicated by critical reflection on what, how and why we think the way we do, and act the way we do, in our personal and shared worlds, as well as the ability to adopt the appropriate paradigm at the appropriate time. This critical consciousness liberates and emancipates the individual

1. This paper was first presented as a thesis for a Bachelor of Applied Science (Honours) with major studies in Social Ecology at the University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury. The author has commenced Doctoral studies which include the Bahá'í community's application of the theory contained within its writings.

and institutions from the prison of uncritical thinking and acting, from being trapped within a single, albeit seemingly effective paradigm. It is a manifestation of fair-mindedness and justice, the "best beloved of all things in My sight."[2]

To explore this concept of critical consciousness and learning might be useful to Bahá'ís, who anticipate the inevitable 'maturation' of their decision-making institutions around the turn of the century (synchronising with the completion of the building projects at the Bahá'í World Centre and establishment of the Lesser Peace)[3] and who have embarked on a global learning program through 'institutes' or 'centres of learning'.

## Paradigms

Paradigms are not simply worldviews. They are the context for our making sense of our being, our doing and our thinking. They dictate the methods we use to find out about our world. They are often invisible to our consciousness. According to Guba,[4] a paradigm is bounded by perceptions of the nature of reality, the nature of how we find out about that reality and the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known about 'reality'.

What individuals accept as the nature of 'reality' (ontology) can be quite different. Some accept a realist ontology (reality exists 'out there'). Others hold to a critical realist ontology, believing reality exists 'out there' but can never be fully apprehended. Still others hold to a relativist ontology ('realities' exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, dependent on the persons who hold them).

The nature of how we find out about 'reality' (methodology) can be just as diverse. Some hold to an experimental/manipulative approach in which hypotheses are stated in advance and subjected to empirical tests under carefully controlled conditions. Others hold to a dialogic-transformative approach, by which they seek to eliminate 'false' consciousness and to energise, facilitate and transform them. Still others hold to a hermeneutic-dialectic approach, through which individual constructions are elicited and refined, compared and contrasted through discussion, with the aim of generating one construction on which there is substantial consensus.[5] A hermeneutic approach attempts to recover and interpret the meanings of social actions from the point of view of those who performed them, as opposed to the point of view of onlookers.[6] Dick

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*. 11th ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.
3. Shoghi Effendi, letter dated October 1, 1954, Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954, p.74.
4. E.G. Guba, 'The Alternative Paradigm Dialog' in E.G. Guba, (ed) *The Paradigm Dialog*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications, 1990.
5. Ibid., p.27.
6. J. Higgs, *Qualitative Research: Discourse on Methodologies*, Sydney: Hampden Press, 1988, p.6.

writes, "Dialectical processes use disagreements to generate agreement".[7]

Following this pattern of diversity, the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known (epistemology) reveals such stances as those of the dualist/objectivist ('I am distinct from reality'), the modified objectivist ('the distinction between reality and I is blurred') and the subjectivist ('I am a part of my reality').

Each of these components of a paradigm – ontology, methodology and epistemology – are interwoven to offer a sensible way both to understand our personal and shared worlds, to predict what will happen in those worlds, and to act accordingly. Labels for various combinations of these ontologies, methodologies and epistemologies include: positivist, post-positivist, critical theorist and constructivist paradigms. Each offers unique ways in which to understand the world and make predictions about it, thus affecting the way we act in the world. It is suggested that because we use paradigms in every decision we make throughout the day, they become second nature to us, especially if they offer successful ways of dealing with the world and people around us. In becoming second nature, they become invisible.

## The paradigm for Bahá'í decision-making (consultation)

A case for the Bahá'í Faith operating within a constructivist paradigm can be developed from the 'theory' contained within the Bahá'í writings. Such a paradigm sees the nature of 'truth' and 'reality' as relative to each individual, not absolute. It follows – if each individual operates according to his or her own 'reality' – that, to find out about these 'realities', individual constructions need to be elicited and made explicit, so that, through conversation, these 'realities' can be compared, contrasted, explored and modified, to generate a single construction of 'reality' on which there can be substantial consensus.[8] Thus, the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known is a subjectivist one: knowledge is literally the creation of the process of the interaction between the knower and his/her 'reality'.

## A relativist ontology

Bahá'u'lláh suggests the world of creation is not real at all: "The world is but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality… the world is like the vapour in a desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until

7. B. Dick, 'Rigour Without Numbers – The Potential of Dialectical Processes as Qualitative Research Tools', a paper distributed at the XVIIIth Annual Meeting of Australian Social Psychologists, Greenmount, Queensland, Australia, May 12-14, 1989.
8. E.G. Guba, 'The Alternative Paradigm Dialog'.

when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion."[9]

'Abdu'l-Bahá also points out the relativity and tentativeness of 'truth', stating that humanity itself creates a body of knowledge relative to its level of capacity and understanding:

> *"For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything is continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. In the future much that is announced and accepted as true now will be rejected and disproved. And so it will continue ad infinitum."*[10]

## A subjectivist epistemology

Regarding the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has spelled out the legitimacy of working within a constructivist paradigm by stating that it is more important to hold to a relative, shared 'truth' in unity than be disunited in holding to different, subjective 'truths'. He wrote that it is preferable to reach consensus on a 'wrong' decision than risk disunity by clinging stubbornly to what one individual might perceive as being 'right'.[11]

Seeming to confirm further the legitimacy of a subjective epistemology, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not".[12]

Further, in more abstruse and mystical prose, Bahá'u'lláh spells out that it is important for the individual, when establishing a relationship between himself or herself and 'knowledge' of the Divine Essence, to do so subjectively and without the influence of such things as love or hate, pre-conceived notions, traditions or knowledge held by present society.[13]

## A hermeneutic-dialectic methodology

Methodologically, both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have used the word 'consultation' to encompass a hermeneutic-dialectic approach to

9. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987, pp.328-329.
10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. 2nd ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
11. See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publishing Australia, 1990, p.91.
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.62.
13. See also Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989, pp.192-195.

'finding out', seeing merit in the clash of seemingly contradictory opinion as fruitful collisions of ideas from which a higher 'truth' might be reached by way of synthesis and consensus.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that consultation is "not the mere voicing of personal views".[14] He elaborated that "he who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right, but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide."[15] 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to use the positive imagery of the 'light' of 'reality' to emphasise to Bahá'ís the higher value of a comment made as a contribution to shared understanding than one made to voice what is correct and right. This reinforces the view that Bahá'ís should place more value on a subjectivist epistemology than on a dualist or objectivist one when seeking to arrive at a decision.

One commentator on this methodology of decision-making in the Bahá'í community sees consultation as "neither a compromise nor the simple addition of one thought to another: it is a new creation."[16]

## The unconscious process of decision-making

In the myriad decisions I make each day, it has been my experience not to stop and *consciously* determine, for every decision, the influence of how I have arrived at the decision, the paradigm I held, my values at the time and the assumptions I was making, let alone consider whether the decision would result in actions to satisfy my fundamental human needs.[17] It has been my experience in 12 years of participation in Bahá'í consultation (decision-making) that Bahá'ís too, as group decision-makers, do not consciously determine the method by which they arrived at a decision, the paradigm in which they explored the issues associated with it, their values at the time and the assumptions each was making. Availability of time among a group of volunteer decision-makers is a pressing factor in limiting the level of consciousness that can be developed.

## What is now important in the Bahá'í community?

The Bahá'í International Community is anticipating the maturation of its administrative institutions to synchronise with the completion of the building projects at the Bahá'í World Centre and the establishment of the Lesser Peace.[18] The Universal House of Justice has suggested that the Faith's national and local institutions focus their attention on the

14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.72.
15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.72.
16. J.E. Kolstoe, *Consultation – A Universal Lamp of Guidance,* Oxford: George Ronald, 1985.
17. M. Max-Neef, A. Elizalde M. Hopenhayn, *Human Scale Development: Conception, Application and Further Reflections*, London:Apex Press, 1991.
18. Shoghi Effendi, letter dated October 1, 1954, *Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950-1957*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954, p.74.

development of the role of the individual, on the quality of the functioning of the local institutions and on the vitality of the local Bahá'í community. It also suggested the formation of 'institutes' or 'centres of learning', which have, as their goal "the raising up of large numbers of believers who are trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love."[19]

Maturation and learning, then, are stressed as important components of the current focus of Bahá'í activity, in the context of the individual, local institutions and local community. As proposed earlier, to move comfortably from one paradigm for action to a constructivist one for decision-making, and back, requires consciousness and learning about how we come 'to know', what influences this 'knowing' and what we value as 'knowledge'.

## Maturity

Some commentators consider 'maturity' to be the ability to be conscious and aware of these paradigm jumps and levels of learning, as well as to be able to critique them. Such a perspective suggests that maturation of the Bahá'í institutions could be seen as the conscious ability of their members to jump from their individually favoured paradigms to a constructivist one for group decision-making, and back; to be conscious of various levels of making-sense and how these influence the decision being created; and to be able to critique these.

For instance, Brookfield links the notion of critical consciousness with maturity when he writes: "An adult's increasing sophistication can be seen in his or her coming to see one's own culture from a critical stance and establishing loyalties that go beyond one's immediate community."[20] Mezirow too points out a link between greater consciousness and maturity. He writes that: "Critical awareness or critical consciousness is 'becoming aware of our awareness' and critiquing it… Critical consciousness – and particularly theoretical reflectivity – represents a uniquely adult capacity and, as such, becomes realised through perspective transformation."[21]

Bahá'u'lláh draws a link between maturity and understanding. He writes: "For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation"[22]

These commentaries on 'maturity' link it closely to understanding, to greater consciousness, to critical consciousness. Thus, from the basic

19. Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message, 1996.
20. S. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987, p39.
21. J. Mezirow, 'A critical theory of adult learning and education' *Adult Education*, 32:1 (1981), pp.3-24.
22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publishing Australia, 1990.

pairing of maturity and learning can now be added the term 'consciousness' or awareness. Mezirow uses the word 'awareness' in relation to adult learning: "Awareness of why we attach the meanings we do to reality, especially to our roles and relationships – meanings often misconstrued out of the uncritically assimilated half-truths of conventional wisdom and power relationships assumed as fixed – may be the most significant, distinguishing characteristic of adult learning."[23] Thus, he links awareness with adult learning.

Bahá'u'lláh also introduces the notion of awareness when stating: "The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of the Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being."[24] So Bahá'u'lláh sees awareness as a product of the Bahá'í decision-making process of consultation. The Bahá'í notion of "mindfulness"[25] and the practice of bringing "thyself to account each day"[26] could also be understood to be a call for consciousness about what one is doing, in practice, in relation to what one knows one should do in theory.

In terms relevant to a Bahá'í institution, maturity would manifest itself as a consciousness by its members about the influence of:

- Their previous experience.
- The subject matter of what they are deciding.
- The method chosen to find out more about the issue at hand.
- Why they considered some aspects of the issue more important than others.
- The values that dictated this importance.
- The assumptions behind these values.

Being conscious of these aspects of their decision-making then places them in a position to critique their stance at any of these levels, determining if a different method might be more appropriate, whether a different set of values would be more relevant, or whether the initial assumptions are unfounded.

These can be represented diagrammatically (Figure 1) as a nested set of virtually invisible filters surrounding each individual (and group), influencing what is allowed to be 'seen' and 'known' about the world. Consciousness can be defined as becoming aware of these filters and appreciating how changing the nature of the filter can change the perspective on the issue at hand.

23. J. Mezirow, 'A critical theory of adult learning and education' *Adult Education*, 32:1 (1981), pp.3-24.
24. Bahá'u'lláh, *Compilation of Compilations*, Sydney: Bahá'í Publishing Australia, 1990.
25. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West*, 8:9. 1917.
26. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*.

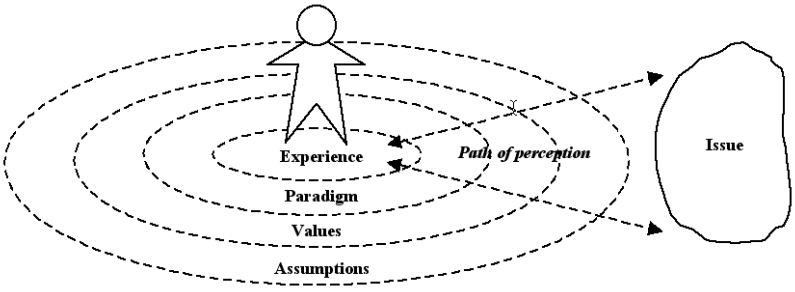


*Figure 1: A suggested model of the nested filters of invisible realms influencing our perceptions of the world. Becoming conscious of their influence could lead to the appreciation and understanding of the great diversity of perceptions about our shared world.*

## Learning

Consciousness can also be applied to the concept of learning. The modes of learning relevant to the theme at hand include experiential learning, that is, learning *to be*; propositional learning: learning *to know*; and practical learning: learning *to do*.

Propositional learning is the style most are familiar with through formal institutions, such as schools, where teachers convey a body of knowledge to the student and expect him or her to memorise it and understand its application. Mathematics, chemistry and history are among the subjects often taught in this way. For a Bahá'í, propositional learning is useful in memorising quotations from the Bahá'í writings and in memorising prayers for personal recitation.

Practical learning is a different style. For instance, no matter how much theory one learns about riding a bicycle, one will never be able to do it until one gets on the bike and starts riding, falls off and gets back on until one gets accustomed to keeping balance. For a Bahá'í, practical learning is useful in performing the genuflections associated with the obligatory prayers. There is little point in studying the theory of the genuflections: it is the attempted action, which brings benefit to the supplicating person.

Experiential learning involves a process of learning theoretically about a situation, experiencing it, reflecting upon that experience, refining one's theoretical understanding of it, and re-engaging with the situation to act more appropriately in it. For Bahá'ís, this is particularly useful for such actions as teaching the Faith, for consulting, for proclaiming the Faith, for presenting the Faith through the Arts, for executing duties as an Assembly office bearer, for parenting, for being good citizens, for being good sons and daughters.

It is this style of learning that appears to be at the heart of the Bahá'í 'institute' process:

> *"The [institute] process unfolds as the group strives to deepen and train receptive members of the population; actions and materials are revised, based on their effectiveness; eventually, a progressively unfolding plan of action emerges. This continual learning process is the central, driving force of the institute's program."*[27]

Experiential learning requires critical reflection, consciousness, awareness: becoming conscious of what one has experienced, critiquing it and searching for further theory to understand better the experience and how future action can be modified for more effective and more satisfying experience. It is a cyclical process, with the participant repeatedly moving through the phases of theory, experience and reflection in a given context so that refinement of experience and understanding, of *being*, are made.

Just as there would appear to be a nested set of filters which one's perceptions of the world must traverse before reaching our understanding, some commentators propose a nested set of levels of learning. These three levels of learning have been referred to by some as cognition, meta-cognition and epistemic-cognition.[28]

Maudsley describes "the process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning and growth that they have internalised" as 'meta-learning.'[29] Bawden also refers to meta-learning, describing it as "learning about learning". However, he suggests the learning shouldn't stop there but reach the higher level of epistemic-learning, "the domain of the philosophical beliefs that each of us holds as the context for what we know and what we value."[30]

Thus, learning or cognition relates to *what* we are learning. Meta-cognition relates to *how* we are going about our learning, while epistemic-cognition relates to questions about *why* we are valuing these methods of learning and subject matter over other methods and subjects. For example, questions of relevance to the Australian Bahá'í Community at the epistemic level include: why does it seem, in practice, that the positions of doctor and engineer are considered more prestigious than that of plumber and artist, and why does the Bahá'í community in Australia seem to value university education over vocational education at a technical college or over an apprenticeship? It could be argued that excellence can be achieved at each of these levels and in each of these fields.

Adding these levels of learning to the previous model gives the following model (Figure 2).

27. International Teaching Centre, 'Institute Training Programs', 1995, p.40.
28. K. Kitchener, 'Cognition, Meta-Cognition and Epistemic-Cognition: A Three-Level Model of Cognitive Processing', *Human Development* No.26, 1983, pp.222-232; M. Salner, 'Adult Cognitive and Epistemological Development in Systems Education' in *Systems Research*, Vol.3:4 (1986), pp.225-232.
29. D. Maudsley, D., 'A theory of meta-learning and principles of facilitation: An organismic perspective', Ph.D., University of Toronto,1979.
30. R. Bawden, 'Systemic Development: A Learning Approach to Change', an occasional paper for the Centre for Systemic Development, University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury, March 1995.

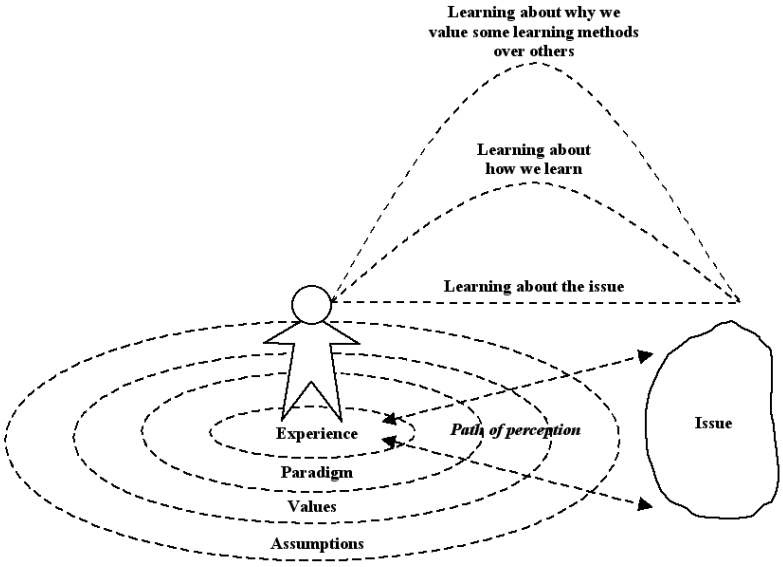


*Figure 2: A suggested model of the nested filters of invisible realms influencing our perceptions of the world, along with the levels of learning which influence our sense-making. Becoming conscious of these influences could lead to a liberation of our thinking and acting in the world and our learning about it.*

## A conscious process of decision-making

Bringing the above strands together, it is proposed that a more conscious (and thus mature) process of decision-making could be fostered in the Bahá'í community through their centres of learning, if these institutes were to offer a course whose subjects included:

- Propositional learning about paradigms and learning levels – to give participants the language by which to articulate and critique their experiences, paradigms, values, assumptions and levels of learning, and
- Experiential learning scenarios which cycled through the phases of presenting theory about Bahá'í consultation and the constructivist paradigm (in particular), putting this theory into action in the real world by consulting about one or two specific topics (such as the delivery of a teaching project or holding a stall at the local market) and reflecting on their experience of consultation to refine their understanding of the theory about it and their past actions – with at least three repetitions of the cycle so that it becomes more habitual for participants to critique consciously their thinking, acting and reflecting.

It is envisaged that a centre of learning would, through such a course, facilitate self-directed learning among participants to liberate them from being

at the mercy of other 'knowers' and their unconscious matrix of understanding, and equip them with language and skills to think and act more consciously.

Such a course is suggested as a path by which members of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and their committees could foster their own maturation and, thus, that of the institutions they serve on, as well as foster the development of a learning community among the rank and file of the Bahá'í Faith.

# Teaching the Faith in Australia 1963-1975: Personal Recollections

*Hedi Moani*

## Introduction

As the last born of eight sons, I was the result of my parent's final attempt to gain the daughter they had always longed for. I was born on the 16th February 1944, in the Holy Year of the Centennial of the declaration of the Báb in the district of Mazindarán. In this year, the first Seven Year Plan devised by the beloved Guardian was launched, and a number of Bahá'í families from Tehran, including the Ma'anis, responded to its call for pioneers and settled on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Here in the vicinity of Amol (the scene of the martyrdom of Quddús), in the village of Mahmood Abad, the pioneers shared, in the style of the 'long houses' of the Dayaks of Borneo, the only rental accommodation available in the area. This building, my birth-place and first home, was none other than the tea drinking palace of the late Reza Shah. Although the spirit of this pioneering venture was brave, laudable and sacrificial, lack of forward planning and practical difficulties forced most of the families to return to Tehran before the conclusion of the plan. My first childhood memories are, therefore, of a life of relative ease spent in the Northern suburbs of Tehran in the early 1950s. We enjoyed the benefits of a large and active Bahá'í community within the confines of a society traditionally hostile to our Faith. In our neighbourhood Jews, Armenian Christians, Zoroastrians and Bahá'ís associated amicably with each other as well as the Moslem majority. Through travel, trade, literature, the printed media and the cinema, we were also familiar with many aspects of life and civilisation of the West.

## The Ten Year Spiritual Crusade

With the advent of the Ten Year Plan in 1953, once again the family decided to venture into the field of pioneering. By 1963, five of my brothers had settled in Africa, Arabia, Indonesia, Southeast Asia and Austria, while

the two married brothers and their families remained in Tehran. My parents and I pioneered to Damghan, a small and fanatical city, tracing its origins some 3000 years back to the first capital of the ancient Medes. It was near Damghan, at Cheshmih Ali (Ali's spring), that on their journey to Khurásán, Mullá Husayn and company set up camp. According to Nabíl, on this occasion a gust of wind caused the sudden fall of a great branch near their tents, signalling, in the words of the Bábu'l-Báb, the downfall of Mohammad Shah. Over a century later, that relic of the early Bábí history, laid at the bottom of that large reservoir of water; intact and undisturbed.

My teenage years were mostly spent in Damghan, where, from the tender age of ten I began to learn the meaning of blind prejudice, senseless persecution, and fear born of ignorance. As evident were the evidences of Bahá'u'lláh's unfailing protection, and the invincible power of God, ensuring the ultimate triumph of the Cause. Later in life I realised the value of such lessons in the school of adversity, preparing me for the unforeseen challenges of serving the Cause.

## A Year in Southeast Asia

In 1962, two of my pioneering brothers returned to Iran for a brief visit. Encouraged by their tales of adventure and service, two of my Bahá'í classmates (Abol Fazel Beyzaee and Fereydoon Misaghian) and I decided to pioneer to Southeast Asia. They went to Laos, and I ended up in Jakarta, after having spent a little time in Brunei. Here, at the home of Minoo and Margarret Fozdar; I met uncle Yankee Lee Ong, the first Malaysian Bahá'í of Chinese origin. Shortly after my arrival, because of communist insurgencies, all expatriates were forced to evacuate the area. We were taken aboard a Royal Air Force Hercules to a military base on the island of Labuan and a few days later to Singapore. Soon after, I flew to Jakarta, where I stayed for almost a year; learning English and adjusting to my first encounter with the rich cultures of Southeast Asia. This first year overseas holds a special place in my heart. The magic of the Far East has left me with many a treasured and indelible memory. The Bahá'í pioneers in the area lived like members of an extended family. Their recent successes in mass teaching in the Mentawei Islands, Sarawak and other areas in the region, had generated much excitement and anticipation throughout the Bahá'í world. It was here that I had the honour of meeting Dr Mohajer for the first time. He wanted me to study medicine and offered me all his medical books, but on hearing of my interest to go to Australia, he advised me to take up an extensive course of studies. This I did, when eventually the difficulties of attending university in Indonesia (without a good knowledge of the Bahasa), led me to pursue that objective in Australia.

## Melbourne Australia 1963-65

On the 16th of November 1963 I arrived in Melbourne and joined a small group of Persian Bahá'ís living in the country. They consisted of three Persian youth whose parents were pioneers in Southeast Asia: Kamran Eshraghian, Farid Payman, and Bijan Vosoogh. They arrived in Adelaide in the early 1960's and were followed by Dr and Mrs Gabriel and their children Mona and Bashir. Sponsored by Mr Handley of Ballarat (John Handley's father), they settled in Melbourne in 1962. To my knowledge, there were no other active Persian Bahá'ís living in Australia prior to this date.

The first Australian Bahá'ís I met were Frank and Bibi Khan, who in 1962 on their way back from pilgrimage visited Tehran. I attended a meeting at which Frank Khan spoke about the building of the Sydney House of Worship. The use of helicopter to complete the dome of the building fascinated me greatly. At the Gabriel's home, very early after my arrival, I had the privilege of meeting Effie Baker, Mr and Mrs Frank Khan (for a second time), Gerty and Gerhard Schmeltzle and Betty Anderson (my first contact with an Aboriginal Bahá'í). The first Bahá'í meeting I attended was held at the Theosophist centre in Little Collins Street. Here I met the Bahá'í community of greater metropolitan Melbourne, and the Bluett family, who were visiting Victoria on their way to Papua New Guinea. That same afternoon of 22nd November 1963 we heard the shocking news of the assassination of JF Kennedy.

At the time, barring the Gabriels and the Truemans, there were no other Bahá'í families living in the Melbourne metropolitan area. This to some degree determined the direction of our teaching efforts and its concentration on single middle class intellectuals with a spiritual bent. In 1963-64 I boarded with Pym Trueman's family in Toorak, and attended George Taylor's Coaching College in Little Collins Street. During that year, the warmth of Pym's hospitality combined with my youthful enthusiasm to share the Bahá'í message with my fellow students, led to many a social events and firesides. These were supported by such Bahá'ís as John Walker, Collin Wosley, Grenville Curtin, Claudia Kelly, Elizabeth Bloomer, Camilia Chance, Bob Patterson (who pioneered to Samoa and soon after passed away in that country), and Brian Whitehead, to name but a few.

The highly diverse group of students at George Taylor's private College consisted mostly of the children of affluent families living in Africa, India, Europe, Southeast Asia, as well as Melbourne and Victoria. In subsequent years, some of my classmates who attended these meetings achieved national recognition. Sikai Holland, the daughter of the first black Ambassador of Rhodesia distinguished herself in the 1970s as a prominent activist in civil and Aboriginal rights. In short, Pym Trueman's Punt Road flat became a centre for Bahá'í activities and its warm and informal atmosphere led to much

teaching and fruitful social interaction. At this time, Pam Ringwood, a tutor in law at the University of Melbourne, conducted Bahá'í deepenings for the youth at her home, and the Gabriels had a regular weekly fireside.

Having put behind me the limitations imposed by the oppressive conditions of Iran and its lack of religious freedom, I saw Australia as a land of incalculable teaching opportunities and felt a sense of urgency in tapping its immense spiritual potential. To me the Australian society was a rare celebration of cultural diversity, and a powerful expression of political and religious freedom. The significance of Australia as the first and only politically united continent in the history of the planet and a land destined to act as a powerful advocate for individual rights and the liberation of the Oriental followers of Bahá'u'lláh (as indicated by Shoghi Effendi's last letter to Australia and New Zealand), are never dimmed in my mind - any more than its role as the southern pole of the Spiritual Axis could be ignored when considering the spiritual future of the region and the world. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Australian society has distinguished itself as a living laboratory of unity in cultural diversity. The path is now open, I believe, for this country to become a leading light in the establishment of universal peace; and a beacon of freedom in these, the darkest hours in human experience. Little wonder that the very name 'Australia' was officially adopted on the 21st of December 1817, only weeks after the birth of Bahá'u'lláh. The privilege and the responsibility for awakening the nation to so high a destiny rests primarily on the shoulders of the Australian Bahá'í community. They are called upon to regenerate the dormant spiritual potential of a vast country; a task that at the closing years of the millennium, calls for their urgent, selfless and ceaseless endeavours.

## Geelong and Formation of the First LSA: 1965-1968

In 1965 1 left Melbourne and enrolled at the Gordon Institute of Technology (now Deakin University at Geelong). At the time Emily Easey was the only Bahá'í in the city, but soon after my arrival Reg and Sue Priestly and family also moved in enabling us to form an active Bahá'í group, which soon became the first Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Geelong. We proclaimed to the Mayor, ran public meetings, wrote to the papers, published articles, conducted firesides, formed Bahá'í Club and advertised the Faith on a regular basis. Mrs Wright's declaration in 1965 was the first fruit of such activities.

## Teaching at Colleges and Universities

For the first nine years in Australia, schools, colleges and universities were the principal arena of my teaching activities. In four educational institutions (George Taylor's, Gordon I.T., Perth I.T., and Melbourne University)

I had the honour of being the first and only Bahá'í student on the campus. Through Divine confirmations, and the assistance of Bahá'í friends, both at the Gordon Institute of Technology in Geelong during the 1960's, and later at the University of Melbourne in the early 1970's, two new souls in each establishment joined the rank of the believers. Solomon King, the first Australian Bahá'í of Turkish origin, and Milan Gricic, among the earliest Bahá'ís of Yugoslav extraction, were students at the GIT. Mistakenly, they attended a meeting of the Bahá'í club, and showed a keen interest in the Faith. Their declaration in the late 1960s, was a great boost to our small community as well as the Bahá'í Clubs at the GIT. At the University of Melbourne in 1970-71, I publicised numerous meetings attracting the attention of both the students and the staff. Each week at the Union Building I held a Bahá'í display. Finally, with the formation of the Bahá'í club, we were given our own room and mail box. Mrs Bainbridge was a most supportive and kind Bahá'í friend at this time. Shirley Charter's visit from New Zealand caused the declaration of two pure souls who made the affiliation of the Bahá'í club possible. Both Dr Furutan and Dr Mohajer spoke at public meetings sponsored by this club.

## Tasmanian Working Holidays

Twice in the sixties I travelled to Tasmania and boarded with Mr and Mrs Benson and their son David, who lived in Devonport. Albert being a journalist arranged for my first media exposures, through both radio and the newspapers. At the ABC interview I dared to advance the notion that Australia will one day boast of a unique culture, created through the confluence of both the East and the West. It is a credit to the freedom of speech in this land that in 1965 they broadcast views so contrary to the opinion of the vast majority of the Australian population! In a similar interview in the 1990s I would have added the significance of the abiding spiritual influence of the Aboriginal culture; the essential ingredient to a unique Australian cultural identity. This blending of the East, the West and Indigenous cultures, guided by the eternal principle of the oneness of humanity, is in my view the recipe for creation of a wholesome society; balanced in all its material, intellectual and spiritual pursuits. This amalgam will ultimately evolve into a global culture of infinite diversity, creativity and vigour; and the emergence of a social order committed to the rule justice and an inviolable peace among all who dwell on the earth. During the summers of 1965-67 I joined a Tasmanian travel teaching team, covering Victoria, South Australia, NSW and the A.C.T. This team of Bahá'í youth consisted of David Benson, Ken Gretton, Edith Van den Dool and myself. We travelled the Eastern States in a "figure of eight" route, giving public meetings, interviews, firesides and initiating some exciting teaching activities in Sydney's Hyde Park and Kings Cross. In Hyde

Park our considerable stock of pamphlets ran out, so great was the receptivity of the public in Sydney! We wondered then, as I wonder now, why such opportunities for proclamation and teaching are so often neglected by the friends? In Adelaide we held what was possibly the first public meeting conducted by Bahá'í youth in Australia. We gate-crashed David and Safura Chittleborough's wedding, and listened to the Hand of the Cause of God Collis Featherstone speak about racial unity!

## The International Conference in Sydney, 1967

A significant shift in my understanding of the Cause resulted from the International Conference held in Sydney during October 1967. The event was commemorating the Centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and leaders of the world. Some 300 Bahá'ís attended the Conference, including Hands of the Cause of God Dr Giachary and Mr Collis Featherstone. This gathering generated a new sense of mission and confidence throughout the Bahá'í community. For me, it was well worth the sacrifice of living on potatoes and vegetables for three months in order to save sufficient funds out of my meagre student allowance to attend this historic event! Meeting Dr Giachary alone was worth all that effort and more! Here was also a chance to meet some of the pioneers who opened the Pacific region to the Faith. Alvin and Gertrude Blum, Lilian and Suhayl Ala'i, Nui Tuatonga and others.

## Love and Fellowship Among the Friends

Together with a newborn confidence resulting from the International Conference in Sydney was another factor of great importance assisting the teaching work in the late 1960s; namely the love and fellowship experienced among the Australian Bahá'í Community. At the time, the number of friends throughout the country were small enough for each Bahá'í to know the entire national community. In Melbourne, when Bahá'í as much as stopped over for an hour or two at the airport, the local friends would go there to greet them. As this close fellowship began to wane in the early 70's, the emphasis began to shift away from loving association attracting the seekers of truth, to consolidation and administrative efficiency. In the Four year Plan the House of justice called for a new mind set on the part of both the elector and the elected members of the Bahá'í community to remedy such an imbalance.

## The Arrival of the Persian Bahá'ís

In the early 1970s the number of Persian believers in Australia rapidly began to increase. The Islamic revolution in 1979 brought a further upsurge of Persian Bahá'ís who took refuge here from the atrocities committed by the fanatical regime of their homeland. The impact of these sudden upturns in the Bahá'í population of the country could have been less dramatic had a

New Zealand style of compulsory distribution of the refugees throughout the country been adopted. The undesirable concentration of Bahá'ís (and of Persians in particular) in the large cities can only be remedied by a consecrated commitment to: a) homefront pioneering; b) overseas pioneering; or c) entry by troops in the capital cities and the rest of the country. Should this latter solution be adopted, after the enrolment of say 50,000 new believers, once again the Persian believers will number less than 10% of the total Bahá'í community. I believe that in communities such as the Gold Coast, such a process is already in progress.

A deeper understanding of this phenomenon may point to the mystical workings of God's greater plan for the promotion of His Cause. Its far reaching consequences, as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets, go far beyond our present understanding of the organic nature of the growth of the Faith. All we know is that this army of light must be put to best use in illuminating the Australian continent and turning the Pacific into an ocean of light.

## Perth 1968-1970

In summer of 1968 I left Victoria and lived in Perth for approximately 15 months before resuming my studies at Melbourne University in March 1970. This turned out to be one of the most memorable years of my life. Teaching the youth was highly encouraged in this community, and great firesides were held at the home of John and Margaret Handley. Charlie Pierce, a most dynamic teacher of the Faith had arrived from Great Britain. His love for the Faith burned so brightly that the youth were drawn to him like moths to a flame! There were many declarations around that time, changing the face of the Bahá'í community in Perth, and turning a new page in the history of the Faith in Western Australia. One day Charlie was driving in West Perth and he saw me walking in a quiet street. His enthusiasm in greeting a Bahá'í brother was so great that he drove his car right into the path of an expensive sport car driving in the opposite direction! This was the nature of spiritual attraction among the Bahá'í friends at the time!

## Love and Unity Leads to Teaching Success

One of the most remarkable outcomes of this spirit of love and unity, followed by intense teaching activities, was the rise of an extraordinary number of Bahá'í pioneers from Western Australia in the early 1970's. Charlie met Barbara at a fireside in 1970, they married and pioneered to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) soon after. The Deamer family followed the same destination and Gwen Strickland studied nursing for three years in order to pioneer to Nepal. Kevin Croft also accepted the Faith about this time. John and Margaret Handley and family pioneered to Fiji. Others pioneered to the Kimberlies in the North West of Western Australia. Fiona McDonald also

joined the Faith in that period, and is today serving as the chairperson of the NSA of Australia. Still others went homefront pioneering, or travelled across the world to serve and teach the Cause of God.

Both quantitatively, and qualitatively, they achieved remarkable feats for a numerically small and isolated Bahá'í community! Hands of the Cause Mr Faizi and Collis Featherstone, as well as Joy Stevenson (then the chairman of the NSA), and ABM Bill Washington, travelled big distances to visit Perth during that year. Iran Roshan Milne was the first and only Persian Bahá'í residing in Perth in 1968. Mr and Mrs Soheil Taheri and their children arrived in 1970. We felt overjoyed that at the turn of the decade, so much growth was being accomplished, and the Faith of God was gaining in strength and number in Perth, the remotest capital city in the world!

This experience of teaching success in WA, was a prelude to the years of intense teaching, pioneering and spiritual activities that followed in the 1970's. They commenced with two unprecedented years of teaching efforts in Melbourne, followed by five years of pioneering to Darwin, NT; a year of service in Kiribati, and the crowning experience of pilgrimage to the Holy Land in April 1974.

## Return to Melbourne

In March 1970 I returned to Victoria to complete my architectural degree at the University of Melbourne. Having experienced such a remarkable period of expansion and growth of the Faith in Western Australia, the untapped teaching potential of the great city of Melbourne was a challenge that could not be ignored. A brief analysis of the situation led me to diagnose the malady as 1) a dearth of love and fellowship among the friends; and 2) lack of focus on teaching activities. As witnessed in the early 1970s, to the degree that the community maintained its loving fellowship and taught the Faith, success accompanied their every effort.

## Intense Teaching Activities;

The events in Victoria at the opening years of this decade, represent some of the most intense teaching activities in the history of the Australian Bahá'í community. In the early 70s we had the rare privilege of welcoming to this land several Hands of the Cause of God, including Dr Furutan, Dr Mohajer, John Robarts and Mr Faizi, adding their spiritual blessings and encouragement to our own much loved Hand of the Cause of God Collis Featherstone. We were also host to some outstanding Bahá'í teachers from NZ, the USA, UK, Europe and other countries around the globe. In Melbourne, in rapid and coherent succession, they taught us some salient lessons on mass teaching and entry by troops.

## A Bahá'í Club at the University of Melbourne

The formation of Melbourne University Bahá'í club was one of the fruits of teaching in the early 1970s. With the declaration of Ken Robinson and Bridgitte Keating, resulting from the audacious approach of Shirley Charters, and the assistance of a few non-Bahá'í well wishers of the Faith, in 1971 the Bahá'í club was officially formed and was given its own room and mail box. It was in this club room that the first and only Chinese member of the NSA of Australia[1] made his initial inquiry about the Faith. About this time, Shirley Charters proclaimed to the Chancellors of Melbourne and Monash universities, and Hands of the Cause of God, Dr Mohajer and Mr Furutan, also spoke on the campus.

## Teaching the Masses

Concern with the Vietnam war was the outcry of the student body in the early 70s who sought justice and compassion, instead of war and carnage. Love cults and the alternative movements were in their heyday. The harvest of souls ready and eager to receive the call of their Lord was greater than any time before or since in the history of our Faith; but alas, the workers were few and the community of the Greatest Name lacked the vision and preparation to take the fullest advantage of this rare and historic opportunity. Unlike N.Z., where such courageous teachers as Shirley Charters, Gwen Venus and Alex Cookson, succeeded in attracting a significant number of youth to the Faith, the conservative element in our community made us err on the side of caution, and hence our failure to meet the final spiritual challenge of the third epoch. Our efforts in Victoria, however, were blessed with an abundance of Divine confirmations promised by Bahá'u'lláh. These took the form of visits by many of the Hands of the Cause and some outstanding Bahá'í teachers, who came to Melbourne in the early 1970's. They provided much needed guidance, and taught us lessons essential to the process of entry by troops. The following is a digest of their legacy, left for the future generations of Australian Bahá'ís; those who are yet to experience the supernal joys and challenges of a massive increase in the number of believers in this land.

## Systematic Distribution of Bahá'í Literature

Dr Mohajer instructed us in the "systematic distribution of Bahá'í literature, resulting in the publication and spread of tens of thousands of pamphlets throughout the country, and formation of a Bahá'í information centres and a correspondence course. An outstanding example of this approach was seen at the Sunbury (a Woodstock-like) Festival in Victoria. 10,000 pamphlets were distributed among the 30,000 youths attending the event, and it was my privilege to address this live audience, (arguably, the largest in the

1. Sein Yeang Chew.

history of the Faith) about Bahá'u'lláh! A news item and photograph depicting this even appeared in the 1971 edition of the *Malaysian Bahá'í News.*

### 500 Removers of Difficulty

The visit of Hand of the Cause of God John Robarts consolidated our experience of 'mass teaching' by the introduction of "prayer" as an indispensable ingredient to the success of the process. In particular, he emphasised the long obligatory prayer and 500 "remover of difficulties". Some went overboard with enthusiasm and held-frequent prayer vigils, and the 500 removers of difficulties were said on a daily basis. We all came to recognise the pivotal significance of the devotional element in the task of teaching of the Cause.

### The Personification of Audacity

The outstanding Bahá'í teacher from NZ, Shirley Charters, taught the Victorian Bahá'í community many a lesson in audacity. This lioness of the Kingdom, in her own unique and at times socially embarrassing manner; provided a rare-example of courage in proclamation of the Word of God. Her contribution to the Victorian 'mass teaching' process was to highlight the vital importance of ceaseless and fearless proclamation of the Cause of God! Time spent with Shirley Charters could never be erased from one's memory! She is in my view, the most outstanding Bahá'í teacher born to the land of the Long White Cloud.[2]

### The Street Teaching Team from the U.S.A.

The tempo of the teaching work in Melbourne had reached such heights that the Universal House of Justice decided to send us three experts in street teaching from South Carolina, who had the experience of seeing thousands of new believers accepting the Faith in a short period. The ethnic composition of this team could not escape the attention of the Australian Bahá'í community. The group consisted of an African American, an Anglo-American and a Jewish-African-Anglo-American Bahá'í.

This team galvanised the-friends in the bold action of reaching the masses in the streets with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. From the time of their arrival, a group of us dedicated every spare hour at our disposal to this 'street teaching' method. Many souls, both old and new believers, were transformed by the experience of the power, the courage and the joys associated with this public process of promoting the Word of God. Some gnats turned into eagles and their doubts and fears gave way to valour and certitude!

In various suburbs of Melbourne firesides were held each and every day of the week. During 1971, my final year at the University, without private

2. New Zealand

transportation, I managed to attend over 350 of these firesides! Cooperation and loving fellowship among the friends involved in these activities were at an all time high. It was then that I met Harry Penrith,[3] an Aborigine Bahá'í who was actively involved in both the Bahá'í community and its promotion. Mahvash Master, living in Melbourne at this time, was another soul transformed through contact with Dr Mohajer, into a most dynamic Bahá'í teacher. She taught the Cause unceasingly, and set ablaze many a heat with the love of Bahá'u'lláh. She traversed the length and breadth of the continent and remained faithful to her life's mission of igniting the fire of God's Love in every assembly even unto her last breath. Suffice it to say that the excitement the love and the willingness to sacrifice and share by those who followed the guidance of the hands of the Cause and the House of Justice in this period, remains unsurpassed in my Bahá'í experience, either before or since those fateful years!

## Young Pioneers go to N.T.

Having completed my Architectural degree at the University of Melbourne, I decided to pioneer to Darwin, a post at which I stayed from February 1972 to April 1978, barring a year of service in Kiribati and six months of travels and pilgrimage in 1974, from which I returned to Darwin just in time to experience the devastations of cyclone Tracey! Out of the summer school of 1972, followed by the National Youth Conference in Canberra, both blessed by the presence of Hand of the Cause Collis Featherstone, came a number young pioneers who settled in the Northern Territory. They included Juanita Buckney, Julia Salter, Marion Leedham, and Paul Stevenson (who opened Bathurst Island to the Bahá'í Faith, thus fulfilling a goal of the 9 year plan). It was February 1972 when I began my employment with the Federal Department of Works, based in Darwin. Leaving Melbourne for this post, I was accompanied by a friend, Adib Shahmardani, who kindly accepted to drive me through the heartland and be my fellow Bahá'í pioneer in the Far North. The vehicle dedicated to this epic journey was a 1963 VW, assembled out of the wrecked car yard belonging to a Melbourne Bahá'í, purchased at the modest price of $400.00. It was mechanically in excellent condition and was freshly painted in bright orange. The only improvement we made to it was to write a highly visible slogan "Bahá'í Unites Mankind" in flowing 6 inch black lettering across its engine cover! On the way we stopped in Adelaide where a teaching conference was in process. In attendance were the Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Gertrude Blum and Councillor Howard Harwood, together with many other friends. Gertrude predicted that I would prosper materially as well as spiritually in the service of the Cause, and to this day I pray for the speedy fulfilment of her predictions! On our departure, Howard Harwood gave us enough grapes to last us the rest of the journey.

3. Burnum Burnum, c.1936 - 1997.

## Alice Springs

We stopped in Port Augusta briefly, and in order to make contact with the locals played the pool tables. We managed to impress them sufficiently to establish a dialogue. We then left for Alice Springs, where, at the time, Mr and Mrs Mansell Morris were the only Bahá'í pioneers. We covered every letterbox in town with Bahá'í literature, and stayed the night at the Morris's. I remember Mrs Morris being concerned about how we were going fare as the first Persians ever to penetrate the heartland of Australia. She must have forgotten that our camels had preceded us over a century earlier! My answer to her, however, was that we intended to capitalise on being Persians, in order to teach the Australian Aborigines! Upon reflection, this was my first conscious thought about one of the most challenging issues of our time: the relationship between the cultures of the East, the West and the indigenous First Nations. Years later the theory of the complementary nature of these cultures, each offering a basket of knowledge essential to a wholesome development of civilisation, engaged a great deal of my thoughts. The practical civilisation of the West the philosophical heritage of the East and the spiritual cultures of the indigenous peoples are not only complementary, but interdependent. Once Divinely guided, their harmonious blending will lead to the birth of a global culture, rich in its infinite diversity, and marked by its pursuit of excellence in material, intellectual and spiritual pursuits. This global culture and its accompanying World Civilisation will usher in the long promised 'Golden Age of the entire human race'; the ultimate goal and the crowning achievement of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

## Entry By Troops in Alice Springs

In Alice Springs, known for its racial intolerance in the 1970's, Adib Shahmardani and myself, having covered the town with Bahá'í pamphlets, went to teach the Faith to some Aboriginals who were camping in the dry bed of the Todd River. The result was 15 declarations, 14 of them Aborigines. Admittedly, with no Bahá'í communities in place for follow ups, they were never heard of again. The Bahá'í community at that time was unaccustomed to declarants with no forwarding address, telephone numbers or even an exact date of birth or surnames! Their conditions were summed up in the prophetic words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "blessed are the nameless and traceless poor, for they shall be the leaders of mankind!" (a more detail account of these events was published in the *Australian Bahá'í Bulletin*, April 1972).

## Darwin Before the Cyclone

In the years prior to cyclone Tracey that devastated Darwin in the Christmas of 1974, that city, as well as all the townships along the road to Alice Springs, including some settlements in Gove Peninsula, and Bathurst Island,

had, in no uncertain terms, received the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, and other settlements along the main highway, almost every household had received some Bahá'í literature. The orange VW with the "BAHÁ'Í UNITES MANKIND" slogan, was by then a recognised feature of Darwin life. Daily it was parked strategically across from the central P.O. for several hours acting as a silent teacher. Meanwhile we mixed and mingled with the crowd, using the street teaching methods we had learned in Melbourne. Great efforts were put into reaching the hippies who camped on the City beach, although Aboriginal teaching was always our first priority. This presented our youthful and inexperienced team with extreme difficulties. In those days in Darwin, you could hardly communicate with any Aboriginals or Torres Straight Islanders, as they either had insufficient command of the English language, or were not sober enough to hold a conversation, no matter what time of the day or evening! All we could do was to mention the name of Bahá'u'lláh, show our genuine love, and pray that God would change their intolerable conditions. The root cause of these problems, I believe, lies in the injustices committed in this land against the First Nation Aboriginals. This subject is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that in the opinion of those who have lived in South Africa and in other lands renowned for racial injustice, the Australian treatment of Aborigines ranks among the most inhumane the world over. It is the moral imperative of the Australian Bahá'í community to help rectify this shameful chapter in the history of their nation. So far the Bahá'í efforts in this arena have been far from adequate. With the approach of the 2Ist Century and the Lesser Peace, we may well ask ourselves, for what time or mandate should we wait in order to act decidedly on this most urgent and challenging of all tasks facing a nation with such `incalculable spiritual potential'? Seventy-five years after the Cause of God has reached the shores of the Australian Continent, its community boasts but of a few deepened Aboriginal Bahá'ís. We have no Bahá'í cultural group representing their heritage to the rest of the community, nor do we have a strong Aboriginal teaching teams active within the borders of Australia and beyond. There are few, if any, Bahá'ís in Australia who have seriously studied an Aboriginal language or are fully conversant with their culture. We have little understanding of their values, and have rarely attempted to live amongst them in order to demonstrate the reality of the oneness of humanity. Intermarriage within the community of the Greatest Name, between Aborigines and other racial groups is almost unheard of. The time for a much higher profile for this long suffering community has now come, and the Bahá'ís (as advised by the beloved Guardian must provide a platform for the legitimate expression of their grievances, before it is too late.

In my monthly travels to hold Bahá'í classes for the Leyton's children in Katherine, I observed the contrast between Aboriginal and mainstream

Australian families living only a few hundred meters apart. While the children of both families attended the same school and studied the same curriculum, one family lived in a government supplied air conditioned house, fitted with all the modern conveniences while the other dwelled on the bare ground, sheltered under some rusty corrugated iron sheets held up by a few recycled timber posts, a rickety structure with no walls or furniture, no beds, no desk, no bathroom and no parents who could either read or write let alone encourage their offspring in the pursuit of excellence. Both children were judged by the same standards and were expected to conform and succeed in the same society.

## A Family Year of Service

In the light of the deprived conditions of the Aboriginal children and youth, it may be timely to devise a well-considered scheme for an international "family year of service" project, which aims at hosting Aboriginal students in Bahá'í homes. This concept could well extend to other countries and peoples, assisting to eradicate the ethnic and cultural prejudices that to this day plague the life of many nations. What better demonstration of our faith in the unity of the human race, and our concern for the well being of future Australians could we present, than to apply such preventative remedies to the lingering question of racial disharmony and cultural misunderstanding. In due course the establishment of a Bahá'í school for the Aboriginal children, and/or an orphanage associated with the house of Worship, would further enhance and strengthen the love and fellowship among the diverse cultures of the Australian society.

## Cyclone Tracey

The cyclone that destroyed the city Darwin on Christmas eve 1974 was a rare social and spiritual experience of immense significance. Darwin was a city with a high proportion of individuals belonging to dysfunctional families. Many people with personal problems, trying to escape their past would take refuge in the remoteness of the North. Greed for lucrative Government contracts was another factor in attracting the work force to the area. Darwin boasted of being the world's capital for consumption of beer and defacto relationships! Another hallmark characteristic of their life there was its intolerance towards the Aborigines, who in spite of the city's multi-cultural composition were mostly living in sub-human conditions and were treated as such. Their treatment by the government agencies in the Northern Territory that were entrusted with the promotion of their welfare and the protection of their interests, were often blatantly racist, manifestly unjust and morally unforgivable. On the other side of the ledger, Darwin was the most cosmopolitan capital city in the country, the gateway to Asia, and the first Australian city to have a Chinese Mayor. As the most culturally diverse

capital city, and due to its manageable population of 40,000, it held the great promise of becoming the country's foremost laboratory for cultural diversity and a fertile soil for promotion of the oneness of humankind.

Prior warnings about the possible impact of the cyclone on the city were generally ignored by a population engrossed in the celebration of Christmas. I can recall the Departmental party on the afternoon of the 24th of December 1974. It was characterised by a total commitment to hedonism; a Godless commemoration held on the occasion of the birth of Christ!

The documented pattern of the city's devastation, as recorded by the satellites and published in the local papers, seemed astonishingly deliberate! Darwin was made of suburbs separated by stretches of bare roads, each branching out to reach a cluster of houses at the end. For the comprehensive destruction that resulted from cyclone Tracey, the eye of the cyclone must have travelled a complex path, going to and fro, reversing and changing direction to reach each and every suburb by the shortest route.

Meteorologists confirmed this seemingly deliberate and highly improbable path adopted by the cyclone. In the biblical context, parallels may be drawn with Sodom and Gomorrah, and the destruction caused by the inequities committed by a people who turned their back to God's forsaken children, and hence to God Himself.

## The Cyclone Aftermath

For a number of Months following Tracey, life in Darwin was an unprecedented social experience in the history of this land. The destruction of houses proved a great equaliser, as all food and shelter was confined to a few schools and government hostels. Money, the great icon of materialism, had lost its power. No commodities could be purchased, while essentials were freely supplied at the supermarket. There were no other shops or businesses operational for some months! Also provided free of charge, were public transport, meals and accommodation.

In addition to receiving a weekly hardship allowance, every two weeks the Government employees were sent for "R&R" to an Australian capital city of their choice. For a while, damaged houses were fully restored by the armed forces, and every kind of building material and assistance was provided for the community. It was a time for the city, if not the nation, to reflect and take stock of their relationship to God and some of His less fortunate children! The socio-economic as well as spiritual implications of this unique experience, resulting from the greatest of natural disasters in the history of the nation, could well be the subject of a separate and fascinating study.

## The North Western Arc

During the city's recovery period I was able to travel, in February-March 1975, through the North-West region of Australia, stopping at every town between Darwin and Perth in order to teach the Faith and place Bahá'í books in libraries and to contact churches and schools wherever possible. Up to that time to my knowledge, no other Bahá'ís had lived or visited the area. In Perth I met with Drs Peter and Janet Khan on their return to Australia after a prolonged stay in the USA. I continued to live in Darwin until the city was fully rebuilt and left for Queensland on April 21st 1978. Ruth Scott was the only active Bahá'í living in Darwin at the time of our arrival. The De Silva family from East Timor, despite language barriers and lack of deepening, supported the consolidation of the LSA by their annual vote. When the Wildes arrived from Adelaide and Francis and family from Hawaii the Community began to function with much greater efficiency. Ray Katt became a Bahá'í in the mid-seventies; and two pioneers from the US swelled our numbers. Marion Leedham taught at the local high school and concentrated on aboriginal teaching.

## In Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the 1970's proved a turning point in the spiritual destiny of the N.T. and the Aboriginal people. It was in 1972 that finally the Aboriginal population ceased to decline and through a mysterious process akin to telepathy, the Aboriginal race decided to turn back the tide across the entire continent. The direct correlation between such a major event in the history of a people and the promotion of the word of God in their midst, is worthy of the greater research than is permissible in the scope of this paper. In short, the teaching experiences of the 1960's and the 1970's, proved both the capacity of the Australian Bahá'í Community for rapid response to the call for teaching and pioneering, as well as their willingness for personal sacrifice in the path of service to their beloved Cause. The failure to sustain the process of entry by troops was due to an unfortunate lack of unified vision by a community mentally unprepared for a massing increase in its numbers.

Another essential component of teaching success in Australia is the recognition of the pivotal role played by the original inhabitants of this land in the spiritualisation of the nation as a whole. They are the gatekeepers of the hearts of the nation. Teaching Aborigines, therefore takes precedence over all other Bahá'í activities Australia. In this way, and in this way alone, can the Australian Bahá'ís ultimately fulfil the unimaginably glorious spiritual destiny that is rightfully theirs.

A quarter of a century after the soul harvest of the 1970's, the Universal House of Justice informed the nations of the world that once again the opportunity to increase in the number of believers is knocking at our door.

Once again, in the closing decade of the 20th century, the spiritual destiny of the Australian nation hangs in the balance, and the future of its people, to an unsuspected degree, depends on how the Bahá'ís, at this crucial time in the nation's spiritual history, respond to the call of God and initiates a sustained process of entry by troops, welcoming under the tabernacle of unity the eager souls awaiting their invitation. The question remains, that having missed the opportunity of the 1970's, are the Australian Bahá'ís now ready to embrace the challenge of entry by troops presented to them by the Four Year Plan?

## A Poem

In the light of the spiritual battles fought and won in the vast arena of this island continent, portrayed by the beloved Guardian as a land of "unimaginable spiritual potential", and in consideration to the challenges that lie ahead, it is befitting to close this paper with the blood stained manuscript of a poem, found in the coat pocket of a fallen Australian soldier in Flanders Field:

*"Ye who have faith to look with fearless eyes,*
*Beyond the tragedy of a world at strife,*
*And know that out of death and darkness*
*Shall arise, the dawn of ampler life.*
*Rejoice! Whatever anguish rend the heart,*
*That God has given you this priceless power;*
*To live in these great days*
*And have your part in Freedom's growing hour,*
*That you may tell your sons*
*Who see the light high in the Heavens,*
*Their heritage to take.*
*I saw the powers of darkness put to flight!*

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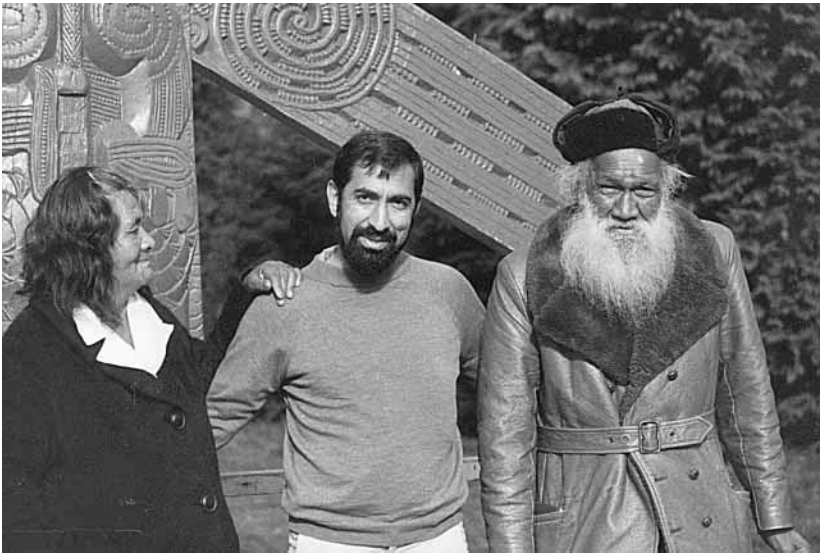
On the evening of Tuesday 13th October 1998 Hedi Moani was murdered in his home. On 23rd June 1999 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand received a letter from the Bahá'í World Centre which read:

"*The House of Justice has noted that the police in Takapuna have provided information from the deposition statement of Mr. Dean Hemopo, who has entered a plea of guilty with regard to the accusation that he murdered Mr. Hedi Moani. In this statement Mr. Hemopo indicates that he carried out this crime because of his belief that Mr. Moani was converting the leaders of the Ratana Church to the Faith and that he was responsible for subversion of that organization through his teaching activities as a Baha'i.*

*In the light of this information, the Universal House of Justice has decided that Hedi Moani should be designated as a martyr to the Cause of Baha'u'llah. You are asked to convey this decision to the close relatives of Mr. Moani and to the members of the New Zealand Baha'i community, who will doubtless draw inspiration and new energy in their service to the Faith from the fact that this devoted servant of the Cause has attained the rank of martyr in your country.*



*Mere Barrett, Hedi Moani, and Huti Barrett photographed at Hia Kaitupeka Pa, Taumarunui, New Zealand.*

# Bahá'í social and economic development
## Participating in the unfoldment of world civilisation

*Payam Pakravan*[1]

### 1. Introduction

Bahá'í social and economic development encompasses a broad range of endeavours that contribute to an organic process of learning about the application of the Bahá'í spirit and teachings to the problems of society. It is an integral component of the broader transformative process set in motion by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and destined to push humanity through the turbulence of adolescence into the glorious radiance of its long awaited maturity; a coming of age that will culminate in the "efflorescence of a world civilisation"[2] far removed from any that has been witnessed by our race, or conceived by its brightest minds.

The call of the Universal House of Justice for the worldwide community to give systematic attention to this "vital sphere of Bahá'í endeavour"[3] is, therefore, not to be understood simply as a directive to find ways of ameliorating poverty and destitution, important as this is. A far broader impetus is required than that which has driven much of development activity since World War II, namely, the attempt to replicate the economic prosperity of selected regions of the world in other regions. Instead, it represents one more dimension of the duty of all Bahá'ís to "erect the fabric of the Kingdom of God on earth".[4] It is, when viewed in this broader perspective, a call to participate in

1. This paper was written during the author's term of service at the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) in Haifa, Israel. It is not necessarily representative of the philosophy or views of that Office.
2. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p.6
3. 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world (published in *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1983-1992*, pp.6-10)
4 From a letter written by the Universal House of Justice dated 8 December 1967 to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.125-128)

the unfoldment of a new, divinely inspired System of planetary organisation.

The radical transformation of human consciousness and social structures implied by such a stupendous undertaking cannot conceivably be limited to one section of the globe, however its boundaries are defined. Indeed, to shape our vision of the future on national, regional, continental, or even hemispheric bases seems to fly in the face of the very spirit of the age, which is unambiguously global. The breathtaking acceleration, this century, of the worldwide integration of human affairs only serves to reinforce the growing realisation that serious-minded contemporary undertakings, however much they vary in form across time and space, must be animated by a universal spirit.

In like manner, Bahá'í social and economic development is a global process that must be propelled and enriched by activities in every corner of the earth. In guidance provided to the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre , the Universal House of Justice makes the following statements:

> *The worldwide Bahá'í community, as an organic whole, transcends divisions prevalent in society today, such as "North" and "South", "developed" and "underdeveloped". Social and economic development efforts are undertaken by Bahá'ís, irrespective of the degree of material prosperity achieved by their nations, as they strive to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the gradual process of building a new civilisation. Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh is a member of this worldwide community and can rightfully offer to contribute to a specific endeavour in any country.*[5]

Every Bahá'í community, including those in more materially prosperous countries such as Australia, must gradually enhance its capacity to participate in this process by learning to channel the forces released by Bahá'u'lláh toward the betterment of society. No attempt is made here to provide an exhaustive description of the nature and principles of Bahá'í social and economic development. Indeed, it would seem grossly premature to do so. Broad guidance continues to emanate from the Bahá'í World Centre, and will expand in accordance with the exertions of the Bahá'í community. Rather, the aim of this paper is to highlight certain features of a revised conceptual framework within which Bahá'í social and economic development might be considered, and to identify several imperatives for individuals and communities in Australia to become more involved in this field of action.

5. Memorandum dated 11 March 1997 from the Universal House of Justice to the Office of Social and Economic Development

## 1.1 The evolution of development praxis

The term 'economic development', as it is currently used, can be traced to the reconstruction of post-World War II Europe. In the late 1940s and 1950s the efforts of the United States, under the Marshall Plan, and of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), were largely focused on rebuilding the infrastructure of a war-ravaged continent. In the 1950s, within a world context of rapid de-colonisation and the establishment of independent nation states, the World Bank and leading nations began to shift their focus from reconstruction to development, applying the same principles that had led to such a dramatic recovery in European industrial production levels to these newly-formed states.[6] The goal of development was generally defined as putting the "less developed countries, as soon as possible in a position where they can realise their aspirations with regard to economic progress without relying on foreign aid".[7]

Regrettably, after half a century of well-intentioned efforts to improve the economic welfare of the world's poorest countries, and despite the eagerness with which these countries have striven to attain the relative prosperity of industrialised nations, the world enters a new millennium facing two disturbing trends. On one hand, large masses of its population are lagging further and further behind the economic wealth of the privileged minority.[8] At the same time, however, the largely uninterrupted growth in the aggregate income and wealth of richer nations is rapidly becoming undermined by – and arguably contributing to – massive social, moral and environmental breakdown.

An increasingly vocal legion of thinkers is beginning to recognise that perhaps these two processes are more similar in their underlying causes than may first appear. The idea that a fundamental shift might be required in the definitions of, and assumptions underlying, key concepts such as progress, wealth, and prosperity is one which is driving some leading lights of development theory to question the very bases on which models of thought and action in this field are currently constructed.[9]

This is not to say that development thinking has been completely stagnant for decades. The failure to achieve lasting improvements in the economic welfare of the masses of people in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia and the Pacific has led to evolving paradigms of thought, each of which has, for a time, been viewed as the answer to the dilemma of poverty. In the

6. The so-called "third world"
7. *Partners in Development: Report of the Commission on International Development*, Lester B. Pearson, Chairman, 1969, p.11
8. The United Nations' Development Programme's *Human Development Report 1999* laments the "grotesque proportions" of global inequalities in income and living standards. Since 1960, the income gap between the world's richest 20 per cent and poorest 20 per cent has widened from 30 to one to 74 to one.
9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "we should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end" (*The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, pp.3-4)

earliest models of development, there was almost exclusive emphasis placed on increasing physical capital to raise production and income levels. From the outset, then, the question of development was, for the most part, reduced to one of economic growth. Industrialisation, synonymous for many with modernisation, was seen as the prime instrument for achieving this objective. In many 'developing' countries it was the state that played a leading role in promoting economic growth, often taking measures to protect the domestic economy from imports and pouring resources obtained from foreign aid into industry and high technology projects. However, it soon became clear that the expected "trickle down" of wealth to the poorer strata of the population was not occurring. Instead, patterns of growth were inequitable, with upper and middle class elites capturing most of the benefits. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a shift in emphasis away from trying to achieve aggregate economic growth to a more explicit focus on the alleviation of poverty and on meeting basic human needs such as education, health and nutrition. With social development now being targeted directly, movements began to arise within the development field centred on the promotion of democracy and popular participation, environmental concerns, and womens' affairs. The 1980s saw a shift back to growth-focused arguments and policies, with an emphasis on structural macroeconomic adjustment. Instead of the state-led planning of the 1960s, however, it was market forces that were given reign, leading many countries to take steps toward opening up their economies to the competitive rigours of rapidly emerging global markets. There was ongoing debate on the meaning and merit of key phrases such as 'participatory development', 'appropriate technology' and 'sustainable development'. Most recently, and perhaps most promisingly, discussion at the leading edge of development thinking has begun to include notions of values and spirituality.[10]

This evolution of thought contains some hopeful elements but has failed to incorporate a "searching re-examination of the [essentially materialistic] attitudes and assumptions that currently underlie approaches to social and economic development,"[11] including, in particular, those pertaining to the purpose and goals of the development process. As stated unambiguously in *The Prosperity of Humankind*, unless "the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals. That purpose must be sought in spiritual dimensions of life and motivation".

Within the Bahá'í community as well, a change is required in the way

10. Witness, for example, the "World Faiths and Development Dialogue" hosted by Dr. George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Mr. James D. Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank, at Lambeth Palace, London on 18-19 February 1998. The contribution of the Bahá'í community to this dialogue has been published in the booklet *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*
11. Bahá'í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind*, 1995

these issues are perceived. The tendency to immediately associate social and economic development with images of rural tutorial schools and primary health care programmes in poorer countries is deeply and widely entrenched, and can sometimes reflect an uncritical acceptance of some of the materialistic assumptions which have driven secular thought:

> *In this connection, it is a source of concern that communities in materially advanced countries may have a tendency to view social and economic development as being chiefly of interest to the so-called developing world. Yet even in those countries where the most advanced public services and infrastructures are to be enjoyed, important segments of the population may suffer relative privation. Indeed, literacy and public health campaigns, usually thought of in connection with poor nations, may be just as appropriate for the industrialised world's disadvantaged districts. Moreover, such social problems as a soaring rate of failed marriages, interracial strife, inadequate education, substance abuse and criminality show no preference for the Third World and may at times be more devastatingly pervasive in materially advanced countries. This social disarray which increasingly infringes upon the quality of life in every part of the globe provides many potential arenas for the social and economic development efforts of Bahá'í communities.*[12]

Bahá'í social and economic development is nothing less than the global application of profound spiritual principles for the transformation of society and the building of new patterns of human association. Its purpose is to lay the "foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness."[13]

## 2.0 New patterns of thought

New patterns of action are intimately associated with new patterns of thought. It is, indeed, difficult to break free from dominant modes of thinking, features of which include the adoption of a materialistic mindset; a strong focus on individualism in ethical relations; a tendency to dichotomise between thought and action, science and religion, and objectivism and relativism; and the largely unchallenged acceptance of conflict "as the mainspring of human interaction."[14] These underlying attitudes and assumptions form the basis of the conceptual framework within which the world has been and continues to be viewed. However, there is a strong argument to suggest that a new framework of thought is required in order to allow humanity to develop a

12. From a letter dated 30 June 1993 written by the Office of Social and Economic Development to an individual believer
13. *The Prosperity of Humankind*
14. *The Prosperity of Humankind*, p.6

vision of – and the volition to move toward – the next stage in its collective evolution. The "supreme animating power" for such a transformation derives from the counsels revealed by the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh[15]:

> *All things are now made new … Renewal is the order of the day … The people, therefore, must be set completely free from their old patterns of thought, that all their attention may be focused upon these new principles, for these are the light of this time and the very spirit of this age.*[16]

In this section, it is argued that a sea change is required in the way that several concepts intrinsic to development thinking – namely civilisation, welfare, and growth – are conceived. From such a change in thinking, a broader understanding of development will begin to emerge and, it is argued, imperatives for global participation in the development process become more readily apparent.

## 2.1 Civilisation

Because the ultimate purpose of Bahá'í social and economic development is to contribute to the gradual building of a new civilisation, an understanding of the concept of civilisation is pivotal to any discussion about development. In his highly influential book, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington identifies several "central propositions concerning the nature, identity, and dynamics of civilisations". These include the distinction between 'civilisation' as an ideal and simultaneously co-existing 'civilisations'; the enmeshment of civilisations with culture and, in general, their close identification with one of the world's great religions; the integrative relationship of civilisations with their constituent components; and the enduring and evolutionary continuity of civilisations.[17]

The Bahá'í concept of civilisation might be defined as the enterprise whereby "the human mind and heart have created progressively more complex and efficient means to express their inherent moral and intellectual capacities."[18] Important elements of this understanding include the spiritual reality of civilisation,[19] its reflection in the material realm,[20] its developmental

15. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.93
16. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.252
17. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996, pp.40-45
18. Bahá'í International Community, *Who is Writing the Future? Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, 1999, p.2
19. The spiritual nature of reality is a fundamental Bahá'í belief: "The mainspring of Bahá'u'lláh's Message is an exposition of reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and of the laws that govern that reality's operation": *Who is Writing the Future?*, p.2
20. The first paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* refers to a three-layered hierarchy of reality: the "Godhead" or the "Reality of the Divinity" which is beyond all comprehension; the "Kingdom of His Cause", or "Primal Will", in which the names and attributes of God are fully revealed and exist in perfect form; and the "world of creation", which is the material world apparent to our senses, every element of which is a sign of these names and attributes (see *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.184)

nature, and its' necessary subjection to the law of moderation by harmonising material advancement with "moral precepts and foundations of divine civilisation."[21] As Bahá'ís around the world strive to translate the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into social reality, this understanding will be gradually enriched.

Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation"[22] cannot merely be reduced to a call for humanity to generate progressively higher levels of economic activity and wealth, to adopt increasingly refined standards of living, or even to establish more sophisticated institutions and agencies for the governance of human affairs. Rather, it seems to allude to a process, driven by the power associated with the generation and application of knowledge, that is aimed at achieving "an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."[23] A deeper comprehension of this idea derives from the fact that "the working of the material world is merely a reflection of spiritual conditions and until the spiritual conditions can be changed there can be no lasting change for the better in material affairs."[24]

In describing contemporary civilisation, Shoghi Effendi refers extensively to the "universal fermentation which, in *every continent* of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity."[25] The forces of internal disintegration and destruction assailing the world are ubiquitous, and are eating into the vitals, and tearing down the foundations, of every society. The one truly integrative, constructive process at work in the world today stands associated with the consecrated efforts of the Community of the Most Great Name to put into effect the Divine Program revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, "embodying in its essentials God's divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age".[26] The most fundamental task in this respect is "spreading the Word of God" and lending support to the "establishment of the Bahá'í Administrative Order". However, a no-less vital effort is required for the implementation and support of "projects and institutions for human advancement"[27], and this constitutes a clear mandate for involvement in Bahá'í social and economic development activities. It is possible, therefore, to conceive of an 'integrative' imperative for engagement in this sphere of endeavour.

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.109-110
22. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.215
23. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.43
24. From a letter dated 19 November 1974 written by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Italy (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, p. 283). According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The divine teachings and the admonitions and exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh are manifestly evident. These constitute the organisation of the Kingdom and their enforcement is obligatory." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.106)
25. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.170 (note: emphasis added)
26. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.34
27. From a letter dated 21 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.368-370)

## 2.2 Welfare

At the heart of every social and economic development project is some notion of human welfare. Institutions are established, programmes are implemented, and ideals and sentiments are given voice, all in the name of enhancing well-being, generating prosperity, or furthering human happiness. The overwhelming majority of these efforts give prime importance to economic considerations; for many thinkers and policy makers, the objective of prosperity and well-being is readily equated with, reduced to, or measured by the generation and distribution of income and wealth.

Clearly, economic activity is a vital component of the advancement of civilisation, and the welfare of its people. Material means are crucial to survival, and they facilitate the expression of human capacities and the manifestation of the potential of the human spirit. However, from the materialistic mindset – which is a defining feature of our moment in history, and which implies a particular view of human nature that pays very little attention, if any at all, to the spiritual element of life or to the role of the individual as an agent for social transformation – it readily follows that the wealth generated by economic activity is an end in itself.

The Bahá'í approach to development rests on a broader conception of welfare, which in turn derives from a fundamentally different understanding of human nature and of the purpose of human existence. True welfare, for a Bahá'í, has a spiritual basis. It consists in drawing closer to God and striving to align our will with His. It is manifested by a life-long effort to know and to love God, to live in accordance with His dictates, and to "become a source of social good".[28] True advancement and prosperity, in this view, are spiritual, and our focus on the material aspect of life is considered a means of allowing us to achieve this deeper objective.[29] True wealth is found not in the pursuit of selfish interests, but rather in dedication to the well-being of society and the enrichment of the lives of its peoples.[30]

Such an approach is based not only on a broader, spiritually inspired conception of human welfare, but on the confident expectation that a comprehensive, Divinely-ordained System – comprising laws, institutions and the essentials of a Divine Economy[31] – is gradually being implemented to promote and safeguard it. The lynchpin of this system is the spiritual principle of the oneness of mankind; a principle that drives the efforts of the Bahá'í community to promote world unity. According to Bahá'u'lláh "(t)he well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless

28. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p.2
29. See *The Prosperity of Humankind*, Section V
30. Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, pp.24-25
31. See *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.19. The context in which the phrase "Divine Economy" is used by Shoghi Effendi indicates that it should, perhaps, be read as a reference to the incarnation of spiritual principles in a broad system of management, organisation, or administration of social affairs.

and until its unity is firmly established.[32] The unity of any entity must be based on a particular order, and the key force in this respect is religion, which is "a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world."[33] In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, nothing short of the "various laws, institutions and principles of the world" found in the divine teachings "can assure peace and tranquillity to mankind."[34]

Accompanying the Revelation of these laws and principles is the release of the requisite generative power necessary to effect change in the reality of all created things.[35] Human will is the agency through which these spiritual forces are gradually made incarnate in the social realm. Mankind has been invested with the capacity, and the obligation, to draw on the power of the creative Word to bring earthly existence into closer alignment with the World of the Kingdom. In His Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh instructs the people of the world to promote "the development of the cities of God and His countries."[36] To think of this ordinance as being for another time or place demonstrates a failure to adequately recognise the station of the Word of God. "No place is there for any one to flee to", writes Bahá'u'lláh, "once Thy laws have been sent down, and no refuge can be found by any soul after the revelation of Thy commandments."[37] The spirit released by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation must, therefore, be given expression in the world of creation. There is thus a 'generative' imperative for all Bahá'ís to apply the Teachings for the improvement of human welfare; an imperative that encompasses the challenge of engaging in Bahá'í social and economic development:

> *This challenge evokes the resourcefulness, flexibility and cohesiveness of the many communities composing the Bahá'í world. Different communities will, of course, perceive different approaches and different solutions to similar needs. Some can offer assistance abroad, while, at the outset, others must of necessity receive assistance; but all, irrespective of circumstances or resources, are endowed with the capacity to respond in some measure; all can share; all can participate in the joint enterprise of applying more systematically the principles of the Faith to upraising the quality of human life.*[38]

32. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.286
33. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.125
34. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.249
35. See, for example, *Prayers and Meditations*, pp.294-296
36. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.77. "In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the 'progress of the world' and the 'development of nations' as being among the ordinances of God for this day" (20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world)
37. *Prayers and Meditations*, p.197
38. 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world

## 2.3 Growth

The concepts of development and growth are, in a certain sense, synonymous. Both can be thought of as involving movement from a lower or simpler to a higher or more complex form or stage. Given the complexity and spiritual reality of human institutions, communities and civilisations, it is instructive to draw on the tool of metaphor in seeking to understand the processes by which they grow.[39] The imagery of metaphor, by shaping thought processes, can influence patterns of action.

The source of metaphor underlying much of modern social thought has been the classical, mechanistic tradition of (Newtonian) physics.[40] However, for all of the insights that they do allow, mechanistic metaphors struggle to cope adequately with concepts that are fundamental to human existence such as knowledge, choice, and irreversible, purpose-oriented social change.[41] Biological metaphors, on the other hand, can facilitate a deeper understanding of human-based phenomena, and the processes of growth associated with them.[42] 'Abdu'l-Bahá often used examples from the vegetable and animal kingdoms to explain complex social and spiritual concepts.[43]

The principles of organic growth, for instance, can offer key insights into the structure of civilisation and its development – a process which lies at the heart of the present discussion. They can yield valuable information about fundamental principles of social existence such as the importance of knowledge, moderation, and cooperation as driving forces for social development; the dynamic interplay between individual and collective transformation; the emergence of institutions and patterns of interaction necessary for evolution to progressively more complex stages of social organisation; the inextricable link between individual and societal interests and the need for the subordination of the former to the latter; the impetus to collective advancement and the enhancement of the beauty of society provided by diversity of "customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions"[44]; the critical importance of unity in promoting the maintenance and expression of this diversity; and the transcendence of the purpose and reality of civilisation from the mere existence of society and its elements.

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39. Far from being mere literary ornaments, metaphors offer a distinctive mode for achieving deeper understanding, are central to reasoning about the world, reflect our beliefs about reality, and can inspire new patterns of thought (G.M. Hodgson, *Economics and Evolution: Bringing Life back into Economics*, 1996, pp.18-19)
40. For instance, the model of human behaviour upon which economic theories are built, encapsulated by the appellation *homo economicus*, can be thought of as involving agents optimising welfare subject to a combination of forces and constraints, "as if they were mere particles obeying mechanical laws" (Hodgson, 1996, p.23)
41. Hodgson, 1996, pp.21-24
42. Witness the recent comments made by Rupert Murdoch about *accretive* economic growth *(Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 9 October, 1999)
43. See, for example, His comments in *The Secret of Divine Civilisation* about the evolution of the political world (pp.107-108)
44. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p.291

Similarly, the growth of the Faith is organic in that it resembles a living organism in its organisation and development. Taken together, the 20 October 1983 message of the Universal House of Justice and several others immediately preceding and following it[45] highlight the fact – perhaps unappreciated – that the worldwide Bahá'í community has evolved to a stage at which participation in development efforts is a requisite for its continued growth:

> *Bahá'í communities in many lands have attained a size and complexity that both require and make possible the implementation of a range of activities for their social and economic development which will not only be of immense value for the consolidation of these communities and the development of their Bahá'í life, but will also benefit the wider communities in which they are embedded and will demonstrate the beneficial effects of the Bahá'í Message to the critical gaze of the world.*[46]

Social and economic development activities should be viewed as an "enlarged dimension of the consolidation process" and, thus, a "reinforcement of the teaching work".[47] If, however, Bahá'í communities fail to expand their efforts in this sphere of endeavour, there will be "grave consequences" to their lives[48], and they will effectively deprive themselves of the chance to build the institutional capacity necessary for future undertakings. Accordingly, it seems clear that there is an 'organic' imperative, related to the growth of the Faith, for Bahá'ís to take action in the field of social and economic development.

## 3. The Australian context

In a country such as Australia, generally considered to be one of the most advanced economies in the world, there still exist a host of social challenges and problems that require attention. Indeed, comments by a leading domestic journalist indicate that even in the midst of a period of apparent economic prosperity, the Australian economy is failing to fulfil most of the basic, traditional goals of economics, and that "we are still far from a Golden Age".[49] Perhaps even more poignant is the questioning by a prominent and well-respected commentator, of whether economic growth, as measured by ever-

45. That is, the Ridván 140 and 141 Messages (1983 and 1984); the message dated 2 January 1984 to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in every land (see *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1983-1992*, pp.3-13; 17-23); and a letter dated 3 January 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer (published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986*, pp.513-519)
46. *A Wider Horizon*, p.12 (note: emphasis added)
47. *A Wider Horizon*, p.10. Although they are complementary, it is most important to maintain a distinction between teaching and social and economic development. Guidance from the Universal House of Justice clearly indicates that development activities should not be pursued with the intention of attracting people to the Faith
48. *A Wider Horizon*, p.12
49. Tim Colebatch, *The Age*, Tuesday 15 June 1999

increasing consumption levels, is synonymous with happiness. This writer recently quipped that "too much economics", with its narrow, materialistic focus, and inability to say anything of much use about ecological, communal, social or spiritual aspects of life, "is bad for your wellbeing."[50]

This type of comment reflects a growing awareness in Australia that improvement of economic conditions does not necessarily lead to an amelioration of other societal problems.[51] It highlights the real need for local Bahá'í communities to begin to consider what set of actions they might take to demonstrate the potency and efficacy of the spiritual principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. A recent communication from the Office of Social and Economic Development contains the following statements in this connection:

> *As you set out to stimulate development efforts in the Australian Bahá'í community, you may wish to consider holding a series of consultations … about the problems currently confronting Australian society. Many of these are readily apparent even from afar: the racial tensions between the Aboriginal community and society at large, the overwhelming challenges facing the Aboriginal people in general, the problems of environmental degradation, the changes in the global economy, the spread of disease, inequities with regard to women, the disintegration of family bonds, the demoralisation of youth, and the pronounced need for moral education … Whatever the area or areas of concentration chosen, it will be important for activities to begin simply and be allowed to grow in complexity over time.*[52]

## 4. Conclusion: imperatives for a global enterprise

Three imperatives for engagement in Bahá'í social and economic development have been identified in this paper:

1. integrative imperative – the foundations of civilisation are disintegrating; social and economic development efforts constitute an integral contribution to the unfoldment of a new, divinely-inspired social order;
2. generative imperative – the creative forces associated with Bahá'u'lláh's ordinances await and demand expression through the efforts of His followers to promote human welfare and development;

50. Ross Gittens, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Wednesday 5 May 1999
51. Indeed, inequitable economic growth is likely to exacerbate social turmoil. Contemporaneous with what is possibly the longest ever peacetime expansion of the Australian economy, there appear to be growing signs not only that the gap between rich and poor is widening, but also that the magnitude of social inequalities in the fields of education and literacy, quality of life, and so on, are increasing along the urban/rural divide, and within larger cities. This can lead to the surfacing of deeper problems such as racism and other forms of intolerance.
52. From a letter dated 8 June 1999 written by the Office of Social and Economic Development to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia. Note the final statement as an illustration of the principle of organic growth as applied to the planning and implementation of development projects.

3. organic imperative – social and economic development endeavours must be incorporated into the regular pursuits of Bahá'í communities to ensure their continued evolutionary growth.

These imperatives are not confined to any particular segment of the Bahá'í World. Within each community, including the Australian one, the vision of Bahá'í social and economic development must be reconceptualised within the context of a broader and richer vision of the purpose of the Revelation, and shaped in accordance with social requirements.

In attempting to incorporate development activities into the pattern of Bahá'í community life, it is important to remember that the worldwide Bahá'í community is, in effect, only sixteen years into a process that is destined to take shape and flourish for centuries to come. With such a monumental task ahead of us, a certain degree of humility is called for on the part of those who arise to promote and take action in this sphere of endeavour. There exists no set of unambiguously 'correct' or definitive methods and practices to be followed. At this early stage, success will, to a very great extent, be measured by the ability of the friends to learn systematically about the increasingly effective translation of spiritual principles into social reality. This will be a process permeated with errors and challenges.

A posture of learning ought therefore to encompass our efforts to consult, act and reflect on the process of applying the healing Message of Bahá'u'lláh to the maladies of an ailing society. In striving to contribute to the building of new patterns of civilisation, we will be expediting the fulfilment of the vision of St. John that "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord."[53]

53. Rev 11:15

# Drug Abuse Prevention
## The Spiritual Dimension[1]

*Vahid Payman*

### Introduction

On behalf of the Victorian Bahá'í Community, I would first like to salute the efforts of the Victorian Education Department and the Australian Drug Foundation in embarking on their drug prevention programs. I have had an opportunity to read the Education Department's manual, "Turning The Tide", and, along with the presentation earlier, I am impressed by the depth and breadth of thought that has gone into its preparation. I am particularly impressed by its decision to make drug education in schools a continuous program, rather than an ad hoc approach, and also in recognising the importance of starting early by including primary schools under its rubric. Life attitudes are acquired early in life and these attitudes become values which then guide behaviour. It is important, therefore, also to include parents in the school strategy for we all know that it is parental attitudes and the examples they set for their children that have the greatest influence on their development.

### Definitions

In speaking about the spiritual dimension of drug abuse prevention, a few definitions are in order. This is important because many would consider the concept of spirituality as foreign to any consideration of important social problems such as drug abuse and its prevention. The World Heath Organisation's definition of a drug is "any substance, with the exception of food and water which when taken into the body alters its function physically and/or psychologically. " Drugs can be divided into three categories: I) depressants, such as alcohol, opiates, cannabis, inhalants, tranquillisers and sedatives, and non-narcotic analgesics; 2) stimulants, such as caffeine, tobacco, cocaine, and amphetamines; and 3) hallucinogens, such as LSD and mescaline. Drugs can be licit or illicit, prescribed or 'over-the-counter'.

1. This is the text of an address given at a seminar in Melbourne on 19 November 1998 on the Prevention of Drug Abuse, organised by the Monash Bahá'í Community.

The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSMIV) defines substance abuse as "a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by one or more of the following, occurring within, a twelve month period: 1) recurrent substance use resulting in a failure to fulfil major role obligations at work, school or home: 2) recurrent substance use in situations in which it is physically hazardous, such as driving an automobile; 3) recurrent substance related legal problems, such as disorderly conduct: 4) continued substance use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of the substance, such as arguments with spouse about intoxication.

The related term, substance dependence, describes a state of physical and/or psychological dependence characterised by tolerance to the drug and a characteristic withdrawal syndrome.

Prevention can be divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary prevention attempts to prevent the onset of a condition (in this case, substance abuse). Secondary prevention aims to identify and promptly treat an illness once it has already happened, thus reducing its duration. Tertiary prevention aims to reduce the residual disabilities caused by an illness. Examples of these different types of prevention include school programs that promote an understanding of the risks of drug use (primary prevention), programs that help teachers identify students who have a drug problem (secondary prevention), or needle exchange programs, which reduce the incidence of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis 8 and C (tertiary prevention).

The 'spiritual dimension' can be defined as that aspect of a person pertaining to the soul or psyche, as opposed to matter or the body. The soul or psyche has three capacities, namely the capacities to know (knowledge), to feel (love), and to act (will). Other terms that have been used for these three capacities are 1) Cognition, 2) Affect, and 3) Motivation. We know that most drugs of dependence can affect some or all of these three capacities of the psyche through their actions on the cerebral cortex and the limbic system.

## Adolescent Drug Abuse Why did it happen?

There are many reasons why young people take drugs. Some of these are: fun and excitement; curiosity; relief from stress and distress from problems at work, school or relationships; the need for group acceptance, to impress the opposite sex, or to boast about improved sexual performance, pressure from friends, society, media, or role models; parental example; to anger parents; and to self medicate against mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia.

If we take all these reasons and try to group them we can see that drugs are taken as 1) a diversion against boredom or aimlessness, 2) a psychological anaesthetic, akin to 'soma' in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, 3) a performance enhancer, or psychological steroid, 4) a way of achieving acceptance amongst peers, or 5) a form of protest. What this suggests is that we have individuals who are bored, in psychological pain, unhappy with themselves, feeling alienated and angry with society. If this is the case, I would suggest that our society is in a state of crisis, a crisis of meaning, purpose, and connectedness.

Mental health statistics seem to support this suggestion. The National Health and Medical Research Council reports that up to a quarter of adolescents will suffer major depression by age 18, and, in any six months, 40% will suffer from prolonged sadness and unhappiness.[2] Suicide rates have tripled for young males and doubled for young females over the past fifty years.[3] And whilst suicide is an uncommon event – 0.02% of young people take their lives each year it is the tip of an iceberg insofar as up to l0% will make a suicide attempt .

The factors contributing to this situation include: "family conflict ... lack of a close relationship with caring, dependable adults, increased expectations, peer and media influences, the perceived lack of meaningful opportunities in mainstream society, and an inadequate cultural framework of meaning, belonging, and hope." [4]

In an address given in I997 at the "Exploring Adolescent Spirituality" Seminar in Melbourne, Richard Eckersley of the CSIRO suggested: "The bottom line of psychological wellbeing seems to be having a sense of meaning and purpose in life ... Positive life meaning is related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals." [5] Eckersley then proceeds to quote Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing from their book *Understanding Happiness*: "Clearly a person cannot simply invent a new mission in order to achieve a sense of purpose and meaning in life, but it is worth remembering that in the long haul this is what matters most."

Spirituality, therefore, lies at the heart of any campaign to solve the drug problem. A spiritual model which addresses the questions of purpose, meaning, suffering and connectedness, is crucial, I believe, for the success of our prevention programs.

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2. R. Eckersley, "A View from the Mouth of a Cave: Spirituality, God, science and the future", Youth Issues Forum Summer I997/8.
3. R. Eckersley, "A View from the Mouth of a Cave: Spirituality, God, science and the future", Youth Issues Forum Summer I997/8.
4. R. Eckersley, "A View from the Mouth of a Cave: Spirituality, God, science and the future", Youth Issues Forum Summer I997/8.
5. R. Eckersley, "A View from the Mouth of a Cave: Spirituality, God, science and the future", Youth Issues Forum Summer I997/8.

## A Spiritual Model of Human Nature

I would like to offer a spiritual model based on my understanding of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, of which I am a member, a model which is probably consistent with the principles of the world's other major religions. The model consists of the following principles: 1) That humans have a dual nature, spiritual and material, and that our reality is our soul; 2) The soul is a divine trust that has the potential to manifest its capacities of knowledge, love, and will. These capacities are expressed as attributes, such as truthfulness, patience, humility, love, compassion, tolerance, joy, determination, and service. These are, in fact, all attributes of God, and, having been created in His image, we are all capable of expressing them. 3) The purpose of life is to develop these attributes. 4) In the same way that the body needs food and water to grow, the soul requires spiritual sustenance in the form of prayer and meditation., in particular, meditation on the Word of God, found in the Scriptures of the world's major religions. 5) Life's challenges provide the situations in which to develop these attributes. As we develop them, we master the challenge and move on to greater challenges. 6) Tests and difficulties, therefore, are necessary for the progress of the soul. They are to be welcomed, not avoided.

This spiritual model can assist in drug abuse prevention by addressing the problems of discontent, boredom, pain, alienation, and anger, which psychologically underpin the drug abuse epidemic. It provides meaning and purpose consistent with the essence of our beings. It teaches that humans are 'mines rich in gems of inestimable value', of virtues, which, through education, can be unearthed for the benefit of humankind. It teaches that psychological pain is part of growth., in the same way that a plant is pruned in winter so that it can flower abundantly in spring. It resolves the problem of alienation by reuniting humans with God, and, through God, to God's universe such an individual will then begin to look at constructive solutions to society's problems, rather than railing against them.

## How Can Such a Model Be Implemented?

A successful program using a spiritual model already exists. 'The Virtues Project',[6] developed by Linda Kavelin Popov and Dan Popov, a social worker and child psychologist wife and husband team from Canada, teaches and encourages virtues in children, youth and adults. Designed primarily for parents, it also used by schoolteachers and others working in human development. It honours the world's sacred traditions and offers simple principles for paying attention to a child's spiritual development, helping them set spiritual goals. The four key principles of the project are: 1) the parent is the

6. L.D. Popov & J. Kavelin, The Virtues Guide: a handbook for parents teaching virtues. Gold Coast: The Virtues Project Inc. I995.

primary educator of the child; 2) children are born in potential: their natural qualities can develop into positive or negative traits depending on how they are educated in the early years; 3) character develops as children learn to make responsible, moral choices; and 4) self-esteem is a natural outcome of living by spiritual principles.

The Virtues Project is being promoted amongst parents, in schools, in mental health and forensic settings. One of its authors, dare I say it, recently appeared as a guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show! Such a program would be an important addition to existing drug prevention strategies like "Turning The Tide". It would also be important to offer it to parents of preschool children, as it is in these early years that personality and character are formed.

## Conclusion

Of course, the spiritual dimension is not the only dimension. There is the material dimension; the tasks of curbing the production of, and traffic in, drugs of dependence, providing young people with opportunities for training and employment, making them aware of the risks of drug taking, and promoting concepts of healthy living. But underpinning all these efforts must be a recognition of the potential nobility of the human condition and the loftiness of one's purpose in life. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

> *"I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I moulded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful, and self subsisting."*[7]

7. Bahá'u'lláh *The Hidden Words*. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. 1957 edition.

# Book Review
# Memorials of the Faithful

*Ron Price*

In any attempt to discuss intelligently what this profoundly important book is about I find myself drawn irresistibly to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portraits, not so much of the '77 individuals he so deftly describes, but of the condition they may come to occupy in the world beyond. Indeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá creates what could appropriately be called a vocabulary associated with the afterlife. The following words are used frequently when 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the passing of the 77 individuals and their condition in the next life. He uses these words in assuring us of their new condition or in offering us a description of what he hopes will be that condition:

> light, splendours, grace, mercy, forgiveness' nearness, assemblage, celestial company, musk-scented, camphor, sweet scent of holiness, bestowals, gifts, rewards, mysterious, endless, placeless, waters, gardens, fair and undiscovered country, goodly home, gentle gales, food, drink of brimming cup, the place of the mystical contemplation of God, all-highest realm, highest heaven, Abhá paradise.

These words suggest that "the purified soul connects with other souls in those worlds, and the powers and joys become so intensified that we will wonder at ever having lived as separate tiny candles, alone with our flickering light, when in the worlds to come we will be ablaze as one radiant force." (1)[1] This radiant force is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, over and over again, in terms of light. These words are intended, as are the words of Dante and other great artistic luminaries, to illustrate and help make comprehensible to our earth-bound senses, a vision of divine order and heavenly beauty.(2)

All our instinctual human desires and fears," says Conow[2], "will disappear, to become one pre-phenomenal fear and desire, the awe of God and the yearning to return to Him."(3) 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the process in terms

1. B. Hoff Conow, **The Bahá'í Teachings: A Resurgent Model of the Universe**, George Ronald, Oxford, 1990, p.142.
2. Kenneth Clark, **Civilization**, Penguin Books, NY,1969, pp.147-148.

of the mystical contemplation of God, nearness and the sweet scent of holiness. In dozens of subtle and sometimes graphic depictions of the passing of these men, for there are only three women, human salvation is partly defined as motion toward godliness, and endless progression, a heavenly, intellectual and aesthetic journey that has already had its beginning in this earthly life. Indeed this earthly life has, as its animating theme, a vision of this world as a reflection of the spiritual world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision, though, is one which suggests that "a dedicated study of one reality will inevitably facilitate an understanding of the other." Hence the value in this life of the pursuit of learning in virtually any form and any subject but especially, of course, those subjects that profit humankind.

Just as this life is neither static nor fixed so in the next is change and a continual refining process also the story. We do not attain one condition of perfection but many perfections. At the point in time when we no longer can use the physical metaphor, the teaching device of the phenomenal world, we detach, or are detached, from it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this point of detachment, the point of departure in vivid variation. In studying the many descriptions of this departure one gets a real sense of the afterlife as both wonderful transformation and simple continuity.

This, then, is where my own eye is drawn to in examining the several dozen picture portraits, the choreography of lives which 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets before us. But, of course, the book is much more than the simple story of human lives. The book serves a number of functions not the least of which is an informed guide on how to live. The revelation, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá was intimately associated with during Bahá'u'lláh's life, contained literally thousands of pages of guidance on this question. In *Memorials to the Faithful* this elderly Persian man who had enjoyed what the Guardian called "a mystic intercourse" with his Father, tells us how some seventy-seven people applied this guidance in day-to-day living.

'Abdu'l-Bahá observed with unobtrusive care, with warmth and tenderness, the day-to-day lives of these people. As Marzieh Gail puts it in her introduction, the Master is giving us a testament of indispensable values for the survival of our own selves and humanity itself. The question 'how to live?' sounds like a deceptively easy question. But for millions on this planet that is a central, if only partially asked question. What should I do? How do I decide whether to go fishing or to read a book? The question is an easy one to ask, but the answer takes so many forms that modern man lives in some state of confusion.

The question is a particularly acute one for Bahá'ís who spend their lives trying to put into practice what often seems an impossible agenda of spiritual and moral prerequisites. For their's is a search for peace, happiness, success, closeness to God, etcetera, etcetera. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I'm sure, was also aware

of' the difficulty. He was aware, too, that He would be the exemplar, the model, of how to 'live the life' for many generations to come. In a religion under whose spiritual umbrella billions of souls would one day be protected from the rain, the tempest of life, it would be useful for that future community to have a range of' models of how ordinary men and women, people who had no station, no special relationship as He had with the Source, with Bahá'u'lláh, put the whole thing into practice.

And so he describes the entire lives of over six-dozen People, albeit in the briefest of compass. The descriptions are succinct, deceptive quotients. I think many readers miss so much of what this book is on about by thinking, as they read, that they are reading about funny old men who lived long ago and what they are doing in the book has little to do with the modern world. The long names; the brief descriptions of people's lives give the modern reader a sense of irrelevance. I don't think I'd ever lend this book to a non-Bahá'í for their "first read." I have talked to many long serving Bahá'ís, as well, who have never even read this book. And many who have read it, don't seem to have any idea of what it is about. Just a bit of history, they say to me. They forget, if they ever knew, that there is a metaphorical nature to Bahá'í history. It is not just an inspirational account of men who lived long ago.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spends from one to several pages on each character and, in the process, He gives us the full range of human types, the range there has always been and the range there would probably always be in the rich texture of the greatest drama on earth: people in community. I shall discuss briefly some of the types in the paragraphs below and leave it to readers to get themselves 'into' this book with a sense of new eyes. For all of us must keep coming back to old books with new eyes, if the revelation in all its grandeur and mystery is to stay fresh in our hearts and minds.

Restlessness is a dominant theme for many people who 'could not stay quiet', 'had no rest', were 'amazingly energetic', were 'awakened to restless life', or were 'plagued by yearning love'. Nabíl of Qá'in was "restless, had no caution, patience or reserve."(p.51) Shah Muhammad-Amín "had no peace" because of the love that smouldered in his heart and because he "was continuously in flight."(p.46) 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this restless personality, one of a fascinating galaxy of men He came to know.

In a community that does a lot of talking it is interesting to read about: the quiet personality. The men and women who keep mostly to themselves, are 'inclined to solitude' and keep 'silent at all times' are painted with deft brevity. You just about miss the whole point when He talks about their 'inner calm', that they are souls 'at rest', 'souls who were at rest' or who remained in 'one and the same inner state'. Who are these quiet ones who do not fill the air with the sound of their own voice and seem to have an inner calm which seems to perplex us as we go about in our garrulous state? I don't

mean to oversimplify a complex issue, but clearly quiet people, people who don't like going to meetings, indeed, virtually every conceivable human type have a place in this new community we are building. I'm not sure the term 'active members' would have any meaning in the terminology offered to us by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this delightful, this deceptively simple, book.

There is an element of restlessness in the human psyche that will not leave us in peace and incessantly asks for more, to see and have and understand, more and more and yet more. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses not the unease or frustration, which so often is basically unhealthy, but the sense of urgency and eagerness in alliance with the inner life, the soul. It is a spiritual restlessness that urges us toward transcendence, toward 'that undiscovered country'. Táhirih was "restless and could not be still". There are a host of others in this book with the same quality. We meet such souls all over the Bahá'í world as we travel from place to place: always on the go, can't sit still. When you recognize them, at first, on the telephone, you often think 'not them again!' They are, like the quiet ones, part of that slowly evolving revolutionary force. It takes all kinds. For that is what people in community is about.

This boundless and surging motion within the soul is a vitality, a quicksilver life of the spirit. The impulse to express this spiritual restlessness is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá again and again draws to our attention in his writings as he lays the foundation for what he knows will one day be incarnated in a new world Order. It is also a key quality required for the enormous job that the Bahá'í community is charged with: the spiritual conquest of the planet[3]. The theme of restlessness and rest is also reflected in a similar contrast between:: Quiet People and Talkative Ones.

There seems to be a gregarious type and a type of person who keeps to himself. Ustád Báqir and Ustád Ahmad both kept to themselves and "away from friend and stranger alike"(p.73) Mírzá Muhammad-Qulí "mostly ... kept silent," and -kept company with no one, but stayed by himself most of the time, alone in his small refuge"(P.71) and, like 'Ali Najaf-Ábádí, some tended to be meek and quiet. There was, too, the more sociable person who, like Hájí 'Abdu'lláh Najaf-Ábádí, "spent his days in friendly association with the other believers; " (p. 66) or, like Ismu'lláhu'l-Asdaq "taught cheerfully and with gaiety." (p.6) "How wonderful was his talk", says 'Abdu'l-Bahá of Nabíl of Qá'in, "how attractive his society."(p.53)

These personality dichotomies, these opposites, continue on so many fronts. While there are occasionally impatient individuals in the main we find patience and long-suffering: There are many souls, in this medium length book of some 200 pages, who are long-suffering, invariably patient and forbearing. Contentment and a sense of thankfulness at whatever life hands out also seems to be part of this particular complex of

3. Conow, **op.cit**.,p.142.

traits. Although Muhammad-'Ali suffered hardship (p.79), his heart was at peace. "With patience, calm and contentment, but difficulty..." he engaged in his trade. 'Azím-i-Tafríshí "was never despondent" (P.155). A basic serenity and calm, a contentment and acceptance characterises believer after believer. The long_years of tribulation and isolation of Mishkín-Qalam was the very means to his own survival. He developed a delightful sense of humour which 'Abdu'l-Bahá places some emphasis on in his characterization of people in community and its survival. I often think what 'Abdu'l-Bahá is doing is describing the parameters for our own survival and happiness in community life. They were difficult times the forty years from 1852 to 1892, no easier for them than for us.

Mishkin-Qalam is the hallmark of the suffering artist-soul within us all, striving for sincerity. He has a sense of humour, it would appear, not unlike many Australians we meet today who are the masters of the self-put-down. It certainly keeps the ego manageable, at least ostensibly. It is something to watch for in the Australian personality which people from other countries often misinterpret.

'Abdu'l-Bahá knew that great sacrifices would be required to build the new Order and He laid bare before us these many sketches of souls who gave their all, broke the patterns of their lives, patterns which had often imprisoned them, and hastened to the Most Great Prison. So, too, is this our task: to get out of the prisons of our making. What is the Most Great Prison we are trying to get in? It seems to me we are often trying 'to escape'. I know: I'm a master at escaping. Pioneers are often the greatest escape artists, to use the symbolism of the prison which 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses literally.

The following characteristic is found again and again: the devotional attitude. Individuals keep "vigils most of the night" (p.67), dwell "continually on God, remain submerged in supplications and prayers" (p.43) and always voice their thanks (p.31) "Day and night" Mírzá Mustafa remained in a state of prayer" (P.149) An other characteristic is: joyfulness and ecstasy. Joy is not an uncommon word in the lexicon of characteristics which 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses to describe the many men he got to know over the years. Joyously an Afnán left Persia; the constantly joyful condition of Ustád Báqir and Ustád Ahmad are but two examples. Ecstasy is also a word which appears not infrequently. The sheer ecstasy of Nabíl-i-Zarandí while he wrote and the "happy, carefree and light of heart" nature of' the intellectually inclined Afnán, are only two of' the many examples of a state of being, a state of day-to-day existence that was filled with an unquestionable happiness. These are just a few of the many qualities which are placed before us. People who are trying to get into prison; people who have left their homes. The metaphor of 'journey of travelling' is everywhere apparent.

The journey is an infinite one. The wayfarer must endlessly travel if he is

to attain the object of his quest. Within the context of the lives of these 77 people the journey's end was 'Akká, from I868 to I892, or Iraq, from I852 to I863, or Constantinople or Adrianople in the years I863 to I868. These individuals would find somewhere to live near His presence, near the Most Great Prison, near the Friend. Some would return to their home: some would be sent out on yet another journey and others would remain near their Lord. All were transformed in various ways.

Written in 1915, in the evening of his life, *Memorials of the Faithful* was not published until 1924, three years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. The book was out of print for many years, but was republished in the USA in 1971. Eighty-five years after He wrote the book, more than seventy five years after His passing, the Bahá'í World is coming to appreciate this remarkable testimony to the affect a manifestation of God had on ordinary men and women. That they became far from ordinary was due to Bahá'u'lláh. That we can see their perfections was due to the eye of the Master, an eye which did not behold imperfections. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá was unquestionably easy to please; He enjoyed the rich variety of human types and His observant eye was both warm and tender.

As Marzieh Gail states, this is "a book of prototypes … a kind of testament of values endorsed and willed to us." These values can also be found all around us in the Bahá'í community today, if we but cultivate that same observant eye, that same sin-covering and loving perception that made 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Master which He was. For it is this quality of acceptance, of non-judgementalism as psychologists call it, combined with humour and letting people be whoever they are and whatever they are which is the source of our own community happiness and survival in these the earliest days of community building to which we are all being called as the millennium opens in the months and years ahead. *Memorials of the Faithful* has a great deal to offer us would-be builders of relationships, community and a World Order. Don't let the long names and the pithy descriptions that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses put you off. He probably would have given us more but, in the evening of His life, after His western tour, my guess is that He was worn out. It was the last book He gave us. Only the **Tablets of the Divine Plan** remained and these letters gave us a Plan in which to put all the good advice He'd given us in *Memorials to the Faithful*. Like the wisdom of *The Will and Testament*, though, it may take us a century of more to grasp the implications of this surprisingly subtle and, deceptively simple, book.

## Notes on Contributors

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**Paul Friedman** became a Bahá'í in 1970 and has spent more than 25 years as a member of various local spiritual assemblies in New Zealand, including eight years as the secretary of the Hamilton Spiritual Assembly. He is a specialist in rehabilitation medicine and health care for the elderly at Waikato Hospital in Hamilton.

**Hedi Moani** (February 1944 - October 1998). Lover of the Faith and humanity, passionate teacher of His Cause, defender of the poor and downtrodden, visionary, scholar, peacemaker, mystic voyager, writer, architect, and businessman. He lived for the Faith and died "a martyr to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh".

**Payam Pakravan** is serving in the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.

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**Ron Price** has been a teacher and lecturer for nearly thirty years, is a Canadian who came to Australia in 1971. He is married with three children. He has temporarily retired from teaching and is writing poetry and a novel in Tasmania. Some 5000 of his poems (2 million words) are in the Bahá'í World Centre library.

**Ladan Rahmani** recently completed a Bachelor of Arts Honours in Political Science at the University of New South Wales. She has worked at the National Bahá'í Office in the Membership and Human Resource department and with the Australian Human Rights Centre. She convenes the inter-faith and status of women sections of NSW Division of the United Nations Association of Australia.

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*Australian Bahá'í Studies* promotes analysis of issues relevant to the Australian Bahá'í community. It encourages exploration of the history, teachings, and philosophy of the Bahá'í Faith in systematic, reflective, or artistic ways. It thus offers itself a medium of communication for anyone who is interested in the development of the Australian Bahá'í community.

In view of the Bahá'í vision of scholarship as an activity accessible to all, rather than one limited to a small academic community, Australian Bahá'í Studies seeks input from people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints, in a way that assists in redefining what is meant by scholarly practice. The readers of the journal have an interest in teaching the Bahá'í Faith, serving its administrative organs, and participating in its community life. It is also of interest to those studying the model that the Bahá'í community offers for the resolution of contemporary problems.

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