

# The Bahá'í Faith and the Singapore Women's Movement: Challenges for the Next Millennium

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## Abstract

This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the relationship of religion and the fight for women's rights in Singapore, which began with the founding of the Singapore Council of Women. It sets out to chart and analyse the reasons behind the Bahá'í Faith's extraordinary engagement in the women's movement in Singapore and to reflect on the broader relationship between gender, religion and the women's movement. The article concludes by examining some challenges for the next millennium with regards to the relationship between gender and religion.

## Introduction

Of the nine religions of Singapore listed in the book "Religions in Singapore" published by the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO),<sup>1</sup> an organisation which attempts to inculcate the spirit of friendship and co-operation among the leaders and followers of different religions in the island republic, the Bahá'í Faith can be said to be the religion with the most direct and consistent involvement in the women's movement, either in Singapore or in other parts of the world. This is a unique and unusual phenomenon because religion's record in promoting the advancement of women has not been exactly exemplary. While typically in the early years of their existence, religions have tended to

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore. *Religions in Singapore*, Revised edition, 1999. The book lists nine religions of Singapore: Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, and Bahá'í.

encourage the participation of women, historical evidence suggests a gradual tendency among religious institutions over time to establish practices and support attitudes that impede the development of women's potential. Over time, religions have adopted a patriarchal framework of interpretation and this has played a role in enforcing the subordinate status of women.

The great religions of the world have been the most important source for shaping and enforcing the image and role of women in culture and society. It is the source for both vision and values as well as a source of division and social fragmentation. This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the relationship of religion and the fight for women's rights in Singapore which began with the founding of the Singapore Council of Women. I will attempt to chart and analyse the reason behind the Bahá'í Faith's extraordinary engagement in the women's movement in Singapore and through such an attempt, reflect on the broader relationship between gender, religion and the women's movement as a whole. I will then conclude by examining some challenges for the next millennium with regards to the relationship between gender and religion.

Such an examination is timely because such an inter-relationship has rarely been commented on, much less published. Nevertheless, where religion is concerned, there have been studies on religious trends in Singapore and their implications through an analysis of the 1980 and 1990 census (Kuo 1989 and 1995). University academics such as Ling (1987) and Clammer (1991), Tamney and Hassan (1987) and Quah (1989) have also written sociological accounts on religions in Singapore. The IRO has published about fifteen published works, mainly speeches of past conferences and the history of the various faiths. Correspondingly, there have also been several published works on gender. Books published by the *Association of Women for Research and Action* (AWARE), a leading woman's group in Singapore, focuses only on the history, social conditions, economic conditions, legal status, laws, etc. concerning women (1998, 1996, 1999). So too do publications on women's status by Wong and Leong (1993) and Lam-Lin and Chew (1993). However, all these give inadequate attention to gender differentiation in religion and do not uncover the patriarchal framework of all-religious beliefs and practices. Their accounts have been mainly descriptive, historical and statistical, and they do not focus on the gender

element in religion. In so doing, they also contribute to the "invisibility" or marginality of women where Singapore religious life is concerned.

## **The Bahá'í Faith in Singapore**

Founded in Persia in 1844, the Bahá'í Faith is the youngest independent world religion. Bahá'u'lláh, its founder, is regarded by Bahá'ís as the latest in a line of messengers of God that include Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and the Báb. The central message of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness or the unity of humankind.

To foster its basic principle of unity, the Faith teaches that one should treat others as one would oneself wish to be treated, a not too unusual tenet, which is also found in the other great religions. What is unique however, is that the Bahá'í Faith extends this basic principle unequivocally to that of the relationship between men and women. In other words, it believes that in order to establish justice, peace and order in an interdependent world, this principle must guide all interactions, including those between men and women. Men must use their influence in the political, religious and social institutions which they control to promote the systematic inclusion of women not out of condescension but through the belief that the contribution of women is valuable to the progress of society. Women on their part must be educated and come forward and contribute their skills to every aspect of social, economic and political development.

There are Bahá'í administrative bodies in almost all countries of the world. In Singapore, the first Bahá'í administrative body, known as a Local Spiritual Assembly, was incorporated in July 1952. Since then the community has been active but relatively low-key. In 1956, it organised the first World Religion Day, an occasion whereby members of different Faiths come together to talk and discuss important issues in the spirit of inter-faith harmony. The occasion was graced by the attendance of the Chief Minister of Singapore, Mr Lim Yew Hock. He was so impressed with the Faith that in the following year, when the Bahá'í community applied for a cemetery, it was awarded one, an act symbolic of the recognition by the Singapore Government of the Bahá'í Faith's

independent status. In 1972, the Bahá'í Faith was awarded a license to solemnise marriages in the Republic. In 1995, the practice of organising a World Religion Day was reactivated and such an occasion once again served to publicise the Bahá'í Faith's commitment to inter-religious harmony. Yet another milestone was achieved in 1997 when the Bahá'í Faith was admitted to the IRO as a full member. It was also highlighted in 1999 as one of the nine religious faiths in Singapore in a postage stamp issued by the Postal Authorities of Singapore.

Presently, the Singapore Bahá'í community has a membership of 2000 and today there are five Local Spiritual Assemblies in Singapore. These five assemblies are under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, a national body incorporated in Singapore in 1972.<sup>2</sup> Together, they oversee a wide variety of activities including the education of children, devotional services, study classes, discussion groups, social events, the observance of holy days, marriages and funeral ceremonies.

### **The Singapore Women's Movement: the First Wave**

The Bahá'í Faith was instrumental in initiating the first women's movement in Singapore. The names of two Bahá'í women in particular come to mind here. One was Mrs Shirin Fozdar (1905-1992), the Honorary Secretary of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) from 1952-1961 and the other was Mrs George Lee (Mdm Tan Cheng Hsiang) (1904-1999), the President of the SCW from 1952- 1971. The activities of the SCW signalled the first real attempt of women to form a broad-based umbrella body to fight for social reforms and increase their status with respect to men in society.<sup>3</sup>

Both Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee were chiefly responsible for formulating the advocacy work of the SCW and keeping its agenda in the public eye. While Mrs Lee, as President, held the helm and met with government agencies and foreign visitors on behalf of the SCW, it was her fiery and eloquent secretary who was the better known, and who created most of

<sup>2</sup> Membership records. The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.

<sup>3</sup> See Chew, P.G.L. *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement*.

the publicity for the SCW. Mrs Fozdar's public speaking abilities made her the natural spokesperson for the SCW and the darling of the media during the term of her tenure. Mrs Lee, on the other hand was reticent, soft-spoken and more comfortable in playing a background role. Nevertheless, she provided a good balance to her dynamic secretary: being Mandarin and Hokkien-speaking she was the natural magnet for the Chinese-speaking membership of the SCW.

Mrs Shirin Fozdar was born in Bombay, India, of Persian-Bahá'í parents in 1905. She had begun the fight for the emancipation of women in India when she was a teenager. Her involvement in the women's movement in India culminated in her nomination in 1934 as the representative of the All Asian Women's conference executive committee on women's rights at the League of Nations in Geneva. Mrs George Lee, on the other hand, was born in Singapore, was educated in English and Chinese, and did what most women of her generation did, managed the home and children. She was a member of the Methodist Girls' School Alumni Association and the first wife of newspaper owner and industrialist, Mr George Lee. Influenced by the Bahá'í views on the rights of women and the relationship of that principle to world peace, her life took on an extra dimension – changing from that of contented homemaker to that of women' advocate. She became convinced that women's rights were essentially human rights. As she was herself a victim of the then pervasive Chinese customary practice of polygamy, she persuaded Mrs Fozdar that the abolition of such a practice should be the main focus of the SCW and that it should be used as a symbol of the injustices faced by women in Singapore.

There were also other women from other religious denominations who were involved in this first awakening. The first executive committee of the Singapore Council of Women comprised, in fact, more Christian than Bahá'í women. Christian women, however, were more comfortable occupying the middle and lower executive positions. A good example was Mrs E. V. Davies (also known as Mrs Checha Davies) who, as membership chair of the SCW, recruited new members for the Council, helping its membership to grow, within a few years, to 2000 in 1955. She was a staunch Christian who believed that the essence of a religious life was in the doing rather than the talking. She was the daughter of a lay preacher in Kerala, India and an active member of the Tamil

Methodist Church in Singapore. While committing much of her time to the overseeing of SCW social projects for needy women, she deliberately kept out of the limelight where controversial issues on equality were voiced.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs Constance Goh Kok Kee (nee Wee Sai Poh), another member of the SCW during its inception, was an active member of Wesley Methodist Church and the General Conference of Women's Society for Christian Service. She was chiefly responsible for the moderate aspect of the SCW's agenda such as family-planning, the education of women and the formation of a girl's club, rather than its better known public stand on anti-polygamy and one-man-one-wife campaign. Another founder member and *protem* President of the SCW, Mrs Elizabeth Choy, was also a committed Christian and keen to play her part in the upliftment of women. Through her contacts with members of the Legislative Council, of which she was member from 1951-1956, the SCW was able to network with the political elite. Another *protem* committee member was Mrs Robert Eu, a City Councillor from 1949-1957 and founder-principal of the Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School who gave much moral support to the SCW. Other Christian members were Mrs Seow Peck Leng, Mrs Shufen Khoo and Mrs H. B. Amstutz, wife of the Methodist bishop in Singapore. The expatriate women members such as Mrs R. A. Pohan, Mrs Winifred Holmes and Mrs V. W. West were also Christians. The Christian element was strong because they made up the better-educated and more socially conscious segment of the population. They were by and large against the practice of polygamy, which was then practised largely by the Buddhist-Taoist-Confucianist and Muslim segment of the population.

While the SCW contained mainly Bahá'í and Christian English-speaking women, it was the Bahá'í component which was chiefly responsible for the advocacy work. Generally, while accepting that the abolition of polygamy would be good for all, Christian women did not feel comfortable with the clear and unequivocal stand of Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee with regards to the principle of the equality of the sexes. Thus while Mrs Elizabeth Choy used her influence as Legislative Council member to get the SCW off to a good start, her role as member was

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mrs Shanta Sundram, daughter of Mrs E. V. Davis, 2.2.1992.

largely symbolic after the first year. Mrs Seow Peck Leng found Mrs Fozdar's ideas "too radical" but admitted that "without her the women's rights movement wouldn't have begun."<sup>5</sup> In the same way, while Mrs Constance Goh was generous in her financial support to the SCW, she was comfortable only with its educational and social aspects. The following statement in a letter by Mrs Goh to Mrs Fozdar in 1952 epitomised the ideological difference between the Bahá'í and Christian coalition: "I do feel that we shall achieve most of our aims if we show that we are out to assess the needs of the women of Singapore and the potential contribution they would make to the community given the opportunity and facilities, rather than to stress fighting for one's rights."<sup>6</sup>

### **Muslim Ordinance of 1957**

A distinguishing aspect of the SCW fight for the institution of anti-polygamous laws was that it was not just aimed at Chinese marriages but also at Muslim marriages. This was because more than half of the Malay marriages ended in divorce. The laws governing divorce then were lax, the husband having only to pronounce a ritual formula stating to his wife "I divorce you". If the husband pronounced a triple "talak", stating "I divorce you" three times in succession, the divorce became irrevocable.

Bahá'í women were therefore in the forefront of consciousness raising for Muslim women in Singapore. Indeed, there were Muslim members in the SCW. Two Muslim women, Cik Zahara bte. Noor Mohammed and Mrs Azizah Izmail, sat on its executive committee. However, Muslim women generally kept a low profile for fear of reprimand from their husbands.<sup>7</sup> Being familiar with Muslim laws, Mrs Fozdar became their spokeswoman in the 1950's. Indeed, her attempts to uplift the status of Muslim women brought her headlong into conflict with the conservative members of the Muslim Advisory Board (MAB), the body responsible for advising the government on social, cultural, economic and religious

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mrs Seow Peck Leng, 29. 11.1992.

<sup>6</sup> Singapore Council of Women's Organisation (SCWO), Mrs Constance Goh. First Family Planner. *One Voice*, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Singapore Council of Women Organisation (SCWO), The Quiet Crusader. *One Voice*, 1993.

matters pertaining to Muslims. In an interview, Mrs Fozdar recalled threats made on her life from irate husbands keen to hold on to such privileges.<sup>8</sup>

It was Mrs Fozdar's idea to highlight the plight of Muslim women by the distribution of handbills in the kampongs. These handbills quoted the Koran: "And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them) then (marry) only one or what your right hand possess (i.e. females taken as prisoners of war); this is more proper that you may not deviate from the course."<sup>9</sup> This activity was stopped in mid-course by the police who feared a breach of peace, reminiscent of the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950<sup>10</sup>.

In 1954, as a means of putting pressure on the MAB, Mrs Fozdar sent a petition to a member of the House of Commons in England, Stanley Awbery, decrying the terrible insecurity of married life in Singapore and the opposition the SCW was encountering in its attempts to initiate reforms. Mrs Fozdar argued that while the SCW had a sizeable number of Malay supporters, a few leaders of the Malays "who are mostly themselves either Arabs, Persians or Indians and who are rich and can indulge in polygamy are opposed to any change." Moreover, these men were "backed by the Kathis (priests) who had made a business out of frequent marriages and divorces."<sup>11</sup> The petition prompted Awbery to ask the Secretary of State for the colonies in the House of Commons (in London) to report on the divorce rate in Singapore as well as what steps were being taken to tighten the marriage and divorce laws.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mrs Shirin Fozdar, 19.3.1990.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Quran*, Sura 4, verse 3.

<sup>10</sup> These riots occurred in 1950 in Singapore and centred around a little girl, Maria, born of Dutch parents given to a Malay family for adoption during the Japanese occupation in Singapore. The battle for her custody began as a dispute between two families but soon developed social implications. Racial sensitivity, religious fanaticism and radical nationalist politics were involved. The issue became a battle between two cultures and religion.

<sup>11</sup> Singapore Council of Women to Stanley Awbery, 9 Sep 1954. Available from Microfilm NA2044. Singapore National Archives.

<sup>12</sup> See Chew, P.G.L. *The Singapore Council of Women*, p. 13.

The activities of the SCW extended across the Causeway. Aware that the marriage laws in the Federation of Malaysia were more flexible and that many Malay men wishing to avoid the stricter laws in Singapore could go across to nearby Johore to be married, the SCW viewed changes in the Federation of Malaya as a necessary adjunct to their activities. In 1955, a petition was sent to all the Sultans in the States of Malaya asking them to use their influence to raise the marriage age of girls to 16, to encourage monogamy and to make the education of girls compulsory. In addition, Mrs Fozdar wrote to President Gemal Abdul Nassar of Egypt, then the dominant force in Arab politics, asking him to come to the rescue of Muslim women all over the world and to legislate for monogamous marriage, so that other Muslim countries could follow the progressive trend in Egypt.

Such actions played their part in pressurising the MAB for reforms and the Board eventually agreed to a provision of the Muslim Ordinance, which became law in 1957. The ordinance basically provided for the establishment of a Muslim law court (Syariah Court) in 1958 so as to make the process of divorce more difficult. Its enactment resulted in a marked decline in the divorce rate among Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Women's Charter of 1961**

While the Muslim Ordinance of 1957 was a sterling victory for Muslim women, the Women's Charter of 1961 was a landmark victory for non-Muslim women. Once again, the roots of this Charter can be traced to 1954 when Mrs Fozdar initiated a bill ("Singapore Prevention of bigamous Marriages Ordinance"), calling for the minimum marriage age to be raised to sixteen and for bigamous marriages to be made void, for the attention of the Legislative Council.<sup>14</sup> This was uneventful due to strong opposition from the Chinese, Tamil and Muslim Advisory Boards. Not one to be impeded by initial setbacks, both Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee lobbied for women's rights with politicians from newly

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<sup>13</sup> While the divorce rate was 51.7% in 1957 (the year of the passing of the Ordinance), it fell to 49.2% in 1958, to 36.8 % in 1959, to 26.9% in 1960 and to 21.8% in 1961. By 1962, the Singapore divorce rate was 26.8%.

<sup>14</sup> The bill is reproduced in Chew, P.G.L., *The Singapore Council of Women*, p. 28.

established political parties such as the Labour Front and the People's Action Party (PAP), formed to contest for seats in the Singapore Legislative Council of 1955. In addition, Mrs Fozdar accepted numerous engagements to speak on radio and public lectures, most of which were highlighted in the press. One notable public engagement was at the International Women's Day Conference organised by the Women's League of the PAP on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1956 where Mrs Fozdar urged the crowd to support their stand on the abolition of polygamy. It was on this occasion that a resolution was passed for the first time by the League in support of the principle of monogamy, and which was subsequently moved during the Party's annual general meeting in 1957.<sup>15</sup>

When the PAP won the election of 1959, they kept their promises to women made in their election manifesto. Thus, the Women's Charter was enacted in 1961, which protected the status and welfare of women in Singapore with regards to marriage and divorce. It also abolished polygamy among non-Muslims and changed the whole framework of Chinese marriages. All marriages had to be legally registered from 1961 and those done solely through customary Chinese rites were not recognised as legal.

The successful passing of the Charter also saw the departure of Mrs Fozdar to Yasothorn, an impoverished Northeastern region of Thailand, to start a school for girls, as a means of rescuing them from prostitution and a life of drudgery. Without the driving force of Mrs Fozdar, and with most of the SCW's agenda already enacted in the Charter, Mrs Lee, as a President, found it difficult to hold the committee together, being more interested by then in the more prayerful and meditative aspects of the Bahá'í Faith rather than in its social-reform agenda. In the sixties, much of her time was taken up with volunteer duties in the local spiritual assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. She was also elected as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Malaysia (1965-1966), a position that required much travelling time between Singapore and various parts of Malaysia. In addition, Bahá'í or Christian women were not forthcoming in the reorganisation of the SCW or in taking over its leadership. Mrs EV Davis became more involved in social work with the YWCA. The building of the first women's hostel in Fort Canning Road

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<sup>15</sup> See Chew P.G.L. *Ibid.*, footnote 140.

in 1969 is chiefly attributed to her efforts. Mrs Constance Goh focussed on family planning and Christian mission work. Due to her work in this area, she was made a patron of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1977, an honour accorded to only a few. Mrs Elizabeth Choy concentrated her energies on managing the School for the Visually Impaired. Mrs Robert Eu left Singapore to begin a new life in Malaysia. Membership declined and the Council was eventually de-registered in 1971 due to disinterest.

The leadership of the women's movement passed from non-political women to political women with the departure of the colonial power and the election of the first nationalist government in 1959. Bahá'ís gave up the initiative to be in the forefront of political change during the early years of Singapore's independence because of the Bahá'í principle of non-involvement in party politics. Media attention was now on the new political women -- eight of whom contested in the 1959 elections and another ten in the 1963 elections.<sup>16</sup> The 1959 election saw five women voted into the Singapore Legislative Assembly. Of these new women, the most outstanding was Chan Choy Siong, a member of the PAP who would remain as a Member of Parliament until 1970 and who had mooted the notion of anti-polygamy in 1956 immediately after the rally at which Mrs Fozdar spoke. Another early SCW member, Mrs Seow Peck Leng, who learnt much about advocacy work from Mrs Fozdar in the early fifties, became the first woman opposition member from 1959 to 1961 in Singapore's first Legislative Assembly.

Since most of the demands advocated by the SCW were met in the Charter of 1961, women associations reverted to their focus on social, charitable and community activities. This was a surprising phenomenon in view of the fact that this period saw the rise of many consciousness-raising groups in the West. The publication of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* in the early sixties, for example, became a catalyst for many women by naming the sources of frustration they had experienced, and served as a focal point around which they could gather.

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<sup>16</sup> Most of the active women however were in the opposition parties which boycotted both the 1965 and 1968 elections leaving only Madam Chan Choy Siong of the PAP to be the spokeswomen for Singapore women. When Madam Chan resigned from politics in 1970, there were no women in politics until the 1984 elections.

In contrast, the sixties and seventies were relatively quiet years for women advocacy groups in Singapore. Attention seemed to have shifted to the pressing need for economic survival for the new nation state rather than women rights.

Groups such as the Chinese Women's Association, the YWCA, the Kamala Club, the Asian Women's Welfare Association and the Inner Wheel were occasionally highlighted by the media for their social, charitable and educational activities. It was also a time for the inception of local chapters of international organisations such as Soroptimist International, Quota Club and the Zonta Club. Professional networking groups slowly formed during this period e.g. the Singapore Association of Women's Lawyers and the Singapore Business and Professional Women's Association. There were also religiously-inspired women groups such as the Young Muslim Women's Association, the General Conference Women's Society of Christian Service and the Bahá'í Women's Committee but these organisations did not seek the public stage on women's rights.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, it was the national grassroots organisation under the Ministry of Community Development which made the greatest impact. In 1960, the People's Association (PA) was formed as a major community development agency. Its women's committees in each of the electoral constituencies were active in organising a wide range of cultural, educational, sports and recreational activities. Control at the grassroots level passed from the hands of independent civil groups to that of the government.

### **The Singapore Women's Movement: the Second Wave**

Lam and Chew (1993) recount a second awakening in the eighties. By then, a younger group of Bahá'í women were ready to be involved in the second awakening. When a National Council of Women (NCW) was inaugurated in 1975 as a broad-based umbrella body, Bahá'í women were a part of the executive committee. However, the NCW functioned for only two years – until 1977 when the Social Affairs Ministry informed them that it was not a national organisation but a private one –

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<sup>17</sup> Bahá'í women rented a place at the YWCA in the 70's and focussed on projects to help the needy.

since it had only 7 affiliates, which did not include the PA and the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), two groups with the largest number of female members in Singapore.

In 1980 when yet another attempt was made to form a broad-based Council, this time the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), Bahá'í women e.g. Mrs Anula Samuel and Mrs Shirin Fozdar (having returned from Thailand after 18 years) rallied once again to its inaugural meeting.<sup>18</sup> The Bahá'í Women's Committee (BWC), a committee formed in 1972 under the auspices of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, became one of the first fifteen women's associations to seek affiliation to the SCWO.<sup>19</sup> Its members took an active part in the SCWO's many sub-committees. In 1986, Lena Tan, a Bahá'í, became a member of the executive board of the SCWO (1986-1990).<sup>20</sup> Other Bahá'í women who succeeded her on the board included Christine Lee, Lalitha Nambiar and Anula Samuel. In their respective stints on the SCWO executive board, Bahá'í women served mostly as Treasurer and/or secretary and were also active in committees such as publication and research.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most notable achievements of Bahá'í women where the SCWO was concerned was their involvement in the fundraising for the SCWO building during the tenure of Christine Lee, (Treasurer of the SCWO from 1992-1994), a period in which a Finance committee was first instituted to raise funds for a "Women's Centre".<sup>22</sup> When the new building was opened in 1998, the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women (BOAW) (earlier known as the Bahá'í Women's Committee) was among the first to establish its office there. It is now the focal congregational point for Bahá'í women in their attempts to organise service projects for the public.

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<sup>18</sup> Minutes of the first meeting of representatives of various women's organisations called by the Singapore Council of Social Service, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1979.

<sup>19</sup> In 1980, the SCWO had only 15 affiliates. This grew to over 40 affiliates in 1999.

<sup>20</sup> See *SCWO Salutes Singapore women, 1980-1990*. 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorative publication by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisation.

<sup>21</sup> Lynette Thomas and Phyllis Chew were involved in the editorial board of *One Voice*, the organ of the SCWO from 1993 - 1996.

<sup>22</sup> The Treasurer and the Finance Committee under the leadership of Liew Geok Heok raised half a million dollars during its two-year tenure, establishing a solid start for the inception of the building.

Although Bahá'í women are no longer in the frontline of leadership, their participation in the women's movement has remained strong. They were actively involved in the Fourth UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995. Eleven Bahá'ís went as part of the forty-eight strong SCWO contingent and the two workshops contributed by the SCWO during this conference were organised by the BWC.<sup>23</sup> In 1993, the BWC teamed up with the SCWO to publish the book *Voices and Choices – the Women's Movement in Singapore*, a landmark book which traced the history of the women's movement in Singapore and which was launched by the then President of Singapore, Mr Wee Kim Wee.

It was during this period that the BWC/BOAW began to focus not so much on advocacy work but also on activities such as family life relationships, education of girls, peace education, environmental protection and the promotion of women's health. In 1990, Bahá'í women organised a week-long exhibition *The Arts for Nature* which was one of the first attempts to raise public awareness, on the need to conserve our environment in Singapore. The works of more than 60 local artists were selected and their paintings, sculptures and installation pieces were displayed at the Empress Place Museum and the proceeds from the sale of the paintings donated to the *Save the Turtles Campaign* of the Malayan Nature Society. In 1992, a Bahá'í, Mrs Tia Traazil became the first woman to win the Ministry of Environment's Green Leaf Award in the individual category for outstanding contributions to environmental protection and preservation.

The BOAW has also worked closely with government ministries. In 1995-6, Dr H. B. Danesh, an internationally renowned psychiatrist was invited by the BOAW to conduct a series of public workshops on marriage, family life and personal development. During his visits, he met with several governmental and non-governmental organisations, medical and educational institutions working in the areas of family violence and juvenile delinquency as well as with Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, the Minister for Community Development. Another health project and one which was endorsed by the Ministry of Health was the one that took place in 1997-8 when the BOAW and SCWO jointly

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<sup>23</sup> These two workshops were on "Women, Work and Family" and "Young Women and a Violence-free Society".

organised a series of talks by medical doctors on various aspects of women's health.

Keen to cooperate with other civic groups, the BOAW has co-organised activities with the University Women's Association of Singapore, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the Malayan Nature Society, the Society Against Family Violence and the National University of Singapore Society in its efforts to promote consciousness on women rights and the environment.

The second wave of women in the Singapore women's movement were quite different to those of the first wave. By comparison with its predecessor, the SCW, the SCWO has had a moderate agenda. The colonial authorities had left the scene and women's advocacy groups no longer spoke at street rallies or played to an eager media. Instead, groups such as SCWO (and subsequently, AWARE and SAWL) preferred the medium of letter-writing e.g. to the Forum page of the local press and the writing of reports to government and national bodies as a means of getting heard. There was not so much of the rousing passionate speeches and the extensive media coverage which occurred in the fifties. The socio-political scene was much more subdued than it had been in the years before independence. For example, a major event in 1984 organised by the SCWO and the Singapore Women's Association (SWA)<sup>24</sup> to commemorate the United Nations 1975-1985 "the women's decade" was basically an educational rather than an advocacy event. It was a presentation of the facts, problems, and statistics on women's jobs, home and families, children education and health rather than an explicit clarion call for popular support on women's rights.

Dissatisfied with what was perceived as the moderate agenda of the SCWO, and concerned with the discrimination of women in the home and workplace, another women's organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), was formed in 1985. Its immediate aim was to lobby and draw public attention to problems such as violence against women and children. This group also received support from Bahá'í women who worked mainly in its sub-committees.

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<sup>24</sup> Mrs Seow Peck Leng, an early member of the SCW, was the founder-president of the Singapore Women's Association.

Since then, AWARE has highlighted controversial issues such as the phenomenon of unequal pay for equal work in many jobs, the unequal burden of childcare (with many women having to resort to staying at home to care for children in their infancy), inequalities in employment (unequal medical benefits), the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse, and last but not least, negative media portrayal which imposes on women disadvantages and handicaps not faced by men. Not surprisingly, AWARE has been the women's organisation that has received the most press coverage in recent years.<sup>25</sup>

It should also be noted that the second wave of women in the SCWO and AWARE were eager to promote themselves as secular organisations, careful not to focus on the powerful influence of religious ideology on gender issues. This is not surprising since the PAP government, from its inception in 1959, has handled matters of a religious nature with extreme care and has made it clear that any hint of religious prejudice that may lead to feelings of ill will and hostility between different religions would not be tolerated. To highlight this point, a Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was passed in 1990 to provide for the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore and to ensure that religion was not exploited for political or subversive purposes. Since then, civic groups have been extremely careful in keeping clear of religious issues.

Indeed, of the 41 affiliates of the Singapore Council of Women, religiously-inspired ones like the BOAW, Young Women's Christian Association, Young Women's Muslim Association, and the General Conference Women's Society have not succeeded in assuming leadership. While individual leaders of the SCWO and AWARE may have their particular religious affiliations, they are always careful to keep them in the private domain. This is a noticeable departure from SCW leaders such as Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Mrs George Lee, Mrs EV Davis and Mrs Constance Goh who were often keen to connect their civic commitments to their strong religious convictions. In media interviews, Mrs Fozdar, in particular, often referred to the Bahá'í teachings as the source of her inspiration.

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<sup>25</sup> Two past AWARE presidents, Ms Claire Chiang and Dr Kanwaljit Soin have been elected Nominated Members of Parliament and two past presidents, Ms Claire Chiang and Ms Hedwig Anuar have also been nominated "Woman of the Year" in Singapore.

I found, however, three occasions where issues of religion continued to play a part in the women's movement, all three of them related to AWARE. One was in 1996, when as immediate past President of AWARE, Constance Singam, a Catholic, in a speech on the occasion of the official launching of *Veritas*, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore's Home page on the internet in 1996, called for the church to admit women to leadership positions in institutions of the church. She argued for the socialisation of men and women as equals in Catholic educational institutions. She urged the Church to introduce gender studies in Catechism classes, in Catholic schools and in the Seminary. Finally, she urged the Church to appoint girls for service during Mass, women as Communion ministers or have women as chairpersons of Parish Councils.

The other two occasions occurred during the AWARE presidency of Dr Phyllis Chew, a Bahá'í. As AWARE President, Dr Chew highlighted to the Singapore public the mass rape of Chinese women by the Indonesian military during the May riots of 1998. AWARE launched a public exhibition on mass rape and collected 45,000 signatures for a petition to the Indonesian President and the UN Commissioner of Human Rights, an event which was given extensive media coverage both in Singapore and Indonesia.<sup>26</sup> It carefully downplayed the religious and racial character of the rape by highlighting it from the women's angle. The other occasion took place in December 1998 when AWARE became the sponsoring body for the play "Talaq" which focussed on oppressed women divorcees in the Tamil Muslim community. The play explored the true-life experiences of such women in Singapore and highlighted social issues such as oppression, marital rape and the culture of silence forced upon these women. This play raised opposition from the conservative Tamil Indian Jamath group who filed their complaint to the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) and the Ministry of Community Development on the grounds that it brought disgrace to Islamic principles and values.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See the local media in Singapore e.g. *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper*, *Lianhe Zaobao* from 15. 8. 98 to 10. 9. 98. See also *Asiaweek* 7. 8. 98, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> See *The New Paper* 8.3. 1999, 12.3.1999.

It can be concluded that while the Bahá'í contribution remained strong in the "second awakening", they had by and large, lost the leadership of the movement. Nevertheless, they remain highly visible in many women's groups in Singapore and enjoy a good reputation as co-operators and workers.

### Reasons for Bahá'í involvement

Many reasons can be found to explain involvement of Bahá'í women in the women's movement in Singapore and other parts of the world. Firstly, there is the Bahá'í principle that women's education is of greater importance than men's education and there is the Bahá'í view that not until the equality of opportunity in education for the two sexes is achieved, will the foundations of war be removed. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the interpreter of the Bahá'í writings, was even Aware of linguistic biases and style. In the promotion of a Universal Language for world-wide communication, he said "... no one person can construct a Universal Language. It must be made by a Council representing all countries, and must contain words from different languages. It will be governed by the simplest rules, and there will be no exceptions; *neither will there be gender, nor extra and silent letters. Everything indicated will have but one name*"<sup>28</sup>(my italics).

Second, the Singapore BOAW is also advantaged in the periodic guidance it receives from the world Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women, a committee of the Bahá'í International Community in New York which enjoys consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is a world body that has worked directly with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and its Secretariat, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women. It has also established a close and co-operative relationship with other international non-governmental organisations, which are seeking, through their activities, to promote the advancement of women.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' in London, *Addresses and Notes of Conversations*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1987, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.bic-un.Bahá'í.org> The Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women

Thirdly, Bahá'í women are also encouraged to assume leadership positions in the Bahá'í administrative system. A survey of the participation of women in Bahá'í community life found that the percentage of women in leadership positions in the Bahá'í Faith compared favourably with the percentage of women in positions of political leadership world-wide.<sup>30</sup> Women compose an average of 30% of the elected membership of national-level Bahá'í governing councils and some 47% of the membership in special Bahá'í appointment positions for the sub-national and regional level. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the average percentage of women members in the world parliaments is about 10%.<sup>31</sup>

This is an interesting contrast to religious leadership in other religions. While mainstream churches e.g. Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian do allow the ordination of female pastors, they are by tradition male-oriented in terms of leadership, ritual and preaching role.<sup>32</sup> In a book published on the occasion of the 40 years anniversary of the IRO, (1949-1989), Rev Anne Johnson, a Presbyterian minister, was listed as the only woman in the Council of the IRO. She is of the opinion that the lack of women leaders in religion is not because of a dearth of capable women but that the men have kept them out.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, while there are many nuns in Mahayana Buddhism, they are still not equal to monks. For example, Mahayana nuns do not teach in temples or take disciples here as the monks do. While monks officiate at funerals, to transfer merit to the deceased, nuns chant to lessen the bad karma and pollution of the deceased. In the Hindu tradition, the Dharmasutras defines a woman as one who is dependent on her father during her childhood, on her husband during her youth and on her son during her old age (Manu IX.3). Similarly, in Islam, men's work is usually regarded as more valuable than women's work, no matter how arbitrary the division of labour. As a consequence of this standard of determination, a

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<sup>30</sup> Bahá'í World Centre, *The Bahá'í World 1995-1996*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p. 135.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> In Singapore, women in religion are few and far between. The first Asian to be elected Head of the 200 year old world-wide Congregation of the Church of the Holy Infant Jesus is Singapore born, Mother superior general Daniel Ee. CHIJ nuns are exclusively teaching in convents and working with the poor (*Straits Times* 26.7. 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Telephone interview with Rev Dr Anne Johnson, 14.3.99.

hierarchy evolved in which women have been considered less significant than men in many social-religious systems (Wadud-Muhsin 1995).

Last but not least, Bahá'ís have an unusual role model in the figure of Tahiri, the most well known woman in Babi-Bahá'í history. Tahiri presents a startling contrast to the former religious female models. This gifted poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, far from being a dutiful daughter, continually opposed the theological views of her father, a prominent Muslim cleric. She is not admired for her success as daughter or wife, since her estrangement from her husband (also a cleric) also resulted in forced separation from her children. It is not surprising that to the more conservative religious clergy, she is a paradigm of the dangers of allowing woman too much freedom. Tahiri can be contrasted to the role model of Sita, Mary and Fatimah. In Hinduism, Sita is a wife who remains faithful to her husband at all costs. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary is a symbol of motherhood who, through devotion to her son, remained discreetly aloof from his ministry. Then there is Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad, who figures as role model of mother, wife and daughter.

To be objective, it must be noted that the Bahá'í Faith has the advantage of being a relatively young religion. It has been observed that if it is religion that downgrades women it is usually not the early version. Women were active in early religious movements, as can be seen in early Christian and Buddhist histories. However, the loss of momentum in women's religious activities after their initial success and their painful absence from epoch-making events attest to arbitrary restrictions introduced to curtail their work when past religions emerged from obscurity. What could be the reasons? Jealousy, insecurity, complacency by men? Disinterest and apathy on the part of women? There is evidence to support all these speculations. Abraham (1995) recounts that male theologians and religious leaders, whether they be Muslims, Hindus and Christians, have taken religious texts taken out of context to relegate women to subordinate roles in home, church and society.

Sharma (1987) also notes that the less differentiated religion and society are the greater is the participation of women. The more institutionalised a religion becomes, the more it excludes women from positions of authority and power. One observes that women hold higher positions in

archaic, ancient, tribal, and relatively non-institutionalised forms of religions e.g. shamanism, possession, rites, spiritualism or non-hierarchical groups like the Quakers, than in highly differentiated religious traditions with their complex structures. In both primitive and ancient religions, we find the widespread presence of women magicians, shamans, healers, visionaries and seers, prophetesses and priestesses. Women oracles of ancient Greece are well known. Female temple priestesses exist in Egypt, Sumeria, Babylon, Greece and Japan. As the Bahá'í Faith is a less differentiated religion viz. the other world religions, (e.g. there is an absence of clergy in the Bahá'í Faith), it is not surprising that women are able to play a more prominent role.

### **Challenges for the next Millennium**

The Bahá'í Faith is linked intimately with the inception of the women's movement in Singapore; just as it is linked with the emergence of a wider woman's consciousness in the world. Tahirih, for instance, is one of the firsts, if not the first, woman in the Muslim world to remove her veil in public, her intention being to signal the dawning of a new religious dispensation. In Singapore, the public became familiar with the word "Bahá'í" through media coverage on Mrs Fozdar and the anti-polygamy issue. For many people in Singapore in the 1950's, "Fozdar" was a household word due to the extensive media coverage, which she was able to generate with regards to women rights. Mrs Fozdar's contribution to the social history of Singapore cannot be doubted. She was the first woman singled out for a tribute by the SCWO in 1988. AWARE has also initiated a trust fund to honour her memory – the Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund – in 1992. Due to the work of the SCW, the first umbrella body of women's associations to fight for equal status, Singapore was ahead of UN organisations and similar organisations in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.<sup>34</sup> Of course, it

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<sup>34</sup> The United Nations passed a convention concerning consent to marriage, minimum age for marriage and registration of marriage only in 1962, one year after the Singapore Women's Charter. Non-Muslims in Malaysia acquired rights similar to the Women's Charter of Singapore only after the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1976 was finally implemented in March 1982. In Indonesia, it was only in 1974 that the status of women in marriage was safeguarded by a Marriage Act, which recognised the principle of

must not be forgotten that there were other women who rallied around her -- most of whom were reform-minded and socially motivated Christians. Christian women, however, were uncomfortable with the forthright stand which Bahá'ís took on the issue of the equality of status between men and women and preferred a lower profile.

With the first flush of independence in 1959 and the enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961, the women's movement in Singapore began to lose its momentum. In the place of the civic groups of the 1950's was the emergence of women in politics and they began to spearhead policies pertaining to women. Gradually, more women groups were formed -- professional, international, and charitable -- but the issues of interest were now not so much on women's rights but on adapting to a newly independent republic keen to get ahead with economic progress. Meanwhile, the social, recreational and educational needs of the masses were gradually taken over by the vast network of Peoples' Associations (PA) all over the island. While Bahá'í women remained active throughout the first and second wave of the women's movement, they had, by and large, lost the leadership of the women's movement with the departure of Shirin Fozdar. Due to the changed socio-political climate, the younger group of Bahá'í women in the second wave were not so focussed on the promotion of human rights per se as their health, environmental and educational activities.

As the chief influence on culture, social norms and values, religion must always feature either directly or indirectly in the women's movement. In the first wave, women leaders in civic groups had the courage to face the wrath of the conservative religious leaders of the community, as can be seen in the resistance between the SCW and the Tamil, Muslim, and Chinese Advisory Boards. In the second wave, women were careful to detach themselves from matters relating to religion owing to the changed socio-political climate in Singapore. While Bahá'í women attempted to influence Muslim reforms in the past, it would be inappropriate to do so today due to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and also due to the existence of Muslim women's groups who could themselves take the lead in their own affairs. Neither is it appropriate for Singaporean

groups to extend their work across the Causeway, since Malaysia is now an independent country.<sup>35</sup>

What then for the next millennium? For the Singapore Bahá'ís, they will have the task of keeping pace with a movement which they have been associated with from its inception. They will have to train more leaders among themselves to play key roles in the movement and they will have to continue to educate the masses on the importance of human rights and women's rights in their attempts to create a united world.

There is also an urgency to link the women's movement more closely with the peace movement. The goals of peace have been a central theme in all religions, although traditionally, religion has focussed more on inner than outer social and political peace. Peace is an urgent survival issue for the contemporary world, an issue of extraordinary magnitude ever since Hiroshima. It is time for religious leaders to argue persuasively against the justification of violence and war. For the Bahá'ís, the achievement of full equality between the sexes is one of the most important though least acknowledged prerequisite of peace. If conflict among nations is closely related to conflict in the country and the family, it is the special responsibility of non-governmental organisations such as the BOAW to eradicate the underlying sources of conflict – be it poverty, human rights violations or misunderstandings. Such sources are often the real causes leading to human unhappiness and dissatisfaction with one another, eventually contributing to violence as a means of remedying the source of the perceived injustice. The challenge then for the Bahá'í community both in Singapore and the world is to educate the public on the inter-relationship between equality of the sexes and world peace. They have to convince the public that only when women enter into all fields of human endeavour, then and only then can the moral and psychological climate be created for international peace to emerge.

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<sup>35</sup> In Malaysia, there is the presence of AWAM (All Women Action Society), a member of the Muslim Women's Action Group (better known from Sept 1990 as "Sisters in Islam", the name under which the group entered public debate, especially through letters to the editors of the Malay and English language press). Whether this movement will eventually influence their Muslim sisters in Singapore remains to be seen.

It should also be noted that although the Bahá'í Faith has been in Singapore for half a century, its membership size has remained relatively small. The Bahá'í register records a total of about 2,000 believers. It is an irony that while it is the religion which appears to be the most conducive where women's rights are concerned, it has not succeeded in attracting the majority of the more progressive or feminist-inclined sector of the population. This is striking when one realises that in Singapore and Southeast Asia, religion is not only holding its own but also gaining in strength. The Dakwan movement in Malaysian Islam, the Christian charismatic movement of Southeast Asia, the emergence of neo-Hindu groups like Sai Baba, the proliferation of Chinese mediums, the Japanese Nichiren Shoshu School of Buddhism are conspicuous examples. It will be interesting to see how the Bahá'í Faith will meet the challenge from such groups in the coming years.

Looking at religion in general today, it is obvious that religions are at a turning point where gender issues are concerned. The feminine critique of specific religious ideas and practices is becoming sharper, more articulate and detailed day by day. Today, institutional religion is facing a crisis due to a worn-out paradigm between the sexes. A new perspective is needed to help women develop their full potential, which has laid dormant for most of recorded history. In order to establish this reality, there is a need to eliminate worn out doctrines and shibboleths that have emerged from earlier socio-religious conditions and which have denied women's full equality by claiming she was created unequal by God.

The challenge of traditional theological thinking has already begun. In the West, the Movement for the Ordination of Women has gained considerable support especially in larger Christian churches such as the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. In the last 20 years, the number of women theology students have risen exponentially. In many theology courses in the West, more than half are women.<sup>36</sup> (King 1993). In Singapore, in the early 1990's there was a conference on feminist mariology whereby a statement was issued by the attendees "to liberate ourselves from the destructive effects of 2000 years of male interpretation of Mary" and "to return to the Scriptures as women within

<sup>36</sup> King, Ursula. *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, p. 2-20

our own cultural contexts, to rediscover the Mary who is liberated and the liberator."<sup>37</sup>

While most of the challenges so far have been addressed to the patriarchal heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition, increasing evidence exists that critical feminist consciousness is growing everywhere among the religions of the world, not just Jewish and Christian, but also within Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Buddhist nuns in the Theravada tradition strongly request the right to full ordination in Sri Lanka and Thailand. In the Mahayana tradition, women have asked for full recognition as Zen masters. Hindu women have established the right to recite the Vedas and follow the path of renunciation (*sannyasa*) traditionally closed to them. Some also campaign to be gurus in their own right.<sup>38</sup>

There is a growing awareness that religion is indispensable to social order and has a direct effect on laws and morality. The challenges of the next millennium must include the challenge to explore in greater depth the achievements of women and the potential transformative power of their contributions in religion. More important is the issue of educating the next and future generations on inequality. How are we to ensure that succeeding generations will not perpetuate the stereotypical ways of thinking and being that they have been used to? Society today needs a global ethic, a universal standard of values, ideals and goals - a need reflected in the "declaration toward a global ethic" of the recent World parliament of religions in Chicago (1993) which outlined a "minimal ethic" based on common values of the great world religions. One ethical point common to all religions is to treat each other as one would oneself like to be treated. Certainly, if the treatment of women were scrutinised in the light of this universal ethical standard, the world would progress beyond traditional, cultural and religious practices. In Singapore, perhaps the IRO as the officially recognised body representing the multi-faiths of the republic, can lead the way where this principle is concerned.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 271

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp 20-20.

In the light of fast-changing social-political circumstances, the enduring values of religion also need, from time to time, to be re-examined. Questions and problems never encountered before need to be posed. The challenge of the equality of the sexes confronts most of the world's religions in an unsettling and perturbing way. The Bahá'í Faith can only be commended for pointing and leading the way for its resolution, a process truly unique in religious history, both in Singapore and elsewhere.

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