

ASSOCIATE



Newsletter of the
Association for Bahá'í Studies
(English Speaking Europe)

Issue 37 – Spring 2002 C.E.

Conference on Bahá'í Theology

We would like to invite you to a conference on the above theme to be held in London. The Conference will include a special session on the Translation of Scripture into English and a seminar on the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. An interesting programme has been arranged with speakers from Germany, USA, Kirgizistan, Sweden, Italy and Britain.

The conference will be held at the London School of Economics, The Old Building, Vera Anstey Room, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE Friday 19 July 2001, 7:00 p.m. until Sunday 21 July, 5:00 p.m.

Registration fees: For the duration of the Colloquium including the package of materials: 30 pounds (includes package of materials) (Students: 20 pounds) Registration per day: 10 pounds without the package of the materials. Package of materials: 12 pounds

For information on registration contact: Mr Oliver Scharbrodt, Friendship House, Room C33, Rectory Lane, 1 St. Nicholas Glebe, London SW17 9QH, United Kingdom, E-Mail: scharbrodt@gmx.de or Mrs. Mirta, Lopez, 64 Addison Road, Flat 1, London W14 8JL. Phone & Fax: +44 (0) 20 7371 6022; E-mail: mirta@compuserve.com

Accommodation is available in a student hall of residence. For accommodation contact: Mr. Mark Holmes, Tel.: 020 7379 5589. E-mail: m.holmes@lse.ac.uk

This conference is the Forty-Second session of the Irfan Colloquium and is held in conjunction with the Religious Studies

Special Interest Group of the Association of Bahá'í Studies (English-Speaking Europe)

Reporting on the Spirit: How the Media Covers Spiritual and Religious Issues - No coverage; no comment?

[Our final paper in our series of papers from last year's ABS(ESE) annual conference – Ed.]

We hear a lot in the British media about 'morals' - building a 'moral society', questioning the 'morality' of politicians, of scientists, of the clergy, or the education and legal systems, and so on. So, in a sense, we hear a lot about the end-point of spirituality; how it informs moral behaviour. But we hear less about the starting point - this nebulous concept of spirituality itself.

If we're going to ask why some issues or stories are covered by the media - and why others aren't - we need to know what criteria the media apply in deciding to cover particular stories.

If you want to attract as many customers as possible, you have to avoid upsetting or putting off as many people as possible. One of the consequences of this is that the media tend to reflect the moral values which journalists and editors believe are shared by the most people.

In 'News and Journalism in the UK', media lecturer Brian McNair defines values as 'an individual's conscious or

INSIDE

6

- **New Book**
- **George Ronald Website**
- **American Academy of Religion**

9

- **Religious Studies SIG – N. America**
- **Summer Scholarship Academy**

unconscious preferences for what the world should be', and he adds that 'the news media of a particular society... tend to construct accounts of events which are structured and framed by the dominant values and interests of that society.'

As someone who's worked in journalism for quite a while, I can tell you that there aren't a set of written rules on how to churn out this 'value-laden' material. The social historian, Noam Chomsky has argued over the years that journalists are pressured by 'the establishment' into covering stories a certain way. While there is documented evidence that journalists are put under pressure from time to time not to run - for example - a negative story on a reliable advertiser - most of the time it's a lot subtler than that. The overarching principle at work in determining what to run, and what not to run, is that the story has to *sell*. And, as I will argue later in this paper, stories about religion are not widely viewed as a saleable commodity.

It is a mistake to assume that putting forward particular values or moral ideas do not sell, however. Journalists and the media 'evangelise' all the time; they take sides, voice opinions, and run campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion - and these kinds of stories do sell.

Through their media consumption, readers and viewers get to feel as though they're in on a bid to change the world, or their corner of it, anyway. They feel their opinion is being given voice by *their* favourite media outlet. They get to feel outraged or titillated or informed in an inclusive way. They become more loyal to that newspaper or radio program or TV show; they become regular *customers*.

So, given that journalists and media outlets do voice opinions and publish stories about particular values, I'd now like to argue that there is no *ideological* reason within the ethos of British journalism to prevent journalists or media outlets from holding religious opinions or giving voice to them.

Media outlets do, in fact, put forward what could be called 'religious' opinions. In fact earlier this year, Tony Benn wrote in The Observer that 'the mass media have to some extent replaced the church' - although I would add that the media only does this in cases where it's likely to sell newspapers, radio programs

or television programs. Where they refrain from committing themselves to a moral or religious standpoint, I would argue, it's because they're convinced it won't sell, and not because they feel morally obligated not to, nor because they think it might have a negative 'moral' or social outcome.

An example to illustrate this argument is the reporting of the murder of the little girl, Sarah Payne, by the News of the World, and the campaign that newspaper launched to name and shame child molesters in Britain. As a journalist, I saw that campaign as a very clever, calculated marketing move on the part of the News of the World, which had very little to do with building a more moral Britain. The newspaper's agenda was to sell newspapers by doing what we call in journalism 'generating a story'; where the story wasn't really about Sarah Payne, or her parents, who weren't happy about the campaign. The story was: the News of the World's campaign.

Now, if the paper's aim was to build a more moral Britain, in which children can walk the streets safely, it failed. The campaign sent a number of paedophiles into hiding, and forced some convicted molesters off the rehabilitation programmes they were on so they could move to another area, or go underground. It made it difficult for individuals who might have been facing a trial to get an unbiased jury - and that leads cases to be dismissed. And in at least two instances, the mobs mistakenly attacked individuals who had no history of child molestation. So as a moral campaign, it was a failure. But it did sell a lot of copies of the News of the World.

So - to sum up so far: the media are comfortable with handling stories about morals - about right and wrong; what's fair and not fair, what's justice and what's an injustice, what behaviour is acceptable, and what isn't. And we're comfortable with them doing that, and there's plenty of coverage of these issues. And they're also happy to hold forth on subjects that were traditionally the domain of religion.

There are stories *about* religion. But there are fewer than there used to be and there is likely to be even less of it in future. The religious coverage that does remain tend to be handled in a particular way. Not, as I mentioned before, because

there are rules about how these stories should be covered, but because the coverage is determined according to the values we're collectively perceived to hold.

In a collection of essays called 'Dare we speak of God in public?', theologian Hugh McLeod writes that churches continue to be approached for input not only by the media, but also by government and civil organisations, for input on 'moral issues' - such as the Abortion Act, South African apartheid, the 1980s peace movement, and so on. The *reason* for this, McLeod argues, is that 'the Churches (are) still seen as uniquely qualified to make moral judgements, and indeed, many people would have felt that the churches were failing in their duty if they had not attempted to respond.'

Last year, or the year before, a group of Afghan Muslims took the passengers on board a plane hostage. These people were making a last-ditch effort to avoid being sent back to Afghanistan. Now, you can guess how this story goes, too. There'll be an interview with one of the passengers' family members about how terrible these 'terrorists' are, an interview with a trustworthy police officer about how the hijacking is being handled ... and perhaps, at the end, there might be an interview with an Afghan Muslim here in Britain. But here, the religious person, the Muslim, will be on the back foot, with questions that paint Islam in a negative light. Why? Because - again - audience feedback and opinion polls show that many people in Britain share values and assumptions about Islam; they associate it with 'fundamentalism' and terrorism. And so by covering the story in this way, the reporter is reflecting a set of values back which are shared by much of the audience, and knows the story will *sell*. Even if one of the elements of this story is that human rights abuses drive people to do desperate things, only the most broad-ranging report will include this in its coverage. You are also unlikely to hear anything about institutionalised racism or religious prejudice in the police force in *this* story - even though there may be a story about that on the facing page of your newspaper.

Let's look at another example. A couple of years ago, in Kansas in the United States, three people from what is called the Religious Right were elected to

the state government education board, leading to a right-wing majority on the board. For about a year, this tiny group of conservatives held sway over the Kansas education system - and one of their first policies was a requirement that all Kansas schools teach Creationism instead of evolution in science class. In other words, that the world was created in six days, and is only a few thousand years old. How do you think this was reported? Most of the reporting painted religion-in-total in a negative light, rather than getting a balanced response from, say, Christian evolutionists in Kansas. Did anyone here know that this policy was reversed after new state elections a year or so later? Why not? Because it's not as entertaining to report that Kansas children are studying evolution; that's boring. *Everyone* studies evolution. But it's a much zanier idea to hear about people who believe the world was created in six days. A lot of people in Britain believe the Religious Right are crazy, that anything can happen in America - and we're delighted when we find examples of this. And the media know this - and give us what we expect - because it will get us watching, or listening or reading that media.

Okay, let's move on again - more specifically to some of the religious concepts that can be associated with spirituality - such as God and prayer. Here, there's a lot less coverage. Why is this the case? It's not because these issues aren't interesting to British people. A government survey two years ago found more than 70% of people in Britain have some form of belief in God. If we take a closer look at those statistics - the survey found one in five people were convinced there was a God, another fifth said they had some doubts but nevertheless felt there probably was a God, and another 15% said they believed in a higher power of some kind. About 20% said they believed in God some of the time, but not all of the time. Worldwide, the figures are even higher; a newly published Oxford University encyclopaedia of world faiths records that 84% of the world's people describe themselves in believers in a religion.

This tells us two things. First, that spirituality is something that interests more than 7 out of 10 British people. But second, we can see from this survey that

people hold a wide range of beliefs about God.

Because British people have less in common with each other about concepts like 'God' than they do about 'moral' behaviour, it's harder for the media to do stories on concepts *about* God, or *about* beliefs, because there aren't widely held ideas *about* these concepts. And as we've already heard, if a story won't appeal to or resonate with a wide audience, it won't get covered.

The lack of media coverage on stories or issues that are not expected to resonate with a wide audience is often frustrating for people who do public relations work for religious organisations. What's interesting is, similar frustrations are expressed by people who work in PR for asylum seekers and refugee organisations, or the anti-capitalist movement - in fact, any group that doesn't meet with the approval of mainstream society, or about which public opinion is divided.

And so we find ourselves in a situation where J.K. Galbraith said television reporters breathlessly report on the game of politics, but are 'quite silent' on what the game is about. An interview I did with the Refugee Council made a similar complaint about the British media and asylum seekers; that there was coverage on how many people seek asylum in Britain, and there are interviews with residents in Dover and politicians about how the majority of these people are 'bogus', but far less coverage of what it's like to be a refugee; in other words, *about* being an asylum seeker.

And the same is true of religion. A Muslim writing to the Independent some months ago complained that even after years of extensive coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis in the United States, most Americans knew all *about* the hostages, but nothing about the people who took them hostage. The US public was also left none the wiser about the tenets of Islam. Martin Bell stood just last month against a Christian party in London; there was plenty of coverage. But there was little coverage devoted to the teachings of the Peniel Pentecostal Church.

So we can see that it's fine to tell us that a politician is running for election against a church, or that Muslims have kidnapped Americans, but it's not fine to tell us what those people believe. Because

almost any report we hear is going to challenge our ideas and beliefs - and it may make us feel uncomfortable. And it can also spark protests from the religious community. The last thing a producer or an editor wants is a heap of letters from the Christian, or the Muslim, or the Sikh community complaining about a story and boycotting the paper or the broadcast in future.

There's another reason, Stephen Pattison, in an essay subtitled 'Need Theology Be So Useless', says theological academics have contributed to the lack of public understanding by using language which is 'complex, technical and obscure to non-initiates'.

So - Oxford University's Paul Joyce writes that theologians must share some of the blame for the public's inability to engage with spiritual issues. The essence of his essay can be summed up in the opening paragraph, which I'd like to share with you:

Picture the scene. A golden July evening in Manchester. At Maine Road Stadium, the rock group Queen comes on stage, to a roar of appreciation from a crowd of 50,000 fans ... Half a mile away, at one of the halls of residence of Manchester University, a mere 100 Old Testament scholars have gathered to listen to the distinguished German scholar Otto Kaiser read a paper on the Second Book of Samuel. The sounds of Queen reverberate across the city, and at least a few of the biblical scholars wish they could be at Main Road ... (T)he overwhelming sense that this episode conveys is of two worlds, with little in common; those who read and study the Bible being a tiny, ghetto-like minority separated from the great bulk of humanity and out of touch with the lives and interests of most of their contemporaries.

Joyce issues a challenge to his fellow theologians to move away from the 'academicisation' of religious study, in which there is a 'widespread sense that only the experts could interpret the Bible whilst others - even many parish clergy - [have come] to feel deskilled'.

To move on: if *most* people do actually have some form of religious belief, *and* religious people are actively

toiling away at good works and charitable organisations, *but* they aren't visible in any positive sense or feel too embarrassed to speak up; and if the stories that *do* make it into the press tend to be about an ailing Pope, or perverted priests or crazy Creationists or Islamic 'terrorists' or Branch Davidians or pro-lifers bombing abortion clinics or unfaithful televangelists or breatharians starving to death - *then* it's easy to believe at best that religion is a problem, not a solution, which deserves to be pilloried in public, or - if the issue at hand is too complex, too specialised, too academic, too inaccessible or irrelevant to most people - a problem which deserves to be ignored.

There's one last factor I'd like to mention in relation to what kinds of stories the media tend to cover. They like *short, simple* stories. Whether it's a story about religion, or horticulture, or gene therapy or trade relations - if it's complicated, or if the significance lies in the details, or if it takes too long to tell, it's probably going to be spiked.

Many stories *about* God or religious beliefs are complex, full of nuances and caveats - and that makes them difficult to cover. If you add to that the perceived apathy about religion and the diversity of beliefs in Britain, you get a media that's wary of covering these issues at all.

So - what happens when direct coverage of what religions have to say and what they're about, dwindles? Does it have any effects on us as individuals or as a society? Let's go back to the end-point of spirituality - our attitudes and values about moral behaviour. What are the influences that shape those values and attitudes? These can include our family, our school or university, our colleagues and friends, our religious community if we are part of a church or a religion. And another influence is what we watch on television, what we listen to on the radio, and what we read in newspapers and magazines.

To illustrate the influence the media can have, and in order to ask 'what happens when there's no coverage of a story?', I want to give you a couple of examples of what can happen when there *is* coverage.

Who here remembers the photograph of the little girl running naked down a road in Vietnam, covered in napalm? Up to when that photo was

published, the war in Vietnam was happening 'somewhere else'; there was little television or newspaper coverage of the effect it was having on the people of Vietnam. Historians agree that this photo was one of the triggers that swung public opinion against the war, and the protests that made the Vietnam War politically unpopular. America pulled out of Vietnam not long afterwards.

That photograph was a single moment in media coverage. But there's another example I'd like us to think about - which is sustained coverage, when you're bombarded with a particular idea or a particular message. One concept we're bombarded with is the idea that it's important to be slim. Over the past 40 years, the average dress size of female models has fallen from a size 12 or 14 to a size 8. Over the same period, the eating disorder anorexia nervosa has emerged from obscurity, if you like, to become one of the leading causes of death and hospitalisation among young women.

So you can see that if we're bombarded with a particular idea or concept - if there is coverage - it can become absorbed into public values or attitudes. So it follows that if we never see a particular idea or concept, we'll become comfortable with its absence; we may not even notice that it's gone.

Well, there are a number of potential consequences. First of all, we get out of the habit of seeing these stories. Secondly, we all forget things unless we're reminded of them. So it follows that if we don't see stories about spirituality, or God, or religion, we forget about these things, unless something else in our lives reminds us; such as our family, or where we work, or our religious community.

I think there's at least one consequence of this: it can make it hard to learn how to think about spirituality. We don't get the information we need to make an educated or informed choices about them. Most of us go through our lives equipped with the spiritual education of a child, and we don't get very much more information than that from the media. And because we live in an increasingly secular society, we may not get that information from anywhere else; from friends, or workmates, or whatever. So it's difficult to have ideas about these issues, let alone develop our thinking

about them, and work out what we think about these things.

So if a story isn't in the news or on TV or on the radio or in the newspaper - and if it's NEVER there, what does this tell us? Without the media necessarily meaning to - because I don't think - overall - that there's an anti-religion agenda in the British media - nevertheless, we get the impression that spirituality and religion aren't particularly important. It's not one of 'today's top stories'. Even though 70% of us have at least a suspicion that it might be.

What they hear instead is how important it is to make money, to get ahead, to be competitive. Their moral education, if they get one, will come from attempts by their parents to instil moral values, and perhaps once or twice a week while they're in primary school. And they'll receive that education from people who will increasingly have had no religious upbringing or influence on their lives.

But there are two very clear effects on individuals, I think. Firstly, it is becoming harder to search for spiritual truth; for a way of life that gives us spiritual strength and inspiration. It's not easy to ask questions, because many people around us won't have any more answers than we do. And we don't have much information to go on, and we're conditioned by the media to think spirituality isn't that important anyway. So embarking on a spiritual search is going to become more of a challenge - not just for seekers, but a challenge to people of faith to make what they have to offer more openly available and understandable to those seekers.

But secondly, if we look at history, we can see that the spiritual urge seems to be a central part of being human. It's an urge that persists no matter how superficially beautiful or wealthy or materially successful we become. An example of this is Ted Turner, the incredibly wealthy head of the news corporation CNN. He gives away millions of dollars every year to charities, and has said a number of times that these acts of generosity are what actually make him happy. This urge appears to be an integral part of being human; our *spiritus*, our human spirit. What I hope is that when it makes itself felt, when we feel the need to ask the big questions about life, or the need to embark on a spiritual search, that

we have the courage to do that, and feel that it is important, it is worthwhile - even if it's not a particularly good story.

Corinne Podger

New Book from [Kalimat](#)

Coming soon ... *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá'í Thought*

'An exciting and provocative volume of essays that take innovative approaches to familiar Bahá'í themes. These are the most recent, the most interesting, and the most challenging contributions to Bahá'í intellectual discourse.'

Retail price: \$29.95, paperback only

George Ronald Website

George Ronald now has a Website which can be viewed at www.grbooks.com

It has:

- * details of all our books that are currently in print that can be found by title, by author or by category
- * details of forthcoming titles
- * special offers of reduced priced books (which will change monthly)
- * a list of books that are out of print and when they are scheduled for reprinting
- * details of how submit a manuscript
- * a brief history of the company

At the moment it is not possible to order books on line but the Website gives you the addresses of distributors who have their own Website and are happy to take on-line orders. It also tells you how to order directly from us.

American Academy of Religion

The annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion will be held in Toronto this November 23-26, 2002. The AAR is the professional association of professors of religious studies, theology, and biblical studies, and its annual meeting is attended by 7,000 to 8,000 professors, graduate students, and other interested persons. The Bahá'í Studies Colloquy holds one or two panels at the

AAR, each of which includes two or three presentations on the Bahá'í Faith as it relates to religious studies. Persons interested in offering a presentation on the Faith at the AAR should submit a 250-word abstract to Dr. Robert H. Stockman (rstockman@usbnc.org). The deadline for proposals is May 15.

Religious Studies SIG of North America

The Religious Studies Special Interest Group of the Association for Bahá'í Studies holds a one-day program every year at the ABS annual meeting. This year the ABS meeting will be held August 30 through September 2, 2002, in Toronto, and the Religious Studies SIG will meet on the first day. Persons interested in presenting on the Bahá'í Faith as studied through the methods of religious studies, or as it relates to world religions and philosophies, should submit a 250-word abstract to Dr. Robert H. Stockman (rstockman@usbnc.org) by May 15.

Summer Scholarship Academy

11 August -18 August
Summer School of the Republic of Ireland

Come and explore how to correlate the Bahá'í teachings with the contemporary world. A one-week course held by the Association for Bahá'í Studies English-speaking Europe aimed at training interested Bahá'ís to learn the practical skills to do Bahá'í research and scholarship. Aimed at Bahá'ís from all backgrounds aged 15 upwards.

Speakers include leading lights in Bahá'í scholarship from North America and Europe, and include Moojan Momen, Stephen Lambden, Todd Lawson, Wendi Momen, Sholeh Quinn. The course was run last year at the Arts Academy and was very well received by the participants.

The course will run parallel to the Irish summer school in Waterford.

To book, send in a booking for summer school as normal and tick the box on the summer school brochure to say that they will attend the academy. The registrar for **summer school** is Geraldine Ronan,

Glenashley, Old Kildimo, Co Limerick, Ireland.

Cost: Full board and accommodation approximately €150 (UKP 90).

For more information about the **scholarship academy** contact: Jane.Aldred@iplbath.com

To see the provisional programme, go to the ABS-ESE web page at www.breacais.demon.co.uk/abs

Membership of ABS(ESE)

- Individual membership: £15 Sterling per year
- Unwaged membership: £10 Sterling per year (including full-time students and senior citizens)
- Sponsoring membership: £25 Sterling per year (supporting a Bahá'í in Central or Eastern Europe)

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Submissions for *Associate* should be sent to:

By e-mail:
absese@hotmail.com
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Or by post (preferably on disk) to:
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The ABS(ESE) webpage can be found at:

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