



VOLUME 1

# SOLAS

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES  
*English-speaking Europe: Irish Edition*  
2001

**Introduction**

*Dr Iarfhlaith Watson*

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**The Theology of Sacraments in the  
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The Covenant: A Study Weekend in Dublin

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## Introduction

Ireland has often been called “the land of Saints and Scholars,” and it is hard to write an Introduction such as this without making some reference to it. That was a particular time and place; although certain parallels may be drawn between Christianity then and the Bahá’í Faith now, there are also very many differences. The most important aspect of this phrase is not the cyclical nature of history, but the inspiration we can gain from it and the challenge it sets for us. After all, scholarship is of central importance in the Bahá’í Faith. Scholars are held to have an important role to play, for example, in defending the Faith, applying and producing a deeper understanding of its teachings, promoting its principles and working hand in hand with science and religion - having faith and using reason. No matter how scholarly the individual, their faith should balance their achievements with humility.

It was in this land of saints and scholars that the Association for Bahá’í Studies for English-speaking Europe (ABS-ESE) was first launched. Our history with the ABS goes back that far, but we are a small community and it was not possible for us to support such an endeavour. The ABS-ESE was established to support scholars in their important tasks. There are such associations in many countries across the globe, but our ABS covers Ireland and the UK and, more recently, there has been a concerted effort to include English-speakers on the continent, particularly from countries that do not have their own association. The ABS provides fora for Bahá’í scholars to present their ideas. These fora come in the form of an annual conference, a newsletter, a journal and a number of special interest groups. The largest density of English-speaking Bahá’ís is in England and this is where many of the Association’s events take place. It is a wonderful experience to attend a gathering of Bahá’í scholars, where new and thought-provoking ideas emerge.

The Weekend Conference held in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal at the end of October last year had such an indescribable spirit. There were extremely interesting and varied presentations, in an atmosphere that was calm and energetic, rational and refreshingly spiritual. The range of papers herein will provide some intellectual sustenance, but will not convey the regenerative spirit of that Conference. Judging from the experiences of conferences in the UK and the relatively small size of the Irish community, it is no mean achievement for this community to be able to produce enough people who were willing and able to have made the Conference work. Added to that, their enthusiasm has brought together not only most of the papers that were presented at the Conference, but also a number of additional pieces.

For the success of the Conference and for the huge effort in bringing together this premier volume thanks, although due to a number of people, are most especially due to Edwin McCloughan for hosting it and for editing the proceedings - céad míle buíochas.

*Solas*, as the name suggests, is a ray of light for scholarship in the land of saints and scholars. It is also a significant symbol of both faith and reason. But it is a small flame in a small community. The question at this stage is: Do we have the inspiration to keep it alight? With your support, we can.

Iarfhlaith Watson, PhD (Sociology)

# **The Theology of Sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church**

*Kevin Brogan*

## **Abstract**

*One of the most endearing features of the Bahá'í Faith is its openness to people of different beliefs and traditions. But that openness demands a knowledge of the belief systems of the people with whom one is in dialogue. This paper attempts to enter into a dialogue between the theology of Roman Catholic Sacraments and the Bahá'í response to that theology.*

## **Introduction**

One cannot ignore the part played by the Sacraments in the life of a Roman Catholic. While there may be a decline in the actual belief that people have in the Sacraments, they continue to be administered at crucial points in an individual's life. Perhaps it is because they are thus administered that they still hold such importance. Many Catholics today may see the Sacraments as mere empty formulae, but others see them as stepping stones along the path to eternal life, whereby the believer is infused with the Grace of God at significant points in their lives: they are seen as signifying no less than Christ's hand in humankind's redemption.

The intention of this paper is to examine the background to the Sacraments, their central importance to Catholic belief and their significance in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. It would not be possible to treat each of the Sacraments adequately in this space, but it is hoped that a detailed explanation of the Eucharist will give Bahá'ís some understanding of the importance of Sacraments in Roman Catholicism.

## **What are Sacraments?**

The seven Roman Catholic Sacraments are: Baptism, Penance, Confirmation, Eucharist (or Mass), Marriage, Holy Orders and Sacrament of the Sick (formerly "Extreme Unction"). The Church tells us that Sacraments are "the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ, the Head, throughout the Church which is His Body" (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 774). The noun "sacrament" is derived from the Latin *sacramentum*, originally "a military oath" taken by Roman soldiers not to desert their standard, turn their back on the enemy or abandon their general (traces of which survive in early Christian usage), but whose present meaning comes from its employment in the Latin New Testament to mean "sacred mystery." As one receives each Sacrament, he or she experiences the Grace of Jesus Christ and ultimately of God in a deeper way than experienced in previous Sacraments: one experiences God in a deeper way when one receives the Sacrament of Confirmation than when one is baptised. In the *Vatican Council Document* ("The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy," Section 59), we are told that the "purpose of the Sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ [the Church] and finally to give worship to God."

However, they also act as a form of instruction. Usually before one receives the Sacrament, one goes through detailed instruction about that Sacrament and its significance in the Christian life of the individual and the community. We see this especially in the case of adult Baptism, Penance (Confession), First Communion (Eucharist), Marriage, and Holy Orders. Bahá'ís might be familiar with the elaborate preparations for First Confession and Holy Communion among children in primary schools and also the preparation for Confirmation when the child reaches about eleven years of age. Much of this preparation concerns instruction in the meaning of the Sacrament being received. The person who is to receive it must have a strong Christian faith, but at the same time the celebration of the Sacrament helps the participant to nourish, strengthen and express his or her faith still further. That is why they are called “sacraments of faith” (*Vatican Documents : The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*).

### **Sacramental Grace**

In addition to this, the Church teaches that for believers, the Sacraments are a requirement for salvation and entry to eternal life (The Council of Trent, 1547). The reason for this is that Christ - through the Holy Spirit - bestows “Sacramental Grace.” This grace (which comes from the Latin *gratia* or “gift”) is defined as “a participation in the life of God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1997) and is the “gratuitous [free] gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it” (Ibid., Section 1999). Without this, one cannot participate in eternal life with God. More than a gift, therefore, it is a relationship with God.

Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (the Book of Certitude), also highlights this relationship when He says: “...for the highest and most excelling grace bestowed upon men is the grace of attaining unto the Presence of God, and of His recognition, which has been promised unto all people” (p. 138). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also highlights the importance of grace in the spiritual life of a believer: “It is evident that the souls receive grace from the bounty of the Holy Spirit which appears in the Manifestations of God. Therefore, if a soul does not receive grace from the bounties of the Holy Spirit, he remains deprived of the divine gift...” (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 128). He goes on to state: “Therefore, it is evident that the spirit of Christ is a heavenly grace which descends from heaven; whosoever receives light from that spirit in abundance - that is to say, the heavenly teachings - finds everlasting life” (p. 98).

While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is saying that the Holy Spirit gives us eternal life through the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Catholic Church also teaches that the Holy Spirit is received by reading the Word of God or Bible (*The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelations: Vatican Council Documents*); in addition, the believer receives the Holy Spirit in a special way through the rituals and symbols enacted in participating in the Sacraments.

### **Sacraments as the Continuation of Jesus’ Revelation**

A key role played by the Sacraments is that when the Church celebrates them, “she confesses the faith received from the Apostles” (*Catechism of the Catholic*

*Church*, Section 1124), and indeed from Christ Himself. It is He Who acts in and through the Sacraments and communicates the grace that each Sacrament signifies. In this we are being told that the Sacraments go back to the time of the early Church, and have been given to us by Christ. If one examines the Gospel, however, one does not find any account of Jesus prescribing the Sacraments in detail. The Church explains that while Jesus did not directly institute the Sacraments while He was on earth, He nevertheless instituted them through the Apostles and their successors. The Gospel reference to Jesus' appointment of Peter as first Pope - the so-called Petrine Clause - is used to explain this:

“...thou art Peter [Gk. *Petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church; and the gates of hell [Hades] shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19).

The Council of Trent (1545-63), the 19th ecumenical gathering of the Roman Catholic Church, which, in response to the Protestant Reformation, initiated a general reform of the church and precisely defined its essential dogmas, stated in 1547:

Adhering to the teaching of Holy Scripture, to the apostolic tradition and to the consensus... of the Fathers, the sacraments of the new law were... all instituted by Jesus Christ our Lord.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Section 1115) tells us that “the mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments through the ministers of his church.” This means that the unfolding mysteries of Jesus through the ages are being revealed in the Sacraments and that through them, He is revealing Himself to suit the needs of every age. This Revelation of Jesus in the Sacraments is being carried out through His ministers - the bishops and priests - who are seen as the direct link with the apostles and therefore with Jesus Himself. Since the existence of the Apostles' Creed as a formula from about the second century, the Church has, since the eleventh century, formally defined itself as “Catholic and Apostolic”.

One can see here again the need that the early Church had for putting the Christian faith under the authority of bishops and priests. Because the Sacraments are important steps in the life of a believer, the doctrine around them was very much influenced by the need to have an authoritarian priesthood. When the Sacraments were first instituted in the first or second century, it was necessary to emphasise the direct line with the Apostles and with Christ Himself. The bishops and priests, as the successors to the Apostles, acted as administrators of the sacraments, as in today's Church. This was necessary at that time because of the fear of schism and because it was necessary to keep the purity of Jesus' teachings intact. (It could be said that this also happened in the Bahá'í Faith with the succession of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as the two authoritative interpreters of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and also with the “learned arm” of the Faith, specifically the appointment

of the thirty-two Hands of the Cause of God by Shoghi Effendi between 1951 and 1957 for the purposes of its protection and propagation.) However, it also meant that the Church authorities controlled the development of Jesus' Faith, and did not take into consideration the spirituality of the people and how Jesus was working through them. This is also understandable in that the laity was not educated enough to be able to think for itself: it was a flock needing pastoral guidance (John 10:11-16) and, in a metaphorical sense, feeding (John 20:15-17).

### **Signs and Symbols**

Part of the celebration of the Sacraments is the use of signs and symbols, which derive their meaning from both the Old and New Testaments. Their purpose is to allow humanity to "express and perceive spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1146). In the same way that in the world of social relationships one uses actions, gestures and words, so also the Catholic Church teaches that we need signs and symbols to conduct a relationship with God. In many cases these signs, symbols and rituals are born out of the social relationships of the day. Washing and anointing, breaking bread and so forth help to demonstrate the presence of God and our relationship with Him while simultaneously being practical activities in the contemporary social milieu. The Sacraments integrate all of these signs and symbols in ritualistic celebrations.

The Church goes further than this in its use of symbol. St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), the foremost Scholastic scholar and theologian and a major figure in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, tells us that a sacrament is an "efficacious symbol," which means that what is symbolised happens. For example, the bread and wine at the Sacrament of the Eucharist (from the Greek word, *eucharistos*, meaning "grateful," literally a "thank-offering" or "thanksgiving") symbolise the Body and Blood of Jesus, but because the Eucharist is a Sacrament, Church teaching states that what is symbolised actually happens: that is, the bread and wine actually *become* the Body and Blood of Christ, while still remaining visibly bread and wine.

Why is it necessary to give signs and symbols such importance? Why is it so important to insist that people believe that this bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, when it is so obvious that they are merely bread and wine? In today's world, does this belief in Transubstantiation recreate the image of fellowship and community that was evident during the Last Supper? The answer possibly lies in people's need in the past for the miraculous and mysterious. It also placed the priest, who was representing Jesus at the altar, in a position of authority. Today, however, people are much less willing to accept this use of symbol and the authoritarian, centralised model of Church that accompanies it. A new understanding of symbol is required.

Bahá'u'lláh discusses symbols as follows:

Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath

been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 49).

In this we learn that symbols are used by the different Manifestations to show us what God expects of us: they are a means of *understanding* God's expectations. In the same way, Jesus used symbols to convey or reinforce His Teachings. He spoke of shepherds (John 11:11-16) and fishermen (Matthew 4:18-22) in relation to how His followers should act. He addressed the nature of fellowship by invoking the analogies of the vine and its branches (John 15:1-9) and of bread and wine. Symbols have a purpose, they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. To a large extent with the Catholic Church and its teaching on "efficacious symbols," this use of symbols has become an end in itself, where the symbol is often more important than what it represents. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies that "Outward forms and symbols must be used to convey intellectual conceptions" (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 83). He goes on to explain what this means by using examples:

...so the symbol of knowledge is light, and of ignorance, darkness; but reflect, is knowledge sensible light, or ignorance sensible darkness? No, they are merely symbols. These are only intellectual states, but when you desire to express them outwardly, you call knowledge light, and ignorance darkness. You say: 'My heart was gloomy, and it became enlightened.' Now, that light of knowledge, and that darkness of ignorance, are intellectual realities, not sensible ones; but when we seek for explanations in the external world, we are obliged to give them a sensible form. It is clear and evident that these signs have symbolic signification, and that they are not literal (p. 84).

Regardless of what Bahá'ís might feel regarding the application of ritual and the use of symbols as they apply to the Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, they are an essential part of Church teaching. It is a core teaching of the Church that they are the "signs and instruments" by which the Holy Spirit spreads the Grace of Christ to all believers. To certain Catholics, they are greater instruments than the actual teachings of the Bible.

Perhaps the greatest sacramental instrument is that of the Eucharist. This is commonly referred to as the Mass (from the Latin *missa* or "dismissal," signifying the solemn dismissal by the priest of the baptised congregation after it had partaken of the Eucharist in the early Church) and it is obligatory on each Roman Catholic to attend Mass each Sunday and Holy Day.

### **The Eucharist**

Recognised by the Catholic Church as "the source and summit of the Christian Life" (*Vatican Documents: Lumen Gentium*, Section 11), the Sacrament of the Eucharist has as its basis the Last Supper of Jesus Christ portrayed in the synoptic Gospels. It was the night before He was to be crucified. The meal has a poignancy that did not exist at any meal up to this. What added to its importance and solemnity was that it was also the Jewish Passover Meal (Pesach), which commemorated the

Exodus of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, an event, we are told, in which the angel of death *passed over* all the houses of the Jews and entered the homes of the Egyptians and killed their firstborn. As a consequence, Pharaoh released them from slavery (Exodus 12:31-32). Since then each year to commemorate this event, a Passover meal was prepared in each Jewish home, a long-established tradition which continues to this day. It included bread and wine, which were recognised as “the first fruits of the earth” and were offered as an acknowledgement of the greatness of God. The bread was unleavened (without dough and therefore not fermented) to signify the Jews’ hasty escape from slavery. Central to the commemoration was the celebration of Yahweh’s Covenant with His people, in which He promised to be faithful and loving to them in return for their acceptance of Him as the One True God. It was at this most important time of the Jewish year that Jesus chose to have His last meal with His closest followers.

It is the belief of Christianity that Jesus was herewith establishing the new Covenant. At Passover a lamb was sacrificed and eaten. Under this new Covenant [Testament], Jesus was the “Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). He had come to die for the sins of the world, a death that was imminent. This was a highly momentous occasion. All that had been said and done by Jesus over the three years of His ministry was encapsulated in this meal. Because He was hosting the Passover Meal, Jesus “took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body’. And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament [covenant], which is shed for many for the remission [forgiveness] of sins’” (Matthew 26: 26-28).

What is the meaning of these words? The Catholic Church takes them literally. By the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, Roman Catholics believe that at the Consecration of the Mass, which is a re-enactment of the Last Supper, the substance of the bread becomes Christ’s Body and the substance of the wine becomes His Blood. This was referred to above as an “efficacious symbol”, which means that what is symbolised actually occurs. The bread and wine offered at the altar are believed to become the actual Body and Blood of Christ. This doctrine, formulated at the Council of Trent in 1551, teaches that Christ is “whole and entire in each species”, that is, in the bread and in the wine. How does this happen? St. John Chrysostom (354-407), Bishop of Constantinople and Doctor of the Church, in his book, *De Proditione Judae*, tells us that “the priest pronounces the words, but their power and grace are God’s,” while St. Thomas Aquinas informs us that the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ “cannot be apprehended by the senses but only by faith which relies on divine authority” (*Summa Theologica*). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* today tells us that this transformation happens “in a way surpassing understanding” (Article 1333). There is no rational explanation for this, so the believer is expected to take Transubstantiation as an article of faith.

Is there a different meaning to what Jesus was telling His disciples at the Last Supper? By going back to the Passover meal commemorated each year by the Jews, we see that the bread and wine are symbolic of food that sustains life, while the lamb in the Old Testament was a sacrificial victim in rituals. Jesus tells His

listeners: “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). Here Jesus is saying that He is the real food of life. The bread symbolises the spiritual nourishment that He gives through His Teachings. In verses 49-51 of this same chapter, Jesus tells those assembled in Capernaum’s synagogue:

“Your fathers did eat of manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

His listeners took offence at this last remark: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52). Even His disciples found His figurative use of bread to be “an hard saying; who can hear it?” (John 6:60), and “From that time many of [them] went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66) and were thereby “tested and proved,” as explained by Bahá’u’lláh with reference to symbolic language. Yet Jesus is the “Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). The new Covenant or agreement between God and His people is sealed by the shedding of Jesus’ blood in the same way that the shedding of the lamb’s blood at Passover (Exodus 12:7-13) brought about the safe passage of the Israelites into the Promised Land. By His death and resurrection, Jesus is bringing about the New Covenant, a Covenant which the Letter to the Hebrews explains as letting “us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22).

The image of bread has another meaning also. Jesus refers to Himself as the “bread of life.” He also says: “...the words that I speak unto you, they are *spirit*, and they are *life*” (John 6:63, emphasis added). The bread He gives is the spiritual nourishment or sustenance of His Teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that this “celestial food is the divine bounties, the spiritual splendours, the heavenly teachings, the universal meaning of Christ. To eat is to draw near to Him and to drink is to believe in Him [John 6:35]” (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 98). He concludes by saying: “Then it is clear that the bread and wine are symbols, which signified: I have given you My bounties and perfections, and when you have received this bounty, you have gained eternal life and have partaken of your share and your portion of the heavenly nourishment” (p. 98).

Because the early Church took Jesus’ words literally, this non-symbolic interpretation became the Sacrament of the Eucharist. As a result the spiritual meaning of the Last Supper was clouded. The reasons for this misunderstanding may lie in the fact that during the formative period of the early Church, there were similar examples of sacred meals where bread and wine were consecrated. Among the Essenes, a monastic group from the desert areas, there existed a “common meal,” and according to the Damascus Document found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, a priest blessed bread and wine. There is evidence that some of the members of the early Church had some contact with this group. There is also evidence of sacred meals partaken of by the Romans, where bread and wine were consecrated. It is probable that from these related examples of sacred meals, which

were part and parcel of the culture of the time, developed the concept of the Eucharist, as celebrated at Mass today.

The Eucharist, which began as the re-enactment of the Last Supper, evolved into what is called the Mass. It is one single act of worship and contains two fundamental parts. The Liturgy of the Word includes readings from the Gospel and the Old and New Testaments, the homily or sermon given by the priest and the prayers of the faithful. This is followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which comprises the offering of the gifts of bread and wine, the Consecration - where the bread and wine are blessed and changed into the Body and Blood of Christ - and finally the faithful partake of that meal which is called Holy Communion. This present format seems to have developed early in the Church's history. St. Justin (100-160 CE), who wrote to a pagan emperor around the year 155 CE, records what the Christians did:

On the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and for a considerable time he gives thanks that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he had concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to the acclamation by saying 'Amen'. When he who presides has given thanks and the people responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'eucharisted' bread, water and wine and take them to those who are absent (*Apologiae*, chapters 65-67).

There are many similarities between that account of the primitive Mass on the Sabbath and the Bahá'í Nineteen Day Feast. The Feast constitutes the heart of the Bahá'í community, and attendance, while not obligatory, is an important Bahá'í duty. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the significance of these Feasts: "The Nineteen Day Feast was inaugurated by the Báb and ratified by Bahá'u'lláh in His Holy Book, the Aqdas, so that people may gather together and outwardly show fellowship and love, that the Divine mysteries may be disclosed. The object is concord, that through this fellowship hearts may become perfectly united, and reciprocity and mutual helpfulness be established" (*The Nineteen Day Feast*, p. 5). In just the same way that the Mass is the most important community prayer of the Catholic Church and its central act of worship, the Nineteen Day Feast is seen as the foundation of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Nineteen Day Feast has many similarities to the Mass in format. The first part is the spiritual or what is called the Devotional, which consists of reciting or chanting the prayers and the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to a certain degree corresponds to the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass. The second part is general consultation on the affairs of the Faith. During this part, the Local Spiritual Assembly, the ruling administrative body elected or formed by the local Bahá'í community each year, consults with the community and learns what the community thinks and then studies the resolutions consulted upon and passed at the Feast. This corresponds to a large extent to the priest's homily because the priest is the spiritual leader of the local parish; the main difference is that his sermon does not, like the consultative portion of the Feast, involve dialogue with the congregation. The third part of the Feast is the social. Here the host, who may be the owner of the house in which the Feast is held, prepares refreshments for the participants. Indeed, in the early Church, when numbers were small and the Eucharist would take place in people's homes, the host would prepare a meal. This is akin to the Holy Communion received by Catholics. When talking to Roman Catholics about the Bahá'í Faith, there is an opportunity to mention the Feast and its place in the Faith and to introduce its similarities with the Mass as an explanation.

For Catholics, the Mass is a very important celebration of the Christian experience. It allows the community or parish to meet each Sunday to renew their Covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the past in Ireland, as in other countries, it also had a social dimension in that it allowed the neighbours and parish members to meet one another on a Sunday morning after the priest had bidden his congregation to "go in peace to love and to serve the Lord."

However, one cannot help thinking that if the Church had not misunderstood the meaning of what Jesus said at the Last Supper, that celebration would have been even more meaningful. By adopting the literal meaning of Jesus' symbolic words, a very rich spiritual meaning was lost to countless generations of Catholic believers. Jesus' redeeming message was clouded by the mystery and "magic" of Transubstantiation. There must also have been good reason why the true meaning of the Last Supper was obscured in this way, however.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to give an outline of the general theology of the Sacraments, which is quite difficult in that they have evolved into what the Church explains as a special encounter with God in and through Jesus, an encounter which fills the participant with the Holy Spirit and bestows a Grace which enables the believer to draw closer to the Creator of all things, an encounter without which the believer cannot attain eternal life. While the Bahá'í Faith does not recognise these Sacraments, it is imperative that in speaking to Roman Catholics, Bahá'ís understand their significance in a believer's life.

Bahá'u'lláh has revealed:

The Word of God... is God's all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate. It is an entity far removed above all that hath been and shallbe... Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God - exalted be His glory - is

higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 140-141).

It should be remembered that the Word of God in the Bible is also a source of Grace to the Roman Catholic. Indeed, increasing numbers of believers see the Bible as being of greater significance in their lives than the Sacraments. Bahá'ís believe that because Jesus did not directly institute the Sacraments, they do not have the same Divine impact or efficacy as the Word of God or Gospel. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that the Sacraments are no longer necessary or essential, but to say this to a devout Roman Catholic is to dismiss a core article of their faith.

As a Bahá'í who was once an active believer in Roman Catholicism, I feel that when speaking to followers of the Catholic Church, it is vital to understand where they "are coming from." In this paper I have tried to explain the teaching behind the Sacraments and particularly the Sacrament of the Eucharist, while at the same time offering a Bahá'í perspective that will allow for dialogue between both Faiths. I feel that it is only in such a spirit of sensitive and constructive dialogue that Roman Catholics - who constitute the world's largest and most widespread Christian denomination - will begin to consider investigating the Bahá'í Faith and that Bahá'ís themselves will consort with Catholics in a more focused and positive way.

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# **A Personal Consideration of the Four Year Plan and its Legacy from an Irish Bahá'í Perspective**

*Brian Corvin*

## **Abstract**

*The following paper, originally delivered at the ABS Conference in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal at the end of October 2000, is a very frank and detailed assessment of the Four Year Plan in the Republic of Ireland. Though highly personal and at times polemical, it may be regarded as a piece of socio-historical analysis.*

## **Introduction**

In its 1996 Ridvan Letter, the Universal House of Justice states: “The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude.” Towards the end of the Letter, the House comments:

This Plan to which we are now committed is set at one of the most critical times in the life of the planet. It is meant to prepare our community to cope with the accelerating changes that are occurring in the world about us and to place the community in a position both to withstand the weight of the accompanying tests and challenges and to make more visible a pattern of functioning to which the world can turn for aid and example in the wake of a tumultuous transition. Thus, the Plan acquires a special place in the scheme of Bahá'í and world history...

In this paper I intend to look at the Letter and consider four areas where I feel it raises questions, namely:

- (1) How did the Irish Bahá'í community respond to the special call in the Four Year Plan?
- (2) In the long term, what of substance emerged from the period and what was the legacy of the Plan?
- (3) How does this 1996 Letter with its the Four Year Plan differ from the Ridvan Letter of 2000 with its Twelve Month Plan?
- (4) What avenues do the latter directives open for us at this point where “we cross a bridge to which we shall never return?”

First, I will look at the main provisions of the 1996 Ridvan Letter. Then I will examine the response and reaction by the Bahá'í community in the Republic of Ireland over the four years covered by the Plan. Then I will consider the implications of the 2000 Ridvan Letter and its development of certain themes so that we may hopefully gain a clearer insight into where we have come from, what we are doing now and where we are going as Bahá'ís. Finally I will make a number of proposals arising from the paper which may help us at this critical period.

## **The Main Provisions of the Four Year Plan**

The 1996 Ridvan Letter of the Universal House of Justice sets forth the objectives of the Four Year Plan in broad strokes.

The Four Year Plan aims at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. As we have stated earlier, such an advance is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believers, of the institutions, and of the local community.

The Letter goes on to highlight the pivotal role that the individual will play in this process:

The role of the individual is of unique importance in the work of the Cause. It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the teaching work and the development of the community depend.

The individual's role is carefully balanced when the House points out:

The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members... Progress... requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá'í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions...  
... Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, and loving shepherds of the multitudes.

The Letter proceeds to stress that:

The community, as distinguished from the individual and the institutions, assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size. This is a necessary development to which much attention is required both with respect to places where large-scale enrolment has occurred and in anticipation of more numerous instances of entry by troops.

The Letter looks at specific areas in which Bahá'ís can act to facilitate the process. It paints the large picture as follows:

The Bahá'í world community will expand its endeavours in both social and economic development and external affairs, and thus continue to collaborate directly with the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world... particularly through the communities' involvement in the promotion of human rights, the status of women, global prosperity, and moral development.

On a local level the House stipulates that:

... it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings... [that] individuals [endeavour to] conduct study classes in their homes... In all their efforts to achieve the aim of the Four Year Plan, the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation.

The individual is advised to:

draw upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular reading and study of the Holy Texts... In addition to these, the individual, having been given the duty to teach the Cause, is endowed with the capacity to attract particular blessings promised by Bahá'u'lláh.

However, it goes on to advise and counsel that:

... sponsorship by the institutions of occasional instruction and the informal activities of the community, though important, are not adequate for the education of a rapidly expanding community. It is therefore of paramount importance that systematic attention be given to devising methods of educating large numbers of believers in the fundamental verities of the Faith, and for training and assisting them to serve the Cause as their God-given talents allow. There should be no delay in establishing permanent institutes designed to provide well-organised, formally conducted programmes of training on a regular schedule.

Then it clearly underlines the importance of these institutes:

What the friends throughout the world are now asked to do, is to commit themselves, their material resources, their abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted. These centres of Bahá'í learning will have as their goal one very practical outcome, namely, the raising up of large numbers of believers who will be trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.

The Letter concludes with the following rousing call:

May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity...

## **Response**

To answer the first question, “How did the Irish Bahá’í community respond?”, one needs to look back to the air of anticipation and hope that was palpable during the Bahá’í Summer School in Waterford in August 1996. The widespread feeling of optimism and expectancy implied that great things would be achieved in the coming four years.

When the National Plan formulated by the National Spiritual Assembly was unveiled at that Summer School, a prominent role was assigned to the individual, who could “Share more confidently, constantly and effectively the healing Message of Bahá’u’lláh with an ailing humanity, through engaging in personal teaching,” “supporting the teaching projects of the Local and National Assemblies” and participating in training institutes.

The theme of training institutes was to be found in the goals assigned to Local Spiritual Assemblies, and it was reinforced as one of the more prominent goals of the National Assembly, which called for the development of national, regional and local institutes.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this National Plan was the advice that we develop an acceptance of “the fact that mistakes will be made, and a willingness to learn from them.” This, I felt, was a sign of a growing maturity, and suggested that we intended to stop sweeping problems under the carpet and then simply ignoring them.

In that first year of the Plan, a number of promising initiatives were undertaken. A National Training Institute was appointed in November 1996. Three months later, we had the first All-Ireland Teaching Conference near Enniskillen in Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. This was a very welcome development, which suggested that Bahá’ís could offer a potential lead to the political forces on this island, especially with regard to unity and co-operation. At this Conference, two important announcements were made. One was a cross-border teaching initiative called the Badi’ Project and the other was the establishment of an External Affairs Department with a full-time officer.

I volunteered for the Badi’ Project and spent several days with more than twenty other volunteers at a training session in the Reconciliation Centre, Glencree in Co. Wicklow, where Counsellor Viv Bartlett from Wales advocated the use of a “Direct Teaching Method.” As far as I could judge, this appeared to be a “cold turkey” approach to teaching, involving as it did stopping people on the street, introducing oneself and telling them a little about the Faith with the intention of interesting, engaging and hopefully enthusing them before inviting them to become Bahá’ís by signing the declaration card. Apparently the approach had worked when used in parts of London and some other places in Britain. I was sceptical, but spent a week on the Project in Belfast with another Dubliner. Before we arrived in the Northern capital, it was arranged that we would walk up the Shankill and down the Falls Road; on reflection, however, it was considered wiser to concentrate on Roman Catholic West Belfast because of our Southern Irish accents.

Some months earlier, I spent a week on the Letters of the Living Project in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, organised by the town’s Local Spiritual Assembly. This involved street teaching, holding an exhibition in a vacant shop, evening firesides in

the cottage in the Oldtown that serves as a Hazíratu'l-Quds and press and radio publicity. (The latter included an interview with a native adult believer.)

In January 1997 there was a meeting of the Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) at the National Centre in Dublin, which hoped to reactivate Bahá'í scholarship here after a period of hibernation. The two-day meeting was chaired by Rob Weinberg from Britain, author of the biography, *Ethel Jenner Rosenberg* (George Ronald, 1995), who was lively, helpful and informative. About a dozen papers were presented, ranging from racial identity, Feasts and firesides, changing one's religion to one on the Hands of the Cause of God who had visited Ireland. There was also a very engaging and imaginative account of the steps taken by humankind towards global political unity entitled "Pan Planet."

In the arts, a Forum was launched on a sunny afternoon at the 1996 Summer School to a packed gathering. Subsequently the Forum held a number of meetings in Dublin, and a core group succeeded in bringing a multi-media exhibition by Bahá'ís, "Lift Up Your Hearts," to Clonmel Library and the Irish Writers' Centre in Parnell Square, Dublin, with financial assistance from the National Assembly. On an individual level, Belfast Bahá'í George Fleming achieved a limited success with his second solo painting show, "All God's Children," which portrayed the different religions of Northern Ireland. Vinnie Flannery organised a well-attended, interactive Arts Workshop Weekend in Co. Leitrim and showed considerable initiative by setting up a Bahá'í Arts Website in 1999, while I undertook a "Dream Journey" from Mizen Head to Malin Head, a conceptual art project with a substantial Bahá'í input that involved distributing leaflets and prayer books and visiting eight Bahá'í communities along the route in the final year of the Plan.

John McGill took over the External Affairs brief during the Plan's first year. He managed to organise an ecumenical service at St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and he played a prominent part in the Dublin City Assembly's 50th anniversary celebration at Dublin Castle in 1998, which was attended by President Mary McAleese, Professor Suheil Bushrui and over two hundred well-wishers.

The Women's Association recruited members at a Summer School early in the Plan, and arranged weekend meetings at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow and Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

In the third year of the Plan, the Panacea Dance Project came to Ireland from the United States, and spent a fortnight in Limerick, training young Bahá'ís to set up their own dance/drama groups.

However, the most innovative and long-lasting change to community life was brought about by the National Training Institute. It started by organising a couple of national weekend courses in Athlone. I attended both courses, and while I enjoyed the company and found them fairly interesting, at the time they seemed to be little more than a series of deepening workshops on the verities of the Faith with interactive trimmings. Following the Letters of the Living and Badí' projects which it organised, the Training Institute arranged and oversaw a "Service to Bahá'u'lláh" Project for local communities which centred on prayer sessions during the Fast. This was followed by organising a series of local courses with the assistance of Auxiliary Board members. Again these looked and felt like deepenings with an interactive element.

In the final Year of the Plan, by which time the National Training Institute had become the Training Institute Board, the Irish Bahá'í community was introduced to Study Circles. These were recommended to the believers after they had achieved some success in Italy as a teaching medium, though details of this activity and success were extremely difficult to come by.

I attended the first regional course in the Dublin area. We met on the third Sunday of every month from September 1999 until May 2000, with the exception of March (because of the Fast). One of the most obvious benefits of the Study Circle has been the involvement of "the learned arm" in the exercise. In Dublin we had the encouragement and involvement of the assistant for Protection and two assistants for Propagation. At the final session in May, most of the participants who had participated in and staged the course seemed impressed and satisfied with what had been achieved, and several said they were very much looking forward to the second course which was arranged to commence at the end of September 2000.

In summation, this was the considered response to the Plan. It was by no means the whole story, however.

### **Reaction**

To answer the second question, "In the long term, what of substance emerged from this period and what was the legacy of the Plan?", we need to look a little closer at the response and, perhaps more important, at the reactions to the initiatives that were undertaken. Unfortunately we have few objective criteria to judge or estimate our progress as a community during the four years of the Plan, e.g. how exactly can the evolution of the administrative institutions be determined? Even such crude statistical evidence as the total number of believers in the Republic of Ireland - which appeared at one time in the Annual Reports - has disappeared. More often than not, we have to rely on anecdotal evidence or bland, feel-good sentiments. However, one has only to look at the number of group projects which have failed, faltered or simply faded away during the period to cause us to question or at least ponder on our commitment to communal action.

When I think back on the Letters of the Living and Badí' Projects during the first year of the Plan, I am struck by the fact that while the local Bahá'í communities in Letterkenny and in Belfast were for the most part helpful and supportive, very few of the local believers actually got involved in the day-to-day running of either Project. In Letterkenny, for example, the exhibition was mostly facilitated by the travelling teachers and only one local believer gave a fireside. National projects surfaced only sporadically after this ("Nur" and "Panacea" are the only two that come to mind), and then without any noticeable success in the teaching and consolidation fields.

In the arts, the one teaching/proclamation discipline specifically mentioned in the 1996 Ridvan Letter, the Forum limped on for the best part of a year, with the number of those attending its meetings dropping from twenty-two to three, while its successor, the Arts Task Force, appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly, issued a single newsletter before it lapsed into silence for the best part of a year.

John McGill spent over a year at External Affairs work before moving on to a more commercial brief. His post has not been filled, and, to my knowledge,

External Affairs has been swallowed up as a Subcommittee of the National Assembly, with one person acting as Information Co-ordinator.

The Association for Bahá'í Studies (ABS) disappeared off the agenda following its meeting in January 1997, surfacing very briefly at Summer School in Waterford last year, and has not been sighted until its reincarnation in Letterkenny at the end of October 2000.

After a number of well-publicised weekends, the Women's Association has been strangely silent with little or no information filtering through.

This is undoubtedly a feeble collective track record, but Social and Economic Development did not even make a token showing during the Plan. This was probably inevitable after the Irish community's unfortunate experience of a decade ago. Then there was a seemingly misguided attempt to approach this area in Third World terms (e.g. teaching on the off-shore islands and amongst the Travellers). It is here that we should have seen the dynamic consolidation of the spiritual and the material which 'Abdu'l-Bahá so clearly and cogently recommended and practised Himself over eighty years ago.

The sad but unavoidable conclusion that one draws from this record is that *we do not work well together* and that *unity is as yet only an aspiration*. It is a shame that the passage in the 1996 Ridvan Letter regarding community was not more closely studied and acted upon. The passage reads:

A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization comprised of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress. Since Bahá'ís everywhere are at the beginning of the process of community building, enormous efforts must be devoted to the tasks in hand.

A footnote by eminent religious scholar, Dr Moojan Momen, in his published address on the style of Bahá'í community functioning, is pertinent here:

What we have in the West, where Bahá'í groups meet for a few hours each week, can scarcely be called a community. The term "Bahá'í community" is more an expression of aspiration than of present reality ("Learning From History," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 1989-1990*, Volume 2, Number 2, p. 66).

One of the most encouraging signs on the horizon that "a lesson has been learnt" has been the survival - if not the success - of the process of Training Institutes and Study Circles. In the Ridvan Letter of 2000 we learn that, on a global scale, "The chief propellant of... [Bahá'í cultural] change was the system of training institutes established throughout the world with great rapidity - an

accomplishment which, in the field of expansion and consolidation, qualifies as the single greatest legacy of the Four Year Plan.”

In the Irish context, I see little sign that the Study Circles have been an unqualified success. Yet there does seem to be an awareness that the Institute process could be a permanent feature in the life of our communities. However, I feel that real difficulties will emerge if we continue to use and depend on unadapted Ruhi textbooks to foster this process.

When I attended the first Study Circle last September, I was more impressed by the main facilitator, who was diligent, thoughtful and refreshingly honest, than I was by the course itself. We spent most of our time studying and trying to memorise passages from the Writings as set out in *Ruhi Book Six: Teaching the Cause*. This was part of a series of textbooks which originated from the Ruhi Institute in Columbia. I never really came to terms with the textbook, which appeared simplistic, inappropriate in an Irish context and probably more suited to the mass teaching and mass conversion conditions of Central and South America. When I made inquiries, I gathered that this series of books is being used for three reasons: (1) They are simple and basic and therefore accessible in most cultures, (2) they have been used with relative success in a number of areas and circumstances worldwide and (3) they have a structured objective which is as desirable as it is rare. However, there is little first-hand evidence available to show if this approach has enhanced the believers’ ability and willingness to teach in the developed world, apart from the brief statement about the success with Study Circles in Italy. When I asked about adapting the course to Irish circumstances, I was told that there hadn’t been time to develop a structured course, which could take ten years to do.

The most unfortunate aspect of the current situation has been the decided lack of information about the process itself. Communications from the Board down to the individual believers in local communities has been slow, intermittent and patchy. As of this writing, there hasn’t been a single national progress report on the Institutes since the process started four years ago. This - and an Information Pack explaining in some detail the purpose, methods and successes of the “centres-of-learning” courses and Study Circles - would be appreciated and would possibly help to stimulate interest in the process. This is necessary, as there still seems to be considerable resistance to the whole idea, despite the encouragement of both the House of Justice and the National Assembly. This may be due to prejudice and conservatism, but is most likely due to lack of information and poor communication.

I felt that a start was made to remedy the situation in July this year when one of the assistants came to our Local Spiritual Assembly in Dublin City with a 17-page document, *Training Institutes and Systematic Growth*, prepared by the International Teaching Centre to explain what was happening. I subsequently enjoyed the explanatory session on Training Institutes and Study Circles at the Waterford Summer School in August this year. Anne O’ Sullivan, who has been appointed to the Board, gave an excellent presentation on the history of the Training Institutes, which helped put the process into some kind of historical perspective. Pat Murphy gave us some background detail on Study Circles and answered questions about them.

In summation, it is extremely difficult to see what of substance emerged from the period in question or how it helped to realise the overriding goal of the Four Year Plan - that of significantly advancing the process of entry by troops. According to the Ridvan letter of 2000, the earlier Plan called for “a clarity of understanding which made systematic and strategic planning a prerequisite of individual and collective action.”

In Irish terms we simply have not seen this yet. Nevertheless, if the Training Institute courses can lead us to an appreciation and realisation of this, it will undoubtedly raise our consciousness, witness an upgrading of teaching activities, lead to a change in the culture of our communities and prove itself a worthy legacy of the Four Year Plan.

### **Subsequent Developments and the Twelve Month Plan**

To answer the third question, “How does the 1996 Letter with its Four Year Plan differ from the Ridvan Letter of 2000 with its Twelve Month Plan?”, I would draw attention to the marked change of emphasis that one finds in the later Plan. The goals of the present year (2000-2001) are given a single paragraph and entry by troops receives, in contrast to the earlier Plan, little more than a passing mention. The Lesser Peace is not explicitly mentioned at all. The Training Institutes and Study Circles are given considerable attention and prominence, but the real surprise is that there were almost two full pages devoted to the care and the needs of children and youth. The reason for this change is not immediately obvious, but it did not appear to follow or emerge from anything outlined in the Four Year Plan.

I made inquiries among the friends and heard a variety of explanations and opinions about this concern for younger Bahá'ís.

First, the present generation of Bahá'ís had failed in their tasks and responsibilities and would soon be swept away to be replaced by a new, brighter and more systematic generation which will come of age towards the end of the next twenty-year thrust of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan.

Second, we had neglected our children by not giving them a clear lead and had not instructed them in the verities of the Faith.

Third, we had not been properly aware of them as our most precious resource.

And fourth was the cynical suggestion that it was simply a way of moving the agenda forward, by distracting and diverting us from the fact that we had not achieved any significant entry by troops (“the number of new believers has as yet only slightly surpassed those of recent years” - Ridvan Letter 2000) or lived to see the Lesser Peace established by the end of the 20th century.

A passage in the *Ruhi Institute Book: Learning About Growth* that deals with children's education foreshadows and signals this concern as far back as 1991. It reads:

Doctrines that have disregarded religious education for children, and have left them to acquire their standards and beliefs supposedly by free choice, from their interaction with society, have contributed greatly to the present state of moral disintegration. The proponents of these doctrines do not seem to appreciate the fact that there are political, economic and cultural interests in

society which aggressively promote their own desired patterns of thought and behaviour. But even if this were not so, humanity, left to its own devices without divine guidance, has produced nothing more than injustice and suffering: there is no reason to suppose that any new generation of children will create a better world without an education that is basically spiritual.

Whatever the reason, I think we can expect that increasing attention will be paid to education for young people and indeed for all. In fact, at this year's Summer School in Waterford, I noticed an increasing emphasis on both education and youth. It was evident in the interactive methodology which Dr Iraj Ayman employed in his sessions (e.g. group consultations on the Covenant and on teaching), in the appearance of a number of enthusiastic young people on the main programme as speakers and in the activities of a pioneer paying a flying visit from China, who was offering Chinese scrolls and artefacts to raise money for the International Fund as well as teaching T'ai Chi, a graceful form of "moving meditation" in the afternoons.

One passage in the 2000 Letter cites another new but related theme: the need for systematic and strategic planning, the appreciation that systematisation will facilitate the process of growth and development and the need to improve our teaching activities that will, hopefully, lead to a change in the culture of the Bahá'í community. As I understand it, this all suggests that there will be a conscious attempt to move our culture away from the "Social Club" mode of development with its casual, "It'll come all right on the night" attitude, its inspired amateurism and anti-intellectualism into a more structured, thoughtful and interactive educational approach.

We increasingly need to ask if we interact and respond in a significant or constructive way to the wider society with its numerous problems. Or do we cocoon ourselves from the violence, poverty, insanity, sexual malaise, sickness, drug abuse, prejudices, rabid consumerism, greed, corruption, alienation and dehumanisation that surround us beneath the veneer of First World modernity? It is extremely difficult to listen to all this glib chatter about the Celtic Tiger and the unprecedented prosperity of our burgeoning economy and then to consider the plight of our poor. Even today we have many, many people living on the streets of cities and towns and in some of the worst physical conditions in all of Europe. Ireland, for instance, has the highest rate of child poverty in the EU; there are well over 1,000 homeless young people in the Dublin area alone. Or consider the long lists of people having to wait for hospital beds and operations, and the fact that the national illiteracy rate is as high as 25%. No one who today calls himself or herself a Bahá'í in Ireland can be complacent about this deplorable situation. Of course it is a highly complex problem and one that has been with us for a long time.

I believe that the Training Institutes are an exciting development, possibly a tiny but significant step on the path to global solidarity. But we need to broaden the concept as we have little more than mere potential at present. There is no doubt that we need teachers who will help to channel and deepen new believers as they come into the Faith. In the past we have seen what can happen when numbers of young people come into the Faith in places like Carlow, Gorey and, before that,

Dundalk. There were neither the structures nor the organisation to secure consolidation, and we experienced the unpleasant phenomenon of “Exit by Troops.”

I am not naively proposing that Study Circles and Training Institute courses are the answer to all our problems or that they should monopolise our community activities in the immediate future. Instead of just effective teachers, we need to develop a fresher, broader and more mature *vision* than hitherto, one that indissolubly links the spiritual to the material. If we continue to ignore or pay lip-service to this connection, we should not expect the world to pay any attention to us: too often we start with words, end with words and use words in between, believing that we hold the moral high ground and priding ourselves on our spiritual susceptibilities. Two of Bahá'u'lláh's counsels from *The Hidden Words* come to mind at this point:

O SON OF MY HANDMAID!

Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds... (Persian 76).

O MY SERVANTS!

Ye are the trees of My garden; ye must give forth goodly and wondrous fruits, that ye yourselves and others may profit therefrom... (Persian 80).

In the first round of Study Circles I attended in Dublin, we spent practically all of our time studying and trying to memorise passages from the Writings contained in *Ruhi Book 6*. We spent a little time promoting recreational, social and cultural activities and no time at all in undertaking as a group acts of service. With hindsight, even the facilitator felt that this was an unbalanced programme. Reading through the November 1999 issue of the national newsletter, *Re Nua (New Day)*, I see that for the Service aspect, the Tralee Study Circle devoted time to cleaning up a local beach, while the Ennis Study Circle offered aid and hospitality to the refugees who had settled in the area. These certainly indicate the direction in which we should be moving. However, I think there should be a special link between the specific reading and the work we undertake. Unless there is a more structured link, we will most likely find ourselves taking one-off actions and then start flailing around in the dark or conveniently forgetting this aspect. It is here that we could implement Social and Economic Development projects, which could guide and channel our service, help and support to humanity.

In summation, if the Four Year Plan set our agenda, then the Twelve Month Plan was mainly about ways and means, structures and strategies, attitudes and approaches that will be needed for the next stage of our journey now that we are crossing “the bridge to which we shall never return.”

### **Looking Forward**

Finally we come to the question: “What avenues are open to us at this point?”

In the coming period we should be prepared to explore, experiment and learn from our mistakes: the Guardian did, after all, describe the Bahá'í Faith as "scientific in its method." I feel and strongly believe that in the recent past we have emphasised individual initiative at the expense of group action and have thereby reflected the ethos of the Old World Order, which relishes and exalts "the cult of the individual." This paradigm was best encapsulated by former British Prime Minister, Lady Margaret Thatcher, when she stated: "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." This, it seems, is a world away from the vision of unity and co-operative endeavour advocated by Bahá'u'lláh.

I believe that if the Training Institute Board can be more forward-looking in a creative and flexible way in relation to educating the believers and in teaching the seekers and involving the community, it will indeed raise our consciousness, upgrade our teaching activities and change our community's culture. The 2000 Ridvan letter, in hindsight, properly stressed that we should engage the youth and children in this educational process. It asks us to understand and appreciate how systematisation will facilitate the processes of growth and development, and we certainly need to develop skills in nurturing our group projects. In this regard I look forward to watching the development of the "Area Growth Programme" to see what lessons will be learned. This is one of the principal goals of the Irish Bahá'í community during this Twelve Month Plan: this puts the spotlight on the teaching work in the Limerick area, with its sizeable Bahá'í community, and will be closely monitored to see what works and what is practically effective and then to build on it. Limerick is an excellent area to make a start on structural development, given its track record, with entry by troops in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the ambitious goals it set for itself at the beginning of the Four Year Plan.

In summation, the future offers many opportunities for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith (as well as challenges), probably more if we can "arise to seize the tasks at this crucial moment, which is so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity."

### **Nine Proposals**

Some of the above observations may seem unpalatable, harsh, even negative, but I have made them only because I honestly believe that we can all do much better. Most important, we must strive to be more efficient in our communications in three ways:

First, we must communicate with ourselves in order to draw on our inner resources; second, with our fellow believers so that we can bond and work with one another more fruitfully; and third, with society and humanity at large so that we can reach their hearts and minds and allow them to be touched by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh.

So I will finish by making nine *positive* suggestions and proposals, which may help us to communicate more effectively.

- (1) That we use *Ré Nua (New Day)*, our national journal, to let us know what is happening at the various Study Circles around the country on a regular basis. Only brief reports from Ennis, Tralee and Dublin appeared during the past year.
- (2) That we have an Annual Report from the Training Institute Board, outlining the progress and difficulties of the period and the goals for the coming year.
- (3) That the Training Institute Board consider sending out an Information Pack to every family or believer in order to acquaint them with the history, development and hopes of the process. The aim here is to interest, involve and enthuse the believers at the grassroots.
- (4) That we look at Social and Economic Development again, this time from a fresh perspective. This might be done in co-operation with the Board or through a Conference, which would examine the way our near neighbours in Britain - through Agenda 21 - and on the Continent worked in this field rather than to the Third World for a model.
- (5) That we think seriously about developing a Universal Educational Model (UEM) in this country at some time in the future. The idea is to use the Internet to connect the Study Circles operating in Ireland first of all, to have them exchange ideas, learn from one another, grow and develop together and then to link up with Study Circles in other countries. It would be marvellous if we could thus achieve a World Wide Web of believers, that would set a valuable example of unity in diversity to the wider society.
- (6) That we consider holding a second All-Ireland Teaching Conference in 2001 to launch the next Plan and also encourage greater co-operation between the two communities on our small island.
- (7) That we examine the feasibility of setting up a second Summer School with a more truly academic basis. This would hopefully attract outside scholars who are sympathetic to the Bahá'í Cause.
- (8) That the Arts Task Force be encouraged to plan each year three to four Arts Weekends with distinct themes where practising artists can discuss their work and encourage group endeavours (e.g. in music, drama and dance).
- (9) That the National Pioneering Committee be encouraged to keep in touch with pioneers after their moves to new localities, to monitor their progress and to help them settle in if need be. Host communities should be encouraged to welcome and integrate the pioneer(s), who can sometimes feel isolated, alienated or discouraged after a short while at their post.

In conclusion, it is our own response to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh, and even more important, how we continue to respond, even in small ways, that count. I believe that this is the best way that we can show our love for Bahá'u'lláh and His awesome vision.

October 2000

# **Equality and Bahá'í Principles in Northern Ireland**

*Edwin Graham*

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the extent to which equality legislation in Northern Ireland has developed and compares it with the legislation regarding the teachings on equality that are enshrined in the Bahá'í Faith. The paper is in two parts: the first examines the development of equality legislation; the second examines Bahá'í Teachings in relation to equality and considers the extent to which the Northern Irish legislation applies or does not apply them.*

## **Part 1: The Development of the Equality Agenda in Northern Ireland**

Over the past hundred and fifty years, the development of equality across the globe has been remarkable, from the virtual abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire during Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) until the democratisation of society during much of the twentieth century and the hoisting of the standard of human rights since the 1960s. Equality became a defining issue on the Northern Ireland political stage with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the late sixties (Purdie, 1990). During the thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland, the equality agenda was dominated by political issues. The Fair Employment Agency was established to deal with employment equality between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The Fair Employment Agency (FEA) was deemed to be rather toothless, and new legislation was introduced to provide the way for increased powers and a new name - the Fair Employment Commission (FEC).

When the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) was created to deal with issues of gender, there were many (not least those in the EOC) who felt that it was something of a Cinderella. The legislation in relation to issues of Protestant/Catholic fair employment under the FEC was somewhat stronger than that for fair employment for women/men under the Equal Opportunities Commission. At that time, there was no effective legislation to deal with discrimination on the grounds of race and very little to deal with discrimination on the grounds of disability: the concept of a "hierarchy of inequalities" existed.

In 1997 new legislation was introduced to establish the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Council. This provided the basis on which issues of equality in Northern Ireland could be considered in a much wider context.

Parallel to the development of equality legislation was the development of Government guidelines in relation to policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT). PAFT provided, theoretically, an equality-proofing mechanism through which Government departments and agencies were required to test their policies for any bias. In practice PAFT did not work very well in Government departments. The PAFT guidelines had no statutory basis, no teeth; there were no statutory powers by which they could be imposed. The civil servants did not like them because they imposed an extra burden on their activities. Because there was no enforcement mechanism, PAFT was effectively shunted into the sidings.

In 1994, when the European Community agreed a Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland (the Peace Programme), the Government departments stipulated that the funding mechanisms to be established under the Peace Programme should abide by PAFT. This was somewhat ironic, given their previous performance in relation to PAFT.

Under the Peace Programme, there were some 70 different funding bodies that were allocated £700 million. Many of the funding bodies involved partnerships of groupings that had never previously come together. In this context, PAFT was seen to play a significant role. It provided an effective “whistle-blowing” mechanism for those involved in such partnerships to challenge attempts at discrimination by their partners. So, for the first time, PAFT developed a meaningful role and consequently has had a far-reaching effect on the development of equality legislation in Northern Ireland. The PAFT guidelines required public authorities to ensure that their policies did not disadvantage anybody from one of the named categories.

The named categories in the PAFT guidelines were as follows:

- People of different religious beliefs or political opinions;
- men and women;
- married and unmarried people;
- people with or without dependents (including women who are pregnant or on maternity leave);
- people of different ethnic groups;
- people with or without a disability;
- people of different ages;
- people of differing sexual orientation.

It is worth noting that the first PAFT category linked religious beliefs and political opinions. This reflected the prevalent understanding at the time that there were “two communities” in Northern Ireland - the Protestant/Unionist community and the Catholic/Nationalist one. When PAFT was developed, there was no public recognition that there were religious communities outside of Christianity.

In the late nineties, as PAFT was being implemented, the political talks were beginning to bear fruit. In this way, there was the coming together of a series of distinct processes that were going to merge to have a major impact: the development of distinct equality legislation in the areas of religion, gender, race, and disability; the development of Government guidelines on policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT); developing political discussions. The consequence of these separate developments was that the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 contained significant sections on equality and provided the basis for the establishment of a number of new equality institutions.

Central to the provisions of the Belfast Agreement was the establishment of the Equality Commission (EC) as a unified equality agency bringing together the previously disparate Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Council, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Fair Employment Commission.

A far-reaching provision of the Belfast Agreement was the obligation to be imposed on public authorities to produce equality schemes. This anti-discrimination legislation that was introduced in the Northern Ireland Act represents a powerful

instrument to promote equality. There are a number of distinct aspects of the legislation that make it robust:

1. The consequence of bringing together the separate legislative frameworks (for gender, religion, race and disability) underneath a single unitary Equality Commission is going to have a very significant impact on the development of equality in Northern Ireland. There will be significant cross-fertilisation from the experience of dealing with inequality in one context to the treatment of inequality in a differing context.

2. The combination of the experience of bodies such as the FEC, the EOC, the Disability Council and the Commission for Racial Equality will result in a greatly strengthened Equality Commission - the total is greater than the sum of the parts.

3. The coupling of the experience of anti-discrimination legislation with the experience of implementing PAFT guidelines has produced a very strong impetus to challenge public authorities on the impact of their policies in relation to equality.

4. The legislation that introduced the statutory duty for public authorities to publish equality schemes (section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act) stipulated that public authorities must consult widely in the development of their schemes. This statutory obligation to consult represents a significant advance in public participation in the region.

The scope of the legislation enshrined in the Northern Ireland Act is wider than any anti-discrimination legislation previously introduced in Northern Ireland, covering nine categories, whereas in the past, the legislation covered only five areas: religion, politics, gender, race and disability.

## **Part II: The Relationship between the Legislation and the Principles of the Bahá'í Faith**

The development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland is a process that has happened alongside the development of the Bahá'í Faith. There has been no direct Bahá'í input into the development of the equality instruments that are enshrined in the legislation, though some individual Bahá'ís have been involved in consultation processes in relation to some of the developing legislation.

At this juncture there are several critical questions to be addressed:

How does the existing legislation relate to the principles of the Faith?

How does the practice of the Bahá'í community measure up to the standards that are established in the legislation?

What are the implications for the Bahá'í community of the development of this equality agenda in society?

How and in what ways should the Bahá'í community be seeking to influence the further development of the equality agenda?

As it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all of these areas, the remainder will focus on the relationship between the legislation and the principles of the Faith.

### **Equality as a Key Social Teaching**

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh contains many quotations that have direct implications for our understanding of equality. During the nineteenth century, when Bahá'u'lláh was writing, the concept of equality was not understood in the way that we have come to understand it in the twenty-first century. It is therefore not surprising that

there are few direct references to equality in the Writings. However, there are many references to concepts - such as justice and the unity of the human race - that are central to any understanding of equality. Many such references are oft-cited by Bahá'ís:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes (Arabic 2).

The most glorious fruit of the tree of knowledge is this exalted word: Of one tree are all ye the fruit, and of one bough the leaves. Let not man glory in this that he loveth his country, let him rather glory in this, that he loveth his kind (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 127).

By the life of God! The word 'Equity' shineth bright and resplendent even as the sun. We pray God to graciously shed its radiance upon everyone (*Tablets*, p. 18).

Moreover We counsel them to observe justice, equity, honesty, piety and that whereby both the Word of God and their own station will be exalted amongst men (*Tablets*, p. 78).

Let My counsel be acceptable to thee [Sultán 'Abdu'l-'Azíz], and strive thou to rule with equity among men, that God may exalt thy name and spread abroad the fame of thy justice in all the world. Beware lest thou aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight, and be unto them a benignant sovereign. They, verily, are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty (*The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 50-1).

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, He made much reference to the concept of equality. During His travels in North America and Europe, He often referred to "the principles of the Faith." When He made such references, He invariably included "equality." Furthermore He often referred in detail to issues pertaining to gender or race equality. Therefore it is clear that the issue of equality is central in the Teachings of the Faith. Indeed, "equality" is seen as one of its key social teachings.

### **The Focus on Equality of Opportunity**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically refers to “equality of opportunity”. Such references raise questions for those engaged in the equality debate at the present time. Consider, for example, the following quotations:

He [Bahá’u’lláh] promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman. Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 175).

Woman’s lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity. The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other (*Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 241).

A number of statements from the Bahá’í International Community reiterate this point:

The new age will surely be one in which the so-called masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced. As women receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women is universally recognized, the natural inclination of women to peace and the fact that they find it more difficult to sacrifice their children and to sanction war will prove of great benefit to the world (Statements 3a, *Universal Values for the Advancement of Women*).

The Bahá’ís Writings make clear that “when all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it” (*Proposals for International Women’s Year*).

In some countries, the process of legal reform along these lines has proceeded a great distance in recent times. Women and men are guaranteed equal civil and political rights as well as equality of opportunity in education and employment, under laws which, by and large, are enforceable and enforced. (*Creating Structures for Gender Equality*).

These quotations raise an interesting issue because some commentators on equality law have observed that a focus on equality of opportunity alone does not guarantee that inequalities in society are eradicated (see, for example, Wilson, 2000).

While equality of opportunity goes a long way to creating a “level playing field,” there are, nevertheless, factors in society that make it difficult for an approach on the basis of equal opportunities to have comprehensive results. It is clear that using such an approach enables some individuals to break through “the glass ceiling,” but large communities remain disadvantaged. For example, there are clear examples of Blacks in the United States who have done very well socially, but at the same time the most impoverished areas there are Black ones. Likewise in Northern Ireland, one can point to individual Roman Catholics who have done very well, but the areas that show the greatest evidence of disadvantage are those areas that have high populations of Catholics (Borooah, 2000). Wilson argues that there needs to be a focus on equality of outcomes in order to overcome this sort of problem.

In the quotations above, the reference to equality is made in the context of education. Clearly it would not be sensible to insist that everyone should have the same educational outcome. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identified the issue of equality of opportunity specifically in relation to education, and that it is not possible to automatically transfer this concept to inequality that is experienced in different contexts.

Indeed, there are many passages where Bahá’u’lláh identifies the need to support the most disadvantaged in society. He goes further - He identifies the spiritual benefits of such actions: “Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression... Blessed is the man that hath, on the wings of longing, soared towards God, the Lord of the Judgment Day (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 93-94).

Passages such as this indicate that rather than focusing on equality of opportunity, Bahá’í interventions that are aimed at addressing inequality should be targeted at benefiting the most disadvantaged in society.

### **Stereotyping and Acceptance of Prejudice in the Legislation**

The focus of the legislation is directed towards communities. The legislation is drafted to identify specific categories and a remedy can be sought on the basis of belonging, or being perceived as belonging, to one of the specific categories. This focus on categories can have a tendency to increase the extent of stereotyping rather than breaking down stereotypes.

In the legislation, there is an implicit acceptance that prejudice is acceptable. It becomes unlawful only if somebody acts out his or her prejudice in the form of a behaviour that impacts on somebody else. This contrasts sharply with the Bahá’í Teachings:

Bahá’u’lláh spent His life teaching this lesson of Love and Unity. Let us then put away from us all prejudice and intolerance, and strive with all our hearts and souls to bring about understanding and unity between Christians and Mussulmans [Muslims] (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 34).

Absolute verities, no matter in what book they be recorded, must be accepted. If we harbor prejudice it will be the cause of deprivation and ignorance ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 15).

We must not entertain prejudice, for prejudice is an obstacle to realization. Inasmuch as the effulgence is one effulgence, the human realities must all become recipients of the same light, recognizing in it the compelling force that unites them in its illumination ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 115).

These quotations demonstrate that the Teachings of the Faith declare prejudice to be unacceptable as well as making discrimination unlawful.

It is not possible to legislate against prejudice. Prejudice does not become unlawful until it is acted out in the form of discriminatory actions. Legislation is based on addressing the actions that are taken by individuals and therefore it is not possible to tackle prejudice directly.

So there is a view that prejudice is unavoidable. Indeed, there is a prevailing view in society that "You can do what you want so long as you're not doing any harm to someone else." Many people use this phrase as a benchmark for their own morality. Such a notion gives rise to the acceptance of increasingly explicit scenes of sex and violence on our television screens and the availability of a plethora of obscene sites on the Internet.

People who articulate such a notion would often subscribe to the view that the individual is paramount and that society exists to serve the individual. Such exaltation of the station of the individual is directly at odds with the Bahá'í understanding that is portrayed by the Writings quoted above.

However, although it is not possible to legislate to tackle prejudice directly, there are actions that can be taken to address prejudice in a more general sense. In the following paragraphs the role of education is explored in this context.

### **The Burden of Legislation**

There is little doubt that legislation has done much to contribute to the development of equality. Its very existence has demonstrated a clear social policy. Its enforcement has empowered disadvantaged individuals and has brought organisational change, especially in employment matters. Indeed, many that are calling for reform are seeking for more legislation to be introduced.

However, there is an urgent need to examine the relationships between the existing legislation before further legislation is introduced. In a recent review of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK, Hepple, Cousseley and Chowdury comment: "The first and most obvious defect of the present framework is that there is too much law. At present there are no less than 30 relevant Acts, 38 statutory instruments, 11 codes of practice and 12 EC directives and recommendations directly relevant to discrimination."

But more than the relationship between existing legislations, we need to examine other ways in which we can create a society that is so advanced that the concept

of prejudice will be non-existent. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the process that is needed to establish such a society:

One thing remains to be said: it is that the communities are day and night occupied in making penal laws, and in preparing and organizing instruments and means of punishment. They build prisons, make chains and fetters, arrange places of exile and banishment, and different kinds of hardships and tortures, and think by these means to discipline criminals, whereas, in reality, they are causing destruction of morals and perversion of characters. The community, on the contrary, ought day and night to strive and endeavor with the utmost zeal and effort to accomplish the education of men, to cause them day by day to progress and to increase in science and knowledge, to acquire virtues, to gain good morals and to avoid vices, so that crimes may not occur. At the present time the contrary prevails; the community is always thinking of enforcing the penal laws, and of preparing means of punishment, instruments of death and chastisement, places for imprisonment and banishment; and they expect crimes to be committed. This has a demoralizing effect.

But if the community would endeavor to educate the masses, day by day knowledge and sciences would increase, the understanding would be broadened, the sensibilities developed, customs would become good, and morals normal; in one word, in all these classes of perfections there would be progress, and there would be fewer crimes.

It has been ascertained that among civilized peoples crime is less frequent than among uncivilized - that is to say, among those who have acquired the true civilization, which is divine civilization - the civilization of those who unite all the spiritual and material perfections. As ignorance is the cause of crimes, the more knowledge and science increases, the more crimes will diminish. Consider how often murder occurs among the barbarians of Africa; they even kill one another in order to eat each other’s flesh and blood! Why do not such savageries occur in Switzerland? The reason is evident: it is because education and virtues prevent them. Therefore, the communities must think of preventing crimes, rather than of rigorously punishing them (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 271).

This passage suggests that our resources should be directed away from penalties and targeted at large-scale educational initiatives. It is implied that nothing is to be gained by penalising offenders, but rather that the needs of society should be addressed in a more holistic manner.

### **Increasing Displays of Violent and Oppressive Behaviour**

In a paper that was presented to a conference organised by the Association of Bahá’í Women in Dublin recently, an impassioned plea was made for action to address the injustice, oppression and inequality that is experienced by women across the globe (Smith, 2001). In the paper, Smith highlights the inadequacy of the legislation and argues eloquently that it is unduly based on economic considerations.

So, for example, childcare has been reduced to a child-minding role to enable the mother to do a “real” job. In this way, the family has become peripheral to the career, rather than the career supporting the family.

correct” in public; however, as we continue to prioritise the individual by providing for ever-greater freedom of choice and individual expression, we have become more corrupt in our private lives. Hence we have become more politically correct and more privately corrupt.

### **Concluding Remarks**

From what has been said above, it is clear that the development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland, though impressive, stills falls far short of the principles of the Bahá’í Faith. This paper has identified some key areas on which Bahá’ís should focus for the further development of the equality agenda. In sum, these areas are the following:

There is a need to move away from the categorisation of inequality (race, disability, gender, etc.) to the acceptance that inequality is unacceptable in whatever way it may be experienced.

The proliferation of anti-discrimination legislation demonstrates a commitment to promoting equality. Such proliferation creates undue confusion, however. Therefore there is a need to rationalise and simplify the legislation. This process is already underway in Northern Ireland.

Legislation on its own will not solve the problem of inequality. There is a need for large-scale educational initiatives that can tackle some of the deep-seated prejudices (e.g. religious bigotry) that are prevalent in our society.

There is a need for an acceptance that prejudice is itself harmful and damaging - even if such prejudice is not translated into discriminating behaviour.

Our society needs to develop to the extent that it establishes high standards for peoples’ private lives as well as for their public activities.

The current perception that “It’s OK so long as it doesn’t harm anyone else” needs to be exposed as a fundamentally flawed basis for morality.

We now have marvellous opportunities in Northern Ireland. The statutory duty that has been imposed on every public authority to develop equality schemes is paving the way for radical social change. As public authorities develop their equality schemes, they have to consult widely. Following the approval of their schemes, they have to undertake a rigorous equality impact assessment of all their policies. The conclusions of their impact assessments are subject to public scrutiny. In this way, every citizen in Northern Ireland has an opportunity to scrutinise public policy from an equality perspective.

We are hopeful that as a result of the equality statutory duty, we will see progress on significant areas that have been problematic for Bahá’ís for many decades. Examples include the development of a syllabus for Religious Education in schools that can accommodate Bahá’í pupils on an equal basis with their classmates, and the provision for Bahá’í marriage to be accepted.

More significant than these is the radical change that we are experiencing in society generally, as public authorities are forced to expose their policies to scrutiny. We are seeing a mechanism develop that will provide opportunities for public participation in a way that has not previously been experienced in Ireland.

At the start of the 21st century, the development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland is only beginning.

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**SOUNDING**  
**Asking Questions:**  
**the independent investigation of truth**  
*Edwin McCloughan*

**The Faith's Primary Principle**

Commenting on the independent investigation of truth, J.A. McLean states: "... this teaching, next to the oneness of humanity... is the primary teaching of the Bahá'í Faith... yet the implications of this teaching have largely been overlooked. With few exceptions [Gary L. Matthews], Bahá'í scholars have written little on this key teaching compared with other areas of Bahá'í scholarship..." (*Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 3, emphasis added).

Few introductory books on the Bahá'í Faith devote very much space to the independent investigation of truth; nor, to take one specific example, do any of the ten essays in *Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approaches to Current Social Issues* (Kalimat Press, 1984), discuss it at all, probably because it is not - like feminism, human rights, racial injustice, economics or Marxism - seen to be a principle with as obvious a social application. Yet it clearly has social consequences, as can be seen from the following observation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "All the peoples have a fundamental belief in common. Being one, truth cannot be divided, and the differences that appear to exist among the nations only result from their attachment to prejudice. *If only men would search out truth, they would find themselves united*" (*Paris Talks*, p. 129, emphasis added).

Not nearly enough has been written about this unifying aspect of the independent investigation of truth nor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement to "Seek the truth, the truth shall make you free!" (ibid., p. 137). "Truth," writes McLean, "is a dynamic force, capable of rendering both individuals and society more progressive, just, united, peaceful and loving; that is, free" (*Dimensions*, p. 40). By independently investigating the truth, one frees oneself from ignorance, which is identified in the Bahá'í Writings as "indisputably the principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples and the perpetuation of prejudice" (*Peace: More Than An End To War*, p. 22). Indeed, one of the twofold purposes of the Manifestations of God is "to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding..." (*Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 79).

In *The Prosperity of Humankind*, the document issued by the Bahá'í International Community in 1995, it is pointed out:

At the individual level justice is that faculty of the human soul that enables each person to distinguish truth from falsehood. In the sight of God, Bahá'u'lláh avers, Justice is 'the best beloved of all things' since it permits each individual to see with his own eyes rather than the eyes of others, to know through his own knowledge rather than the knowledge of his neighbour or group [Hidden Word, Arabic 2]... (p. 9).

Thus the independent investigation of truth equates to justice, “the best-beloved of all things in the sight” of God. Justice can be said to be the motivation for each individual’s spiritual and intellectual development in that it requires each person to use their own God-given faculties to determine reality, to find out what is beneficial (serving and showing compassion to others, promoting amity and co-operation and helping the poor and destitute) and what is harmful (perpetuating prejudices based on ignorance and clinging to traditions and entrenched orthodoxies that hinder genuine social progress). It follows that it is just to use one’s faculties in this way insofar as one has thereby used one’s God-endowed capacity for seeking and finding the truth and for distinguishing truth from falsehood or, in moral terms, right from wrong.

Conversely, not to see with one’s own eyes or to use one’s own mind is to be, in a very clear sense, wilfully unjust, in that one’s divine potential remains unrealised or unfulfilled. This failure can, in many cases, be due to such social pressures as conforming to well-established but possibly obsolete conventions, and not deviating from what Bahá’u’lláh in another instance called “those rules, customs, habits, and ceremonies... current amongst men” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 238). Bahá’u’lláh inveighs against these conformist pressures when He writes:

If, in the Day when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered together, any man should, whilst standing in the presence of God, be asked; ‘Wherefore hast thou disbelieved in My Beauty and turned away from my Self,’ and if such a man should reply and say: ‘Inasmuch as all men have erred, and none hath been found willing to turn his face to the Truth I, too, following their example, have grievously failed to recognize the Beauty of the Eternal,’ such a plea will, assuredly, be rejected. For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself (*Gleanings*, pp. 142-3).

Rather than recognising, independently of others and the dead hand of tradition, “the Beauty of the Eternal,” this facile following the example of others can be said to encapsulate much of the history of religion, as delineated by George Townshend with reference to the unique and final incarnation of God in Jesus Christ:

The followers of every world religion have invented for themselves a similar belief in the uniqueness and finality of their own Prophet. The result has been that no religion has acknowledged a Prophet of a later religion. The Hindus do not acknowledge Buddha, the Buddhists do not acknowledge Christ, nor yet do the Zoroastrians. The result of this delusive belief has been that the world religions have not tended to the unifying of mankind but rather to its further division (*Christ and Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 26).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it very strongly: “He whose father was a Zoroastrian is a Zoroastrian. He whose father was a Buddhist remains a Buddhist. The son of a Muslim continues a Muslim, and so on throughout. Why is this? Because they are slaves and captives of mere imitation. They have not investigated the reality of

religion and arrived at its fundamentals and conclusions” (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272). In contrast to those who investigate the validity of a religion or religions is “the imitator, who... dependeth upon the sight, the hearing, and the conscience of others and hath no will of his own” (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 29).

At a broader social level, justice finds its brightest expression in the practice of unity, which can be realised by investigating as fairly and open-mindedly as possible the beliefs and values fundamentally shared by most people. Thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, during His talk at the Central Congregational Church in Brooklyn on June 16th, 1912, said:

If Christians of all denominations and divisions should investigate reality, the foundations of Christ will unite them. No enmity or hatred will remain, for they will be under the one guidance of reality itself. Likewise, in the wider field if all the existing religious systems will turn away from ancestral traditions and investigate reality, seeking the real meanings of the Holy Books, they will unite and agree upon the same foundation, reality itself. As long as they follow counterfeit doctrines or imitations instead of reality, animosity and discord will exist and increase (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 198).

Bahá’u’lláh states categorically:

The essence of all that we have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 249).

We can therefore be said to be just or faithful to ourselves and to our Creator when we investigate the truth of any matter independently and without “either love or hate” (*Gleanings*, p. 264) or attendant sexist, racial, class, religious and political prejudices, each and all of which inform and shape the particular milieus in which people live. Indeed, investigation in this manner acts as a powerful corrective to the “social assumptions and religious formulae” (*Peace: More Than An End to War*, p. 10) that have spawned so much exclusivity, division and hatred, the distortion or negation of true religion.

### **Applying the Principle**

The first teaching of Bahá’u’lláh is the duty incumbent *upon all* to investigate reality. 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 (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 62, emphasis added).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Does this primary teaching apply to people who are raised as Bahá'ís? The above emphasis strongly suggests that it does, as does Shoghi Effendi's stating that the Bahá'í Faith "enjoins upon its *followers* the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth..." (*Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, p. 4, emphasis added). In practice, does the teaching apply to people who have *not* been raised to be Bahá'ís? Here the principle poses something of a dilemma: in its Ridvan Letter of 2000, the Universal House of Justice mentions Bahá'í parents who "believe that in order to preserve the independence of children to investigate truth, the Faith should not be taught to them" (p. 9), a belief that is deemed incorrect. As many or most people are born into and raised in a particular socio-religious milieu, their belief system is not likely to be by choice or reasoned conviction, however, as demonstrated by the following speech from the eponymous character in Joseph F. Girzone's novel, *Joshua: A Parable for Today*:

"If people take religious leaders too seriously, they become rigid in their thinking and afraid to think for themselves, and must always refer decisions to the clergy. Even as adults they still cling to the religious practices of their childhood, and when even ceremonies and mere customs change they panic, because they have been led to believe these things *were* their faith..." (Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1987, p. 74).

Does investigation here apply only to religion? In "Spiritual Search and the Seeker," the first section of Lameh Fananapazir's *Prove All Things* (pp. 3-56), the principle is related exclusively to the quest for religious certitude under six headings. Fananapazir traces the principle of the independent investigation of truth to certain passages of the New Testament in the first of these subsections (e.g. Matthew 5:3, 5:6, 7:7-8, 13:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, Romans 12:2). (It is noteworthy that most of these passages appear in Matthew's Gospel, which was specifically addressed to, and carefully organised for, a Jewish readership that still awaited its Davidic Messiah.) Udo Schaefer continues this link when he states in the Introduction to his paper, "Infallible Institutions": "Revealed religion is inseparably associated with a claim to truth. If it is the Word of God that is proclaimed, it cannot but be truth..." (*Bahá'í Studies Review*, Volume 9, 1999, p. 17). George Townshend concludes *Christ and Bahá'u'lláh* with the following urgent plea:

The Bahá'í Faith today offers the Christian Church with the most tremendous challenge ever offered them in their long history: a challenge, and an opportunity. It is the plain duty of every earnest Christian in this illumined Age to investigate for himself with an open and fearless mind the purpose and the teachings of this Faith and to determine whether the collective centre for all the constructive forces for this time be not the Messenger from God, Bahá'u'lláh, He and no other... (p. 116).

And the first of McLean's "Seven Criteria of Truth," gleaned from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, is this: "Truth is expressed in its highest and purest form as divine revelation" (*Dimensions*, p. 40).

Another understanding is that it cannot apply solely to religion, for Bahá'u'lláh enjoined people to “look into *all things* with a searching eye” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 249, emphasis added). In the Tablet of *Tarázát* (Ornaments), revealed around 1889 and partly in response to the largely erroneous reports about Him appearing in newspapers, He enjoined journalists to “enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 40): their responsibility is to mirror the truth objectively. Likewise in the case of Assembly consultations, the facts in a case that requires a decision must be presented before the spiritual principles involved in that situation are found and discussed (Moojan Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 80). In both these instances, one secular and the other spiritual, “Truth is verifiable” (*Dimensions in Spirituality*, p. 40). It could equally well be argued that Divine Revelation is itself the lens through which we apprehend and learn from reality (the physical world reflecting and disclosing attributes of the Divine) and understand the purpose of human life (to know, love and worship that transcendent Divinity). Of His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh stated: “Peerless is this Day, for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times” (*The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 79): His Revelation gives both a perspective of history as a single, God-guided process (in Bahá'í terms, progressive revelation) and an epistemology for making sense of a humanity whose development is analogous to that of an individual human being now coming of age.

What precisely does the adjective “independent” denote? Autonomous? Free of preconceptions, prejudices or even inhibitions? Unfettered (the adjective used by Shoghi Effendi)? The latter adjective implies that the inquirer should have full access to accurate information about the Faith while he or she is investigating it, such as might be found in feature articles in newspapers and magazines, on Internet websites or in books that provide information on religion.

“Investigation,” on the other hand, implies a thorough study, analysis, questioning, evaluation or sifting of evidence of a phenomenon with a view to arriving at some kind of conclusion as to its validity. The Bahá'í Faith itself is described by the Guardian as “scientific in its method,” which would be consonant with the process of investigation - corresponding to what McLean terms “the facts and values of truth” (*Dimensions*, p. 40) - undertaken by both individuals and Spiritual Assemblies in, for instance, the role of the latter as decision-making bodies. One of the spiritual requirements of the procedure for these consultations is laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as follows: “They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden” (*Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 43).

In answer to Pilate's perennial question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38), the Bahá'í could reply by quoting part of Christ's Sermon on the Mount: “Seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7). Possessed of the “Most Great Infallibility” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 36-7), the Manifestations of God are Themselves “the truth” (John 14:6). By recognising Them after a process of investigation that serves to purify preconceptions (the superiority of one belief system or ideology to all others), one can be said to have attained truth in its “highest and purest form” (McLean,

*Dimensions*, p. 40). One is then required to translate this recognition into action by observing the Manifestation's "commandments and prohibitions" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19). These inseparable twin duties of recognition and obedience are the truth that every individual has been created and divinely gifted to achieve: every individual has the capacity to recognise God in the Person of His Manifestations; if people do so by independently investigating Their claims and teachings, they will, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, find themselves united (*Paris Talks*, p. 129). In a talk at the Baptist Temple in Philadelphia on June 9th, 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

If the nations of the world investigate reality, they will agree and become united. Many people and sects in Persia have sought reality through the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh. They have become united and now live in a state of agreement and love; among them there is no longer the least trace of enmity and strife (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 180).

Bahá'u'lláh makes clear that "every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified" (*Gleanings*, p. 142). The independent investigation of truth (whether of religion or anything else) is first and foremost a process of spiritualisation. It is always relative to, and dependent on, the individual seeker and the degree of their "earnest striving... longing desire... [and] passionate devotion" (*Gleanings*, p. 267) to ascertaining truth. It is, or should be, an active and ongoing process: though "there is an absolute truth, our understanding of it is relative" (McLean, *Dimensions*, p. 40). "There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in Them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous," observes Shoghi Effendi (*Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 11). And it serves to unite different people when they come to appreciate that, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "truth is one." This basic ethical oneness to which He referred is enunciated variously but consistently in the Golden Rule - we should treat others the way we ourselves would wish to be treated - and in the sanctity of human life. At both an individual and collective level, it enshrines justice, respectively embodied in using our God-endowed potential to see with our own eyes and to think for ourselves and thereby achieving unity in diversity, the watchword of the Bahá'í Faith: "The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity amongst men" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 67).

### **The Need for Detachment**

Detachment is necessary for a proper investigation of the validity of religions: "Purge your sight, that ye may perceive [the glory of God's Cause] with your own eyes, and depend not on the sight of any one except your self, for God hath not burdened any soul beyond its power" (*Gleanings*, pp. 106-7). This detachment is evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's impartial discourses on the civilising and constructive power of religion in many of His Western addresses, in which He sought to dismantle religious and inter-denominational sectarianism, as well as in His outlines of the lives of Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to illustrate Their unique educative influence in *Some Answered Questions*; at one point He says:

Muhammad was reared among these [Arab] tribes, and after enduring thirteen years of persecution from them, He fled [to Medina]. But this people did not cease to oppress; they united to exterminate Him and all His followers. It was under such circumstances that Muhammad was forced to take up arms. This is the truth: personally, we are not bigoted, and do not wish to defend Him, but we are just, and we say what is just. Look at it with justice... (p. 20).

How, though, can any seeker *entirely* leave behind their so-called baggage when investigating the Bahá'í Faith? The assumption often seems to be that such baggage is nearly always deleterious to both the person's search and the adapting of their lifestyle to the Faith they have chosen. Yet scholars, for example, can bring their own specialist disciplines to bear in advancing an understanding of the Bahá'í Faith in relation to such topics as political science, anthropology/sociology, psychology/education, economics, linguistics, English literature, science, philosophy, law and history (*The Bahá'í Studies Review* Volume 3, 1994, pp. 91-4). Of course, one does not have to be a qualified or professional theologian to discuss or write about religion: "In contrast to most institutionalized religions, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that theology is logical and that we should examine our religious beliefs with the same rational faculties and rigorous standards with which we probe the phenomenal world. From such a view questioning is not deemed heresy but is, rather, an essential tool for acquiring belief" (John Hatcher, *The Purpose of Physical Reality*, p. 3).

What has come to be known as "The Tablet of the True Seeker" (*Gleanings*, pp. 264-70) appears in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (the Book of Certitude), Bahá'u'lláh's expository response to four questions posed by the Báb's maternal uncle, Hájí Mírzá Sayyid Muhammad, concerning Shi'ih eschatology and the veracity of his martyred nephew's Divinity. The demands and rewards of this quest - where the seeker ultimately reaches the City of Certitude or Word of God - form a key component of Bahá'í spirituality. (For a discussion of the theological significance of this latter term, see Michael Sours's *Without Syllable or Sound*, pp. 16-40, wherein he stresses the Word's transhistorical and transformative potency and the importance of detached investigation of Scripture as a prerequisite of the search. See also Adib Taherzadeh's *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh Volume One: Baghdad, 1853-63*, pp. 18-44.) Related to the principle or methodology of investigation is this statement by Shoghi Effendi:

To strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation must... remain the first obligation and the object of the constant endeavor of each one of its loyal adherents... We can... derive fresh inspiration and added sustenance as we labour for the propagation of His Faith through a clearer apprehension of the truths it enshrines and the principles on which it is based (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 100).

Is the principle still operative once a person declares and becomes involved in the community's events and obedient to its administration? Or is there too often a tacit assumption that no further investigation or search is required since "I now possess 'all truth'" (John 16:13)? For, having recognised Bahá'u'lláh as God's Vicegerent for this age, the seeker thereby reaches "this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory" (*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19), after which he or she must "observe every ordinance of Him is the Desire of the world" (ibid). The words "constant endeavour" in the above quotation from Shoghi Effendi clearly rule out any complacency about understanding the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's "stupendous Revelation." For those preparing to teach, the Guardian stipulated that they "must devote special attention to the investigation of those institutions and circumstances that are directly connected with the origin and birth of their Faith, with the station claimed by its Forerunner [the Báb], and with the laws revealed by its Author (*The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 41), as well as striving "to obtain a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islam," its parent religion, and to study the Qur'án. From this, it can be inferred that passivity, intellectual or otherwise, runs totally counter to the spirit of the Bahá'í religion.

Is it not much easier "to believe in," for instance, the oneness and unity of religions *without* having to independently investigate the lives of their Founders, teachings and histories so as to validate such a belief? It would appear to be relatively easy to acknowledge this "central tenet" of the Bahá'í Faith (*The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 166) at a purely intellectual level, but not so straightforward to verify it, as it usually requires considerable patience: Pilate famously did not wait for the reply to his question (John 18:38) from Christ's "truth-speaking... mouth" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 14). Ironically, truth in its purest form stood right before him, awaiting sentence. In the first of *The Seven Valleys*, that of Search (*talab*), one must ride the steed of patience in the diligent quest for the soul's Beloved (*The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, p. 5). For some, investigating the Faith and recognising Bahá'u'lláh may take years, while for others it may be weeks or even days.

Bahá'u'lláh suggested an active role for the inquirer in relation to his or her religious search when He stated to Hájí Mírzá Sayyid Muhammad, who subsequently became a believer:

If thou wilt observe *with discriminating eyes*, thou wilt behold Them [the Manifestations of God] all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith (*Gleanings*, p. 52, emphasis added).

As Gary L. Matthew constantly makes clear in the second half of *He Cometh With Clouds* (George Ronald, 1996), his "love letter to all who love the Lord Christ and who cherish a belief in His Second Coming," Bahá'u'lláh does not ask us to accept Him blindly, but to test the proofs or "fruits" of His prophetic station and His predictions so as to ascertain whether they are true, a criterion found in the New Testament concerning false prophets or messiahs (e.g. Matthew 7:15:20).

Is it adequate to investigate the Faith by just reading about it? Or is the affective or experiential principle equally or more important? Could the Faith's at best sporadic expansion in Western Europe and North America be attributed to an imbalance in these twin teaching strategies? Or is this primary principle of investigation given enough emphasis in the first place? In two sample surveys conducted in New York (1953) and in Los Angeles and the United Kingdom (1979) and adapted and published in sociologist Peter Smith's *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* (Cambridge University Press, p. 189), 3.4% of the respondents in Los Angeles and 2.6% in the United Kingdom found the principle of the independent investigation of truth an initially attractive element of the Bahá'í Faith. Smith comments:

Only a few individuals listed the presumed lack of dogma and the Bahá'í doctrine of the independent investigation of truth, a paucity which may possibly indicate that absence of epistemological individualism once so prominent in the Western Bahá'í communities (p. 190).

Does the "illiberal" ethos (Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium*, p. 201) now apparently characterising many Bahá'í communities not seriously undermine its first teaching, the "one developed to a great extent by 'Abdul-Baha" (*Dimensions*, p. 3) and the one capable of uniting people long divided by man-made theological differences and religious leaders' "erroneous and conflicting interpretations of the pronouncements of the Prophets of God" (*Peace: More Than An End To War*, p. 7)? 'Abdu'l-Bahá lovingly urged His audiences to go back and read for themselves their own and other Holy Books (the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'án) from which their present beliefs and sacerdotal institutions were in large measure originally derived, with this guideline: "It is easy to read the Holy Scriptures, but it is only with a clean heart and a pure mind that one may understand their true meaning" (*Paris Talks*, pp. 56-7). (This "clean heart" and "pure mind" constitute detachment.) These talks may be read in context as sensitive challenges designed to stimulate His Western audiences to start pondering why they believed as they did and as open invitations to consider fairly the novel claims of His Father's Faith. He pointed out in relation to Christ's ministry:

Had they [the Pharisees] investigated sincerely for themselves, they would surely have believed in Him, respected Him and bowed before Him in reverence. They would have considered His manifestation the greatest bestowal upon mankind. They would have accepted Him as the very Savior of man; but alas, they were veiled, they held to imitations of ancestral beliefs and hearsay and did not investigate the truth of Christ (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 62).

Near the end of His (Arabic) Tablet to the exemplary believer and teacher, Ahmad, Bahá'u'lláh, Who some two years before in 1863 had declared Himself to be *Man-yuzihirhu'lláh* ("He Whom God Shall Make Manifest") promised by the Báb, observed that "the people [Bábís] are wandering in the paths of delusion, bereft of

discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His melody with their own ears.” This situation is archetypal: veiled by “superstitions” or literal interpretations and imaginary expectations of Scripture and stultified by what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called “imitations of ancestral traditions and hearsay,” people in every religious Dispensation refuse to investigate the truth - the Manifestation and His Revelation - and continue to unquestioningly follow their clergies. In the incisive words of Joshua:

“Religious leaders constantly fall into the pitfall of wanting to control religion and people’s practice of religion, and not allowing people to think for themselves for fear of losing control over them” (*Joshua*, p. 75).

### **An Opportunity for Everyone**

For Bahá’ís and non-Bahá’ís alike, the opportunity is there to discover the “innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster” concealed in the ocean of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation; this discovery, though, will be “in proportion to the eagerness of [their] search and the efforts [they themselves] exert” (*Gleanings*, p. 326).

The crucial importance of such investigation by everyone as a means to exemplifying justice, “the best-beloved of all things” in God’s sight, eliminating man-made prejudices and insularities and thereafter achieving unity is spelt out thus by ‘Abdul-Bahá:

Reality or truth is one, yet there are many religious beliefs, denominations, creeds and differing opinions in the world today. Why should these differences exist? Because they do not investigate and examine the fundamental unity, which is one and unchangeable. If they seek reality itself, they will agree and be united; for reality is indivisible and not multiple. It is evident, therefore, that there is nothing of greater importance to mankind than the investigation of truth (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 62-3).

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# Perspectives on the Global Economy at the Dawn of the 21st Century: An Irish Bahá'í View

*Eamonn Moane*

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to present perspectives on certain aspects of the global economy at the start of the 21st century. It is not intended to be a general Bahá'í critique of the world economy, or a set of comprehensive proposals for a new economic order.*

*The paper will focus on the globalisation of the world economy over the past two centuries, that process of the growing integration and interdependence of its different national economies. It will examine some characteristics of today's world economy, such as the recent development of a harsher free-market system, the lack of international accountability, returns on business investment, the valuation of financial assets and the proneness to sudden crises. It will comment on Ireland's recent economic transformation. The current challenges posed by unregulated free-market forces and competition will be considered, and the paper will conclude with a Bahá'í contribution to the issues raised.*

## **Historical Background**

Economics, or Political Economy, could be defined as that discipline concerned with the production and distribution of wealth. Today's economic system has its origin in the Enlightenment of the 18th century, when the Western elites began to move away from reliance on religion and tradition as guides to life, and to embrace material and social "Progress" directed by human reason. This facilitated the start of the Industrial Revolution, that sudden change in economic life that occurred in the second half of the 18th century, more specifically in Britain, the USA and Northern Europe. Improvements in technology in agriculture made possible a massive shift of employment from agriculture to industry and from countryside to city. This led to the emergence of the capitalist market economy, based on privately owned businesses competing in the production and sale of goods in the market, at a profit for their owners and providers of capital.

The "market" here means an area over which goods and services are sold and bought for money. The role of the market is to direct economic activity and the allocation of resources by providing continual information to sellers and buyers about prices, profits, interest rates and asset values. It is the scope of the market today that is a recent phenomenon. Up to the 18th century, local economic self-sufficiency and self-reliance, based on agriculture, were the norm for the great majority of people, and material life was at a very basic level by today's standards. Trading and market systems were marginal to society as a whole, and were strongly embedded in the milieu of local cultures and values. Long-term per capita economic growth, and population growth, moved at a snail's pace, a small fraction of one per cent per annum, and there were long periods of stagnation and even decline. Continuous rapid material progress as we know it today was unknown.

The intellectual underpinnings for the new system were expounded in Adam Smith's seminal 1776 work, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In a famous analogy, Smith sought to show how the individual firm, acting in its own interests, would be guided by the "invisible hand" of the market to improve the welfare of society as a whole. However, it should be remembered that Smith assumed that the system operated within a framework of public morality and responsibility, something which is often forgotten today.

The new industrial system led to continual improvements in technology and in the productivity of the workforce, and significant sustained economic growth. Its striking feature over the past two centuries, synchronizing with the early stages of the Bahá'í Era, has been the spectacular and prodigious increase in material wealth and living standards for billions of people, even if the benefits have been extremely unevenly spread. Average life expectancy at birth has almost doubled. Advances in individual freedom have been equally impressive. These occurred despite the five-fold increase in the world's population from 1.0 billion in the early 19th century to 6.0 billion at the end of the 20th century. Per capita economic growth has been 1.0 - 2.0% per annum, and higher in the last half century. Consider the effects of compound growth: £1 invested at compound growth of even 1% per annum will accumulate over 200 years to £7.3. At growth of 2% per annum, it will accumulate to £52.

It has been a common phenomenon over the past few centuries that any society undergoing economic development, or a new phase of economic growth, including Ireland since 1994, has experienced increasing economic inequality. This is because such a change disrupts traditional patterns of economic life and requires a redistribution of income from consumption to investment and profits in the new industries. However, appropriate social policies can eventually mitigate the effects of this. The development and spread of capitalism created great misery and disruption for large numbers of people during the 19th century, both in the richer countries and in those colonised by the imperialist powers. Its excesses of inequality, poverty and exploitation provoked Karl Marx's famous critical analyses.

After the mid-19th century, material life for most people in the rich countries began to improve, Marx modifying his earlier views that growing impoverishment for the majority would lead to the collapse of the system and its overthrow in violent revolution. However, many of the issues he raised and the questions he asked are still valid today. More than other economists, he focused on the capitalist market system - driven by many competing firms acting according to their own judgement - as lacking overall planning and co-ordination. It is based on the spread of commodity production, where everything is bought and sold, and on the relentless encroachment of market forces into all areas of human life and social relations. It is cyclical, subject to regular crises of over-investment, overproduction and excess capacity. It is also prone to financial panics and speculative bubbles, where asset prices become inflated, based on expectations that others will pay still higher prices for them, rather than prices based on their true value. These excesses require regular adjustments in the form of recessions or depressions (a fall in economic activity), unemployment, and falling prices, to bring the system back to equilibrium.

In the laissez-faire economic system of the 19th century, with its minimum social role for the State, cyclical crises were sharp and painful but usually short-lived. By

the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and influenced by the socialist and labour movement, it became gradually more accepted that the State should play a role in mitigating the excesses and inequalities of the system, through social security and income redistribution.

World War 1 and its aftermath destabilised the world economy and also acted as a catalyst for the Russian Revolution. The 1930s saw world-wide economic breakdown in the Great Depression, following the collapse of the American economic boom and speculative bubble in share prices of the 1920s, and the inability of the system to cope with inter-country debts and reparations incurred as a result of the War. The crisis was initially aggravated by the inability of many governments to rise above their laissez-faire, free-market ideologies, and by errors in economic policies. In fact, the Depression really ended only in the great mobilisation for World War II. The apparent spectacular success in the 1930s of the Soviet communist regime's state-controlled and centrally planned economy posed a further challenge. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the Soviet model seemed to many to be the way of the future.

The intellectual contribution of John Maynard Keynes, the 20th century's outstanding economist, was the insight that the free-market system had to be managed by the State to prevent exaggerated booms and slumps, in particular the possibility of the market system remaining stuck in a permanent condition of stagnation and mass unemployment. The State should act in a counter-cyclical manner to smooth out booms and slumps. In economic slowdowns, it should stimulate the economy by increasing spending and reducing taxes, borrowing as necessary to cover its deficit. In boom times, it should restrain the economy, increasing taxes and decreasing spending, and paying back its debts from the surplus. Its social policies and programmes should exert a stabilising influence on the economy. Keynes was the leading intellectual architect of the post-World War II international monetary system, and of a new economic consensus based on full employment and greater economic equality. The period 1948-1973 witnessed the greatest economic boom the world has ever experienced. As the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information wrote in 1999:

A parallel process took place with respect to economic life. During the first half of the [20th] century, as a consequence of the havoc wrought by the Great Depression, many governments adopted legislation that created social welfare programmes and systems of financial control, reserve funds, and trade regulations that sought to protect their societies from a recurrence of such devastation. The period following WW2 brought the establishment of institutions whose field of operation is global... At century's end - whatever the intentions and however crude the present generation of tools - the masses of humanity have been shown that the use of the planet's wealth can be fundamentally reorganised in response to entirely new conceptions of need.

(1)

## **Recent Developments**

In the 1970s the Keynesian consensus broke down, due to both accelerating inflation and spiralling oil prices, which triggered two serious recessions in the West, and to changing technology, including the start of the computer and information technology revolution. However, one of the reasons for the constant and accelerating inflation was that governments had been doing only part of what Keynes prescribed. Under constant pressure from materialistic electorates, they did spend money and run up debts in times of slowdown, but never reduced spending or repaid debts in good times. This constant one-sided policy from the 1950s to the 1970s, together with upward pressure on labour costs in conditions of full employment, were major causes of unsustainable inflation.

The years 1979-80 saw a major shift to the right in the UK and the USA, China beginning a steady move away from central economic planning, and the clear emergence of a systemic crisis of inefficiency and stagnation in the Soviet bloc. This signalled the move to a harsher, more unequal market system, with “flexible” labour markets, where it is easy for firms to hire and fire, and the intensification of the globalisation process. This spread of free trade and free markets has been driven by technological change and by the State reducing its role in the economy. The USA has led this drive, and is today the world’s most productive and competitive economy. Other English-speaking countries are following the US model. West Europe is cautiously moving away from the Keynesian “social market” model. China and many other East Asian economies have had phenomenal economic growth in the past 20 years. However, China is now faced with destabilising social inequality and the prospect of scores of millions becoming unemployed as it joins the World Trade Organisation. The free-market policies, adopted by many countries of the former Soviet bloc, have been disastrous for large sections of their economies and populations. The collapse of Russian economic power is almost without precedent.

One of the key issues facing nations is what type of economic system they should, or rather, can have, given the materialistic outlook prevailing at present. There is an inexorable tendency for economies to be forced to the most ruthless and competitive models. Investors are not as confident in the European as in the US model; this is the root cause of the Euro’s fall in value.

Some characteristics of the present global free market system are worth noting:

**1. Free Trade:** The free movement of goods, people (labour), and capital (money), are essential for the continual growth of today’s system. But free trade has been a controversial issue in history, with many paying lip-service to it but practising it only when convenient. In early capitalism, the State played a major role in protecting infant industries from cheap imports. However, following from the lessons of the 1930s, there has been an enormous expansion of free trade since World War 11, helping in the spread of tremendous but unequal prosperity. Yet even today, Western states do not allow free trade in agricultural products from poorer countries, to the latter’s disadvantage.

Free Trade raises moral issues of a fair and level playing field. How can economically underdeveloped countries possibly compete with the industrialised nations? The Bahá’í Writings favour it in principle, but within a universal moral framework. Shoghi Effendi, in one of his 1930s World Order letters, referred to “a

world community in which all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished and the interdependence of Capital and Labour definitely recognized.” (2)

**2. Ownership and control of the big corporations:** Today’s corporation is set up as a separate legal entity apart from its owners, the shareholders. It can enter into contracts, sue and be sued in its own name. It can acquire other companies. The liability of the owners for the debts of the company is limited to the loss of their investment, but no more. More important, ownership shares are transferable, and huge stock markets exist to facilitate the valuation, buying and selling of shares.

In big companies, the owners elect a board of directors to run the company on their behalf. Most shareholders are not individuals, but institutions set up as legal personalities, such as pension funds, mutual funds, and financial institutions like banks and insurance companies. Ultimate ownership and control of the huge corporations that dominate the world economy are frequently clouded in an almost impenetrable and unaccountable web of legal complexity.

The Bahá’í International Community provocatively stated in 1999:

In humanity’s economic life, no matter how great the blessings brought by globalisation, it is apparent that this process has also created unparalleled concentrations of autocratic power that must be brought under international democratic control if they are not to produce poverty and despair for countless millions. (3)

**3. Returns and Profitability on Investment:** The modern industrial system is driven by investment in productive capacity. Investment involves the outlay of a large amount of cash now in the expectation of returns or profits over future years. The rate of return demanded by investors, whether shareholders/owners or lenders, consists of two main components. These are the risk-free rate of return (interest) obtainable from lending to the Government or from bank deposits, plus an additional premium to compensate for the perceived level of risk and uncertainty attaching to the investment. In the USA and UK, where financial markets have been most developed, the annual compound average rate of return on shares in large companies during much of the 20th century has been some 6% per annum above the return from lending to the Government, and some 8% per annum above the rate of inflation. This return has consisted of cash dividends paid out of profits, and increases in the value of shares as companies grew and expanded.

Albert Einstein is reputed to have said that the law of compound interest was the most important in finance and economics. The following table illustrates the effects of compound interest or growth over time:

**Table:** Amount to which £1 Today will accumulate in a Future Year  
Interest or Growth Rate \_\_\_\_\_

Fut Yr	1%	3%	5%	10%
1	1.010	1.030	1.050	1.100
5	1.051	1.158	1.276	1.611
10	1.105	1.344	1.629	2.594
20	1.220	1.806	2.653	6.726
50	1.645	4.384	11.468	117.391
100	2.705	19.219	131.501	13,780
200	7.316	369.35	17,293	190 mil.
1,000	20,959			

The above table demonstrates the central role and implications of interest rates and growth rates in the economy, and how continuous economic growth eventually becomes unsustainable because of its exponential effects.

In the static economies of the past, religious teachings often forbade charging interest on loans because it effectively meant the transfer of resources from poor to rich. The Bahá'í Writings permit interest on loans, and by extension, a rate of profit on business investment, but subject to moral constraints. Bahá'u'lláh stated:

As to thy question concerning interest... Many people stand in need of this. Because if there were no prospect for gaining interest, the affairs of men would suffer collapse or dislocation... Therefore as a token of favour towards men We have prescribed that interest on money should be treated like other business transactions that are current amongst men...

However, this is a matter that should be practised with moderation and fairness. Our Pen of Glory hath, as a token of wisdom and for the convenience of the people, desisted from laying down its limit. Nevertheless We exhort the loved ones of God to observe justice and fairness, and to do that which would prompt the friends of God to evince tender mercy and compassion towards each other...

Nevertheless the conduct of these affairs hath been entrusted to the men of the House of Justice that they may enforce them according to the exigencies of the time and the dictates of wisdom. (4)

**4. Valuation of Financial Assets:** The market value of financial assets - such as shares in companies - depends on the amount, timing, and risk of the future cash flows they are expected to earn.

Financial assets and shares generate cash flows over many future years. In the meantime the owner is forgoing immediate cash returns and is incurring the risk that the cash returns will not be received. Hence, in valuing financial assets, the market “discounts” or reduces these future cash returns to their “present value”, i.e. their value as if they were received right now instead. This is the amount which, if

received now, would accumulate along with interest or returns to the future amount to be received. Discounting is akin to compounding in reverse. The discount rate varies directly with the perceived level of risk of the expected future cash flows.

The following table shows the effects of discounting future cash over time:

Fut Yr	Present Value of £1 to be received in a Future Year			
	Discount Rate _____			
	1%	3%	5%	10%
1	0.990	0.971	0.952	0.909
5	0.952	0.864	0.784	0.621
10	0.905	0.744	0.614	0.386
20	0.820	0.554	0.377	0.149
50	0.608	0.228	0.087	0.009
100	0.370	0.052	0.008	0.0001

The more distant the future year's cash flow, and the greater the discount rate due to greater risk, the lower is the present value of the future cash flow.

As the economy grows, company profits and cash flows grow over time. The expected rate of growth in profits and dividends - and their perceived risk - determines the value of shares in companies. Assuming constant growth rates per annum into the future, it can be shown that the present value of a share's future dividends is next year's dividend divided by the discount rate less the growth rate.

$$\text{Value of a Share today} = \frac{\text{Next year's dividend} (= \text{recent div} + \text{growth})}{\text{Discount rate minus growth rate}}$$

Consider an example of a share whose most recent dividend was 10 pence and how its value changes under three different expected economic scenarios: average, good, bad:

	Average	Good	Bad
Discount rate	10%	9%	12%
Growth rate	7%	8%	6%
Value of Share	10 x 1.07	10 x 1.08	10 x 1.06
in pence	0.10 - 0.07	0.09 - 0.08	0.12 - 0.06
	= 357p	= 1,080p	= 177p

Note the huge changes in value as investors become more optimistic or pessimistic about the company's prospects, and as they adjust their discount rate and their estimates for future growth rates. Growing confidence in a stable long-term future causes investors to reduce their risk premiums and discount rate and increase their growth estimates, and vice versa.

The same principles apply to lending and debt. The willingness of banks and investors to lend, the conditions (including interest rates), under which they lend, and their inclination to call in or sell their debt, depend on their perception of the risk involved.

The big institutional shareholders today hold diversified portfolios of shares in different companies. They employ professional fund managers to manage their trillions of pounds worth of shares, and they constantly monitor their performance. Each fund manager is under constant pressure to maximise the returns on his portfolio, subject to the level of risk undertaken, by the appropriate buying, selling or holding of shares. The fund managers in turn expect the directors and management of companies to maximise their company's share price. The spread of cheap desktop computers and the development of new "Shareholder Value" models have added to the pressure on Fund Managers to maximise their returns, and on companies to maximise their share price. The whole milieu in which the fund managers operate leads to a herd mentality, and adds to the fickleness and volatility of equity markets.

The experts assure us that a collapse in share prices on the scale that followed the Wall Street crash of 1929, and the ensuing Great Depression of the 1930s, could never happen again. They argue that a particular combination of global circumstances and errors in policy led to the 1930s breakdown. Between 1929 and 1932-33 in the USA, shares lost almost 90% of their value, while economic output dropped by one third and unemployment rose to 25%. The situation was not as bad in the UK, but was worse in Germany.

However, speculative bubbles, volatility in the financial markets, and sudden crises of confidence remain a feature of the economic system. Share prices and property prices in Japan in the 1980s underwent a speculative bubble that burst in the early 1990s; in early 2001, prices are still down by 60-70% from their 1989 level. Fortunately, the impact on the real economy has not been as severe. However, sudden losses of confidence by international investors and the resulting financial panics, aggravated by the free withdrawal of capital, led to devastating, if sometimes short-lived, economic crises in Mexico in 1994, East Asia in 1997 and Russia in 1998. The scale of the 1997 East Asian crises and of the ensuing international rescue effort led the Universal House of Justice to refer in 1998 to "the dramatic recognition by world leaders in only recent months of what the interconnectedness of all nations in the matter of trade and finance really implies - a condition which Shoghi Effendi anticipated as an essential aspect of an organically unified world." (5).

Share prices in the USA in the 1990s enjoyed one of their greatest-ever bull market of rising prices as investors became very optimistic about the prospects for the US economy following the collapse of communism and the intensification of the information technology revolution with its prospects of higher productivity growth.

It became fashionable to believe, until late 2000, that the economic cycle had been abolished. In the late 1990s, the high technology NASDAQ share-price index underwent a classic speculative bubble, which burst in March 2000. The index in April-May 2001 is down some 60% from its March 2000 high. Broader share-price indices have fallen by some 20%. By all traditional valuation models, US shares are still over-valued. Worldwide equity values today, in relation to the size of the real

economy, are by far their highest ever. Investor sentiment can be very fickle and volatile, and markets have a habit of undervaluing as well as overvaluing. A severe and widespread fall in US and world share prices is certainly one of the greatest risks facing the global economy, because of its depressing effect on the wealth, confidence and spending of consumers and business. Whether the sudden and unexpected economic slowdown that emerged in the US economy in late 2000 will turn out to be short and mild, or betoken a more serious crisis, remains to be seen.

### **Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" Economy**

The first half of the 19th century, following re-incorporation into the UK, was an economic and human disaster for Ireland. In the potato famine of the 1840s, the suffering was aggravated by the prevailing laissez-faire, free-trade ideology. While the poor starved, food was still exported from the country. In 1847, a new British government more committed to this ideology largely abandoned the substantial relief effort, prolonging and intensifying the agony. Mass emigration became a defining feature of Irish life. In the second half of the century, this, together with more benign British policies, enabled economic conditions to improve for those who remained in Ireland.

Although always among the rich countries, Ireland's economic performance between independence in the early 1920s, and the mid-1980s, was poor by European standards, and was blighted by high unemployment and emigration. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the new State adopted policies of economic self-sufficiency and cultural isolation. The decade 1948 to 1957, in particular, was a disaster. The country lost about 400,000 or one-eighth of its population to emigration, and the numbers at work fell by one sixth, from 1.2 to 1.0 million. In the late 1950s, the country began to open up economically, to embrace freer trade and foreign inward investment. It has pursued these policies since then, and the economy has achieved long-term economic growth of just over 4% per annum.

The early to mid-1980s was another period of crises. In the late 1970s the country began to live beyond its means. This aggravated the effects of the severe world recession of the early 1980s. The country endured a prolonged economic slowdown with huge budget deficits, accumulating national debt, high interest rates, and the resulting mass unemployment and emigration, before it mustered the collective will to rectify the situation.

A remarkable economic turnaround occurred in 1987, with the country embracing more firmly the values and requirements of the global economy. Based on a consultative partnership between the Government and the main economic and social interest groups, the country began to put its public finances in order, by reducing State spending and taxes as a percent of the economy. Central to the strategy were modest increases in incomes for employees in exchange for income-tax reductions, a consultative approach to industrial relations, and across-the-board reductions in business profits tax. From 1987, and particularly since 1994, Ireland has experienced, by conventional economic criteria, one of the most remarkable changes in economic fortunes ever achieved by a rich country. Average annual economic growth from 1987 to 2000 was 6%. In the same period, the national debt as a

percent of the economy fell from 130% to under 50%. Inflation remained very low until the end of 1999. Irish living standards rose from 60% to almost 100% of the EU average. The economy coped relatively well with the world slowdown of the early 1990s.

For the seven years from 1994 to 2000, the economy grew at 8% per annum by conservative calculations, a cumulative growth of some 70%. The dominant feature of this boom has been the almost 50% increase in the numbers at work, and the ending of involuntary mass unemployment and emigration which has been a feature of Ireland for much of the past two centuries. In the early 1990s, unemployment was over 15%, and the numbers in work, at almost 1.2 million, had changed little since the early 1920s. At the end of 2000, the number at work was over 1.7 million and unemployment was below 4%. This was made possible by a big increase in the supply of labour coinciding with a big increase in the demand for labour. The former resulted from high unemployment, a population bulge in the 20s and 30s age group, and emigrants returning. The demand by business occurred as a result of the benign economic climate in Ireland, the willingness of those at work to accept modest increases in incomes, the extraordinary US economic boom resulting from the information technology revolution and the resulting volume of US corporate investment in Ireland, and the stimuli resulting from a fall in interest rates on joining the Euro, and from a weakening currency.

But the primary reason for the boom was the putting of the country's economic house or playing field in order, from the perspective of the global free-market system, and the consultative and partnership approach to achieving this. The last twenty-odd years of Irish economic history shows that even a tiny open economy can have a considerable measure of control over its own performance where the will to do so exists.

Full economic modernity and globalisation arrived belatedly in late 1990s Ireland. The negative aspects of the transformation are the increase in relative inequality, a deterioration in the quality of life for many due to growing congestion resulting from an increasingly inadequate infrastructure, and the effects of soaring house prices and rents since 1998, which, if not rectified, will destabilise the society and the economy. This society has become much more materialistic and individualistic, and the stock of social and moral capital, that delicate network of human reciprocity and trust, is in rapid decline. Like all affluent societies at present, Ireland has become a "fast lane" society whose energy is preoccupied with material things and where time has replaced money as the dominant constraint in people's lives.

### **Current Challenges**

Unregulated market forces and competition are now presenting humanity with grave problems and challenges. In order to maintain their market share and grow their profits, companies must continuously innovate and come up with new or improved production methods and products. The 20th-century economist, Joseph Schumpeter, famously described this process as one of "creative destruction", and regarded it as capitalism's most essential characteristic. Unceasing economic growth, some 3% per annum even in the rich countries, becomes necessary to maintain employment and stability. The system depends on perpetual acquisition and consumption by

consumers, based on the continual creation of new wants rather than needs. Bereft of a true moral vision and framework, capital and capitalism become social forces in themselves, out of control, with investors and managers becoming their mere agents. Economic growth and the technology that makes it possible have become the defining purpose of modern life; humanity and society have become secondary and incidental. All aspects of life and human relationships are being reduced to economic values and money transactions. The attitudes, concepts and assumptions underlying economic behaviour are entirely materialistic and cynical.

A strident ideological global crusade is underway to condition the world's governments and peoples to accept that there is no alternative to the current free-market system. An ever-more "dumbed down" and influential media - dominated by commercial interests - assists in this, and propagates a banal, superficial, voyeuristic culture. The paradox of this free-market ideology is that it seeks to minimise the role of the State in the economy, while depending on the State to maintain social and political stability, enforce the rule of law, and provide vital social services in areas where the market clearly fails, such as basic health and education, social welfare, and modest housing.

The Universal of Justice, in its 1985 Peace Statement, referred to the baneful effects of materialistic ideologies carried to excess, of which the current free-market ideology is the latest:

...religion and religious institutions have, for many decades, been viewed by increasing numbers of people as irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world. In its place they have turned either to the hedonistic pursuit of material satisfactions or to the following of man-made ideologies designed to rescue society from the evident evils under which it groans. All too many of these ideologies, alas, instead of embracing the concept of the oneness of mankind and promoting the increase of concord among different peoples, have tended to deify the state, to subordinate the rest of mankind to one nation, race or class, to attempt to suppress all discussion and interchange of ideas, or to callously abandon starving millions to the operations of a market system that all too clearly is aggravating the plight of the majority of mankind, while enabling small sections to live in a condition of affluence scarcely dreamed of by our forebears...

Most particularly, it is in the glorification of material pursuits, at once the progenitor and common feature of all such ideologies, that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive. It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants. (6)

Increasing inequality and poverty are further effects of the free-market system that perpetuates a certain pattern of production and of income distribution, and involves many poor nations and peoples in a never-ending process of trying to catch up with the rich. Inequality has now reached grotesque proportions, both within countries and between the rich and poor countries. Huge numbers of poor people are becoming worse off, not just in relative but in absolute terms. About 30% of

the world's workforce, or 1 billion people, are unemployed or under-employed. The Universal House of Justice in 1985 identified this issue as being of immediate relevance to the peace and stability of the world:

The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt effectively with this situation. The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made. It is an issue that is bound up not only with the necessity for eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty but also with those spiritual verities the understanding of which can produce a new universal attitude. Fostering such an attitude is itself a major part of the solution. (7)

Admittedly, in many poor countries, poverty is aggravated by endemic corruption and lack of trustworthiness, the AIDS epidemic, and by war and conflict. These problems are partly a result of the tragic legacy of colonialism. However, it is encouraging that the problem of world poverty, and the inability of market forces alone to solve it, is now being increasingly recognised, not least by such international institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The emerging environmental crisis is also one that seems incapable of being seriously tackled by the present global economic system. The system lacks the mechanisms to conserve scarce resources, and unending competition between national and regional economies for diminishing resources increases the threat of war and conflict. Indeed, this crisis may be the one overriding factor that will force a change in economic direction in the foreseeable future. This is because of the constraints the crisis may impose on continuing uncontrolled economic growth and consumption. Even then, changing the character of over two centuries of material development will be a formidable challenge for humanity, and will require hitherto unprecedented levels of wisdom and responsibility, goodwill and cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the growing awareness of the challenges facing the world economy, there is little evidence that governments and peoples, whether rich or poor, are prepared to make the necessary changes and sacrifices required for a radical change of direction. The competitive free-market system and unrestrained economic growth seem set to continue for a long time. It appears that only a major intense systemic crisis will force a change of attitude, and there is little evidence in 2001 that a crisis on such a scale is imminent. Yet who can confidently deny that at some time in the foreseeable future, an unforeseen combination of circumstances and economic policy errors might lead to a breakdown comparable to the 1930s, with its appalling consequences?

The essence of the Bahá'í approach to economics is summed up in the brief but profound statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "the solution to the economic problem is divine in origin and is connected with the worlds of the heart and spirit." (8)

The economic condition of society is a reflection of moral, cultural and social values and attitudes, and will change as the Bahá'í spirit and ethos permeates society. This will reflect itself in values and attitudes, and thence in appropriate economic institutions, policies, and patterns of behaviour. Considering this, it becomes apparent that economics, or political economy, is the most subtle and sophisticated of the social and ethical disciplines.

A number of general Bahá'í economic principles are well known. Anchored in the recognition of the divine purpose to human existence and of the oneness and interdependence of the world's peoples, they are: cooperation rather than competition as the basis of economic life; the primacy of agriculture as the foundation of economic activity; the central importance of useful work for all; work regarded as worship, and motivated by service rather than gain; profit-sharing between employers and employees; limiting the degree of economic inequality through progressive taxation and a minimum guaranteed income for all; the importance of voluntary giving, including the discharge of Huqúqu'lláh; an environmentally sustainable system which regards the earth and its environment as a divine trust; and thrift, economy, and living within one's means being regarded as virtuous.

Like the family, some form of free-enterprise market economy is essential to a healthy human society. The family is a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í social teachings, although not the overly traditional and extended family of the past or the extreme nuclear family of today's suburbia. Similarly, Bahá'í teachings fully accept the need for private ownership of economic assets and a role for the market. However, they reject the extremes of the recent centrally planned economies and of today's unfettered free-market system. They distinguish between the principle of a free-enterprise market system per se, and the extreme individualist, decadent consumerism into which the affluent market economies have degenerated in recent decades.

The spectacular but destabilising economic development over the past two centuries is surely due to the forces released by the coming of Bahá'u'lláh (9), forces which have yet to be channelled in a spiritual direction: the Kingdom of God on earth is one of material as well as spiritual abundance. It is arguably in the economic and financial sphere that world unity and interdependence is most advanced. It is also this sphere of life that most strongly reinforces the competitive ethos with its dangerous consequences, and promotes the vices of greed, avarice, envy and discontent.

It is essential that the global economy be brought under international democratic accountability and moral control. It must be reorganised on a just, cooperative and sustainable footing, and reoriented to some extent from private profit to social and human need. It must be recognised that relying on unfettered market forces represents the abdication of moral and social responsibility. Market forces must be brought under social control and regulation.

It seems appropriate to conclude with the following references by Shoghi Effendi to the future Bahá'í World Commonwealth. The first and final paragraphs are

particularly momentous in their implications, stating the clear need for global governance, regulation and coordination of the world economy:

...This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples...

...a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.

...The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

...economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war... will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind... to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet...

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources... and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving. (10)

October 2000 - May 2001

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## The First Four Caliphs of Islam

*Betsy Omidvaran*

### **Abstract**

*This paper was originally written for submission during the final year of an undergraduate Degree in Arabic. Many Bahá'ís appear to know little about Islam and most of they do know is based on the Shi'i tradition, which does not constitute the mainstream of Islamic studies in general. It was thought that this overview, presented from a perspective of Western scholarship, of the first four caliphs, known as "rightly-guided", would help a Bahá'í readership put the subject into a broader perspective than exists at present.*

At the time of the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, Islam and the Islamic community were vibrant, active and expanding. They controlled most of the Arabian Peninsula and had already begun to expeditions north into Syria and west into Africa. The two great empires, the Byzantine (East Roman) to the north-west (covering present-day Syria, Palestine, Turkey and Egypt) and the Sassanian (Persian) to the north-east (covering present-day Iran and Iraq), had exhausted themselves in warring with each other. In the few years after 610, Persia had taken over most of the Byzantine lands and even almost besieged Constantinople, and only in 628 had Byzantium regained the territory and taken the Persian capital. The Byzantine Emperor made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 630, two years before the death of Muhammad.

From the perspective of a historian, the thirty years after the death of Muhammad are very problematic. There are very few historical sources from Byzantium covering this period and they generally date from one or two centuries later. The most important are Nicephorus (late eighth century) and Theophanes (early ninth). There are numerous non-historical sources, such as sermons, religious tracts and poetry, which can reveal a few details if carefully sifted: there would not be enough detail to get any kind of clear picture. The Islamic sources, on the other hand, are voluminous and detailed. They, too, however, date from a later period. Three of the best-known and reliable are al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari and al-Ya'qubi, all from the late ninth century, but are held to be based on much earlier materials. In the past twenty years, much work has been done to critically examine the sources, as well as to communicate between those who specialise in Byzantium and those who specialise in Islam (from Kaegi). Most experts still accept, with a variety of caveats, the broad outline of events as they are presented in the Islamic sources. (Bahá'ís are inestimably privileged in that their history is so well-documented in the contemporaneous records of writers like Nabíl-i-A'zam).

Muhammad's death, which occurred on 8 June 632 CE, was unexpected, and He had left no clear instructions as to His successor. Thus, His followers had to decide how the governance of the community would be organised and how it would continue to progress and expand. There were three main groupings within the central body of the Muslims: the ansar, the natives of Medina who had invited the persecuted Muslims there from Mecca, the muhájírún, the early Muslims who followed Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, and the Meccans, who converted later

and after the Prophet overcame Mecca. After some initial discussion of the rights of these three groups, they finally agreed on Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr had been one of the earliest Muslims, accompanying Muhammad on His emigration from Mecca to Medina, and had been asked by Muhammad to lead the prayers during His illness.

Abu Bakr was determined to carry forward the programme for expansion that Muhammad had initiated. However, his first priority had to be the re-conquest of the tribes who had pledged their allegiance to Muhammad, a series of conflicts known as the Riddah Wars. Riddah is usually translated as “apostasy,” and many of the tribes felt that they had a treaty with Muhammad which did not have to be honoured after His death. This was seen as apostasy from their declared Islamic faith. In the process, the other tribes which had been waiting to see the outcome of these conflicts and some of those who had never been under the banner of Islam were won over. Another aspect of this problem was that a number of people had arisen even before Muhammad’s death who claimed to be prophets, on a par with Him, to their particular tribes. They had seen this as their opportunity. Success in re-establishing Muslim control was a major achievement of his reign as Caliph, the name which he took for the office of successor to the Prophet; without this accomplishment, the future unified expansion of the Islamic community could not have taken place.

At the same time as he was prosecuting these wars, with the support of the Meccans and Medinans and nearby tribes, he sent expeditions north to Palestine and to Mesopotamia, as the Prophet had been planning to do before His death. The success of Abu Bakr’s two enterprises, internal and external, were interlinked since “[t]he Arabian tribes would probably never have been conquered had not the conquests in the north provided an attractive solution to the internal economic problems of the peninsula. The first northern expeditions were merely raiding parties aiming at plunder not conquest. The latter only followed when the weakness of the enemy was revealed.” (1)

The main general of the Riddah Wars was Khalid ibn al-Walid, a Meccan from a powerful clan who had lately converted. Once the wars within the peninsula were successful, he took it upon himself to begin venturing into the territory of the weakened Sassanian Empire, where the booty to be gained was rich. In 634 Abu Bakr sent four separate contingents into Byzantine territory, which indicated that they were not looking for a military confrontation, but for the fruits of raiding. (2) However, the Byzantine Empire took the threat seriously and sent an army to meet them. The Muslims requested reinforcements and Abu Bakr felt it was too dangerous to use the tribesmen who had just been overcome in the Riddah Wars, so he directed Khalid and his army in Iraq to go to their assistance. Khalid assumed command of the combined forces and they won a decisive victory at Ajnadayn.

Abu Bakr died before he heard the news of the victory. His term as Caliph lasted for only two years, from 8 June 632 to his death on 23 August 634, but it was very eventful, providing a crucial foundation for future growth and development. Before his death he designated Umar ibn al-Khattab as his successor. ‘Umar was also one of the Muhájirun, commanded respect among the Muslim community and had proposed Abu Bakr as leader upon the Prophet’s death. He added the title

Amir ul-Mu'minin ("prince of the believers") to the title of Caliph. He was known for his integrity and ability, and he provided a firm foundation for the future administration of the vast territory that the Arabs were to control. For example, he set up the diwan system for dividing the spoils of war and a clear revenue system for subjugated people, which was important for the continuity of the empire.

Unlike Abu Bakr, 'Umar favoured the Muhájirun over the ansar, and among the newly converted Meccans, he favoured the rich and powerful Umayyad clan, which would have implications in the future. In addition, "'Umar's first act was to reverse Abu Bakr's policy towards the ex-rebels of the ridda. He not only allowed but even encouraged their participation in the raids on Sasanian territories... It was the most meaningful step towards the unification of the Arabs." (3) During 'Umar's reign from 23 August 634 to 4 November 644, the first and greatest conquests were achieved by the Muslim armies.

There is a historiographical problem here, described by Kennedy:

The Arab conquests in Syria and Iraq pose the historian an unusual problem. The Arab literary sources which describe them are very full... They are, on the other hand, hopelessly confused about the chronology and order of the main events. (4)

That said, it is possible to give a general description of the events. In Palestine and Syria against the Byzantine Empire following the victory at Ajnadayn in 634, there were a number of sieges and small confrontations. The last and most major battle was that on the Yarmuk River, probably in 636 or 637, which led to the final fall of Damascus and the breaking of the Byzantine army in Syria. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius at this point abandoned Syria. In early 638, the Muslims took Jerusalem and, as the Patriarch would surrender only to the Caliph himself, 'Umar travelled to Jerusalem, the first and only time that he travelled from Medina to the scene of the conquests. The Umayyad Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan was appointed governor of Syria, and he set about establishing garrison towns and settling it with divisions of the conquering army.

In relation to the Sassanian Empire, "... in the summer of 637, 20000 Persians were decisively defeated by a far smaller Arab force at Qadisiya. The Arabs followed up their victory by capturing the Persian capital of Ctesiphon... and occupied the whole of Iraq." (5) A decisive victory was won by the Arabs at Nihavand in 642. The battle for most of the remainder of the Sassanian Empire went on for several more years, with successive Sassanian kings retreating into the mountains and trying desperately to hold on.

A small force had gone into Egypt, although the 'Umar had initially been reluctant to sanction it, and laid siege to Alexandria. In 641, they gained control of Alexandria by treaty. Four years later, Byzantium made an effort to regain it but failed in the end.

The Muslim community during the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar went from strength to strength. Muslim authority within Arabia was firmly established and the unity of the Muslim community largely maintained. The conquests included victory over the two most powerful empires of the day and a vast expansion of the lands

over which they had hegemony, from southern Arabia west into Iran, north to the border of Anatolia and east into Egypt. It seems from this record that these first twelve years comprised all gain and virtually no setbacks, and so it was. However, some of the seeds of future setbacks had been sown and these became evident during the reigns of the next two Caliphs.

‘Umar was murdered on 3 November 644 by a slave. Although the details are unclear, it seems that it was not for political but for personal reasons. His successor, Uthman ibn Affan, was chosen by a shura, appointed by ‘Umar on his deathbed. This was a group of six likely successors, who were to consult among themselves and decide who the successor would be. The six included ‘Alí, the Prophet’s cousin and the husband of His daughter, Fatimah, and the final choice was between ‘Alí and Uthman. Uthman, like Mu’awiya, the governor of Syria mentioned above, was a member of the family Umayya. Although Uthman himself was an early convert to Islam, his election represents a victory for the Meccans who were later converts to Islam and who still carried their previous sense of superiority to other Arabs. He was weak in character and easily influenced by members of his family to appoint members of powerful Meccan families to important posts. By this time, the conquests had come up against geographical barriers and, while the domains continued to expand, the expansion was not at anything approaching the rate of that during the reigns of the first two Caliphs.

His reign lasted for twelve years, from 4 November 644 to 17 June 656. Many of his appointees to administrative posts were causing discontent among the residents of their areas. In the end a group of discontented soldiers from the army in Egypt came to Medina to complain to the Caliph, caused turmoil in Medina and in the process he was killed. “The murder marks a turning point in the history of Islam. The slaying of a Caliph by rebellious Muslims established a mournful precedent and gravely weakened the religious and moral prestige of the office as a bond of unity in Islam.” (6)

Despite the weaknesses of his reign, ‘Uthman made an important contribution to the religious unity of Islam. By his time, discrepancies had arisen in people’s memories of the sacred text of Islam, the Qur’án, and different readings were beginning to lead to disputes. ‘Uthman arranged for the text to be collected and regularised, so that there was only one authentic version. “For the history of Islam, this editing of the Qur’án was the most important and fruitful achievement of the reign of ‘Uthman.” (7)

Following ‘Uthman’s death, ‘Alí was acknowledged as Caliph and most of the remaining companions of the Prophet in Medina pledged their allegiance to him. But he immediately began to face opposition and problems. ‘Alí had been closely associated with the ansar in Medina, which led to opposition from the Muhájirun of the Quraysh tribe, who had been in the ascendant under ‘Uthman. Several of them left to find military assistance elsewhere; ‘Alí was forced to follow in order to find his own military support, and the two armies met in the Battle of the Camel. ‘Alí’s army won. “But for the first time there had been civil war among the Muslims, the gate of fitna, a strife, had been opened and, like Pandora’s box, once opened it was impossible to close.” (8)

‘Alí felt the need to restore a spirit to the administration more in keeping with the religion of Muhammad and began to remove many of ‘Uthman’s appointees, whom he felt were not living up to the standards of Islam. He was able to establish his authority in most areas of the empire, with the exception of Syria, where Mu’awiya had control. He refused to be removed and, as he was ‘Uthman’s closest living relative, he demanded that ‘Uthman’s murderers be punished before he would recognise ‘Alí as Caliph. Unfortunately for ‘Alí, he was dependent for support on some of the people of the city of Kufa, who had been implicated in the murder. ‘Alí led an army against Mu’awiya and they met at Siffin in 657. ‘Alí was obliged to agree to the arbitration proposed by Mu’awiya, and they chose two arbitrators, and agreed to meet again in a year. This greatly weakened ‘Alí, as he showed himself to be dealing with Mu’awiya on equal terms, and much of his support melted away. When the year was up, the result of the arbitration seemed to favour Mu’awiya and both continued to look for support. During this period a faction of his supporters formed a separate group who criticised his resort to arbitration and what they felt was his betrayal of his position. They came to be known as Kharijites (Khawarij) and continued to make an impact on the Islamic community for centuries, by their insistence on purity and frequent resort to violence. ‘Alí was assassinated in 661 by one of these erstwhile supporters and Mu’awiya became Caliph, the beginning of the Umayyad Caliphate.

The Shi’ih branch of Islam would say that the setbacks began at the very beginning as they quote a tradition in which the Prophet Himself had appointed ‘Alí to succeed Him. They believe that this was ignored to the detriment of the progress of Islam.

Thus ended the rules of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs. During the reigns of the first two, the gains greatly exceeded the setbacks, but during the reigns of the second two, setbacks multiplied and while the territorial gains were preserved, the vast potential was greatly hampered.

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## REVIEWS

### *The Child of the Covenant: A Study Guide to the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*

Author: Adib Taherzadeh

Publisher: George Ronald, Oxford, 2000, 465 pages

Reviewer: Tricia Fallon-Barry

This is a sequel to *The Covenant Of Bahá'u'lláh* (George Ronald, 1992), though in its comprehensiveness, it stands alone.

In his Preface, Adib Taherzadeh explains: "The organizational principle behind this guide is the relationship of the various parts of the Covenant and its verities to almost every subject mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament." He cautions readers to bear in mind Shoghi Effendi's statement: "The contents of the 'Will' of the Master are far too much for the present generation to comprehend. It needs at least a century of actual working before the treasures of wisdom hidden in it can be revealed."

The method employed by Taherzadeh is thorough and effective: "In some instances a study is made of a full paragraph, in many cases of a sentence, and sometimes of certain words." With characteristic humility, he expresses the desire that his "study guide, however inadequate in scope and depth, will stimulate the believers in their own study of this weighty document."

He prepares the way for his study of *The Will and Testament* with an enlightening 10-page Introduction that describes the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Covenant. This is followed by three preparatory chapters.

Chapter 1 deals with the "Prerequisites for the Study of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh": "Man can acquire the knowledge of God and come to understand the significance of His words only through purity of heart, detachment from earthly things and humility and meekness before His servants" (p. 15).

Chapter 2 chronicles the family of Bahá'u'lláh, with this caveat: "To attempt to study the life of Bahá'u'lláh from a purely human point of view is an unhelpful exercise" (p. 17).

Chapter 3 focuses on "Tests of Faith": "The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh will continue to be a testing ground for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh" (p. 32).

The main body of the work explores the text of *The Will and Testament* in great detail. The reader gains valuable background information through explanations from the Faith's Central Figures (e.g. p. 30), historical accounts (p. 72), memoirs (p. 183), eyewitness testimonies (p. 309), excerpts from letters (p. 191), notes (p. 351), etc.

Taherzadeh is an eloquent narrator - the book can be viewed as a narrative centred upon the Figure of 'Abdu'l-Bahá - and his masterly story-telling is always engaging. One is reminded that "the greatest source of strength for a Bahá'í is to draw from the power of Bahá'u'lláh" (p. 157). Directing his audience to this power, Taherzadeh includes numerous inspiring passages from the sacred Writings.

Spiritual verities are illustrated through skilful analogies (e.g. 26, 34) and insightful observations (p. 36, 286).

*The Will and Testament* itself - some 23 pages or 55 paragraphs in its English translation and composed in three parts “during the darkest days” of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry - touches on virtually every aspect of the Bahá’í Faith. The author, in elaborating on each excerpt and its relationship to Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant, spans the Heroic to the Formative Age, from the Martyrdom of the Báb (p. 50) to the need for a Supreme Tribunal (p. 399). Paragraphs from *The Will and Testament* are treated thematically in relation to various aspects of the Covenant (e.g. teaching) and not sequentially.

While much of the subject-matter necessarily deals with the distasteful aspect of Covenant-breaking (16 chapters out of 40), Taherzadeh’s book testifies to the dialectic of victory and crisis perceived by Shoghi Effendi in the organic evolution of the Bahá’í Faith (*God Passes By*, p. xiii). Specific topics of interest given detailed attention here are “The Deviations of Mírzá Muhammad-’Alí,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s younger half-brother and named by Bahá’u’lláh as “the Greater Branch” (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 222), which receives five chapters.

Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s eldest grandson, is discussed in terms of his appointment as Guardian, the sole authoritative interpreter of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh (chapter 27), and who is under the protection of both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh (chapter 28), as are his extraordinary achievements, “the terrible Covenant-breakers’ attacks he sustained” (chapter 29), the rebellion of many of his own relatives that he had to painfully endure (chapter 30) and the tremendous loyalty and devotion he attracted from the overwhelming majority of believers (chapter 31).

The concluding chapter (40) concentrates on “Steadfastness in the Covenant,” and ends with a prayer from *The Will and Testament* for the protection of God’s “trusted servants.”

Useful inclusions are the three appendices: “The Administrative Order,” excerpted from Shoghi Effendi’s 1934 letter, *The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh, The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (November 26th, 1972) and a Guide to Paragraphs in the Will and Testament, the latter presented in two sections that provide “an easy reference linking passages of the Will and Testament to the chapters of the book.”

This publication is a superb resource for all Bahá’ís (for whom it was written), the last important literary offering from this outstanding Bahá’í scholar. Indeed, it is a hitherto unrivalled in-depth study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Will and Testament*, the “Child” born of that mystic intercourse between the minds of Bahá’u’lláh and His eldest Son, and described by the Guardian as “the Charter of a future world civilisation.” Together with such works as Michael Sours’s *The Prophecies of Jesus* (Oneworld, 1991), it is a prime example of Bahá’í exegesis.

*A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*

Author: Peter Smith

Publisher: Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1999, 396 pages

Price: £12.99p stg.

Reviewer: Edwin McCloughan

This is one of a series of reference books by Oneworld on specific religions e.g. Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity.

In his Preface, Dr Peter Smith, author of three books on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, referring in particular to the importance of Wendi Momen's *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary* (1989), remarks on "the obvious need for a more encyclopedic study" than is currently available in English. The completion date of the "large-scale 'Bahá'í Encyclopedia' project... at present underway" in the United States remains uncertain. "In the interim, it is hoped that the work will be of value to those who are seeking basic information about the Bahá'í Faith and the Bábí movement from which it emerged." The *Concise Encyclopedia* is "something of a pioneer effort," and, "conscious" of its "limitations," Smith "can only aim to provide a basic summary of our present knowledge, and to point readers in the direction of other works they might consult on particular topics." Unlike *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, published before the English edition of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* was made widely available in 1993, Smith's *Encyclopedia* includes much more detailed material on Bahá'í law. It is the most up-to-date reference book of its kind in English on the Bábí and Bahá'í religions.

The white and red cover has colour photographs of the Terraces leading to the Shrine of the Báb, jazz trumpeter John 'Dizzy' Gillespie and three Houses of Worship.

The *Encyclopedia* has a Chronology of key events from the early Bábí period (1844-53) until the ministry of the Universal House of Justice (1963-92) (pp. 1-10).

Immediately before the Encyclopedia proper are two pages of abbreviations, most of which appear at the end of entries.

There are three maps - of sites in and around Akka, the journeys of Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad to Akka and of Iran, Iraq and the Levant in the nineteenth century.

There are also numerous, captioned photographs and portraits of people (including the ten Bahá'í women martyred in Shiraz in June 1983, p. 235), places and buildings and calligraphic renderings of Bahá'í Scripture. ("Calligraphy" receives a separate entry, p. 100.) There is also a diagram of the Administrative Order, a model of the completed Arc on Mount Carmel and tables of statistics.

There are two pages of Further Reading, recommending certain introductory and biographical books and correctly appraising the quality of the large secondary material on Bahá'í belief and practice as "variable," a 15-page Bibliography and an eight-page Thematic Index that greatly facilitates referencing.

The *Encyclopedia* entries themselves run to 356 pages. The title of each entry is in bold, with capitalised subheadings in the articles on the Faith's three Central Figures, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, as well as on several other extended topics.

The book is richly informative, containing, for example, a summary of Bahá'u'lláh's better-known Writings (pp. 67-86) and an Itinerary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journeys to Egypt and the West (p. 17). It is comprehensive in the range of its entries (laws, doctrines, other religions, biographies, community life and administration, canonical texts, periodicals and reviews, etc.), succinctly paraphrasing longer subjects found in such reference books as *Lights of Guidance*. It is balanced and, for the most part, characteristically objective, relying on primary sacred Writings, interpretations of Shoghi Effendi and communications of the Universal House of Justice, standard works of Bahá'í scholarship and more recent works by 'Abbás Amanat and Denis MacEoin on Bábism. Occasionally, Smith includes evaluative or contextual comments alongside purely factual information.

Unlike his father, grandfather and uncles, all of whom followed the upper-class Muslim practice of having several wives, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remained monogamous (p. 15).

The exact nature of the Báb's claims at different stages of his mission is complicated, and sometimes veiled by his allusive and esoteric language (p. 58).

The difficulty of following this teaching [not backbiting] is recognized, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi accepting that backbiting was probably the major cause of disunity amongst Bahá'ís (as amongst human beings in general) and of withdrawal from Bahá'í activities (p. 64).

[The principle of the emancipation and equality of women] appears to have received little more than passing reference from Bahá'u'lláh, but... was discussed at length by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (p. 70).

The great devotion and love that his followers felt for Bahá'u'lláh makes it difficult for us to gain an impression of what he was actually like (p. 78).

The marriage is conditional upon the payment of a relatively small amount of money by the husband to the wife. (Bahá'í sources refer to this gift as a 'dowry', giving the term a new meaning: the payment is not brought to the marriage by the bride from her family. In that the payment is not given to the bride's parents, it is not a 'brideprice' either.) (p. 233).

[Shoghi Effendi's personal life] was generally uneventful, and was largely subordinated to his work as Guardian (p. 316).

Inexact translations of some of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's theological texts limit the present possibilities of explicating certain aspects of Bahá'í theology for those reliant on Western language sources (p. 337).

Although empowered to legislate on matters not revealed in the Bahá'í scriptures, the Universal of Justice has as yet been extremely limited in its exercise of this function (p. 350).

By far the longest entry is that on Expansion (pp. 137-154). This is a thoroughly detailed history of the “missionary” establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in 190 countries and 45 dependent territories by 1995, its greatest global expansion having taken place systematically since the completion of the Ten Year World Crusade in April 1963. Expansion patterns are discussed mainly in geographical terms.

There is, however, no real attempt to analyse or explain the Faith's success or failure in terms of the rate and scope of its expansion, the largest numbers of believers being concentrated in the “Third World” and comparatively small numbers in both the West and the Far East. (This indifference to the Faith and other minority religions in the West is usually attributed to material acquisitiveness.) Nevertheless, this entry could well provide a comprehensive resource for a more extensive analysis by scholars as to the patterns of Bahá'í expansion up until very recently and what can be learned from them in regard to future expansion and consolidation projects.

Unlike that in *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, the typeface is quite small (but then it is a smaller book). Also there are a number of typographical errors, though not so many as to warrant stricture.

Overall *A Concise Encyclopedia* is an invaluable reference book for religious scholars, anyone interested in learning basic information about the Bahá'í Faith and, of course, Bahá'ís themselves desiring to improve their knowledge or clarify their understanding of various or little-discussed aspects of their religion (e.g. kindness to animals, gambling, sexual morality, mysticism, etc.) and as a handy aid to teaching and presenting it. The precision, economy and clarity of Smith's style make it a pleasure to consult or read right through. True to its title, it is admirably concise.

## REPORT

### The Covenant: A Study Weekend

The Association for Bahá'í Studies Weekend on the Covenant took place at the National Bahá'í Centre in Dublin on 10th and 11th of February this year. A reading pack was sent to those who'd registered. It included a 46-page paper, "Seeing Double: The Covenant and the Tablet of Ahmad," by Dr Todd Lawson, who facilitated the study sessions, and seven articles on the subject of the Covenant, several excerpted from Encyclopedias of Islam, Judaism, Religion and Ethics and the Bible and also the first two chapters from Dr Moojan Momen's *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (1985). The intensive two-day sessions were intellectually stimulating and spiritually beneficial.

Todd, a distinguished Canadian academic in Islamic Studies based at McGill University in Montréal, Quebec, became interested in Islam after reading that, according to Shoghi Effendi, a study of Islam for Bahá'ís was "absolutely indispensable" if they were to gain a sound understanding of their own religion. Since the early 1970s, his initial interest in Islam has become a lifelong passion. Despite some jet lag, Todd showed himself to be a congenial, skilful and enthusiastic facilitator during the two days of interactive study.

Todd commenced sessions on Saturday morning by explaining that the idea of the Covenant is one of the oldest and most enduring in religious history and that it denotes a promise from God to humanity to continue to bless, guide and reward humanity on the grounds that it conform to His Will. He reminded those participating that all religion had come from the same Divine source and suggested that the best way of approaching a religion was to learn about its covenantal arrangement. He further explained that religious Covenants had come down to us from the area of Mesopotamia through Judaism and Christianity, but that God's Will had been more clearly and completely expressed in Islam (literally, "peace" or "submission"), the religion founded by Muhammad (570-632 CE), than in either of these earlier dispensations. The sessions aimed to focus on the different aspects of the Islamic Covenant.

Todd then gave participants a digestible crash course on Islam, concentrating on the birth of Muhammad's Faith in the largely desert peninsula of Arabia, on the classical period when the civilisation ushered in by the Qur'an (literally "reading" or "recitation") and seminal documents like the civil Constitution of Medina (622 CE) came into its own and on the crisis within Islam brought about by the Mongol invasions of the 13th century. Much was learned about the hadith (sayings and traditions of the Prophet, compiled and stringently verified for publication by Muslim scholars soon after His passing) and how the Mongol invasions compelled Islam to turn inwards and thereafter to develop its unique style of mysticism exemplified by Sufism.

The sessions on this opening day allowed for some lively discussion and debate, especially on the status of women in Islam, Muhammad's having fourteen wives and the vexed question of Holy War. Todd offered a spirited defence of the Islamic position on these and other issues - explaining that the word *jihad* actually means "struggle" (that is, with oneself) - and advised that we shouldn't allow media

reports and current attitudes - which tend to sensationalise and scandalise Islam - to determine our own views of it and its place in history. He stressed that Islam still has many positive features, and made clear that it was more important to ask the right questions than to claim that Bahá'ís themselves had all the right answers.

On Sunday sessions started at 9 a.m. with a devotional followed by a workshop in which three groups of between five and seven participants examined and then commented upon a short passage from the Qur'an (5:35). Known as "The Light Verse," it reads:

*God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is like this: There is a niche, In the niche there is a lamp; The lamp is (placed) in a globe of glass, The globe is as it were a brilliant planet [star], It is lighted with the oil of a blessed olive-tree which is neither of the East nor of the West, The oil thereof well-nigh [virtually] gives light though no fire touches it: There is Light upon Light. God guides towards His light him who wishes (it). And God sets forth parables for mankind, because God knows all [created] things.*

In "Seeing Double," Todd proposes that a thorough study of this verse would help to define more clearly the relationship between Islam and the Bahá'í Faith. After some forty minutes' consultation, the three groups each produced in their exegeses of this richly figurative passage some varied and cogent interpretations, including a passage from a 1952 letter by the Guardian, in which the "oil" (i.e. crushed seed) was symbolised by the martyrdom of the Báb. This exercise also provided a practical demonstration of how Islamic scholars themselves approach interpretation of the Qur'an and related hadith.

After a break, Todd discoursed on the highly subtle use of language, script and calligraphy in the universe of Islam and outlined its theology, philosophy and poetry over successive periods of its evolution as a major religio-cultural force by citing, and describing, outstanding figures from each of these disciplines, including the polymath Avicenna and the poet Rúmí.

After lunch, Todd explored the similarities and differences between the two main branches of Islam - Sunni (constituting 80% of Muslims) and Shi'ih (constituting about 20% and found mostly in Iran) - and identified the distinctive characteristics of each. He paid particular attention to the line of Imams (leaders) in Shi'ih Islam, which eventually led to the heterodox, esoteric but immensely popular teachings of Shaykh Ahmad (1753-1826), from within whose matrix emerged the Revelations of the Báb and then Bahá'u'lláh. Todd pointed out that the main differences or disagreements within Islam arose because of the increasingly divergent interpretations of the Covenant - particularly the disputes concerning Muhammad's rightful successors - and he touched on how Bahá'u'lláh and then 'Abdu'l-Bahá resolved these problems through specific appointments in Their respective Will and Testaments.

Todd had an inexhaustible fund of knowledge and anecdotes about diverse aspects of Islam and a seemingly effortless ability to communicate his insights and

understandings with gusto: at all times he provided everyone with ample food for thought. Bahá'ís possibly appreciate the imperative part that Islam has played in humanity's gradual progress towards global unity and the immense debt that the Bahá'í Faith owes to its immediate predecessor. (At least 70% of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh's pre-eminent doctrinal opus, contains references and allusions to Shi'ih Islam.) The question is: Do Bahá'ís sufficiently appreciate the richness and exuberance of Islamic culture, the ardour found in its religious love poetry (e.g. the stream of “white-hot” paeans to Muhammad) and the subtle and intricate use of allusion, metaphor and symbol in its language? These aspects of the relationship between the two religions were highlighted by Todd during the Weekend. He said that it is vital to ask questions at every opportunity, even if they reflect only our frustrations, and that as a community, Bahá'ís still had a considerable amount to learn from and about Islam.

Brian Corvin and Edwin McCloughan

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Patricia Fallon-Barry** has been a Bahá'í for 24 years serving in various capacities.

**Kevin Brogan** has a background as both a member of the Roman Catholic Church and as a teacher of religious education, which has allowed him to forge some understanding between the Bahá'í Faith and Catholicism. He has served as secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Drogheda in Co. Louth, and is involved in his union, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI).

**Brian Corvin** has just completed a Community Media course at Colaiste Dhulaigh, Dublin. A conceptual artist, retired coach driver and natural provocateur, he became a member of the Bahá'í community in 1962.

**Edwin Graham** is the director of Lurgan Council for Voluntary Action and in that capacity he is also the chairperson of Craigavon District Partnership and a member of the Joint Forum for the Government and Voluntary Sector in Northern Ireland. He is an authorised officer for the Parades Commission in Northern Ireland and is secretary of the Bahá'í Council for Northern Ireland.

**Edwin McCloughan** received his B.A. Degree in English Language and Literature in 1992 from University College, Dublin, and has since worked as a tutor to secondary school pupils, freelance journalist and creative writing instructor. Last year he co-authored and published a book of poetry.

**Eamonn Moane** is a lecturer in Accountancy and Financial Management at the Dublin Institute of Technology, and is a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland. He has been a Bahá'í since 1977, and worked for 10 years as an accountant in the Finance Department of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.

**Betsy Omidvaran** joined the Bahá'í community in 1974 in the United States. She moved to Ireland in 1987 and has served as a member and officer of a number of Bahá'í institutions, local and national. She received a B.A. Degree in Psychology and Sociology in 1979 from Wesleyan University in Connecticut (US) and has just finished a second B.A. in Arabic and History at University College Dublin (UCD).