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Larissa Tsutskova, on a visit to Moscow, with the Kremlin in the background.

PERM, Russian Federation — Like so many of her generation, Larissa Tsutskova was raised without any religious education — and would have classified herself an atheist if someone had asked before the Communist Party lost its power in Russia.

Yet, also like so many in her generation, Ms. Tsutskova felt her life in the old Soviet Union lacked something. Something of a spiritual nature.

"My life was no different from the life of most people in the former Soviet Union," said the 42-year-old civil engineer in this medium-sized industrial city some 900 kilometers east of Moscow. "I was in a 'Red October' children's group, then I became a young 'Pioneer,' even secretary of a Communist youth group. Later I became a member of the Communist Party. I lived like any citizen of my country.

"I can't really say that my life in the former USSR was all that bad," she continued. "I feel uncomfortable when everyone heaps abuse on the past. But it is true that I was constantly looking for some hidden spiritual meaning, trying to find my identity."

And so it was that shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 Ms. Tsutskova embarked on a personal journey of spiritual searching. In 1986, she and her daughter were baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. This was during the Perestroika reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev, which

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The Rise of Civil Society

It is perhaps the most significant social phenomenon of our time: the sudden efflorescence of countless movements and organizations of social change at local, regional, and international levels.

This blossoming of civil society, as represented by non-governmental organizations, community-based groups, academic institutions, and others, is significantly reshaping the international agenda. The expansion and activism of these groups have changed the way global issues are understood, considered and dealt with, in the process changing and sometimes challenging the role of governments.

As Jessica T. Mathews noted in the January/February 1997 issue of *Foreign Affairs*: "The end of the Cold War has brought no mere adjustment among states but a novel redistribution of power among states, markets and civil society. National governments are not simply losing autonomy in a globalizing economy. They are sharing powers — including political, social, and security roles at the core of sovereignty — with businesses, with international organizations, and with a multitude of citizens' groups, known as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The steady concentration of power in the hands of states that began in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia is over, at least for a while."

This issue of ONE COUNTRY has two stories that reflect the degree to which NGOs are increasingly important international actors. Our story on the Microcredit Summit [page 4] tells how NGOs organized a meeting that was in some ways reminiscent of a major United Nations Summit, bringing together representatives from all levels of international society to discuss a major global issue. Our story on the Rio + 5 meeting and the benchmark draft Earth Charter [page 7] reflects the growing ability of civil society to organize itself globally to promote new values and norms.

The expansion of civil society's influence at the international level can largely

be traced back to the first Earth Summit, held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. There, NGOs moved from the hallways to positions on government delegations and played a key role in advancing the negotiations for Agenda 21, the global action plan on environment and development that governments adopted. NGOs also proposed much of Agenda 21's actual structure and have been instrumental in mobilizing support for it since.

The influence of civil society has continued to grow throughout the entire series of global UN meetings this decade, from Vienna to Cairo to Copenhagen to Beijing to Istanbul. At each of these meetings, whether on human rights or population or social development or women or human settlements, NGOs contributed greatly to the discussions and, ultimately, to the final agreements.

The reasons for civil society's rise are numerous and varied. The end of the Cold War, which dominated the international agenda with an overarching concern for military security, allowed a shift in focus to social issues and created a climate where peoples' organizations could participate more directly in international fora. As well, the computer and telecommunications revolution has ended the monopoly on information that was formerly held by governments and large institutions, opening the door to new modes of organization and expression in every sphere.

At the root of these developments is a transformation in the way that great numbers of ordinary people are coming to see themselves — a change that is dramatically abrupt in the history of civilization. The heart of this change is our perception of community. Increasingly, people are coming to understand that the human race is one. This has dramatically expanded our notion of who are our neighbors and what are our obligations towards them. And this new idea carries with it a concomitant concept: that each of us has tremendous capacities that can be developed, especially if we work together.

Today, NGOs take on many tasks that were formerly the province of governments. They deliver social services. They do legal, scientific, technical and policy analysis.

Perspective

They shape, monitor and implement international commitments. They breed new ideas. And they are often more effective and efficient than governments at these tasks — again, largely because they are able to tap into the capacities of people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

These successes have led some NGO representatives to ask for an even greater share of the “power” currently held by nation-states. Some NGO representatives, for example, have suggested that they should be given a greater role in negotiations at UN meetings. Others have urged the creation of a Forum of Civil Society or a directly elected People’s Assembly within the United Nations, parallel in structure to the General Assembly.

Some of these ideas deserve careful consideration. As the world moves to a greater recognition of its interdependence, the diversity of voices represented by civil society must be considered in global decision-making.

At the same time, however, any move to give more “power” to civil society — or even to formalize the recognition of its influence — places a heavy responsibility on the leaders and representatives of civil society itself.

For example, NGOs have been at the forefront in calling for more democracy within and among governments. Yet some NGOs themselves fail to live up to such standards, whether in the manner in which their own leaders are selected, in the processes by which their policies are determined, or in the degree to which financial contributors understand how their money is actually spent.

Moreover, many NGOs pursue only a narrow agenda, have limited expertise, or represent a tiny constituency. The strength of many NGOs as activist organizations often stems from the fact that they are founded by just a handful of high-minded but intensely focused individuals. This strength, however, becomes a weakness if such individuals claim to speak for all.

These issues become especially important as NGOs work together in coalitions or alliances — as they have to an increasing extent. If NGOs expect to assume a role at the negotiating table, their actions should be consistent with the high-minded principles they promote for others and they should be ready to demonstrate that they are indeed the properly empow-

ered representatives of diverse groups of people and their interests include the well-being of all humanity.

Bahá’u’lláh wrote a century ago: “Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men.”

As one of the principal groupings of civil society, religious organizations have a special role, one that has so far been largely unrecognized — and untapped. To the degree that they are true to their principles, religious groups as NGOs represent the aspirations and moral values of the vast majority of the world’s inhabitants — who by and large have no doubt about the spiritual nature of human reality and its importance in their daily lives.

To restate: the real engine behind the rise of civil society is the new perspective in which ordinary people everywhere are coming to see themselves as members of one human race. It is a perspective that is more encompassing, more embracing and more empowering than the nationalistic, racial, or other categorizations that have shaped our collective identities in the past. At its core, this new perspective is a spiritual one, and recognition of its reality is the key to fully unlocking the potential inherent in every individual — a potential that civil society has only begun to tap. ☸

ONE COUNTRY goes on the World Wide Web

NEW YORK — ONE COUNTRY, the newsletter of the Bahá’í International Community has established a site on the Internet’s World Wide Web. The site, located at <www.onecountry.org> will feature the full text of ONE COUNTRY as each issue is published, as well as an extensive archive.

“We plan to start by putting up the last two years of the English edition when the site is launched on 15 May 1997,” said Brad Pokorny, the editor of ONE COUNTRY. “As time passes, we intend to add the complete text and photographs for all back issues of the English edition, as well as the texts of the non-English editions.” At the present time, ONE COUNTRY is published in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and German. ☸

At the root of civil society’s expansion is a transformation in the way that great numbers of ordinary people are coming to see themselves — a change that is dramatically abrupt in the history of civilization. Increasingly, people are coming to understand that the human race is one.

The Microcredit Summit: NGOs host a world-class meeting

To an unprecedented degree at the international level, NGOs were setting the agenda, choosing the issues, drafting the documents and bringing together representatives from the highest levels of society — from heads of state to corporate executives to UN agency directors.

WASHINGTON — With some 17 dignitaries from around the world waiting to speak, it was not surprising that Sam Daley-Harris became concerned when Ugandan President Yoweri Kakuguta Museveni started running beyond his allotted time.

So Mr. Daley-Harris, as director of the Microcredit Summit, did the sort of thing that any experienced NGO meeting chairman might be expected to do: he passed a note to President Museveni indicating his ten minutes had run out.

And President Museveni did what many heads of state might be expected to do: he kept on talking.

"You don't invite a man from 10,000 miles away just to come and sit down without speaking," joked President Museveni.

Though minor, the incident reflects the unusual dynamics at the Summit, which was held here from 2-4 February.

Attended by more than 2,200 people from some 112 countries, the conference had many of the earmarks of a United Nations summit meeting. It tackled a major theme on a global scale, had a carefully negotiated plan of action, saw the active involvement of UN agencies, was attended by heads of state and government, and provided a forum for representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Yet the Microcredit Summit was not organized by the United Nations — it was instead organized by an ad hoc coalition of NGOs. And in that fact, said many who were involved in the Summit, lay an historic significance.

To an unprecedented degree at the international level, NGOs were setting the agenda, choosing the issues, drafting the documents and bringing together representatives from the highest levels of society — from heads of state to corporate executives to UN agency directors. The significance was clear to those who see the rising influence of NGOs and civil society as part of a major international trend, one which stretches back through the recent UN-sponsored global summits and promises to extend on into the future.

"One of the most exciting developments, in my opinion, in the process of moving microcredit activities onto the international stage was the evolution of the role of civil society," said Juan Somavia, Chile's Ambassador to the United Nations and the chairman of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development.

"You have been able to bring together from the civil society, the governments, the relevant actors throughout, those that can make the Microcredit Summit a real-

Five heads of state spoke at the opening plenary of the Microcredit Summit.



ity," he added. "This is the sort of activity that civil society has to continue."

Goal of the Summit

The stated goal of the Summit was "to launch a global movement to reach 100 million of the world's poorest families, especially the women of those families, with credit for self-employment by 2005." Summit organizers believe that microcredit, the practice of providing extremely small loans to people with little or no collateral, offers a breakthrough innovation for economic development.

The main activity of the Summit was to bring together representatives from major international actors that can boost such a movement, such as UN development agencies, donor organizations, heads of state, parliamentarian groups, NGOs, and educational institutions, as well as commercial banks and corporations — and to get them all to make commitments to achieving the Summit's goal.

To this end, a committee composed principally of NGO representatives who have long been involved in managing microcredit programs worked for two-and-a-half years to organize the Summit, a process to which they brought their own particular imprint.

For example, instead of negotiating the conference's "Declaration and Plan of Action" at the Summit itself, the document was worked out via a series of mailings to microcredit specialists around the world, as well as at several preparatory meetings. All totaled, more than 5,000 individuals and organizations were involved, said Mr. Daley-Harris, founder of The Results Educational Fund, which played a leading role in sponsoring and organizing the Summit.

And instead of organizing along thematic issues into committees or caucuses, as has been the practice at other recent UN Summits, participants were organized into "councils," with each organization or agency being assigned by the category of its work. UN agencies, for example, were grouped into one council; banks and commercial finance institutions into another. The list of councils included "foundations and philanthropists," "religious institutions," "NGOs" and even "domestic government agencies."

Most significantly, perhaps, organizers succeeded to an impressive degree at



bringing top level representatives from each grouping to the Summit.

Five heads of state or government attended and spoke, including President Museveni of Uganda, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, President Alpha Konare of Mali, President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, and Prime Minister Pascoal Mocumbi of Mozambique. Also present were two royals, Queen Sofia of Spain and Queen Fabiola of Belgium, and three first ladies, Hillary Clinton of the United States, Siti Hasmah of Malaysia, and Ana Paula dos Santos of Angola.

In attendance, as well, were government ministers and the heads of the following UN and international agencies: the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

In virtually every case, the leaders who attended the Summit voiced strong support for its goals and/or announced new programs to support microcredit efforts in their country, region, agency or company.

President Fujimori, for example, announced the creation of a new credit and financial institution, MIBANCO, "especially geared at supporting and promoting growth for low income entrepreneurs" which he said will "dramatically" boost microcredit in Peru.

"Using microcredit as a lever, I am persuaded women in Peru and in poor

The European Bahá'í Business Forum participated in the Microcredit Summit as members of the Council of Advocates. Shown above are some of EBBF's representatives to the Summit, left to right: Eric Zahrai, Annette Zahrai, Diane Starcher, Janith Leowen, and Marcello Palazzi.



In Colombia, Jair Sarasti has benefitted from a microcredit program administered by FUNDAEC, a development and education foundation based in Cali. Mr. Sarasti is shown standing in front of a field of cassava that he planted with the help of a small-scale loan from FUNDAEC. For more information about FUNDAEC, which is organized along Bahá'í principles, see the January-March 1996 and April-June 1996 issues of ONE COUNTRY (7.4 & 8.1).

countries around the world can make a substantial contribution to create wealth and jobs," said President Fujimori.

James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, which has in the past been criticized for focusing too much on large-scale projects, said the Bank would do more with the microcredit movement. "We are part of the effort to bring microcredit to 100 million families," said Mr. Wolfensohn.

The Successes of Microcredit

According to Mr. Daley-Harris, NGOs sponsored the Summit because they felt recent United Nations conferences had not done enough to call attention to the effectiveness of microfinance as a tool for alleviating poverty. "If any of the preceding summits had emerged with one compelling, measurable goal in the area of microcredit, we would not have attempted to organize this Summit," said Mr. Daley-Harris. "Another way of saying it is that we, as NGOs, said to the UN, 'you missed a point' and they agreed."

The most successful programs see repayment rates in the 90 percent range, and some report repayment rates of up to 98 percent. "The first Microcredit Summit announces to the world a discovery of enormous power," said Michael Chu, president of ACCION International, a major microcredit NGO. "The seed of sustainable development and the road out of poverty — so elusive despite enormous efforts —

lies not in massive public handouts but in tapping the wealth found even in the most economically fragile sectors of our societies: the self-initiative of the world's poor men and women."

Although microcredit programs vary by region, one of the key innovations is organization of clients into small "solidarity groups" in which members pledge to satisfy each other's debt, providing a form of "social capital" that helps ensure that loans are repaid. NGOs have played a key role in helping people to organize such groups, and in administering such loans, which many banks have believed were too small to be profitable.

"Ten years ago, there were virtually no loans made by microfinance institutions," said Nancy Barry, president of Women's World Banking and a member of the Summit's executive committee. "Today there are 13 million. All of that is because of NGOs and grassroots organizations."

Despite the praise and support for microcredit and its practitioners, a number of people cautioned against imagining that such programs are the only solution to poverty worldwide. "Microfinance is an efficient instrument, but an instrument that can work only when integrated into other development actions," said Paul Grozen, executive secretary of the United Nations Capital Development Fund.

Others also cautioned against assuming that simply providing more funds to microcredit programs will succeed in reaching the Summit's goals. "It is not the lack of capital but rather the lack of human and institutional capacity which constrains microcredit programs," said James Gustave Speth, administrator of UNDP. In recognition of that, his agency announced a \$41 million program to build up the capacity of NGOs to deliver microcredit — a program that will seek as a central element to work directly with NGOs instead of through governments, which has been the main method of operation for UNDP in the past.

Summit organizers are hopeful that the establishment of the various "Councils," as well as pledges by participants to report back on the results of their plans and efforts to do more with microcredit, will create an on-going movement that can lead to broad-based change in the way economic development is practiced. ☉

“Benchmark” draft of Earth Charter emerges at Rio + 5

RIO DE JANEIRO — A redrafted “Earth Charter,” which emphasizes human oneness and challenges the world to make a “fundamental change of course” toward sustainable development, was the main product of “Rio + 5,” an international gathering of some 500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations leaders here in mid-March.

Backers of the Charter, who believe it can provide a critically important moral guide for building a sustainable world civilization, hope to present the so-called “benchmark” draft to governments for consideration at the upcoming “Earth Summit II” — a special session of the UN General Assembly scheduled for June.

“In the midst of all our diversity, we are one humanity and one Earth family with a shared destiny,” states the draft, which has evolved gradually over the last half-dozen years in a process that has involved consultation with thousands of groups and individuals around the world. “The challenges before us require an inclusive ethical vision.”

The document enumerates 18 principles by which the world should “reinvent industrial-technological civilization” and seek to find “new ways to balance self and community, having and being, diversity and unity, short-term and long-term, using and nurturing.” Those principles include the practice of non-violence, the affirmation of equality between the sexes, respect for indigenous peoples, and the importance of participatory decision-making processes.

Held 13-19 March, the Rio + 5 meeting aimed at assessing and revitalizing the progress towards sustainable development since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, was held here five years ago.

Organized and coordinated by the Earth Council, an international NGO based in Costa Rica, the gathering was by invitation only. It brought together some of the leading activists and specialists in environment and development, including Maurice

F. Strong, Secretary General of UNCED and President of the Earth Council; Juan Somavia, chairman of the World Summit for Social Development; Wally N'Dow, Secretary General of the Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II); Bella Abzug, President of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO); and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, now president of Green Cross International.

“The Earth Charter addresses the fundamental problem underpinning the global crisis, namely, conflict in values,” said Brendan Mackey, a forest ecologist at the Australian National University. “Without agreement as to what we value and think is important, we will continue to spin dangerously out of control.”

“The document reflects a very long and extensive process of participation and consultation with people throughout the world, and reflects the language of the world's major religions, philosophies and world views,” added Dr. Mackey.

The Earth Council plans to continue to circulate the Charter for comment and to introduce it for consideration at the General Assembly Special Session in June. The upcoming Session aims to review and appraise the progress that has been made in implementing Agenda 21, the global plan of action adopted at UNCED. ☉

Looking ahead to the upcoming “Earth Summit II,” scheduled for June in New York, NGOs call for an emphasis on values, issuing a new draft of the long-discussed Earth Charter.

Among the participants in the effort at Rio + 5 to draft the “benchmark” Earth Charter were (left to right): Eileen Gannon and Carol Zinn of Global Education Associates; Richard Clugston of the Center for Respect of Life and the Environment; Bawa Jain of the Temple of Understanding; Steven Rockefeller of the Earth Charter Commission; Peter Adriance of the Bahá'í International Community; Marian Vilela of the Earth Council; Vittorio Falsina of the Rockefeller Foundation; Mary Evelyn Tucker of Bucknell University; and Brian Swimme of the California Institute of Integral Studies.



Sentenced to death for “apostasy,” two Bahá’ís in Iran await appeals

A number of governments and organizations outside Iran have recently expressed grave concern over the status of two Bahá’ís in Iran who have been sentenced to death for allegedly committing apostasy — a “crime” that boils down to choosing one faith over another.

NEW YORK — Reports that the Iranian Supreme Court has upheld death sentences against two Bahá’ís who were tried and convicted of “apostasy” for allegedly converting from Islam to the Bahá’í Faith has stimulated international concern that the Iranian Government may start soon executing Bahá’ís again as part of an ongoing campaign of religious persecution.

A number of governments and organizations outside Iran, including the United States, Germany, the European Parliament, Amnesty International and the Bahá’í International Community, have recently expressed grave concern over the status of the two men. They have all said, in one way or another, that imprisonment and capital punishment for merely choosing one faith over another is pure religious persecution and patently against international human rights laws which Iran has agreed to uphold.

Musa Talibi, who was arrested in 1994, and Dhabihu’llah Mahrami, arrested in 1995, have been in prison while awaiting the outcome of appeals to the death sentences that were handed down last year by local Revolutionary Courts on charges of apostasy.

In January, it was learned that the two men have been informed orally that the Supreme Court had recently confirmed their sentences. It has been the general practice of Iranian authorities to convey verdicts orally to prisoners, without giving them the actual texts of court decisions.

Prison Transfers

Both men have also been moved recently within the prison system, another act that raises concerns about the government’s intentions. Mr. Talibi, who was imprisoned in Isfahan, has recently been transferred to the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran. Mr. Mahrami, held in Yazd, was recently moved from the prison of the Revolutionary Court in that city to the prison of the Security Information Department there.

“The confirmation of the sentences against Mr. Talibi and Mr. Mahrami brings to four the number of Bahá’ís who

are under the sentence of death in Iran,” said Techeste Ahderom, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations. “That the sentences of Mr. Talibi and Mr. Mahrami have now been confirmed by the highest court in the land has sent a chill through the hearts of just-minded people everywhere.”

Since 1979, more than 200 Bahá’ís have been killed in Iran because of their religious beliefs. Hundreds more have been imprisoned and thousands have been deprived of employment, property and/or access to education in a Government-led campaign of persecution. In recent years, however, some aspects of this oppression have eased. Bahá’ís have increasingly been allowed to travel and no Bahá’í has been executed since 1992.

Campaign of Misinformation

In an apparent attempt to deflect international pressure over this latest action, the Iranian Government has begun a campaign of misinformation with respect to the charges leveled against the two men, said Mr. Ahderom.

In statements to the media and to governments, Iranian officials have recently begun to say that Mr. Talibi and Mr. Mahrami have in fact been sentenced to death for allegedly spying for Israel, a charge that Iranian authorities have often used to bolster claims that Bahá’ís are involved in “political” activities.

According to Reuters News Service, Iran’s official news agency, IRNA, quoted the head of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Courts, Gholam Hoseyn Rahbarpour, as saying the two men were convicted of spying for Israel. “No one in Iran will be prosecuted or punished for having a specific ideology or view,” Rahbarpour said, according to the 23 February report.

Yet court records show clearly that it was for “apostasy” that the two men were initially tried, convicted and sentenced to death. According to the record of Mr. Talibi’s trial, undertaken by the Revolutionary Court of Isfahan, he “is accused of: apostasy from the religion of Islam, acting

against the internal interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and attracting individuals to the misguided sect of Bahá'ism." The record of Mr. Mahrami's trial, by the Revolutionary Court of Yazd, states that he was charged with "denouncing the religion of Islam and adopting the beliefs of the wayward Bahá'í sect; national apostasy."

"Iran has repeatedly tried to claim that Bahá'ís are involved in illegal political activity, and that it is for such activities that Bahá'ís have been imprisoned and executed," said Mr. Ahderom. "Yet numerous independent investigators, whether working for the UN itself or groups like Amnesty International, have repeatedly concluded that Iran's Bahá'ís are persecuted solely for their religious beliefs."

"The charge now that Mr. Talibi and Mr. Mahrami are guilty of spying for Israel or other such crimes, coming after officials and court records have previously made clear that their only crime was a decision to convert from Islam back to the Bahá'í Faith, which they label as a 'misguided sect' and a 'heresy,' shows the degree to which Iranian officials are willing to fabricate in order to placate international opinion," said Mr. Ahderom.

The expression of international concern over Iran's treatment of its Bahá'í community, which numbers more than 300,000 and is the largest religious minority in the country, has been relentless since the early 1980s, when the executions of Bahá'ís were averaging more than one a month.

Report on Religious Intolerance

In February 1996, Iran's credibility was acutely challenged when the UN's Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Abdelfattah Amor of Tunisia, explicitly questioned Iran's claim that the Bahá'í Faith is a political organization and is therefore not subject to international human rights laws against religious discrimination.

"It should not be presumed that the entire community has been politicized or is engaged in political or espionage activities," wrote Prof. Amor last year. "For this reason, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the ban on Bahá'í organizations should be lifted to enable it to organize itself freely through its administrative institutions..."

Then, in October 1996, a report by Maurice Danby Copithorne, who is charged by the UN Commission on Human Rights with monitoring the human rights situation in Iran, noted with concern the apostasy charges against Mr. Talibi and Mr. Mahrami, which were then working through the court system. Mr. Copithorne said also that Bahá'ís "continue to be held in prison because of their beliefs"; that private property belonging to Bahá'ís continues to be confiscated in many regions of the country; and that Bahá'í youth continue to be deprived of access to Iranian universities.

General Assembly Concerned

In December, for the eleventh time in 12 years, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution expressing its concern over the "grave breaches of human rights of the Bahá'ís" in Iran, calling on the Government of the Islamic Republic to "abide by its freely undertaken obligations" under international human rights instruments. The General Assembly also urged Iran to "implement fully" the recommendations of Prof. Amor — recommendations which also called on Iran to allow the Bahá'í community to "engage fully in its religious activities."

In February, Mr. Copithorne prepared an updated report for the Commission on Human Rights. He said he has "continued to receive reports of cases of grave breaches of the human rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran and of situations of discrimination against the members of this religious community, including arbitrary detentions, refusal of entry to universities, dismissals from employment and confiscation of properties."

Mr. Copithorne said that Bahá'ís have been "arrested and detained for short periods in various cities of the country" and that the "private ownership of property by Bahá'ís continues to be generally disregarded."

"In Yazd alone there were reportedly more than 150 cases relating to the confiscation of property during 1996," Mr. Copithorne wrote. "The majority of the Bahá'ís in Yazd are now prohibited from conducting any business transactions. In Kashan, a mosque was built on land confiscated from Bahá'ís. Pharmacies owned by Bahá'ís in Sari and Qa'im Shahr were reportedly closed down and sealed."❦

"Iran has repeatedly tried to claim that Bahá'ís are involved in illegal political activity... Yet numerous independent investigators, whether working for the UN itself or groups like Amnesty International, have repeatedly concluded that Iran's Bahá'ís are persecuted solely for their religious beliefs."

**— Techeste Ahderom,
Bahá'í International
Community**

A group photograph of some of the members of the today's Bahá'í Community of Russia, taken at a seminar in Moscow last year. Among the group are Zakir Buttaev (fourth from the right, back row), Larissa Tsutskova (fourth from the right, middle row), and Sergei Poselski, Secretary of the Community (far right, first row), a former physics teacher who himself became a Bahá'í five years ago. At the center of the photograph is celebrated composer Lasse Thoresen of Norway (third from right, middle row), who was visiting.



In Russia, a long-suppressed community is restored

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, with its official state ideology that eschewed God and religion, many Russians have undertaken searches for spiritual meaning. The Bahá'í Community of Russia, long-suppressed, has re-emerged as men and women from all walks of life have embraced the Faith and its ethical principles.

(Continued from page one)

made such a step easier and more acceptable. "But I never really became part of the Christian community," she said, explaining that she felt uncomfortable with the rituals and dogma of the Church. "It was part of just trying to think of spiritual things in a more spiritual way."

Then she began to study foreign languages, enrolling in a humanities program at the University of Nizhny Novgorod in 1987. "Knowledge of languages other than Russian somehow makes life a little fuller," she said. "But if I look at it more closely, it probably says more about the state of my spirit at that time, about my sense of futility and emptiness." In the early 1990s, she also tried yoga. But that, too, failed to satisfy her spiritual longing.

Then, at the beginning of 1991, Ms. Tsutskova read a newspaper story about the Bahá'í Faith. Its lack of clergy or rituals very much resonated with Larissa's thinking about religion. She wrote for information and, intrigued, attended a Bahá'í conference in Estonia that summer. There, she and her daughter, Olesya, formally accepted the Faith.

The decision brought an end to her search. "It brought me such joy, the kind of

happiness I can only compare to those moments when one discovers more and more beautiful qualities in a loved one," said Ms. Tsutskova, recalling when she first read from *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, one of several books of Bahá'í sacred writings that she received that year.

New Atmosphere of Freedom

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, with its official state ideology that eschewed God and religion, many Russians have undertaken similar searches for spiritual meaning. Public opinion surveys indicate a general rise in the percentage of people who believe in God. Membership in the Russian Orthodox Church, previously highly regulated, has surged. The number of parishes has more than doubled since 1988, according to statistics from the Moscow Patriarchate. And more than 13,000 religious organizations have been legally registered with the Ministry of Justice as of January 1996, according to the Russian President's Center for Analysis.

More significantly, perhaps, the new atmosphere of religious freedom has allowed Russians to investigate a wide variety of movements — some of which are entirely new to the country, and some of which have been around since before the

Russian Revolution. After 1991, for example, scores of evangelists and missionaries brought a plethora of unfamiliar names and ideas, covering the full range of social, religious, esoteric, hedonistic, and ecological concerns. Many of these movements, including some of those that predated the Revolution, have flourished and are today winning a firm place in the pluralistic society that Russia is striving to build.

Among thriving religious organizations in the new Russia, the Bahá'í Faith stands out. In the first place, its position is well-grounded in modern Russian history: a robust community of Bahá'ís existed in Russian Turkistan at the turn of the century. [See page 13] In addition, the revived Bahá'í community has today won solid acceptance among not only the people but also Government officials and academics. They say that its high moral principles have much to offer to a society that has seen so many upheavals in recent years.

Spirit of the Times

"The principles of the Bahá'í Faith correspond to the spirit of the times," said N. F. Suvorov, head of the Department of Religious Affairs of the Perm Regional Government. "There is such a need for peaceful coexistence and tolerance among the various religious denominations and it is so important that people make joint efforts to solve social problems. Bahá'ís should be more active in the sphere of spiritual education — they should become much more noticeable in the life of the region."

Such comments come amid a backlash that has developed against some of the new movements that have sprung up in Russia, principally as foreign-based missionaries have sought aggressively to win converts. In 1993, for example, the Government considered legislation that would have placed restrictions on foreign missionary activity. More recently, a 1996 federal program for combating organized crime has identified several newly arrived foreign-based "religions" as socially dangerous.

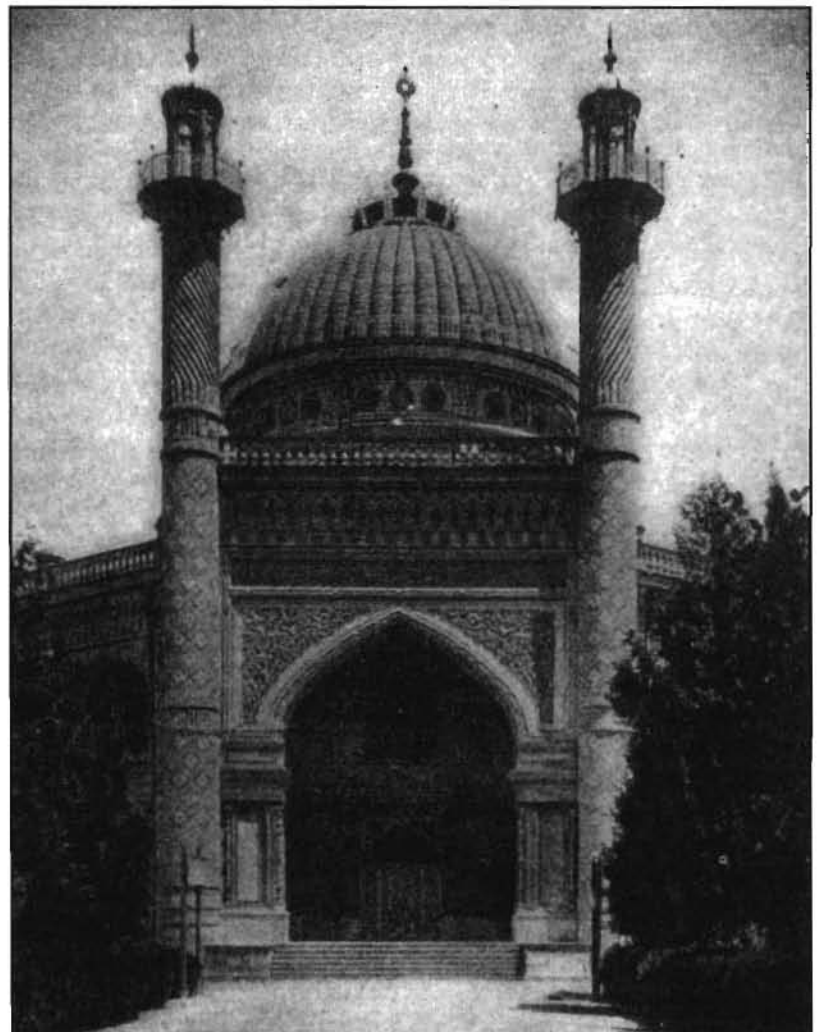
Well-informed officials, however, are quick to distinguish Bahá'ís from this category. "Bahá'ís are law abiding and peaceful, known for their humanitarian views and their honesty," said Aleksandr I. Kudryavtsev, head of the Religious Registry in Russia's Department of Justice. "That is the official view of the Ministry of Jus-

tice, and not only my view but that of all my colleagues as well. The Bahá'ís have long roots in this country and now they are restoring their community."

When laws granting religious freedom were passed in 1990, there were no functioning Spiritual Assemblies, the local governing unit that forms the heart of Bahá'í community life. By late 1996, there were 46 Assemblies in Russia and over 160 more in the other former states of the Soviet Union. All totaled, there are an estimated 9,000 Bahá'ís in Russia and the former Soviet Republics today.

"The universal character of the Faith, the fact that it accepts different religious revelations as true — this is new to Russians and people welcome this idea," said Sergei Poselski, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Russian Federation, the national governing council of the Bahá'í community of Russia. "People are tired of instability, tired of the

The world's first Bahá'í House of Worship was erected in Russian Turkistan in the first decade of the Twentieth Century. Its establishment was a sign of the thriving Bahá'í community that existed in Russia before the 1918 Revolution. It was confiscated by the Communist Government, and was later damaged by an earthquake and subsequently destroyed.





Born and raised in Siberia, 23-year-old Leonid Osokin was raised as an atheist and one of the last things on his mind was religion, which he and his peers understood as something very strait-laced and conservative. He is shown here presenting a talk on ethics and moral education at a December 1996 Association for Bahá'í Studies conference in Kazan.

“Finding a new sense of morality and ethics is today the main requirement for society. Because previously we had Communist morality and all that was lost and there is no foundation now. And you can't live without a foundation.”

— Larissa Tsutskova

ethnic conflicts and conflicts among religious groups. So this teaching is very appealing to Russians. The other appeal is its contemporary character. The Faith is well suited to modern life. It has no rituals, no clergy and it is very scientific.”

Indeed, the Faith's resurgence has come as men and women like Ms. Tsutskova have embraced the Faith—and felt the transformations that it has led to in their lives. “Finding a new sense of morality and ethics is today the main requirement for society,” Ms. Tsutskova said. “Because previously we had Communist morality and all that was lost and there is no foundation now. And you can't live without a foundation.”

Shortly after Larissa Tsutskova and her daughter became Bahá'ís, her husband, Vitaly, enrolled. Under the Soviet Union, he worked as a civil engineer at Perm's central heating plant. Today, however, he is president of his own successful insurance company, with an office of a dozen people and more than 30 agents in the field. One reason for his success is his emphasis on running an ethical business. Business decisions are made on the basis of consultation and mutual respect; his company is also quick to meet its obligations when insurance claims are filed.

Mr. Tsutskov is a founding member of the Russian Bahá'í Business Partnership, a nonprofit organization that seeks to help businesspeople explore the spiritual side of economics and to put ethical principles into daily practice. It is something the cut-throat business environment in today's

Russia sorely needs, said Mr. Tsutskov.

“I started getting involved in business the same year that I became a Bahá'í, after I left my government job,” he said. “So I grew in both ways at the same time, as a Bahá'í and as a businessman. My colleagues' trust grows when, right at the beginning, I give them some literature about the Partnership and they read about business ethics. Somehow, the level of tension in our business relationship disappears. Of course, I feel a great responsibility never to deceive anyone, and I don't think I have so far.”

Leonid Osokin and the Orange Show

Leonid Osokin has also found that his embrace of the Bahá'í Faith has led him to a new view of ethics and morality. Born and raised in Siberia, the 23-year-old Mr. Osokin was raised as an atheist and one of the last things on his mind was religion, which he and his peers understood as something very strait-laced and conservative.

Then, in 1990, a musical group from California came to his city, Ulan-Ude. Mr. Osokin learned that they were all Bahá'ís and became attracted to the Faith. He soon discovered that there was already a well-established Bahá'í community in Ulan-Ude and he joined.

“The Bahá'í community seemed like one great big family,” he said. “I thought deeply about the Faith, the more I got into it. I started to become more spiritually mature and my life became fuller. The Faith helped me to develop a vision not only of myself but of the whole world. I found my place in life.”

In 1995, Osokin began hosting a live TV program for young people in Ulan-Ude, called the “Orange Show.” The program was modeled on a show called “ZIPOPO,” which translates from Russian as “Institute for Positive Behavior.” ZIPOPO was started in Kazan by another Bahá'í, television journalist Shamil Fattakhov.

The Orange Show featured young actors who doing a skit to dramatize a moral problem: Should I try drugs? Should I lie to my father? Cheat on my girlfriend? The action stopped dead just before the critical moment of choice and the audience then had the opportunity to share their ideas and suggestions as to what the decision should be. After the discussion, the actors completed the scenario, demonstrating a

With deep roots, the Bahá'í community of Russia survived a long era of Communist persecution

The connection between Russia and the Bahá'í Faith stretches back more than a century. In the mid-1800s, Russian diplomats made important interventions on behalf of the Faith when it faced a first round of persecutions in Iran. Turn-of-the-century Russian intellectuals studied and wrote about the Faith extensively, attracted by its progressive principles. And early followers established a thriving community in Russian Turkistan in the pre-Revolutionary era, building there the world's first Bahá'í House of Worship.

The Faith was founded in Iran by Bahá'u'lláh, who claimed to be a Messenger of God on a par with Muhammad, Jesus and the world's other great Prophets, teaching that all of the world's religions are one. Branded a heretic, He was imprisoned in Teheran in 1852. Prince Dolgoruki, then the Russian Ambassador to Iran, appealed to the Shah to release Him, offering refuge in Russia. Although Bahá'u'lláh chose not to accept Prince Dolgoruki's offer, He was ultimately released from prison and sent into exile.

Later in the 1800s, prominent Russian orientalists and scholars, including M. Gamazov, V.P. Rosen, Mirsa Kasem-Beg, Alesander Tumanski, Bernard Dorn, and V. Zhukovski, began to research the Bahá'í movement, describing its principles, chronicling its early history, translating its literature, and, in general, playing an important role in acquainting the rest of Europe with the new religion.

In 1904, journalist S. Umanets was among the first to recognize the Faith as an independent religion. Both Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy investigated the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and spoke often about it. In the later years of his life, Tolstoy mentioned the Faith many times in his correspondence, sharing books and information with his colleagues and friends, calling it at one point "the highest and purest form of religion".

Artists were likewise touched by dramatic episodes from the Faith's early history. Plays about its founding were written by St. Petersburg poet Isabella Grinevskaya and performed not only in St. Petersburg theaters, but in Paris, Lon-

don and Berlin until the early 1920's.

In Russian Turkistan, the Bahá'í community reached a high stage of development in the early years of this century. Just prior to the Russian Revolution in 1918, more than 4,000 believers lived in Ishqabad, where they had erected a Bahá'í House of Worship, built an elementary school, two kindergartens, and a medical clinic, and had established a highly developed community life, featuring multiple libraries, social clubs and various societies devoted to drama, gymnastics and other pursuits.

As with other religious communities under Communism, the Bahá'ís of Russia were forced to severely curtail public activities after the Revolution. Those who remained active experienced systematic persecution and imprisonment. The House of Worship was confiscated by the government in 1928 and, its structure weakened by an earthquake in 1948, it was razed in 1963. In the 1930s, nearly all adult male believers were exiled to prison camps, where most perished. Yet some followers were able to teach their children about the Faith and its principles and, during periods of official leniency, community life sporadically flourished. For the most part, however, Bahá'í activity in Russia was virtually extinguished during Communist rule. ☸



A photograph of the Bahá'ís of Ishqabad, in Russian Turkistan, carrying material for the construction of the world's first Bahá'í House of Worship, sometime early in this century.



graphic artist had always believed in God, even under Communism. "I was born in a deeply religious family," said Mr. Buttaev, who is originally from the city of Makhachkala on the Caspian Sea. "My father was educated in a Muslim spiritual seminary — which, by the way, didn't prevent him from becoming a member of the Communist Party."

"Like many others of us, he had to live a double life," he added, using the term common for those who believed in God but hid their beliefs from the authorities.

"Since early childhood, I never doubted that God exists," he said. "But dogma was foreign to our family. I was never forced to pray. Even as a child, the authoritarian ways of the clergy disturbed me and I was bothered by the fact that almost all religions were spread by force."

Mr. Buttaev, like Ms. Tsutskova, first read about the Faith in a newspaper. "I was taken with the fact that the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the unity of all religions." He formally enrolled in the Bahá'í community in 1994, after attending regular meetings in Moscow. There, he said, he was struck by the diversity of the people, who came from at least a dozen different countries and ethnic backgrounds and seemed so entirely without prejudice — qualities that he believes Russia very much needs.

According to Evgeny G. Balagushkin, a senior research associate with the Center for Research on the Philosophy of Culture and Religion at the Russian Academy of Sciences, new religions have become a sort of scapegoat for the social and economic difficulties facing post-Soviet Russia. "Religion has thus become highly politicized," he said. "People don't see religion as a source of cultural enrichment, of enlightenment, bringing people together. They rather see it as a political tool."

"With regard to the Bahá'ís, however, I think they take a very constructive position, in that they are obedient to the law, supportive of the development of society, and support the growth of civil rights, human creativity and prosperity," Dr. Balagushkin continued. "I see in the Bahá'í approach the most attractive position, fostering a peaceful attitude towards one's fellow Russians and towards those in neighboring countries. There's no emphasis on ritual separateness, or sectarianism."

Zakir Buttaev, a 47-year-old Moscow graphic artist, had always believed in God, even under Communism. Like Ms. Tsutskova, he first read about the Faith in a newspaper. "I was taken with the fact that the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the unity of all religions."

"I see in the Bahá'í approach the most attractive position, fostering a peaceful attitude towards one's fellow Russians and towards those in neighboring countries. There's no emphasis on ritual separateness, or sectarianism."

— Evgeny G. Balagushkin, Russian Academy of Sciences

positive moral decision.

During its two year run, the bi-weekly Orange show was quite popular, reaching upwards of a million people in the region, filling a crucial need for young people facing the kind of moral confusion that often prevails in today's Russia.

Last fall, Mr. Osokin ended the show and enrolled in a doctoral program at St. Petersburg University. Once again, his subject of choice is morality and ethics. "Almost all the philosophers and great thinkers of the past recognized the importance of values," said Mr. Osokin. "Today we are lacking a system of ethics and morality universal in its nature, one which embraces all the particular truths of ethics. I believe this goal is attainable now with the coming of the Bahá'í Faith, which provides a pattern within which all the ethical systems can receive a new life and can serve humanity in the best way."

Like Mr. Poselski, Mr. Osokin is a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Russian Federation, a position to which he was elected in 1996. This work, which is voluntary and unpaid, takes a huge amount of Mr. Osokin's time. But it offers him a chance to witness ethical principles in action. "The Bahá'í administration is not just about abstract ideas and philosophy, but a practical way of functioning," he said. "It evolves like a living organism."

Zakir Buttaev, graphic artist

Zakir Buttaev, a 47-year-old Moscow

"This kind of religious movement could very well function as the pivot around which harmony can be created among the religions; the Bahá'ís have a peacemaking role, opening dialogue between those who haven't found a common language yet," Balagushkin said.

Mr. Buttaev feels strongly about the need for more peace and harmony in the world. He speaks heatedly and sorrowfully about terrible events in the former Yugoslavia, about the war in Chechnya, and about the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. He is also troubled by religious fighting, asking why Christians and Muslims are unable to agree among themselves, even though they both recognize the same God.

But he finds solace in the Bahá'í teachings about the importance of unity in thought and action. "One person alone cannot decide these things," he said. "It has to be done together."

That process of building towards social unity, he believes, is essentially a spiritual one. "We can't only think about bread—that's empty, futile. Everything depends

on how spiritually developed we are as individuals. In my opinion, prayer is like a vertical connection to God. When you pray, you get answers to what most concerns you in your own behavior."

Mr. Buttaev finds he has become much more optimistic since becoming a Bahá'í. "My whole outlook on life has changed," he said. "I feel we are able to overcome problems. You don't just run around in circles, like before, thinking that there's no way out of the situation. The Faith gives you a wise approach to life, a way of dealing with difficulties."

"I find that when I am focused daily on God, through prayer and reading, that I am able to become more objective about the everyday crises of life—in the family, at work, in the community," he said. "It has helped me to really work on myself, to keep myself 'accountable.' I know I'm a long way from reaching that ideal, but it's the striving that counts, to keep facing myself honestly." ☉

— Reported by Nancy Ackerman and Lev Lanier

Review: *The Sex Side of Life*

(Continued from back page)

digm shift occurred as pleasure replaced duty and personality replaced character as the defining factors of the new belief system. The fall of traditional religion led to the rise of do-it-yourself philosophies whose only criteria were to please the self. This resulted in a general questioning and weakening of the institution of marriage, from which alternative life-styles took root. In the midst of this, Mary's husband became convinced through the rhetoric of another woman that 'free love' was the path to a higher morality."

Likewise, Ms. Chen illuminates the Victorian attitudes of close-mindedness that led to the repression of information about birth control and sexuality—and the blossoming of new ideas that ultimately prevailed. The growing movement for women's rights led many to recognize that laws which classified information about birth control as obscene were devastating to women's health—as Mary Ware Dennett discovered in her own life when she almost died after giving birth to her second child. Mrs. Dennett, writes Ms.

Chen, believed "birth control to be a humanist movement, a parenthood question, to include both men and women. Since it took two to create a child, she reasoned, the responsibility should be consciously shared by both.... Absolutely against any kind of separatist thinking whatsoever, Dennett believed in partnership."

And in describing Mrs. Dennett's 1929 trial for distributing obscene material—the simple and straightforward *Sex Side of Life* pamphlet, which actually upholds a moral and spiritual view of sex—Ms. Chen likewise explores thoroughly the degree to which issues affecting an entire generation and its progeny were brought to light.

Although Mary Ware Dennett was not a Bahá'í, she did attend lectures on the Bahá'í Faith at Green Acre, a prestigious institute in Eliot, Maine, where members of Boston's turn-of-the-century intellectual elite explored new ideas about religion and spirituality. (Green Acre is today a Bahá'í school.) Yet Mrs. Dennett may well have been influenced by the Faith's progressive ideals, hints Ms. Chen, who is herself a Bahá'í. Ms. Chen writes that "the social principles of the Bahá'í Faith would bear an uncanny resemblance to Mary's own belief structure for the rest of her life..." ☉

Mrs. Dennett believed "birth control to be a humanist movement, a parenthood question, to include both men and women. Since it took two to create a child, she reasoned, the responsibility should be consciously shared by both.... Absolutely against any kind of separatist thinking whatsoever, Dennett believed in partnership."

An unsung hero of the early women's movement

The Sex Side of Life: Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education

By Constance M. Chen

The New Press

New York

Good biographies tell the story not only of a subject's life, but also of their times, covering the major social and moral issues of a particular era. The best illuminate paradigm-shifting currents of thought while presenting a compelling personal story.

In *The Sex Side of Life: Mary Ware Dennett's Pioneering Battle for Birth Control and Sex Education*, Constance M. Chen has created such a work. Tightly focused on the life of Mary Ware Dennett, a turn-of-the-century

Review

American social activist, her biography shines a light on the vast moral changes at the root of the women's movement, our era's openness about sexuality, and, even, the idea that people should launch an individual search for spiritual fulfillment.

Although not well known today, Mrs. Dennett was a major figure in the women's movement in the decades before, during and after World War I. She played key roles in the fight for women's suffrage, in the pre-World War I peace movement, and in the postwar battle to lift the ban on the distribution of information about contraception and birth control. Even in her times, Mrs. Dennett was not well acknowledged: humble by nature, she often worked behind the scenes in the movements she championed, letting others take the glory.

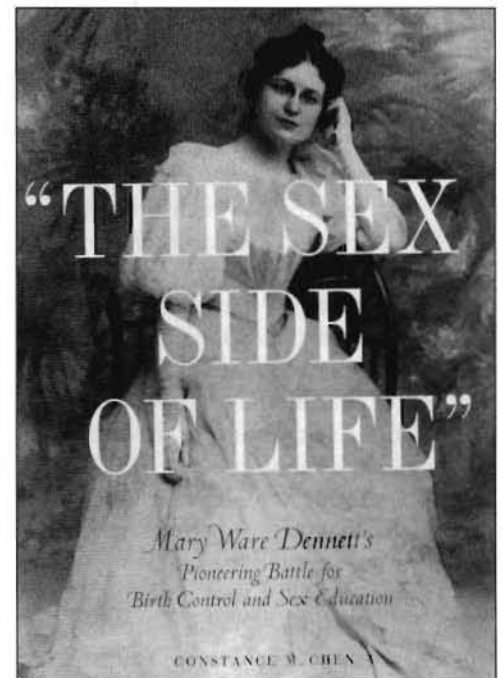
Yet, through meticulous research, Ms. Chen shows that Mrs. Dennett's contributions to the women's movement were huge — and that her points of view about its shape and direction are those that have born the most fruit in the long run. For example, Mrs. Dennett early on promoted the idea that men had as much of a stake in women's advancement as women themselves, suggesting that true equality between women and men would make marriage and family life better for both.

Mary Ware Dennett took on a wide range of roles and causes during her life. Born in 1872 in Worcester, Massachusetts, she was a daughter, a student, an artisan, a wife, a mother, a suffragist, a peace activist and, finally, a pioneering advocate of birth control and sex education.

By the time she died in 1947, she had waged three major battles, according to

Ms. Chen. The first battle, she writes, was to hold together her family in the face of a free-spirited husband who abandoned her and their two children for another woman. The second was as an activist to obtain the vote for women and to make birth control legally available to Americans. And the third battle was over her ground-breaking sex education pamphlet, *The Sex Side of Life: An Explanation for Young People*. For distributing it through the mail, she was charged with violating national obscenity laws — and her widely publicized trial was partly responsible for a major shift in the practice of sex education in the United States.

What makes Ms. Chen's account of these three battles especially interesting is her talent for showing how each episode stems in part from a process of moral change that was vastly affecting society. Throughout the book, Ms. Chen explores how sudden shifts in the post-Victorian moral climate opened the door to a whole range of new ideas about love, marriage, sexuality — and even spirituality.



"Around the turn of the century, religion was being challenged as the arbiter of moral values and a new individualism was leading to a decline in social responsibility and the rise of a 'rights'-oriented culture," Ms. Chen writes, referring to Mrs. Dennett's battle for her husband's love. "Reacting against the repression of the old world, a major para-

(Continued on page 15)