



# ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" – Bahá'u'lláh

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Newsletter of the Bahá'í  
International Community  
January-March 1999  
Volume 10, Issue 4



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## In Mongolia, community-grown vegetables fill a big nutritional gap

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*The children of Erdenbulgan explore a pumpkin patch. Such vegetables were unknown here until recently.*

ERDENBULGAN, Mongolia – Until about three years ago, 16-year-old Amartuvshin had never even seen such plants as sweet corn, pumpkins or squash – let alone considered that fresh vegetables might easily be turned into something worth relishing.

But today Amraa, as he is known, is striving to learn as much as he can about the process of preparing, growing and cooking vegetables. He has even invented his own recipe for a salad.

"I now like vegetables very much," said Amartuvshin, who, like many Mongolians, has only one name. "Vegetables are very important for good health, because they contain many vitamins and other nutrients. There are many different kinds of vegetables, each with different flavors, colors and shapes, and we can make many kinds of tasty dishes with them."

Last summer, Amartuvshin and his younger brother, Batuvshin, shared the responsibility – along with other members of this remote village in northern Mongolia – of making sure that an emergent community vegetable garden was staffed 24 hours a day. That meant frequently staying all night adjacent to the site in the small wooden house used to house tools.

Their commitment reflects the dedication and energy with which members of the small Bahá'í community here have thrown themselves into a local project to grow vegetables, an endeavor that stands at the forefront of a burgeoning movement in Mongolia to stimulate the production of vegetables, which are generally absent from the traditional diet, much to the dismay of health specialists who see incipient signs of vitamin

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is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

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International Community

ISSN 1018-9300

Printed on recycled paper ♻️

# One world, one currency

Over the last few years, the monetary crises in Mexico, Brazil, Russia and South-east Asia – to name but a few of the countries and regions whose economies have been especially hard hit – have demonstrated the fragility of the international financial system.

While some countries and regions have been relatively insulated so far from the very real economic hardship and dislocation caused by these crises, specialists in international finance have warned repeatedly of a possible domino effect, through which a deepening economic collapse in one region could spread elsewhere, if not worldwide.

Such warnings stem from the fact, now well established, that the world's economy is today entirely integrated. While this integration offers a degree of redundancy and resiliency, it also calls for a much greater attention to the whole system – and mandates greater cooperation to ensure the economy's proper functioning.

Government leaders, economists, business leaders and others have accordingly raised the call for some sort of reform of the global financial system. As policy makers consider the options, the long-neglected idea of establishing a world currency system deserves a thorough investigation.

In an age when international interdependence and integration are increasing on all fronts, a "uniform and universal system of currency" is one of a number of complementary measures that will help to "simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind," as Shoghi Effendi, who led the worldwide Bahá'í community from 1921 to 1957, wrote in 1936.

A single currency would in some respects be like a world language, improving communications around the globe. It would eliminate the present problems of speculation, instability and uncertainty and would provide a strong foundation for the growing world economy. It would reduce a significant cost and risk of doing business internationally.

A global currency would also be an important step in promoting economic justice in the world, removing the advantage of a few favored countries whose currency is seen as stronger or more secure and prevent-

ing the poor from being hurt by the impacts of currency fluctuations. In the long run, such a step would do much to counteract the local harm that is sometimes induced by economic globalization by putting everyone, everywhere, on a more "level" economic playing field.

The idea of a world currency is not new. Economist John Maynard Keynes proposed an "international currency union" in the 1940s. His idea was watered down at the Bretton Woods Conference by diplomats afraid of something quite so dramatic, and in its place emerged the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. More recently *The Economist*, among the most orthodox of financial journals, called for a re-examination of the idea, suggesting in a 26 September 1998 article that "One world, one money" might be worth "a moment's thought." Certainly, a world currency would go far to solving the immediate problem of the regional currency crises.

Under the present system, over a trillion dollars changes hands each day as investors seek the best returns for the least risk. These currency movements are managed by professionals who must anticipate or protect themselves against adverse changes in exchange rates, which often leads to speculation for or against particular currencies. Governments also frequently intervene to protect their currency's position or to seek trade advantages. The system is fundamentally unjust, inasmuch as countries whose money is held as a reserve currency receive undue economic benefits compared to less favored countries.

The instability in exchange rates between currencies creates difficulties for international trade and investment, for business planning, and for national economies, with impacts on prices and inflation. With any movement, there are not only winners and losers, but also general economic penalties. If a country opts for a fixed exchange rate, its monetary policy must defend that rate; if it chooses a managed float, it is open to speculative attacks. Central banks can intervene to defend their currency, but major currency crises today can quickly over-



whelm national reserves and require emergency international assistance – assistance that in recent years has amounted to tens of billions of dollars.

The psychological dimension is important in currency crises, since much depends on the confidence investors have in a particular currency. Yet confidence is easily shaken and hard to restore. A world currency would not only eliminate the opportunity for speculation but also provide universal confidence.

In the past, various objections to a world currency have been raised, ranging from the rational to the emotional. A single currency would impose a common economic rigor on all countries and force them to face unpleasant realities. No longer could governments print money at will or ignore the fact that they cannot live forever beyond their means. Yet, in many important ways, these would obviously be positive developments.

Some argue that the best protection against international fluctuations is many more local currencies that people can manage for themselves, insulating their economies from the outside. Yet while this may apply in a world of fluctuating monies, a world currency would in fact eliminate a major source of outside impacts.

Another fear is that the abandonment of national currencies and foreign exchange markets would increase unemployment in some regions, both because some occupations would become redundant and because of the likelihood that a more open and level economic “playing field” would divert some jobs to other regions. But such transitions are occurring already – and without any underlying sense of justice that a world currency with its leveling power entails.

There are also those who fear such steps towards world unity as a further loss of control to powerful interests and distant bureaucracies. In the same vein, a national currency is a symbol of national sovereignty, and such symbols are rarely given up easily.

Yet, as shown by the launching in Europe of the Euro, a single currency for 11 countries that will by the year 2002 entirely replace the French franc, the German mark, the Italian lire and other long-established currencies, such symbols can be dispensed with when the promised benefits are strong.

A single currency must be accompanied by many other measures for integration and harmonization. It would require a strong and effective world monetary authority or central

bank, working in the common interest and freed from political manipulation, to manage the world currency, regulate the money supply, and ensure adequate liquidity without inflation. The creation of such an institution would go hand in hand with the development of other mechanisms for global decision making aimed at building trust and consensus among the world's governments.

The adoption of a world currency by itself will not solve all the world's problems. It is one element needed to support a more just and effective world economic system, which in turn is but one facet of the world federal system necessary to accompany globalization and to achieve world unity and peace. Ultimately, technical solutions to economic problems will only work effectively if a new spirit permeates economic life and a new economic system is evolved based on the application of spiritual principles. Money itself needs to be put back in its place as a medium of exchange rather than the measure of economic performance or development. Economic values must be balanced by social and spiritual values.

A single world currency may seem like a distant goal, but the logic behind it as a solution to some of the critical problems threatening our present economic well being cannot be denied. Indeed, given the trends of global interdependence and integration, its desirability – and its ultimate inevitability – suggest that the idea should receive a thorough investigation by world leaders sooner rather than later. \*

***A single currency would in some respects be like a world language, improving communications around the globe. It would eliminate the present problems of speculation, instability and uncertainty and would provide a strong foundation for the growing world economy.***

## CELEBRATION



*In Thailand, HRH Princess Soamsawali, center, was the guest of honor at the official opening of the new National Baha'i Center in Bangkok on 26 November 1998. Above, the Princess poses with Baha'i children who performed at the opening.*



## Dialogue between World Bank and world faiths sparks new approaches to poverty

**J**OHANNESBURG, South Africa – It would be an oversimplification to say that the first working meeting between world religionists and World Bank specialists boiled down to a debate over the relative importance of human values versus economic facts and figures in understanding the causes and cures for poverty.

Rather, it became clear at a meeting held here January 12-14, that the new dialogue begun in 1998 between the world's major faith groups and the World Bank is stimulating an evolving convergence between economists at the Bank and religious representatives – a direction that promises to have a major impact on thinking about economic development worldwide.

Entitled "Values, Norms and Poverty: A Consultation on the World Development Report 2000/1," the meeting was the second in a series of workshops held to solicit input from stakeholders in the processes of global economic development for the 2000/2001 edition of the Bank's annual development survey, a publication that has great influence around the world on development theory and practice.

Also present were academics who study development issues and representatives of African non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Accordingly, the topics and discussions of the consultation were multifaceted.

Yet, according to participants, the presence of representatives from the world's major religions was a fresh element – and the discussions were richer and more comprehensive because of it. In a word, the main contribution of the religions was a further elaboration of the importance and practicality of "values" in development.

"If there was one achievement in Johannesburg, it was that we got values fairly and squarely on the agenda," said Wendy Tyndale, coordinator of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), a new entity that acts as a secretariat for the world's religions in the dialogue with the World Bank. "And at the end, I feel the authors of the World

Development Report were saying that they see values as a very important topic."

For the religious groups, the meeting in Johannesburg, along with a preparatory meeting held last December in Rome, offered an opportunity for in-depth dialogue among themselves on the issues of poverty and development – something that faith representatives say has rarely occurred before, and certainly not at such a deep level. The result, say participants, is a greater level of interreligious understanding and unity, especially on these issues.

The religions are, for example, drafting a commentary on the preliminary outline of the World Development Report 2000/1, and although still a work in progress, it can be seen as an important product of the Dialogue. Indeed, the mere existence of such a document – which seeks to integrate the views of major faiths on the issues of poverty and development – is considered by some as a large step forward in interfaith understanding and agreement.

"At almost every meeting I have gone to, people from the other religions have commented on our work and our values and said, 'Look, there seems to be a lot in common,'" said Azim Lakhani, a representative of the Aga Khan Development Network, which represents the Ismaili branch of Islam at the WFDD. "So the first realization that comes up is that there is a lot we [the faiths] have in common. The second thing is that there is a genuine interest in looking at the different experiences we have had and learning from them. I think a lot will come out of this, but it will take time."

### Initiated by James Wolfensohn

The new dialogue between the Bank and the faiths was formally begun at a historic meeting in February 1998, when James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, invited representatives of nine of the world's major religions to Lambeth Palace in London to discuss how the Bank and the religions might forge a new relationship to help

*For religious groups, the new dialogue with the World Bank has spurred a greater level of interreligious understanding and unity on the issues of poverty and development.*



tackle the problems of global poverty.

At the meeting were leaders from the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Taoism, who, together, represented the religious traditions followed by an estimated 3 billion people. Mr. Wolfensohn himself represented the World Bank.

From the meeting came a joint statement, signed by Mr. Wolfensohn and by the event's co-sponsor, the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, on behalf of the religions, which acknowledged a shared "deep moral concern for the future of human well-being and dignity," confirmed a "conviction that the definition and practice of desirable development must have regard to spiritual, ethical, environmental, cultural and social considerations," and committed the parties "to continue and develop this dialogue, to deepen our relationship with one another and to look forward to possible new ways of working together in the future at many different levels."

Among the specific ideas for such a continuing dialogue was an invitation by the Bank to the religious communities to "influence the thinking of the World Bank by participating in the studies and discussions embodied in the Bank's annual World Development Reports," especially in relation to the year 2000/2001 report, which will focus on poverty.

As such, the meeting in Johannesburg – which was co-hosted by the Bank and the Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Reverend Njongonkulu Winston Hugh Ndungane – represents the first real working meeting between bankers and religionists as they enter into an ongoing dialogue.

And according to participants, the meeting in South Africa – at least as far as the relationship between the Bank and the religions is concerned – was something of a new experience for all.

"One of the main challenges was bridging the three very different languages expressed at the meeting, between the economists, the bankers and development professionals, and the people representing the faiths," said Jeffrey Solomon, president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, who was present as a representative of Judaism. "But during the conference there were moments when you could almost see light bulbs going off over people's heads, a sort of 'Aha, now I get it,' insight."

Much of the give and take between the

economists and the religious representatives came over the issue of how properly to measure poverty. "Getting measurements right is important when you are talking to World Bank people," said Ronald Herring, a professor of government at Cornell University in the USA, who attended the meeting as an academic specialist. Dr. Herring explained that the Bank's personnel know that they will have to justify their positions to governments and government finance ministries. "And if you don't have your numbers right, nobody respects you. You can't just say people are happier or poorer."

At the same time, representatives of the faiths were concerned with moving the discussion on poverty and its cure in a direction that more explicitly recognizes the importance of spiritual and moral values in the development equation.

"One of the starting points for all of the faiths is the idea that you can't separate economics from the rest of life, and that therefore development must take into account cultural, social, spiritual and political aspects of human existence," said Ms. Tyndale of the WFDD. "Development is about life and people and not just about abstract economic concepts. So, for example, if the economists are pushing a structural adjustment program, they've got to understand how people will be affected by it."

Other points emphasized by the faiths, according to Ms. Tyndale and others, included: that education and the personal transformations that come from it are vital in combating poverty; that qualities of moral leadership (with an emphasis on fighting

**"Development is about life and people and not just about abstract economic concepts."**

**– Wendy Tyndale, coordinator, World Faiths Development Dialogue**

*Representatives of the World Faiths Development Dialogue at a World Bank seminar on "Values, Norms and Poverty: A Consultation on the World Development Report 2000/2001" are shown below. In the top row, from left to right, are Javier Iguinez, Swami Amarananda, Jeffrey Solomon, David Loy, and P.D. Premasiri. In the bottom row, from left to right, are Wendy Tyndale, Mauricio Laborde, Matthew Weinberg, and Azim Lakhani. (Photo courtesy David Loy.)*







In Uganda, World Bank funds have been used for direct approaches to poverty, such as to support an intensive feeding at a health center in Kabong. [Photo courtesy the World Bank. Photographer: Yosef Hadar © 1985]

***"From the point of view of poverty reduction, the values emerging from a faith perspective clearly strengthen the moral imperative to eradicate basic deprivation, and they place a special injunction on those of us who are not deprived to pursue this goal."***

**– Ravi Kanbur,  
director, World  
Development  
Report 2000/2001**

corruption) are likewise essential; and that poverty cannot be realistically eliminated without the participation of the poor themselves in determining the best solutions to their problems.

Many of these points also struck a chord with NGO representatives at the meeting. "A lot of people commented on the fact that religion is such an intricate part of our lives, that it guides our moral values, it guides our thinking, it guides the way we react," said Uzo Egbuche, director of the Nigeria-based Centre for Environmental Resources and Sustainable Ecosystems, who was among about a dozen representatives of African academic and non-governmental organizations at the meeting. Some Africans at the meeting expressed disappointment, however, that representatives of indigenous religions were not present.

Ravi Kanbur, director of the World Bank team that will write the 2000/2001 World Development Report (WDR), indicated that these first interactions with religious representatives have indeed provided the team with much to think about.

"From the point of view of poverty reduction, the values emerging from a faith perspective clearly strengthen the moral imperative to eradicate basic deprivation, and they place a special injunction on those of us who are not deprived to pursue this goal," wrote Dr. Kanbur, in response to a series of email questions from ONE COUNTRY. "Johannesburg also provided the consistent message from the faiths that religion is not a substitute for removing material deprivation. We now need to move to specific

issues such as gender inequality, civil conflict, land reform, market liberalization, social safety nets, etc. – all issues which are central to the WDR, and on which it will be important and interesting to have a faiths-based perspective (recognizing the fact that there may indeed be different faiths based perspectives on these issues)."

Dr. Kanbur also indicated that his team looks forward to more "interactions" on the "question of values and norms and what this means for the conceptualization, identification and measurement" of poverty. "Encouraged by the initial explorations in Johannesburg," wrote Dr. Kanbur, "the WDR will give weight to participative methods of poverty assessment and, from the preliminary analysis so far, the issues of dignity, voicelessness and powerlessness emerge as important."

## Case studies

Representatives of the faiths presented various case studies, drawn from their own experience in social and economic development work, to show how such a spiritually conscious approach can be effective and that such approaches do have measurable elements.

"Dignity is almost a summary measure of all the different dimensions of poverty that the World Bank is considering," said Dr. Lakhani of the Aga Khan network. "And by looking at things like self-esteem, self-worth, the ability to participate in decision making, which are all components of dignity, you have things you can measure."

The Bahá'í representative presented a paper entitled "Religious Values and the Measurement of Poverty and Prosperity" which, among other things, suggested that measuring the "improvement in the ability of all the members of a community to consult" could be used as a primary measure of success in assessing development.

"Both the process and the outcomes are observable and, therefore, in some way measurable," said the paper, which was presented by Matt Weinberg, director of research for the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community. "The use of consultative methods of decision making can lead to novel solutions to community problems; they can result in greater fairness in the distribution of community resources; and they tend to involve and uplift those who have historically been excluded from decision making, such as women and minorities.

"Experience has shown that consultation



enables communities to sustain and modify development initiatives, contributing, thereby, to self-sufficiency and a higher quality of life. The ability of people to come together in these new and constructive patterns of participation and interaction is, in some respects, a more important outcome – and, therefore, more important to measure – than the quantifiable goals traditionally associated with development projects.”

The Bahá’í presentation also emphasized the importance of capacity building, especially training that includes moral education. “To omit the spiritual or moral dimension is to miss the key ingredient in building up the fabric of community life,” said Mr. Weinberg. “We tried to go beyond the issue of recognizing the importance of religious values per se, and emphasize that the integration of moral values into every development initiative is crucial. This might mean designing projects that emphasize service to the community and its needs; or allowing people to learn how to work together in developing constructive solutions to problems or pursuing in a systematic way the implementation of gender equality.”

For the Bank’s part, Dr. Kanbur said his team is indeed looking forward to discovering more about “what lessons can be learned from faiths based anti-poverty interventions which are different from secular interventions.”

## Learning from each other

More than merely a process that engages economists and other mainstream development thinkers with religious groups, the World Faiths Development Dialogue is also creating a new arena for interfaith understanding and collaboration.

“This is unusual – the idea of the religions getting together a common platform and exchanging ideas on this issue of poverty,” said Swami Amarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, who was a representative of Hinduism at the meeting. “Because theologically, every religion is a little different. But we are beginning to learn how to talk together, to learn how to cooperate.”

Swami Amarananda said, too, that some religious representatives began to question their own approaches and histories on the issue of poverty and development. “Roman Catholicism is a major religion in Africa and Latin America,” said Swami Amarananda. “Yet these regions are poor. Why is this so? The Buddhists were asking the same ques-

tions – how is it that the Buddhist countries are lagging behind? And the Hindus, also, asked the same question.”

One significant outcome of the dialogue is a new body of work that is being produced by the religions as they grapple with these issues together. At the Johannesburg meeting, Dr. Kanbur and his team asked the faiths to submit a detailed commentary on a draft outline of the WDR.

In response, the WFDD secretariat has begun to circulate among the representatives a draft commentary, titled simply “Comment,” on the WDR outline. In its initial form, “Comment” is remarkable for the manner in which it draws out the common points of view among the faiths on these issues while paying homage to each faith’s approach.

“The starting point for all the faiths is that, as the Hindus put it, ‘all human activities are part of the sacred pattern of the Universe,’” says a February 1999 draft of “Comment.” “There can be no separation between the material and the spiritual elements of life. Thus ‘development’ or ‘progress’ must include the cultural, social, spiritual and political aspects of human existence. If emphasis is placed only on economic development, even this will fail. ‘Where there is no bread, there is no Torah, and where there is no Torah, there is no bread,’ say the Jews.

“The fundamental concern of all faiths is with life. ‘Development’ must be, first and foremost, about enabling life, in all its dimensions, to flourish,” the draft Comment continues. “The focus of development must thus be on people rather than economic processes.” \*

***“This is unusual – the idea of the religions getting together a common platform and exchanging ideas on this issue of poverty. But we are beginning to learn how to talk together, to learn how to cooperate.”***

**– Swami Amarananda**



Faith groups often focus on education and empowerment at the community level when fighting poverty. Above are graduates of a carpentry training workshop sponsored by the local Bahá’í community in the Dang District in India’s Gujarat State.



## UN Commission advances new machineries to protect women

UNITED NATIONS – As UN bodies go, the Commission on the Status of Women was for many years relegated to back-bench status. In its early years, male diplomats headed most of the Commission's government delegations. Established in 1946 to promote women's rights, it drew little attention – nor was its agenda viewed with much importance internationally.

Not any longer. This year's three-week session drew more than 1,000 participants, from government ministers and other high-level officials to UN agency heads, including hundreds of representatives from prominent international non-governmental organizations.

The Commission's work clearly stands at the forefront of international concerns and arrangements, involving as it did this year the negotiation and refinement of agreements that substantially change the way governments are likely to treat reports of injustices against women.

Specifically, the Commission passed by consensus an "Optional Protocol" to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The protocol, which must still be ratified by states individually before it goes into effect, provides a way for women, as individuals or in groups, to issue complaints about violations of their rights. Significantly, it also provides the CEDAW Committee, an international body of 23 experts established by the Convention, with a way to "inquire" into situations of grave or systematic violations of women's rights.

These mechanisms for communication and inquiry, which allow individual women to go around national boundaries, follow the ground-breaking path of other such instruments, such as the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT).

The CEDAW Optional Protocol, however, "is the first woman-specific mechanism allowing an individual to contact the UN directly," said Jane Connors, chief of the

Women's Rights Unit at the UN Division for the Advancement of Women. "In cases of human rights violations, that can lead to international embarrassment, the effects of which can't be underrated."

As such, passage of the Optional Protocol was widely hailed as a major step forward for women's rights. "There is still a fiction that persists that threats to human rights are gender neutral and we know that's not so," said Patricia Flor, who chaired the Commission on the Status of Women. "One effect of that failure is that sustained and systematic discrimination is not addressed in many countries... The Optional Protocol opens a channel of complaints for human rights violations against women. It creates a mechanism to make women's voices heard."

### Strengthening national mechanisms

The 43rd Commission also explored ways of developing "national mechanisms" to protect women's rights and promote their advancement. The Commission, composed of delegations from 45 governments, agreed that "national machineries are necessary for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action; and that for national machineries to be effective, clear mandates, location at the highest possible level, accountability mechanisms, partnership with civil society, a transparent political process, adequate financial and human resources and continued strong political commitment are crucial."

More specifically, the Commission urged the strengthening of two key factors related to national mechanisms: data analysis and adequate funding.

"The national machineries area is really the backbone of the other 11 critical areas of concern determined by the Beijing Platform of Action, because without that one element, there is no way to monitor the progress of the other areas," said Bani Dugal Gujral, convenor of the Task Force on Institutional Machineries for the NGO Committee on the Status of Women and director of the Office for the Advancement of Women

**The CEDAW Optional Protocol "is the first woman-specific mechanism allowing an individual to contact the UN directly. In cases of human rights violations, that can lead to international embarrassment, the effects of which can't be underrated."**

– Jane Connors,  
chief of the  
Women's Rights  
Unit at the UN  
Division for the  
Advancement of  
Women.





During the 1999 Commission on the Status of Women, Bani Dugal Gujral (center), director of the Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women, chaired an NGO presentation on "Building National Machinery for the Advancement of Women: The Role of Civil Society." At left is Margareta Winberg, the Swedish Minister for Gender Equality. At right is Suzanne Kindervatter of InterAction, a coalition of some 160 NGOs in the USA.

at the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office.

In both the approval of an Optional Protocol and the discussions on improving national machineries, NGOs played a major role.

"Creating better implementation mechanisms has been something NGOs and women's groups have put on the agenda, in Vienna in '93 and again in Beijing in '95," said Donna Sullivan, professor of international human rights law at New York University, referring to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

"It's had very broad, cross-regional support," added Prof. Sullivan, who is a member of the Open-ended Working Group on the Elaboration of a Draft Optional Protocol to CEDAW. "The breadth of support helped to move some governments that would not otherwise have been willing to participate constructively. And it will be women's groups and other human rights groups that make sure it gets ratified."

Ratification remains a key question with regard to the Optional Protocol. Adoption by the CSW as it stands now indicates only general approval and the willingness of state parties to consider accepting the binding provisions of the protocol. The protocol is ratified by a member country only when its head of state notifies the UN Secretary General that his or her country agrees to be bound by and apply its provisions. It must be ratified by 10 state parties to the Convention before it enters into force.

Many here believe ratification will proceed in a timely way. "There was a consensus agreement; all the governments agreed to the terms," said Ms. Connors of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women. "That suggests that it will be widely acceptable."

CEDAW itself was quickly entered into force in 1981 after its adoption in 1979. "The Women's Convention," as it is sometimes called, guarantees women equality with men before the law and specifies measures to eliminate discrimination.

Other work of the Commission this year focused on preparing for the so-called "Beijing Plus Five" conference, a UN General Assembly Special Session scheduled for 5-9 June 2000, which will review progress on the implementation of the Platform for Action since its passage at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

The Commission extended its usual two-week session by a week to discuss the Special Session, which is formally being called "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century." Some of the items on the provisional agenda for the Special Session include: review of gender mainstreaming in organizations of the UN system; emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women; implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern; and comprehensive review and appraisal of the implementation of the Platform for Action. \*

— Reported by Veronica Shoffstall

***"Creating better implementation mechanisms has been something NGOs and women's groups have put on the agenda, in Vienna in '93 and again in Beijing in '95."***

***— Donna Sullivan, specialist on international human rights law***



## Annual conference on development for the Americas aims at encouraging non-professionals

**The idea of encouraging people from all walks of life to participate in community-based development projects has become a main and continuing theme of the conferences.**

*Small group, face-to-face presentations about small-scale development projects are a major feature of the annual Bahá'í Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas.*

ORLANDO, Florida – Over the last six years, the Bahá'í Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas has established itself as an event where non-professionals from throughout the Americas can come to learn what it really takes to launch and sustain a grassroots-based, small-scale development project.

In this regard, the three-day conference reflects the degree to which Bahá'í communities around the world have become involved in such projects and, more specifically, the degree to which the idea of social and economic development has engaged the hearts and minds of many Bahá'ís.

For the past three years, the conference has attracted more than 1,000 participants. Most are Bahá'ís and the majority come from Canada and the United States.

"This is not a professional or a technical conference," said Pierre Beemans, a vice president at the Canadian-based International Development Research Centre who was a featured speaker here. "That is not to belittle it. Many of these people here are from mainstream America. Yet many of them are involved in local community development initiatives, such as local schools, local health delivery programs, or local day

care centers.

"And that is the level at which societal change has to take place," Dr. Beemans continued. "Lasting, sustainable changes happen when local, ordinary people make a commitment to the community."

The idea of encouraging people from all walks of life to participate in community-based development projects has become a main and continuing theme of the conferences held here. The conference is organized by the Rabbani Charitable Trust, a private, non-profit foundation based here. It was established by Bahá'ís in 1991 with the aim of promoting "the spiritual and social well-being of the entire human race," the conferences consciously seek to "uplift the spirit of individuals and motivate them to work in their communities," said Benjamin Levy, who serves on the Trust's five-member board.

"The objective is to enable those people who come to advance their own knowledge about development, so they can go back and apply what they have learned to stimulate and initiate projects, particularly at the grassroots level," said Mr. Levy, who has served as program director for the conferences over the last six years. "To this end, we try to make these meetings a learning process where everybody is a teacher and everybody is a learner."

Each year, the main conference, which always takes place over a weekend, is preceded by a smaller seminar for full-time development specialists. The full-time specialists, who are mostly Bahá'ís, come for in-depth consultations about development theory and practice and then often stay on as resource people for the weekend conference. Taken together, the two segments last about five days and provide an opportunity for a tremendous amount of networking and interchange, drawing Bahá'í development specialists from all over North, Central and South America.

This year, for example, there were 1,229 registered participants; 1,083 came from Canada and the USA. All totaled, however, participants came from 39 coun-





tries – representing virtually every nation in the Americas.

Presentations were made this year on more than 21 projects, which ranged in type and size from a 10-year-old, 1,200-student university in Chile to a project started two years ago in the Toronto, Canada, suburb of Markham by six women to promote the discussion of women's equality.

"From a networking point of view, the Conference is extremely successful," said Duncan Hanks, a Canadian development specialist who is currently working in Bolivia and who has attended the Orlando Conference four years running. "The level of the discussion is extremely high."

Conference participants here certainly

speak of a desire to commit themselves to making changes at the local level.

Jim Ferguson, a physician's assistant from Michigan, USA, came to the Florida meeting to gain further insight and inspiration. In 1994 and 1995, he volunteered at a Bahá'í-sponsored health project in Guyana, spending about a month each visit.

"I am not a professional in the arena of social and economic development," said Mr. Ferguson. "But being in the health care field, I am interested in applying my skills to help people, especially overseas, in developing countries. Many of the people that are here have firsthand experience with development projects, but there are many that do not – and they are here to learn how to get involved."\*

## CIVIL SOCIETY

# Millennium Forum planning structure set

**UNITED NATIONS** – At a two-day meeting here in February, representatives from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gave concrete structure to the planning process for a proposed NGO-sponsored "Millennium Forum," agreeing to a set of organizational by-laws and confirming the membership of the Forum's main organizing committees.

The meeting, held 22-23 February 1999, capped a year-long series of consultations that saw the gradual coming together of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and NGO coalitions or groups with the aim of organizing some sort of civil society forum or gathering that would associate with the UN's proposed "Millennium Assembly," as the regular UN General Assembly meeting scheduled for September 2000 has been designated.

About 100 people attended the February meeting. Most represented international NGOs with multiple national-level affiliates around the world, although some represented various national-level NGOs. In a series of consensus votes, the assembled gathering approved, with a few minor amendments, a set of proposed by-laws for the Forum. The group also confirmed the proposed membership of the Forum's "Planning Consultative Council" and its "Steering Committee," which are the two main decision-making bodies for the Forum.

According to by-laws adopted at the meeting, among the "aims" of the "Millennium Forum" are "to promote innovative visions and ideas of non-governmental organizations and civil society at the local, national, regional, international and global levels in regard to the objectives of the Millennium Summit/Assembly, as well as channel implementation concepts to the appropriate bodies."

The by-laws define the Planning Consultative Council as the "primary body" of the Millennium Forum. Its membership, which is expected to number more than 100 people, is composed largely of representatives of large in-

ternational or regional NGOs, as well as NGO "confederations" or associations with a strong track record in the major global issue areas that the Forum hopes to address.

Although the issues to be addressed by the Forum are not defined in the by-laws, the discussion at the meeting indicated that the Forum should closely follow topics that are to be addressed by the UN's Millennium Assembly. While the agenda for the Millennium Assembly – and the proposed coinciding "Millennium Summit" for world leaders – is still under discussion, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has suggested such a meeting might focus on peace and security, development cooperation, international economic and social affairs, humanitarian affairs, and human rights. In the planning process for the NGO-sponsored Millennium Forum, which is tentatively scheduled for May 2000, these issue areas have further been broken down into a number of subcategories, including topics such as food, aging, religion, disarmament, and education.

The Forum's Steering Committee is defined as "the primary planning and decision-making body" of the Council and will consist of about 30 individuals, as defined by the by-laws. Some 31 people were appointed to the Steering Committee at the meeting. Most had been proposed by the Interim Steering Committee, which was appointed at a meeting of NGOs at the UN last July. Among the 31 people confirmed are representatives from a diverse range of global and regional NGOs.

Also among those serving on the Steering Committee are the leaders of other major civil society and NGO gatherings scheduled for the coming year – such as the May 1999 Hague Appeal for Peace and the December 1999 World Civil Society Conference in Montreal. Organizers of the Forum hope that the outcomes from these and other upcoming civil society meetings will be incorporated into the Forum's final report, which is to be presented to the UN Secretary General and the Millennium Assembly. \*



## In Mongolia, community gardens meet a need

*At the forefront of the burgeoning movement to teach people to grow more vegetables is the small Bahá'í community of Erdenbulgan, which started its own vegetable garden project in 1997 and has become a model for the region.*



*For the Erdenbulgan Bahá'í community, fresh salads have become a regular treat at gatherings.*

### **Mongolia**, continued from page one

deficiencies and growth stunting because of their absence.

Although the effort in Erdenbulgan has produced only a few hundreds of kilograms of fresh vegetables for families here, the project has nevertheless become something of a model for the region, demonstrating that vegetables can indeed be easily grown in many parts of Mongolia. It is also a showcase for the sort of wider community development that can emerge from just such a locally originated and operated undertaking.

"Many people such as the elderly, children and youth have been involved in this project," said Davaadulam, a teacher in Erdenbulgan and a member of the local Bahá'í community. "The project has helped people to learn how to consult together, to work in harmony and to be united with one goal."

### **Against tradition**

The growing season throughout most of Mongolia is very short – and that is especially true here in the northern province of Khovsgol, nestled among the fingerlike extensions of Siberia's Sayan Mountains, which

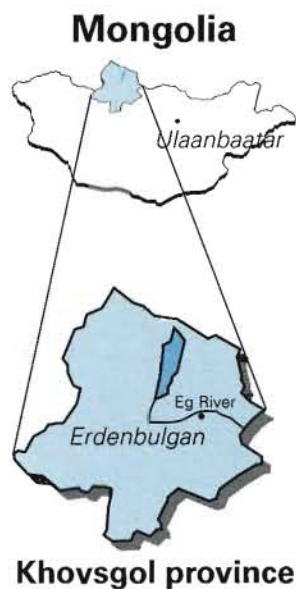
lie just to the north.

The combination of a high latitude (50 degrees north) and high elevation (about 1,200 meters above sea level) pushes the last frost of spring into June and brings fall's first frost as early as the first week of September – sometimes even mid-August.

But the climate is not really the biggest impediment to agriculture here or elsewhere in Mongolia. Tradition is perhaps the main reason that crops are grown on less than one percent of the nation's land area.

Historically a nomadic people, Mongolians continue to rely on animal herds for most of their food, exploiting the vast grasslands that compose the famous Central Asian steppes. The result is a diet for the average Mongolian that consists chiefly of meat and dairy products.

More recently, the legacy of dependence on a centralized economy, acquired during the Soviet era, has reinforced the limited diet. "During the years of socialism, the diet was better and more diverse because more support was coming from the state," said David Megit, a Canadian agricultural specialist who works with the Mongolian Development Center in Ulaanbaatar, the





nation's capital. "But of course that whole system collapsed in 1990. And so over the last eight or nine years the availability and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables has declined quite significantly."

The 1997 Human Development Report for Mongolia, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), echoed this analysis, saying: "At an average national level, the dietary balance has worsened substantially, with much of the improvements over the 20 years prior to transition being undone in just a few years. Vegetable and fruit intakes have been cut dramatically." A lack of vegetables and fruits contributes to an absence of essential vitamins and minerals that may cause "diseases and disorders, many of which are not reversible," such as stunting, the report says.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations are keenly aware of the problems posed by the limited diet. The national Government proclaimed 1993 as "food year" and has been promoting more large-scale production of crops like wheat, said Maidar, the director of the Mongolian Horticultural Society, an independent NGO which has also launched its own campaign to encourage small-scale vegetable gardening. The city government of Ulaanbaatar has given financial support to the Society in the campaign.

In Mr. Maidar's view, the Erdenbulgan project is a model for all of Mongolia because of the way it has educated and empowered local people. "The whole Erdenbulgan population is much encouraged by the successful implementation of the project," he said. "And this is very important because it reflects a deep psychological change that is going on. Before, during the Communist period, it was prohibited even to have a garden, because it was regarded as private initiative. So people don't think they can grow vegetables themselves or they think that growing cabbage is more difficult than raising sheep. But now things are changing very quickly, and the Erdenbulgan community has demonstrated this."

### An isolated region

Erdenbulgan is an isolated village with a population of about 3,000, located about 650 kilometers from Ulaanbaatar. No formal roads lead to Erdenbulgan and access is by rough track through forested and mountainous terrain. Electricity is only available at certain hours on certain days, and water for every household must be carried from the river. Food is mostly limited to locally

produced meat, milk products and flour.

The Bahá'í Faith came to Erdenbulgan in 1994, when Ulzisaiken, a young student who had become a Bahá'í at college in Ulaanbaatar, returned to her home and told her family about the Faith. Many others in Erdenbulgan soon embraced it, attracted to its progressive social principles, its harmony with the region's Buddhist heritage, and its emphasis on unity. By 1995, a local Bahá'í governing council had been elected and, presently, there are about 100 Bahá'ís, including children, in the village.

In deciding to create a vegetable garden, the Erdenbulgan Bahá'í community started from the premise that they must undertake activities that contribute to and serve the wider community. In May 1995, the community began to talk about undertaking some sort of local social and economic development project, coming up with a list of possibilities that included establishing a bread bakery, erecting a cultural center, sponsoring English classes and starting a vegetable garden.

After further consultation, the Bahá'ís decided in 1996 that the vegetable garden was perhaps the easiest to undertake immediately – and perhaps the most needed. They got permission in 1997 from the municipality to fence off a quarter hectare of land near the Eg River. And knowing it needed help, the community reached outside itself, asking the national Bahá'í office in Ulaanbaatar for advice and assistance.

Officials at the national office knew about the presence in the region of Mr. Megit, a Canadian agricultural specialist who is also a Bahá'í and who had been working in nearby Ulan Ude, Russia. They invited him to travel to Erdenbulgan and con-

***"During the Communist period, it was prohibited even to have a garden, because it was regarded as private initiative. So people don't think they can grow vegetables themselves... But now things are changing very quickly, and the Erdenbulgan community has demonstrated this."***

**– Maidar, Mongolian Horticultural Society**

*Below, 16-year-old Amartuvshin, at left, helps others to sow vegetable seeds at the Erdenbulgan project.*







*To provide moisture for the garden, water must be carried by hand from the Eg River, about 30 meters from the site. This year the Erdenbulgan community hopes to erect a water pumping windmill.*

***"The vegetable growing project is not seen as an end in itself – it is an important, albeit small, building block in the development of the community. It can help [members] learn to consult together better and generally increase their capacity for collective action...."***

**– David Megit,  
agricultural  
development  
specialist**

sult with them, which he did in April 1996. Partly because of what he saw, Mr. Megit decided to relocate to Mongolia in late 1996, where he joined the staff of the Mongolian Development Center (MDC), a national-level non-governmental organization operated on Bahá'í principles to promote social and economic development.

"In the first year, it was more of a pilot project," said Mr. Megit. "Mongolians, particularly those in the countryside and in small rural areas, have had practically no experience in growing vegetables, so in many ways it took a certain degree of courage and conviction for the local Bahá'í community of Erdenbulgan to initiate such a project and to have enough perseverance to see it through the growing season."

Nevertheless, he said, those who became involved with the project not only quickly acquired a taste for the new foods but became committed to the process of community-building that the project seemed automatically to entail.

"The vegetable growing project is not seen as an end in itself – as simply a way to grow vegetables and possibly supplement one's income, as important as this might be," said Mr. Megit. "It is an important, albeit small, building block in the development of the community. It is one way that the community members can put into practice the principles of development they believe in. It can help them learn to consult together better and generally increase their capacity for collective action, so that in the future larger, more complex development activities can be undertaken based on the experience gained from this initiative."

The project quickly gained acceptance among the people of Erdenbulgan. At an end-of-the-summer festival in 1997, held to

honor Erdenbulgan's "Great Mothers", a number of salads and delicate vegetable dishes were displayed on the central table along with the traditional meat and dairy offerings. People had an opportunity on this occasion to sample what for many were entirely new foods. On other occasions, demonstrations have been held for the community at large at the garden site.

"It was amazing and great to see how many vegetables the Bahá'ís had planted and how they had grown," said Dorjasuren Tsenden, a former local leader. "Big turnips, potatoes, many kinds of cabbages, and so on – many sorts of vegetables had been grown, which showed the result of hard work and unity. This project started a year before [the program] promoted by the Mongolian government, and it was a big lesson and an example to people in Erdenbulgan."

So far the only inputs from outside have been the training and advice provided by Mr. Megit, supported by MDC, and some financial assistance -- including several hundred dollars worth of seeds -- sent over from an individual Bahá'í in Canada who heard about Erdenbulgan's desire to undertake such a project and offered to support it.

"The climate is similar to Regina, Saskatchewan — a short hot summer with lots of sunshine — so we send over seeds identified for that climate," said Jim Collishaw, a planning consultant in Cambridge, Ontario, who has been buying and mailing the seeds. "And what we are trying to do is to be sure as well that we are sending open pollinated varieties, so they can be trained in saving their best seeds and the varieties will begin to adapt to the specifics of the climate."

The project is set to begin again this spring with training in April and planting in May and June. The Erdenbulgan community is preparing to erect a windmill to pump water from the river into a storage tank near the site, which they hope will help save in the labor that is currently expended in carrying water from the river to the site.

"People around the area see the example set by the Bahá'ís," said Soninbayer, a 36-year-old Erdenbulgan woman who embraced the Bahá'í Faith in 1994. "Before the implementation of this project some people grew a few vegetables and plants, but many people now are planting many different varieties. So it is not only the Bahá'ís who have benefited from the project." \*

– with reporting from Lois Lambert



## Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet

*Review, continued from back page.*

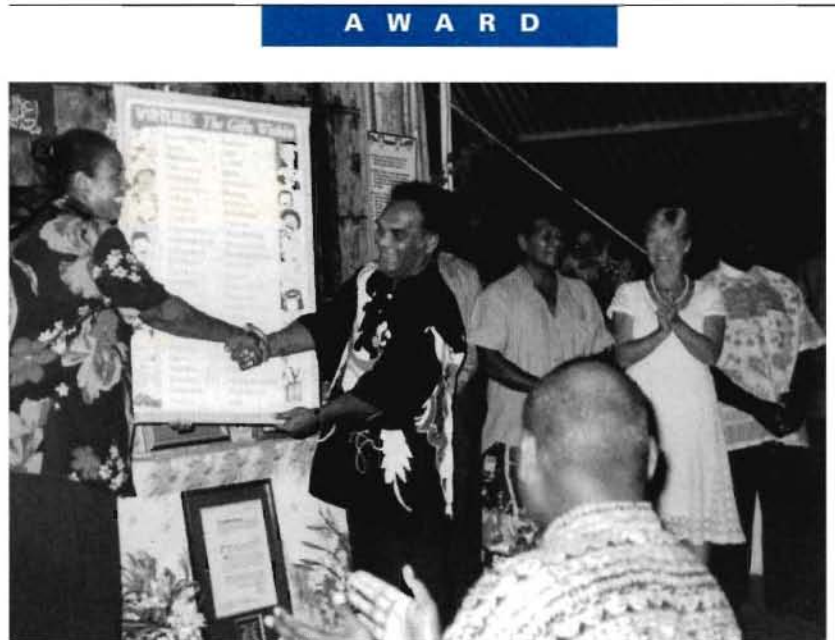
a patron in Mary Elizabeth Haskell, the headmistress of a girls' school who became a financial, intellectual and emotional support to Gibran for much of his life.

Until his untimely death in 1931, at the age of 48, from "cirrhosis of the liver and incipient tuberculosis," the rest of Gibran's life was something of a Bohemian whirl. He spent time in Paris and again visited Lebanon but ultimately settled in New York. He never married but, it is clear, had a series of intense love affairs – one of which was carried on wholly by mail. According to Bushrui and Jenkins, he often existed almost wholly on "strong coffee and cigarettes," working long into the night on his writing or artwork. He suffered almost continually from poor health and yet soared upon the spiritual visions of his own inner Muse.

Along the way, Gibran met some of the greatest men and women of his time. According to Bushrui and Jenkins, Gibran spent time with the poet William Butler Yeats, the sculptor Auguste Rodin, writer John Galsworthy, and Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung. He also read widely in English and Arabic, and among the writers that touched him greatly were Friedrich Nietzsche and William Blake. Such meetings – whether in person or on paper – refined Gibran's own thinking and direction. When combined with his life experiences, these influences helped shape the singular voice that marked his work, which comprises hundreds of essays, poems, drawings and paintings.

Among the important figures who Gibran encountered was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, who founded the Bahá'í Faith. In 1912, while visiting New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sat for a portrait by Gibran. According to Bushrui and Jenkins, the meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá left an "indelible impression" on Gibran, who wrote that in 'Abdu'l-Bahá he had "seen the unseen, and been filled", and that "He is a very great man. He is complete. There are worlds in his soul."

Drawing on various sources, Bushrui and Jenkins conclude that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was later to become "the inspiration and template for his unique portrait of Christ" as expressed in his 1926 book, *Jesus, the Son of Man*, which is widely acknowledged as his second most important work, after *The Prophet*. They quote Gibran as saying, about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that "For the first time I saw form a noble enough to be



a receptacle for the Holy Spirit."

Whether influenced directly by his meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá or merely following an inner spiritual vision, it is clear that many of Gibran's views on religion are much in harmony with the Bahá'í teachings.

"For Gibran true religion was joyous and liberating: 'teachings that free you and me from bondage and place us unfettered upon the earth, the stepping place of the feet of God'; a God who has given men and women 'spirit wings to soar aloft in the realms of love and freedom' – a religion of justice, which 'makes us all brothers equal before the sun.'"

In the end, the portrait Bushrui and Jenkins paint of Gibran is both clear-eyed and loving. By interweaving straightforward facts about his life with incisive quotations from Gibran's own writings and letters, adding in a wealth of observations from those who knew him, and supplying their own perceptive brand of literary criticism, Bushrui and Jenkins have written a tightly woven and yet highly readable narrative that shows how the sum of a man's life – his family background, who he met, what he read, and how he lived – combines every once in a great while to produce someone capable of creating works of literature or art that can move the world. "Gibran became the most successful and famous Arab writer in the world," write Bushrui and Jenkins. "Gibran's message is a healing one and his quest to understand the tensions between spirit and exile anticipated the needs of an age witnessing the spiritual and intellectual impasse of modernity itself." \*

*Above: In the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu (center) receives a Virtues Guide Chart from Betty Oit (left) of the Bahá'í community during the Blum Community Service Awards program on 20 September 1998. The Awards are sponsored by the Bahá'í community of the Solomon Islands.*



## Transcending the barriers between East and West

**Kahlil Gibran:  
Man and Poet**

**By Suheil Bushrui  
and Joe Jenkins**

**Oneworld  
Publications**

**Oxford**

What makes a great artist different from the vast majority of men and women? How to account for the inspiration and insight that enables someone like Kahlil Gibran to create one of the century's most popular and enduring works of literature?

Answers to such questions gradually emerge (as much as may be possible, anyway) in an absorbing new biography on Gibran by scholars Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins.

Entitled *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, the book thoroughly explores the life, loves, times and works of Gibran, whose 1923 book *The Prophet* has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide and has been translated into at least 20 languages.

Born in Lebanon, but a resident of the United States of America for most of his adult life, Kahlil Gibran holds a unique place among modern writers, inasmuch as he wrote well in both English and Arabic and was widely acclaimed in both cultures. Sitting astride two worlds, Gibran created his own unique literary style, one that has won fans in every generation since.

"He was one of those rare writers who actually transcend the barrier between East and West, and could justifiably call himself – though a Lebanese and a patriot – a citizen of the world," write Bushrui and Jenkins. "His words went beyond the mere evocation of the mysterious East but endeavored to communicate the necessity of reconciliation between Christianity and Islam, spirituality and materialism, East and West..."

In this way, Bushrui and Jenkins establish the theme of the book: that Gibran, for all his personal flaws and foibles, was a genuine artistic visionary whose works are imbued with themes of unity and oneness that are entirely reflective of our century-long march toward global integration and, at the same time, "expressed the deep-felt desire of men and women for a kind of spiritual life that renders the material world meaningful and imbues it with dignity."

The story of Gibran's life – apart from his artistic and literary accomplishments – makes for compelling reading. Born in the small Lebanese village of Bisharri in 1883, the son of an alcoholic tax collector, Gibran

was brought with his two sisters to America by his mother in 1895 at the age of 12. Although poor and living in a Boston ghetto, his talent for drawing attracted the attention of some of the city's intellectuals, who introduced him to a circle of established artists and writers, including the painter Lilla Cabot and the poet Louise Guiney.

At age 15, longing to better understand his heritage, Gibran returned to Lebanon, where he enrolled at the Maronite college of Madrasat-al-Hikmah, then perhaps the foremost Christian secondary school in the Arab world. "This land of mystic beauty became his solace, his source of imagination, and in later years his object of yearning," Bushrui and



Jenkins write of Gibran's experiences in Lebanon. After four years, he returned to Boston, to face there in short succession the deaths of one of his sisters, his half-brother and his beloved mother, all of who succumbed to poverty-induced illnesses.

Overcoming the impact of these tragedies, Gibran reentered the intellectual and artistic circles of Boston, and he soon found

*Review, continued on page 15*