ONE COUNTRY

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

INSIDE

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In Stockholm, a global dialogue on microcredit focuses on social impact

Some 80 leading specialists on microfinance, gathered for a face-to-face exchange, warn of new challenges as large financial institutions and other major players increasingly turn to small-scale lending.

Posing for a group photograph at the Global Dialogue on Microfinance and Human Development are members of the European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF) and Muhammad Yunus (center, in white jacket) of the Grameen Bank in Pakistan.

STOCKHOLM — In an effort to ensure that the global rush to promote small-scale lending does not overlook the human and cultural dimensions of development, some 80 leading specialists on microfinance gathered here in April to discuss how to balance economic sustainability and social impact as large financial institutions increasingly enter the field of microcredit.

Convened by the European Bahá'í Business Forum (EBBF) and the Progressio Foundation of the Netherlands as part of a parallel Business Forum held in conjunction with the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, the Global Dialogue on Microfinance and Human Development was held 2-3 April 1998. The meeting drew together leading practitioners, specialists, donors, business people and representatives from financial institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from some 25 countries.

The Dialogue focused on promoting a face-to-face exchange between the various players in the burgeoning world of microcredit and, while no formal vote or final statement was issued, the general discussion made it clear that the movement faces a number of important challenges as it seeks to expand.

"We are at a critical point in the microfinance movement where a split in thinking is occurring," said Barbara Rodey, the Dialogue's coordinator. "On one side there is the need to find funding sources and on the other is the need to best serve the interests of the poor.

Microcredit, *continued on page 12*

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PERSPECTIVE

The Spiritual Foundation of Human Rights

[Editor's note: The following Perspective is adapted from a keynote address delivered by Dr. Suheil Bushrui at the 21st annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies on 15 November 1997. Dr. Bushrui holds the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, USA.]

The recognition of human rights under international law is relatively recent, but the philosophy underlying the concept is ancient. In such texts as the Babylonian code of Hammurabi, the rulings of the ancient Israeli Sanhedrin banning torture and limiting the use of capital punishment, the Islamic legislation on rights of women, the English Magna Carta, the US Declaration of Independence, the nineteenth century conventions outlawing the slave trade, and the post-World War II Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the shape and form of a global moral order has been created.

The questions that human rights address are perennial. What does it mean to be a human being? What is the purpose of life on this earth? What should our intellectual and emotional attitude towards one another be? These very questions are central to religious thought and practice. From this perspective, we can discern that one of the chief drawbacks in our approach to human rights concerns the method of presenting them as a code of civil and moral law, and perhaps as a product of Western civilization, when in fact human rights are essentially a codification of mainly spiritual laws which are themselves the cumulative achievement of the world's religious traditions.

Our moral laws have come to us through the religions that have enriched us as human beings. The source of our morality is God, the unknowable essence. The source of human rights, therefore, lies in the immortal words of all scripture.

Underlying the astounding diversity of traditions that have developed there lies a common foundation manifested in their cosmological, eschatological, and theological teachings — teachings about our origins, our destinies, and the nature of the divine. Again we must emphasize the critical awareness from which human rights spring: the forms are many but the essence is one.

This underlying unity is eloquently articulated in the ethical systems of different faiths, as in the teaching that we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated, otherwise known as "The Golden Rule" and found, in different formulations, in the Hindu Mahábhárata, the Jewish Talmud, the Zoroastrian Dádistan-í-Díník, the Buddhist Udana-Varqa, the Christian Gospel of Saint Matthew, the Islamic Hadíth, and in Bahá'u'lláh's Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih.

The greatest impediment to unity in the post-Cold War world is not political ideology but rather religious-cultural discord. If a universal system of human rights is to be achieved, men and women of faith need to see each other with the eye of Him who created us all.

The challenge facing us, of course, is to overcome the misunderstandings and prejudices that are the cause of strife between the different religions, and instead build upon the fundamental beliefs that they hold in common. The human race enjoys a shared religious-cultural heritage, for ultimately culture and civilization are built upon religion. When we begin to search out the universal truths that we agree upon, we shall find ourselves collectively manifesting "the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment." In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "If we investigate the religions to discover the principles underlying their foundation, we will find they agree, for the fundamental reality of them is one and not multiple."

The time has come for us to carefully examine the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and to find the underlying morality in humanity's various spiritual traditions. From such a perspective we can see that religious differences are matters of form, but never of essential principles. For example, what religion does not teach the value of every individual person as a manifestation of God's divine grace? If every religion recognizes the existence of individual souls and the relationship between that soul and its Creator, then every religion agrees on the fundamental basis of

human rights: human beings enjoy certain inalienable rights that no worldly authority may capriciously or systematically abrogate.

It is precisely the contention that human rights are universal and may not be infringed upon by governments that makes the concept of such rights so controversial and problematic in the world today. What is important to our discussion of human rights is that state sovereignty and its appurtenance, cultural exclusivity, are major impediments to a system of universal human rights. The idea that certain principles and institutions, such as participatory democracy, are simply alien to particular peoples is encapsulated within the notion of "cultural relativism."

In theory, cultural relativism is the reasonable idea that certain social, economic, cultural, and political practices are inherent to particular groups, and that the abrupt, artificial introduction of alien influences can be disruptive. In practice, however, cultural relativism is often employed by ruling elites as a pretext for opposing homegrown reform movements that threaten their power or status.

The knowledge and practice of human rights must be universalized by means of education and access to relevant information. Crucial to the diffusion of the concept of human rights is Article 18 of the UDHR, which serves as a point upon which the world's religions can cooperate in realizing this goal. Article 18 reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Any attempt at achieving a just order in the world will not be possible without a prior transformation of faith through the retrieval of our common spiritual heritage.

The religious systems of the world, evolving as they have at different times and under diverse circumstances, embody numerous and varied responses to humanity's innate sense of the transcendent. Yet they share much in common, including the historical continuum in which the different responses have been produced. Much valuable work has been done to bring diverse religious thought together, including the initiation of religious dialogues, the building of models of tolerance, the cultivation of religious toleration, and the adoption of a common ethic of human rights. Hans Küng tersely but with unchallengeable eloquence captured the importance of inter-religious understanding with this formulation: "There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions."

The approach of the Bahá'í Faith to the question of the unity of ethics and vision is encapsulated in the concept of progressive revelation. The foundation for the establishment of religious peace and the promotion of human rights is the acceptance of the essential unity of the Founders of all religions. Each is the successor and fulfillment of the One who has preceded Him, and the Herald of the One who is to succeed Him. Through these Messengers, appearing at different historical periods and in various regions of the earth, the one true Creator has communicated His will and purpose to mankind, granting successively greater outpourings of religious truth and affording an ever fuller apprehension of the divine.

But at root and in their inmost essence the messages thus conveyed are one. Only by establishing a universal system of human rights, embodying an understanding of the underlying truth and unity of all religions, can we hope to establish genuine and lasting peace. ❋

Human rights are essentially a codification of mainly spiritual laws which are themselves the cumulative achievement of the world's religious traditions.

COMMEMORATION

Mrs. Mary McAleese, the President of Ireland, was the honored guest and featured speaker at a commemoration the 50th anniversary of the Irish Bahá'í Community. Held 22 April 1998 at St. Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle, more than 250 guests attended. Shown left to right are: Olive McKinley of the Bahá'í community of Dublin; Professor Suheil Bushrui, holder of the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, USA; Mrs. McAleese; Brendan McNamara, chairman of the Bahá'í community of Ireland; and Patrick O'Mara, a member of the Bahá'í Continental Board of Counsellors.

In Thailand, a provincial school paves the way for education in a global society

The teachers and staff of Santitham School in Yasothon, Thailand.

"I like the diversity at Santitham, the staff from different nations. This way my child will learn to communicate and associate with people from other countries."

– Rungtiwa Kongskul, parent

YASOTHON, Thailand — Every May in this quiet provincial capital, people gather to fire elaborately designed handmade gunpowder rockets into the atmosphere. The Rocket Festival is held to wake the great dragon in the sky, so that he will splash in his lake and bring rain. This ancient ritual speaks volumes about the importance of tradition here.

Surrounded by lush rice paddies and stands of cassava plants and sugar cane, Yasothon city at first glance stands in sharp contrast to the high-rise buildings and dense traffic jams of Bangkok, which lies some 530 kilometers to the southwest. More than 95 percent of the people in Yasothon province live in the countryside and Yasothon city is by most standards just a small agricultural town.

Yet, despite the pastoral environment, the province is not at all insulated from the processes of global transformation and modernization that are bringing change throughout the country.

Western businesses are beginning to set up shop in Yasothon city. A Seven-Eleven convenience market opened up recently and there is talk — hopeful talk — that a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant will soon follow. A factory to assemble videotapes has brought the flavor of high-tech industry to the region. On the dark side, a local NGO runs a camp to shelter youth who have AIDS and have come back home from the big city to die.

Against this backdrop, it is not difficult to understand the success of Santitham School, a Bahá'í-sponsored primary school with an enrollment of about 500 students. In contrast to most of the schools in the region, whether private or public, Santitham focuses on providing a learning environment that encourages a global vision.

And despite the relatively remote and isolated nature of Yasothon, parents are increasingly recognizing the need for their children to have an education that prepares them to become world citizens.

"We need to go along with the current of globalization," said Rungtiwa Kongskul, who has an eight-year-old daughter at Santitham. "I like the diversity at Santitham, the staff from different nations. This way my child will learn to communicate and associate with people from other countries."

Santitham also stands out for its emphasis on moral education and its progressive educational model. Its reputation for excellence was recently confirmed by an award from the Ministry of Education, which proclaimed it the second best medium-sized school in the entire northeast region of Thailand. The award compared Santitham with more than 2000 other

schools in eight provinces.

"We want to produce a new generation of children, that is our goal," said Nawarat Wongsopa, director of Santitham. "We want to prepare a generation of children who believe in unity in diversity, who practice world citizenship, and who are ready to help serve humanity."

Founded in 1967, Santitham has struggled towards that goal for more than 25 years. Supported at first almost entirely by the Thai Bahá'í community, the school has had its ups and downs as it faced the sorts of difficulties experienced by any relatively under-funded new project. In recent years, however, it has at last come quite close to being self-supporting. And it is now certainly considered among the best schools in Yasothon city; its students include many children from the families of top-ranking civil servants and military officers.

One of Santitham's big attractions is the fact that it offers instruction in English, which is spoken by very few people here. And the quality of the English instruction is greatly enhanced by the efforts of international youth volunteers who come to the school as part of a year-of-service concept endorsed by many Bahá'í institutions around the world.

This year, four young people from Canada and Ireland are working as unpaid volunteers. Last year, the group included six students from Canada, Ireland, Malaysia, Scotland, and the United States. These youth bring a particular brand of idealism and vision that is very much in line with the school's own philosophy.

"I wanted to serve humanity in a tangible way," said Roya Ravanbakhsh, a 21-year-old woman from Vancouver, Canada, who served in 1997. "The school really needs help, so I feel really needed here. There are only a few other foreigners in Yasothon. The culture is very Thai here. If you go someplace and you work in a different culture, you are serving humanity just by breaking down barriers. And that is what I believe we help to do here."

Municipal education officials agree that Santitham's role is important to the region's future. "The world is moving to be one," said Pean Pakpeal, the Yasothon district education officer. "So English language instruction will help inter-link the nations. I think Santitham is leading the way in preparing the students to fit in with a more global community."

The school's emphasis on moral education is also distinctive. At all levels and in all classes, the teachers emphasize courtesy and good behavior, as well as more sophisticated concepts like tolerance for other religions and peoples and the understanding that all humanity is one.

"We follow the compulsory curriculum that is used throughout Thailand, but also add a strong element of moral education," said Naiyana Wongsopa, the school's principal, who is married to Mr. Wongsopa. "Every morning before the teachers start class, they talk with the children about virtues like honesty, unity and love, and about how to live together peacefully and how to share with each other. This is emphasized every day."

"We want to produce a new generation of children, that is our goal. We want to prepare a generation of children that believe in unity in diversity, who practice world citizenship, and who are ready to help serve humanity."

– Nawarat Wongsopa, director of Santitham

International volunteers who serve for a year at a time to help teach English bring a particular brand of idealism and vision that is very much in line with the school's own philosophy. Shown left to right are the six volunteers who served at Santitham last year: Roya Ravanbakhsh of Canada; Almasi Hanks of the United States; Sahar Khavari of Scotland; Andrew Alexander of Northern Ireland; Vasugy Arumugam of Malaysia; and Allen Slea of the United States.

Teacher Tassanee Nantum leads a class in mathematics for the upper primary grades. She contrasted the atmosphere at Santitham with a school she had worked at previously, saying: "Here the teachers treat the children like family. We nurture them."

Some of the teachers put it more simply. "Here the teachers treat the children like family," said Tassanee Nantum, a mathematics teacher who previously worked at a large private school in eastern Thailand. "We nurture them."

Educators at other schools say they can tell the difference in the behavior of the children from Santitham. "From what I have observed," said Chamroon Phaipaim, the director of the Anuban Yasothon School, one of the largest public schools in the city, "the students from Santitham school are better behaved than the students from other schools in the city — and also better prepared to study."

Paitun Hienthag, a public school teacher who has two daughters at Santitham, said it is much to Santitham's credit to spend the time and effort on moral education when many schools are focusing purely on academic skills. "Right now in Thailand, everyone is concerned with survival," he said. "So it is a difficult time to bring in concepts of moral education."

But Santitham school officials said that training students in moral virtues is as important to their mission as academic performance. To that end, the school strives to practice what it preaches. The school has also been involved in small projects aimed at improving the social and economic development of the entire community. These projects currently include: 1) the provision of assistance, in the form of moral education classes, to Youth and Children for Development, the local NGO that works with young people afflicted with AIDS; 2) the training of teachers and workers at village child care centers, a project that saw the involvement of some 80 participants in 10 villages for two days in May; and 3) a project to offer sewing classes for women in cooperation with the Non-Formal Education Center of Yasothon.

"We want our school to be like a miniature society," said Mr. Wongsopa, "a model of what we would like society to manifest one day, so that all members of this mini-society will grow up to be loving and contributing members of the community at large with the realization that they are world citizens." ✲

NEWS BRIEF

Hospital Bayan wins government support

PALACIOS, Honduras – Hospital Bayan, a Bahá'í-sponsored community hospital and medical center, has entered into a three-year agreement with the Ministry of Health and the municipality.

Under the agreement, which was signed 4 June 1998, the Ministry of Health will provide physicians, nurses, and laboratory personnel to Bayan; the municipal government will provide a degree of financial assistance, and Bayan itself will provide the hospital facility. A local administrative council will be formed and will have the responsibility for setting policies and administrative procedures.

"Bayan's mission is to develop the capacity of the population to make and execute decisions in favor of their own material and spiritual well-being," said Dr. Houshang Sabripour, Bayan's Executive Director. "We see this agreement as part of that process, a process in which the community, the government, and Bayan have now joined forces."

Established in 1985 by two Bahá'í doctors and their wives on Honduras' isolated northeast coast, Hospital Bayan has been struggling to meet the needs of the Black Carib (Garifuna) and indigenous Miskito people, whose the main occupations are subsistence fishing and subsistence farming – and they have been largely unable to provide local support for the Hospital. ✲

Eighth International Convention a showcase of diversity

HAIFA – More than 1,100 Bahá'ís from around the world gathered here at the end of April to choose the membership of the international governing council of the worldwide Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice.

Delegates came from 161 countries for the four-day gathering, which was held 29 April-2 May 1998. The council is elected every five years and this year's International Convention was the eighth since 1963, when the Universal House of Justice was first elected.

Composed of nine individuals, the Universal House of Justice guides the activities and institutions of the worldwide Bahá'í community, which consists of more than five million people in over 230 countries and territories. According to the 1998 Encyclopedia Britannica yearbook, the Bahá'í Faith is the second-most widespread religion in the world, after Christianity.

"The International Convention is the culmination of a distinctive electoral process that combines administrative and religious elements," said Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community. "Since there is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, the community is governed by elected councils composed of ordinary believers. These bodies function primarily by consensus, reaching their decisions through a combination of consultation and prayer.

"The Universal House of Justice, which oversees the entire world community, is the keystone of this administrative structure. In addition to administrative and judicial functions, it has the power to supplement the religious laws laid down by Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, through new legislation, allowing the religion to evolve and adapt to new circumstances. Since all the Bahá'ís of the world look to this body for guidance and leadership, the selection of its membership is a matter of great importance to us."

"The electoral process itself has some unusual features, and it stands as a functioning model of global governance," said Mr. Lincoln. "The electors are the members of the 175 national bodies, who have themselves been elected by delegates from all parts of their respective countries in national conventions held a year earlier. They have twelve months to prepare themselves for the heavy responsibility of voting for the individuals indicated by their own conscience alone, without any electioneering or even a slate of candidates. Not only is the vote cast by secret ballot, but the electors are forbidden to discuss their choices among themselves or with any other person. The only assistance is the serene and prayerful atmosphere which prevails during the balloting."

Delegates to the Eighth International Convention came from some 161 countries. Many wore their native dress to Convention meetings, offering a showcase of the world's diversity.

Elected were Ali Nakhjavani, Peter Khan, Adib Taherzadeh, Glenford Mitchell, Ian Semple, Hooper Dunbar, Farzam Arbab, Douglas Martin, and Hushmand Fatheazam.

In addition to the election, which was the opening event on 29 April, the Convention included consultation on major issues facing the Bahá'í community, such as the promotion of integrated patterns of community development, the education of children, moral development, elevating the status of women, and relations with non-governmental organizations and national and international institutions, as well as those issues of concern to individual Bahá'ís such as the importance of personal responsibility and the impact of prayer.

The Haifa-Acre region of Israel is the administrative and spiritual centre of the worldwide Bahá'í community. The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, the final resting place of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is located near Acre, and the Shrine of the Báb, Forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, is located on Mount Carmel in Haifa. The Universal House of Justice has its Seat in Haifa. ❋

In Norway, a classical composer strives for a new musical paradigm

Lasse Thoresen and his wife, Britt Strandlie Thoresen, during a quiet moment in Bergen.

Lasse Thoresen, well-known in his native country, integrates meditation and music within the complex framework of classical composition; a new CD and a book map out his intended direction.

BERGEN, Norway — Even though he is widely recognized as one of Norway's top composers of modern classical music, Lasse Thoresen has no illusions about what that means in terms of drawing a crowd.

"What is the essence of paranoia?" he joked as he sat in an audience at the Bergen International Music Festival in May, waiting for a concert to begin. "That would be to be sitting in the second row at a new classical music concert and thinking that there is someone behind you."

In a somewhat more serious tone, he explained: "I recognize that the young generation is seeking less and less to listen to classical music. And so I've accustomed myself to small audiences. When I was in my twenties I considered the options of playing jazz or pop music. But I decided it was better to have my compositions played for audiences who came to listen to music rather than to have a beer."

More to the point, Dr. Thoresen is pursuing a lofty goal — one that runs counter to predominant trends in modern music: to create a new type of spiritually inspiring work that reflects what he sees as the religious paradigm for today.

And, indeed, Dr. Thoresen's ability to blend art and religion is at the core of what critics have come to appreciate in his work. Recipient of the 1987 Norwegian Critic's Prize, he was also awarded the 1995 "Work of the Year" by the Norwegian Society of Composers and was selected as the Festival Composer for the prestigious Bergen International Music Festival in 1996. The previous year, one of his compositions was sung by famed Norwegian opera singer Anne Lise Berntsen in the opening ceremony of the NGO Forum at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen.

"He's not a household name, but only the pop stars are," said Mona Levin, editor of *Listen to Norway*, a major national music magazine. "But I love Lasse's music. It's ethereal. It has an atmosphere that makes it different from so much of the other music of our time. His music sounds musical to the ear and yet there is a universe of thought and idea and religious feeling behind it."

Music and Meditation

In this regard, Dr. Thoresen's career may well be poised for a new level of recognition. Last fall, a top Norwegian choral group performed a new series of compositions before a spellbound audience in Oslo Univer-

sity Hall, venue until 1995 for the Nobel Prize award ceremonies. The Compact Disk (CD) recording made from that concert has since won praise from classical music reviewers in this country.

In a parallel direction, this summer a British publishing house, George Ronald, will publish an English translation of a book by Dr. Thoresen. Entitled *Unlocking the Gate of the Heart*, it also deals with spiritual themes, offering an in-depth analysis of the meditation practices suggested in the Bahá'í writings, a field that has been little explored in print.

Spending a few days with Dr. Thoresen offers a glimpse into how the powers of the intellect and the spiritual qualities of the heart can be fused in a singular artistic vision.

"Music and meditation aren't that different," Dr. Thoresen explained. "There is a tradition in the West for music to deal with existential and religious and philosophical questions. And the expression of these ideas through sound is certainly more challenging and profound in classical music than in the tradition of popular music.

"So for me, my life and work have been an exploration process. Not only of sound, but of the correlates of sound in my psyche. The point of art is to show phenomena as they appear to the consciousness, so that you come closer to showing reality as we each perceive it.

"Now, if you look to religious revelation, it is also always using metaphors and symbols. And everyone, at each different stage in his or her life, will always find new meanings in these symbols. So, in a way, both art and religion employ ambiguity as their greatest resource," said Dr. Thoresen.

Virtually all of his compositions since 1971, when he became a member of the Bahá'í Faith, have incorporated spiritual themes. The set of compositions on his new CD, for example, which is entitled *From the Sweet-Scented Streams of Eternity*, is entirely built around words from the holy texts of the Bahá'í writings.

"His beliefs are very integrated in his art," said Åse Kleveland, a former minister of culture in Norway who has long been familiar with Thoresen's work. "In our Scandinavian culture, most people think of religion as something very separate. It is something you do in your spare time. But not with Lasse."

Far from being sentimental or syrupy, Dr. Thoresen's compositions are extremely complex in their melodies, rhythms and scoring, requiring much of performers. The first choral group to attempt the set of compositions on *From the Sweet-Scented Streams of Eternity* gave up halfway through the task, finding one of the pieces too difficult to learn in the time given.

"It is difficult music to perform," said Peter Tornquist, chairman of the board of the Norwegian Soloists' Choir, which successfully premiered the complete set of compositions last fall. Mr. Tornquist nevertheless believes that the result was worth the effort.

"When the concert was given, it was late at night and the audience was restless and not absolutely happy," he said, explaining that no one knew exactly what to expect. "But from the first moment, and on through 70 minutes of choral music, the audience was absolutely still — no one even rustled a program. And it was absolutely sacred. It was the experience of being able to hear a religious message, one that was without preaching but rather was an artistic statement. There are no clear associations to the musical experiences you have had before."

Dr. Thoresen is modest about his accomplishments, noting that despite the critical acclaim, the actual CD has so far sold few copies. Yet, clearly, he is happy that others have been able to see the connection between spirituality and his work.

"As in all other great religions, there is in the Bahá'í Faith an essence of mysticism," Dr. Thoresen wrote in the notes to *Sweet-Scented Streams*. "The human spirit must

"Both art and religion employ ambiguity as their greatest resource."

– Lasse Thoresen

During his stay in Bergen this year, Lasse Thoresen visited the home of Edvard Grieg, Norway's most famous composer. There, he was invited to play at Grieg's piano. A number of tourists are shown listening in the background.

At the Bergen International Music Festival, composer Lasse Thoresen, fourth from the left, listens intently while a Corsican folk group gives an impromptu concert. Many of Dr. Thoresen's compositions incorporate folk music themes and the study of folk songs has been a particular passion.

undergo a metamorphosis and be transformed until it reflects divine qualities. Prayer and meditation are important means, and music can be used to further reinforce the effect of the process.

"According to the scriptures of the Bahá'í religion, music is a ladder by which the soul can ascend to attain higher realms of the spirit. My hope is that this combination of sacred texts and music will give the listener an insight into the eternal and invisible kingdom, hidden in the hearts of men."

Life as an Exploration

Through both music and meditation, Dr. Thoresen's life has been an exploration of such themes, a constant search to understand the processes of individual transformation and the role that music can play in advancing them.

Born 18 October 1949 in Oslo, the son of the director of a small printing company who rose from working class roots, Dr. Thoresen says that he loved music almost as far back as he can remember. At the initiative of his parents, he began taking piano lessons at age seven; by 15 he was an accompanist for his school's choir; and at 16 he had composed his first piece.

As a child, he was "spontaneously religious." Yet by the time he wrote his first composition, Dr. Thoresen had began to question what he'd been taught. "The atmosphere at my school was very intellectual and I soon became a committed atheist," he said. "And as a young intellectual it seemed somehow illogical to believe in God."

In 1968, however, the year of his graduation, a number of events forced Dr. Thoresen to reevaluate his beliefs. His father had a heart attack. He also went into the military for his required service. And his longtime girlfriend — who had greatly influenced his atheism — left him.

"But most of all, it was the shock of my father dying," he said. "I hadn't understood the reality of death. So suddenly I found myself being an atheist, faced with the understanding that that is the fate of everyone. And this caused me to have an enormous crisis of anxiety and fear."

Having already rejected Christianity, his search for peace of mind took him in alternative directions. He read Greek philosophy, as well as Buddhist and Hindu scripture, and took up the practice of meditation. "This opened a whole new world to me," he said. "I sometimes spent four hours a day in meditation and yoga exercises at the beginning of the 1970s." At the same time, he studied philosophy at Oslo University and music composition at the Music Conservatory of Oslo.

Red Hot Iron

"During this period, I made two decisions — that the only thing worth living for, really, was eternal life, and that the only vocation I could ever sustain was to compose music," he said. "I sometimes think that we all must have a rod of iron in our souls and, through red hot emotion, you can bend it in a certain direction. And once you have bent it and it cools, it more or less defines the fundamentals of your

"I sometimes think that we all must have a rod of iron in our souls and, through red hot emotion, you can bend it in a certain direction. And once you have bent it and it cools, it more or less defines the fundamentals of your life."

– Lasse Thoresen

life. And so I have been stuck with these two decisions ever since."

In 1971, during a summer course on meditation, he heard about the Bahá'í Faith. "I was cooking dinner and I had burned my food in the pan and so I went to a neighbor's flat to see if they had a cleaning brush," he said. "They were holding an introductory meeting on the Bahá'í Faith and I stayed."

He was given a book of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Faith's Founder. "It seemed very much to be a revelation from God," said Dr. Thoresen. "It fit in very well with what I knew of Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita. And it also seemed to fit the world situation today. Because, being enrolled at the same time in the Red Student Front, I had an appreciation for the world's problems."

Dr. Thoresen soon became deeply involved with the Faith. He made a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, in 1975. The next year he was elected as Secretary of the national Bahá'í community of Norway, an unpaid position which nevertheless demands a great deal of day-to-day practical and administrative work. Dr. Thoresen served in that role for three years, until 1979.

During that period he began to have success as a composer. In 1976, his first major chamber work, "The Garden," was inaugurated in the chamber music room of the Oslo Concert Hall, representing his breakthrough as a composer. And in 1979 a multimedia work, *Skapelser* ("Creations"), was commissioned for and premiered at the 10th anniversary of the Høvikodden Arts Centre. It was later adapted as a TV ballet.

As his career progressed, Dr. Thoresen took a position as a professor at the Norwegian State Academy for Music, where he still teaches. He is known, for example, for his expertise in the creation of electronic music, and, at the other extreme, for his study of aboriginal Norwegian folk music, from which he has drawn extensively for its distinctive rhythms and tonalities.

"His music is a dialectic involving very simple and extraordinarily complex elements," Ms. Levin wrote in *Listen to Norway* two years ago. "His vision is conceived and formulated in a holistic combination of harmonies, calculated with the help of mathematical formulas, and emotional and spiritual undertones that often come from folk roots — oral traditions, chorales, Gregorian chants."

Dr. Thoresen puts it more simply. "My career is really not all that glorious compared to that of numerous other composers and musicians," he said. "I like to explore new fields. I have this interest not only in finding the similarities between things, but the differences between things. In this way, you start to appreciate how diverse humanity is. That becomes an exercise in seeing things from another human's point of view. And I think that is useful." ❋

"His vision is formulated in a holistic combination of harmonies, calculated with the help of mathematical formulas, and emotional and spiritual undertones that often come from folk roots..."

– Mona Lewin, editor, Listen to Norway

FAMILY

An International Conference on Family, Social Security, and Social Welfare, held 3-6 April in Beijing, drew some 120 participants and was cosponsored by the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Jinglun Family Centre in Beijing, the China Association for Family Culture, and Landegg Academy, a Bahá'í-inspired educational institution in Switzerland. Shown left to right are Dai Zhou, chairman of the Conference, Dr. Hossain Danesh, rector of Landegg Academy, and Professor Chen Yi Yun, director of the Jinglun Family Centre.

In Stockholm, a global dialogue focuses on the social impact of the expansion of microcredit

Microcredit, *continued from page 1*

How we can get these two positions together will determine the real outcome. Is the purpose of microfinance to give the economy a boost or to provide for human well-being, going beyond finances?

"The Marshall Plan was based on the premise that enough financial resources will lift humanity out of poverty," said Ms. Rodey, who is executive director of the EarthRise Development Network, a USA-based microfinance consultancy, and a member of the EBBF. "Yet the gap in income globally has more than doubled in the last 30 years. The global economy has bypassed one fifth of the world's population. We are still promoting the growth-led model. The sustainable model is a new way of thinking based on principles of equity and justice. Financial services alone cannot provide the base for development."

UNESCO Secretary-General Federico Mayor addressed the Dialogue during a joint plenary, held in conjunction with the First UNESCO Business Forum on Enterprise, Human Development & Culture in the Global Age, as the Business Forum component of the UNESCO intergovernmental meeting was known. Other well-known participants in the Microfinance Dialogue included Muhammad Yunus, director of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, one of the world's leading experts on microcredit; Jean-François Giovannini, deputy director-general of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation; Rosalind Copisarow, chair of Fundusz Mikro in Poland; Christopher Dunford, president of Freedom from Hunger; John Hatch, founder of FINCA International; and Monica Hernandez, vice president of Banco Solidario, an affiliate of ACCION in Ecuador.

"Microfinance is an emerging business and a learning process for us all."

– Prof. Muhammad Yunus

Increased interest by banks

Due in part to last year's Microcredit Summit, an increasing interest is being shown at all levels in using microfinance to alleviate poverty. Held 2-4 February 1997 in Washington, DC, the Summit brought together some 2,200 people from 112 countries to forge support for a global action plan to promote small-scale lending and entrepreneurship at the grassroots level worldwide. The stated goal of the Summit was to expand access to microcredit to some 100 million of the world's poorest families by the year 2005. Currently, some 8 million families are estimated to receive microcredit loans, which typically run from $50 to $500.

The Summit drew the attention and participation not only of many NGOs who had long been involved in microcredit but also of major international corporations and banks, as well as intergovernmental institutions like the UN and the World Bank. Many of these new players pledged to commit significant new resources to microcredit efforts.

Although microcredit programs vary by region, one of their key innovations is the 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 assisting people to organize such groups and in administering such loans, which many

One important feature of the Global Dialogue on Microfinance was the opportunity for face-to-face dialogue between individuals involved in the various facets of microcredit. Shown above is one of the small "dialogue sessions" held during the meeting. Such sessions sought to ensure, for example, that bankers met with NGO representatives and/or that UN agency officials heard from corporate executives.

banks had believed were too small to be profitable. Yet some of these programs have been highly successful, achieving repayment rates of more than 90 percent.

The participants in this year's Dialogue stressed repeatedly that microcredit programs, which are also known as microfinance programs, remain among the best methods for alleviating global poverty. The often-expressed concern was, however, that the new partners in the microcredit movement should not just focus on the bottom line and/or simply seek to "scale-up" microcredit concepts to reach small entrepreneurs, who may be more likely to be profitable.

"Microfinance is an emerging business and a learning process for us all," said Prof. Yunus of the Grameen Bank. "It is different from our former approaches. Credit means trust. Conventional banking took over the word and made a business on distrust. Legal fine print is used to tie people down. Millions of loans — $4 million daily — are given without lawyers with a basically very different system. This is a different animal altogether, a system that is based on people. We need to be selective about banking methods, because the world of trust is quite different from the world of distrust."

Prof. Yunus was critical, for example, of new micro-banking regulations that some large institutions have recently proposed. "From the world of distrust, consultants come to establish a 'regulatory framework' and collect high fees. But first comes self-regulation. This should emerge from the industry itself.

"An unpolished diamond"

"Microcredit can grow on its own, developing skills and methodology. It's a new industry and now it may look like an unpolished diamond. But don't throw it away; later it will dazzle," Prof. Yunus said.

Ms Copisarow, who as chair of Fundusz Mikro heads one of the leading microfinance practitioners in Eastern and Central Europe, said she believes that microcredit has the potential to bring banking back to its origins.

"Microcredit is educating bankers worldwide about the real meaning of banking," Ms Copisarow said. "'*Credo*' means 'I believe, I trust,' which is a concept that banking has long done away with. The practice of the Medici family to give private money is a thing of the past. Perhaps the next 20 years will be the opportunity to go back to these banking roots. Everything can be approached in two ways: either to gain maximum profit or to gain maximum well-being. It was normal in the 15th century to view banking as a means to gain maximum well-being. This perspective could now be returning to the banking world via microfinance."

Focus on children, families

Mr. Dunford of Freedom from Hunger, a USA-based antipoverty NGO, likewise stressed the importance of values and moral principles, such as an emphasis on social equity, the advancement of women, and the need to ensure that the poorest of the poor — and especially children — are helped.

"The standards...for financial performance should have a balanced approach including efficiency on one side and social equity on the other," said Mr. Dunford. "It is time to step back and re-examine whether microfinance is following this path. If it is driven by principles with a higher purpose, then we can proceed along the present path. Children should be the focus, and we should have guide lines to assure that children have a future with a family, culture and a sense of purpose. Best practices need to be oriented to have the best impact on children's lives.

"What we have now is a mass production of the traditional microcredit models," he added. "No real forum exists to discuss innovation in microfinance and we need to explore new designs. Bank standards shouldn't be used to stifle creative potential. Maybe we should build a whole new system of banking. Here the NGO's have the responsibility to regain leadership in microfinancing. The genius of microfinance is the view that the poor should be part of the world market. We need financial engineers but this movement is much too important to leave it over to the business world. The approach must be equally value-driven as well as market oriented."

Larbi Mebtouche, head of the Reintegration and Self-Reliance Unit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, reported on some of the ideas discussed in one of the working sessions held during the Dialogue.

"The key element is to clearly define the objectives: is it self dignity or efficiency?" he said. "We need to look at the social impact that microfinance makes and to be sure that a sense of ownership on the part of the borrowers is created in order to create

"We are at a critical point in the microfinance movement where a split in thinking is occurring. On one side there is the need to find funding sources and on the other is the need to best serve the interests of the poor."

– Barbara Rodey, EarthRise Development Network

sustainability. Savings should be a part of the program, right from the beginning. It doesn't work to replicate a model, the context of culture needs to be taken into account. Truthfulness and trustworthiness are basic for success. Displaced people need to be taken into account, even if they don't have an address."

Organizers of the meeting said they hope it will be the beginning of a larger dialogue to deal with questions about how a sustainable model for development can be promoted.

"We hope that by looking ahead with wisdom and foresight we can avoid some of the development mistakes of the past," said George Starcher, secretary-general of the EBBF. "Our goal here was to explore the most challenging issues in microfinance and to face the question: Twenty years from now what will we have achieved?"

The EBBF is a network of some 250 business people in 46 countries that aims to promote values and ethics in business. The Progressio Foundation, which seeks to "foster human progress through enterprise," organized and chaired the World Business Forum at the 1996 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul. The Dialogue also received support from the Monsanto Corporation, Telenor, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and The Imperial Finance Group of Austria. ❋

– *Reported by Janith Loewen*

BOOK REVIEW

Do They Hear You When You Cry

Review, *continued from page 14*

who was far more traditional. Her uncle and aunt soon contracted for her marriage to an older man (who, to Ms. Kassindja's dismay, already had three wives). One Monday in October, with no previous notice, her aunt brought in an array of clothing, jewelry and other gifts. "It's all yours," her aunt announced. "It's from your husband."

"I don't have a husband," Ms. Kassindja said.

"You will soon, Fauziya. Today's the day," she said, adding: "Don't worry about the circumcision. We won't do that today. We'll wait until Wednesday for that."

In accordance with custom, that same day Ms. Kassindja was dressed in a wedding gown and a wedding photo was taken; papers were also issued indicating that she was indeed now married and the property of her new husband.

Ms. Kassindja panicked. Her mother's sister had died from complications following FGM, as had numerous other young women that she knew. As practiced in Togo, FGM entailed being held down while a *nachane* – a tribal woman who performs such rituals — scrapes away almost all of a woman's visible parts, usually with a dull and unsterilized knife or blade. The woman is then bound from hips to knees for 40 days of healing. The risk of infection is high. But should she survive, the woman is then pronounced fit for her husband.

"I don't have a husband," Ms. Kassindja said.

"You will soon, Fauziya," her aunt replied. "Today's the day. Don't worry about the circumcision. We won't do that today. We'll wait until Wednesday for that."

With the help of her older sister, Ms. Kassindja escaped her aunt's house, crossed the border to Ghana and caught a plane to Germany. After two months there, where she felt isolated because of her inability to speak German, she became convinced that her best hope lay in going to the United States, where she also had relatives. An African friend told her she could easily fly to America on someone else's passport and then, immediately upon arriving, ask for asylum.

Placed in chains

In her naiveté, she followed that advice. When she surrendered the passport upon arrival at the Newark, NJ, international airport on 17 December 1994, however, she was promptly arrested, placed in chains and delivered to a special INS detention center designed for illegal aliens who had been "excluded" – caught, as it were, before officially arriving in the US. As such, she learned later, she had limited rights under US law. And thus began her long journey through the US immigration legal system.

From her point of view, Ms. Kassindja's ordeal now featured two main themes: the deplorable conditions of her detention and the manifestly capricious way she was treated by the court system run by the INS, which is separate from the American main court system that applies to people who are "officially" in the United States, legal or not.

Her detention was marked by poor food, inadequate medical care (Ms. Kassindja suffered from severe asthma and was later diagnosed with an ulcer), periods of isolated confinement, and numerous transfers from

one institution to another, which separated her along the way from belongings, new friends and any sense of security.

Her experience with the INS court system featured inadequate access to counsel, a seemingly arbitrary system for scheduling court dates, and, at her main hearing, a judge who seemed to care more about chit-chatting with Ms. Kassindja's lawyers than probing into the facts of her case or the unique legal situation it posed.

Ms. Kassindja was ultimately rescued by a group of Americans who learned of her plight and fought hard to save her. Her principal advocate was Ms. Bashir, who was doing a summer internship with the lawyer who took Ms. Kassindja's case. A law student at American University in Washington, DC, Ms. Bashir had since her undergraduate days taken it upon herself to learn everything she could about FGM, with a special focus on its relation to international human rights law. Because of that interest, she was assigned Ms. Kassindja's case.

The pair bonded almost immediately, coming to feel a tremendous sense of friendship and sisterhood that deepened as the case progressed. Ms. Kassindja tells how, at the end of their first jailhouse meeting, held just a few hours before her all-important asylum hearing, Ms. Bashir promised to fight onward, whatever the outcome of that day's court appearance.

"We joined hearts"

"' If the judge denies us, then we'll keep fighting until we win,'" Ms. Kassindja quotes Ms. Bashir as saying. "'I'll do whatever it takes.'

"That was one of the most moving moments of my life," Ms. Kassindja continues. "We joined hearts in that moment. We were sisters now. She knew it. I knew it. I wasn't alone anymore. I'd never be alone again."

Sadly, the asylum hearing did not go well. Ms. Bashir took the legal position that FGM was a form of persecution and torture, to which Ms. Kassindja was subject to because of her immutable membership in a certain class of people (her tribe and gender), making her eligible for asylum under US law. But the immigration judge assigned to the case denied the asylum petition. That was in August 1995.

Devastated, Ms. Kassindja returned to detention and began to give serious thought to returning to Togo and facing whatever fate lay in store for her there. In the meantime, Ms. Bashir traveled to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. There she began to network with other women in various NGOs with long experience in refugee law, FGM and human rights, telling them of Ms. Kassindja's plight.

As a result, a number of women, men and organizations arose to support Ms. Kassindja. Of critical importance, Ms. Bashir convinced Karen Musalo of the International Human Rights Clinic to take Ms. Kassindja's case to a higher court. Ms. Bashir also enlisted the help of Equality Now, a human rights advocacy group for women. Through contacts made by Equality Now, the defense team succeeded in winning widespread support for Ms. Kassindja both among prominent people (at one point, Ms. Kassindja received significant support from US Congresswomen Pat Schroeder, Cynthia McKinney, and Maxine Waters) and in the news media.

This combination of good legal work, the right connections and publicity led, first, to a parole for Ms. Kassindja, on 24 April 1996, and then, on 13 June 1996, to a complete reversal of the first judge's decision to deny asylum.

In making the reversal, the higher court involved in the case opened the way for other women who might be fleeing FGM to seek asylum in the United States, putting the US into the vanguard among countries that recognize this as a valid human rights issue. It is an accomplishment that Ms. Kassindja judges to be worth the pain and suffering she endured.

"Now that I know about FGM, not just as something that almost happened to me but as a worldwide problem, I know I have to speak out about it," she writes at the end of the book. "The people of my tribe are good people. But good people can do bad things. They need to think carefully about what they're doing and why, not just keep on doing it because that's how things have always been done in the past. Tradition doesn't make something right."*

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Correction:

In the January-March 1998 issue of ONE COUNTRY, in the photograph caption on page 3, the last name of Afaf Mahfouz was misspelled as "Mahfous." We regret the error.

Women, putting differences aside with love and faith, fight a terrible tradition

Do They Hear You When You Cry

By Fauziya Kassindja and Layli Miller Bashir

Delacorte Press

New York

At first glance, *Do They Hear You When You Cry* seems to be a fairly straightforward institutional horror story, about an African woman who flees to America to escape female genital mutilation at the hands of her tradition-bound family in Togo and ends up imprisoned for more than a year in the United States as an illegal immigrant.

But at the heart of Fauziya Kassindja's story is something much more: a tale of true sisterhood with regard to the relationship she developed with a young law school student, Layli Miller Bashir, who became one of Ms. Kassindja's strongest advocates and a key figure in her ultimate release and vindication.

Further, as told by Ms. Kassindja, her tale is also one of great faith. A devout Muslim, who was only 17 years old when she took the bold step of leaving her home country alone, Ms. Kassindja says repeatedly it was only her strong faith in God that enabled her to survive the culture shock and demeaning conditions that she found upon arrival in the United States.

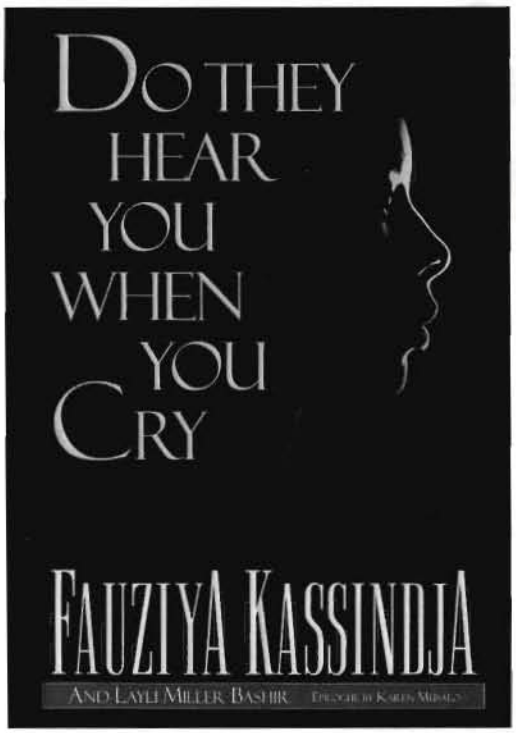
What's more, she also unequivocally believes that God led Ms. Bashir, who is a Bahá'í, to take up her cause. In this regard, the story is amazing for the way in which it shows how two women from very different cultures — and religions — can embrace each other wholeheartedly in a spirit of love and faith.

As such, the book — which reads like a fast-paced novel and contains evocative descriptions of Ms. Kassindja's homeland, family and the other refugee women she met along the way — is inspirational. It also teaches much about how women relate to each other and are often able to put aside disparities that, for many men, would likely be a source of conflict.

The story begins after Ms. Kassindja has spent nearly 16 months in prison and feels she can no longer bear the often deplorable conditions of her incarceration and the indignity of being locked up with criminals. She decides that she must, at last, submit to the will of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and return to Togo, which would in all likelihood mean that she would have to submit to having her exterior genitals removed, something known in her culture as female circumcision and to the world at large as female genital mutilation (FGM).

Having set the stage, Ms. Kassindja then flashes back to her childhood, which was idyllic. Born into a relatively wealthy family in Kpalimé, Ms. Kassindja was the youngest of four daughters and enjoyed the love of a doting father who encouraged her at every step and, when she was a teenager, sent her to a private English-language school in neighboring Ghana.

Although it was traditional for all young women from her father's tribe, the Koussountu, to undergo FGM before marriage, Ms. Kassindja's father detested the custom and protected his older daughters



from the practice up to and into their marriages. But in January 1993, while Ms. Kassindja was away at school in Ghana, her father died suddenly.

She was summoned home and, according to the custom of her tribe, fell under the guardianship of her father's older brother,

***Review,** continued on page 14*