

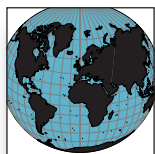


ONE COUNTRY

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

INSIDE

Newsletter of the Bahá'í
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Perspective: How literacy is fundamental to development.



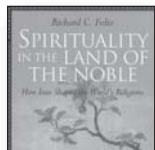
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The Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT) helps participants acquire the skills, knowledge, and incentive for a "lifelong self-improvement plan" — coupled with an emphasis on moral education and interreligious harmony.



A literacy class, under a tree, conducted by UPLIFT in northwest Uganda.

ONGIDO, Nebbi District, Uganda — In the past, when Judith Kojjo's children had bouts with malaria, she took them to a witchdoctor. But since taking literacy classes offered by the Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT), she has learned to quell malarial fevers with a tea made from the leaves of a common tree.

"I don't take the children to the witchdoctor anymore, I first administer traditional medicine made from neem leaves," said Ms. Kojjo, a 53-year-old mother of eight, who lives in this village of some 400 in the West Nile region of Uganda.

"I prepare it by adding one cup of water to the leaves and then boiling it," she said. "I give one small spoonful three times a day to a child suffering from malaria. If there is no improvement after this treatment, then I go to the hospital."

While traditional literacy programs focus mainly on getting adults to read and write, the UPLIFT method incorporates other kinds of knowledge — such as how to combat malaria, how to make compost, and how to obtain better nutrition — into its outreach.

The result is a program that, in addition to teaching literacy, helps participants acquire the skills, knowledge, and incentive that are the basis of what the project calls a "lifelong self-improvement plan." Also fundamental to that process is an emphasis on moral education and interreligious harmony.

These side benefits have not gone unnoticed by local officials, who praise UPLIFT for its integrated approach, the dynamism of its workers, and the effect on participants.

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Literacy and Development

Language is fundamental to human consciousness. Without language, higher levels of abstract thought and insight are impossible.

Language is also fundamental to human society. Without language, higher levels of social structure and culture are unattainable.

As an extension of language, the written word likewise makes possible the achievement of ever greater intellectual and social accomplishment. It is the repository of humanity's accumulated knowledge and the building block for innovation, creativity, and social and economic development of every kind.

In today's globalized world, moreover, the written word has become essential to our collective advancement. Not only are those who cannot read or write cut off from their own opportunities for advancement, but society as a whole is also deprived of the potential contributions that individuals can make to the good of all.

It is a crisis of the worst kind, then, that nearly a billion people worldwide cannot read or write.

According to the United Nations, more than 861 million adults are illiterate; in addition, some 113 million children are not in school and risk living out their adult lives as illiterates.

The period from 2003–2013 has been proclaimed as the United Nations Literacy Decade. And the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has adopted a simple but powerful slogan for the Decade: "Literacy as Freedom."

It is a slogan that perceptively encompasses the idea that knowing how to read and write is about more than those simple practical things, such as processing a business transaction, reading a letter, or finding one's way, that are usually given as reasons to banish illiteracy.

The slogan illustrates the way in which illiteracy also prevents an individual from participating in the give and take of democracy and other forms of social interaction that make diverse societies work in the modern world.

The ability to read and write is recog-

nized as a fundamental human right in the Bahá'í teachings. "Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent," wrote Bahá'u'lláh more than 100 years ago. "Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."

Around the world in recent years, Bahá'í communities have become deeply involved in literacy projects. In recent years, Bahá'í-inspired projects in Bolivia, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chad, Chile, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guyana, India, Malawi, Mongolia, Nepal, Niger, the Philippines, Russia, and the United States of America, among other countries, have addressed literacy in a variety of ways.

The global experience of Bahá'í communities in promoting literacy can offer much as the world considers how best to promote literacy during the UN Decade.

In particular, Bahá'í efforts to promote literacy generally take an integrated and holistic view of the challenge posed by illiteracy. As described in the cover story for this issue of ONE COUNTRY, for example, the Bahá'í-inspired Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation (UPLIFT) incorporates elements of community participation, practical self-help, and moral development into its literacy curriculum.

Such concepts are part of a much needed redefinition of education that frees it from the traditional focus on economic results and acknowledges its transformational role in both individual lives and social organization. Basic education, literacy, and vocational education, in other words, should not focus merely on the acquisition of a few skills and the grasp of a few simple facts.

Rather, the direction needed for such programs should stem from an underlying realization that all individuals have the right and capacity "to become conscious subjects of their own growth, and active, responsible participants in a systematic process of building a new world order," as was stated by the Bahá'í International Community in a 1989 position statement on education that was developed for the World Decade for Cultural Development.

One critical aspect of this redefinition of

priorities is a realization of the importance of moral and spiritual development in any effort that seeks to uplift and empower the underprivileged and impoverished.

In the Bahá'í view, as the 1989 statement points out, the mind is “the fruit of a spiritual dimension of existence which distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation and endows them with potentialities that become apparent through a process of spiritual and material evolution. While acknowledging the value of material forces in the advancement of civilization, Bahá'ís attribute a central role in this evolutionary process to the religious teachings of diverse peoples which constitute the wellspring of the cultural history of the human race.”

Language plays a key role in the development of the mind — and in the development of spirituality.

In virtually all of the world's great religions, there is an emphasis on the creative power of the “word” — especially the Word of God — as the key to human transformation, empowerment, and advancement.

“The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh. “The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked.”

“When words and actions are not directed by a moral force, scientific knowledge and technological know-how conduce as readily to misery as they do to prosperity and happiness,” the 1989 statement said. “But moral values are not mere constructs of social processes. Rather, they are expressions of the inner forces that operate in the spiritual reality of every human being, and education must concern itself with these forces if it is to tap the roots of motivation and produce meaningful and lasting change.”

The overriding spiritual and moral principle for today is the oneness of humanity. From this principle, which reflects the reality of humankind, comes a whole range of corollary principles — such as the equality of women and men, the equality of all races, and the necessity for recognizing our global interdependence.

These principles are, of course, gradually diffusing themselves throughout the global culture, a result one would expect from the comprehension of such universal truths. However, full comprehension of these principles offers — as suggested in the quote above —

the means of unlocking new levels of human capacity, motivation, and development.

It is helpful, then, to draw out how the application of an understanding of humanity's spiritual reality can help in an undertaking like the promotion of literacy on a global basis.

“Some of these principles can be expressed in terms of values and imperatives, such as the compulsory nature of education, the importance of the role of the family, the urgency of promoting an awareness of the fundamental unity of humanity, the necessity of freeing people from religious fanaticism, and the need to abolish all forms of prejudice,” the 1989 statement said.

“Commitment to the unity of mankind implies a balance between a study of one's own cultural heritage and an exploration of those universal qualities that distinguish the entire human race. Awareness of the need to free people from religious bigotry and fanaticism gives rise to a non-sectarian yet spiritual approach to moral education. The zeal to abolish all forms of prejudice leads to policies that favor groups who have suffered systematic discrimination, including women, entire races, and disadvantaged social classes, to help them overcome the obstacles most social systems have incorporated into their structures.

“In connection with this policy, the education of girls is given primary importance, with boys and girls following the same curriculum so that women may take their place alongside men in the sciences and arts, commerce and public administration, and every other field of human endeavor,” the statement said.

In another statement, this time to the 48th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1992, the Bahá'í International Community said:

“The effectiveness of any individual grows as he is taught to appreciate through the exercise of his own faculties, the way in which diversity of faith enriches social life. Bahá'u'lláh urges the right of the individual to freely investigate truth for himself as a principle essential to the advancement of civilization. In order to exercise this capacity fully, however, one must be able to read. One great value of literacy, therefore, is the access it gives ordinary people to the scriptures of their own faith as well as to the sacred texts of other faiths.”

Literacy is freedom, then, in many more ways than one.*

In virtually all of the world's great religions, there is an emphasis on the creative power of the “word” — especially the Word of God — as the key to human transformation, empowerment and advancement.

In Australia, a look at “bioprospecting” and the knowledge of indigenous people

The search for new plant and animal substances with medicinal or other useful properties often deeply affects indigenous people.

SYDNEY, Australia – The D’harawal people, whose ancestral lands lie about a hour’s drive south of this metropolitan hub, understood how to use 1,794 plants for medicinal purposes. So it seemed quite fitting that Sydney was the site of a major international conference on “bioprospecting” in April.

Bioprospecting is the search for new plant and animal substances with medicinal or other useful properties. By one estimate, more than 50 percent of the most used medicines were developed from natural sources.

But bioprospecting often deeply affects indigenous people, as a member of the D’harawal made clear in a speech here.

“To our people, the community was the most important thing,” said Francis Bodkin, an Aboriginal descendent, author, teacher, and traditional storyteller who cited the figure of 1,794 medicinal plants. “What community are we helping by giving away our knowledge — the community of shareholders?”

“Plants can be used for good or ill,” Ms. Bodkin said. “If I give someone the knowledge, how do I know what they will do with it? I am responsible and so are the ancestors. We have to guard our knowledge. Our knowledge has not been

lost...we cannot give the knowledge away until there are safeguards it will only be used for the good.”

Ms. Bodkin was among more than 150 participants, many of them indigenous, at a conference titled “Indigenous Knowledge and Bioprospecting,” held 21–24 April at Macquarie University.

Speakers came from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom. The conference also brought together people from a variety of disciplines — law, history, science, economics and education — who shared their particular perspectives on this increasingly important issue.

Sponsored jointly by the Association for Bahá’í Studies and the University’s Centre for Environmental Law and Department of Indigenous Studies, along with five other university departments and centers, the conference was called to mark the close of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Peoples and to contribute towards social and economic development and the protection of the environment.

Presenters included people of Aboriginal, Maori, Native American, and other indigenous backgrounds. Over 40 talks were presented over the 4-day program by speakers ranging from world experts in their field to grassroots health and legal workers and advocates.

Among the points discussed were the contribution of indigenous peoples’ knowledge to the development of pharmaceuticals and herbal remedies; the importance of protecting the rights of indigenous peoples in the use of such knowledge; and impediments to protecting indigenous rights.

Quest for cures

Bioprospecting is increasing around the world in the search for cures for diseases such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, and for the development of other products such as cosmetics. Conference participants, for example, reported on current research into the Australia-

A group of Aboriginal dancers performed at the “Indigenous Knowledge and Bioprospecting” conference.



lian “Prickly Fanflower” for its potential cancer-fighting properties, and on South African research into some 600 plants in the quest for a cure for malaria.

Efforts such as these hold the promise of enormous advances in world health. They also offer the potential for material benefits to the indigenous communities that are the repositories of botanical knowledge. However, there is the risk of indigenous communities being bypassed in the race for scientific and commercial progress, and of their traditional ways of life being irreparably damaged.

“Those parts of the globe with the greatest biodiversity are also those inhabited by indigenous peoples,” said Celerina Balucan of Lourdes College in the Philippines, noting that indigenous peoples constitute approximately four percent of the world’s population.

“The relationship of these peoples to the land and its resources are paramount to their survival...their identity, culture, languages, philosophy of life, and spirituality are in a balanced relationship with all creation. Disturbance of the land for development activities threatens the survival and continuity of indigenous knowledge and biodiversity,” said Dr. Balucan.

The conference was opened by a traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony, symbolizing purification. Participants were welcomed by a representative of the Darug people, on whose traditional lands the city of Sydney now stands. An indigenous member of the New South Wales Parliament, Linda Burney, gave the opening address in which she pointed out that the Aboriginal culture is the oldest surviving culture on earth — a precious gift to the world.

On the first evening of the conference, participants were treated to a feast of cultural performances: an Aboriginal dance troupe performed traditional dances to the accompaniment of the didgeridoo; renowned Native American educator and traditional flute-player Kevin Locke performed the intricate and difficult Hoop Dance; and Sydney’s Bahá’í Cultural Group performed music and dance from the Pacific Islands.

Several speakers referred to the clash of cultures that exists between indigenous and dominant Western concepts of “ownership.” Aroha Mead, a Maori academic, said that most indigenous communities were founded on the principle of guardianship, not ownership. But modern states are now formulat-



ing laws relating to ownership over land, resources, species, all genetic properties, and traditional knowledge associated with these resources. Patents are being taken out on plants to such an extent that indigenous communities may no longer be able to use them, said Ms. Mead. It is very difficult for indigenous communities to fight companies and legal systems to prevent or revoke patents.

Ms. Mead said it is easy to misappropriate indigenous knowledge in the technological age. Cultural material provided for one purpose may end up being used for something quite different on the other side of the world — and there is no legal recourse available.

Anne Waters, a Native American philosopher, poet and lawyer, expressed the fear that bioresearch could result in disaster for indigenous peoples as their resources are co-opted, taken away, and made unavailable. Each species has a role to play in the balance of the environment that the human species needs for survival, said Dr. Waters. Disaster could play itself out through greed and arrogance.

International instruments

Henrietta Marrie, formerly of the UN Environment Programme Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, reported on recent developments in the global arena. The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture was adopted by the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in November 2001. Signed by 77 countries so far, the Treaty is regarded as a landmark, said Ms. Marrie, placing traditional and modern farmers on the same level, thus

Among the speakers at the conference were, left to right, Philip Kerr, Australia; Memory Elvin-Lewis, United States; Inotoli Zhimomi, Nagaland (India); Jim Kohen, Australia; Kevin Locke, United States; and Joanne Jamie, Australia.

Sponsored jointly by the Association for Bahá’í Studies and Macquarie University’s Centre for Environmental Law and Department of Indigenous Studies, along with five other university departments and centers, the conference considered the many aspects of “bioprospecting” and its impact.

"Patents are not applicable to all cultures...the law protects the interests and worldview of those who participate in its making, and indigenous people have not been involved."

– Ikechi Maduka Mgbeoji, Professor, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Toronto

Henrietta Marrie, formerly of the UN Environment Programme Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, reported on recent bioprospecting developments in the global arena.

protecting indigenous knowledge as well as farmers' rights.

The Treaty is concerned with conservation, sustainability, and equitable distribution of benefits. Taken together with related provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity, it provides another instrument through which local communities can pursue their rights to genetic resources and traditional knowledge at national and international levels, Ms. Marrie said.

An indigenous Australian herself, Ms. Marrie cited Australian bush food as an example of how an indigenous community could use its two precious assets — biodiversity and traditional knowledge — as a basis for economic development. An estimated 10,000 native plants can be used for food, and only a fraction of these are currently used by non-indigenous people. Sales of "bush tucker" were worth A\$1.4 million in 1996 but are expected to grow to A\$100 million. The bush tucker industry has the potential to replace the pastoral industry in outback Australia. However, she cautioned, indigenous value systems must be protected at the same time as communities benefit from their resources.

The legal context

Many speakers expressed concern that the current intellectual property regimes, with their basis in Western concepts of ownership and invention, are inadequate to justly pro-

tect and compensate indigenous peoples for their traditional knowledge. New creative solutions need to be found, they said, such as specially designed legal regimes.

Ikechi Maduka Mgbeoji, Professor, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Toronto, said the Western patent regime was designed in a European context and is in many ways unsuitable to deal with the protection and recognition of indigenous knowledge.

"The patent system was designed for machines, not for biology," said Dr. Mgbeoji. "Patents are not applicable to all cultures...the law protects the interests and worldview of those who participate in its making, and indigenous people have not been involved." He also said that indigenous knowledge has not received enough attention because of sexism and gender disempowerment, as traditional knowledge is often the province of women.

Jerzy Koopman, from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, said that when traditional knowledge is widely held, or in the "public domain," it is not possible to patent it because it no longer meets the legal requirement of novelty. Additionally, he said, a patent can only be issued when a new, industrially applicable product is brought into being. These and other barriers mean it is not possible to patent the majority of indigenous resources. Nevertheless, Mr. Koopman said, he has tracked down 600 patents where some kind of indigenous knowledge has been incorporated into the product. The largest holders of patents are not corporations, but universities, he added.

Yee Fen Lim, of Macquarie's Department of Law, said that the financial incentives to exploit traditional knowledge are high. "In 1995, the estimated market value of pharmaceutical derivatives from indigenous peoples' traditional medicines was US\$43 billion worldwide," said Ms. Lim. "Many ancient herbal remedies...find their way into high-priced Western pharmaceuticals without the consent of, or compensation to, the people who have used them for generations."

Sonia Smalacombe, of Australia's Charles Darwin University, said that legal language is sometimes inaccessible to many indigenous people. "Plain English versions need to be made of intellectual property and biodiversity legislation," said Dr. Smalacombe, who is a member of the Maramanindji people in the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. "Local com-



munities can understand technical concepts if it is explained to them.” While policies and declarations created in global arenas can have far-reaching effects, their outcomes need to be better disseminated locally so that indigenous people are more aware of their rights, she said.

The way forward

Chris Jones, one of the conference’s organizers, said the event pointed out the need for new social, legal, and political relationships based on justice. “We are all part of one human family, while we recognize the value and beauty of diversity,” he said. “This perspective of ‘one family’ needs to be applied to the issue of bioprospecting. While relationships between people are unequal, you cannot have a productive outcome.”

Among a range of solutions, Mr. Jones suggested the formation of regionally based, indigenous-owned pharmaceutical and herbal remedy companies as a means of overcoming inequality.

Several presenters gave accounts of projects that are currently being run in conjunction with Aboriginal communities. In Titjikala in Central Australia, the Plants for People Program aims to document and protect traditional knowledge about plants of cultural significance. The information is recorded on an electronic database to which access is restricted, to protect the intellectual property rights of community members. Professor Louis Evans of Curtin University in Western Australia pointed out the potential of traditional knowledge to develop plant-based enterprises to generate employment and wealth. She explained that not only

is the existing patent system problematic for protecting indigenous knowledge, but royalty payments by themselves do not generate employment.

In Western Australia, the Kimberley College of TAFE is working with Aboriginal businesses to cultivate the “gubinge” or wild plum, which is believed to contain the highest level of Vitamin C of any fruit in the world. Macquarie University is working with Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley and New South Wales to record and preserve indigenous botanical knowledge while protecting Aboriginal intellectual property. Access to indigenous foods could reduce health problems such as diabetes, which are adversely affecting Aboriginal people.

During the conference, an important workshop was held to launch a twelve-month project to revise university ethics guidelines relating to biodiversity research and benefit sharing with indigenous peoples. Macquarie University has committed A\$90,000 to this project, which supports the aims of the conference.

The conference program closed with a performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancing, in which the audience was invited to participate. The conference brought together a variety of disciplines, and the participants benefited by hearing different perspectives on this multi-faceted issue. The atmosphere of the gathering was characterized by friendliness and a genuine desire to advance the interests of indigenous peoples. The conference organizers plan to enable the relationships that were established to be maintained for the benefit of all.*

— by Jane McLachlan-Chew

“We are all part of one human family, while we recognize the value and beauty of diversity. This perspective of ‘one family’ needs to be applied to the issue of bioprospecting. While relationships between people are unequal, you cannot have a productive outcome.”

—Chris Jones, one of the conference’s organizers

New website offers online access to Bahá’í sacred writings

HAIFA, Israel — The Bahá’í International Community has launched an Internet website that makes available the sacred writings of the Bahá’í Faith in English, Arabic, and Persian.

The launch of the Bahá’í Reference Library, which also carries other Bahá’í publications, marks the first time that a voluminous and authoritative library of Bahá’í scripture has been available online.

“The site is expected to assist researchers, students of religion, and the general public worldwide in gaining greater access to the Bahá’í holy texts,” said Douglas Moore, director of the Office of Public Information of the Bahá’í International Community.

The Bahá’í Reference Library offers an extensive collection of Bahá’í holy scripture, which includes the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It also makes available works by Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice, and Bahá’í authors.

“It joins the family of Bahá’í International Community sites including, among others, the general information site, the news service, and the Bahá’í International Community’s statement library,” Mr. Moore said.

The address of the Bahá’í Reference Library is <http://reference.bahai.org>. The launch is the first stage of the development of the Reference Library. Other materials will be added as they become available.*

In Uganda, a focus on practical knowledge boosts literacy

UPLIFT literacy classes are often held under a tree. In many villages, as well, local churches or community centers have offered space.



UPLIFT, continued from page one

Founded by a group of Bahá'ís in Uganda in 2001, UPLIFT operates in more than 100 communities in the Nebbi District of the West Nile Region of Uganda, an isolated and relatively impoverished area in the northwestern corner of the country.

"First of all there is a change in their attitudes and their lifestyles because now they are able to count, they are able to write, so they are able to keep records and, therefore, able to improve on their trade activities," said Kakura Joseph, chairperson for Local Council 3 in the sub-county of Parombo, where UPLIFT is active.

"But they are able to farm better using improved seeds and so forth," said Mr. Joseph. "These learners and the community now will be able to lead healthy lives because now they recognize some of these preventable diseases. Actually sanitation in homes has improved. You find the latrine coverage has increased. Most homes have pit latrines. The environment is being now protected much better."

In 100 Communities

Founded by a group of Bahá'ís in Uganda in 2001, UPLIFT operates in more than 100 communities in the Nebbi District of the West Nile Region of Uganda, an isolated and relatively impoverished area in the

northwestern corner of the country.

To the east, across the West Nile River, is the war-torn Gulu District, scene of battles with the infamous Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group that makes extensive use of child soldiers. The effects of civil strife there sometimes spill over into Nebbi, and security issues make travel to and from the region difficult.

The economy of the Nebbi District is dependent primarily on subsistence agriculture. Major food crops include cassava, millet, sorghum, maize, beans, and groundnuts. Fishing is also an important activity, providing 20 percent of household income in some areas. More than 90 percent of the population lives in rural areas.

Health standards are generally lower than the national average. There are frequent shortages of medical supplies and equipment partly because of inadequate transport and poor road networks. As well, poverty further reduces access to health care.

The literacy rate in the region is about 58 percent, also somewhat less than the national literacy rate of 68 percent. The rate for women is lower — about 30 to 40 per-

cent — and providing literacy for women is UPLIFT's primary focus. More than 80 percent of the some 2,300 learners who have participated in the UPLIFT program so far are women.

"Development very much depends on women," said Hizzaya Hissani Mwani, UPLIFT's program manager. "For example, where women are literate, they tend to be more likely to send their children to school. They are more aware of hygiene. And if women are educated, they are better able to express themselves."

Beyond its focus on women, the program has been successful because of its innovative approach to teaching literacy in rural environments. This approach includes an initial emphasis on the phonetic elements of the local language instead of the traditional memorization of the alphabet, and the use of highly participatory teaching methods such as singing, skits, and role-playing.

All of this results in a program that enables most participants to learn to read and write in about 100 hours of class time. The norm is from 200 to 300 hours of instruction, according to literacy specialists.

At the core of UPLIFT's success is a methodology, devised by Dr. Mwani, that breaks down the local language, Alur, into easy-to-memorize phonetic units.

"Dr. Mwani has identified five or six code words that give you every letter and sound in the Alur language," said Tom Gossen, an international development consultant who is a member of UPLIFT's management team. "Often working just on a

blackboard under a tree, the literacy educators break these key words down into all of their sounds and letters. The participants memorize those, and soon they are able to put them back together to make word formations and, finally, sentences."

Another important aspect of the project is its emphasis on building the reading and writing curriculum around issues of local concern and interest, giving the program a context that goes beyond simply learning to read and write. Information in literacy workbooks covers issues such as malaria prevention and treatment, composting and other simple agricultural improvement techniques, and basic health and sanitation.

"The approach is to look at the needs of the community as a whole and to relate the content of the program to the lives of the learners," said Dr. Mwani.

Maureen Kendrick, an assistant professor of family literacy at the University of British Columbia who has visited the project twice over the past 12 months, said this emphasis on making the curriculum relevant to the social context of the community should help make the project sustainable in the long run.

"Other adult literacy programs I've seen are not firmly rooted in the cultural and social context," said Dr. Kendrick. "They are often transplanted from another cultural context, and so they don't take root because they are not related to or meaningful to the lives of the people."

"One of the things that really struck me about the project is how much effort

"Development very much depends on women. For example, where women are literate, they tend to be more likely to send their children to school. They are more aware of hygiene. And if women are educated, they are better able to express themselves."

– Hizzaya Hissani Mwani, UPLIFT's program manager



An UPLIFT literacy group. Overall, some 80 percent of UPLIFT learners are women.



Hizzaya Hissani Mwani, UPLIFT's program manager, played a key role in developing UPLIFT's innovative approach.

"One of things that makes UPLIFT different is its embrace of spirituality... UPLIFT targets everybody within a community, whether they are Muslim or Christian or none of the above."

– Zoe Bakoko Bakoru, Uganda's Minister of Gender, Labor, and Social Development.

they put into trying to solicit the opinions of the participants. They really try to understand what the people want and what their needs are.

"So it is not just reading and writing for the sake of reading and writing," said Dr. Kendrick. "They are trying to look at the authentic purposes that the people in these communities would have for reading and writing, in relation to helping with agriculture, for example, such as through composting."

Use of resident educators

Like other non-governmental organizations that provide literacy training, UPLIFT relies on a cadre of literacy facilitators, called educators. Typically, they travel to communities in the service area to provide classes.

One distinctive aspect of UPLIFT's model, however, has been its emphasis on using resident educators who live in the communities they serve. Dr. Mwani himself spends more than half his time in the field, at the same standard of living as the local educators.

"This is important — to support the concept that money is not the key to a poor person's development," said Mr. Gossen. "Instead, what is needed is a self-help program of increased skills, knowledge, and spirituality."

At UPLIFT's start, most of the literacy educators served as volunteers — and classes were held in the open, often under the branches of a spreading tree. As the project has gained recognition, various buildings such as churches, schools, and community centers have been made available for classes.

Recently, as well, many of the educators

have begun to receive small stipends. And the government has provided a small number of bicycles for transportation.

The use of bicycles, instead of automobiles, also distinguishes UPLIFT educators. "Imagine a man who only wants to use a car to penetrate and go into our villages where you find most of our illiterate people," said Mr. Joseph of Parombo. "The illiterate people are not within towns. You find them in places where cars cannot pass."

Interfaith participation

Another distinctive aspect of UPLIFT's approach has been its emphasis on including members of all religious groups in its classes, a feature that has helped in some cases to soothe tensions between the various communities. The region is predominantly Christian, but a substantial percentage of the population is Muslim. UPLIFT, as a Bahá'í-inspired agency, has sought to include everyone from all religions in the literacy classes, an unusual step in an area where religious communities for the most part keep to themselves.

The reading materials, for example, feature quotations from the Bible, the Quran and the Bahá'í writings. They also include quotations on basic virtues such as honesty, trustworthiness, and service.

"One of things that makes UPLIFT different is its embrace of spirituality," said Zoe Bakoko Bakoru, Uganda's Minister of Gender, Labor, and Social Development. "The Bahá'ís talk about humanity, oneness, and unity. The majority of people in Uganda have been through a phase of suffering before this Government came into power, during the Idi Amin era, and there is a need for a healing process."

"UPLIFT targets everybody within a community, whether they are Muslim or Christian or none of the above," said Minister Bakoru, who has visited the project area. "So the UPLIFT program has found a fertile ground where it is able to sow the seeds of unity among the people of different religions and to help them co-exist together."

Local authorities echo this observation. "UPLIFT has solved very many problems in the community," said Matthew Ngarombo, a member of the Nebbi District Public Community Service Committee. "There has been a lot of disunity, especially about religious differences, tribal ideologies, and so forth. But these days, people are cooperating. They are coming together as one because of the

UPLIFT program, which has made people more friendly through interfaith activities.”

At the core of UPLIFT’s program, of course, is literacy training. And participants who have stayed with the program almost all say it has made an importance difference in their lives.

Increased self-confidence

“Now I can read and write letters to my friends, unlike when I used to take my letters to my friends to read for me,” said Florence Nyiwege, a 38-year-old farmer in Ongido village. “Now I am proud. I even discuss with my children how the program has made me read and write well.”

Many UPLIFT learners said they appreciate literacy because they are better able to read holy scripture, whether the Bible, the Quran or the Bahá’í writings.

“Before, I was lacking in knowledge because I did not know how to read,” said Judith Nyiwegi, a learner in Panyango subcounty. “Now I can even read the Bible, and it has given me the knowledge of how to keep my family clean and even how to control my children.”

Others speak of the sense of self-confidence that literacy has given them. “It has allowed me to speak with confidence in meetings,” said Kulastika Okwanga, another UPLIFT learner in Panyango subcounty. “I like the knowledge of how to be in a community, how to do things together.”

Many women say they feel better able to run small businesses, now that they can read and write and do simple arithmetic. And newly literate mothers often say how happy they are to be able to help their children with school work.

“We see an increased confidence in which women feel they have improved their status in the home and the community,” said Eliza-



A graduation ceremony.

beth Kharono, chairperson of UPLIFT’s board of directors. “They are expressing their views in public, organizing local women’s groups, networking for passing on information, and establishing small businesses to supplement family finances.”

In Punvuga village, Margaret Atho said the knowledge provided by UPLIFT has greatly helped her cassava growing enterprise.

“In UPLIFT, we learned how to plant cassava in rows,” said Ms. Atho, a 46-year-old mother of ten children. “By planting the cassava in rows, it is easy for the farmer to know which plants are not growing well, so you can replant.”

Ms. Atho added that the simple arithmetic that UPLIFT taught her has also helped greatly when she takes her cassava to market. “If you set the price of each row of cassava to be 5000 shillings, and you have 100 rows, you can calculate how much money to expect from the sale of cassava.”*

“We see an increased confidence in which women feel they have improved their status in the home and the community.”

– Elizabeth Kharono, chairperson, UPLIFT board.

Comprehensive catalog of Bahá’í books for sale online

ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA — A comprehensive catalog of Bahá’í sacred literature, as well as Bahá’í books on history, social teachings, and other aspects of the Bahá’í Faith, is now available on the World Wide Web.

The new e-commerce site also carries Bahá’í-inspired music, videos, calendars, and other materials.

The Bahá’í Distribution Service, an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, launched

the site. More than 2,000 titles, representing the efforts of hundreds of publishers around the world, are available for purchase through the site.

The Bahá’í Distribution Service is the primary distributor for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and its agencies; the Bahá’í Publishing Trust of the United States; and Bahá’í World Centre Publications. The site is <http://www.BahaiBookstore.com>*

UN “eminent persons” panel sees rise of civil society as a “landmark” event

UNITED NATIONS – As the world’s problems grow ever more complex and globalized, the United Nations must reach out more vigorously to civil society — and give non-governmental actors more access to high level deliberations that have traditionally been reserved for governments.

That’s the conclusion of a blue-ribbon panel charged a year ago with reviewing the relationship of the UN with civil society.

“The rise of civil society is indeed one of the landmark events of our times,” wrote former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, chair of the Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations, in a letter accompanying the panel’s final report in June 2004.

“Global governance is no longer the sole domain of Governments,” continued President Cardoso. “The growing participation and influence of non-State actors is enhancing democracy and reshaping multilateralism. Civil society organizations are also the prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to deal with emerging global threats.”

The report, entitled “We the Peoples: Civil Society, the United Nations and Global Governance,” outlines a series of concrete steps that the United Nations can take to strengthen partnerships with civil society.

Recommendations include regularizing the “cycle of global debate” on issues so that civil society is more widely included, taking specific steps to give civil society increased access to high-level bodies of the United Nations, including the Security Council, boosting staff and budgets for units and offices concerning civil society, and appointing an Under-Secretary-General responsible for overseeing an office that would engage the constituencies of civil society, indigenous peoples, the private sector, and parliamentarians.

“The United Nations should use its moral leadership to urge coordinated approaches to civil society, to encourage Governments to provide a more enabling and cooperative environment for civil society and to foster debate about reforms of global governance, including deeper roles for civil society,” the report states. “This should emphasize principles of constituency engagement, partnership, transparency and inclusion, with a special emphasis on those who are normally underrepresented.”

This kind of engagement with civil society is necessary, the report says, because it is no longer possible for the world’s governments by themselves to solve complex global problems, such as HIV/AIDs, poverty, environmental degradation, and ethnic strife.

Public opinion is key

“Public opinion has become a key factor influencing intergovernmental and governmental policies and actions,” states the report. “The involvement of a diverse range of actors, including those from civil society and the private sector, as well as local authorities and parliamentarians, is not only essential for effective action on global priorities but is also a protection against further erosion of multilateralism.”

Much of the report discusses the growing influence of civil society, which it defines as “associations of citizens entered into voluntarily to advance their interests, ideas and ideologies,” such as trade unions, professional associations, social movements, indigenous peoples’ organizations, religious and spiritual organizations, academia, and public benefit non-governmental organizations. Its analysis includes an extended discussion of the changing nature of democracy.

“[C]itizens increasingly act politically by participating directly, through civil society

“Civil society organizations are also the prime movers of some of the most innovative initiatives to deal with emerging global threats.”

— Former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso

mechanisms, in policy debates that particularly interest them,” the report says. “This constitutes a broadening from representative to participatory democracy. Traditional democracy aggregates citizens by communities of neighborhood (their electoral districts), but in participatory democracy citizens aggregate in communities of interest. And, thanks to modern information and communication technologies, these communities of interest can be global as readily as local.”

This trend arises in part, the report says, because of the processes of globalization, which have made traditional forms of representation less relevant.

“Elected legislators and parliaments seem to have little impact on decisions made intergovernmentally or in the supervision and regulation of international markets,” says the report. “And the traditional separation of powers — having a legislative body of elected representatives to supervise and oversee the executive function — does not apply so clearly in international intergovernmental institutions.”

Since more decisions are being reached in international forums and organizations, it is becoming more important to develop a stronger framework for global governance with democratic accountability to citizens everywhere, the report says. “The emerging pillars for this framework are civil society, global roles for parliamentarians, public opinion and global media. People concerned about such issues are using new channels to express their political interests, through global civil society networks and global social movements.”

Engagement with religion

The report specifically calls for greater engagement with religious and spiritual groups. “These groups provide powerful community leadership, shape public opinion, provide advice on ethical matters, facilitate reconciliation between conflicting communities and identify the needs of vulnerable groups,” the report says.

It also urges greater outreach to trade unions, and it supports the importance of reaching out to the private sector, as part of an overall engagement with non-governmental actors.

Mary Racelis, one of the Report’s authors, said perhaps the most important message of the panel was simply that the UN and governments must appropriately recognize the growing influence and capacity of civil so-

ciety organizations.

“In a sense, we are calling for a new mindset on the part of the UN,” said Dr. Racelis, a sociologist at Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. “The UN has to reach out and recognize and draw in, on a multi-stakeholder basis, different views, in the debate that leads towards better global governance.”

Dr. Racelis also said the Report’s discussion of representative democracy versus participatory democracy was not meant to tear down traditional forms of democracy, but rather to strengthen them.

“In so many parts of the world, the majority of people are often poor and disadvantaged, and, for various reasons, either don’t vote, or if they do, are captured by a structure that doesn’t represent their interests,” said Dr. Racelis.

“We know that people who are left out of society sometimes turn to other means, such as terrorism or crime or violence,” said Dr. Racelis.

Strengthening democracy

“What we are saying is that representative democracy is fine, but there must also be recognition that participatory democracy is now the trend,” Dr. Racelis said. “And we are trying to say to member states that this is a very positive development that can strengthen democracy.”

Jeffery Huffines, immediate past president of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN, said the report would be welcomed by most NGOs. “The power of this report is that it offers a step-by-step, rational process whereby member states of the UN can more effectively engage key constituencies of civil society across the board,” said Mr. Huffines, who hosted several meetings with representatives of the panel, to help provide input from faith-based NGOs. Mr. Huffines is also the representative of the Bahá’í community of the United States to the UN.

The panel was appointed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in February 2003. Its members are affiliated with governments, NGOs, academia, and the private sector. In addition to Mr. Cardoso and Dr. Racelis, they include Bagher Asadi of Iran, Manuel Castells of Spain, Birgitta Dahl of Sweden, Peggy Dulany of the United States, André Erdős of Hungary, Asma Khader of Jordan, Juan Mayr of Colombia, Malini Mehra of India, Kumi Naidoo of South Africa, Prakash Ratilal of Mozambique, and Aminata Traoré of Mali.✿



The flag of the United Nations. (UN Photo)

“What we are saying is that representative democracy is fine, but there must also be recognition that participatory democracy is now the trend. And we are trying to say to member states that this is a very positive development that can strengthen democracy.”

– Mary Racelis, one of the report’s authors

In South Africa, filmmakers draw on social action for their on-screen vision

Inspired by the struggles of ordinary people in South Africa, two Hollywood transplants create a much acclaimed film with an optimistic vision.

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Work on Bahá'í service projects here gave screenwriters Mark Bamford and Suzanne Kay the idea for a movie that has recently won international attention.

After their arrival here from Hollywood in 2001, the husband and wife team threw themselves into various projects such as after-school enrichment programs for disadvantaged children and English lessons for refugees from French-speaking Africa.

Those experiences inspired them to make "Cape of Good Hope," a feature film that was screened recently at two international film festivals — Cannes and Tribeca — and won appreciative reactions from, among others, the BBC and *Variety*.

Mr. Bamford and Ms. Kay had left their careers as television scriptwriters in Los Angeles so they could pursue their own film projects in Cape Town. It was a place where they wanted to raise their newborn baby and to involve themselves in helping the reconstruction of a newly democratic African nation.

They saw firsthand the struggles of ordinary people to make the most of their lives. That inspired them to write the screenplay and then produce and direct the movie.

The film that emerged, "Cape of Good Hope," won a standing ovation at its premiere in April 2004 at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

Following that premiere, the BBC television's "Talking Movies" show carried interviews with some of the stars of the film and described the movie as "heartfelt and real."

And the subsequent screening of

"Cape of Good Hope" at the Cannes Festival — which highlighted the 10th anniversary of the end of apartheid by showing major South African films — clearly struck a chord.

Variety, a widely read film industry journal, hailed the movie's "warmth and charm" and said it was a "good-natured multi-character snapshot of contemporary South Africa."

The film, cowritten by Mr. Bamford and Ms. Kay, interweaves fictional storylines around a Cape Town animal rescue center.

Characters include the woman who runs the shelter, a refugee from the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, a single mother trying to educate herself while working as a servant, a young couple unable to have children of their own, and a recently widowed veterinary surgeon.

In this mosaic of love and hope, filmed on location in South Africa, the human stories replace the intense political focus that is the norm for films set in Africa.

"There were lots of films about Africa and with epic political messages," Mr. Bamford said, "but we felt they were missing the trees for the forest. You actually feel more from a story which is about the reality of people's lives."

The film highlights themes of love, interracial relations, xenophobia, justice, and — in an unusual twist for a commercial movie — kindness to animals.

"Cape of Good Hope" is Mr. Bamford's debut as a director of a feature movie. His previous work includes "Hero," a widely screened short film, featured on PBS.

The positive themes of the movie reflect the couple's philosophy on filmmaking. "I think the purpose of art is to uplift the human spirit," Mr. Bamford said. "In film, entertainment is fine, but a lot of what passes for entertainment is destructive — it degrades women and glorifies drugs and violence."

Ms. Kay added: "Because we say 'uplifting,' we don't mean 'naive' — we just want to give [audiences] energy to contribute something for the betterment of society." ❀

— Bahá'í World News Service



Mark Bamford and Suzanne Kay

Religions in Iran

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carving of sacred grottos from rock, inherited from Persian Achaemenid funerary architecture, which spread to Buddhist sites throughout India and China.

The chapter on Judaism covers ground that is perhaps more commonly known, in the West at least, since much of Old Testament history involves the exile of ancient Israelis to Persia. “It can rightly be said that the Jewish diaspora, spanning twenty-seven centuries, begins in Iran,” writes Dr. Foltz. He also writes that Judaism “underwent one of its most radical transformations” as a result of contact with the Persians.

Dr. Foltz suggests, for example, that the Israelites derived the concept of the messiah from the Zoroastrian “Saoshyant” savior figure.

In his chapter on Christianity, Dr. Foltz notes that the three “wise men” who, according to Matthew, came to witness the birth of Jesus, were clearly identified as Zoroastrian Magi from Iran.

It goes without saying that Islam had a huge impact on Iran. What is perhaps less well known is the degree of impact that Iran had on the practice of Islam. Although Islam originated in Arabia, Dr. Foltz writes, it was mainly Iranian followers who, among other things, were chiefly responsible for compiling the sayings of Muhammad (*Hadith*), creating the concept of the Islamic school (*madrasa*), and writing the first systematic grammar for Arabic.

Dr. Foltz also appropriately chronicles the rise of Iranian-based Shi’ism and its role in the Islamic world, including its part in the 1979 Islamic revolution and the rise of fundamentalist Islam around the world.

Noting that Iran was the birthplace of two independent world religions — Zoroastrianism and the Bahá’í Faith — Dr. Foltz devotes a chapter to each tradition.

His chapter on “The Bábi Movement and the Bahá’í Faith” is noteworthy for its lucid sketch of the early history of the Bahá’í Faith, specifically its emergence from the matrix of Islam and establishment as an independent belief system.

Dr. Foltz, who is not a Bahá’í, describes the fervent turmoil and messianic expectation that seized many in Iran in the early 19th century. Specifically, he writes, “many of the existing trends in Iranian religious thought had been synthesized in the so-called ‘Shaykhi’ school

of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i.”

For many in the Shaykhi sect, this longing was satisfied by the emergence of a new figure, Siyyid Ali Muhammad, known as the Báb, which means “gate” in Arabic. A young merchant from Shiraz, the Báb declared that He had come as the Promised One, bringing his own Revelation. He soon had many as 100,000 followers, according to Dr. Foltz — a tidal wave that stirred intense official opposition.

The Báb Himself promised the coming of another, even greater figure, “He whom God will make manifest.” For the vast majority of Bábis, that figure was Bahá’u’lláh, Founder of the Bahá’í Faith.

“Whereas the former movement had focused on the Shi’ite world of Iran, Bahá’u’lláh’s vision encompassed the entire world,” notes Dr. Foltz. “All humans, Bahá’u’lláh taught, are of the same essence and substance. The world, in his view, was ‘but one country, and mankind its citizens.’”

The majority of Iranians rejected this universalist message — although, as Dr. Foltz notes, there are at least 300,000 Bahá’ís in Iran, composing that country’s largest religious minority. Instead, as Dr. Foltz explores in his final chapter, the Iranians turned to a radical, anti-modernist version of Shi’ism envisioned by the Ayatollah Khomeini in the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Iran’s Shi’ite clergy has over the years consistently attacked the Bahá’í Faith as an apostasy. “The position of the present Iranian governments towards the Bahá’í Faith verges on the bizarre,” writes Dr. Foltz.

“Official references to the Bahá’í Faith claim that it is an organization founded by the British in the nineteenth century as part of the latter’s colonial project, aimed at the eventual takeover of Iran by foreign interests,” writes Dr. Foltz.

“Any admission of the Bábi movement as arising within messianic Shi’ism is entirely absent, and the explicit Bahá’í tenet of political non-involvement is disregarded. The rabid hostility of the official view makes it essentially impossible within Iran today to obtain anything approaching an accurate understanding of the Bahá’í religion.”

As Dr. Foltz properly notes in his concluding chapter, this odd degree of religious intolerance serves only to mask Iran’s great contributions to the history and progression of world religions — a phenomenon that has been widely overlooked but is now significantly rectified by his highly engaging book.*

“Whereas the former movement had focused on the Shi’ite world of Iran, Bahá’u’lláh’s vision encompassed the entire world. All humans, Bahá’u’lláh taught, are of the same essence and substance.”

– Dr. Richard C. Foltz

Religious history through the lens of Iran

Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions

By Richard C. Foltz

Oneworld

Oxford

There are many ways to look at history. Ancient historians sought to glorify heroes and battles. Modern historians have found new directions, looking at the past through such lenses as sociology, psychology, economics, and, more recently, race and gender.

In *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions*, Richard C. Foltz keeps the focus tight by using the lens of geography to examine the history of world religions.

An associate professor of religion at the University of Florida, he zooms in on Iran, chronologically tracing the currents and cross-currents of religious history there.

"Modern Iran's relative religious homogeneity notwithstanding, throughout the country's long history its peoples and cultures have played an unexcelled role in influencing, transforming, and propagating all the world's universal traditions," writes Dr. Foltz.

Yet, although his focus is a single country, Dr. Foltz offers up what amounts to an extremely readable and interesting summary of the teachings of most of the world's major religions — and, significantly, their evolution and progression throughout history.

A listing of chapter headings gives the range of religions that have been bound up with Iran throughout history: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Gnostic Traditions, Islam, and the Bábí Movement and the Bahá'í Faith — virtually all of the world's major religions, in other words.

Even Hinduism, one of the most ancient of world religions and one that today is almost wholly associated with India, can trace some of its origins to Iran, writes Dr. Foltz.

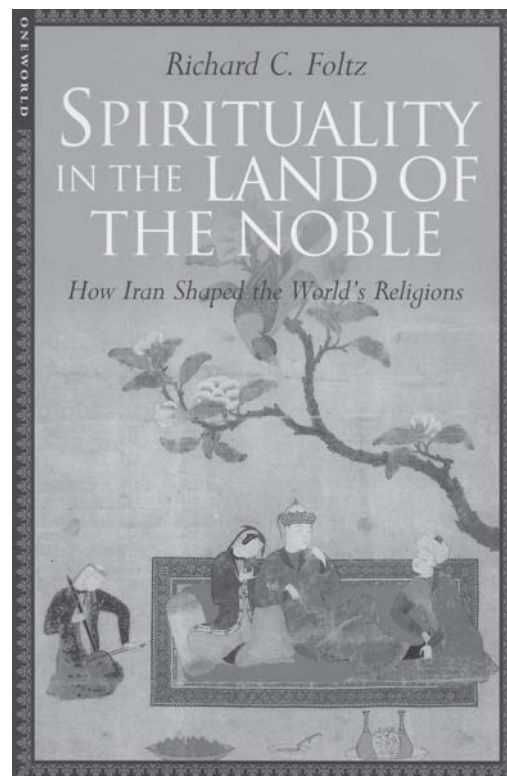
Specifically, he says, the Rig Veda, which is considered by Hindus to be a sacred text and is commonly dated to around the eighth century BC, is probably much older — and quite likely originated with the ancient peoples who once inhabited Iran and its surrounds.

"The world it evokes resembles not the steamy plains of northwest India, but rather the dry steppes of western Eurasia whence the Indo-Aryans came," writes Dr. Foltz, adding that it shows many similarities with the oldest Iranian text, the Avesta.

"...the Rig Veda can shed light on the origins of Iranian religion as much as it can for Hinduism — perhaps even more so, since Hinduism retains much that presumably predates the Aryan arrival."

In like manner, Dr. Foltz — digging deep into Iranian history — reveals a number of facts, insights and observations that many will find quite surprising.

Buddhism, for example, was once hugely popular in Iran, even though it has now completely disappeared in that country. Neverthe-



less, he writes, "for a number of centuries, a huge proportion of the Iranian population practiced Buddhism, and it is equally apparent that Iranian Buddhists infused the tradition with a number of distinctly Iranian ideas."

The merchants and missionaries who carried Buddhism to Central Asia and China were mostly of Iranian background, according to Dr. Foltz. And, among other things, he writes, Iranian architectural styles can be seen to have greatly influenced Buddhist styles, such as the

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