

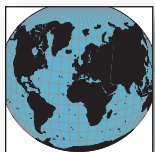


ONE COUNTRY

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

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Newsletter of the Bahá'í
International Community
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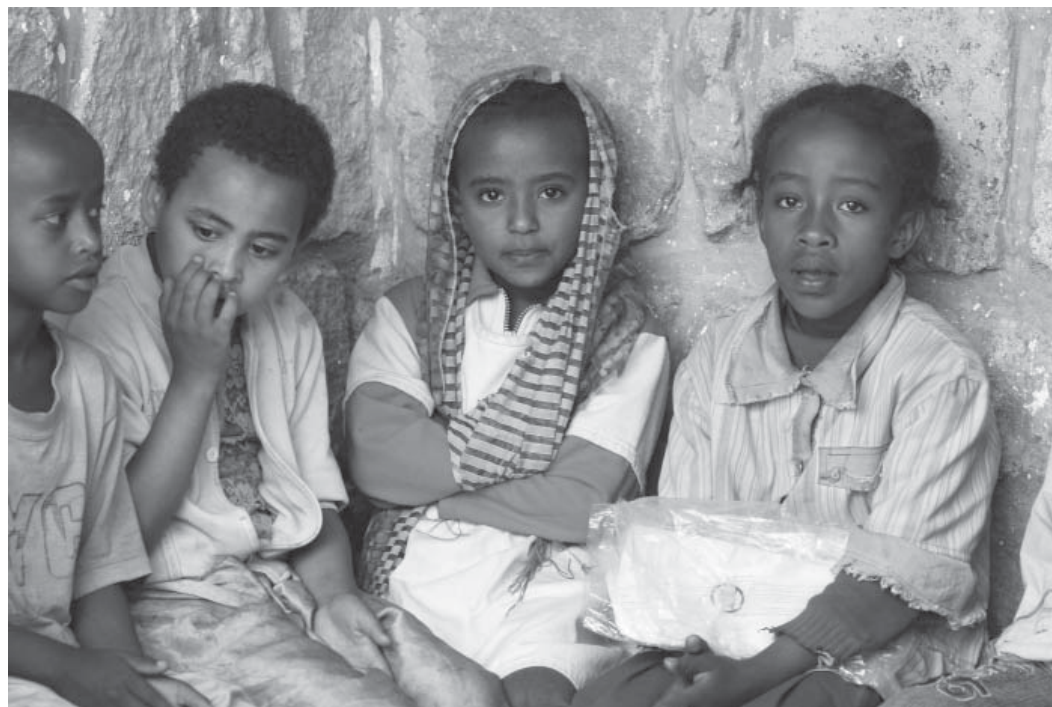


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In Ethiopia, local children's classes aim to fill an academic gap

Small-scale classes on moral education in more than 45 localities stress the importance of common virtues like honesty, trustworthiness, and nobility of self.



A group of children waiting to join an activity at a Bahá'í children's class in Ethiopia. (Ryan Lash photo)

NEFAS SILK LAFTO, Ethiopia, 11 October 2006 — Although this sub-city on the western edge of Addis Ababa is home to numerous foreign embassies and international development offices, it nevertheless has its share of poverty and unemployment.

Most of the residents, if they have jobs at all, are manual laborers or domestic workers — construction workers, cooks, maids, and clothes washers. HIV/AIDS is another challenge, leaving behind many single- or no-parent families.

So it is not uncommon most days of the week to find children here working on the streets, helping to provide the evening meal by polishing shoes, selling fruits and vegetables, or simply begging.

On Saturdays, however, the scene is somewhat different. Many of those same children can be found gathered at the home of a Bahá'í family, attentively studying, among other things, the importance of common virtues like honesty, trustworthiness, and nobility of self.

Although the classes were started in March, just eight months ago, they now regularly draw more than 100 children each week. Split into groups by age, the Nefas Silk Lafto Bahá'í community manages these classes with the help of seven local Bahá'í volunteers.

Parents say they are extremely pleased with the Saturday offering.

"Ever since my child joined this class, I see some positive behavioral changes," said Eji-

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The eradication of violence against women and girls

[Editor's note: The following is an edited version of a recent statement by the Bahá'í International Community, titled "Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls." The full statement can be read at: <http://statements.bahai.org/06-0702.htm>]

By many measures, the status of women and girls has improved significantly over the last 50 years. They have achieved higher rates of literacy and education, increased their per capita income, and risen to prominent roles in professional and political spheres. Moreover, extensive local, national and global networks of women have succeeded in putting women's concerns on the global agenda and catalyzed the creation of legal and institutional mechanisms to address these concerns.

Notwithstanding such positive developments, a relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls — perpetuated by social norms, religious fanaticism, and exploitative economic and political conditions — continues to wreak havoc in every corner of the world.

The challenge now before the international community is how to create the social, material and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential. The creation of such conditions will involve not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly, will require the transformation of individuals — men and women, boys and girls — whose values, in different ways, sustain exploitative patterns of behavior.

From the Bahá'í perspective, the essence of any program of social change is the understanding that individuals have a spiritual or moral dimension. This shapes their understanding of their life's purpose, their responsibilities towards the family, the community and the world. Alongside critical changes in the legal, political and economic architecture slowly taking shape, the development of individuals' moral and spiritual capabilities is

an essential element in the elusive quest to prevent the abuse of women and girls around the world.

Such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time — the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole. In this way, the goal of moral development is shifted from individualistic notions of 'salvation' to embrace the collective progress of the entire human race.

A number of Bahá'í schools and institutions of higher education have identified specific moral capabilities which help to equip children and youth to develop skills of moral reasoning and to assume the responsibility of contributing to the betterment of their communities. Among the moral capabilities identified by Bahá'í educational institutions are the ability to participate effectively in non-adversarial collective decision-making; to act with rectitude of conduct based on ethical and moral principles; to cultivate one's sense of dignity and self-worth; to take initiative in a creative, disciplined form; to commit to empowering educational activities; to create a vision of a desired future based on shared values and principles; and to understand relationships based on dominance and to contribute towards their transformation into relationships based on reciprocity and service.

While such values can be taught in schools, it is the family environment in which children grow and form views about themselves, the world and the purpose of life. In the family, the child learns about the nature of power and its expression in interpersonal relationships; it is here that she first learns to accept or reject authoritarian rule and violence as a means of expression and conflict resolution.

The state of equality in the family and in the marriage requires an ever-increasing ability to integrate and unite rather than to separate and individualize. In a rapidly changing world, where families find themselves unbearably strained under the pressures of shifting environmental, economic and political upheavals, the ability to maintain the integrity of the family bond and to

prepare children for citizenship in a complex and shrinking world takes on paramount importance. It is imperative, then, to help men as fathers understand their responsibilities in a family beyond economic well-being to include setting an example of healthy male-female relations, of self-discipline and equal respect for the male and female members of the family. This is a complementary role to that of the mother, who is the first educator of her children and whose happiness, sense of security and self-worth is essential to her capacity to parent effectively.

What children learn in the family is either confirmed or contradicted by the social interactions and values that shape their community life. All adults in the community — educators, health workers, entrepreneurs, political representatives, religious leaders, police officers, media professionals and the like — share a responsibility for the protection of children.

Across the world, religions have traditionally played a defining role in cultivating the values of a community. Yet today, many voices raised in the name of religion constitute the most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviors perpetrated against women and girls. Using religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, proponents of extremist religious interpretations have sought to 'tame' women and girls by limiting their mobility outside of the home, limiting their access to education, subjecting their bodies to harmful traditional practices, controlling attire and even killing to punish acts which were claimed to abase the family honor. It is religion itself that stands in desperate need of renewal. A core element of such renewal is the need for religious leaders to state unequivocally and become the standard bearers of the principle of the equality of men and women — a moral and practical principle urgently needed to realize progress in the social, political and economic spheres of society.

Today, religious practices and doctrines in flagrant violation of international human rights standards must be subject to deeper examination and scrutiny, bearing in mind that all religions contain the voices of women, which have often been absent from the evolving definition of what religion is and what it requires.

The individual, her family and community environment are ultimately under the protection of the state; it is at this level that enlightened and responsible leadership

is desperately required. Most governments, however, continue to abdicate their international obligations to punish and prevent the violence and exploitation of women and girls; many lack the political will; some fail to allocate adequate resources to implement the laws; in many countries specialized services addressing violence against women and girls do not exist; and work on prevention has in almost all contexts been limited to local short-term measures.

Many states continue to hide behind cultural and religious reservations to international treaties condemning this violence — further perpetuating a climate of legal and moral impunity rendering the violence and its victims largely invisible.

The era of developing legal frameworks must now be followed by an emphasis on implementation and prevention. The foundation of such measures is a strategy rooted in the education and training of children in a way that enables them to grow intellectually as well as morally, cultivating in them a sense of dignity as well as a responsibility for the well-being of their family, community and the world.

In order to deliver on its many commitments, the international community needs to dramatically increase the power, authority and resources dedicated to women's rights, equality, and empowerment. The Bahá'í International Community is part of discussions that suggest creating an autonomous United Nations agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's rights and concerns. To guarantee a voice for women at the highest levels of decision-making at the UN, such an agency should be led by a director with the status of Under Secretary-General.

Efforts to eradicate the epidemic of violence against women and girls must proceed from and be reinforced at every level of society — from the individual to the international community. However, they must not be limited to legal and institutional reforms, for these address only the manifest crime and are incapable of generating the deep-rooted changes needed to create a culture where justice and equality prevail over the impetuosity of authoritarian power and physical force.

It is this inner, ethical and moral dimension which now stands in need of transformation and, ultimately, provides the surest foundation for values and behavior which raise up women and girls and, in turn, promote the advancement of all of humankind.*

Many voices raised in the name of religion constitute the most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviors against women and girls. Using religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, proponents of extremist religious interpretations have sought to 'tame' women and girls by limiting their mobility outside of the home, limiting their access to education, subjecting their bodies to harmful traditional practices, controlling attire and even killing to punish acts which were claimed to abase the family honor ...the need [is] for religious leaders to state unequivocally the principle of equality of men and women...

UN Declaration on religious tolerance commemorated in Prague

“We need to eliminate the root causes of intolerance and discrimination and to remain vigilant with regard to freedom of religion or belief worldwide.”

— Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

PRAGUE — Although it was negotiated at the height of the Cold War, a 25-year-old international agreement on freedom of religion or belief remains as relevant today — and perhaps even more so — said speakers at a major United Nations-sanctioned observance here in late November.

Some 350 participants representing more than 60 governments, UN agencies, and various international non-governmental organizations — including the Bahá’í International Community — gathered on 25 November 2006 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

The commemoration was marked by speeches, workshops, and an end-of-the-conference statement. They echoed a common theme: that the 1981 Declaration remains a critical document for the protection of freedom of religion or belief, especially at a time when religious conflict seems on the rise.

“These days, we live in a globalized

world,” said Piet de Klerk, Ambassador-at-Large of the Netherlands on Human Rights. “This means that different cultures, including different faiths, meet each other more frequently and in a more intense manner than during previous periods of time.”

Mr. de Klerk said that although it was initially negotiated at a time when issues of freedom of religion or belief concerned the ideological struggle between Communism and the West, the Declaration is nevertheless today helpful in addressing the challenges posed by global diversity because it is “based on the conviction of many that the freedom of religion or belief itself offers a way forward for fighting intolerance.”

Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, said the principles of the Declaration remain “pivotal” in the current “polarized climate.”

“We all need to join our efforts to disseminate the principles contained in the 1981 Declaration among lawmakers, judges and civil servants but also among non-state

Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, center, and Diane Ala’i, right, the Bahá’í International Community’s representative to the UN in Geneva, both spoke at a workshop on the right to change one’s religion at the Prague commemoration. (Photograph by Hamid Jahanpour)



actors,” said Ms. Jahangir. “We need to eliminate the root causes of intolerance and discrimination and to remain vigilant with regard to freedom of religion or belief worldwide.”

Felice Gaer, chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, also said the Declaration has become more important over time.

“The right of everyone to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is universal, as the unanimous adoption of the Declaration on Religious Intolerance showed — even in 1981,” said Ms. Gaer. “Regrettably, violations of this universal right continue to be committed across the globe.

“The occasion of the 25th anniversary is a call to all governments to intensify their efforts to protect freedom of religion or belief at home and to advance respect for religious freedom abroad. The ability of people throughout the world to live in peace and freedom depends on it.”

Other speakers included Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, who presented at a workshop on the right to change one's religion, along with Ms. Jahangir.

In that workshop, Ms. Jahangir noted that although the Declaration does not specifically mention the word “change,” it is clearly implied in an article that says everyone has the “freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice.” As well, Ms. Jahangir said, other UN treaties and statements have clearly upheld this right.

Ms. Ala'i said upholding the right to change one's religion is of “practical importance” overall in the regime of religious freedom, in that the denial of such a right also essentially denies all of the other rights guaranteed in the Declaration, as well as rights guaranteed in other international treaties, such as the right to freedom of association, the right to privacy, freedom of expression, and minority rights.

Yet the right to change one's religions is not always upheld, said Ms. Ala'i, because some governments today want “to preserve the popularity stemming from a particular state-religion relationship” and so they restrict the right to change one's religion through particular laws and policies.

This is of critical importance, said Ms. Ala'i, because there are some countries where the right to change one's religion is considered apostasy, which is punishable by death

under some interpretations of religious law.

Ms. Ala'i pointed specifically to the situation of the Bahá'í communities of Iran and Egypt, which currently face persecution and discrimination over religious belief, and where Bahá'ís have indeed been labelled as apostates, a “crime” which is punishable by death in Iran.

“People are known and respected for risking imprisonment, torture and even death because they uphold a certain political ideology, however, this is not yet fully recognized when it comes to a religious belief,” said Ms. Ala'i.

Other workshops at the commemoration considered issues relating to freedom of religion versus freedom of expression, how freedom of religion relates to the religious community as a whole, and freedom of religion in the context of the propagation of religion.

A final statement, titled the “Prague Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief,” was announced by the gathering. “We consider it essential for governments and international organizations, such as the UN and various regional organizations, to give priority to the protection of the freedom of religion or belief and to the eradication of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief,” said the Prague Declaration.

Adopted by the United Nations on 25 November 1981, the 1981 Declaration spells out and delineates the right to freedom of religion or belief, which was initially recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

The 1981 Declaration indicates, for example, that the right to freedom of religion or belief includes the right to “establish and maintain” places of worship; to “write, issue and disseminate” religious publications; to “observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays”; and to “establish and maintain communications with individuals and communities in matters of religion and belief at the national and international levels.”

The Prague commemoration was sanctioned as the official, international commemoration of the adoption of the 1981 Declaration by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. It was organized by Jan Ghanea Tabrizi of Tolerance 95, an NGO based in the Czech Republic, and Nazila Ghanea of the UK-based Centre for International Human Rights, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. Funding was provided by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ❀



Piet de Klerk, Ambassador-at-Large of the Netherlands on Human Rights, was among the featured speakers at the Prague commemoration on 25 November 2006. (Photograph by Hamid Jahanpour)

“People are known and respected for risking imprisonment, torture and even death because they uphold a certain political ideology, however, this is not yet fully recognized when it comes to a religious belief.”

— Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community

UN forum sees interfaith dialogue as essential to peace

UNITED NATIONS — Continuing a distinctive initiative that brings together governments, UN agencies, and civil society to discuss how governments and religions can work together for peace, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace sponsored a high level conference during the General Assembly on 21 September 2006.

The event drew some 33 government delegations, reflecting rising concern about the spread of religious intolerance and the need to promote religious dialogue as a remedy.

“Some of the atrocities, violence and problems which the world encounters rest squarely at the doors of proponents of varied religious orientations,” said Alberto Romulo, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Philippines and the chair of the Forum

Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, delivered the keynote address, setting the tone for the event, which focused on the theme of “Contributing to Peace-building and Development.”

“Interfaith dialogue has become an urgent necessity,” said President Wade, adding that the world is currently fighting “the demons of suspicion, ignorance and contempt for people of other cultures.”

Intolerance and extremism fly in the face of the sacredness of true religious purpose, said President Wade, suggesting instead that

people should examine the common roots of religions and recognize that they all come from a source that “prescribes good and encourages forgiveness and love.”

President Wade, who is a Muslim, said there is no justification for violence in the name of the Qur’an. “The real message has always been rapprochement and harmony.”

Haya Rashid Al Khalifa, ambassador to the UN from Bahrain and president of the 61st General Assembly said the initiative was “a necessity for our time.”

“To think that any one of us can become secure while others are not is purely an illusion,” said Ambassador Al Khalifa. “Everyone must be engaged in this process to fight misperception.

“In this era of interdependence and globalization, it’s time for people to reach out and live together in harmony and peace as we all belong to one large human family,” she said.

Religious leaders at the conference — which was held also to coincide with the UN International Day of Peace, celebrated each year on 21 September — echoed similar themes.

Bishop Joseph Humper, United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, spoke about what religions have in common. The ultimate goal of dialogue is to reach a better understanding about the different and the new. “This dialogue must be seen as means of eliminating violence, hatred and bigotry,” said Bishop Humper.

Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, said: “We cannot permit God to be hijacked and religion to be misused.”

Professor John Grayzel, holder of the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, said religious leaders have an obligation to promote tolerance and, even, unity among religions, in recognition of “a common source of moral authority which takes precedent over baser determinants of daily action and response.”

“Religious leadership holds the power to set the tone for acceptance, tolerance, respect, and mutual collaboration for the common good of humanity,” said Dr. Grayzel.

“If the religious organizations of the

Among the religious leaders participating in the High-Level Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace on 21 September 2006 at the United Nations were, left to right, Dr. John Grayzel, holder of the Bahá’í Chair for World Peace; Bishop William Swing of the United Religions Initiative; and Bishop Joseph Humper of the United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone. (Photograph by Bud Heckman)



world were to unite they could initiate a new global response group on ready alert to step forward at the first appearance of contention, conflict, or misunderstanding.

"This group could bring to the conscience of all, regardless of any disagreements and apparent divergence of interest, a level of reflection that recognizes humanity's common origin and, fundamentally, common faith," said Dr. Grayzel.

Also addressing the conference were representatives of various United Nations agencies and offices, including UNESCO, UNFPA, UNDP and the UN-NGLS.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, said there is a growing body of evidence that ethnic violence is considerably less likely to erupt in cities where interfaith organizations are present.

"The notion of partnership is absolutely integral if we are to ever find world peace," said Ms. Coomaraswamy, saying that religious groups can play an important role in issues such as the recruitment of child soldiers or by intervening at the outbreak of war.

"What was most significant was that per-

haps the best represented sector was governments, particularly from the developing world," said Jeffery Huffines, a member of the Committee of Religious Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the UN who served on the planning committee for the Conference.

"Many of these countries are suffering from the consequences of religious conflict. They were the ones at the table, wanting to learn, wanting to share their perspective on the importance of promoting religious dialogue and cooperation," said Mr. Huffines, who is also a representative of the Bahá'í community of the United States to the UN.

Mr. Huffines said the Forum hopes to see the General Assembly pass a resolution promoting further steps to promote interfaith dialogue and peace sponsored by the United Nations, including the holding of a one-day, informational interactive hearing with civil society on interfaith cooperation and peace.

The Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace was formed in 2005, and it sponsored its first event on 22 June 2005, when it held a day-long hearing at the UN in advance of an historic hearing on civil society participation by the General Assembly that month. *

"In this era of interdependence and globalization, it's time for people to reach out and live together in harmony and peace as we all belong to one large human family."

— Haya Rashid Al Khalifa, ambassador to the UN from Bahrain and president of the 61st General Assembly

Bahá'ís help found Interfaith Forum in Iceland

REYKJAVIK, Iceland — The Bahá'í community of Iceland has joined with twelve other faith groups and collaborative partners here to form the country's first national interfaith forum.

The Iceland Forum for Interfaith Dialogue was officially founded on 24 November 2006 in ceremonies at the Reykjavik City Hall in the presence of Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, the president of Iceland.

"The object of the Forum is to promote tolerance and respect between persons of different religions and religious organizations with differing outlooks on life as well as to protect religious freedom and other human rights," said Ingibjorg Danielsdottir, secretary of the Bahá'í community of Iceland.

This initiative was put together by the Intercultural Center in Reykjavik, a human rights advocacy organization that, among other things, strives to facilitate exchange between different cultures and groups.

The founding groups drafted and signed an "Interfaith Dialogue Policy Statement" that calls for the building of understanding and respect, as well as the upholding of religious freedom.

"As Bahá'ís we feel that we have a unique

perspective to offer this type of dialogue," said Bridget McEvoy, a member of the Bahá'í community. "A central feature in the Bahá'í Faith is the unity of religion and we want to be involved in any activity that promotes this idea."

Ms. McEvoy said one goal of the Forum will be to maintain Iceland's traditional openness to different cultures, which has become an important issue. "With the inclusion of Iceland into the European Economic Area and the European Single Market many people have chosen to move to Iceland to work. We have lots of cross border work opportunities, a good standard of living and have traditionally thought of ourselves as being an open society," said Ms. McEvoy.

In addition to the Bahá'í community of Iceland, founding members of the Forum are: the Cross, Reykjavik Free Church, the Buddhist Association of Iceland, the Lutheran State Church of Iceland, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWU), the Muslim Association of Iceland, the Icelandic Asatru Society, the Parish of St. Nicholas of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Way Free Church. *

In Tanzania, families and youth are identified as keys to reducing poverty

"It is at the family whereby the true reflection of the achievement of Millennium Development Goals achievement can be observed in individual basis instead of generalization."

—Stella M. Manyanya, Member Tanzanian Parliament

Stella M. Manyanya, Member of the Tanzanian Parliament, delivered an address about the role of youth and families in development.

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania — Strengthening families and empowering youth are two key factors in poverty reduction, said experts at a one-day symposium held here on 21 October 2006.

Organized by the Dar es Salaam Union Student Organisation (DARUSO) and the Bahá'í community of Tanzania, the symposium examined the theme "The Role of Family and Youth in Establishing Brighter Communities."

The event, held on United Nations Day, focused on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a series of targets in the fight against poverty, which were adopted by the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000.

"Basically everybody comes from the family," said Stella M. Manyanya, a Member of Parliament. "It is at the family whereby the true reflection of the achievement [of the Millennium Development Goals] can be observed."

Youth, especially, will provide new ideas and are a potential labor resource, said Ms. Manyanya, outlining why a focus on the family and youth were so important in poverty reduction.

Shalli Tumaini of DARUSO said the MDGs "are a recognition that over half a century after the end of WW II, the world remains very far from the ideals of harmony, prosperity and peace inspired by the end of the war.

"For Africa, particularly, the MDGs provide an impetus to reverse deterioration in human development," said Ms. Tumaini.

Other panelists included Adeline Kimambo of Christian Social Security Council; J. Abunuwasi Mwami, senior lecturer of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Dar es Salaam; and Killian Nango of the Youth of United Nations Association of Tanzania (YUNA).

"Family is the foundation of society," said Mr. Nango, echoing the theme of the symposium. "Having strong families means that you will have strong leaders."

Elieshi Lema, another panelist and author of the book "Parched Earth," presented a paper that outlined some of the problems facing families and youth in the region. Those challenges include rural-to-urban migration for jobs, increased drug abuse, domestic violence, and the lack of entrepreneurship, she said.

However, strong families can help overcome these problems by promoting integrity, education, and effective interpersonal leadership, said Ms. Lema.

"Families have to join up and improve societal undertakings like educational, social, economic, environmental, cultural, health, or even religious undertakings in their society or community for a bright future of communities," said Ms. Lema.

More than 100 people attended, including a wide range of representatives from the academic and diplomatic communities, non-governmental organizations, and faith-based groups.

Sohaila Loftus, a representative of the Bahá'í community of Tanzania, stressed the importance of the education of women in achieving the goals of reducing poverty, improving health, and promoting education.

It is, Ms. Loftus said, "essential for the child to interact face-to-face with an educated, intelligent, loving, caring mother who will give this child the moral and spiritual grounding he needs in order to grow into an effective adult."

Ms. Loftus also stressed the importance of religion and spirituality as the keys to creating a strong family. "Families should strive to raise children who will choose education



and good-will,” said Ms. Loftus. “Children should be brought up to bend their wills to the service of the human race, seeing their roles as contributors to communities. These are faith-based concepts.”

Both the participants and the organizers felt that the symposium was rewarding.

“There was a high level of thought-provoking discussion and commentary from members of the audience, particularly the university students,” said Bryan Tribble, a member of the Office of External Affairs of the Bahá’í community of Tanzania.

One outcome of the event was the forma-

tion of a team of some two-dozen students, young professionals, journalists, and NGO representatives, who pledged to join in an effort led by the Bahá’ís of Tanzania and DARUSO to achieve the MDGs.

Mitra Deliri, director of the Office of External Affairs of the Bahá’í community of Tanzania added: “The gathering brought together various organizations who realized that the only way to achieve a meaningful development and fight poverty is to unite and combine efforts by different groups. And that this unity will strengthen the community and society at large.” ❀

UN General Assembly again expresses concern over human rights in Iran

UNITED NATIONS — For the 19th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted a resolution expressing concern over the human rights situation in Iran — and specifically mentioning violations against Iranian Bahá’ís.

The resolution passed on 19 December 2006 by a vote of 72 to 50, with 55 abstentions.

Put forward by Canada and co-sponsored by 43 countries, the resolution calls on Iran to “eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to minorities, including Arabs, Azeris, Bahá’ís, Baluchis, Kurds, Christians, Jews, Sufis, and Sunni Muslims.”

The resolution takes note of the worsening situation facing Iran’s 300,000-member Bahá’í community, noting “reports of plans by the state to identify and monitor Bahá’ís,” “an increase in cases of arbitrary arrest and detention,” and “the denial of freedom of religion or of publicly carrying out communal affairs.”

The resolution also expresses concern over the “destruction of sites of religious importance” to Bahá’ís and “the suspension of social, educational and community-related activities and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits” for Bahá’ís.

“We are extremely grateful to the international community for this significant show of support for the Bahá’ís of Iran,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN, after the resolution was initially adopted by the UN’s Third Committee in November.

“The level of persecution and discrimina-

tion facing the Bahá’í community of Iran has steadily worsened over the past year. The Government has stepped up its covert monitoring of Bahá’ís, and at present more than 129 Bahá’ís are awaiting trial on false charges.

“The General Assembly and its Third Committee deserve special praise for stepping into the gap created by the slow start of the new UN Human Rights Council, which has not yet made fully operational its mission of upholding the international human rights regime,” said Ms. Dugal.

In November, the Bahá’í International Community learned that Iran’s Ministry of Interior had ordered officials to step up the surveillance of Iranian Bahá’ís, focusing in particular on their community activities.

In a letter dated 19 August 2006, the Ministry requested provincial officials to complete a detailed questionnaire about the circumstances and activities of local Bahá’ís, including their “financial status,” “social interactions,” and “association with foreign assemblies,” among other things.

The letter was addressed to provincial deputies of the Department of Politics and Security in Offices of the Governors’ General throughout Iran, and it asked them to order “relevant offices to cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise” all Bahá’í social activities.

“This letter further confirms that Iran’s government has targeted the Bahá’ís for covert surveillance,” said Ms. Dugal. “It also reveals for the first time the type of information the government strives to collect on both individuals and the Bahá’í community as a whole — information that in most societies would be considered private and highly sensitive.” ❀



Image of original 19 August 2006 letter from Iran’s Ministry of the Interior ordering the stepped up monitoring of Bahá’ís.

Egypt court rules against Bahá'ís on ID cards, upholding policy of discrimination

CAIRO — In a closely watched case that became the focus of a national debate on religious freedom, Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court has ruled against the right of Bahá'ís to be properly identified on government documents.

The decision, handed down on 16 December 2006, upholds a government policy that forces the Bahá'ís either to lie about their religious beliefs or give up their state identification cards. The policy effectively deprives Egyptian Bahá'ís of access to most rights of citizenship, including education, financial services, and even medical care.

The ruling was immediately criticized by the Bahá'í International Community and human rights organizations in Egypt. It also received extensive media coverage in Egypt and the Arab world.

“We deplore the Court’s ruling in this case, which violates an extensive body of international law on human rights and religious freedom to which Egypt has long been a party,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. “The Court’s decision threatens to make non-citizens of an entire religious community, solely on the basis of religious belief.”

The case concerns a lawsuit filed against the government by a married couple, Husam Izzat Musa and Ranya Enayat Rushdy, who had their identification cards and passports confiscated after they applied to have their daughters added to their passports, which listed the Bahá'í Faith as their religion.

In Egypt, all citizens must list their religious affiliation on state ID cards and other documents, and they must choose from one of the three officially recognized religions — Islam, Christianity or Judaism.

In April, a lower administrative court ruled in favor of the couple, saying the state must issue them ID cards that properly identified their religion. The ruling said that even if the government did not recognize the Bahá'í Faith, adherents should still have their religious status properly stated on official documents.

That ruling provoked an outcry among

extremist elements in Egyptian society, who objected to any official mention of a religion other than the three mentioned in the Qur'an, opening a vigorous debate over issues of religious freedom and tolerance here.

Since April, more than 400 articles, stories, commentaries and programs have appeared in the Egyptian and Arabic news media about the case or its fallout.

The Court’s ruling

In May, the government appealed the lower court’s ruling, which brought the case before the Supreme Administrative Court. The Court held a series of hearings on the case through the summer and fall before issuing its final ruling on 16 December.

In the ruling, the Supreme Administrative Court offered a contradictory rationale to support the idea that Egypt can both uphold its commitment to international human rights covenants that uphold freedom of religion or belief, such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and satisfy an Islamic interpretation that says only three religions are “heavenly,” and thus deserving of protection under that right.

On the one hand, the Court wrote, “all Egyptian constitutions [have] guaranteed the freedom of belief and the freedom of religious rites, as they constitute fundamental principles of all civilized countries. Every human being has the right to believe in the religion or belief that satisfies his conscience and pleases his soul. No authority has power over what he believes deep in his soul and conscience.”

At the same time, however, the Court wrote that “the Bahá'í belief — as unanimously concluded by the Muslim imams as well as the rulings of the Supreme Constitutional Court and the Supreme Administrative Court — is not among the recognized religions, whoever follows it from among the Muslims is considered apostate.”

Thus, “despite its guarantee in Article 18 [of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights] to give everyone the right to freedom of thought, expression and religion, ‘this latter right should be understood within the limits

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— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community



Outside the Supreme Administrative Court building in Cairo on 16 December 2006, supporters of the Bahá'ís held enlarged ID cards with the word "Bahá'í" written in. The placard on the far left says: "I'm a Muslim. I believe that Bahá'í belief is invalid but I support their right to mention the word Bahá'í on the religious section of their identification cards."

of what is recognized i.e. what is meant by religion is one of the three religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism," the Court wrote, citing an earlier Egyptian Supreme Court decision.

As such, the Court wrote, the recording of the Bahá'í Faith or other religions "which [Islamic] scholars of the nation and the successive rulings of both the constitutional and administrative courts unanimously agreed are not among the heavenly religions...is not allowed. This is established on the grounds that the legal provisions that regulate all these issues are considered part of the public order."

News of the decision and its impact on Egypt's small but active Bahá'í community were carried by the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse, as well as on BBC radio and France24 television. It also received extensive coverage in newspapers and on television in Egypt and in Arab countries.

Egyptian human rights groups immediately condemned the decision.

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) issued a press release on 17 December expressing "great concern," saying it was "unfortunate that the debate raised during the crisis was restricted to a doctrinal prosecution of Bahá'ism [sic], while totally overlooking the core of the issue, namely, the right of each citizen to embrace the religion or beliefs of his own free choice without being discriminated against by any authority in society."

In an unprecedented move, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith wrote a public letter to the Bahá'í community of Egypt a week after the ruling, casting the struggle for the rights of Bahá'ís in Egypt as part of a "peace-

ful" and principled "fight for justice" that contributes to the establishment of a "single global standard of human rights," based on the principle of the oneness of humankind.

The Universal House of Justice urged Egyptian Bahá'ís to "stand firm and persevere in your effort to win affirmation" of the right to be properly identified on government documents.

"The ruling was unreasonable not only because it is contrary to prescriptions set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a signatory, but more especially because the sacred scriptures of Islam extol tolerance as a precept of social stability," wrote the Universal House of Justice in the letter, dated 21 December 2006.

"Like other Egyptian citizens, you simply wish to be free to carry out the requirement of the civil law that you must obtain identification cards without lying about your religious beliefs. Possessing such a card is a common right to which every native-born Egyptian is entitled."

"[H]ow strange it is that the custodians of the law would themselves oblige you to violate a government policy that all citizens without exception are expected to observe," wrote the Universal House of Justice.

"Those groups supporting you in your current encounter are of a world-embracing vision and are themselves prepared to withstand the harsh resistance to their selfless occupation, sustaining blows of injustice in the process," said the Universal House of Justice.

"Undoubtedly," the letter concluded, "Egypt will rise to participate, as befits its stature, in the fruition of that destiny of world peace and prosperity of which all nations dream." ❀

"The ruling was unreasonable not only because it is contrary to prescriptions set forth in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a signatory, but more especially because the sacred scriptures of Islam extol tolerance as a precept of social stability."

— The Universal House of Justice

In Ethiopia, local children's classes aim to fill an academic gap

Games are part of the children's classes held each Saturday in Nefas Silk Lafto. (Photograph by Ryan Lash)



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“Bahá’í children’s classes enable children to develop their inner potentials of imagination, thinking, and creativity so as to become active agents of positive change once they reach the age of maturity.”

**— Ahadu Abaineh,
Sabri Development
Institute**

gayehu Gameda, a Nefas Silk Lafto mother whose child participates in the weekly class. “I have no doubt in my mind that my baby will completely change his life if this class continues and he gets more education.”

Simply called Bahá’í children’s classes, the effort in Nefas Silk Lafto reflects part of a global initiative by the worldwide Bahá’í community to offer local-level training for children in moral education and spiritual fundamentals.

According to the Bahá’í International Community, there are more than 10,000 such local Bahá’í children’s classes currently taking place around the world, with more than 90,000 participants.

The Bahá’í writings stress the importance of children’s education, emphasizing especially the need for training in virtues and spirituality. Although adapted to local conditions and needs, Bahá’í children’s classes around the world focus on moral education, aiming to provide an ingredient that is often overlooked in secular education.

“Bahá’í children’s classes fill the academic gap,” said Ahadu Abaineh, director of the Sabri Development Institute, which coordinates Bahá’í children’s classes in Ethiopia. “They

enable children to develop their inner potentials of imagination, thinking, and creativity so as to become active agents of positive change once they reach the age of maturity.”

In Ethiopia, there are about 45 such local children’s classes being offered currently by Bahá’í communities here, according to the Institute.

Of the 13 classes being offered in Addis Ababa, three stand out as interesting examples, showcasing the grassroots approach undertaken by the Bahá’í community in this effort — as well as the positive reception given to the classes by the community at large.

Deep social needs

Like the class offered in Nefas Silk Lafto, classes in the localities of Kirkos and Yeka are similarly bounded by the difficult social problems that are endemic to this part of the world: poverty, under-education, and the ravages of HIV/AIDS.

Each community, as well, faces its own distinctive dynamic.

Kirkos, for example, is located in an urban area of Addis Ababa. Youth there are troubled by high levels of drug and alcohol abuse, pollution, and crowding as ever more rural youth migrate in search of jobs.

This was the setting for a Bahá'í children's class that was started in 2002 by Lennie Ketsela, a mother who wanted to start a class for the spiritual development of her two children.

"Kirkos is a difficult place to live," said Ms. Ketsela. "The population is very high. There is lots of unemployment. The living standard is very low. Most people here are day workers."

After starting small, the class grew rapidly as children found out about it.

"Six months after starting the class with two children we had about 12 children participating," said Ms. Ketsela, adding that it grew to around 100 participants after children told their friends about a Bahá'í holy day celebration they participated in. The growth necessitated a move to larger facilities at the Fresh and Green Bahá'í school, a primary school that is owned and operated by the Bahá'í community of Ethiopia.

Parents say the classes in Kirkos have benefited their children, who might otherwise go without moral and spiritual education.

"I do not have time to be with my child because of my work," said Gelam Awol, a day laborer and the parent of one of the children in the Kirkos class. "I am a Muslim, so spiritual education is very important to me. It is good to see my child talk about the fear of God and say prayers. This is why I like these classes for my child."

Tayework Lemma, another parent, said her daughter is praying more often now. "She will say prayers when she wakes up, before she eats, when she goes to school," said Ms. Lemma. "She is also very worried about being clean now. Even the neighbors say that they have seen she has changed."

As the children have grown into youth, some have stayed on to volunteer to help the younger ones, evidence of the lasting effect of the classes. "They have understood what it means to serve," said Ms. Ketsela.

In Yeka, a district in the northern part of Addis Abba with roughly 300,000 to 400,000 residents, a new Bahá'í class for children was started earlier this year and now has more than 80 participants.

"I noticed that there were a number of children in the neighborhood who did not have much to do," said Metkneh Getachew-Bagashaw, a Bahá'í in the district. "So I decided to start a Bahá'í children's class."

As with the class in Nefas Silk Lafto, parents here are already seeing changes in the behavior of their children.

"Really, really my children have changed,"

said Azed Badi, a mother of two children in this class. "Sometimes when I am tired and shouting they remind me that we must be kind to each other. It surprises me because this is a big change from the way things used to be."

Worketalu Mersa said her seven-year-old daughter began to cry one weekend when she learned she would not be able to attend the class.

"One weekend I took Nardos with me to my sister's house," said Ms. Mersa. "Then the child began to cry. My sister and I were confused because she used to love going to my sister's house. She said that she was crying because she didn't want to miss her class. She told us that she liked learning prayers and singing songs and she did not want to miss it. My sister said that it sounded important and she should not miss the class. So we came back home."

Universal themes

Mr. Abaineh of the Sabri Development Institute said the virtues taught in the classes are universal in all religions. These include: trust in God, unity, kindness, justice, love, service to humanity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, nobility of self, humility, honesty, use of courteous language, generosity, sociability and patience.

"These classes are kept alive with songs, games, arts, memorization, story telling and plays that the children with the help of their

"Ever since my child joined this class, I see some positive behavioral changes. I have no doubt in my mind that my baby will completely change his life if this class continues and he gets more education."

— Ejigayehu Gemeda, a Nefas Silk Lafto mother

The virtues taught in the classes are universal in all religions. They include honesty, trustworthiness, generosity, and service to humanity. (Photograph by Ryan Lash)



Volunteers strive to keep the classes alive with songs, games, arts, memorization, story telling and plays that the children with the help of their teachers write and perform. (Photograph by Ryan Lash)



"I am a Muslim, so spiritual education is very important to me. It is good to see my child talk about the fear of God and say prayers. This is why I like these classes for my child."

— Gelam Awol, parent

teachers write and perform," said Mr. Abaineh.

The classes are conducted in small groups in the homes of families who open their doors, often volunteering to teach themselves.

"One of the important elements of Bahá'í children classes is that they are conducted on a purely voluntary basis," said Mr. Abaineh. "All children class teachers are volunteers and these classes are done with much devotion and a sense of responsibility. This sense of service is something that distinguishes these classes in that hundreds of children learn while there is no teacher remuneration."

The classes in Nefas Silk Lafto provide a concrete example of this process at work.

Like Yeka and Kirkos, Nefas Silk Lafto is a hard place to live in. Many of the children who participate in Bahá'í children's classes here have lost either one or both parents to AIDS.

The classes are hosted at the home of Kurt and Marcia Henne, who moved to Nefas Silk Lafto in mid-2005 after Mr. Henne took a position as country director for Project Concern International, an international non-governmental organization focused on community health and sustainable development.

"Our two older children, 11 and 9 years old, did not make friends quickly, because of the language barrier," said Mr. Henne, noting that no one in the family speaks Amharic. "For this reason, we started inviting neighborhood children to play football with our kids in our driveway.

"Before long there were easily 10 to 15 children running in and out of the house. My wife and I thought that this provided the

perfect opportunity for us to start a Bahá'í children's class and did," said Mr. Henne, who has been a Bahá'í since 1987.

The class grew rapidly from its original size to between 50 to 100 children in a little over a month.

The Hennes turned to the Addis Ababa Bahá'í community for help. They knew that Bahá'í communities around the world had in recent years been focusing on children's classes.

Tewodros Sikru is one of the seven volunteers from the Addis Ababa Bahá'í community that decided to help. He said that the classes grew because there was very little structured activity for children in these neighborhoods.

With the help of trained teachers like Mr. Sikru, who speaks the local language, the Saturday morning class has become increasingly popular. The number of children attending is now between 100 to 200 each week.

After seeing the positive development in the character of their children, some of the parents were invited to ask for more information. This led to parenting workshops.

"Their questions turned from those of what we were doing with their children to what they could be doing with their children," said Mr. Henne. "Most of these parents had children as children. This has meant that they were not prepared for the trials of parenthood."

Since the parenting workshops have begun, older children have also taken an interest in the activities.

"Now on Thursday evenings they have an arts program that they are involved in," said Mr. Henne. *

— by Kerii Hange Tjitendero

The Spirit of Agriculture

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ture,” writes Mr. Hanley. “For Bahá’u’lláh, agriculture was a ‘vital and important matter.’ His commitment to agriculture is evidenced in his own agricultural endeavors and those of his son and successor, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and in their extensive discourse on the topic.”

The essays explore the deep connection between agriculture and religion — a relationship that is too often unacknowledged.

“Every creature must feed and the way it does helps to decide its place in the world and its impact on other living things,” writes P.J. Stewart, a development specialist at Oxford University. “One of the things that most influences human food consumption and production is religion.”

Mr. Stewart, who is not a Bahá’í, suggests for example that the shift from polytheism to monotheism in the Judeo-Christian tradition increased the “distance” of humans “from the rest of the biological world” by creating a theology that held that “only human life was sacred.”

In modern times, this distance has been widened by scientific thought. “The consequences have included the Industrial Revolution, with attendant pressure on resources and outpouring of pollutants,” Mr. Stewart writes.

Other essays address the ways the Bahá’í Faith offers new principles to address problems that have emerged as the world has become more industrialized and interdependent. Along the way, the authors examine a number of hotly debated topics, such as genetically modified crops, the problems of rural-to-urban migration, and the role of diet in sustainable development.

Paul Fieldhouse, an adjunct professor at the University of Manitoba, writes that the Bahá’í perspective on food and diet, with its emphasis on moderation, simplicity, compassion and justice, augurs well for a future diet that is more sustainable.

He notes for example that although Bahá’í dietary law allows the eating of meat, vegetarianism is encouraged. He quotes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The food of the future will be fruits and grains,” and observes that “by reducing the demand for meat, land and resources that are used for intensive animal rearing are freed to produce larger quantities of plant crops.”

Gary Reusche, an agronomist and international development specialist, suggests that the Faith’s emphasis on environmental and social justice, community participation, diversity, and human-scale living offers a vision for a new kind of village life that is both

spiritually and intellectually rewarding.

“As long as the village is considered culturally and intellectually backward, people will naturally move away to areas of greater potential for the full expression of the human spirit,” writes Dr. Reusche, suggesting, among other things, that Bahá’í teachings that promote diversity can help contribute to a “rural renaissance.”

“Diversity will be an important source of creativity, innovation, and synergistic productivity, and will be an important aspect of quality of life in rural areas,” Dr. Reusche writes.

Michel Zahrai writes that Bahá’í principles on ethics, cooperation, consultation, profit-sharing, and social integration taken together offer a framework for a grassroots-oriented management practice that can support the emergence of small non-farm activities that can restore “pride to rural livelihoods” and bring back “life into a decaying social structure” in the countryside.

Paul Olson, a geneticist who has worked and studied in the Philippines, Colombia, Ecuador, and Costa Rica, offers his perspective as an individual Bahá’í on the genetic modification of crops, suggesting that “Bahá’í themes of unity, interdependence, justice, and consultation” lead to an approach that “neither glorifies nor vilifies the technology.”

“Instead,” Dr. Olson writes, “in assessing the risks and opportunities associated with this technology, [a Bahá’í approach] calls for a broad understanding of creation and an emphasis on building ethical values, institutions and process that promote and safeguard the interests of the entire human race.”

The last few chapters of the *The Spirit of Agriculture* offer case studies of Bahá’í perspectives in practice. One is an excerpt from a 1944 book by Richard St. Barbe Baker, a Bahá’í whose pioneering conservation work won him the sobriquet “Man of the Trees.” It describes his early experiments with tree farming in Nigeria in 1927.

There are also descriptions of a Bahá’í scientist’s pioneering efforts to restore coral reefs through the promotion of community-based aquaculture and a Bahá’í-inspired effort in Mongolia to promote community gardens.

The book also re-prints two stories from ONE COUNTRY: an account of efforts at the Dorothy Baker Environmental Studies Center in Bolivia to encourage the use of solar-heated greenhouses on the Andean altiplano and a story about the Ruaha Secondary School in Tanzania with its “self-reliance program” that emphasizes “practical experience in agriculture.”*

“Every creature must feed and the way it does helps to decide its place in the world and its impact on other living things. One of the things that most influences human food consumption and production is religion.”

**—P. J. Stewart,
Oxford University**

We are what we eat, globally

The Spirit of Agriculture

**Edited by
Paul Hanley**

George Ronald

Oxford

As Paul Hanley points out in his new book, the topic of agriculture sometimes conjures up more jokes than serious discussion, especially in contrast to seemingly more urgent issues like war, peace, poverty, education and human rights.

“Negative views of rural people are evident in a rich vocabulary of put-downs: rube, yokel, hayseed, bumpkin, clodhopper, hick, peasant, rustic, heathen, pagan, savage, and even ‘farmer,’” notes Mr. Hanley in the opening chapter of *The Spirit of Agriculture*.

Yet, Mr. Hanley writes, “food is the prerequisite of human development: What could be more basic to human dignity than an adequate diet? Can we have peace or even fellowship while multitudes starve? Is education possible when children are malnourished?”

On that premise, Mr. Hanley and a group of other essayists explore the teaching in the Bahá’í Faith that “special regard must be paid to agriculture.”

Their collective conclusion is that the whole subject — which they define to include food, farming, forestry, aquaculture and in general terms man’s interaction with the natural environment — badly needs closer attention by those who desire a prosperous global future.

Composed of 14 chapters by about as many authors, the 230-page book focuses on the urgent need to create a more equitable and sustainable system of agriculture if we are to eliminate poverty, meet the demands for global justice, and ensure the long term health of the earth’s ecosystems.

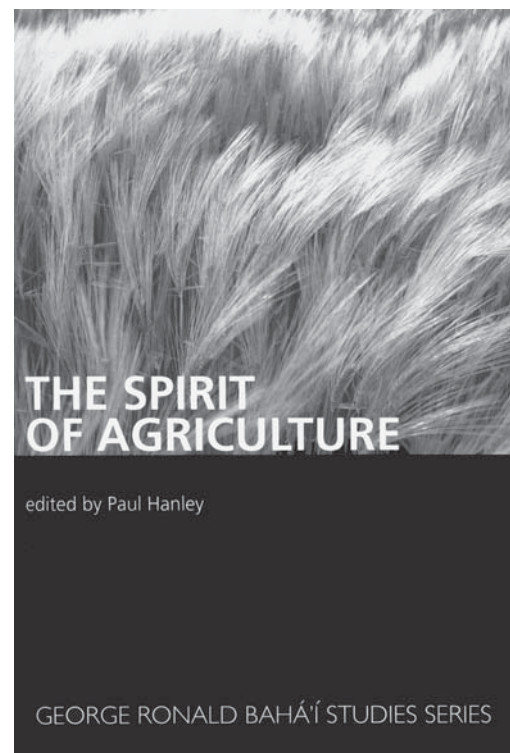
Specifically, writes Mr. Hanley, the world’s agricultural system currently suffers from two crucial defects: “The first is its inherent injustice and inequity, which results in the destabilization of rural communities throughout the world and in widespread poverty and hunger in much of the ‘developing world.’ The second is its inherent unsustainability, which results in the gradual deterioration of the soil, water and genetic and other resources on which productivity depends.”

Efforts to tackle these two problems, he writes, have failed so far not from a lack of technical expertise but rather because of the lack of moral will and long range vision. “Alternative methods of agriculture that are

more productive and more environmentally sensitive have been identified and are being used with impressive results,” he writes, asking rhetorically why such practices haven’t been more widely adopted.

What is needed, suggests Mr. Hanley and the other essayists, is an application of spiritual principles, such as justice and equity within a global framework of human oneness. “Since a lack of food supplies and land is not the cause of hunger, the objective of agricultural policies designed with equity in mind would be to increase the inclusiveness of access to food and to the means of productivity, more so than to increase production,” Mr. Hanley writes.

Moreover, writes Mr. Hanley, it is important to understand the role of religion as a motivating force in the development of agriculture — and to explore why the Bahá’í



Faith, as the newest of the world’s independent religions, gives agriculture such a high place in its sacred writings.

“The Bahá’í Faith is unique among religions in the emphasis it places on agricul-

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