

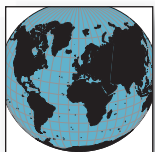


ONE COUNTRY

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

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Newsletter of the Bahá'í
International Community
January-March 2007
Volume 18, Issue 4



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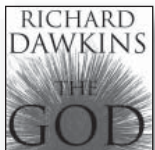
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Increasingly recognized for his contributions to the new "realism," Mr. Sheridan is unambiguous about how his Bahá'í belief affects his artistic expression.



Artist Duffy Sheridan at the 2005 Florence Biennale with three of his paintings.

ELROY, Arizona, USA — Having painted in obscurity for decades, artist Duffy Sheridan was in Italy of all places when an art lover surprised him by singling him out in a crowd.

Mr. Sheridan had just finished hanging three paintings in the main gallery at the 2005 Florence Biennale of Contemporary Art — a prestigious, invitation-only art festival which that year brought together 768 artists from 74 countries.

"My son and I were walking back to the hotel when we heard a woman yelling, 'Artiste! Artiste!'" said the painter, telling the story during an interview at his home in this American Southwest desert town.

"We started looking around for someone, and we see that she's pointing at me and running at me with a group of women. They had seen my self-portrait hanging in the gallery and recognized me in the crowd. I turned to my son and said, 'This is going to be fun.'"

The recognition given to Mr. Sheridan at the show in Florence, where he won the celebrated President's Award, is all the more significant because of the style of his paintings. Mr. Sheridan is a classical realist and his vision runs counter to the trend in contemporary art toward abstraction.

He is also unusual in the art world because he is entirely self-taught, and because he speaks explicitly of the influence of spirituality on his work. A member of the Bahá'í Faith since 1971, Mr. Sheridan is unambiguous about how Bahá'í teachings and principles affect his choice of subjects and themes.

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Climate change and the oneness of humanity

With the release in February of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), there remains little doubt about the reality of global warming.

"Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level," wrote a committee of international scientists, known as Working Group I, in the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report.

Moreover, there seems little doubt that global warming is caused by human activity. IPCC scientists — an international group that has long been known for its relatively conservative approach — are now more than 90 percent confident that humanity is bringing climate change upon itself, primarily through the burning of fossil fuels, which release carbon dioxide, the primary "greenhouse gas" that is understood as responsible for warming.

The potential dangers of global warming have long been known, of course, albeit sometimes intensely debated. But in April, a second group of IPCC scientists attached specific probabilities to various outcomes from warming.

They identified warming effects and associated trends, all with an 80 percent or greater probability, that include: increasingly severe weather, including stronger storms and greater drought; a significant rise in the level of the oceans; and shifts in the range of various terrestrial plant and animal species, along with increased extinctions in ecologically sensitive areas. There will also likely be increased spread of disease, significant localized crop failure, especially in Africa, and increased cross-border refugees.

Since before the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the Bahá'í International Community has repeatedly called attention

to humanity's increasing impact on the environment and its potential consequences. Whether discussing ocean pollution, deforestation or greenhouse gas emissions, Bahá'í statements have focused on the global nature of such problems, raising this question:

"Can humanity, with its entrenched patterns of conflict, self-interest, and short-sighted behavior, commit itself to enlightened cooperation and long-range planning on a global scale?"

In the short term, the answer clearly remains in doubt. In the long term, however, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith offer much hope — and a basis for both immediate and sustained action.

More than a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh explained that humanity is moving inexorably into an age when its underlying oneness and the need for unity and collaboration in virtually all spheres of endeavor will eventually be universally recognized — and that from that recognition the long promised age of peace and security for all humanity will ultimately be realized.

For Bahá'ís, then, the growing scientific consensus on climate change and its wider public discussion offer an urgent reason for humanity to examine its underlying interdependence and oneness, which is the fundamental reality of the human condition today. The challenge of global warming, moreover, highlights the degree to which humanity must swiftly move towards unity of action at the global level if it is to thrive and, perhaps, even survive.

In previous statements, the Bahá'í International Community has identified a number of key principles needed to create sustainable development on a global scale. These principles include a mandate for justice above all else, a commitment to world citizenship, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. Principles

such as the equality of women and men, an emphasis on moral education, and the creation of a new system of global governance have also been held up as prerequisites to the creation of “an ever-advancing civilization,” as Bahá’u’lláh phrased it.

Within the context of sustainable development, what makes climate change especially intractable is the way in which its many inputs are so small, and so deeply interwoven into the fabric of modern life, and yet are set against an overall long time frame in which changes, whether positive or negative, will take decades to show results.

Today, with few exceptions, every time someone somewhere turns on a light, rides in a motor vehicle, purchases an industrial artifact, or heats his or her home, more carbon dioxide is produced, and, according to the current understanding, the potential for global warming goes up by a tiny increment.

The accumulation of these tiny inputs of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has taken on the characteristics of a long but slowly accelerating freight train: the momentum has been building for a long time and it will now take considerable time and effort to slow it down.

The imperative for action, then, extends from the highest political levels — at which broad policies can be implemented to stem warming — to the choices that each person around the world makes every day at home or in work.

It is in this regard that religion and religious belief offer a critically important venue for reflection, transformation, and action. For, as has increasingly been recognized by activists in the approach to other environmental problems, there is perhaps no more powerful impetus for social change at the grass roots than religion.

As the most recent of the independent world religions, the Bahá’í Faith offers principles and ideas that appeal to the contemporary mind and establish a framework for fruitful action.

As noted, foremost among these principles is the oneness of humanity, which, the Bahá’í writings state, “implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.” And at the heart of this change stands Bahá’u’lláh’s imperative: “Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.”

The Bahá’í writings also tell us that such unity cannot be created without justice.

“There is no force on earth that can equal in its conquering power the force of justice and wisdom,” wrote Bahá’u’lláh. “The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.”

Both principles, unity and justice, are essential if international negotiations over things like carbon limits, emissions trading, the sharing of alternative technologies, and the elimination of poverty (which has a very real effect on greenhouse gas production, as when the poor are impelled to burn down forests to create farmland) are to succeed.

Once such principles are firmly adopted at the highest levels, it will be easier to motivate ordinary citizens at the lowest levels — who in many places are already at the forefront of action — to make whatever further changes that may be required in their own lives to ameliorate global warming.

Another key principle of the Bahá’í writings that can broadly illuminate new directions in addressing climate change is the understanding that science and spirituality are not antagonistic but, in fact, are complementary in their descriptions of reality.

Too often, of course, advancing technology has been the cause of unintended pollution or social harm. “If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation,” warned Bahá’u’lláh. On the other hand, traditional religion has too often delayed or hindered the adoption of new ideas and technologies that could be of benefit.

Bahá’ís believe that once a human-oriented basis for scientific endeavor has been established, built first and foremost upon the principles of unity and justice, the possibilities for fruitful scientific endeavor are limitless. In the case of climate change, Bahá’ís have no doubt that science, animated by such values, could lead to the creation and adoption of such technologies and alternative economic structures that will permit a high and sustained level of global prosperity in which everyone can lead materially and spiritually satisfying lives.

Bahá’u’lláh warned that humanity would face an increasing number of severe and unprecedented calamities until it recognized and fully embraced its underlying unity. The threat posed by global warming offers yet another opportunity to discover within ourselves the fundamental reality upon which the peace, security and well being of the entire planet depend.*

Bahá’u’lláh warned that humanity would face an increasing number of severe and unprecedented calamities until it recognized and fully embraced its underlying unity. The threat posed by global warming offers yet another opportunity to discover within ourselves the fundamental reality upon which the peace, security and well being of the entire planet depends.

Focus on the empowerment of girls at 2007 UN meeting on women's status

This year's Commission on the Status of Women drew nearly 2,000 people from around the world, including some 200 girls, a response to the theme, "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child."

UNITED NATIONS — Last autumn, Anisa Fadaei started a discussion group on women's issues at her high school. Meeting every two weeks at lunch, about a dozen girls examined issues like domestic violence, unequal pay rates, and trafficking in girls.

The topics were unfamiliar to most of the participants — which is the point.

"Before we started, most of the others didn't have a clue about gender equality issues or violence against women," said Anisa, who is 17 and lives in the town of Stroud, in Gloucestershire, United Kingdom. "We live in quite a nice area and so most of my friends didn't realize that such problems with inequality were going on around the world."

Though young, Anisa is committed to raising awareness about gender issues. She is involved in the youth caucus of the UK National Alliance of Women's Organizations, and she has been the featured speaker at several schoolwide assemblies on women's topics. She was recently profiled in a UNICEF newsletter that focuses on how young people can get involved with global issues.

Anisa was one of at least 12 girls and 36 women and men from 27 countries who came to represent their national Bahá'í com-

munities at the 51st UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), held 26 February–9 March 2007. The group represented the largest delegation of Bahá'ís ever at the annual meeting of the Commission, which has in recent years become a global rallying point for activists on women's issues.

An examination of the Bahá'í delegation offers a snapshot of how Bahá'ís around the world are striving in their local and national communities to promote the equality of women and men, which is a basic principle of the Bahá'í Faith.

Among those attending the Commission this year, for example, were:

- Ahenleima Koijam, a 16-year-old student from Imphal, India, who has been working with children and youth groups since 2003, and has also participated in a public hearing on human rights, where she talked about problems facing girls in the province of Manipur.

- Mitra Deliri, a 48-year-old teacher who recently founded a school for underprivileged girls in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. The school, the Chipua Institute for Social Transformation, tutors some 70 girls in English, math, and science, and also vocational skills.

- Ruth Montgomery-Anderson, a 49-year-

Anisa Fadaei, 17, left, on stage at the UN's Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium, with her mother, Zarin Hainsworth Fadaei, for a discussion on 1 March 2007 at the Commission on the Status of Women on the topic of "Eliminating Violence across Generations." Anisa and her mother were among some 48 Bahá'ís who attended the Commission this year.





On 2 March 2007, young people from around the world shared their perspectives with Yakin Erturk, center, at the Bahá'í International Community's offices. Ms. Erturk is the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

old midwife from Greenland, who has recently completed several films for the Ministry of Health on issues that touch the lives of women in Greenland. One film, for example, explores family life in Greenland, while another discusses issues of rape and sexual abuse.

- Jutta Bayani, a 52-year-old business-woman from Mamer, Luxembourg, who was recently appointed by her city's mayor to a consultative commission on gender issues. "The appointment came, I believe, as a result of my longstanding involvement in women's activities, especially at the national level," said Ms. Bayani.

"The United Nations is looking for models about how to implement its various programs, and in the case of these Bahá'í women from around the world you have some concrete examples of effective activities at the local and national levels to promote the advancement of women," said Fulya Vekiloglu, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

This year's Commission meeting drew nearly 2,000 people, representing some 334 organizations. Among them were some 200 girls from around the world, a response to the theme of this year's Commission, which was "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child."

In its final statement, the 45-member Commission reaffirmed that the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child is "an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms."

"[T]he empowerment of girls is key to

breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and to promoting and protecting the full and effective enjoyment of all their human rights," said the Commission in its outcome document. "[E]mpowering girls requires the active support and engagement of their parents, legal guardians, families, boys and men, as well as the wider community."

The 51st session of the Commission was also marked by a special meeting of the UN General Assembly to discuss women's empowerment and equality.

"There is no other cause that we can commit ourselves to that can have as much an impact on the lives of so many," said General Assembly President Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa of Bahrain. "We all stand to gain from women and men having equal opportunities... we must move beyond words and deliver on the promises that we have made."

In addition to the main meeting by governments to discuss that theme and other issues, the UN, government missions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sponsored more than 170 "parallel events" — panel discussions, workshops, briefings and other activities aimed at exploring issues facing women and girls around the globe.

The Bahá'í delegation participated in virtually all aspects of the Commission's program, said Ms. Vekiloglu, focusing this year especially on the theme of eliminating discrimination against girls.

Ahenleima Koijam, the girl from India, for example, was a featured panelist at a workshop titled "Gender-Based Violence: Consequences Across the Life Span," held on

"There is no other cause that we can commit ourselves to that can have as much an impact on the lives of so many. We all stand to gain from women and men having equal opportunities."

— Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa of Bahrain, UN General Assembly President

"A girl's most important influence is on her family. The mothers need to be educated properly, as they are the first line of educators."

— Ahenleima Kojiam, a 16-year-old student from Imphal, India

1 March at the UN Church Center.

"Many girls are forced to get married at an early age," said Ahenleima, saying that girls face various forms of violence, both physical and psychological, even from before birth. "Early marriage often results in the birth of a low-weight child. Fifty-six percent of girls suffer from anemia, and 40 percent suffer from stunted growth."

Ahenleima's answer to this and other problems was to increase support for education, especially for girls. "A girl's most important influence is on her family," noting that even when young girls have children, their role in raising the next generation is nevertheless powerful. "The mothers need to be educated properly, as they are the first line of educators."

Other activities that featured specific involvement by Bahá'ís included a 2 March panel discussion on "Ethical Perspectives on Transitional Justice and the Girl Child," which was sponsored by the UN office of the Bahá'í community of the United States; a 25 February workshop on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Kinds of Discrimination Against Women) and the CRC (Child

Rights Convention), which was moderated by Ms. Vekiloglu; and a 2 March "Girls' Perspective" meeting with Yakin Erturk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, which was held at the Bahá'í International Community's offices.

Anisa Fadaei, the Bahá'í girl from the UK, participated in a panel discussion on 1 March titled "Eliminating Violence across Generations." Held in the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium at the UN building, the discussion featured not only Anisa but also her mother, Zarin Hainsworth Fadaei, and her grandmother, Lois Hainsworth. The event was sponsored by the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the UN and the Bahá'í International Community, and also featured a performance of the Children's Theater Company.

In her presentation, Anisa stressed the need for young women to educate their male peers about the equality of women and men.

"We need to tell more boys what is going on," said Anisa, when asked by someone in the audience about how to end violence against women and to promote their advancement. "For me, personally, we need to raise awareness." ❀

Design for Bahá'í temple in South America wins citation

TORONTO, Canada — After months of testing a key computer model for the unique Bahá'í House of Worship to be built in Chile, architects announced in February that fabrication of components for the structure is beginning.



The design for the Chile Bahá'í House of Worship features a dome of nine translucent alabaster and cast-glass "wings."

The milestone comes just as the design for the building received a coveted architectural award — a citation from *Architect* magazine in its annual Progressive Architecture competition. The awards, established in 1954, are among the most prestigious honors for projects that have not yet been built. The award was announced in the January 2007 issue of the publication.

The Bahá'í temple in Chile is one of eight projects from around the world that received an award or citation in the program this year.

"For architects, it's the award that recognizes designs that go in a new direction," said Siamak Hariri of Hariri Pontarini Architects of Toronto, the firm that designed the House

of Worship and is overseeing its construction. Representatives of the firm traveled to New York for the awards ceremony.

Mr. Hariri describes the building as a "temple of light." The structure will be created by nine translucent alabaster and cast-glass "wings," which during the day will allow sunlight to filter through. At night the temple will emit a warm glow from the interior lighting.

The huge segments that will form the sides and dome of the building are being fabricated in Toronto and then will be transported to Chile. It will take two to three years to complete the pieces of the temple that are being fabricated in Canada.

"It's a little bit unorthodox, but it's the most cost effective way to do it," Mr. Hariri said of doing part of the work off-site. Five countries, including Chile, were considered for the fabrication, but the Canadian bid turned out to be the least expensive, he said.

At the actual site in Chile, construction of the foundation is tentatively set to begin next October. Financed entirely by voluntary contributions from Bahá'ís around the world, the cost of the Chile project has been estimated at US\$30 million. ❀

In Iran, Bahá'í schoolchildren are now targets of persecution

NEW YORK — Bahá'í students in primary and secondary schools throughout Iran are increasingly being harassed, vilified, and held up to abuse, according to recent reports from inside the country.

During a 30-day period from mid-January to mid-February 2007, some 150 incidents of insults, mistreatment, and even physical violence by school authorities against Bahá'í students were reported as occurring in at least 10 Iranian cities.

At the same time, nearly 40 percent of college-age Bahá'ís admitted to Iranian universities in the fall of 2006 have been expelled, powerful evidence that Bahá'í students in Iran still face severe discrimination and limited access to higher education.

Taken together, these two trends reflect a worsening situation for Iranian Bahá'ís, said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

“These new reports that the most vulnerable members of the Iranian Bahá'í community — children and junior youth — are being harassed, degraded, and, in at least one case, blindfolded and beaten, is an extremely disturbing development,” said Ms. Dugal.

“The increasing number of such incidents suggests a serious and shameful escalation in the ongoing persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís,” said Ms. Dugal. “The fact that school-aged children are being targeted by those who should rightfully hold their trust — teachers and school administrators — only makes this latest trend even more ominous.”

Abuse of school children

Ms. Dugal said the Bahá'í International Community has been aware of scattered reports of abuse directed at schoolchildren but has only recently learned that young Bahá'ís are now widely being forced to identify their religion — and are also being insulted, degraded, threatened with expulsion, and, in some cases, summarily dismissed from school.

“They are also being pressured to con-

vert to Islam, required to endure slander of their faith by religious instructors, and being taught and tested on ‘Iranian history’ in authorized texts that denigrate, distort, and brazenly falsify their religious heritage,” said Ms. Dugal. “They are also being repeatedly told that they are not to attempt to teach their religion.”

According to Ms. Dugal, one Bahá'í has reported that the school-age children of a relative in Kermanshah were called to the front of the classroom, where they were required to listen to insults against the Faith.

“Another student, accepted at an art institute, has been followed by the authorities and on three occasions seized, blindfolded, and beaten,” said Ms. Dugal.

“While a few of these may be isolated attacks, the extent and nature of this reprehensible activity has led the Bahá'ís in Iran to conclude that this is an organized effort,” said Ms. Dugal.

Of special concern, she added, was the fact that a high proportion of the attacks against high school students have been against girls.

“While the attacks reported to have taken place in elementary and middle schools were leveled evenly against boys and girls, those at the high school level targeted girls to a far greater degree: of 76 incidents, 68 were against Bahá'í girls,” said Ms. Dugal.

Discrimination in higher education

After more than 25 years during which Iranian Bahá'ís were outright banned from attending public and private universities in Iran, some 178 Bahá'í students were admitted last fall to various schools around the country after the government changed its policies and removed religious identification from entrance examination papers.

As of mid-February, however, at least 70 students had been expelled after their universities became aware that they were Bahá'ís — some 39 percent of those who were admitted.

“The high percentage of expulsions

“They are also being pressured to convert to Islam, required to endure slander of their faith by religious instructors, and being taught and tested on ‘Iranian history’ in authorized texts that denigrate, distort, and brazenly falsify their religious heritage.”

— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

A 2 November 2006 letter from Payame Noor University's "Central Protection Office," issued on the letterhead of Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, states that it is official policy that "Bahá'ís cannot enroll in universities and higher education centers" and "if they are already enrolled they should be expelled."



— which are all explicitly connected to the students' identities as Bahá'ís — suggests at best that the government is turning a blind eye to discrimination in higher education, and, at worst, is merely playing a game with Bahá'í students," said Diane Ala'i, the Bahá'í International Community's representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

"While we are happy that for the first time since the early 1980s a significant number of Iranian Bahá'í youth have been able to enter and attend the university of their choice, the government's long history of systematic persecution against Bahá'ís certainly calls into question the sincerity of the new policies," said Ms. Ala'i.

She noted, for example, that another 191 Bahá'í students, having successfully passed national college entrance examinations last summer, were unable to enter university this year, either because of the limited number of places for the course of their choice or for other reasons unknown to them.

In March the Bahá'í International Community obtained and released a 2 November 2006 letter from the headquarters of Payame Noor University to its regional branches, which states that it is government policy that Bahá'í students "cannot enroll" in Iranian universities and that if they are already enrolled, "they should be expelled."

The 2 November letter was issued on the letterhead of Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and went out from Payame Noor's "Central Protection Office" to

directors of the university's regional centers.

"With respect, according to the ruling of the Cultural Revolutionary Council and the instructions of the Ministry of Information and the Head Protection Office of the Central Organization of Payame Noor University, Bahá'ís cannot enroll in universities and higher education centers," states the letter.

"Therefore, such cases if encountered should be reported, their enrollment should be strictly avoided, and if they are already enrolled they should be expelled."

Payame Noor University is "the largest state university in terms of student numbers and coverage," according to the university's website, with some 467,000 students in 74 degree programs at 257 study centers and units throughout the country.

So far this year, at least 30 Bahá'í students have been expelled from Payame Noor.

"International law provides that access to education is a basic human right, and Iranian universities have no excuse for denying students who have successfully passed their examinations the right to attend simply because they are Bahá'ís," added Ms. Ala'i.

Members of the largest religious minority in Iran, Bahá'ís of all ages have faced systematic religious persecution since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. More than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have had property or businesses confiscated, been fired from jobs, and/or had pensions terminated.

According to a secret 1991 government memorandum, Bahá'ís "must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

One of the chief means the government has used to enforce this policy was to require that everyone sitting for the national college entrance examination state their religion on the test registration forms. Test forms that listed "Bahá'í," or that had no listing, were rejected.

In 2004, apparently in response to continued pressure from the international community, the Iranian government removed the data field for religious affiliation. About 1,000 Bahá'í students successfully sat for the examination that year and hundreds passed, many with very high scores.

Later that same year, however, in an action that Bahá'í International Community representatives characterize as a "ploy," exam results were sent back to Bahá'ís with the word "Muslim" written in, something that

"The high percentage of expulsions — which are all explicitly connected to the students' identities as Bahá'ís — suggests at best that the government is turning a blind eye to discrimination in higher education, and, at worst, is merely playing a game with Bahá'í students."

— Diane Ala'i, Bahá'í International Community

officials knew would be unacceptable to Bahá'ís, who as a matter of religious principle refuse to deny their beliefs.

Government officials argued that since the Bahá'ís had opted to take the set of questions on Islam in the religious studies section of the test, they should be listed as Muslims. Bahá'ís contested the action and were rebuffed; no Bahá'í students entered university that year.

The same thing happened in 2005. Hundreds of Bahá'í students took and passed the national examination, only to find that the government had listed them as Muslims. Bahá'ís again contested the action, but without successful redress, and no Bahá'ís matriculated in 2005.

Last summer, again acting on good faith, hundreds of Bahá'ís took the national examination. This time, as indicated in the figures above, hundreds have passed, and some 178 were accepted into universities.

Throughout the fall, reports came out of

Iran indicating that many of those who had been accepted were being refused entry or expelled once the universities learned that they were Bahá'ís.

“One student, for example, received a phone call from Payame Noor University on 18 October, asking whether he was a Bahá'í. When he replied in the affirmative, he was told that he could not be enrolled.

“Later, after visiting the university, the student was told that the university had received a circular from the National Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization, which oversees the university entrance examination process, stating that while it would not prevent the Bahá'ís from going through the enrolment process, once enrolled, they were to be expelled.

“Another Bahá'í student at that same university was told that students who do not specify their religion on registration forms would be disqualified from continuing their education there,” said Ms. Ala'i. ❀

Congo Republic issues stamp for World Religion Day

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo Republic — The Congo Republic became the second country to issue a postage stamp for World Religion Day, an annual event commemorated in dozens of cities and towns around the globe.

The stamp was presented here on 20 January 2007 at a World Religion Day program that drew more than 250 participants from eight religious communities. Agents were on hand to sell both the stamps and first-day covers.

World Religion Day was first celebrated in 1950, when the national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in the United States established it to call attention to the essential oneness of the world's religions and to show that religion is the motivating force for world unity.

The day is celebrated with interfaith discussions, conferences and other events that foster understanding among the followers of all religions. World Religion Day, which always falls on the third Sunday in January, is traditionally commemorated a day early in Brazzaville.

The new stamp from the Congo pictures a globe surrounded by the symbols of 11 religions. Across the top it says, in French, “God is the source of all religions.”

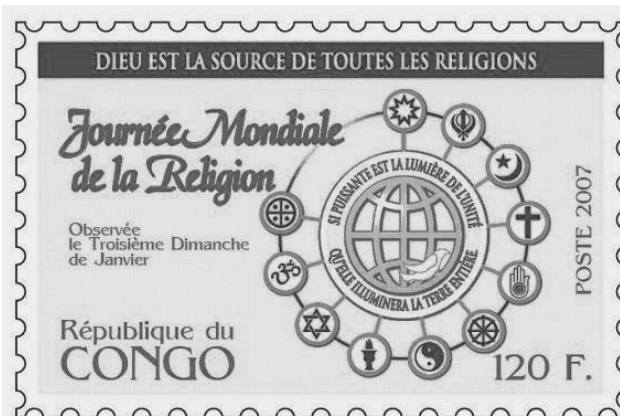
Sri Lanka issued a World Religion Day stamp in 1985 that pictured symbols of eight religions.

In 1999, Singapore issued a postage stamp

that listed the names of nine major religions along with the words “Unity in Diversity” and a tribute to the 50th anniversary of the Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore. The release of the stamp coincided with World Religion Day, although it did not actually carry those words.

In Entebbe, Uganda, organizers of the World Religion Day commemoration there announced that they had requested their national postal service to issue a stamp for the occasion next year.

At their celebration this year, hosted by the Entebbe Municipal Council, participating religious leaders signed a declaration to form the Entebbe Inter-Faith Coalition. The signers pledged to use “the unifying power of religion to instill in the hearts and minds of all people of faith the fundamental facts and spiritual standards that have been laid down by our Creator to bring them together as members of one family.” ❀



Congo Republic stamp issued in January 2007.

In Papua New Guinea, mothers take charge

In a simple but striking example of grassroots development, a circle of mothers in Mom Village on a remote island have successfully initiated the construction of their own village medical aid post.

The Bahá'í mothers of Mom Village, Papua New Guinea, proudly standing in front of their newly built medical aid post.

MOM VILLAGE, Papua New Guinea — In a simple but striking example of grassroots development, a group of villagers on a remote island some 30 kilometers off Papua New Guinea's northern coast have funded and built their own medical aid station.

Inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on women's equality and community participation, a circle of mothers in Mom Village on Karkar Island launched the project, which now serves the entire community.

"The Bahá'ís of Mom Village decided to arise and do something for their community because the government infrastructures like medical aid posts, schools and roads have deteriorated or have been completely closed due to lack of funds for maintenance," said Abegul Bodick, a frequent visitor to the island.

The project was initiated in 2002, said Mr. Bodick, when the villagers launched a fund-raising campaign, which resulted in the dedication of a new aid post in July 2006.

Home to about 50,000 people, Karkar Island has few of the services available on the mainland. Residents have to walk long distances to collect water from human-powered groundwater pumps. Electricity is a luxury that typically comes only from expensive solar panels or gasoline-powered generators.

Medical services are also scarce. Although Mom Village is the third largest town on the island, with about 3,500 residents, they nev-

ertheless had to travel more than 10 kilometers — usually on foot — to reach the nearest aid station before the new post was built.

It was this need for access to medical care that spurred the group of Bahá'í mothers here to initiate the aid post project four years ago.

"Both the Bahá'ís and the members of a wider community within Mom Village realized that there was a need to create a medical aid post that was accessible to the community," said Mr. Bodick.

The Bahá'í women in the village, however, were inspired by teachings on women's equality and participation to address the problem, said Mr. Bodick, who is an auxiliary board member, a Bahá'í with a special responsibility for educating, motivating and encouraging Bahá'í communities and individuals at the regional and local level.

"Bahá'í teachings brought new values," said Mr. Bodick, explaining that the women realized they could now be "part of the decision making process" that had been denied to them in the past.

The idea of constructing an aid post was brought by the women to the Local Spiritual Assembly, the locally elected governing council for the Bahá'í community here. An action plan was conceived, said Mr. Bodick, and the women began a fund-raising drive.

"In fact, the Bahá'í women put forward ideas of fund raising by way of 'bring and buy,' as well as a practice known as 'exchange basket,' meaning that they would ask the women from other villages to come with a certain amount of money and other gifts while the women in Mom provide the feast," said Mr. Bodick. "This is a common reciprocal activity throughout Papua New Guinea."

Mr. Bodick said Bahá'ís also established a special fund for the aid post, and donations were collected at Bahá'í feasts and holy days.

"From the start of the project Bahá'ís of Mom recognized the importance of being united in thoughts and followed by unity in action are seen to be a force to driving them achieve what they wanted to achieve," said Mr. Bodick.

Mr. Bodick said the women raised 3,048 PNG Kina, the equivalent of more than US\$ 1,000. In January 2006 they decided that they had raised enough money to start building their medical aid post. ❁



Firing of Egyptian Bahá'í draws international scrutiny, highlights rights concerns

CAIRO — The firing of a young teaching assistant at the German University of Cairo, apparently solely because he is a Bahá'í, has drawn concern from German politicians and academics concerned with human rights.

Bassem Wagdi, a 24-year-old, third-generation Egyptian Bahá'í, was dismissed from his job at the University last September, less than three weeks after he was hired.

The stated reason for his dismissal was because his “legally required documents and procedures” were “not fulfilled” — a reference to the fact that Mr. Wagdi has been unable to get a state identification card because he is a Bahá'í.

Because the university is sponsored and funded in part by the German government and allied German institutions, Mr. Wagdi's dismissal has drawn scrutiny from members of the German Parliament and others in Germany.

In late January, Bundestag Member Lale Akgün wrote to German Foreign Minister Angela Merkel, asking her to raise the issue of Mr. Wagdi during a February visit to Cairo.

On 22 March 2006, a group of Bundestag members opened a query with the German Federal Government asking it to investigate the firing of Mr. Wagdi and whether the government can use its influence in such issues of discrimination against Egyptian Bahá'ís.

“How does the Federal Government judge the action of the German University in the case of Bassem W.?” wrote MPs Volker Beck, Marieluise Beck, Alexander Bonde, Uschi Eid, Thilo Hoppe, Ute Koczy, Kerstin Müller, Winfried Nachtwei, Omid Nouripour, Claudia Roth, Rainer Steinhilber, and Jürgen Trittin along with a contingent of the Green Party. “How does the German University stand in relation to Germany, and in what way is the work of the university promoted by German organizations or institutions?”

In response to those questions, a representative of the German Foreign Ministry replied that the Federal government was “concerned” about recent court rulings against Bahá'ís and that it “will continue to monitor the civil rights situation.”

Johanna Pink, a well-known specialist on Islam and human rights in Germany, said the firing of Mr. Wagdi is “an unacceptable

incident in the context of human rights, especially if an institution with a strong relation to Germany is involved.”

The dismissal of Mr. Wagdi, who has since found another job, came at a time when the issue of identity cards and religious affiliation had become a major issue in Egyptian society, following a lower-court decision in April 2006 that upheld the rights of Bahá'ís to be properly identified on government documents.

That ruling — which was overturned by the Supreme Administrative Court in December — led to a widespread debate in Egyptian society over issues of religious freedom, with more than 400 newspaper articles and other media reports about the situation of Egyptian Bahá'ís last year.

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.

Moreover, with the recent introduction of computerized ID cards that lock out the possibility of leaving that section blank, Egyptian Bahá'ís — who are forbidden by their beliefs from lying about their faith — have been unable to get or renew their cards, effectively depriving them of access to most rights of citizenship, including education, financial services, and even medical care, a situation which continues.

Such was the case for Mr. Wagdi, who was unable to open a bank account so that he could receive salary payments for his new job because he lacked a proper ID card. He told the university's finance department about the problem.

“They were very understanding at the time,” said Mr. Wagdi in a recent interview. A few days later, however, he was told that he was being let go “because my paper ID is not valid.”

It took months for Mr. Wagdi's story to reach the news media, but once it became known, human rights specialists in Germany began to express concern.

“This young Bahá'í scientist has lost his work and his income and also his scientific career,” said Dr. Pink, who is an academic staff member at the Free University of Berlin. “In my opinion it is not acceptable that a German institution with a German name is doing so.”✽

The stated reason for Bassem Wagdi's dismissal was because his “legally required documents and procedures” were “not fulfilled” — a reference to the fact that he has been unable to get a state identification card because he is a Bahá'í.

For artist Duffy Sheridan, painting is a means to “elevate the human condition”

Duffy Sheridan in his studio at home in Arizona.



Sheridan, continued from page one

“There is a direct relationship to what I do as an artist and what I believe as a Bahá’í,” said Mr. Sheridan.

His first big break

Unsuccessful as a young artist in California in the early 1970s, he moved with his family to the Falkland Islands in 1976 to assist the Bahá’í community there. He thought the isolation would mean the end of his painting, but instead it allowed him to refine and refocus his technique and his approach. The sojourn also put him in the path of the Falklands War, an event that required him and his family to spend every night for nearly two months in an underground bunker.

Interest in the war led to his first big break when in 1983 a show in London featured his paintings of Falkland Islanders. Since then, Mr. Sheridan has won increasing notice as an important figure in the realist school.

“I believe Duffy is one of the top 15 or 20 artists alive today,” said Fred Ross, chairman of the Art Renewal Center, a not-for-profit organization in New Jersey that promotes a return to traditional realism. “He has a wonderful technique that gets better and better. He

captures the humanity of his subjects, creating very moving pieces that are very compelling.”

In March 2005, the Center honored Mr. Sheridan’s painting “Trust” with the Chairman’s Choice award in the Second International ARC Salon Competition, which had received more than 1,500 entries from around the world. In 2006, one of Mr. Sheridan’s paintings was a finalist in the Third International ARC Salon Competition.

The Center has also honored Mr. Sheridan with the appellation “Living Master,” a title it has bestowed on about 40 individuals worldwide.

In 2005, also, Mr. Sheridan’s “Self Portrait 2004” won the Director’s Award at the International Guild of Realism, a juried show in Dallas, Texas. And again in 2006, his “Promise of Renewal” received the Director’s Award at the International Guild of Realism show in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

“I consider him one of the best classical realist painters today,” said Don Clapper, founder of the International Guild of Realism. “His technique, his ability to render light and shadow, is absolutely gorgeous. He really captures the emotions and the life of the individuals that he paints.”

To describe Mr. Sheridan’s style is not diffi-

Unsuccessful as a young artist in California in the early 1970s, Duffy Sheridan moved with his family to the Falkland Islands in 1976 to assist the Bahá’í community there. He thought the isolation would mean the end of his painting, but instead it allowed him to refine and refocus his technique and his approach.

cult: Most of his paintings are simple but highly realistic portraits, often of young women, in elegant classical or natural settings.

Some have compared them to photographs, but the depth of field, the choice of detail, and an indescribable “life” that illuminates them go beyond even the painting school of “photorealism.”

“All I really want to do is to create an image that will make the viewer stop for a minute and say, ‘Honey, I really want to look at this,’ and to do it so skillfully that they can’t ignore it,” said Mr. Sheridan, who is 59.

His choice of subjects — mainly the human face and figure but also natural things like rocks and water and even the wings of birds — come from a desire to portray spiritual qualities he sees in the real world.

“I have found that my eye — my heart — is always attracted to the things which are beautiful to me,” he said. His goal is to call attention to “tokens of the Divine” that he believes can be found everywhere, and especially in the human countenance.

“For me, as a Bahá’í, I don’t want to do anything other than to elevate the human condition by pointing to something that is lovely,” he said. “And nature’s best expression of that is usually found in the human face.”

Many of his paintings carry simple titles of virtues — “Hope,” “Trustworthiness,” “Compassion.”

“Most abstract painters believe our true artistic nature is inspired abstractly, but not me,” said Mr. Sheridan, explaining why he prefers to paint people and why he strives for realism. “I try to reflect things that are great in the human sphere. Love for a human being is different than love for a rock or a tree.”

Long path to success

Like many artists, Mr. Sheridan’s path to success was long and tortuous. At one point in the late 1960s, he was working as the manager of a grocery store in California by night and selling simple portraits by day. In another down-and-out episode, he traded his only means of transportation — a red Volkswagen with a leaky exhaust pipe — for a month’s rent and three cords of heating wood.

It was during this period that Mr. Sheridan and his wife, Jeanne, heard about the Bahá’í Faith from an old college friend.

“His message was that the world had a new teacher or educator from God,” said Mr. Sheridan, explaining the Bahá’í concept of progressive revelation — that all the world’s major religions were sent from one God

— and how the process was renewed in the 19th century with the coming of Bahá’u’lláh.

“We realized that if the nature of progressive revelation was true, it was not something that could be ignored,” said Mr. Sheridan.

The couple recalls staying up all night after hearing about the Bahá’í Faith and deciding that they had to embrace it.

“Everyone comes into the Faith in their own way, but for us it was a spiritual experience as opposed to an intellectual experience,” said Mr. Sheridan. “It was the knowledge that even though we didn’t have a thorough understanding of who Bahá’u’lláh was, it was clear to us that the Manifestation of God for this day had come.”

The couple moved to the Falklands in April 1976 in response to an appeal from Bahá’í institutions to travel to areas where Bahá’í communities were small or struggling.

They found the windswept islands in the South Atlantic to be a sharp and often difficult change from life in the United States.

“At that time, the lifestyle probably wasn’t much different from what it was 100 years ago,” said Mr. Sheridan. Heating and cooking were done on peat-fired stoves, the diet was mostly mutton and potatoes. “And there was

“I consider him one of the best classical realist painters today.”

**– Don Clapper,
International Guild
of Realism**

“The Confident” is typical of Duffy Sheridan’s use of realism to convey human emotion.





Duffy Sheridan and his wife, Jeanne, who is a ceramics artist, on the front porch of their home in Eloy, Arizona,

In the Falklands, he also developed in himself a power of observation — an ability to find what he believes are “tokens of the divine creation” in the shape of a rock or the pattern of a leaf.

no television or refrigerators.”

To support the family, Ms. Sheridan got a job as a typist for the government and Mr. Sheridan started working as a carpenter. It didn't occur to him he could make a living as an artist.

“I told myself, ‘Well, there goes any art career I ever dreamed of,’” he said, explaining that he believed that the distance from art centers in North America and Europe would cut him off from trends in the art world and from access to galleries. “As it turned out, it was exactly what I needed for my art.”

The couple discovered that life was so simple in the Falklands that it did not take much money to survive. They were able to live on Ms. Sheridan's salary, and Mr. Sheridan was able to take up painting full time.

“I was really cut off — as cut off as I could be on the planet,” he said. “And because I didn't have anybody looking over my shoulder, I was allowed to practice according to my own whim. I found that I had a greater tendency towards drawing and painting in a realistic fashion.”

Learning to observe

He also developed in himself a power of observation — an ability to find what he believes are “tokens of the divine creation” in the shape of a rock or the pattern of a leaf. “I just learned to love to look at stuff,” he said.

Their sense of isolation was abruptly broken in 1982 by the outbreak of the war between Argentina and Great Britain over the Falklands. Thousands of Argentinian soldiers swarmed the island, driving out British officials, and setting up defenses to repel a possible counterattack.

Committed to Bahá'í principles of humanitarian service, the Sheridans ignored calls by the U.S. government to evacuate. Mr. Sheridan helped form the civil defense committee in Port Stanley, the capital, and ended up serving during the war by driving around to check on elderly people and others who could not easily get out for groceries or other necessities.

“With thousands of Argentine troops in town, we were essentially hostages, and we knew that,” he said. “They set up gun emplacements all over town. And we realized this was a real danger... They fired at every cat that jumped out of a garbage can. And the shells they were using would go right through the houses, in one side and out the other.”

Their own house had walls of thin metal siding, “so we went and stayed with a family who had a bunker underground,” said Ms. Sheridan. “Eleven of us spent 56 nights sleeping head to toe in that bunker.”

Before the war, Mr. Sheridan had spent much of his time painting portraits of native Falkland Islanders, a project that became the core of the 1983 show in London that first brought wide attention to his work. A stunningly lifelike portrait of the family's baby sitter, Anya Smith, ended up on the cover of the *Sunday Times Magazine* in London.

In 1986, the Sheridans moved to Samoa, where Mr. Sheridan painted full time and Jeanne did secretarial work. Today an 8-by-11-foot painting of his hangs in the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Pago Pago. Mr. Sheridan also did a portrait of the Samoan head of state, His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II, who was also a Bahá'í. *[Editor's note: The Malietoa passed away on 11 May 2007.]*

Five years later, the Sheridans moved back to the United States, eventually settling in Eloy, Arizona, a desert community in the southwestern United States. Mr. Sheridan has established relationships with a number of galleries and also travels to exhibitions around the country and even overseas, as when he was invited to Florence. He also has a Web site that displays his work and from which prints can be purchased.

Through it all, he has retained a sense of humility. “I don't ever remember thinking that I was going to be a famous painter,” he said. “I just always wanted to paint. And when the opportunity presented itself to do that, I would do it. And then I managed to start making a living at it.

“But the goal has always been to do it just as good as I can do it. And anything else that happens is in the realm of providence.” ❀

The God Delusion

Review, continued from page 16

ings suggest that God's action and the laws of nature are folded together — and that the natural laws that, say, guide evolution, are merely an extension of God's will. "Nature is the expression of God's will in and through the contingent world," writes Bahá'u'lláh, explaining that "all the atoms of the earth have celebrated Thy praise," and yet are "under one law from which they will never depart."

In this vein, distinct categories of natural and supernatural action blend together, allowing Bahá'ís to view the physical world in both sacred and secular terms. God's action in the world looks more like physics than magic.

Moreover, reason is given a place of honor in the Bahá'í writings. "Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise, it is superstition," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Bahá'ís embrace the theory of evolution without believing that it implies that human life is merely some wildly improbable accident.

In the second half of the book Dr. Dawkins turns to the subject of religion and its effect on human society, attempting to extend the theory of evolution to explain our innate moral sense and the roots of the religious impulse. While this argument is intended to invalidate religion, here too the central idea under discussion is given an unexpected new meaning in the Bahá'í writings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that the founders of the world's great religions "aware of the reality of the mysteries of beings," and that from this awareness they establish religion, which is defined as "the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things."

"The the supreme Manifestations of God," he said, "establish laws which are suitable and adapted to the state of the world of man." Such Manifestations have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad — and, most recently, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

While religion is seen in the Bahá'í writings as an expression of interconnectedness, so too is nature: "By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relationships derived from the realities of things," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Religion, then, becomes an expression of the limitless unfolding potentialities of creation; and revelation takes on, like nature itself, an evolutionary character: its form and content are a function of time and place, even as its underlying purpose, the transformation and sublimation of human

consciousness, remains unchanged. The idea "that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is not final but progressive" becomes, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "the fundamental verity underlying the Bahá'í Faith."

From this perspective there is no necessary tension with Dr. Dawkins' argument that our deepest religious and moral sensibilities might have an evolutionary explanation. Even if religion in principle arises from the natural order of things, there is no reason to assume that every part of that order can be encompassed by the ordinary human mind, or that religious morality is arbitrary.

Rather, Bahá'ís understand that those moral precepts which have most critically guided the development of human civilization, and which have resonated most deeply with the human soul, stem from the articulations of the Manifestations of God, who have been given a preternatural grasp of the deepest interconnections between things. Like all-knowing physicians, they perceive the disease afflicting human society in every age and prescribe the appropriate remedy.

The disease that is most gravely afflicting the world today is religious fanaticism and hatred, as Dr. Dawkins acutely observes in his closing chapters. With this Bahá'ís would wholeheartedly agree. "The fire of religious fanaticism is a world-devouring flame," wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

For Dr. Dawkins the source of the decline of religion in the modern age is in part a "changing moral zeitgeist" that has superseded much of the moral message of sacred scriptures of past ages, and in part a persistent rejection of reason and adherence to man-made doctrines. With this, too, Bahá'ís would fully agree.

The remedy lies in building up the new as the old collapses. Bahá'ís see religion as a living phenomenon, having its own life cycle on the scale of centuries — individual faiths have their birth, efflorescence, and decline, in the end providing the seeds for the renewal of the one "changeless faith of God."

Without this larger perspective, it is easy to conclude in a world "dimmed by the steadily dying-out light of religion," as Shoghi Effendi put it, that religious belief in any form is incompatible with the needs of the modern age. But evidence of a rebirth, embodied in the worldwide Bahá'í community, composed of millions who are gradually building open-minded and God-centered oases of faith in action, is dawning on the horizon. *

— by Steven Phelps

Bahá'ís understand that those moral precepts that have most critically guided the development of human civilization, and which have resonated most deeply with the human soul, stem from the articulations of the Manifestations of God, who have been given a preternatural grasp of the deepest interconnections between things.

The new atheism, reconsidered

In a world threatened by religious extremism, the need to take stock in religion and to search for new perspectives is an urgent one.

Among the most vigorous of such examinations is a movement dubbed “the new atheism,” led by scientists who argue that not only can science better explain reality than a belief in God but also that religious belief itself has become a threat to humanity.

Foremost among this group is Richard Dawkins, a British ethologist and evolutionary biologist at Oxford University, whose latest book, *The God Delusion*, has remained near the top of best-seller lists.

“Faith can be very, very dangerous,” writes Dr. Dawkins. “Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities....”

But while Dr. Dawkins and other new atheists believe the way forward lies in a world without religion, Bahá’ís approach the issue of God, nature, and religion from an entirely different perspective.

Stating that traditional religious beliefs are inadequate for the modern age, the Bahá’í Faith recasts the whole conception of religion, suggesting it is the principal force impelling the development of consciousness.

In this light, there is much in Dr. Dawkins’ book that Bahá’ís would agree with — including his condemnation of religious fanaticism, his call for the application of reason and science in the battle against irrational theologies, and his argument that the theory of evolution can explain the emergence of complex life.

Central to Dr. Dawkins’ project of dismantling the foundations of religious belief is an attack on what he calls “the God hypothesis” — the idea “that the reality we inhabit also contains a supernatural agent who designed the universe and — at least in many versions of the hypothesis — maintains it and even intervenes in it with miracles, which are temporary violations of his own otherwise grandly immutable laws.”

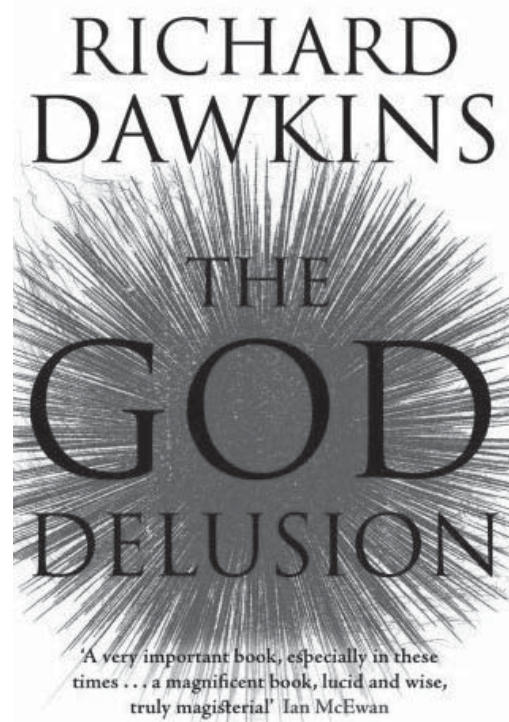
The arguments in the first half of *The God Delusion* flow from this assertion, beginning with a solid, if at times dismissive, rebuttal of the traditional proofs for God’s existence and culminating in an exposition on how evolution explains how life might arise through a

gradual and cumulative process without the need to invoke an intelligent designer. Indeed, Dawkins argues that a designer of the kind defined by his “God hypothesis” must be even more improbable than its handiwork.

When set against traditional religious understandings of God, Dr. Dawkins’ arguments are quite powerful. But against the Bahá’í understanding of God and nature, the contradictions that he identifies between science and religion simply dissolve.

Bahá’u’lláh describes God as an “unknowable essence,” “sanctified above all attributes,” and “exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness.” As such, Bahá’ís understand that God is far above all that we can ever know. The very categories of “being” and “existence,” which underpin logic itself, are inadequate when referring to God.

Accordingly, Bahá’ís would agree that the traditional logical proofs for the existence of God fall short. But it does not follow that



because God is far removed from physical reality that God is therefore irrelevant to the workings of the universe.

A number of passages in the Bahá’í [Review](#), continued on page 15

**The God
Delusion**

**By Richard
Dawkins**

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