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HUMAN RIGHTS

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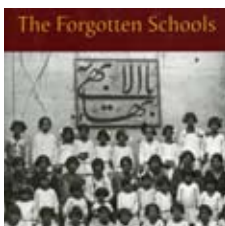
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Trial of seven Bahá'í leaders in Iran begins; international condemnation follows

GENEVA — After several postponements last year, the trial of seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders began in January 2010 — an event that was immediately condemned by governments and human rights groups and activists outside Iran.

Arrested in 2008 and held in Evin prison for nearly two years, the seven leaders were transported to Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 12 January 2010. There, in a closed courtroom, prosecutors formally read the charges against them. The seven categorically denied all the accusations and, after the hearing, they were sent back to prison.

The fate of the seven remains uncertain. They were summoned to court again on 7 February. That session, also closed, lasted about an hour and apparently focused on procedural issues. On 12 April, they were called to court for a third session, but that was cut short after the seven objected to the improper presence of a television crew and other non-judicial officials in what was ostensibly a closed court proceeding. As of this writing, no date for continuance has been set.

The seven are Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. They were responsible for tending to the spiritual and social needs of Iran's 300,000 Bahá'ís. Formal Bahá'í institutions in Iran were dissolved in 1983.

According to the government-sponsored news media, the actual charges read against the seven in their January court appearance were: espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation

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An undated photograph of the seven Bahá'í leaders currently held in Evin prison, taken before their imprisonment, with their spouses.

Transforming Collective Deliberation: Valuing Unity and Justice

IN BRIEF

- Efforts to promote social integration should draw on new models for cooperation and consciousness-raising
- One useful model is “consultation,” a Bahá’í-inspired method for deliberation and decision-making
- Consultation emphasizes the search for justice, collective inquiry, detachment from ego, and respect for diversity

Detachment from one’s positions and opinions regarding the matter under discussion is imperative. Once an idea has been shared, it is no longer associated with the individual who expressed it, but becomes a resource for the group to adopt, modify, or discard.

[Editor’s note: The following editorial is adapted from a statement of the Bahá’í International Community to the 48th session of the UN Commission for Social Development. The original statement can be found at: <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/10-0203.htm>]

The most compelling model for the integration of the world’s cultures and peoples may lie in the complexity and coordination that characterize the human body. Within this organism, millions of cells, with extraordinary diversity of form and function, collaborate to make human existence possible. Every least cell has its part to play in maintaining a healthy body; from its inception, each is linked to a lifelong process of giving and receiving.

In the same manner, efforts around the world to build communities guided by values of cooperation and reciprocity are challenging notions that human nature is essentially selfish, competitive and driven by material considerations. The growing consciousness of a common humanity lying beneath the surface of our different identities is redefining our relationships with each other as peoples, as nations, and as co-stewards of our natural environment. Whether stubbornly opposed in some societies or welcomed elsewhere as a release from suffocating oppression, the understanding that we are all part of an indivisible human family is becoming the standard by which our collective efforts are judged.

In this time of transition to a new social order, processes of social integration gather momentum alongside

related processes of disintegration. Collapsed moral foundations, outworn institutions, and a sense of disillusionment foment chaos and decline in the social order while, at the same time, integrative forces raise up new bases for collaboration and transform the nature and scope of collective action.

Such integrative processes are evidenced by growing social networks facilitated by information technology; expanded suffrage and formal participation in governance; collective approaches to knowledge generation and dissemination; the spread of education and consciousness-raising regarding human interdependence; the evolution of new mechanisms of international cooperation, and the like. Similarly, one discerns emerging processes of decision-making that are increasingly inclusive, unifying and just, and that challenge partisanship as a means of addressing problems facing increasingly interdependent communities.

In this context, the Bahá’í International Community would like to offer its experience with a process of collective inquiry called *consultation*, which serves as the basis for deliberation and decision-making in Bahá’í communities around the world.

Consultation is an approach to collective inquiry that is unifying rather than divisive. Participants are encouraged to express themselves freely as they engage in discussion, yet take care to do so in a dignified and courteous manner. Detachment from one’s positions and opinions regarding the matter under discussion is imperative. Once an idea has been shared, it is no longer associated with the individual who expressed it, but becomes a resource for the group to adopt, modify, or discard.

As consultation unfolds, participants strive to identify and apply moral principles relevant to the matter at hand. These may include the equality of men and women, stewardship of the natural environment, the elimination of prejudice, the abolishment of the extremes of wealth and poverty, and the like. This approach, unlike those of partisan confrontation or debate, seeks to shift the deliberation towards a new center, maneuvering away from competing claims and interests to the arena of principle, where collective goals and courses of action are more likely to surface and prevail.

Great value is placed on the diversity of perspectives and contributions that individuals bring to the discussion. Diversity is harnessed to enrich collective inquiry and deliberation. Actively soliciting views from those traditionally excluded from decision-making not only increases the pool of intellectual resources but also fosters the trust, inclusion and mutual commitment, needed for collective action. For example, the valuing of diversity and the encouragement of minorities shapes the practice of electing local governing councils within Bahá'í communities: in the case of a tied vote, the position is awarded to the minority candidate.

On its own, however, a diversity of perspectives does not provide communities with a means to bridge differences or to resolve social tensions. In consultation, the value of diversity is inextricably linked to the goal of unity. This is not an idealized unity, but one that acknowledges differences and strives to transcend them through a process of principled deliberation. It is unity *in* diversity. While participants have different views or understandings of the issues at hand, they exchange and explore these differences in a unifying manner within the framework of consultation and out of a commitment to the process and principles that guide it.

In environments where sects, political factions, conflicting groups and entrenched discrimination weaken communities and leave them exposed to exploitation and oppression—unity, based in justice, is a quality of human interaction to be fostered and



The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Mongolia is one of more than 180 national-level Bahá'í governing bodies. All use a distinctive method of decision-making outlined in the Bahá'í writings, which is known as “consultation,” that inherently values unity and justice.

defended. The principle of ‘unity in diversity’ also applies to the manner in which the decisions of the consulting body are carried out: all participants are called on to support the decision arrived at by the group, regardless of the opinions they may have expressed in the discussion. If the decision proves incorrect, participants will learn from its shortcomings and revise the decision as needed.

The principles and objectives of the consultative process rest on the understanding that human beings are essentially noble – they possess reason and conscience as well as capacities for inquiry, understanding, compassion and service to the common good.

The principles and objectives of the consultative process rest on the understanding that human beings are essentially noble — they possess reason and conscience as well as capacities for inquiry, understanding, compassion and service to the common good. Labels such as “marginalized,” “poor,” or “vulnerable,” with their emphasis on needs and deficiencies, fade as participants strive to see each other in light of their inherent nobility and potential. They gradually become protagonists of their own development and full participants in a world civilization.

The experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, established in 188 countries and 45 territories, suggests that the consultative process has universal application and does not favor any one culture, class, race or gender. Bahá'ís strive to apply the principles of consultation within their families, communities, organizations, businesses and elected bodies. As this practice is refined, it allows participants to attain greater levels of insight and understanding about the matters under consideration; to foster more constructive modes of expression; to channel diverse talents and perspectives towards common goals; to build solidarity of thought and action; and to uphold justice at every stage of the process. In order to develop and apply these integrative processes worldwide and to enable them to truly yield their fruit, they will need to be coupled with efforts to provide universal education, to reform modes of governance, to eliminate prejudice and the extremes of wealth and poverty, as well as to promote an international auxiliary language to facilitate communication among all peoples and nations. Such efforts will give rise to forms of social integration that are unifying and just and through which all peoples can strive together to build a new social order.

As commitments pour in, many find reason for optimism in Copenhagen climate summit

IN BRIEF

- **Initially viewed as a failure, the outcome of the Copenhagen Climate Summit has been undergoing a quiet reassessment**
- **Pledges to reduce greenhouse gases by 2020 have now been received from some 75 countries, which together account for 80 percent of global emissions from energy use**
- **The real challenge of climate change may be to the UN's multilateral, consensus-based system of decision-making**

COPENHAGEN — Although initially derided for its failure to reach a binding agreement to reduce greenhouse gases, December's United Nations Climate Change Conference has in recent months undergone a quiet reassessment, and many are now saying that in fact considerable progress was made in the fight against global warming.

Expectations were high leading into the conference, held here 7-18 December 2009. With emission reduction targets in the Kyoto Protocol set to expire in 2012, non-governmental organizations and governments were pushing hard for more ambitious limits on the emissions of greenhouse gases, along with new funds to adapt to and mitigate global warming.

Instead, the final agreement was limited to a short, 12-paragraph "Copenhagen Accord" that emerged from backroom negotiations

involving just a few countries.

Although it recognized the need to stabilize warming, there were few specifics, other than a promise to raise US\$100 billion by 2020.

"Well meant but half-hearted pledges to protect our planet from dangerous climate change are simply not sufficient to address a crisis that calls for completely new ways of collaboration across rich and poor countries," said the WWF (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature) a day after the conference.

But some who follow the process closely are these days feeling more optimistic about what happened in Copenhagen, saying that the continuing international negotiations to prevent the worst effects of global warming will find a solid basis in the documents and procedures that emerged there.

"This was first time the majority of the world's leaders gathered to

At a press conference on the Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change, Bahá'í representative Tahirih Naylor, left, said that climate change is "challenging humanity to rise to the next level of our collective maturity." The event was one of many side events and activities in which Bahá'ís participated.



seriously discuss climate change,” said Tahirih Naylor, a representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations. “The fact that 120 leaders attended was in itself an indicator of the importance the issue has attained.”

Moreover, since the conference, a number of countries have made substantial commitments to reducing emissions in the context of the Copenhagen accord. As of March, pledges to reduce greenhouse gases by 2020 had been received from some 75 countries, which together account for 80 percent of global emissions from energy use, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

These commitments come not only from wealthy countries — members of the European Union pledged reductions from 20 to 30 percent — but also from nations defined as “developing” countries under the accord. China and India, for example, pledged to reduce the intensity of the greenhouse gas emissions of their economies by 40-45 percent and 20-25 percent, respectively, by 2020. Similar pledges have been made by Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia, among others.

“This is a powerful demonstration of the determination of these countries to contribute their fair share to this global effort,” said Ms. Naylor.

Ms. Naylor and others also said that many of the underlying documents that were negotiated in the Copenhagen process, even though not formally adopted, nevertheless reflect significant progress in a number of areas.

For example, negotiations to reduce emissions caused by deforestation moved forward significantly. And the underlying texts show an increasing focus on the social and humanitarian effects of climate change.

Cate Owren, program director of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), said for example that more than 40 references to gender-specific issues were incorporated in negotiating documents at Copenhagen.

“We felt that we as gender advocates had accomplished something we



Halldor Thorgeirsson of the UNFCCC Secretariat, center left, surrounded by delegates to the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change. [Photograph courtesy of IISD/Earth Negotiations Bulletin]

weren’t sure we were going to be able to do — and that is to get beyond the perception that gender issues and human rights issues were a distraction from the ‘real’ negotiations,” said Ms. Owren.

We felt we were able “to get beyond the perception that gender issues and human rights issues were a distraction from the ‘real’ negotiations.”

— Cate Owren, WEDO

Others similarly noted that the moral and ethical dimensions of climate change — such as its disproportionate impact on developing countries that have not been responsible for most carbon emissions — have also become part of the mainstream discussions.

Behind the scenes

In an interview with *ONE COUNTRY*, Halldor Thorgeirsson offered insights from his personal perspective as a senior official in the secretariat of the UNFCCC, the treaty that governs climate negotiations.

Among other things, Dr. Thorgeirsson said the way the participation of so many world leaders was

managed contributed to the fact that the conference ended in acrimony and fell short of meeting the high expectations.

“The fact that so many world leaders were coming acted as a brake on negotiations at the level of officials,” said Dr. Thorgeirsson, whose title at the UNFCCC is director of Bali Roadmap Support. “There was limited willingness to compromise in advance of the end game involving the leaders. As a result, leaders were confronted with too many issues.”

One such issue was the dissonance between the needs and viewpoints of developed countries — who are largely responsible so far for carbon emissions — and those of developing countries, who are already starting to feel the impact of global warming.

Dr. Thorgeirsson, who is a Bahá’í, said the assumption that emerged from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was that “developing countries would not be required to take action to reduce emissions. That would be up to the industrialized countries, because they were responsible for the historical load of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere.”

This changed in Bali, with the negotiation of the Bali Roadmap, Dr. Thorgeirsson said. It created a new arrangement where all parties are



In India, in a gesture of hope for progress at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, environmental activists released 2,000 eco-friendly lanterns into the evening sky above the Bahá'í House of Worship in New Delhi. Representatives of faith communities participated in the ceremony, which was organized by Greenpeace. The event in New Delhi was held on 10 December 2009.

expected to contribute to the effort to reduce emissions. “And that raises fundamental geopolitical questions — which were beyond the mandate of officials to address.”

The leaders made a major contribution given the difficult circumstances, said Dr. Thorgeirsson, and they managed to come to an agreement forged mainly between the United States on the one hand and China, India, Brazil, and South Africa on the other.

By the time the leaders had reached an agreement there was very limited time available to garner support for it among the broader community of nations represented in Copenhagen and it proved impossible to go further than taking note of it. Many parties and non-governmental organizations decried this as undemocratic and a harbinger for the end of multilateralism in global negotiations on issues like climate change.

“Points of convergence”

But Dr. Thorgeirsson said he believes the Copenhagen accord is more positive

than it might seem because it contains important “points of convergence” that can now be integrated into ongoing negotiations leading up to the next major climate summit, scheduled to be held in Mexico in December.

The practice in UN negotiations, he said, is based on consensus decision making. “This tends to provide veto power to the more conservative parties,” he said. “This makes it difficult to reach agreement on progressive steps in a consensus process. The nature of the climate challenge, however, makes the UN the only legitimate decision-making forum.”

“This coming year will to a large extent determine if a multilateral climate process is capable of delivering the required international response to a global issue like climate change.”

— Halldor Thorgeirsson,
UNFCCC

But Dr. Thorgeirsson said the Copenhagen accord provided some key ingredients for progress. “There is the objective of limiting warming to less than 2 degrees,” he said. “The commitment by developed countries to mobilize 100 billion U.S. dollars by 2020 to meet the needs of developing countries is an important expression of political will.”

Such agreements, although non-binding, can “unlock important unresolved issues in the negotiations and lead to a unified outcome in Mexico,” said Dr. Thorgeirsson.

To reach a final, binding treaty outcome on how to limit climate change will nevertheless be a significant challenge, said Dr. Thorgeirsson — one that will not necessarily be possible to conclude this year. “The foundation for such an outcome can be laid in Mexico,” he said, adding that the cooperative mechanisms and institutional arrangements required to effectively address a challenge like global warming will pose a significant test for the consensus-based UN system.

“This coming year will to a large extent determine if a multilateral climate process is capable of delivering the required international response to a global issue like climate change,” he said.

Climate science controversy

Dr. Thorgeirsson, whose doctorate is in plant physiology, also addressed some of the concerns, raised recently, over whether the science that predicts global warming is fundamentally sound.

“The discovery of a couple of errors in the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] report are unfortunate and need to be looked into,” said Dr. Thorgeirsson.

“But none of this has changed any of the basic conclusions of the science,” he said. “The problems that have come up are all in the domain of predicting specifically what will happen in certain regions as the climate warms. But the fundamental science that predicts global warming as a whole has not changed.”

Women and environment are highlighted at 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions

IN BRIEF

- Every five years, the Parliament of the World's Religions is a snapshot of the interfaith movement
- The 2009 Parliament drew 5,000 people from 80 countries and 220 religious traditions
- The over-arching theme was about interreligious tolerance and peace, with an emerging emphasis this year on women and the environment

MELBOURNE, Australia — As the largest regular global interfaith gathering, the Parliament of the World's Religions offers a chance every five years to assess new directions and crosscurrents within the interfaith movement.

Among the trends that stood out at the 2009 Parliament was the increasing role of women in interreligious activities, greater concern for environmental issues, and new efforts to involve youth and others in concrete action at the local level.

The trend towards the greater involvement of women was reflected in the fact that some 60 percent of the 5,000 participants who gathered here in December were female — as were about 40 percent of the speakers.

The program featured a variety of presentations on topics like “Breaking Through Patriarchy: New Visions for Women of Faith” and “Taking Our Place in the Interreligious Movement:

Women in Society, Peacemaking, and Interfaith Dialogue.”

“There is an increased visibility of women at the parliament and we are very happy about that,” said Dirk Ficca, director of the Chicago-based organization that puts the event together every five years.

The Parliament of the World's Religions is almost certainly the largest regular interfaith gathering. The 2009 parliament in Melbourne followed previous events in Barcelona, Spain (2004); Cape Town, South Africa (1999), and Chicago, United States (1993).

More than 5,000 people from 80 countries, representing more than 220 religious traditions, attended the 2009 event, which featured more than 650 programs and 1,300 speakers and performers. Prominent speakers included the Dalai Lama and theologian Hans Kung.

The Bahá'í International Community was represented by some 70 people at all levels. They ranged

Shadi Toloui-Wallace, right, and her mother, Shidan, performed at the sacred music concert held during the Parliament of the World's Religions. The duo are from the Bahá'í community of Australia. *[Photo by Rachael Dere]*



from youth volunteers to Lucretia (Lally) Warren of Botswana, who was a plenary speaker and a founding member of Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa (IAPA). At the parliament, Ms. Warren and several colleagues received the Carus Award, which recognizes “outstanding contributions to the interreligious movement.”

The origins of the parliament lie with the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago. That gathering is widely seen as the dawn-ing place of the modern worldwide interreligious movement.

As with past parliaments, the overarching theme focused on inter-religious tolerance and peace.

“We need constant effort to bring closer all religious traditions, and then we will have a more effective role to bring compassion to this planet,” said the Dalai Lama.

The focus on religious tolerance and its corollary, religious freedom, was emphasized throughout the program. [See box at right]

But many agreed that the new element at the 2009 parliament was the increased emphasis on the role of women in the interfaith movement — and in religious leadership generally.

“Three things stood out for me at the parliament. They were a great interest in the action on poverty, and the tremendous energy behind the gender issue and climate change.”

— **Katherine Marshall,
World Faiths
Development Dialogue.**

“Three things stood out for me at the parliament,” said Katherine Marshall, the executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue. “They were a great interest in the action on poverty, and the tremendous energy behind the gender issue and climate change.”

The strong presence of women at the parliament was evident from the opening ceremony, where Wurundjeri Aboriginal elder Professor Joy Murphy

A discussion about matters of religious tolerance and freedom

MELBOURNE, Australia — How can interfaith dialogue and religious freedom flourish when one religion declares that another is not a religion? Are tolerance and cooperation only possible among people who share the same doctrinal view of the world?

These questions were posed at the Parliament of the World’s Religions by Natalie Mobini, a representative of the Australian Bahá’í community, during a 30-minute presentation on 7 December 2009 at a session on religious conflict and persecution that focused on Myanmar, Thailand, and Iran.

Reflecting on the origins of the interfaith movement — in particular the first Parliament of Religions in 1893 — Dr. Mobini noted that its principal organizer believed that it had “emancipated the world from bigotry.”

“The interfaith movement has continued to be inspired by the vision of a world in which the followers of different faiths are able not merely to engage with one another in a spirit of tolerance and respect but also to collaborate in contributing to the advancement of society,” she said.

“At the same time, the havoc that religious intolerance is continuing to wreak in our world now poses a more serious threat to humanity’s progress and well-being than at any previous time in history.”

Dr. Mobini asked how dialogue can occur when one religion attempts to delegitimize another because of underlying theological differences.

In the case of Iran, the results of such an attitude have included the imprisonment of the Bahá’í community’s leaders, the desecration of its cemeteries, and the destruction of its holy places.

Noting that the Islamic government of Iran has denied that the Bahá’í Faith is a religion, Dr. Mobini asked, “Is this not the same as the

past, when Christianity claimed that Islam is not a true religion?”

“And when the machinery of the state is used for the purpose of eliminating that religion, the challenge moves into sharper focus,” she said.

The lives lost during the crusades highlighted the prejudice that colored the attitudes of Christians towards Muslims in past centuries because Christianity did not recognize Islam as a “divine” religion, she said.

“Christians today have, however, been able to transcend that intolerance without compromising their own theological beliefs and engage in interreligious dialogue with Muslims with an open-minded spirit. The world needs to learn from this.

“Should not everyone seek to find within the particular framework of his or her beliefs how to set aside exclusionist claims in order to collaborate with followers of religions whose beliefs are different?” she asked.

In the case of Iran, the Bahá’í Faith does not need to be recognized as “divine” in origin, said Dr. Mobini, “but simply asks that the fact of its existence be accepted and the rights of its followers upheld.”

She said that the transformation of attitudes begins at the grass roots and urged individuals to take the spirit of the Parliament back to their communities.

“It is evident that growing numbers of people are coming to realize that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one,” Dr. Mobini said.

“This is the challenge of all of us here and to all who desire to overcome religious intolerance and hatred: how to live up to a ‘golden rule’ that is at the heart of each of the world’s religions; urging us to treat the followers of other faiths as we ourselves would wish to be treated.”



Gary Sterling sings a passage from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh at the opening ceremony of the Parliament. *[Photo by Rachael Dere]*

Wandin welcomed participants. Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning, a women-led grassroots NGO in Afghanistan, was a keynote speaker.

Women were active in most sessions and addressed the major themes of the parliament: gender equality, climate change, the rights of indigenous peoples, the global economy, and poverty.

Benedictine nun Joan Chittister spoke about the need for men to stand up for equality. “When you eliminate half of the human race from the participation in solutions that affect the entire human race you leave a society that is seeing with one eye, hearing with one ear, thinking with one half of the human brain — and it shows,” said Sister Chittister.

Arini Beaumaris, secretary of the Bahá'í community of Australia, also discussed the importance of women's leadership in religious affairs.

“We believe we will not achieve the peace and tranquillity of the world until we have equality of men and women,” said Ms. Beaumaris during a panel discussion titled “East and West: Spirituality and Women's Leadership in Different Religious Perspectives.”

A path to leadership roles for women was outlined in a session titled “Experience the Women's Interfaith

Network” hosted by members of the Sydney-based Women's Interfaith Network (WIN), whose membership includes women from virtually every major faith tradition.

The organization, which promotes harmony and understanding among the followers of all religions, sought to encourage women to set up similar groups in other places.

Josie Lacey of Sydney's Jewish community said that prior to the formation of WIN, interfaith dialogue in Australia's biggest city was largely conducted by male religious leaders.

“Today WIN members are often invited to provide a female voice alongside male leaders at interfaith gatherings,” said Ms. Lacey. “WIN provides an opportunity for women to come together and develop their own mode of dialogue.”

Environment a theme

There was also a new emphasis on environmental issues. The program featured many presentations on the environment — and specifically on climate change. That subject drew special attention because of the parliament's coincidence with the UN Climate Change Conference, held in Copenhagen, also in early December.

“There were many panels on religion and ecology,” said Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-founder of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, writing in the group's newsletter.

“Moreover, the climate change meeting in Copenhagen loomed large at the parliament. Some people attended both meetings, and numerous messages were sent to the negotiators in Denmark urging climate justice to be part of the resolutions,” Dr. Tucker wrote.

The role of youth

Another theme evident at the parliament was the increased involvement of young people in various grassroots efforts to promote religious tolerance.

At a session titled “The After Party—Legacy and Young People,” several participants said that local multi-faith service projects are an especially effective way to involve young people.

Jem Jebbia, a Mahayana Buddhist from the United States, described the “Faiths Act” work of the Tony Blair Foundation, which includes on its agenda multi-faith cooperation by young people in the fight against malaria.

Erin Williams, a staff member of the Interfaith Youth Core, based in Chicago, said her organization found that working together on multi-faith service projects — even before attempts at dialogue — helped to unite the participants, leading to better exchanges on faith issues.

“Our basic goal is to promote religious pluralism,” said Ms. Williams. “We do a service project and then we have dialogue — the service project brings it all together.”

— By Michael Day

Portrayal or Betrayal? How the media depicts women and girls

IN BRIEF

- **The UN Commission on the Status of Women examined progress for women since the 1995 Beijing conference**
- **A panel there considered how images of women in the media affect their status**
- **The “sexualized” images in advertising, film, and TV demean women and girls, said panelists**
- **Positive solutions include individual action and moral education**

NEW YORK — When Jan Floyd-Douglass decided to buy a new car, she bypassed suitable models from many different companies — and then wrote to tell them why.

“I wrote to eight manufacturers saying, ‘I love your car but I didn’t buy it because I don’t like your advertisements because they demean women,’” said Ms. Floyd-Douglass.

She told the story during a panel discussion titled “Portrayal or Betrayal: How the Media Depicts Women and Girls,” which was held 3 March 2010 at the UN offices of the Bahá’í International Community.

The event was one of dozens of side events planned in conjunction with the annual session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, held 1-12 March 2010, which this year examined progress made for women since the 1995 Beijing conference.

As a contribution to this theme, the panel sought to consider how images

in the media — whether television, movies, or advertising — affect the way women are perceived and treated.

Ms. Floyd-Douglass was joined by Michael Karlberg, an associate professor of communications at Western Washington University, and Sarah Kasule of the Mother’s Union in Uganda. The panel was moderated by Baroness Joyce Gould, chair of the UK Women’s National Commission.

Baroness Gould opened by noting that several recent studies have shown that images that objectify or demean women are now more widely used in the media than ever.

Moreover, she said, those studies show that such “sexualized” images have an unhealthy impact on the psychological development of young girls — and on young boys.

“It gives a very disturbing perception to girls and young women,” she said. “For girls, it is about being told they need to be more attractive to men. And for boys, it is about looking upon girls as sexual objects.”

Dr. Karlberg said this trend in the media is a result of both individual choices and institutional forces.

“On one hand,” he said, “people everywhere are choosing to consume media that feeds base appetites that we have inherited from our animal nature. On the other hand, media institutions have been constructed in ways that purposefully stimulate, reinforce, and exploit these base appetites.”

The result, he said, is a “feedback cycle” that has created a media environment that is “unjust, unhealthy, and unsustainable.”

Dr. Karlberg said efforts to address the problem must consider the structure of media institutions.

“The assumption is that the media is just another commodity,” he said. “But the media is not just another



Baroness Joyce Gould, left, chair of the UK Women’s National Commission, and Jan Floyd-Douglass, right, on the board of the same commission, were among the speakers at a 3 March 2010 panel discussion about the portrayal of women in the media. At center is Zarin Hainsworth-Fadaei, a Bahá’í from the UK. The cover photograph referring to this story shows Sarah Kasule of the Mother’s Union in Uganda.

commodity. It is a process that facilitates democratic deliberations. It is a process that creates culture.”

Part of the problem, he said, is that the media’s real product is not content but the delivery of an audience to advertisers. The result is that the media strives to manufacture audiences in the cheapest way possible.

Media junk food

“The cheapest way to manufacture audience is through a high sex, high violence, high conflict content. It doesn’t take talent or research or investigative journalism. Yet it stimulates the appetites, much the same way that a high salt, high sugar, and high fat junk food diet does.”

Dr. Karlberg, who is a Bahá’í, also discussed efforts the Bahá’í community has undertaken to offer moral education for children and young people, which he said can help to counter the ill effects of exposure to sexualized or violent images.

“Bahá’ís, like people everywhere, are struggling to raise and educate children,” he said. “They are trying to do this in a way that cultivates their inherent nobility, that releases their spiritual potential, and that helps them recognize the deep sources of purpose, meaning, and happiness in life.

“Such spiritual education can be a very important factor in making children less susceptible to messages in their media environment. It is also a very important factor in making children more likely to make thoughtful choices about media consumption as they grow older,” said Dr. Karlberg.

Ms. Floyd-Douglass said she considered her effort to write to various automobile manufacturers that use sexualized images of women in their advertising as one among many weapons in the battle against the problem of such images.

Like the other panelists, she noted that such images are so commonplace as to seem innocuous.

Parents, she said, should explain the existence of such images to their children — and make efforts to counter their harmful effects. “We have to

How much have women advanced since Beijing?

In a declaration, the 54th Commission on the Status of Women broadly concluded that much progress for women has been made since the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. But it also stated that many “challenges and obstacles” remain before the agreements forged in Beijing are fully implemented.

“Action is needed where it matters most — in the lives of girls who do not have access to education or training,” said Rachel Mayanja, a UN assistant secretary general and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, in remarks at the end of Commission.

“We must act to empower women who risk death and disability in childbirth; those who work long hours for little, unequal, or no pay. We must commit ourselves to ensuring a place for women at the peace table, on the village council and in national parliaments. By ensuring equal opportunities for women and men, we promote the progress of our entire society,” said Ms. Mayanja.

Ms. Mayanja also hosted a presentation, held 3 March at the UN, that assessed the degree to which women have achieved higher levels of representation in government, civil society, corporations, and at the UN.

Aparna Mehrotra, the UN’s focal point for women, reviewed some statistics. In 1995, the percent of women in national parliaments was 11.3 percent. “Today, it is slightly up, to 18.8 percent,” said Ms. Mehrotra. “So there has been progress. But I don’t say it is great progress.”

Emma Sabin, a vice-president at Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that helps businesses become more inclusive of women, said similarly incremental progress has been made in the corporate world. “In 1995, point 1 (.1) percent of women were chief executive officers at the top 1,000 companies. Today, we are at 3 percent.”

Ms. Sabin said she believes more women will rise to senior management levels as women take seats on corporate boards, noting that percentage has risen from 9.6 in 1995 to 15.2 today.

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN, spoke about the contribution that civil society has made in helping women achieve greater representation. “Women’s groups have been one of the main vectors through which women’s needs and goals have been communicated to governments,” said Ms. Dugal.

question stereotypes in the media. We have to laugh at them.

“My message is, if we don’t actually do anything about this, we are complicit in it,” she said.

Ms. Kasule said the problem is not confined to western countries.

“In the African context, much of the time, the way women are depicted in the media is quite negative,” she said. “They are depicted as symbols of sex. Or as something to do with making men comfortable, or giving care.”

There are some counter trends to the problem, she added. She described a national television project in Uganda that gives free air time for women to talk about things that matter to them and noted that educational levels for women and girls are rising.

“There are many programs for girls to read and write. This is important because they will be able to access information, to access media reports, and then they can respond,” said Ms. Kasule.

At the Human Rights Council, the world objects to Iran's record in a historic first review

IN BRIEF

- **Iran faced its first Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in February**
- **53 nations made oral statements, of which 28 were critical of Iran's record, especially its post-election crackdown on citizens**
- **21 nations made specific mention of Iran's oppression of Bahá'ís. Many called for an end to religious discrimination and release of the seven Bahá'í leaders**

GENEVA — At a historic first review of its record before the UN Human Rights Council, Iran found itself sharply criticized by other nations for a wide range of violations — not the least of which were its treatment of citizens in post-election protests and its ongoing persecution of Bahá'ís.

Of the 53 national delegations that made oral statements during a 15 February 2010 meeting called to review Iran's human rights record, at least 28 read statements that were in some way critical. Another 25 governments filed written statements, many of which also were critical of Iran.

Nations were especially concerned about Iran's crackdown since the 2009 presidential election. Hungary's statement was typical: "It is particularly worrisome that, according to reports, actions against participants in peaceful demonstrations seem to become ever more violent and that the physical well-being of detainees as well as their right to fair trial is not guaranteed."

At least 21 nations made specific mention of the situation of Iranian Bahá'ís. Many in this group issued a

broad call for an end to religious discrimination against Bahá'ís and other minorities, while others expressed specific concern for the detention of seven Bahá'í leaders. [See page 1]

"We recommend to the Islamic Republic of Iran to respect freedom of religion, to end the policies of discrimination against religious minorities and to assure a fair and transparent trial of the members of the Bahá'í Faith," said Romania in its statement.

The meeting was significant because it was the first time Iran has faced a procedure known as Universal Periodic Review (UPR). That procedure came into being with the creation of the Human Rights Council in 2007. The idea is to review the human rights record of all 192 United Nations member states once every four years.

"The good news is that governments and organizations are rallying to defend innocent Iranians, who have over the last year seen their human rights so gravely violated," said Diane Ala'i, the representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva.

"The bad news is that Iran continues to ignore such appeals," she said.

Ms. Ala'i noted, for example, that the head of the Iranian delegation told the Council in his reply that no Bahá'ís are persecuted for their beliefs — a statement that contradicts evidence put forward in numerous UN reports as well as those of human rights organizations.

The head of the Iranian delegation, Muhammad Javad Larijani, also told the Council that there is religious freedom in Iran and that, if any Bahá'ís are imprisoned, it is because of "illegal activities" as a cult — a statement that likewise ignores all outside evidence.

"It was astounding to those of us in the Council chamber to watch the Iranian delegates stand before the



The UN Human Rights Council focused on the situation in Iran in a session on 15 February at the Palace of Nations, the Geneva headquarters of the United Nations.

international community and repeat arguments and rationalizations that everyone knows are completely false,” said Ms. Ala’i.

Even Iran’s friends concerned

Ms. Ala’i also noted that even countries that are known for their relatively friendly relations with Iran raised questions about Iran’s record on the treatment of women and religious minorities.

India asked the Iranian delegation to “share its views on ways to strengthen the role of civil society, including media, in public policy, [and] also ways to strengthen the empowerment of women. We request [Iran] to strengthen developmental efforts for vulnerable groups, including religious minorities.”

Brazil’s statement, likewise, expressed concern over Iran’s discrimination against women — and also specifically called attention to the treatment of Bahá’ís.

“Democratic regimes tolerate diversity of opinion and religious beliefs. The Bahá’í community in Iran should enjoy the same rights extended to other groups. Brazil expects that the Bahá’í leaders in prison will enjoy due process of law.”

— The government of Brazil

“Democratic regimes tolerate diversity of opinion and religious beliefs,” said Brazil. “The Bahá’í community in Iran should enjoy the same rights extended to other groups. Brazil expects that the Bahá’í leaders in prison will enjoy due process of law.”

After the session, the UN compiled a list of 188 recommendations made by other nations — along with Iran’s responses.

These recommendations included urging Iran to take “further concrete steps to promote the rights of disabled persons” and “further steps to

eliminate torture and other forms of ill treatment.”

Iran indicated to the United Nations that it accepted 123 of these recommendations but had reservations on 20 and rejected 45.

Among the recommendations that Iran rejected were a call to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and the suggestion that Iran “repeal or amend all discriminatory provisions against women and girls.”

Iran also rejected eight recommendations that specifically mentioned issues facing Bahá’ís, including a request that it “release detained Bahá’í leaders and end policies of discrimination against Bahá’í and other religious and ethnic minorities.”

[The complete UN report on the Universal Periodic Review of Iran can be found at: http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/IR/A_HRC_14_12_Iran.pdf]

HUMAN RIGHTS

Trial of seven Bahá’í leaders in Iran begins; international condemnation follows

Trial, continued from page one

with Israel, sending secret documents outside the country, acting against the security of the country, and corruption on earth.

The closed nature of the trial, along with other irregularities, were widely condemned in the days and weeks after the first session.

Shirin Ebadi speaks

Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi called for the immediate release and ultimate acquittal of the seven.

“If justice is to be carried out and an impartial judge [would] investigate the charges leveled against my clients, the only verdict that could be reached

is that of acquittal,” said Mrs. Ebadi, who, along with three other colleagues, officially represents the seven. Ms. Ebadi has been outside Iran since the June 2009 presidential election and the turmoil that followed.

Mrs. Ebadi said she had carefully read the dossier of charges against them and “found in it no cause or evidence to sustain the criminal charges upheld by the prosecutor.” Her comments came in a posting on WashingtonTV, a Web-based news service in the United States.

Others also expressed concerns about the fairness of the trial, calling for it to be open and held in accordance with international legal standards. Governments, human rights organizations, and prominent

individuals in the European Union, the United States, Brazil, India, and Canada all issued strong statements of concern.

The European Union said in a statement that it “expresses its serious concern about the start today of the trial against seven Bahá’í leaders in Iran, as the charges against them appear to be motivated by their belonging to a minority faith.”

In Brazil, Luiz Couto, the president of the Human Rights Commission of the Federal Chamber of Deputies, said in a letter to the Iranian ambassador to Brazil that it appears the “trial is not transparent and public,” and that any closed trial would violate the right to a full and fair defense.



Above are photographs of some of the 10 Bahá'ís arrested on 3 January 2010, according to the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, which published the photographs on the Web.

“We consider the freedom of religion and belief — that of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Bahá'ís, and all other religious expressions — a fundamental human right for democracy, both in the East and West,” said Congressman Couto.

Many extended their expression of concern to the entire Iranian Bahá'í community, stating that the trial of the seven leaders reflects just one aspect of an “ongoing repression.”

For example, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the Iranian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LDDHI) issued a press release on 11 February calling on the Iranian authorities to “to immediately cease all kinds of intimidation and harassment against the Bahá'í community and release all persons arbitrarily detained.

“Iran should, under all circumstances, respect the international standards related to the right to a fair trial,” said the FIDH and LDDHI.

Continuing arrests

Such expressions of concern accompanied new arrests of Iranian Bahá'ís in January and February. On 3 January, 13 Bahá'ís were arrested and ten of them were later falsely charged with helping to organize the Ashura demonstrations in late December. According to the government-sponsored news media, some of those arrested were accused of possessing

“arms and ammunition,” implying that they were to be used against the government — a charge which was immediately rejected as false by the Bahá'í International Community.

Among the 13 arrested on 3 January were relatives of two of the imprisoned leaders, including Negar Sabet, daughter of Mahvash Sabet; Leva Khanjani, granddaughter of Jamaloddin Khanjani; and her husband, Babak Mobasher. Others arrested were Jinous Sobhani, former secretary of Mrs. Shirin Ebadi, and her husband Artin Ghazanfari; Mehran Rowhani and Farid Rowhani, who are brothers; Nasim Beiglari; Payam Fanaian; Nikav Hoveydaie and his wife, Mona Misaghi; and Ebrahim Shadmehr and his son, Zavosh Shadmehr.

On 30 January, one of those ten — Payam Fanaian — was among 16 individuals put on trial in Tehran for allegedly participating in the Ashura demonstrations. Aspects of that trial were broadcast on television, featuring confessions that had clearly been coerced.

In a statement issued at the time, the Bahá'í International Community said: “It is well known that such confessions are obtained while prisoners are under extreme duress, often after being exposed to such appalling tactics as food and sleep deprivation, fake executions, threats against their families, and worse. Rather than accepting responsibility for the turmoil

in the country, the Iranian government organizes such show trials in order to lay the blame on innocent citizens and others.”

In late March, it was learned that Mr. Fanaian had been sentenced to six years in prison. Most of the other Bahá'ís arrested on 3 January had been released on bail, and were awaiting trial on unspecified charges.

Revolving-door arrests of Bahá'ís around the country continue. In March, some 14 Bahá'ís were arrested, five in the city of Marvdasht, four in Mashhad, and the others in Semnan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and Sari. Most of the detentions followed the familiar pattern of agents of the Ministry of Intelligence showing up at the homes of Bahá'ís, searching the premises and confiscating items such as computers and books, then arresting the residents.

In all, more than 50 Bahá'ís have been arrested since the beginning of 2010. As this article was written, there were 45 Bahá'ís in prison, all because of their religious beliefs.

“Iran should, under all circumstances, respect the international standards related to the right to a fair trial.”

— Fédération Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH)



An image from *The Forgotten Schools*: The Bahá'í-run Tavakkul Girl's School in Qazvin, Iran, 1928.

Schools, continued from page 16

high government officials and the aristocracy.

The fact that Bahá'í schools were owned and run by individuals rather than by Bahá'í institutions could be one reason they are virtually unmentioned in histories of education in Iran, he said.

But the Bahá'í connection was never secret. Dr. Shahvar believes a key factor in their obscurity has been government coercion aimed at preventing historians from talking about the Bahá'í Faith.

"The Iranian government made it taboo to talk about [the Bahá'í Faith]. If a scholar wants cooperation from the government, he has to go along," he said, noting that what little has been written tends to be by Bahá'ís themselves. "Nobody else wants to touch it."

The Bahá'í emphasis on education had broad ramifications, Dr. Shahvar said. "Everything stems from education," he said. "It is more important than money. ... The Bahá'ís excelled in everything they did. And it benefited the whole society, not just the Bahá'ís."

As well, Bahá'ís were well integrated into Persian society. "The Jews, the Christians, the Zoroastrians tended to have their own neighborhoods, even whole towns. But the Bahá'ís were everywhere — villages, towns, cities."

The influence of the Bahá'ís could be attributed in great measure to the model they provided, he said.

For example, in the 19th century, the intellectuals in Iran were beginning to read about reformist ideas. "But the ideas from Europe — of equality, democracy — were more theoretical. ... The Bahá'í community was an actual model, right there in Iran. The [Bahá'í] idea of democratic elections probably had a major effect on the population," he said.

He believes the lack of scholarly material goes beyond the role of the Bahá'í community in modern Iran, extending even to basic information about the religion and its founders.

"Why, in the intellectual history of 20th century Iran, is there no mention of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá?" he said. "They were talking about globalization and international security before anyone. How can you call yourself a scholar and not mention them?"

Other academicians have agreed that there has not been much scholarly work to date in this field.

Farhad Kazemi, professor of Politics, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University, wrote: "[Shahvar's] fine scholarly book on the development of modern primary and secondary education in Iran through the efforts of the Bahá'ís fills an important gap in scholarly literature of the Islamic world."

— By Sally Weeks



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How Bahá'ís helped bring modern education to Iran

The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran 1899-1934

— By Soli Shahvar
I.B. Tauris, London

IN BRIEF

- Iran scholar Soli Shahvar says the role of Bahá'ís in the modernization of Iran has been vastly overlooked
- His new book tells the story of dozens of pioneering Bahá'í schools established in Iran before being closed in 1934 by government decree
- Their progressive methods, academic excellence and openness to the followers of all religions had a wide ranging but previously unacknowledged impact on Iranian society at large

The role of the Bahá'í Faith in the modernization of Iran remains a history largely waiting to be written, according to the author of a new scholarly work about Bahá'í schools that once existed and flourished throughout the country.

“What I have learned from doing this is that there are a lot more studies to be done on the role of the Bahá'ís,” said Soli Shahvar, author of *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran, 1899-1934*. “This book is just one example.”

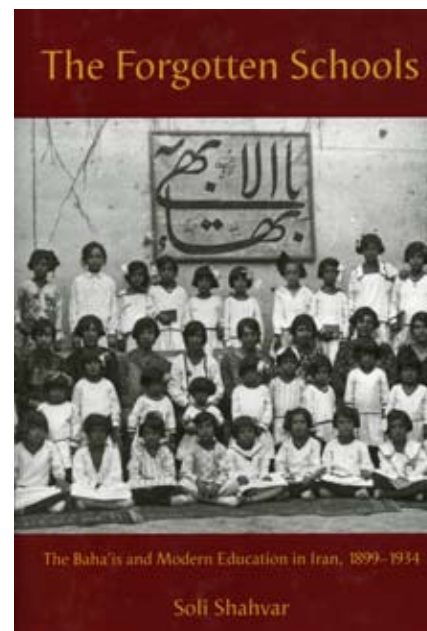
His new work tells the story of the establishment by Bahá'ís of dozens of schools in Iran — in cities, towns, and villages — starting around the turn of the 20th century. In 1934, the Shah ordered most of the schools closed.

Other religious minorities, including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, also operated schools, but those of the Bahá'ís were different, said the Iranian-born Dr. Shahvar, who is senior lecturer in the department of Middle Eastern history and director of the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa in Israel. He is not a Bahá'í.

One way the Bahá'í schools were different is that they welcomed students from all religious backgrounds, including Muslims. This most likely made these schools one of the few places in Iran where people of different faiths mixed as a community, he said.

And unlike the other religious schools, which used the academic setting for religious training, the Bahá'í schools did not offer instruction in the Bahá'í Faith itself.

The main distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í schools was their excellence, said Dr. Shahvar during a recent interview.



“Because education was part of [the Bahá'í] belief, they did it the best they could. That’s why their schools were better,” he said, adding that the teachers were not well paid but were extremely devoted.

Progressive Bahá'í beliefs — the equality of women and men, democratic ideals, the importance of science — spilled over into education. Bahá'í schools had maps and blackboards, and in some localities, they were the only schools available to girls or to children of certain backgrounds, he said.

Most schools in Iran at the time were what Dr. Shahvar called the “old type.” The traditional educational system was based on teaching by local religious leaders who usually had no training in educational methods. They often held classes in their homes, focusing on memorization of the Qur’an and poetry.

The excellence of the Bahá'í schools drew many non-Bahá'í students, said Dr. Shahvar, including children of

Schools, continued on page 15