

ONE COUNTRY

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

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GENDER EQUALITY

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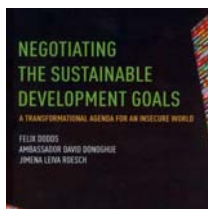
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At the intersection of faith and feminism, a new discourse emerges at the UN



The Faith and Feminism Working Group to the United Nations is at the forefront of a new discourse about religious belief and gender equality. Above: The FaithFem Working Group at a side event during the 60th UN Commission on the Status of Women in March 2016.

NEW YORK— Around the world, the high cost of gender inequality can be seen in all cultures and societies.

Violence against women is pervasive, affecting more than one-third of women worldwide, while women almost everywhere are paid less for doing the same jobs as men. And although progress has been made in closing the gender gap in schools, girls still lag behind boys in access to education, especially in early adolescence and situations of extreme poverty.

Religious traditions and messages have had a substantial role in perpetuating these inequalities — and in ameliorating them.

On the one hand, traditional religious beliefs or interpretations have been used to repress women, keep them in subservient roles, restrict their movement, or limit their role as leaders. The examples are almost too numerous to mention.

On the other hand, many women and men have found religious messages on equality, solidarity, and justice to be powerful factors in motivating them to work for change. A number of early feminists, for example, cited religious messages as one source of inspiration. And in many countries, faith-based organizations provide critical health and educational services to women and girls.

Whether one is a believer or not, religion unquestionably plays a powerful role in society as a whole, touching the lives of nearly everyone.

"Religious groups are in our view one of the most important influences of social and cultural norms," said Lakshmi Puri, the Deputy Executive Director of UN

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New Patterns of Community Life in an Urbanizing World

The following is adapted from a statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), held 17-20 October 2016 in Quito, Ecuador.

IN BRIEF

- **Large-scale migration to urban centers has, in many cases, led to social fragmentation, the depletion of limited ecological resources, and profound feelings of isolation and despair.**
- **The path forward requires reviving the concept of community, such that inhabitants see themselves more trusting of one another, unified in purpose, and attentive to moral and emotional well-being.**
- **Understandings of self and identity are key to establishing dynamics of this kind. In instances where members of a local population are increasingly functioning as a cohesive, united whole, the Bahá'í community has consistently seen that a sense of common purpose has been critical.**

Urbanization in its current incarnation is not a process that can continue indefinitely. Large-scale migration to urban centers has, in many cases, led to social fragmentation, the depletion of limited ecological resources, and profound feelings of isolation and despair. The path forward is not to be found in simply aggregating larger and larger numbers into smaller spaces. Rather, it calls for a holistic approach to human settlements that enables individuals and communities to thrive in urban and rural settings alike, providing for the needs of both and drawing on the strengths of both.

Progress in this direction will require conceptions of life in rural and urban settings to be thoroughly reimagined, drawing on the accumulated knowledge of the past, the scientific advances of the present, and a compelling vision of the future. Insights from the field of psychology, for example, clearly demonstrate that people thrive in communities that are characterized by trust and interconnection. Human happiness — which impacts productivity, physical health, and mental acuity — is at its peak when personal relationships are strong. The close friendships and sense of mutual reliance among neighbors that have traditionally been associated with rural communities is an element of life that should be strengthened, not forgotten.

Building healthy and prospering settlements is a formidable task that will require learning and effort for generations to come. Cities and villages will need to provide economic opportunities and means for young

people to support themselves and build livelihoods according to their skills and talents. Communities of all kinds will also need to nurture many additional aspects of human well-being, such as social inclusion and cohesion, intergenerational solidarity, equitable distribution of resources, and meaningful connections to the land and the natural world.

How are such qualities to be fostered within a population? In the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community, a number of elements seem critical to the creation of flourishing settlements, whether in urban areas or rural ones.

Reviving the concept of community

Prominent among these is an explicit concern with reviving the concept of community. The idea is virtually ubiquitous in its most basic form, of course; we speak of communities of countless types and varieties. The lived reality of many, however, is not that of a cohesive and interlinked whole, but rather an atomistic collection of largely unrelated parts. This will need to be replaced by communities and neighborhoods in which inhabitants are friendly, trusting of one another, unified in purpose, and attentive to moral and emotional well-being.

If community is to further the progress of society in its own right — complementing the roles played by individuals and social institutions — a much more expansive conception of community life must be actively embraced. New patterns of action and interaction will have to be built, and new forms of relationship and association constructed.

As this work continues, new capacities that facilitate progress toward those very goals will come to the fore.

Some of these capacities will include the abilities to forge consensus across a diverse population and foster collective commitment to shared priorities, to strengthen vision of a common future and devise practical steps to pursue it, and to shape and assess action according to an emerging collective conscience about what is right and wrong, acceptable and intolerable, beneficial and harmful.

Not cosmetic integration

Integrating populations that have traditionally — or recently — been at the margins of society is another prerequisite for flourishing human settlements. As the global community faces the large-scale displacement of peoples, as well as the proliferation of various extremist ideologies, the danger of relegating entire populations to conditions of poverty needs no elaboration. Integration cannot be cosmetic or offer certain groups a limited range of choices formulated by agencies inaccessible to them. Instead, decision-making processes must reflect and draw on the talents and views of as wide a cross-section of the population as possible. The input of those who might otherwise be excluded must be not only valued, but actively sought out and embraced. Movement in this direction will require qualitatively different approaches to decision-making. Experience suggests that more effective outcomes are achieved when decision-making is approached as a shared effort to explore the underlying reality of relevant circumstances — a collective search for truth and common understanding. Within such a framework, ideas and suggestions do not belong to any single person or entity. Nor does their success or failure rest on the status or influence of the individual or institution that put them forward. Rather, proposals belong to the decision-making group as a whole, which adopts, revises, or discards them in whatever way conduces to the greatest understanding and progress. Effort



Serik Tokbolat, left, and Saphira Rameshfar, both representatives of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, at the Habitat III Conference in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016.

is made to ensure that all voices are heard and participation is maximized.

In instances where members of a local population are increasingly functioning as a cohesive, united whole, the Bahá'í community has consistently seen that a sense of common purpose has been critical.

Need for a common vision

A united vision of the future helps harmonize diverse efforts into one coherent movement toward shared goals. As a common sense of purpose takes root among more and more individuals, and understanding of how different efforts can reinforce one another becomes sharper, increasing numbers are able to find the unique contribution they can make. A process begins to take shape by which larger and larger segments of a population come to take active ownership over their own material, social, and spiritual development.

The process of integrating immigrants into new communities, to take one timely example, often falters not because any technical capacity is lacking in the community, but because new arrivals are seen to be “other” by those who are more established, and are treated as such. Successful integration, like many other areas, requires

the ability to establish shared priorities and summon the collective will of a diverse and evolving community.

Education is central

Education is also central to the construction of thriving communities. Young people — regardless of race, nationality, or degree of material means — long to translate high ideals into practical realities and aspire to make a meaningful contribution to the fortunes of humanity. Thought must therefore be given to the attitudes, qualities, and skills that are to be cultivated in the coming generations. Experience suggests that, if it is to empower growing numbers to contribute to the betterment of society, education needs to enable young people to think deeply about the purpose of their lives and the aims toward which their talents should be directed. And it should empower them to take constructive action, fostering qualities such as ethical leadership, principled action, and moral courage.

Creating healthy human settlements is an endeavor that the international community will be learning about for years to come. But it seems clear that this endeavor must build and draw on the capacity of all populations to contribute to the common good.

Can community-building activities at the grassroots improve disaster resilience?

A group of Bahá'ís in the village of Lenkanal, on the Island of Tanna in Vanuatu, after Cyclone Pam. Their response suggests that community-building activities at the grassroots can lay the groundwork for greater resilience when humanitarian disasters strike.



IN BRIEF

- **The World Humanitarian Summit, held in Istanbul, Turkey, 23-24 May 2016, sought to bring together leaders from governments, businesses, aid agencies, and civil society in an effort to improve and better coordinate humanitarian assistance worldwide.**
- **The Bahá'í International Community offered a statement that, among other things, suggested community-building activities at the grassroots can help create resilience against hardship.**
- **The response of the Bahá'í community of Vanuatu in the wake of Cyclone Pam offers a case study.**

TANNA, Vanuatu — In March 2015, a severe tropical cyclone swept across the island chain of Vanuatu in the South Pacific.

With winds racing up to 250 kilometers per hour, Cyclone Pam took a path directly over Tanna, one of the southernmost islands in the Vanuatu archipelago.

The damage was extensive. Homes were destroyed and trees defoliated. Communication was cut off.

International aid agencies, which responded quickly with emergency flights of food and medicine, described the conditions as among the most challenging they had ever faced, according to news reports at the time.

Although the island has not yet fully recovered, much has been done to rebuild. One factor that may have helped the people of Tanna was a strong sense of togetherness — a cohesion that had been built up in part by extensive community-building activities undertaken there by the local Bahá'í community in recent years.

In the community of Isangel, local Bahá'ís worked with outside relief organizations to help identify the neediest and effectively distribute relief supplies.

In this, they used capacities acquired in their own community building efforts — such as collecting statistics, consulting together, and acting systematically — to assist the aid agencies and others to better understand local needs and conditions.

“We used the tools and instruments I had learned about while serving as a coordinator (of Bahá'í activities),” said one resident of Tanna. “Many aid organizations approach us when they encounter an obstacle. We suggest to them to work with the chiefs and consult with the people at the grassroots.”

In Tumah Mine, a group of young people helped the elders rebuild their houses immediately after the storm. Their efforts were partly inspired by training they have received in a youth empowerment program offered by the Bahá'í community, which emphasizes selfless service to others.

And in Namasmene, a local resident told visitors shortly after the cyclone that their local Bahá'í governing body would soon meet to discuss how to assist in the reconstruction process for the entire community.

“We know that we should not depend on aid donors, but that we should

take charge of our own development,” they said. “For the reconstruction process, we will use the same tools and instruments that we used for the [advancement] of our community.”

The experiences in Tanna offer a glimpse of the potential that empowered local individuals can play in disaster relief efforts — reflecting the kinds of contributions that can be made when people at the grassroots level are involved from the beginning in humanitarian aid efforts.

“Natural disasters have been conceptualized in various ways throughout history, from acts of God to the combined result of natural phenomena and human-use systems,” said Stephen Karnik, who coordinates humanitarian response for the Bahá’í International Community (BIC).

“Today, they are understood primarily as social constructions, reflecting the reality that while natural calamities can strike anywhere, the brunt of their damage is invariably absorbed by certain populations, such as the materially poor, the sick, the elderly, women, and children.

“This view of natural disaster as a social construction shifts attention from the natural world to the human one. No longer are responders addressing the tsunami or the earthquake. Rather, they are addressing the social effects created by the tsunami or the earthquake — the breakdowns in social interaction, community leadership, communication, and systems of support.

“While most Bahá’í communities have little experience with disaster events, they have extensive experience with the processes of building, strengthening, and transforming social systems. They have strengthened this capacity through years of effort in neighborhoods and villages. This orientation allows them to reach out to recovering communities from a position of strength and confidence, rather than one of doubt and insecurity,” said Mr. Karnik.

World Humanitarian Summit

The BIC brought forward some of these ideas in its contributions to the



Stephen Karnik and Bani Dugal represented the Bahá’í International Community at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016.

World Humanitarian Summit, held in Istanbul, Turkey, 23-24 May 2016.

Convened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the Summit sought to bring together leaders from governments, businesses, aid agencies, and civil society in an effort to improve and better coordinate the delivery of aid in a world where an estimated 130 million people need humanitarian assistance simply in order to survive.

Faith-based organizations are seen by many as having a unique comparative advantage in humanitarian contexts. As noted in the “Charter for Faith-based Humanitarian Action,” which was produced in conjunction with the Summit, religious groups often “have an established relationship of trust and familiarity with local communities in which they are embedded...before a crisis” and “are often the first responders and key providers of assistance and protection during crises.”

The BIC issued a statement to the Summit titled “Rising Together: Building the Capacity to Recover from Within.” It takes note of the importance of such qualities in responding to humanitarian crises.

“An area’s ability to respond therefore has much to do with the capacities, attitudes, and qualities of community that characterized it long before the rivers rose or the cyclone made landfall,” said the statement.

“Communities that have been especially effective in responding have — prior to the disaster — been consciously working to create distinctive and beneficial patterns of collective life. Building consensus and unity of vision over time, they make intentional and purposeful choices about the kinds of interaction found in the community, about how people relate to one another in various spaces, and about the kinds of relationships found between community members, between different groups or sub-populations, and between institutions of governance,” it said.

Any new international, coordinated effort to address the rising tide of humanitarian disasters should consider how best to promote the development of such capacities, the statement said.

“Some will pertain primarily to intellectual, technical, and scientific pursuits. Others will be more social in nature, focused on strengthening and refining patterns of interaction, association, and relationship among inhabitants. Still others will focus on the moral and normative aspects of collective life, drawing on the religious heritage of humankind to address foundational issues of meaning, higher motivation, and moral purpose.”

The full statement can be found at www.bic.org

Growing recognition that freedom of religion is essential in the effort to prevent violent extremism

The Locarno Suite at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, scene of a conference in October 2016 on the connections between the freedom of religion or belief, the creation of more inclusive societies, and the prevention of violent extremism.



IN BRIEF

- **A series of recent international meetings have drawn attention to the increasing recognition of the importance of upholding freedom of religion or belief worldwide.**
- **Experts gathered at separate meetings in New York, London, and Geneva said the promotion of genuine religious freedom could go far to help counter violent extremism.**
- **Involving religious leaders in protecting this fundamental human right is seen as critical.**

LONDON — With its high arches, ornate chandeliers, and golden-topped columns, the Locarno Suite at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office embodies the essence of the old-world establishment.

But the ideas presented there at a recent conference reflect the latest thinking about the importance of human rights in the global effort to counter violent extremism.

Held 19–20 October 2016, the conference brought together 50 experts on religious freedom and more than 100 other participants from 38 countries. The goal was to better understand how defending and promoting freedom of religion or belief might build resilience against those who seek to use religion to encourage violence and terrorism.

Of course, some governments around the world have sought to fight terrorism by cracking down on religious expression and freedom. The argument is that by repressing religious differences, hateful ideologies will be subdued.

But experts gathered here and at other recent international conferences say that upholding religious freedom promotes tolerance and inclusivity — and this, in turn, can help to short-circuit ideologies of “the other” that stand at the center of violent extremism.

“Freedom of religion or belief is fundamental to a successful society,” said Baroness Anelay, the UK’s Minister for Human Rights, in an opening address at the London conference. “It builds resilience against the prejudice, discrimination and persecution that not only prevents a society from achieving its full economic potential but also leaves it vulnerable to extremism.”

A fundamental right

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN in 1948, and further codified as international law in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Yet for many years, FoRB was relegated to the back bench of human

rights, behind concerns over protections against torture and freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention.

Increased concern about the role of religion in international affairs is causing many to re-examine the importance of FoRB.

“The issue of freedom of religion or belief, especially in the context of combatting violent extremism, is one of the main issues the world is trying to grapple with today,” said Diane Ala’i, a Representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations in Geneva, who was an invited speaker at the London event.

“It is driven partly by concern about the rise of Daesh in Syria, and horrors like the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris. But it is a concern that has been growing for a long time. Part of what is happening is that governments thought secularism was going to resolve all of the problems that stem from religious conflict. But what has happened is that by pushing religion out of the public discourse, a void has been created that has been hijacked by extremists.”

At least two other recent conferences reflected a growing awareness of these trends:

- The Global Summit on Religion, Peace and Security, held 23-25 November 2016 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. Convened by the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty, the event sought to discuss how different actors can work together effectively to implement strategies that can foster peace and security.

- A Ministerial Side-Event at the United Nations on “Upholding the Responsibility to Protect: The Role of Religious Leaders in Preventing Atrocity Crimes.” Held 20 September 2016 at the United Nations and organized by the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN, with the UN Office on Prevention Office and the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the event featured a panel discussion examining the actions religious leaders can take to prevent atrocity crimes and build inclusive societies.



Diane Ala’i of the Bahá’í International Community, second from left, was among the invited speakers at the Global Summit on Religion, Peace and Security, held in Geneva 23-25 November 2016.

The three events brought forward a number of sub-themes in relation to the connection between FoRB and combatting violent extremism. These included the necessity of more deeply involving religious leaders and the need to think beyond secularism toward a greater recognition of the importance of religion in binding societies together.

Involving religious leaders

“We sometimes forget here in the West that many of the states troubled by violent extremism are deeply religious societies,” said Sarah Snyder, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Adviser for Reconciliation, at the London conference. “Religion is not an optional extra, or one dimension among many — it infuses every aspect of life, including the political. The cooperation of religious leaders is vital to the building of inclusive, plural — and peaceful — societies.”

Bani Dugal, the Principal Representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the UN, told those at the UN Ministerial Side-Event in September that religious leaders must reconsider the degree to which their own rhetoric may be fueling extremism — a reconsideration that should include renouncing claims of privileged access to truth or guidance.

“For such claims of divine exclusivity or finality have, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, been one of the greatest factors in

undermining steps toward unity and in promoting hatred and violence,” said Ms. Dugal.

Re-thinking the secular approach

Another emergent sub-theme was a recognition of the limits of secularism, and the concomitant need to more openly recognize the role religion plays in society and in human relations.

“In the past, there was an assumption that secularism could be ‘religion-blind,’ and therefore its promotion could create tolerant societies,” said Nazila Ghanea, an Assistant Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford, who spoke at the London event.

“If we think about the challenges of stemming a tide of extremism and terrorism and violence, then pluralism, coexistence, and respecting others despite a diversity of religious beliefs is important. And freedom of religion or belief precisely outlines the implementation of that and provides a framework within a broader context of human rights overall,” said Dr. Ghanea.

“Even states with structures or governments that still uphold a single state religion and that show discrimination against those outside the majority belief are still being plagued by sectarianism — and terrorism,” she added. “And so even their eyes are being opened to the importance of interfaith dialogue and creating understanding.”

"I knew he was a Bahá'í."

Killer's confession exemplifies continuing persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís — and growing public resistance to it.

IN BRIEF

- Bahá'ís in Iran continue to face wholesale persecution by the government, despite its claims to the contrary.
- The story of the hateful killing of a Bahá'í in Yazd reflects the impact of thousands of government-sponsored anti-Bahá'í articles in the media.
- At least 81 Bahá'ís were arrested in 2016, and nearly 300 Bahá'í-owned shops or businesses were closed. As of January 2017, there were 90 Bahá'ís in prison.
- In 2016, the UN General Assembly again expressed concern over Iran's human rights record, as did Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Iran Rights Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed.

The events preceding the brutal stabbing of Farhang Amiri outside his home in Yazd, Iran, last September seemed to begin innocently enough.

Two young men came to the door to say they wanted to buy Mr. Amiri's pickup truck. Mr. Amiri's son, Payam, answered via intercom, and explained that the truck was not for sale.

But the two men insisted and began asking questions about things like the number of people living in the house.

Payam later said he suspected the two men were perhaps planning a raid on their home.

The next day, 26 September 2016, the two men returned. This time Mr. Amiri himself went out to talk to them.

The family soon heard screaming and looked out to see Mr. Amiri severely injured on the pavement. Neighbors and shopkeepers saw the

two run away. Thinking a theft was in progress, they followed and captured one of the men, and brought the police.

In the meantime, Mr. Amiri — who had several stab wounds in his chest — was taken to the hospital. He died a few minutes after arriving.

The police questioned the suspect in front of the crowd, now gathered in the street. And witnesses recorded the following confession:

"I quickly stabbed him in the back and thought he would die, but he turned toward me," said the main suspect. "My friend put his hand on Mr. Amiri's mouth and held his hands, and I stabbed him three or four times in the heart, chest and face."

The inspector asked: "What motivated you to kill him?"

The suspect responded: "I knew he was a Bahá'í."



The family of Farhang Amiri, who was stabbed in Yazd, Iran, for being a Bahá'í.

The situation facing Bahá'ís in 2016

The Amiri case, which is still working its way through Iranian courts, offered a stark reminder of the situation that faced Iranian Bahá'ís in 2016.

On the one hand, Bahá'ís continue to face intense persecution by the government. At least 81 Bahá'ís were arrested in 2016, and nearly 300 Bahá'í-owned shops or businesses were closed in an ongoing campaign of economic persecution. More than 29 Bahá'ís were expelled from university for their religious beliefs, and hundreds more were denied enrollment. As of January 2017, there were 90 Bahá'ís in prison in Iran.

Moreover, a government-sponsored campaign of anti-Bahá'í propaganda in the media spewed out more than 11,000 articles, web pages and programs in 2016 that denigrated Bahá'ís — which undoubtedly helped create an environment that may have incited Mr. Amiri's murderers.

On the other hand, the reaction of neighbors, who rallied to help catch Mr. Amiri's killers, and the repentant attitude of the killer's parents, who told the Amiri family how ashamed they felt about their sons' behavior, show how the citizenry is increasingly willing to give public support to Bahá'ís, despite the government's open animosity.

"Iranians from all walks of life — clerics, journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, and ordinary Iranians — have stood with the Bahá'ís in the quest for religious freedom," stated a 2016 report of the Bahá'í International Community on the situation in Iran. "Some Iranians have even chosen to work alongside Bahá'ís in their community-building activities."

The two trends — increased government persecution of Bahá'ís and increased public support for them — were also reflected in another well-publicized incident last year.

Fariba Kamalabadi, one of the seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, was given a short furlough to visit her new granddaughter. While she was home, a number of activists visited to show their solidarity. Among them was Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of former Iranian President Akbar

Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had met Ms. Kamalabadi while herself imprisoned.

The mere idea that Ms. Hashemi would meet with a Bahá'í stirred an intense outcry among Iran's governmental and clerical establishment.

One top Iranian government official, Judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Mohseni Eje, called the meeting "a very ugly and obscene act." Scores of religious leaders joined in, saying "consorting with Bahá'ís and friendship with them is against the teachings of Islam" and that Bahá'ís are "deviants" who must be "isolated."

These and other statements were circulated in thousands of pieces of anti-Bahá'í propaganda in Iran — a volume of invective that itself became the object of numerous news stories in the international media.

"An Ayatollah's Daughter Prompts a Debate on Religious Persecution in Iran," said the headline of a *New York Times* article on 18 May 2016. That same day, a BBC article likewise highlighted the "political storm" over the meeting, adding that despite the criticism from the government, Ms. Hashemi was "unrepentant" about her meeting with Ms. Kamalabadi.

"She said her time in prison with Ms. Kamalabadi had opened her eyes to the Bahá'ís, who she believed should be accorded full civil and human rights," reported the BBC — adding that Ms. Hashemi also said "the clerics' treatment of Bahá'ís was contrary to the teachings of Islam."

International concern

At the international level, there were continued expressions of concern in 2016 over Iran's human rights record — and its treatment of Bahá'ís.

On 19 December 2016, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution expressing "serious concern" about Iran's high rate of executions, ongoing use of torture, widespread arbitrary detentions, sharp limits on freedom of assembly, expression, and religious belief, and continuing discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities, including Bahá'ís.

The resolution, which was the 29th such resolution by the General

Assembly since 1985, called on Iran to eliminate "all forms of discrimination, including economic restrictions" against religious minorities in Iran.

It also called for the release of "all religious practitioners imprisoned for their membership in or activities on behalf of a recognized or unrecognized minority religious group, including the seven Bahá'í leaders."

That vote followed separate reports by Ahmed Shaheed, then the UN's Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, in his final term.

Both described wide-ranging human rights violations in Iran, also expressing concern for Bahá'ís.

"Adherents of recognized religions, such as Christians (especially those of Muslim background), and of unrecognized ones, such as Bahá'ís, continue to suffer discrimination and are reportedly prosecuted for peacefully manifesting their religious beliefs," said Dr. Shaheed in his report, released in October.

Mr. Ban's report devoted ten paragraphs to the situation of Bahá'ís, calling them the "most severely persecuted" religious minority in Iran, "subjected to multiple forms of discrimination that affect their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights."

Mr. Ban said Bahá'ís are regularly prohibited from engaging in peaceful assemblies, are restricted in access to higher education, and continue to "suffer from severe economic pressure."

"Bahá'í-owned businesses have been shut down by the authorities and vandalized in a number of cities, in particular after proprietors temporarily closed their businesses to observe Bahá'í holidays," said Mr. Ban.

Mr. Ban said he is also concerned about "the increase in inflammatory comments by religious, judicial and political officials" against Bahá'ís — then referring specifically to the outpouring of vitriol that followed the meeting between Fariba Kamalabadi and Faezeh Hashemi.

"The systemic spreading of explicitly hateful rhetoric will only incite more prejudice and violence towards the already marginalized Bahá'í community," said Mr. Ban.

In Chile, a new House of Worship breaks architectural boundaries — and stirs a new sense of community

Leading a delegation of special guests from the House of Worship during a three-day dedication ceremony in October 2016 are (left to right) Minister Secretary General Nicolás Eyzaguirre, representing the President of Chile; representative of the Universal House of Justice Antonella Demonte; Mayor of Peñalolén, Carolina Leitaó; and Felipe Duhart, Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Chile.



IN BRIEF

- **In October, Bahá'ís from around the world and others came to Santiago, Chile, for a three-day ceremony commemorating the completion of the eighth Bahá'í House of Worship.**
- **The distinctive new religious building, inspired by “the universal form of a spiral” has drawn praise from architectural critics and others.**
- **Its builders hope it will spur a new sense of community cohesion and inspiration in the region.**

SANTIAGO — From an architectural point of view, the recently completed Bahá'í House of Worship here is a stunning achievement, pushing both the aesthetic and technical frontiers for religious buildings in new directions.

Aesthetically speaking, it is visually unique: a winding, spiraling dome of glass and white marble that, in the words of one architectural reviewer, “resembles a glorious flower, its translucent glass petals contrasting with the mountains and merging with the cloudy sky.”

Technically, the building required the development of entirely new methods for casting curved glass cladding and affixing it to a steel skeleton. For example, the builders turned to a computer program normally used to design aircraft to work out the precise shapes of the 10,161 cast glass elements and 8,001 marble pieces that went into the spiraling “wings” of the building.

Those assembled for the Temple's dedication here in October 2016 paid tribute to such achievements — and also took note of the building's significant spiritual and community-building aspirations.

Minister Secretary General Nicolás Eyzaguirre, who represented Chilean President Michelle Bachelet at the dedication ceremonies, called it “a transcendental space that looks for unity and respect for all religious backgrounds.”

“It is a Temple which makes our landscape a more beautiful one,” he said. “It will become an icon and it will remind us how important it is to find the unity between the city and nature.”

Claudio Orrego, governor of the Santiago metropolitan region, called the Temple a “huge gift” to the citizens of Chile and beyond.

“Today we see the beauty of its creation, together with all the divine and human forces that have made it

possible,” said Gov. Orrego. “Santiago will be different from now on because of this beautiful temple that has been given to us... It doesn’t matter what religion we belong to, what creed we profess, our cities are full of the thirst for silence and to transcend.”

Minister Eyzaguirre and Gov. Orrego were among the some 500 dignitaries, joined by an estimated 5,000 Bahá’ís from 110 countries, who gathered on 13 October 2016 for the Temple’s dedication, reflecting the building’s importance both to Bahá’ís and society at large — as testified by the continuing stream of visitors.

“Since the inauguration of the House of Worship in October, thousands of people of all walks of life, of various religious affiliations and ethnicities have visited the place,” said Eduardo Rioseco, director of the House of Worship.

“A large number of those visitors have come not once but several times, and often when they return they bring their friends and family. Some neighbors are already taking the habit of coming at least weekly, and sometimes even more frequently.”

Mr. Rioseco said the Temple seemed to be providing a special place within the Santiago area, one that gives visitors a “haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and those foundational questions we all ponder at some point in our lives,” as well as a place for “conversations” on “the nature of the soul, the process of social transformation we can foster, and the spiritual principles that could help us along the way.”

Eighth such Temple worldwide

The House of Worship in Chile is the eighth such Bahá’í Temple to be built, completing a century-long goal of building one such edifice on each inhabited continent or sub-continent.

The first Temple was completed in 1908 in the city of Ishqabad in Russian Turkistan (now Ashgabat, Turkmenistan), but it was later expropriated by the Soviet authorities and ultimately demolished in 1963.



The Bahá’í House of Worship at night, overlooking the city of Santiago, Chile.

Currently, listed in the approximate order of their completion, continental Bahá’í Houses of Worship exist in Wilmette, Illinois, USA (1953); Kampala, Uganda (1961); Sydney, Australia (1961); Frankfurt, Germany (1964); Panama City, Panama (1972); Apia, Samoa (1984); and New Delhi, India (1986).

Over time, Bahá’ís hope to build Houses of Worship in every country where they reside, and, ultimately, in every local community.

The idea is to create places where people of all backgrounds and beliefs can gather, without ritual, to meditate and to read and sing the sacred scriptures of the world’s religions.

As a symbol of this openness to all, every Bahá’í House of Worship has nine sides and nine doors.

“In that sense, to have a building with nine doors open in all directions is a way of saying that everybody is welcome here,” said Mr. Rioseco.

An architectural challenge

The challenge of working from such a simple set of rules is both frightening and exciting, said Siamak Hariri, the architect responsible for the design.

“It is wide open,” said Mr. Hariri, a partner with the Toronto-based firm of Hariri Pontarini. “The brief is deceptively simple. It is just

one room. But there is no clergy, no iconography, and no formal religious service — so what do you grab as a central idea?”

Mr. Hariri noted that so far, each of the seven other Bahá’í Temples has been quite different and distinct from the others.



Interior of the Chile Temple, showing the intricate use of glass and translucent stone.

His goal, then, in approaching the design of the Chile Temple was to start by thinking about how to capture a certain kind of “emotional experience.” He drew inspiration from a passage in the Bahá’í sacred writings that speaks of a house of God in which “all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light.”

From this came the idea that his design should be clad in something like alabaster that would be “alive with light.” And ultimately, that led to the notion of creating a special, translucent glass that would allow the entire structure to glow and radiate.

The second main design theme — that of the spiraling wings that composed the nine sides of the dome — came in pondering the universal form of the spiral. “You see this in photographs of galaxies,” he said, “or the back of a baby’s head. The idea is that the entire Temple is all moving and rotating or torquing around the center,” he said.

His design was accepted by the Bahá’í community in 2003, after an international design competition announced by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Chile.

Then came the arduous and difficult task of translating that vision into reality — all within a very limited budget of about \$30 million.

“Anybody can do anything with gobs of money. And that is not to say \$30 million is pennies. But compared to other budgets for other religious buildings, it is small, and has left people wondering how we did it,” he said.

It took two years, for example, to find the right kind of glass. It had to be super strong, yet relatively inexpensive. Mr. Hariri said they found a company that melts old Pyrex test tubes and petri dishes, and saved money that way. “The whole Temple was built from recycled glass,” he said.

For the interior stone, they found a quarry in Portugal that produced a uniquely translucent type of marble, which was also less costly than traditional alabaster.

“But for me, what is important is to understand that we are talking about



A devotional program during the Temple’s three-day dedication ceremony for some 500 participants who were making their first visit to the Bahá’í House of Worship.

a new typology in religious buildings,” said Mr. Hariri. “We don’t know what form this will take in the coming years. It is an evolving, organic process, like the first cathedrals in Christianity, or the first mosques in Islam, or the first synagogues in Judaism.

“We don’t know what form [Bahá’í Temples] will take in the coming years. It is an evolving, organic process, like the first cathedrals in Christianity, or the first mosques in Islam, or the first synagogues in Judaism.

— Siamak Hariri, Architect

“I was trying to express many of the core concepts in terms of worship in the Bahá’í community,” he said. “But we don’t know what forms this will take in the coming years.”

Social and economic activities

Bahá’í Temples are also intended to become community centers where social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific endeavors are ultimately pursued.

“Although in the Bahá’í writings you can find references to some specific dependencies — such as a home for the aged or a hospital — that are to

be developed in future, we know that those references are not necessarily comprehensive,” said Mr. Rioseco.

“So it’s hard to say how this will evolve, but my guess is that it will probably be related to the evolution of the conversations I mentioned before,” said Mr. Rioseco.

He noted, for example, that four years ago a small group, concerned about environmental issues, came to the Temple’s construction site and decided to establish a temporary tree nursery, to help re-establish vegetation around the Temple.

“Gradually the initiative became a more structured project which drew upon volunteers coming now on a weekly basis. Some activities for children and youth started to be fostered in coordination with other educational initiatives that the Bahá’í community has in Santiago and many other places,” he said, adding that now trees from the nursery have been planted in schools and public parks in Peñalolén and other areas of Santiago.

At the intersection of faith and feminism, a new discourse emerges at the UN

Faith & Feminism, from page one

Women. “And social and cultural norms present some of the strongest barriers to gender equality, to ending discrimination, to ending violence against women.”

The gap between faith and feminism

For many years, there seemed to be a dichotomy between feminist groups and women involved in faith-based organizations. Feminists often saw religion and religious leaders as enemies of progressive ideas on reproductive rights, female genital mutilation, or early childhood marriage, whereas women of faith sometimes felt torn as they pursued equality but also tried to live up to or support the dictates of their religious traditions. Somewhere in the middle were UN agencies, which sought to work with everyone but which also perceived some religious practices as violating human rights, especially the rights of women and girls.

“The divide between faith and feminism has been so long unexamined, and the two categories were seen as completely contrary and unbridgeable,” said Maha Marouan, an associate professor of African American and Women’s Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

“The feminist movement has traditionally been very secular and looks at religion as an oppressive force in women’s lives, while faith-based communities often shied away from feminism because they see it as a radical ideology,” she said.

Over the last few years, however, a new discourse on the subject has become more prominent, making greater efforts to bring together feminists and faith groups, especially those composed of religious women.

At the forefront of this effort has been a loose coalition of

non-governmental organizations in New York, which has established a Civil Society Working Group of Faith-Based Organizations and Feminists for Gender Equality — known more concisely as the Faith and Feminism Working Group.

Founded in 2015 after a series of meetings at the New York office of the Bahá’í International Community, the Faith and Feminism Working Group broadly seeks “to replace the often confrontational dynamic between secular and faith-based proponents of gender equality,” according to a statement the Group delivered to the 2016 UN Commission on the Status of Women.

“Such tensions are often rooted in conceptions of culture and are driven by broader political agendas, geopolitical realities and where religion is instrumentalized and political fragilities are exploited,” the statement continues.

It went on to recommend that “the United Nations, the commission, academics and civil society reflect and consult on the need for religious and secular actors to work together to create a narrative that encompasses the ideals inherent in respective world-views — a narrative that focuses on

our common humanity, on justice and the establishment of peace.”

Three lines of action

The Working Group has organized itself along three general lines of action: 1) to advocate for this new conception of faith and feminism at the UN and in other international forums; 2) to develop a non-patriarchal, multi-religious narrative that can help replace the patriarchal narrative that currently dominates; and, 3) to examine how the media shapes our concept of gender-based issues — and how it can be used to promote a new conception of faith and feminism.

Toward those goals, the Working Group sponsored a series of brown-bag lunches at the 2016 UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). These brought together a variety of participants to discuss topics like “Faith and Feminist Advocacy at the UN” and “Feminine Religious Narrative — Where Art Thou?”

“The CSW brings together over 8,000 women from all over the world each year,” said Christine Mangale, Program Coordinator with the Lutheran Office for World Community, a member of the Working Group’s steering committee. “These lunch discussions were to expand the viewpoint. And we were adding membership to the group as the year went by.”



Panelists at UN Women-sponsored event at the 2016 Commission on the Status of Women examined the role of faith activists and faith-based organizations in implementing gender equality in Agenda 2030. In the center, third from right, is Bani Dugal of the Bahá’í International Community.



A side event at the 2016 CSW on “Engaging Faith Communities to implement the SDGs: Achieving Gender Justice and Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls” reflects one of many discussions at the UN at the intersection of faith and feminism. More than 20 side events addressing faith issues were held at the 2016 CSW.

For 2017, the Working Group planned to have more side events at the CSW — and it has submitted a new statement that suggests a series of concrete actions the international community can take to “challenge religious practices” that undermine women’s contributions to “vibrant” economies.

The suggestions include supporting “feminist faith leaders, theologians and faith-based organizations to challenge religious interpretations that undermine women’s economic empowerment” as well as urging UN agencies to develop “faith literacy” and to help feminist faith-based organizations “hold state machinery accountable for religious fundamentalism which undermines the implementation of ratified human rights treaties and conventions.”

Ms. Mangale said the Working Group also hopes to work in spaces like the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee, and the Human Rights Council. “Our goal is to show that there is no disconnect between women of faith and secular groups when it comes to human rights,” she said.

Support from UN agencies

UN agencies have given strong support to the new coalition. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has long dealt with the intersection of faith and feminism because of its

decades of work on female reproductive rights and related issues, said Azza Karam, a senior advisor on culture at the agency, and support for the new conversation has emerged naturally.

“I may not see eye to eye with my Islamic colleague on Sharia law as regards inheritance, but the fact of the matter is that we both think FGM [Female Genital Mutilation] is completely wrong. And we worked together,” said Dr. Karam.

UN Women has also been very supportive. At the 2016 CSW, for example, UN Women convened, with World YWCA, a well-attended discussion on religion and gender equality in relation to the implementation of Agenda 2030.

“We see faith-based organizations as a critical partner,” said UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka in opening remarks at the discussion. “We know that faith-based institutions have a role to play, in some cases sustaining that which makes patriarchy to thrive, or, where there is a progressive agenda, faith-based organizations play a critical role in challenging the prejudices, and therefore in changing the narrative.”

Omair Paul, the UN representative of Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), who is a member of the Working Group, said he believes the development of alternative narratives can play a critical role at the United Nations when “certain states invoke cultural relativism or other systems of religious law to justify pushing back

on women’s civil, economic, political, social or cultural rights.”

“One of the projects we are working on is the production of information graphics that could be disseminated to diplomats and others in negotiating rooms to equip them with an alternative narrative, so they have a better understanding of how religious arguments are used against women, and what the religions actually say.”

Origins of the Working Group

Developing such new narratives was one among many themes that were identified early on in a series of conversations on the intersection of religion and gender that were held at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community in New York in late 2014 and early 2015.

Co-sponsored with UN Women, UNFPA, and World YWCA, the series comprised four lunchtime events that sought to track the impact of religious messages on women and girls across the span of their lives. They drew a range of participants, including diplomats, UN agency officials, and representatives of civil society. Many participants later joined the Faith and Feminism Working Group.

At one of these meetings, Janet Karim, then the first secretary for social affairs of the Permanent Mission of Malawi to the UN, explained exactly how such new narratives can be created. She spoke from personal experience of the tensions she saw in Malawi some years before, when some religious groups sought to block new national laws promoting equality of women and men.

“Quotes from religious books such as the Bible were often quoted as proof that women were not meant to be leaders,” said Ms. Karim.

But, she said, they were able to provide their own narrative in support of equality. “When Jesus rose from the dead, the first people he met were women,” she said. “So that should show that God is fair.”

Review: Negotiating the SDGs

Negotiating, continued from page 16

One key to reaching this broader, more universal framework was the creation of new modes of working at the UN, the authors write. Specifically, this involved the creation of a so-called “open working group” (OWG) that allowed member states to participate in a fluid manner, instead of through fixed committees or negotiating blocks established along regional lines.

“Despite numerous meetings with regional groups organized by the Brazilian Ambassador, the different regions could not decide which countries should be nominated,” they write. “The number of countries wanting to participate vastly exceeded the number of seats allocated.”

“After six months of negotiations, which went nowhere, a new and creative format emerged: one seat could be shared by more than one country.” In addition, they note, the size of the OWG was expanded from 30 to 70 countries.

“With upwards of seventy countries participating,” they write, “the discussions did on occasion become very long and repetitive; nevertheless the format made for a truly cross-regional and indeed universal process.”

Another element in creating a broader agenda was the adoption of an inclusive approach that sought input from a wide range of actors, including not only UN agencies but also non-governmental organizations, business groups, municipal authorities, trade unions, scientists, and others, known collectively as “Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS).”

Among other things, they said, the co-chairs of the working group instituted a ground breaking practice where delegations would meet with stakeholders each morning before negotiating sessions.

There were numerous other forums for input from major groups and other stakeholders during the run-up to Agenda 2030’s adoption as well. Later in the process, for example, the

co-chairs held a series of “interactive dialogues” that brought diplomats and MGoS representatives together at the UN. And there were a number of informal events held outside the headquarters building.

The authors mention, for example, the Nexus Conference 2014, held at the University of North Carolina, which brought together negotiators, scientists and MGoS to discuss “integrated approaches” to the SDGs.

Another example of such informal contributions, although not mentioned in the book, was the series of more than two dozen monthly breakfast meetings held at the offices of the Bahá’í International Community in New York during the negotiations. These breakfasts brought together diplomats, UN officials, and civil society representatives in an off-the-record format that encouraged an open and frank exchange of ideas. These meetings have continued and are now addressing issues like monitoring and the implementation of the Agenda.

All put together, the authors write, the negotiating process behind Agenda 2030 came to “alter the traditional format of UN multilateral negotiations” in a manner that “truly changed the way in which member states engage with stakeholders on issues of such importance for the future of humanity.”

The authors speak from substantial experience. Mr. Dodds was executive director of the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future from 1992 to 2012. Ambassador Donoghue is Ireland’s Permanent Representative to the UN in New York and was co-chair of the OWG. And Ms. Leiva Roesch was a diplomat for the Permanent Mission of Guatemala to the UN during the negotiations and is now a Senior Policy Analyst at the International Peace Institute.

Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals is an important book for anyone interested in sustainable development — or anyone who wonders how UN negotiations work, and how future modes might be on the horizon as humanity increasingly faces complex global challenges.



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For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Bahá’í International Community and its work, please contact:

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Did the creation of Agenda 2030 forge a new way of engaging on global issues for humanity's future?

Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals

By Felix Dodds, Ambassador
David Donoghue, and
Jimena Leiva Roesch
Earthscan / Routledge
London and New York

IN BRIEF

- Three experts close to the negotiations on Agenda 2030 offer an authoritative look at the process that led to what some say is a “historic” and “transformative” global plan for development.
- Despite a “strong pushback” against expanding the Millennium Development Goals to include sustainable development, innovative working groups and the inclusion of global stakeholders led to a much broader set of development goals for the next 15 years, they say.

Even before it was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Agenda 2030 was widely talked about as being “historic” and, even, “transformative.”

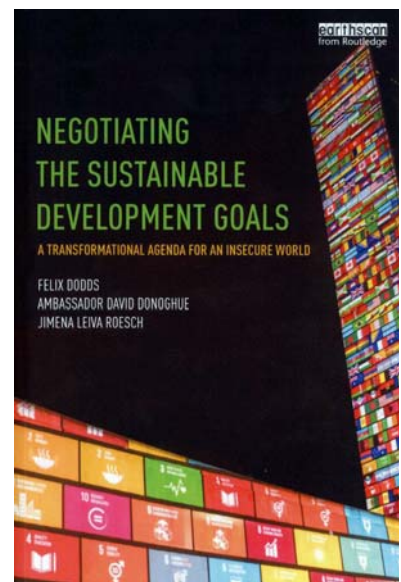
Built around 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), the 15-year global development plan seeks to reinvent the way the world approaches the great global challenges of our time as they relate to poverty eradication, gender equality, health, and environmental conservation.

In a new book, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A transformational agenda for an insecure world*, three key players in the Agenda's creation offer an intimate view of how the plan was put together — and, perhaps most interestingly, how the objections to its ambitious and all-encompassing framework were overcome.

Authors Felix Dodds, David Donoghue, and Jimena Leiva Roesch make clear that there was no guarantee of victory in efforts by the UN to create a new set of goals to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are often cited as among the UN's most successful anti-poverty programs.

Governments started to discuss in earnest what should replace the MDGs in 2012. And early on, the authors say, there was “strong pushback” against the idea of expanding the eight MDGs from their focus on poverty and health issues to the more encompassing idea of promoting sustainable development, a concept that includes a much broader notion that couples a push for overall economic growth with strong environmental protections.

“The SDGs were seen as a direct threat to countries that had invested in the MDGs — which meant most member states,” the authors write. “Developing countries feared that funding would be cut off if the agenda was going to be universally applicable. Bilateral aid agencies from many donor countries were not interested in changing the structure of their aid, which was largely based on the MDGs.”



But, in the end, the authors say, hard work and innovative new forms of multilateral negotiation won the day for those who favored a more universal and encompassing set of development goals, which would require efforts by all countries at all stages of development. The result was the adoption of 17 goals addressing a much larger palette of issues, such as climate change, patterns of consumption and production, and even some peace and governance issues.

Negotiating, continued on page 15