



# ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

## INSIDE

Newsletter of the Bahá’í  
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4

In New York, panelists stress the importance of interreligious dialogue.



7

In The Gambia, free computer courses lead to jobs and self-respect.



8

In Iran, a Bahá’í prisoner dies of unknown causes.



16

Review: *Perspectivas Para o Brasil* — essayists explore the connections between science, religion and development.

## Religions ponder new efforts to “educate” for sustainable development

Faith groups gear up for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development; how a seminar in Florida reflects the Bahá’í community’s global approach.

ORLANDO, Florida, USA – It’s become something of a cliché to speak about “thinking globally” but “acting locally” when you talk about large scale problems like environmental degradation and international development.

But the truth is that some of humanity’s biggest challenges can best be tackled step by step on an individual and community level. Governments can pass laws and create agencies, but unless individuals change their behavior, results are not always forthcoming.

One example of this is in the arena of sustainable development, which encompasses environmental protection, global economic development, and a visionary approach to the future. To work properly, sustainable development requires millions if not billions of people to change the way in which they approach everyday activities, whether recycling, using less energy, or making new choices as consumers and producers.

In an effort to promote such changes at the grassroots level, the United Nations recently launched a 10-year initiative to promote “education” for sustainable development. Known as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), the effort began in 2005 and runs until 2014.

A number of faith groups have embraced the concept of the Decade and begun to develop new approaches, with the view that religious belief offers a powerful tool for individual and social transformation. At various meetings and conferences, diverse groups from Buddhists to Zoroastrians have begun to exchange ideas, develop activity plans, and devise curricula aimed at advancing the process of education for sustainable development both within their communities and outside of them.

*DESD, continued on page 10*



A “World Café” discussion at an Orlando, Florida, seminar on education for sustainable development.

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## Education for Sustainable Development

In the face of urgent global problems like terrorism, HIV/AIDS, and severe poverty in Africa, it is sometimes hard to focus on the long term needs of humanity.

But with the launch in 2005 of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, there is an opportunity to rethink the manner in which we approach long range global challenges.

There are few issues more important to our collective future than sustainable development, a term which has over the years come to be understood as encompassing a whole range of issues that relate to the on-going success of humanity's stay on this planet.

These issues certainly include environmental conservation and the challenge of appropriate development — the two main planks of "sustainable development." But they also extend to the whole gamut of concerns relating to population and human consumption, human rights, women's advancement, food security, energy, industrial growth, urban planning — and even issues of peace and security.

All these things relate to the ability of humanity "to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," as sustainable development was defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987.

As with most good and important ideas, the real problem facing humanity today in terms of achieving sustainable development is how to motivate people to change underlying behaviors and activities that are problematic — in this case "unsustainable."

How, in other words, do we motivate people to use less energy, to contribute more to help alleviate poverty, undertake development that does not pollute or otherwise squander precious resources, and, ultimately, to make peace with each other?

Here is where the idea of a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) has a special role to play: in showing how various processes of education — which lie at the heart of promoting changes in human behavior — can be used on a global level to help turn things around.

In calling for the Decade in 2002, the UN General Assembly declared that "education is an indispensable element for achieving sustainable development." It called on governments, UN agencies and civil society to promote the Decade, with the goal of promoting and improving "the integration of education for sustainable development in their respective educational strategies and action plans..."

The call to civil society is especially important. While governments and international agencies can make top-level policy changes, pass new laws, and re-structure institutions, new social programs are ultimately effective only to the degree that real changes take place at the grassroots.

Put another way, social action inevitably begins with individual citizens. And citizen action, focused through civil society organizations, has proven in many cases to be the best way to achieve lasting change.

Gary Gardner, director of research at the Worldwatch Institute, recently wrote that religious people and institutions can make powerful contributions to promoting sustainable development.

Religions "shape people's worldviews, wield moral authority, have the ear of multitudes of adherents, often possess strong financial and institutional assets, and are strong generators of social capital, an asset in community building," wrote Mr. Gardner in a 2002 paper entitled "Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World." "All of these assets can be used to help build a socially just and environmentally sustainable world."

For Bahá'ís, the concept of sustainable development connects strongly with their religious beliefs. Bahá'u'lláh wrote more than 100 years ago that humanity has been created to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" — a statement that Bahá'ís understand as a clear mandate for sustainable development. The Bahá'í writings also stress the oneness and interdependence of humanity and nature. One of the hallmarks of the sustainable development paradigm is its emphasis on the interdependence of human society, economics, and the natural environment.

Bahá'ís also believe that the foundation for lasting social change lies with individual and community transformation. “Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men,” Bahá'u'lláh wrote. “This can best be achieved through pure and holy deeds, through a virtuous life and a goodly behavior.”

The Bahá'í writings also emphasize the importance of education as a means of spiritual advancement and social progress. “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh. “Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”

As the story on page one of this issue reports, Bahá'ís have begun to examine how they can contribute to the Decade, in particular by exploring how the moral and spiritual values that underpin sustainable development can best be integrated into a program of education for sustainable development.

Such a discussion of spiritual and moral values in education is much needed. The power of education as a tool for social progress has long been recognized. But too often educational systems have been structured so as to reinforce “unsustainable” values and goals.

Traditional educational systems have emphasized immediate material success and progress over long term thinking and moral action. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock-exchange market. We want to provide only such education as would enable the student to earn more. We hardly give any thought to the improvement of the character of the educated.”

With the call for a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the world has a chance to take a fresh look at the underlying role of education itself in creating new directions in society — and to test the possibilities for remolding educational systems so as to bring positive change.

Accordingly, as the world at large ponders how best to participate in the Decade, it would do well to consider how education itself can best be transformed so that it can contribute to the long term progress and prosperity of global human society. In that light, it will be important to ensure that the positive moral and spiritual values that are found in all religions are thoroughly integrated into the process.\*



*President Kessai Note of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, left, and his wife, Mary Note, before entering the Shrine of the Báb at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.*

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## President of the Marshall Islands visits the Bahá'í World Centre

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HAIFA, Israel — The president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kessai Note, and his wife, Mary Note, paid an official visit to the Bahá'í World Centre on 1 December 2005.

The president and first lady were welcomed by a member of the Universal House of Justice, Peter Khan, and his wife, Janet Khan. Also in the welcoming party were a counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre, Stephen Hall, and his wife, Dicy Hall.

Among those in the presidential entourage were the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Marshall Islands, Gerald Zackios, and his wife, and Bikini Atoll senator Tomaki Juda and his wife.

At a reception in the seat of the Universal House of Justice, Dr. Khan discussed with President Note the history of the Bahá'í community in the Marshall Islands and the contributions the Bahá'ís have made to development in that country.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the Marshall Islands was established in 1977. There are currently 13 Local Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'í Faith in the country.\*

## In New York, panelists stress importance of interreligious dialogue

The panel at the symposium on "Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Shown left to right: Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; Piet de Klerk, Netherlands' Ambassador at Large for Human Rights; and Felice Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights.



**N**EW YORK — Governments should fight increased religious intolerance around the world by promoting dialogue both between and within religious groups — and by ensuring that women and political leaders are involved in such dialogues.

Those were among the points made by a panel of experts on the topic of freedom of religion and belief at a two-hour symposium held at the Bahá'í International Community offices in New York on 25 October 2005.

Titled "Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," the panel was composed of Piet de Klerk, Netherlands' Ambassador at Large for Human Rights; Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and Felice Gaer, Director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights.

All three panelists stressed the importance of upholding the right to freedom of religion and belief, which is outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other UN treaties.

"Some say freedom of religion is the mother of all human rights," said Ambassador De Klerk, adding that he believes all human rights are indeed universal and interconnected.

Further, he said, "the degree to which freedom of religion or belief is upheld reflects the general human rights situation in a particular country."

Ambassador De Klerk said that while "classic" concern about government repression of religious freedom has not lost its importance, recent trends that have led to increased tensions and intolerance between religious groups themselves have given rise to new concerns over the right to religious freedom.

"In our globalized world, certain religions or believers feel more and more threatened than before," said Ambassador De Klerk, adding that this trend seems to have led to a rise in fundamentalism and accompanying clashes between man-made law and religious interpretations of divine law.

"Religious tension seems to be increased," he said. "First migration has increased and religions are less confined to one particular region than before. The second reason is that after the fall of the iron curtain, it has become more difficult to rally people around political ideologies. But religious ideology has not lost its influence."

Beyond strictly upholding laws that provide for religious freedom, Ambassador De Klerk said the best way for governments to deal with religious tension and intolerance

***A discussion at the Bahá'í International Community offices in New York stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue — especially when it includes women and politicians — as critical to fighting religious intolerance.***

is to promote interreligious dialogue, both within and between religious groups.

"Intrafaith and interfaith dialogue make it more difficult for extremists to encourage religious violence," said Ambassador De Klerk. "States should support these dialogues both morally and financially."

Ms. Jahangir agreed that interreligious dialogue is today an "essential" element for defusing religious tensions. In her visits as Special Rapporteur last year to three countries — Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and France — she likewise saw evidence of "renewed competition among religions and the fear that one religion is going to overtake the other."

But religious dialogue should not be held just among religious leaders, she said. "Dialogue would remain meaningless unless politicians are involved," Ms. Jahangir said. "More so, women, who remain on the fringes and are often the victims of religious intolerance."

She said for example one of the most contentious arenas between religious groups and others, including the state, is the area of family law. Sometimes religious interpretations of divine law conflict with principles of national and international law, she said, such as regarding the equality of women.

"I believe it is time now for politicians...to take a lead in the dialogue on how these tensions can be removed," said Ms. Jahangir. "Because some of it may be purely because of belief and some of it may be a jostling for power — and it is the jostling for power that must be addressed."

Ms. Jahangir also said that she has observed a relationship between religious freedom and development. "Where you have religious oppression," she said, "it makes poverty worse."

Ms. Gaer spoke about her experience as a member of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), established in 1998 to monitor the freedom of religion or belief outside the United States with reference to US foreign policy.

In her remarks, Ms. Gaer said she believes that some governments misapply the limitations on religious freedom that are specified in international treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

For example, while the ICCPR upholds the right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion," including the right to "manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching," it allows governments to curb the open expression of re-

ligious belief if "necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

Ms. Gaer said that many governments have unjustifiably taken this clause as a license to suppress minority religions.

In Saudi Arabia, she said, members of the USCIRF were told by government officials that the open expression of religion — such as the existence of non-Muslim houses of worship and religious symbols — must be restricted because "the Saudi people would not tolerate it and they might violently oppose the public expression of religion by non-Muslims."

"If this is accurate," she said, "then the remedy must not lie in the suppression of religious expression but in the teaching of tolerance."

Ms. Gaer said, likewise, that during a visit to Egypt in which the USCIRF investigated concerns over the oppression of Coptic Christians, Jews, Bahá'ís and certain "unorthodox Muslims" in the summer of 2004, members of the USCIRF were told by government officials that any such restrictions were required to protect public order.

However, she said, when USCIRF pressed Egyptian officials for evidence that such groups posed a threat to public order, they offered unsupported arguments.

"They said the Bahá'ís had engaged in political activity and that the community participated in immoral acts," said Ms. Gaer. "But they had no facts to back up their denunciations in formal meetings. And when we pointed that out to them, it made absolutely no difference to those officials, who continued in other meetings where the very same arguments were made."

Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, acted as moderator for the panel. She said the Community sponsored the event "to stimulate discussion and thinking about the challenges associated with the implementation and protection" of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

"Against the backdrop of accelerating processes of globalization, the search for meaning, rootedness, and community is manifesting itself in diverse expressions of worship and belief," she said.

"At the same time, we witness persistent intolerance and discrimination based on religion and belief, the proliferation of violence and hatred in the name of religion, and religious extremism."\*



Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

***"It is time now for politicians...to take a lead in the dialogue on how these tensions can be removed. Because some of it may be purely because of belief and some of it may be a jostling for power — and it is the jostling for power that must be addressed."***

**Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

## In Tunisia, the World Summit on the Information Society sets global goals

**T**UNIS, Tunisia — Declaring that the free flow of information and ideas can greatly strengthen social and economic development, governments at the World Summit on the Information Society here approved a global agenda for making information and communications technologies more open, accessible, and available.

“We recognize that freedom of expression and the free flow of information, ideas, and knowledge, are essential for the Information Society and beneficial to development,” said world leaders in one of the Summit’s two main outcome documents.

Held in this North African capital on 16-18 November 2005, the Tunis Summit was the second part of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and its focus was on acting to ensure access and openness in information and communications technologies, or ICTs.

The Summit’s first part was held 10-12 December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland. It focused on making a declaration of principles and plan of action to guide humanity’s progress towards a global “information society,” which many people see as an inevitable outcome of the revolution that comes with new technologies like the personal computer and the Internet.

In that context, both sessions of the WSIS as a whole had a huge symbolic value, in that it brought into the international mainstream the idea that new information and communications technologies have a huge potential for development.

“The WSIS reflects a dawning recognition by the world community that information technology is an integral part of social and economic development — and that it can in fact speed up and make more efficient such development,” said Laina Raveendran Greene, who represented the Bahá’í International Community at the Tunis Summit.

“ICT is a tool that cuts across all issue areas and can be used to improve human rights, gender equality, the environment, education, health, the protection of indig-

enous cultures, and so on,” said Ms. Raveendran Greene.

### High level of participation

The degree of interest in ICTs for development and as an increasingly important feature of global society was reflected in the high level of participation by governments and civil society in the Tunis Summit.

According to the United Nations, 19,401 people participated in the event, representing 174 national delegations, 92 international organization (like UNESCO or UNICEF), 606 non-governmental organizations, 226 business entities, and 642 media outlets. These totals rank with some of the best-attended UN world conferences of the 1990s.

“Our meeting today represents a summit for the ‘global village’ created by the new virtual realities, whose networks have been established, and whose components have been connected, through information and communication technologies,” said Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in opening remarks on 16 November.

Other speakers likewise pointed to the growing impact of new technologies.

“ICTs are changing our society in ways which are as fundamental as the changes wrought by steam engines in the 19th Century or motor cars in the 20th Century,” said Yoshio Utsumi, the secretary general of the International Telecommunications Union, the UN agency that served as the Summit’s secretariat. “As those machines did, ICTs help us to be more productive and efficient than ever before in order to fulfill our desire for a better life.”

Several hundred workshops, panel discussions, and other side events were held in parallel with the main Summit meeting, hosted by UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, technical bodies, and corporate representatives.

Bahá’í representatives were directly involved in two such events specifically: a presentation on “Corporate Social Responsibility-

*WSIS, continued on page 14*

*“The WSIS reflects a dawning recognition by the world community that information technology is an integral part of social and economic development — and that it can in fact speed up and make more efficient such development.”*

– Laina Raveendran Greene, Bahá’í International Community



*Participants in the advanced computer course organized by the Bahá'ís of The Gambia use donated machines at the Banjul Bahá'í center, where the courses are held.*

## In The Gambia, free computer courses lead to jobs and self-respect

**B**ANJUL, The Gambia — A graduation ceremony last month has boosted the number of computer graduates from classes offered free by the local Bahá'í community to more than 900.

Since 1998, the Bahá'ís have arranged the classes to help people who cannot otherwise obtain computer skills to get a job.

Students have ranged from teenagers to the middle-aged, and include both men and women, said local Bahá'í spokesman Faramarz Shams.

Many graduates use their newly-gained skills in jobs that they have obtained after completing the courses, Mr. Shams said.

"The students come from the Islamic, Christian, and Bahá'í communities and include teachers, students, and business people," he said.

The courses, offered at basic and advanced levels, usually involve two sessions of two hours per week for three months. The teachers are Gambian Bahá'ís and Bahá'í youth volunteers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

The country's only television station

and both its major newspapers regularly cover the graduation ceremonies. On 18 December 2005, 56 students received their graduation certificates.

In a speech at the ceremony, one of the graduates, Fatou Cham, 24, expressed her gratitude for the courses.

"I would like to thank the entire Bahá'í community for their tireless efforts to disseminate knowledge in The Gambia at no cost," said Ms. Cham, a Muslim.

"I can remember back in 2000 when I attended the basic Bahá'í computer training I could not even move a mouse, but after the course I built up a lot of interest in computing," she said.

"I hope that other institutions will emulate (the Bahá'í) efforts and empower people with more 'IT' knowledge."

The computers used in the training were donated by Bahá'ís of The Gambia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Classes were initially held in a rental property but they have moved to a specially designed room in the new national Bahá'í centre, which opened last year.\*

*"The students come from the Islamic, Christian, and Bahá'í communities and include teachers, students, and business people."*

– Faramarz Shams

## United Nations again expresses concern over human rights in Iran; a Bahá'í prisoner dies of unknown causes

*Just three days before it is learned that an innocent Bahá'í died of unknown causes in an Iranian prison cell, the United Nations passes its 18th resolution expressing concern over human rights in Iran.*

UNITED NATIONS — For the 18th time since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly has passed a resolution expressing “serious concern” over the human rights situation in Iran, also making specific mention of the ongoing persecution of the Bahá'í community there.

The resolution passed on 16 December 2005, a few days before news emerged from Iran that a Bahá'í who had been wrongly jailed for 10 years died of unknown causes in his prison cell.

Mr. Dhabihu'llah Mahrami, 59, was held in a government prison in Yazd under harsh physical conditions at the time of his death, which occurred on 15 December 2005 and became known on 19 December 2005.

Mr. Mahrami's death comes amidst ominous signs that a new wave of persecutions of Bahá'ís has begun. This year so far, at least 59 Bahá'ís have been arrested, detained or imprisoned, a figure up sharply from the last several years.

As well, Bahá'í students continue to be deprived of access to higher education — a fact which has begun to draw the notice of educators around the world. In December, for example, some 15 top French academics published a letter in *Le Monde* expressing concern about Iran's Bahá'í youth.

The UN resolution, which had been put forward by Canada and co-sponsored by 46 countries including Australia, the European Union, and the United States, passed by a vote of 75 to 50. It took note of the increasing arrests and other forms of discrimination against Iranian Bahá'ís — including the denial of access to higher education.

Specifically, the resolution noted the “escalation and increased frequency of discrimination and other human rights violations against the Bahá'í[s], including cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, the denial of freedom of religion or of publicly carrying out communal affairs, the disregard of property rights, the destruction of sites of reli-

gious importance, the suspension of social, educational and community-related activities and the denial of access to higher education, employment, pensions, adequate housing and other benefits....”

Among other things, the UN General Assembly called on Iran to “eliminate, in law or in practice, all forms of discrimination based on religious, ethnic or linguistic grounds, and other human rights violations against minorities, including Arabs, Kurds, Baluchi, Christians, Jews, Sunni Muslims and the Bahá'í[s]....”

The resolution also encourages various agencies of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to continue to work to improve the human rights situation in Iran, and at the same time it calls on the government of Iran to cooperate with these agencies.

Ms. Bani Dugal, principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, said the worldwide Bahá'í community is thankful for the support of the international community in expressing its concern about human rights in Iran.

“It has been a year when human rights violations against Bahá'ís and other groups in Iran have strikingly worsened, and the scrutiny and support of the international community remains virtually the only tool for the protection of innocent people in Iran,” said Ms. Dugal.

**“A very difficult year...”**

“For Bahá'ís, who are persecuted solely for their religious beliefs, it has been a very difficult year in Iran,” added Ms. Dugal.

“The worldwide Bahá'í community mourns deeply the passing of Mr. Mahrami, who was unjustly held for a decade on trumped-up charges that manifestly violated his right to freedom of religion and belief,” said Ms. Dugal.

Arrested in 1995 in Yazd on charges of apostasy, Mr. Mahrami was initially sentenced to death. His sentence was later commuted



to life imprisonment after an international outcry and widespread media attention.

"While the cause of his death is not known, Mr. Mahrami had no known health concerns," said Ms. Dugal.

"We also know that Mr. Mahrami was forced to perform arduous physical labor and that he had received death threats on a number of occasions.

"In this light, there should be no doubt that the Iranian authorities bear manifest responsibility for the death of this innocent man, whose only crime was his belief in the Bahá'í Faith," said Ms. Dugal.

Born in 1946, Mr. Mahrami served in the civil service but at the time of his arrest was making a living installing venetian blinds, having been summarily fired from his job like thousands of other Bahá'ís in the years following the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Although Iranian officials have asserted that Mr. Mahrami was guilty of spying for Israel, court records clearly indicate that he was tried and sentenced solely on the charge of being an "apostate," a crime which is punishable by death under traditional Islamic law.

Although Mr. Mahrami was a lifelong Bahá'í, the apostasy charge apparently came about because a civil service colleague, in an effort to prevent Mr. Mahrami from losing his job, submitted to a newspaper an article stating that he had converted to Islam.

When it later became clear to Iranian authorities that Mr. Mahrami remained a member of the Bahá'í community, they arrested him and charged him with apostasy for allegedly converting from Islam to the Bahá'í Faith. On 2 January 1996, he was sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court, a conviction that was later upheld by the Iranian Supreme Court.

The death sentence against Mr. Mahrami stirred an international outcry. The European Parliament, for example, passed a resolution on human rights abuses in Iran, making reference to Mr. Mahrami's case. The governments of Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States also registered objections.

There was also significant media coverage of the case, in *Le Monde* and *Liberation* in France, as well as reports by the BBC, Reuters, and Agence France Presse.

Although the authorities did not publicly bow to international pressure calling for Mr. Mahrami's release, in December 1999 they took the occasion of the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad to declare

an amnesty and commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

Regarding the increase in arrests, Ms. Dugal said that the majority of those Bahá'ís who have been arrested have been released, apparently part of a campaign of "revolving door" arrests designed to intimidate Iranian Bahá'ís. As of this writing, two Bahá'ís remain in prison in Iran.

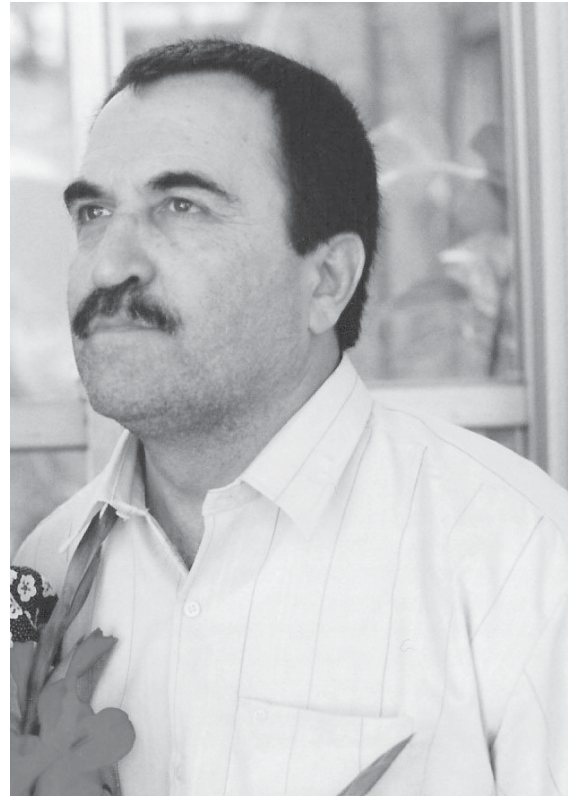
Ms. Dugal said that Bahá'ís also face a wide and growing range of severely oppressive measures, including continued restrictions on religious assembly, the confiscation and destruction of holy sites, and various economic restrictions.

### Appeal by Nobel laureates

On 14 December 2005, 15 top French intellectuals and scientists — including three Nobel prize winners — published an open letter in the French newspaper *Le Monde* calling on the Iranian government to open the doors of its universities to Bahá'ís.

"Every human has a right to know, no matter his origins," they wrote. "We support these youth who thirst for knowledge. We are asking the Iranian government to welcome, in every university of the country, all the youth who have successfully passed the entrance exam, without exception—so that the cultural cleansing may finally stop."

The letter was signed by, among others, Rosine Haguenaer, director of research at CNRS [National Center of Scientific Research] in biology; Professor Jean-Pierre Vernant, historian, professor at Collège au France; Pascal Lederer, director of research at CNRS, physicist; Professor Pierre Gilles De Gennes, professor at Collège de France, Nobel Prize in physics; Miguel Angel Estrella, pianist, ambassador to UNESCO; Professor Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, professor at Collège au France, Nobel Prize in physics; and Professor François Jacob, professor at Collège au France, Nobel Prize in medicine.\*



Mr. Dhabihu'llah Mahrami, 59, was held in a government prison in Yazd under harsh physical conditions at the time of his death, of unknown causes.

*"We also know that Mr. Mahrami was forced to perform arduous physical labor and that he had received death threats on a number of occasions....there should be no doubt that the Iranian authorities bear manifest responsibility for the death of this innocent man."*

— Bani Dugal, Bahá'í International Community

## Religions ponder new efforts to “educate” for sustainable development

During the opening session of the seminar on “Education for Sustainable Development: The Spiritual Dimension” in Orlando, Florida, participants introduced themselves. Conducted in a normally drab hotel conference room, seminar organizers had redecorated the space with wall posters and a “green” centerpiece.



*DESD, continued from page one*

“This is a new way of thinking for many people in the ‘traditional’ education for sustainable development community, which has tended to be composed of people in higher education and focused on curriculum development,” said Steve Cochran, who currently serves as “Interim Steward” of the United States Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

“The very notion of coming from the personal and intimate level of one’s faith and building outward from there,” added Mr. Cochran, “is one of the most effective ways to get people engaged.”

In the Bahá’í community, the direction and scope of this effort was recently reflected at a two-day seminar held in December 2005 in this Florida resort city. Titled “Education for Sustainable Development: The Spiritual Dimension,” the seminar drew some 50 participants from 10 countries, and featured a number of innovative brainstorming exercises designed to stimulate creative thinking and new approaches.

Using innovative group process method-

ologies such as “World Café” and “Open Space Technology,” the seminar sought to lead participants through a collective exploration of how Bahá’í communities around the world could increase awareness of the need for sustainable development and better incorporate its concepts into their activities.

### Snapshot of activities

The result was not only a proliferation of new ideas, which participants vowed to take back to their local communities, but also a snapshot of the kinds of education for sustainable development efforts that members of the worldwide Bahá’í community are already engaged in. These projects include:

- In Australia, an effort to include environmental awareness in a national curriculum of Bahá’í education; another component was the sponsorship of an “ecological camp” for junior youth in September 2005.

- In Canada, Bahá’ís are involved in an interfaith initiative called “Renewing the Sacred Balance,” which seeks to build support for The One Tonne Challenge, a government-led initiative that aims for each Ca-

*“The very notion of coming from the personal and intimate level of one’s faith and building outward from there is one of the most effective ways to get people engaged.”*

– Steve Cochran, US Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

nadian to reduce his or her contributions to greenhouse gas emissions by one ton.

- In Haiti, a Bahá'í couple has founded a community-based NGO to clean up a local river and organize other development activities.

- In Swaziland, educators are working to include sustainable development concepts in the curriculum of Bahá'í schools in Mbabane, which include a preschool, a primary school, and the highly regarded Setsembiso Sebunye High School.

- In the United States, Bahá'ís have created an on-line learning course entitled “Sustainable Development and the Prosperity of Humankind”; as well, the community's semi-monthly children's magazine, *Brilliant Star*, has undertaken to publish a series of articles on sustainable development.

“As Bahá'ís, we see the idea of education for sustainable development in a long term perspective, and we want to make a contribution in our own way, wherever we are in our communities, certainly at the national level but also at the local level,” said Peter Adriance, a board member of the International Environment Forum (IEF), a Bahá'í-inspired NGO that co-organized the Orlando seminar.

## Led by UNESCO

The idea of a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was proposed by the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, and then officially proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in December that year. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been designated as the lead agency for the Decade's promotion.

According to UNESCO, the overall goal of the Decade is to “integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.” The idea is to “encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all.”

The UNESCO plan for reaching these goals calls for partnership not only with UN agencies and national governments, but also with a full range of civil society organizations, including businesses, academic institutions, community groups — and faith-based organizations.

Around the world, a number of religious groups have begun to discuss how to participate in the Decade. In recent years, religious organizations have become major play-

ers in the promotion of sustainable development, going back to the World Wide Fund for Nature's sponsorship of an interfaith gathering on conservation at Assisi, Italy, in 1987, and the subsequent founding of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation in 1995.

“Many faith communities are already well practiced in terms of environmental protection and concern,” said Mr. Adriance, who is also a member of the executive team of the US Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and also the US Bahá'í community's NGO liaison. “So now it is a matter of making the transition to the larger question of sustainability — and how to promote it through education.

“Faith communities recognize the moral dimension of the need to achieve sustainability,” Mr. Adriance continued. “The sacred writings of the world's religions are a powerful source of motivation for many people, and an essential ingredient in making the transition to sustainability.

“Without the spiritual principles brought by religion, how are we going to generate the political will to make the necessary changes in behavior? Religion has a key role to play in motivating people to contribute to the ongoing well-being of humanity, instead of just to their own immediate comfort,” said Mr. Adriance.

According to Mr. Adriance and others, recent efforts by faith-based organizations to respond to the Decade include a wide range of efforts by religious groups to begin to incorporate education for sustainable development in their curricula, outreach, and other activities.

Last April, to cite but one example, at the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, a group of faith-based NGOs sponsored a side event entitled “Engaging Faith Communities in the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.” Among those sponsoring or participating in the event were individuals representing the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

## Brainstorming in Orlando

The International Environment Forum saw the Orlando seminar as part of the start of a decade-long process by which Bahá'í organizations and agencies might draw on their collective experience to devise a distinctly Bahá'í approach to how education for sustainable development might be best developed and promoted. The seminar was

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– Peter Adriance,  
NGO Liaison, Bahá'í  
community of the  
United States



Participants in the Orlando seminar on “Education for Sustainable Development: The Spiritual Dimension” are shown under posters showing some of the principles of the “Open Space” exercise. The seminar drew some 50 participants from 10 countries.

organized by IEF in collaboration with Educators for Social and Economic Development, another Bahá’í-inspired NGO, and the US Partnership for the DESD. The seminar was sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States.

In many respects, the Orlando seminar with its emphasis on generating new ideas typifies the early phase of activity as faith groups approach the goals of the Decade.

“In recent years, it has become apparent that you can’t talk about protecting the environment in isolation of factors like poverty and social disintegration and so forth,” said Mr. Adriance. “And sustainable development education is about making connections between these issues and re-framing how we think about the impact that each of us has on the welfare of society as a whole.”

To that end, organizers created an event that was very much designed to stimulate an interchange of ideas between participants, using a combination of new methods for idea generation along with the principles of Bahá’í consultation, a group decision-making tool.

One session, for example, used the “World Café” methodology, a small-group discussion format created by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs of the Massachusetts Institute for Technology that is designed to create meaningful and in-depth conversations about challenging topics.

Another session made use of “Open Space” technology, a method created by Harrison Owen that uses loosely regulated parallel working sessions organized around a central theme of strategic importance as a

means to create new agendas for action.

These processes spawned a number of discussion groups on topics such as “the integration of business, sustainable development and spirituality,” “using film and television to encourage learning and training in rural communities,” the “moral dimension of sustainability,” “gender equality and sustainable development,” and “using the arts to promote peace and sustainable development.”

One discussion group explored possible responses to the UN Decade by Bahá’í-inspired schools, of which there are several hundred worldwide. Among other things, the group discussed establishing a network to exchange information on existing initiatives, such as the Ray Myer Australian Teacher Training Program, the South African EcoSchools Program, and the Junior Youth Animator Program. The group also discussed the need to form partnerships with other faith-based schools and programs on ESD.

### Gender issues discussed

The group on gender equality and sustainable development concluded, among other things, that gender equality needs to be presented as a moral imperative; that the education of boys and men for gender equality should be integrated into curricula on a variety of subjects; and that the moral obligations to act sustainably within marriage should be explored.

The group discussing “the moral dimension of sustainability” concluded that “sustainability boils down to decisions that individuals make, especially those in positions of power, that affect the lives of others.” In its summary report, the group suggested that individuals must learn to “see the relationship between our personal choices and the impact on the environment, for example where we buy our clothes, recycling, etc.,” and that educational processes towards this must contain an understanding of life’s spiritual dimension if they are to be effective in “shifting the foundations of society.”

The seminar was held in conjunction with the 13th annual Bahá’í Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas, held here 15-18 December 2005. The larger event, which this year took the theme “Ordinary People, Extraordinary Service,” drew more than 700 people from 25 countries. Sponsored by the Orlando-based Rabbani Trust, the annual event focuses on talks and workshops designed to help individuals and commu-

nities become involved in projects aimed at serving humanity at large.

Participants in the ESD seminar came from Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Haiti, New Zealand, Swaziland, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. For the most part, they came as volunteers, traveling on their own money and time. And many said in the closing session that they found great inspiration in the ideas that were discussed, and that they hope to apply them in projects and activities in their home countries.

"The conversations here have been very valuable," said Bruce Saunders, the national advisor for social and economic development for the Bahá'í community of Australia. "It has really crystallized certain points of focus for my work for the next year. Also, the focus on spiritual principles has been just brilliant."

Joell Vanderwagen, a writer, planning con-

sultant, and environmental advocate from Canada, said "I've been totally gratified by the process of going through the last couple of days. It is really cutting edge. I've been able to connect with kindred spirits and develop certain ideas and share certain ideas with people which couldn't have happened if it had been a formally planned, top-down agenda."

Mr. Cochran of the US Partnership, who is not a Bahá'í and who came to lead the group through the "Open Space" session, said he was impressed with the degree to which participants had a desire not just to learn theory but to take what they had learned into action.

"People were primed for this. Nobody was assigned to come here, or just showed up by accident," said Mr. Cochran. "Here it seems there is a real desire to go forth and make sustainable development a foundation of living their faith." \*

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*In Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, representatives of nine religious communities offered prayers on the International Day of Peace at a gathering organized by the Bahá'í community of Tanzania. Held 21 September 2005, the event was attended by Chief Matange, shown above, second from right, representing an African traditional religion. Other dignitaries in attendance included Eshila Maravanyika, a representative of the United Nations Information Center in Tanzania, and Dr. Navruz Lakhani, a representative from the Aga Khan Council.*

*“Now ICTs are being seen not as a luxury item but as something that can be used to more quickly scale up projects for health and education....”*

– Laina Raveendran Greene, Bahá’í International Community

ity” by the European Bahá’í Business Forum and a workshop on the contribution of the information society to a culture of peace, held by the NGO Caucus on Values and Ethics, of which the Bahá’í International Community is an active member.

“At the Tunis Summit in particular, every country presented case studies of how the Internet and ICTs have impacted their countries,” said Ms. Raveendran Greene, who participated in the Values and Ethics Caucus event.

“In the past, countries might have said: ‘We need to build more schools,’ only to realize they don’t have enough books or teachers. But now they are realizing how they can use ICTs to make schools more effective by giving them access to books and libraries and teachers that are located elsewhere.

“Now ICTs are being seen not as a luxury item but as something that can be used to more quickly scale up projects for health and education and so on,” said Ms. Raveendran Greene.

Beyond the general discussion of the importance of ICTs for development, the Summit addressed three key issues that dominated the preparatory process in the lead-up to the Tunis: Internet governance, financ-

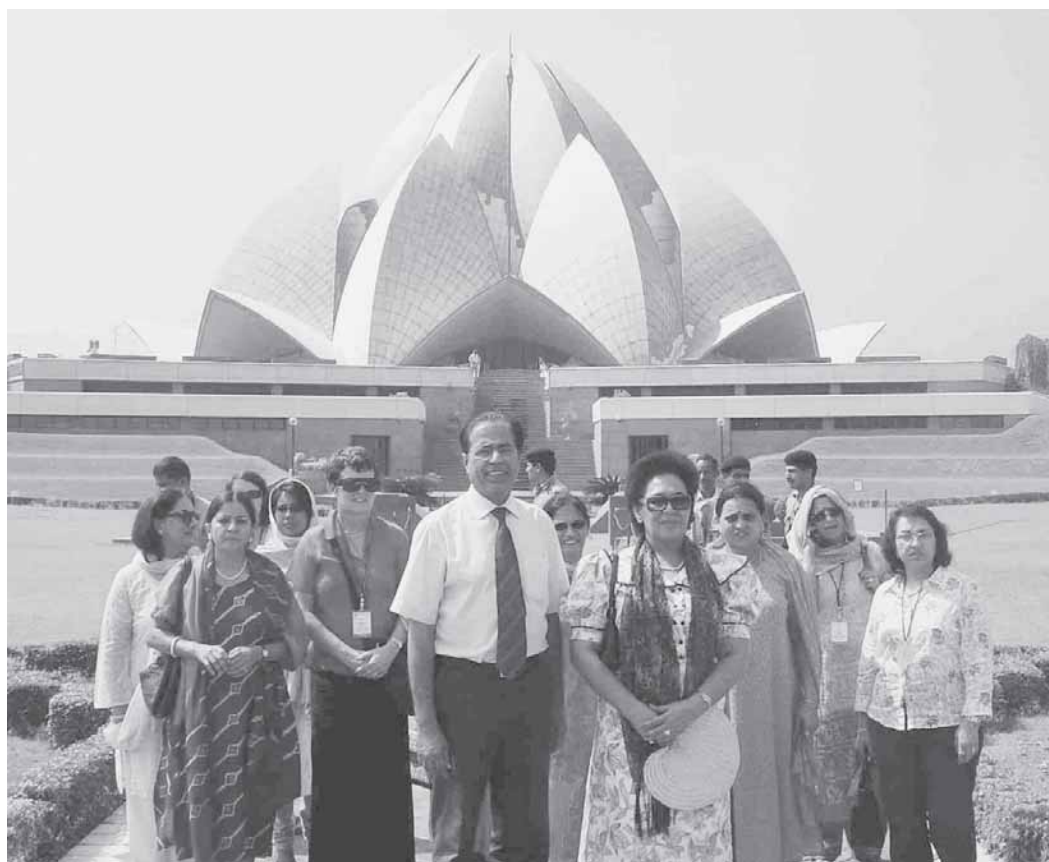
ing strategies to bridge the “digital divide,” and implementation mechanisms for the Action Plan developed in Geneva.

In the area of Internet governance, the Tunis Summit created a new non-binding “Internet Governance Forum” (IGF), to be convened by the UN Secretary-General, to foster and enable multi-stakeholder dialogue on public policy and development issues.

Designed to provide a platform for discussion of crosscutting public policy issues not adequately addressed by current mechanisms, the Forum will not however replace the role currently held by existing Internet governance institutions, such as the quasi-independent organization that manages domain names, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

“This represents a major compromise,” said Ms. Raveendran Greene, who is also a specialist in field of telecommunications and ICT. “There were some countries who were not happy with what they perceived as United States control of ICANN, and who talked of creating an alternative Internet. But the whole power of the Internet is that it is one entity, enabling people to communicate anywhere. This preserves that, and gives the world a new forum for coordination and consultation on the Internet.”\*

At right, the First Lady of Fiji, Leba Qarase, and her entourage are shown during a visit to the Bahá’í House of Worship in New Delhi on 10 October 2005. Escorting the First Lady, at front with hat, was Shatrughun Jiwnani, the Temple’s public relations general manager, in white shirt and tie.



## Perspectivas Para O Brazil

*Review, continued from page 16*

the “interaction between the spiritual and the material” that offers the greatest potential for making long term change.

“It’s not enough to own an automobile; one must know how to drive it,” writes Congressman Camargo, suggesting by analogy that a better understanding of humanity’s spiritual nature can put development participants in the “driver’s seat.”

Feminist Guacira Cesar de Oliveira likewise upholds the need for a more “spiritual,” values-driven approach to development. Ms. Oliveira, a sociologist and member of the Brasília-based Feminist Center for Studies and Advisory Services, traces her own evolution from a “militant Communist” to someone who now sees herself as a “spiritualistic person.”

Communism, she writes, has faded, but “justice has remained within a spiritualistic conception, within a reality that surpasses one’s own experience, that goes beyond our own rationality. So one rationalized one’s possibility to transform the world. In a more spiritualistic conception, the future belongs to God,” Ms. Oliveira writes.

Roberto Crema, psychologist, anthropologist and vice rector of the REDE UNIPAZ network, writes that a materialistic assumption has long governed our understanding of development. But that conception — “one that proposes that the human being is a naked ape” and which sees development as “material development” that “can bring us benefits that are also material” — must be augmented by two other assumptions, which are that “the human being is not just any matter, he is informed matter” and that “the human being is soma, force, psyche, soul and light; he is consciousness of consciousness.”

Maria de Lourdes Siqueira, a professor of anthropology and researcher at Universidade Federal da Bahia, writes that in Brazil, “like in many other countries, the color of poverty is black...”

“This ‘legacy of skin color’ cannot be denied or ignored when we attempt to propose a reconsideration of the central elements of the paradigm of human development,” writes Dr. Siqueira, saying that efforts must be made to develop a “new way of looking” at others that reinforces the “essential nobility of every human being.”

“For the vast majority of mankind, nature has a spiritual dimension,” writes Dr.

Siqueira. “It is of fundamental importance to comprehend that within every human being there exists a basic urge crying for transcendence, something that brings us to understand that the quality of human relationships, whether racial, interethnic or interpersonal, or among peoples and nations, needs to be improved.

“It is human values that constitute the basis of a process of transformation in which there is promotion of equality, of citizenship responsibility, of learning to live with differences and of development, which are qualities needed for community life,” Dr. Siqueira continues. “From a perspective of human and social development, they emerge from the indigenous and black populations of the American continent, and likewise in the different traditions and perceptions of Africa, Asia and Australasia. Our challenge is to learn from these groups the values they bring as a contribution to this process.”

Other essayists likewise made reference to Brazil’s indigenous peoples. Rosângela Azevedo Corrêa, a professor of environmental education and human ecology at the Universidade de Brasília School of Education, for example drew a sharp contrast between indigenous spirituality and Western secularism. Indigenous people, she wrote, are “‘naturally’ immersed in the natural world, seeing themselves like the plants and animals with which they live in practice and symbolically” while Western man sees relationships largely in terms of “the production of goods from nature.”

Dr. Corrêa said she believes that the “bells are tolling for materialistic realism” and the world is moving towards a philosophy that is “holistic, ecological and spiritual.”

Other contributors include Claudia Costin, Secretary of Culture of the State of São Paulo; Carlos Alberto Emediato, coordinator of Global Network for Peace Education; Joaquim de Almeida Mendes, the former Dean of Administration and Vice-Dean Pro Tempore at the Universidade do Estado da Bahia; and Mônica de Oliveira Nunes, an anthropologist at the Universidade Federal da Bahia. As well, an essay was contributed by the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) in Colombia. Another essay, by Farzam Arbab, currently a member of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, was published from the book *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market*.\*

*“For the vast majority of mankind, nature has a spiritual dimension. It is of fundamental importance to comprehend that within every human being there exists a basic urge crying for transcendence, something that brings us to understand that the quality of human relationships, whether racial, interethnic or interpersonal, or among peoples and nations, needs to be improved.”*

—Maria de Lourdes Siqueira

## A view from the South

For anyone studying trends in the theory of social and economic development, there can be little doubt that some of the most important thinking is today being done at the intersection of science and religion.

This new approach comes because the so-called “Western” development paradigm, with its focus on big projects, monetary incentives, and top-down knowledge, has generally failed.

In the search for alternatives, development practitioners and theorists are increasingly realizing that the realm of values, spirituality and religion must be considered if new efforts in development are to succeed.

Another important stream of thought calls for greater participation by the subjects of development in the formulation of development theories — a viewpoint known as “Southern” because most global development work takes place in the southern hemisphere.

These two streams come together in a new book, *Ciência, Religião e Desenvolvimento: Perspectivas Para o Brasil* (Science, Religion and Development: Perspectives for Brazil) — and the result is illuminating. Published by Editora Planeta Paz in Brasília, and currently available only in Portuguese, *Perspectivas Para o Brasil* contributes greatly to the overall discourse on how these new viewpoints — spiritual and southern — can be integrated into a new development paradigm.

Edited by Iradj Roberto Eghrari, the book is a collection of essays written by prominent Brazilian politicians, activists, academics and development practitioners in response to a Bahá’í-inspired initiative to stimulate a new discourse on “Science, Religion and Development.”

That initiative, launched in New Delhi in 2000 by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity generated a paper, “Science, Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations,” which in turn was offered to the essayists as a point of reflection.

Despite considerable diversity among the essayists, the majority of whom are not identified with any particular religion, they found agreement with the idea that the intersecting realms of science and religion cannot be ignored in development.

The New Delhi paper focused on the idea that the “international development agenda has for the most part ignored the fact that the great majority of the world’s peoples do not view themselves simply as material beings..., but rather as moral beings concerned with spiritual awareness and purpose. It has thus become evident that the mainly economic and material criteria now guiding development activity must be broadened to include those spiritual aspirations that animate human nature.”

This theme clearly found a resonance



among the essayists in *Perspectivas*.

Affonso Camargo, a federal congressman from Curitiba, for example, states that “the great discovery of the twenty-first century will be the perception that the religious question is an energy issue; that we are all, in one way or another, illuminated...”

Perhaps, he adds, the “great majority of people are unaware of our discourse on science and religion working together toward development. But there is in society a yearning for change.” And it is in understanding

*Review, continued on page 15*

Ciência, Religião e  
Desenvolvimento:  
Perspectivas Para  
o Brasil

Edited by Iradj  
Roberto Eghrari

Editora Planeta  
Paz

Brasília, Brazil