

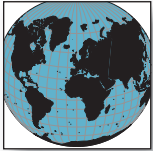


ONE COUNTRY

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

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Newsletter of the Bahá’í
International Community
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In Hungary, empowering Roma mothers to break the cycle of illiteracy

A Bahá’í-inspired project aims to help mothers overcome their fears of reading by encouraging them to read and tell stories to their children, creating a culture of reading at home.



A group of mothers read “Franklin Knows” to their children in a weekly meeting in Jasz Arokszaslas.

THE JASZSAG REGION, Hungary — Before she started studying with the MESÉD Project, Agi Racz was ashamed of the fact that she could not read — and afraid to try to learn how. “At first I had doubts, fears,” said Ms. Racz, a mother of four and a member of the Roma ethnic minority.

But with the encouragement of the MESÉD literacy project volunteers and other participants, she overcame her anxieties.

“I felt good with my friends, and it helped me to get over my feelings of shame,” she said. “If someone couldn’t read she got encouragement from the others. They said, ‘Never mind, go on.’ I realized that I can do it, that they won’t laugh at me.”

Ms. Racz is one of some 40 participants in the MESÉD project, which was started by the Bahá’í community of Hungary in 2003 with the goal of teaching reading and writing to disadvantaged Roma women.

Currently operating in eight towns and cities, the project is distinctive for its use of storytelling in the promotion of literacy. The word MESÉD is an acronym for “Meselo Edes Anyak,” which means “storytelling mothers.”

The project aims to help Roma mothers to overcome their fears of reading by encouraging them to read and tell stories to their children — thereby not only giving them encouragement in the path to literacy, but also to creating a culture of reading at home — and so help break the cycle of illiteracy between generations.

“Many of the Roma women lack basic skills in reading and/or the confidence to read aloud,” said Furugh Switzer, the director of the project. “They usually become mothers at an early

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Freedom of religion and the battle against extremism

Although it has often been relegated to a second-class status among human rights concerns, the issue of freedom of religion or belief today stands at the center of many of our most pressing global challenges.

Successful social and economic development, for example, is greatly influenced by the religious beliefs of its participants. Such beliefs impact key factors in the development process, such as individual motivation, community cohesion, and women's participation — and the right to freedom of religion or belief is accordingly central to the development process.

Experts are also increasingly making connections between religious freedom and other fundamental rights — such as freedom of expression and assembly, equal protection before the law, and rights related to the family, marriage, and children. The rights of women, for example, are often particularly affected by religious belief, as is the status of children.

Most important, perhaps, today there can no longer be any doubt that matters of peace and security are often directly related to freedom of religion or belief.

This fact needs to be stated plainly: among the chief sources of conflict so far in the new millennium have been disputes over religious ideology. The rise of terrorism, in particular, can in large part be connected to a simultaneous rise in religious extremism.

On 25 November 2006, the world observes the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. It is an appropriate time, then, to reflect on the Declaration, its significance, and its role in the future.

The Declaration is significant because it delineates and expands upon the right to religious freedom as first established in the 1948 Univer-

sal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR).

The UDHR, in Article 18, proclaims:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The 1981 Declaration reaffirms the fundamental nature of this right, elaborates upon it, and spells it out in practical terms.

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

At the same time, however, the 1981 Declaration falls short, inasmuch as it fails to elaborate on the right to "change" one's belief — a point that was clearly outlined in the 1948 UDHR.

As specialists in the field of human rights well know, that simple word — "change" — was removed from the 1981 Declaration at the insistence of some countries. Those who opposed the term saw the right to "change" one's religion as a threat to the established order — or even as an apostasy.

This does not mean, of course, that the right to changes one's religion has indeed been expunged. The 1981 Declaration itself notes that nothing in it "shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights..."

Our view, however, is that a greater em-

phasis on this right — along with the other rights encompassed under the rubric of freedom of religion or belief — can contribute greatly to combating religious extremism and its accompanying threats to global security.

In the first place, it is a fact that the underlying teachings of all of the world's major religions — Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, and the Bahá'í Faith — promote harmony, moderation, non-violence and other ethical teachings that are antithetical to any type of extremism.

Greater freedom to manifest and teach a variety of religious beliefs, then, offers a powerful antidote to religious extremism.

Many human rights organizations have posted a “watch list” of those countries where freedom of religion or belief is most significantly curtailed. And an examination of virtually all such lists will show that many of those same countries are also plagued by religious extremism. The connection is clear: extremism tends to flourish where there is less freedom to adopt and practice the religion of one's choice.

But in order to truly tackle the problem of religious extremism, one needs to understand and address its underlying cause.

In a statement to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the Bahá'í International Community noted:

“Many believers find it difficult to reconcile deep religious conviction with tolerance of other beliefs. It is tempting to insist that one has discovered the one and only truth and to relegate the remaining masses of humanity, adhering to other beliefs, to the status of apostates or unbelievers, spiritually doomed, deserving pity at best, or outright ridicule and persecution at worst. Throughout history too many sincere people in every part of the world have fallen victim to this thinking.

“In the Bahá'í view, such attitudes are, in part, the product of ignorance. If other religions are shrouded in mystery, then they become an empty vessel into which the individual is tempted to pour fears and fantasies. Experience shows that ignorance breeds superstition and perpetuates religious prejudice and animosity.”

One part of the answer to religious extremism, then, lies in education about other religions.

As the Community noted in a 1989 statement: “By eliminating ignorance of other religions and, thereby, promoting understanding, education would treat the

latent causes of intolerance and gradually, over time, deprive those who would distort religious teachings for their own purposes of the support they need.”

On this point, the right to “change” one's religion becomes critically important, especially where it concerns those who promote violence under the guise of religious teachings, which represents both the greatest form of religious distortion and the highest level of extremism.

In some countries now, for example, attempts to change one's religion are indeed greeted with the charge of apostasy — which under some interpretations of religious law is punishable by death.

If governments were to uniformly make clear that such interpretations are unacceptable, such forms of extremism would be dealt a severe blow. And the real test of such tolerance is whether the right to “change” one's religion is thoroughly upheld.

The practical reality of this point is further illuminated by the Bahá'í understanding of the oneness of religion. This understanding holds that, despite the varying names for Him, there is only one God, and all of the world's major religions are progressive expressions of God's revelation for humanity.

In its 1989 statement, the Community observed: “The spiritual basis for religious tolerance is the recognition of the common source of all the world's great faiths. A fair-minded examination of the actual utterances of the Founders of the great religions, and of the social milieus in which they carried out their missions, will reveal that there is nothing to support the contentions and prejudices deranging the religious communities of mankind and, therefore, all human affairs.”

Such a fair-minded examination of the teachings of other religions can only come when there are no barriers to the right to both “manifest” one's religion in “teaching, practice, worship and observance” — and the right to “change” one's religion.

Promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief and all that it encompasses is today not only a matter of moral imperative but a practical necessity. It offers the best remedy to extremism and fanaticism, and an important safeguard to our collective security.

Our confidence on this point stems from a belief in the essential goodness of the human spirit and the conviction that, in an unrestricted exchange of religious ideas, those teachings that promote peace and harmony will triumph in the end.*

A greater emphasis on the right to change one's religion — along with the other rights encompassed under the rubric of freedom of religion or belief — can contribute greatly to combating religious extremism and its accompanying threats to global security.

Oxford conference on climate change stresses global collective action

Participants at a Bahá'í-sponsored conference on "Science, Faith and Climate Change" at Balliol College in Oxford, United Kingdom, 15-17 September 2006 hold up results of a quiz they took to test their knowledge about sustainable development and climate change. (Photograph by Gemma Parsons)



OXFORD, United Kingdom — The challenges posed by global warming will require a far higher level of collective action and international cooperation than is currently practiced.

That was among the conclusions at a conference at Balliol College here 15-17 September 2006 that sought to explore the relationship between "Science, Faith and Climate Change."

Climate change is "testing mankind's ability to deal with a collective challenge," said Halldor Thorgeirsson, deputy executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat (UNFCCC). "The solution itself will fundamentally change how governments cooperate."

In an address titled "The International Community's Response to Climate Change," Dr. Thorgeirsson said the role of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide in global warming is now well established scientifically and "sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action."

"When it comes to climate change it will not be solved by any one actor on its own," said Dr. Thorgeirsson.

The conference was organized by the Bahá'í Agency for Social and Economic De-

velopment of the United Kingdom (BASED-UK) and the International Environment Forum (IEF), a Bahá'í-inspired organization. More than 60 people from seven countries attended, while another 115 signed up for online participation via the Internet.

The event featured specialists from a variety of disciplines, including natural science, economics, political science, and psychology, both from within and outside the Bahá'í community, who sought to explore issues surrounding climate change from an interdisciplinary perspective.

IEF President Arthur Dahl said the purpose of the conference was "to unify these perspectives, relate them to each other" and to "engage the Bahá'í community in the process of applying spiritual principles to the practical problems of the world."

Dr. Dahl, a former deputy assistant executive director of the United Nation Environment Program, delivered the keynote presentation on "scientific and faith perspectives" on climate change, saying that most scientists have now concluded that there will be significant warming in the coming years.

"Climate change is going to force humanity to recognize its oneness," said Dr. Dahl. "Whole ecosystems will shift over long dis-

Climate change is "testing mankind's ability to deal with a collective challenge. The solution itself will fundamentally change how governments cooperate."

— Halldor Thorgeirsson, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat.

tances, if they can move fast enough.”

“We are looking at a scale of change this planet has not seen before,” said Dr. Dahl. “Sea level has been going up and the scenarios show the trend to continue. It will bring other impacts: food insecurity, water shortages.”

Such changes, said Dr. Dahl, will require more than technical solutions. Rather, he said, they will require the application of ethical and spiritual principles so as to create “new value-based economic models” that seek to create a “dynamic, just and thriving social order.”

The role of religion

Religion, said Dr. Dahl, can play a key role in strengthening the ethical framework for action on climate change by educating people “about values and global responsibility,” creating “motivation for change,” and encouraging the sacrifices that will be needed to create sustainable development.

Other presentations focused on specific aspects of climate change, such as its likely effects on various regions and sectors of society, and how mitigating global warming will require various transformations in society and individual actions, such as in energy production and use.

Lars Friberg, a research fellow at the University of Potsdam, addressed the impact of climate change on developing countries. “Africa will be worst hit by climate change,” said Mr. Friberg. “One model shows warming of 1.8 to 2.6 degrees will lead to a precipitation decrease by 40 percent in Africa.”

Minu Hemmati, a clinical psychologist, addressed how women around the world are likely to be affected by climate change. She noted that some 60 to 75 percent of the world’s poor are women.

“Poor people are more affected by climate change,” said Dr. Hemmati. “Therefore women will be mostly affected.”

However, she said, women are “more risk sensitive and that applies to their perception of climate change. They will be more ready to consider that we have to change our lifestyle.”

Peter Luff, who works for Action for a Global Climate Community, discussed the need for more cooperation between the north and the south. “Europe understands collective action,” said Mr Luff. “The question is: Can Europe link up to countries in the south?”

Augusto Lopez-Claros, the chief economist and director of the Global Competitiveness Program at the World Economic Forum



(WEF), gave a presentation entitled “What economic systems and policies are compatible with protection of the environment?”

Drawing on data from studies he has done for the WEF, Dr. Lopez-Claros noted that the top 20 countries in terms of environmentally responsible polices are also among the top countries in terms of global economic success.

“There is a positive correlation between environmental and social responsibility and economic competitiveness,” said Dr. Lopez-Claros.

Poppy Villiers-Stuart, a training officer specializing in sustainable development at the University of Brighton, gave a presentation about “community empowerment” and said that “these issues of climate change need to be integrated into the grassroots dialogue of the Bahá’í community.”

“The pivot of the Bahá’í teachings is oneness,” said Ms. Villiers-Stuart. “Every part of the universe is connected. If we could explore the teachings of the Faith to value the role of the earth in our spiritual development, this will naturally make us want to love and be connected to it, which will help sustainable development.”

One way to “inspire this kind of connection” in young people, Ms. Villiers-Stuart suggested, is through the “junior youth animator course,” a spiritual empowerment course for 11-15 year olds. Young people, she suggested, are “most idealistic and have the energy to make change. It is young people who will be able to embody these ideals.”*

— Reported by Jody Koomen

Augusto Lopez-Claros, the chief economist and director of the Global Competitiveness Program at the World Economic Forum (WEF), gave a presentation entitled “What economic systems and policies are compatible with protection of the environment?” (Photograph by Gemma Parsons)

Canadian lawyer joins UN Office

NEW YORK — Tahirih Naylor, a lawyer from Canada, has joined the Bahá'í International Community as a representative to the United Nations.

Ms. Naylor, 28, will work closely with Bani Dugal, the Community's principal representative to the United Nations, on human rights issues. She will also handle issues relating to sustainable development and social development.

"We are very pleased to have Ms. Naylor join our office," said Ms. Dugal. "She has a strong background in law, and she has had formative experiences working with the Canadian Bahá'í community's Office of Governmental Relations and also with Bahá'í-inspired development projects. She is a young woman with maturity beyond her years, who has already brought new ideas and a fresh perspective to our work."

Ms. Naylor joined the Community's United Nations Office in July. Her coming follows the arrival of Fulya Vekiloglu, who joined the Office in June, also as a representative to the UN.

Before coming to the Community, Ms. Naylor worked as a representative in the Office of Governmental Relations of the Bahá'í community of Canada. Her duties there included presenting the Bahá'í community's point of view to government officials and non-governmental organizations, as well as work on projects concerning human rights and immigration.

She worked for the government of Ontario in the Family Responsibility Office before that, handling various legal duties, including representation, research, and the writing of various motions and memoranda.

Ms. Naylor received her law degree from Osgood Hall Law School in 2003. Her undergraduate education was at the University of Western Ontario, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 2000 with the highest grade point average in her class.

Service to the community at large in the arena of development and social justice has also been a feature of Ms. Naylor's experience.

She currently serves as treasurer for the Breakwell Education Association, an NGO that oversees the development of two educational institutions in Stratford, Ontario. She worked for an NGO in Guelph, Ontario, as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher, coordinated Canadian volunteers for the Youth Can Move the World literacy program in Guyana, and trained young people to address social issues through the arts in Samoa, Tonga, and the Bahamas.

In 1997, she was the program coordinator and a dancer for the Diversity Dance Theatre in Europe, which offers educational performances and workshops on issues of multiculturalism and world citizenship. She toured 13 countries in Eastern and Western Europe. She has done similar arts-based projects in China and Papua New Guinea.

"I feel quite honored to have been invited to join the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community," said Ms. Naylor. "My ambition in life has long been to address social problems, such as issues relating to poverty and the environment.

"One of the reasons I went to law school was to get skills that I felt could be used to assist people and communities in a practical way, especially in terms of promoting social justice.

"In my experience, approaches to social and sustainable development often neglect the understanding and application of spiritual principles in favor of a purely materialistic perspective.

"My hope is that my background can be useful in our outreach to the United Nations and its partners in civil society in bringing the Community's distinctive spiritual perspective to this effort." ❁

A native of Canada, Ms. Naylor will focus on sustainable development, social development, and human rights.

Tahirih Naylor, who joined the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community in New York as a representative to the United Nations in July 2006.



At the UN, Bahá'ís host panel on violence against women

UNITED NATIONS — Stemming the global tide of violence against women will require changes in deeply rooted attitudes that for the most part transcend culture and national borders, said participants in a panel discussion here on 8 September 2006.

Titled “Beyond Violence Prevention: Creating a Culture to Enable Women’s Security and Development,” the discussion was hosted by the Bahá’í International Community and the International Presentation Association.

It was held as part of the 59th Annual United Nations Department of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organization conference.

The panelists agreed that violence against women remains a severe problem in almost every nation and culture.

“We all know that at least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime,” said Letty Chiwara, a program specialist with the Africa section of the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM). In some places, such as rural Ethiopia, some 71 percent of women are abused, she said.

“Harmful traditional practices — female genital mutilation, dowry murder, the so-called honor killings, and early marriage — bring death, disability, and psychological dysfunction for millions of women,” said Ms. Chiwara.

Charlotte Bunch, executive director of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers University, said violence against women should not be seen as merely a cultural problem.

“We are not just talking about the remnants of cultural practices in a few southern countries,” said Ms. Bunch. “It is structurally central to all of the western world, as well as the rest of the world. Violence in general and violence against women is culturally accepted on a lot of levels.”

Despite advances in legislation on violence against women, Ms. Bunch said, a lot of people seem to feel that “a little violence against women is no big deal.”

Fulya Vekiloglu, a representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations, said broad international frameworks designed to protect and advance

women, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), must be bolstered by a new global social climate.

“It is evident that there is still a major barrier between legal and cultural practices,” said Ms. Vekiloglu, who moderated the discussion. “The challenge before the international community is how to create the social, material, and structural conditions that will foster the spiritual and physical development of women.

“Such efforts will not only involve deliberate attempts to change the legal, political, and economic structures of society but equally important, the transformation of individuals in society,” said Ms. Vekiloglu.

Joan Burke, a Catholic nun who lived and worked in various countries in Africa for 20 years, said she believes that long-standing cultural practices that harm women — such as female genital mutilation — can be changed if underlying values are addressed.

Layli Miller-Muro, a lawyer and the founder of the Tahirih Justice Center, a Bahá’í-inspired women’s advocacy organization in Virginia, said that often laws are not enough to address deep-seated attitudes.

She described the case of a 12-year-old girl who was raped by her step-father in retaliation for turning him in to the police for brutally beating her mother.

All the proper laws were in place, the girl had free lawyers, and she was surrounded by a sympathetic and trained police force, but none of these things could prevent the abuse of this child, said Ms. Miller-Muro.

“We had a system that worked on its face, but that cannot prevent someone from unleashing his own violent tendencies behind closed doors,” she said.

Ms. Miller-Muro said that such attitudes can be addressed only by a spiritual transformation, both for societies as well as individuals.

“Religion has the capacity for good, to inspire, to motivate, to transform human behavior,” said Ms. Miller-Muro. “People are willing to change their behavior for a higher power, not for a World Bank loan.”*

— by Veronica Shoffstall

“The challenge before the international community is how to create the social, material, and structural conditions that will foster the spiritual and physical development of women.”

— Fulya Vekiloglu, Bahá’í International Community

UK Parliamentary seminar examines religious freedom

LONDON — Although recognized as a fundamental human right by nearly every nation, the freedom of religion or belief is woefully under-enforced by many governments and deserves more attention, said participants at a recent Parliamentary seminar here.

Held 24 July 2006 and sponsored by the All Party Parliamentary Friends of the Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom, the two-hour seminar featured a discussion by three human rights experts on the topic of freedom of religion or belief.

“The persecution of religious believers is shamefully widespread,” said Kevin Boyle, a professor at the Human Rights Centre of Essex University, the first panellist.

The problem exists despite a strong international legal framework for the right to freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, explained Prof. Boyle.

“There is no dispute in international law as to what rights are recognized,” said Prof. Boyle. “The problems lie with the failure of states to live by international standards.”

Nations have a positive duty to protect diversity of belief and to remain neutral regarding diverse beliefs, Prof. Boyle added. If one faith has a privileged position, however, it is hard for that state to promote religious equality, he said. Nevertheless, state neutrality on religion need not equate to secularism.

The right to freedom of religion and belief cannot be seen in isolation, Professor Boyle concluded. It has to be seen in tandem with other rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a democratic culture.

Panellist Samantha Knights said one of the most difficult areas for states to uphold freedom of religion or belief is when religious practices conflict with the wider culture.

A barrister at Matrix Chambers, a London law firm, Ms. Knights has studied and worked on cases of freedom of religion or belief in the United Kingdom and the United States. Ms. Knights said the case of high school student

Shabina Begum, who claimed she had the right to wear the *jilbab* [full Islamic dress for women] at school, illustrates the complexity in this area.

Were her rights interfered with or was she just inconvenienced, asked Ms. Knights, noting that such questions are extremely difficult for the courts to decide.

“When faced with issues of freedom of religion, courts need to ask if practices or beliefs are necessary to a religion or merely incidental,” said Ms. Knights, saying that there is a need to balance the rights of individuals and the need to protect others.

Nazila Ghanea, the third panellist, said freedom of religion or belief is insufficiently protected in part because it has become divorced from other human rights in mainstream thinking.

Dr. Ghanea, a specialist in human rights at the University of London Institute of Commonwealth Studies who has recently been appointed to a post at the University of Oxford, said when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, the right to freedom of religion or belief as spelled out in Article 18 was held to be equal with the other rights in the Declaration.

Over time, however, the international system has shifted its focus to questions relating to race, torture, and other rights.

“There has been a divorce whereby the right to freedom of religion and belief has been separated from protection for minorities defined by race, language, etc.,” said Dr. Ghanea, who is a Bahá'í.

Part of the problem, she suggested, is that upholding religious freedom can be a problem for states that have a patrimonial system that favors one particular religion.

“Protection for religious freedom needs to be understood as a right that is for everyone,” said Dr. Ghanea. “This is currently lacking and contrasts with, for example, the provisions against torture, which are recognized as universal.”

The discussion topic was introduced by Member of Parliament Ian Stewart, who said that the aim of the seminar was to

“Protection for religious freedom needs to be understood as a right that is for everyone. This is currently lacking and contrasts with, for example, the provisions against torture, which are recognized as universal.”

—Nazila Ghanea,
University
of London
Institute of
Commonwealth
Studies

promote freedom of religion or belief as a matter of principle.

“This event is not about the Bahá’ís, but about the challenges we all share — and these are not the property of any one group,” said MP Stewart.

In attendance were representatives of a wide variety of organizations, including the Minority Rights Group, Forum 18, UK Friends of the Falun Gong, Three Faiths Forum, the Jain Samaj and the British Hu-

manist Association, as well as the Bahá’í community of the United Kingdom and Members of Parliament.

The seminar was followed by an animated discussion involving many members of the audience.

“The success of this event confirms our belief that the time is ripe for a debate in civil society about this area of human rights,” said Barney Leith, Secretary for External Affairs of the Bahá’í community of the UK.*

Youth conference in Burundi focuses on social transformation



Nearly 150 Bahá’í youth gathered at a youth conference in Burundi in August to discuss social transformation.

BUJUMBURA, Burundi — Young people from four Central African countries — nations that have in recent years been the scene of intense conflicts — gathered here in August for a five-day conference to discuss how youth can provide the means for peaceful social action and transformation.

At least 149 Bahá’í youth from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda assembled at the National Bahá’í Center here between 17-21 August 2006.

It was a “conference focused on the potential of youth to contribute to the positive transformation of their societies,” said Catie Honeyman, a Bahá’í youth living in Rwanda.

“Speaking different languages, with different nationalities, diverse life experiences, and remarkably distinct cultural traditions,” she said, “it might be difficult to understand how we so quickly became friends.”

Yet, Ms. Honeyman said, there was great joy among “a collection of young people whom the outside world would normally

consider to be complete strangers, and perhaps even enemies.”

Among the specific topics discussed were how youth can help change the world, service projects, the importance of education, and guidelines for a successful marriage. A number of sessions also focused on spirituality and the importance of helping others learn about the Bahá’í Faith.

The conference was honored with a visit by Silvestre Bwatemba, Director General of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, who promised to support the Bahá’í youth in their goal of becoming “luminaries” in the effort to change the world.

Two radio journalists also did interviews with participants in five languages: French, Swahili, English, Kirindi, and Kinyarwanda.

The conference was characterized by prayers, songs, dances, skits and poems. Additionally the youth were encouraged to learn and practice their French, English, and their own local language.*

There was great joy among “a collection of young people whom the outside world would normally consider to be complete strangers, and perhaps even enemies.”

— Catie Honeyman, a Bahá’í youth living in Rwanda

Egypt hearing highlights ID card discrimination for Bahá'ís

CAIRO — The Egyptian government's controversial policy that requires citizens to list their religion on national identification cards, while also limiting the choice to one of just three official religions, was the focus of a major symposium here in August.

The event drew considerable attention to the plight of the Bahá'ís in Egypt, who endure discrimination under the policy. It forces them either to lie about their religion and illegally falsify their religious affiliation — or go without ID cards, which are necessary to access virtually all rights of citizenship here.

Held on 8 August 2006 by the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), a state-funded, advisory body to the government on human rights issues, the symposium heard testimony from a wide variety of civil society groups, official governmental agencies and ministries, as well as the Bahá'í community of Egypt.

"Bahá'ís face a daily struggle now," said Dr. Basma Moussa, the Bahá'í representative, explaining that without valid ID cards Bahá'ís cannot register for school, attend university, address questions on military service, apply for jobs, process banking transactions, or properly receive salaries.

Dr. Moussa said both international agreements and Egyptian law, however, guarantee freedom of religion or belief, and that the administrative issues surrounding the ID card limitations could easily be solved by adopting alternatives, such as leaving the section blank or simply allowing a fourth choice of "other" in the religion identification field.

Some 160 people were present at the symposium, representing not only some 57 civil society and non-governmental organizations, but also prominent thinkers and various representatives from the government, including the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and the Egyptian Parliament. Eighty participants presented testimony.

The event was introduced by former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who is currently president of the NCHR, and it drew

wide publicity in the Egyptian news media.

"The purpose of the event was basically to put the issue on the agenda, and in this sense it was successful," said Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), an independent Egyptian human rights organization. "It is a highly symbolic gesture, and a positive development."

In April, the issue of religious affiliation on identification cards became the focus of increasing controversy when an administrative court ruled that Bahá'ís should be allowed to state their religion on government documents.

Fundamentalist Islamic groups decried the April ruling, while human rights organizations praised it. The Supreme Administrative Court was to hold a hearing on the government's appeal of the Bahá'í case in November.

At present, government policy allows only the listing of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism — the three officially recognized religions, on ID cards and other documents.

The NCHR symposium sought to address this limitation — and it was also marked by an airing of all sides of the issue. Representatives of fundamentalist Islamic groups urged the government to keep its current policy, saying "public order" might be adversely affected if other religions were allowed to be listed or the listing was abolished entirely.

Among the concerns expressed by Islamic groups was a fear that any change would affect various issues relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which are governed by each religious community here.

International law

Other groups, including representatives of Coptic Christians and various national human rights organizations, urged a change in the policy, saying the current policy is at odds with international law — and moral conscience — relating to the freedom of religion or belief.

Dr. Gamal el-Banna, an Islamic thinker and scholar, said for example that "the case of religious belief is a personal matter, which has no connection to public order, and that no one should interfere with it.

"In the upcoming years Egypt will face further conflicts in religious relations, and newer religions will require recognition as they appear, so we should either approve and recognize all religions or eliminate religious classification from ID cards"

— Boutros Boutros-Ghali, president Egypt National Council for Human Rights



Dr. Basma Moussa is shown here in a televised interview on Egypt's Dream-2 TV channel, aired on 13 August 2006. The interview focused on her testimony before the National Council for Human Rights on 8 August 2006 in Cairo. Dr. Moussa presented the Bahá'í point of view on the national identification card controversy to the Council.

“We should be examining the standards of ignorance and prejudice, as well as the publications that darken our lives,” he said, according to published accounts. “Omitting religion from ID cards would neither lead to progress nor regress.”

Dr. Boutros-Ghali, in an opening statement, noted that “the three major religions represent less than 50 percent of world religions, but other religions account for 51 percent of recognized religions.”

“In the upcoming years Egypt will face further conflicts in religious relations, and newer religions will require recognition as they appear, so we should either approve and recognize all religions or eliminate religious classification from ID cards,” said Dr. Boutros-Ghali, according to published accounts.

The recent introduction of a computerized card system that locks out any religious identification other than the three officially recognized religions has made the problem worse for Bahá'ís, who were previously able to find clerks who might at least leave the religion field blank in old style paper ID cards.

Not only are Bahá'ís prohibited by their beliefs from lying, but it is a crime to provide false information on any official document here. Thus, unable to morally or legally list one of the three recognized religions, Bahá'ís are now prevented from obtaining new cards, and they are as a community gradually being deprived of nearly all the rights of citizenship.

In her presentation of the Bahá'í view, Dr. Moussa, an assistant professor of oral and

maxillofacial surgery at Cairo University, read six pages of testimony before the Council.

Her testimony focused on the degree to which international law and the Egyptian constitution uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief. In particular, she said, Articles 40 and 46 of the Egyptian constitution both grant the freedom of religious practice and belief, as does the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Egypt has signed.

In view of these laws, Dr. Moussa said, “it is obvious that limiting the religions on the ID card to the three [official religions] interferes with the freedom of those who believe in religions other than those.

“In these cases, it is as if you are forcing a religion on the ID card holder, which is counter to what the law and the constitution state, and it goes against international human rights.”

Dr. Moussa also said there have been cases in other official documents, such as birth and death certificates, where Bahá'ís have been identified as Bahá'ís — or where the field has simply been left blank. “These alternatives prove to us that it can be done.”

She added that in other countries where Muslims are not in the majority, “they expect, and rightfully so, that their rights will be fully provided for. This, and no more, is what Bahá'ís are asking for.”

“We are asking that, on official papers, you either list ‘Bahá'í,’ or ‘other,’ or a ‘dash’ — or just leave it blank,” said Dr. Moussa. “This is actually all that we have asked of governmental agencies over the last few years.”*

In other countries where Muslims are not in the majority, “they expect, and rightfully so, that their rights will be fully provided for. This, and no more, is what Bahá'ís are asking for.”

**— Basma Moussa,
Egyptian Bahá'í
community**

In Hungary, empowering Roma mothers to break the cycle of illiteracy

A group of mothers with their children in Jaszbereny, celebrating the completion of phase one of the project.



Mothers, continued from page one

Each week the mothers receive and practice with a new children's book, which they then take home and read to their children every night during the week. In this way, skills that are learned are immediately put into practice.

age and the distance between them and book learning increases.

"They tend to develop feelings of inferiority which, in turn, affects their view of life and of their own selves. They are not in a position to help their children with school work, neither are they able to transfer enthusiasm and appreciation for books and book learning, and a cycle of illiteracy is perpetuated," said Ms. Switzer.

Hajnal Racz, a participant of the project and a mother of three, described how initial feelings of shame and embarrassment were replaced by a sense of confidence.

"In the beginning it was strange that we had to read," said Hajnal Racz, who is not related to Agi Racz — Racz being a common surname among the Roma here. "We tried not to make mistakes, but being anxious we made more mistakes. But, after a while, we realized that we don't need to be ashamed. Halfway through the project our reading improved a lot and by the end of the project we could read quite well."

In 2003, MESÉD was selected as one of the five projects that were presented at the Euro-

pean Parliament as a supporting program of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World.

The project has also drawn notice from local officials. Leko Belane Malika, the deputy mayor of Jakohalma — one of the villages in the region of Jaszszag where a large population of Roma reside and one of MESÉD's main areas of focus — recently described the facilitators as "dedicated professionals who take it to their heart to bring about equality which is a key question in today's world."

"I think this is a pioneering effort in this field," said Mr. Malika. "And I would like to express my gratitude for this work."

The Roma, which constitute roughly six percent of Hungary's population, are considered to be the most disadvantaged and discriminated against minority group in the country. Literacy rates for the Roma are distinctly lower than for the Hungarian population at large, according to the United Nations Development Programme. This is especially true for people over 45. While 97 percent of that age group are literate in Hungary as a whole, just 77 percent of Roma men and

women are.

What matters more, perhaps, are the statistics on educational attainment for Roma children. According to Balazs Wizner, writing in the Hungarian Quarterly last year, about 36 percent of Roma children failed to complete elementary school in 2000, versus 5 percent for other Hungarian children. That gets worse as they move up the educational ladder. In 2001, approximately 20 percent of the Roma entered secondary school, versus 73 percent nationwide.

By stressing the literacy among mothers — and focusing on reading at an early age — MESÉD hopes to break that cycle by providing a course of free weekly literacy classes.

“At a basic level it empowers women,” Ms. Switzer said. “It affects the mother’s relationship with books and learning by creating a positive association which, in turn, and naturally, will be passed on to her children. Women begin to see themselves as active agents of change.”

Participant Andrea Racz said the course had indeed helped her see the importance of motherhood. “The role of a mother is very important in a family,” she said. “If in a family the mother feels good, then that family is a happy family because a mother not only thinks about the day-to-day life of a family, but she also prepares them for life. We are mothers, but we raise future mothers and fathers.”

One of the main goals of the project is to create a forum where Roma mothers can feel safe and comfortable to express their feelings, grievances, and hopes. “The most important thing,” said Andrea Racz, “was that we had found a new family because the atmosphere was very warm.”

Ms. Switzer described the process of bonding and sharing that took place between the mothers. “The mothers started by sharing experiences from their childhood,” she said. “Having found an accepting, loving and secure milieu — an experience otherwise unprecedented in their life within a deeply prejudiced society — they poured out their hearts and shared their past experiences.”

The first phase of the project focuses on the development of basic literacy skills through the reading of children’s books — and the teaching of moral virtues illustrated in them.

Each week the mothers receive and practice with a new children’s book, which they then take home and read to their children every night during the week. In this way, new skills are immediately put into practice.

“Our task in this was that when we went home, we read the story to our children,” said Andrea Racz. “Every night we read to them. They eagerly waited every night to see what story they would get.”

In all, the mothers read 15 books, which are given to them as gifts. They become a small library for the family in each home.

“Research shows that the more children are read to before they go to school,” said Ms. Switzer, “the more likely they are to be academically successful. Thus the Roma children will become the mutual beneficiaries of this project. They will enter school mentally more equipped for the written word and will have a positive association with books and reading.

“They are also more likely to be supported by their mothers at home who, by now, have gained a sense of pride in their ability to read and are more equipped to help track the progress of their children at

“At a basic level it empowers women. It affects the mother’s relationship with books and learning by creating a positive association which, in turn, and naturally, will be passed on to her children. Women begin to see themselves as active agents of change.”

**— Furugh Switzer,
director of the
MESÉD project**



A MESÉD graduation ceremony in Torokszentmiklos in 2003.

school,” said Ms. Switzer.

Julika Kovacs, a mother of three, described her children’s enthusiastic response to reading. “They always waited for me to arrive every week asking what new story book I brought. They always read, all three of them, and fought with each other to be the first one to read.”

The emphasis on educating children in virtues is directly linked to the books. The mothers are taught to use the stories they read in their day-to-day life to teach children moral and spiritual qualities, such as honesty, trustworthiness, kindness and generosity.

“When there were behavioral problems with my little son or he didn’t understand something,” said Andrea Racz, “I read a story to him and talked about the main characters in the story and we discussed how they behaved and whether it was proper behavior or not. There were situations where all I had to say was, you know ‘Franklin Helps’ [the name of the book] and he knew what I meant.”

Participant Marika Farkas said coming together to read has a positive effect on her whole family. “Every week...the whole family sits together to read. It brings the whole

family together. Mother, father and the children sit together and read and in this way the home becomes a warmer place because of these stories.”

So far ten groups of mothers throughout Hungary have completed the first phase of the project, which was funded by the Bahá’í community of Hungary. The MESÉD project plans to expand, and the next step is to organize trainings for facilitators who will then act as coordinators for the MESÉD meetings. Once a core number of women have been trained, the project will start experimenting with phase two: the development of writing skills.

“By all means I recommend the course,” said Andrea Racz. “Roma and Hungarian mothers alike get to know each other, and think together, and they will see how nice it is to think together, and from this they will see that not only is it possible to live together, but we must.

“Let us all be proud that we are mothers, that we make every effort for the benefit of our children,” she said. “For the children the only task should be learning, learning, learning.”*

— By Yaz Taherzadeh

Jamaicans celebrate 4th National Bahá’í Day

KINGSTON, Jamaica — When the Governor General of Jamaica, Sir Howard Cooke, proclaimed a National Bahá’í Day for this tropical Caribbean island nation three years ago, Bahá’ís here had no idea it would become an annual event.

Established in 2003 as part of the 60th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Faith in Jamaica, Bahá’ís discovered in 2004 that once a proclamation has been made, it becomes a permanent feature of the island.

“We began to have observations for ‘Bahá’í Day’ on July 25 each year,” said Linda Roche, secretary of the Bahá’í community of Jamaica.

The event has become a celebration not only for the 21 local Bahá’í communities on the island, but they have been joined by other religious leaders and Jamaican politicians.

This year the Bahá’í Day events included a Bahá’í Day Breakfast sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly. It was attended by representatives of the various religions from the Interfaith Council, including Moslems, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus, as well as the Mayor of Kingston and the media.

Celebrations were also held in Kingston, Montego Bay, and Port Antonio. Port Antonio held a four-day exhibition at the public li-

brary on the history of the Faith in Jamaica.

The highlight of the national observance was the speech by Kingston Mayor Desmond McKenzie, who praised the Bahá’í community of Jamaica for its message of spirituality and unity at a time when many are losing faith in politics and traditional religions.

“We have always depended on the traditional churches to create the foundation for moral respect and social tolerance,” said Mayor McKenzie.

“However, we are concerned that the traditional churches seem to have lost their voices lately when it comes to the issue of morality,” said Mr. McKenzie, who is not a Bahá’í, “And since the politicians are not considered to have the moral authority, it is the newer churches and religions like the Bahá’ís, and their refreshingly new view of morality, to which we must turn.

“Bahá’u’lláh’s divine mission was to bring about spiritual rebirth and the unity of mankind leading to a permanent world peace and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth,” said Mr. McKenzie. “The city of Kingston welcomes the Bahá’ís with open arms because we share your zest for unity and peace.”*

“Since the politicians are not considered to have the moral authority, it is the newer churches and religions like the Bahá’ís, and their refreshingly new view of morality, to which we must turn.”

— Desmond McKenzie, Mayor, Kingston, Jamaica

Parliament of Man

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most familiar: blue-helmeted soldiers patrolling a cease-fire zone, distributing food to displaced villagers, and guarding election centers,” Dr. Kennedy writes. “When it works well, and there are many examples of that, it is perhaps one of the highest expressions of our common humanity and a testimony to human progress.”

Yet, Dr. Kennedy observes, “the most astonishing thing is that the UN Charter contains absolutely no mention of the word *peacekeeping* and offers no guidance as to this form of collective action. Here is a prime example of flexibility and evolution in the story of how various governments and individuals interpreted — and reinvented — the original rules in the light of unforeseen and pressing events.”

In another example, Dr. Kennedy notes that the General Assembly played a key role in articulating new international norms and standards. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he writes, led to “a bigger advance in the idea and practice of national and international human rights in the past sixty years than in any comparable period of all of history.”

However, Dr. Kennedy says, “there was a view among many governments at the time that since this text originated from the General Assembly, and not the Security Council, it was in no way binding upon states; that it was, literally, a ‘declaration’ of principles of which one might take as much or as little as was desired.”

And then there is the impact of agencies like UNICEF, which, Dr. Kennedy notes, has a staff less than that of the Chicago Police Department, and was created in 1953 merely as an “emergency administering body” to handle the humanitarian crisis faced by children in the aftermath of World War II.

Today, Dr. Kennedy writes, UNICEF is “a world body of an unequalled vigor and commitment,” now supported by governments, private foundations, local efforts, and even airlines who are “keen to show their support for this best of good causes.”

On balance, then, Dr. Kennedy concludes that while the United Nations may not have quite lived up to Tennyson’s idealized Parliament, it has nevertheless “brought great benefits to our generation” and is likely to bring benefits to future generations.

“Reforms will, or should, come piecemeal,” he writes. “Doing nothing at all is impossible, given humankind’s needs for better cooperation

and governance; and trying to batter through Charter amendments that totally transform existing power relationships would have no chance of succeeding. So we need a middle way, one that produces some changes now, with the possibility of more to come.”

The evolutionary process Dr. Kennedy describes mirrors the Bahá’í concept of history’s progress — and humanity’s prospects for the future.

More than a hundred years ago, Bahá’u’lláh clearly outlined the need for new international institutions capable of establishing the universal peace that has been long promised by poets and prophets. In particular, Bahá’u’lláh spoke of a “new World Order,” which would include institutions such as a “vast” and “all-embracing assemblage of men” that would “lay the foundations of the world’s Great Peace.”

More specifically, the Bahá’í writings, anticipate “the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded.

“This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth.”

The worldwide Bahá’í community, then, has confidence that such a true “Parliament of man” will ultimately be established, and the “war drum” will in the end be permanently silenced. This conviction stems from a belief that human reality is at its core spiritual in nature, and that the forces of history are driven by a higher destiny.

Dr. Kennedy’s hard-headed assessment of the United Nations as a work in progress, then, is an illuminating one, and it offers a couplet to this theme. Although governed by an anarchic system of sovereign nation-states, and hampered by structural limitations, the UN, Dr. Kennedy makes clear, nevertheless has an impressive record of successes, many of which more than live up to the idealist vision of its founders.*

“The most astonishing thing is that the UN Charter contains absolutely no mention of the word *peacekeeping* and offers no guidance as to this form of collective action. Here is a prime example of flexibility and evolution in the story of how various governments and individuals interpreted — and reinvented — the original rules in the light of unforeseen and pressing events.”

— Paul Kennedy

Idealism versus reality at the UN

Paul Kennedy's new book on the United Nations takes its title from a famous poem written in 1837 by Lord Alfred Tennyson that offers a vision of a peaceful future when, thanks to the "Parliament of man," "the war-drum throb'd no longer."

With that as a preface, Dr. Kennedy presents an "intellectual history" of the UN, examining the ideas and politics behind its creation, tracing its subsequent evolution, and asking whether the organization has lived up to Tennyson's dream — as well as to the ideals of its founders, which were "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Given the continuing doubt in many circles today over the effectiveness and even necessity of the UN, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* is extremely timely and important.

Dr. Kennedy, a former fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* and other books, provides an intelligent, insightful, and highly readable overview of the history of the UN in its first 60 years — and some clear-eyed conclusions about its utility.

At the core of his account is a penetrating exposition on the fundamental tension "between sovereignty and internationalism" that is "inherent, persistent, and unavoidable" in virtually every aspect of the work of the UN.

In this vein, Dr. Kennedy frequently contrasts the UN's record against the classic "realist" interpretation of international relations, suggesting that while its failures can often be attributed to the realpolitik of competition between nation states, many of its greatest successes have occurred when the "idealist" vision of diplomacy shines through.

As such, Dr. Kennedy explains, the UN has in surprising ways overcome the structural limitations that were imposed on it at its creation, as well as the political restrictions imposed by events like the Cold War.

Take, for example, the relative position of the Security Council versus other UN branches. The General Assembly looks at first glance "as if Tennyson's Parliament of man" was to be realized. A closer inspection of its functions, powers, and procedures shows the Assembly to be far from the "politi-

cal center of gravity."

Instead, the Charter clearly establishes the much smaller and less representative Security Council as the organization's controlling entity. Its five permanent members, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, each have the power through the so-called "veto" to block virtually any decision at the United Nations.

"Perhaps the greatest measure of the power 'gap' between the two organs was that Assembly resolutions, while always carrying an important symbolic weight, were not binding," writes Dr. Kennedy.

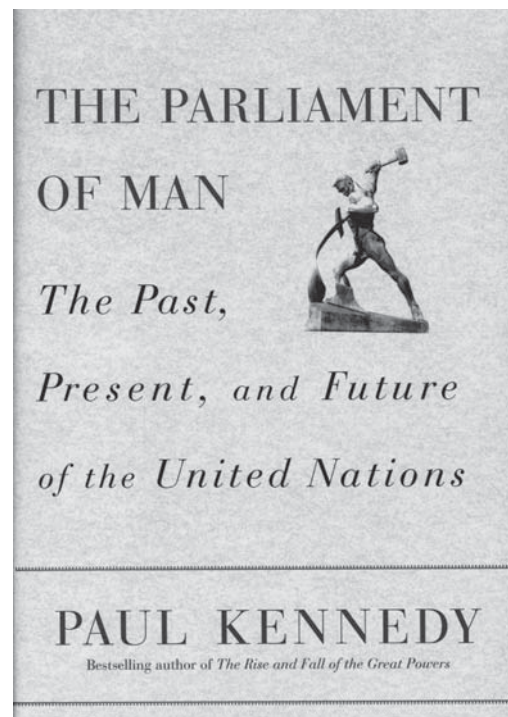
In response to various global challenges, nevertheless, the Assembly, along with other branches of the United Nations, such as the Secretariat, have in fact carved out significant and important roles. He describes this as "the evolution of the many UN's."

The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations

By Paul Kennedy

Random House

New York



Peacekeeping, for instance, is authorized by the Security Council but is generally operated by the Secretariat — and often initiated through the "good offices" of the Secretary-General.

"Of all the images and ideas we have about the United Nations, one surely is the

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