

ABS Bulletin

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES—NORTH AMERICA

2008 Annual Conference to be held in San Diego

Sunny San Diego, California, has been chosen as the site of the 32nd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America. The conference will be held over the Labor Day Weekend, 29 August–1 September 2008, on the theme of “Religion and Social Cohesion.” The conference will be held at the San Diego Marriott La Jolla.

The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the role that religion can play as a source of social conflict, on the one hand, and a force of social cohesion on the other. The roots of the term *religion* denote a force that binds human beings together—a force of social cohesion. In this regard, religion continues to play a primary role in identity formation even as it reaches to the deepest wells of human commitment and motivation. The Bahá'í Faith, while acknowledging abuses and corruptions of the religious impulse, “declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society.”

Recent expressions of religious intolerance, conflict, and violence have caused leaders of thought, policy makers, and academics to ponder if, or how, religion can play a more constructive role in processes of social integration. How can this force that binds people together, shapes human

identities, and reaches to the depths of human motivation, be aligned with the construction of a peaceful, just, and sustainable social order in an age of increasing interdependence among the world's diverse peoples?

You are invited to explore these themes at the 32nd annual ABS conference. New and experienced presenters and participants, from all backgrounds and disciplines, are welcome. Possible topics for presentation might include, but are not limited to: the role of the global plans of the Bahá'í community in promoting social cohesion; implications of a Bahá'í culture of learning for processes of social integration; the critique of religion articulated within the “new atheist” discourse of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and others; social cohesion, public policy, and effective governance; processes of social integration and disintegration; the religious construction of social reality; the psychology of human motivation and identity formation; religion in social development; the forces of attraction and the science of cohesion; and the sources of, and solutions to, religious conflict.

Call for Presentations

Proposals are invited for presentations and workshops on (but not limited to) the above themes, as well as



Reflection pool graces a San Diego landmark (Photo courtesy San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau)

themes pertaining to creative and conceptual processes within the performing arts, visual arts, and other modes of artistic expression.

Proposals must be submitted online (go to <www.bahai-studies.ca>). Potential presenters unable to submit online may contact the address below for further information on alternate

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“Denied!” conference focuses on plight of Iranian Bahá’í students

The Campus Association for Bahá’í Studies at the University of Alberta organized a symposium on 29 September, to raise awareness of the denial of education to Iranian Bahá’í students, and to provide a practical way for individuals to help. Dr. Pierre-Yves Mocquais, Auxiliary Board Member for Protection and Dr. Marie Gervais helped organize and guide the event, advertised to faculty, students and community members. Attendance was 47 participants in the morning and 51 in the afternoon, including 5 students from the University of Calgary. Dr. Mocquais and Dr. Redwan Moqbel opened the day with talks on the importance of education in the Bahá’í Faith and the role of universities and scholarship in advancing civilization. Dr. Joy Fraser, representative of the Edmonton branch of the United Nations, was also scheduled to talk about the Right to Education and Freedom to Believe documents, but became very ill the morning of the event and was unfortunately unable to attend.

Artistic presentations dotted the day’s events with song, spoken word, story, and tombak, and finally a short dramatic presentation about the persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran and the plight of Bahá’í students there. A Persian lunch was provided free of charge courtesy of the Edmonton Bahá’í community. Unlike many academic presentations, the entire day was based on the idea the participants need to engage with material, with each other, and with higher concepts to truly learn. All presentations included an interactive portion where small-group discussion based on quotations, concepts, or guiding questions

kept hearts and minds connected throughout the process.

The afternoon portion consisted of a moving and informative update of the situation of Bahá’í students in Iran by Dr. Moqbel, a summary by Dr. Gervais of the history of Bahá’í education in Iran and its far-reaching effects in the face of daunting opposition by the surrounding society, Muslim clergy, and government of Iran, and finally a snapshot of the life of Bahá’í post-secondary students and the BIHE by master’s student, Misagh Ziaiei.

As a culminating activity, all participants wrote letters to the president of the University of Alberta, Dr. Indira Samarasakera, to encourage her to follow the example of several other Canadian universities in writing a letter of support to decry the denial of education of Bahá’í post-secondary students. Participants additionally pledged to talk about the plight of their fellow students in Iran with at least five people throughout the following week.

There was a beautiful atmosphere in the room as approximately fifty people concentrated with unity of thought on their heartfelt letters to request support in ending these human rights abuses. The entire event was videoed by local film maker, Laheeb Quddusi. Excerpts will be made available to the public through YouTube subject to approval by the appropriate institutions. Photographs also documented the event. Participants were mostly Bahá’ís,



Dr. Pierre-Yves Mocquais speaking at the “Denied!” conference

about half Persian or of Persian descent, and six interested friends of Bahá’ís who attended the entire day’s events. Over half of the participants were Bahá’í university students at the U of A. Organizers believe there would have been a higher percentage of non-Bahá’í university students concerned about human rights issues in attendance, had the posters and invitations placed all around campus not mysteriously disappeared almost immediately after being posted in all locations.

The **ABS Bulletin** (ISSN 0840-6138) is published quarterly by the Association for Bahá’í Studies, a nonprofit scholarly organization with 1487 international open memberships and 118 institutional memberships. The Association promotes scholarship on all aspects of the Bahá’í Faith; holds conferences and seminars on promising research fields; develops courses, lectureships, and other formal presentations relating Bahá’í principles to scholarly research fields; and publishes books, as well as the refereed *Journal of Bahá’í Studies*.

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Association for Bahá’í Studies
34 Copernicus Street
Ottawa, ON
Canada, K1N 7K4
Tel. 613-233-1903
Fax 613-233-3644
E-mail: abs-na@bahai-studies.ca
Web site: www.bahai-studies.ca

ABS–Japan conference report

The 15th annual conference of ABS–Japan was held 5–7 October at the Tokyo Bahá'í Center with the theme of “Towards An Ever-Advancing Civilization.” Although attendance was not large, the presentations were excellent, exploring aspects of the Faith as it relates to Japanese culture, especially Japanese religions.

The conference was opened Friday night by ABS–Japan chair Hiroshi Tsunoi and commenced with a presentation by Kimiko Schwerin, “Assisting Persecuted Colleagues: Some Bahá'í Human Rights Activities,” which discussed the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. It was noted that in 2006, the UN General Assembly passed a favorable resolution by majority vote, including a “yes” vote by the Japanese government, in favor of human rights protection.

Saturday morning began with a presentation titled “Lighted Candles in the World of Humanity: The Education of Junior Youth,” by Marilyn Higgins. She introduced key points related to the needs of junior youth from biological, sociological, psychological, and spiritual perspectives, showing how Junior Youth programs can effectively create educational environments and socialization opportunities to nurture young people into happy, confident, and fully proactive citizens oriented toward the service of humanity.

The next presentation, by Nozomu Sonda, was titled, “What is Bahá'í Scholarship, Revisited?” He noted that it had been more than fifteen years since the inception of the Association for Bahá'í Studies–Japan in 1991. Mr. Sonda explored what took place between 1991 and the present, focusing on how Bahá'í scholarship has evolved in Japan. He introduced a Bahá'í paradigm, methods, and theoretical framework to apply Bahá'í teachings to current thoughts and

issues, sharing several examples of the Teachings that can be related to specific problems in Japanese society.

This was followed by Hiroshi Tsunoi's presentation on “The Religious Characteristics of the Bahá'í Faith,” which emphasized that the openness of the Bahá'í Faith frees the Bahá'ís from the dangers of closed religions that do not allow criticisms of what they label “religious truth,” and sometimes compel their followers to take part in antisocial activities.

The next presentation was Allen McDermid's on “Civilization and the Universality of Religious Experience.” Noting that the oneness of religion is a central tenet of the Bahá'í Faith, he observed that the world's religions appear to be at odds, suggesting that, over time, even religions that sprang from the same root, such as Judaism and Christianity, have come to look vastly different. Yet, Bahá'u'lláh has said that there is only one God and His religion is one. This is explained by the concept of progressive revelation: God periodically reveals His Will to mankind through the appearance of Divine Messengers.

This was followed by Jane Goldstone's presentation on “Omoto's Encounter with the Bahá'í Faith.” In 1923 Sumi, the wife of Deguchi Onisaburo, leader of the Japanese religion Omoto, invited Martha Root and Ida Finch to the Omoto headquarters in Kameoka. Most sources refer to this meeting as little more than Omoto's “contact with Bahá'í missionaries,” together with an extensive list of other religions that Onisaburo communicated with during the 20s and 30s. This paper focused on a central concept in Omoto, *bankyo-dokon* (all religions come from the same root), and described its early development from its native millenarianism roots to its encounter with the Bahá'í teachings.

After a dinner break, the annual public meeting featured Mary Noguchi's presentation on “The Japanese Education System: Strengths and Issues.” Ms. Noguchi emphasized that, when analyzed from view of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the Japanese system of education has a number of strengths. Among them is its universality, as seen in its success in imparting a large body of knowledge and a wide array of skills uniformly to students throughout the nation.

Sunday's program began with a presentation by Suzanna Kawamura, “Towards an Ever-Advancing Civilization: Protecting Society's Fundamental and Most Important Unit, The Family.” Ms. Kawamura observed that the pattern of disintegration of the traditional family and the consequences that follow have been accelerating over the years to the point that there is now confusion as to what a family is. The structure of present-day Japanese families was discussed and a new type of family was described, the “unity-based family,” which, by following Bahá'í principles, can create a new mindset and prepare mankind for an ever-advancing civilization.

This was followed by Nozomu Sonda's presentation on “Japanese Attitudes Towards Religion, Revisited.” Mr. Sonda noted that people talk about the Japanese people's “negative attitudes” toward religion, citing recent scandals caused by so-called religious organizations. Most Japanese regard religious topics as taboo and public institutions do not allow any explicitly “religious activity” in their facilities. On the other hand, according to the Japanese government's White Paper on Religion, the “religious population” of Japan is double that of the country's population, meaning that most Japanese are affiliated with at least two “religions.”

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Conference call

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means of submission. Presentation content should go beyond the overview and summary approach typical of a summer school course or talk to explore an original question or proposition through a clearly described method or approach. While many presentations are in the style of talks or workshop-discussions, the use of the arts and other diverse approaches is also encouraged. All presentations should engage the participants in review and in contributing to the development of the ideas raised.

Presentations must be substantially original work, unpublished and not previously presented. Papers will be considered for publication in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*.

Proposals are especially welcome from youth and first-time ABS presenters. Guidelines for submissions are available on the ABS Web site, and you can also contact ABS if you

would like further assistance with preparing a proposal. The deadline for submitting proposals is **15 April 2008**. Contact the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 34 Copernicus St., Ottawa, ON Canada K1N 7K4; tel.: (613) 233-1903; fax: (613) 233-3644; e-mail: <abs-na@bahai-studies.ca>.

Registration and hotel information

Conference registration and hotel information are available on the ABS Web site: <www.bahai-studies.ca>. For further inquiries, please contact the Association for Bahá'í Studies at the above address.

Hotel reservations must be made directly with the conference hotel, the San Diego Marriott La Jolla, 4240 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla, CA, 92037; tel.: 858-587-1414; toll-free reservation number: 800-228-9200.

Mention the Association for Bahá'í Studies conference to receive the special conference rate. Room rates: \$109 single/double; \$129 triple/quad.

Members' News

Seena Fazel (Oxford, UK), has published the multi-author volume, *The Bahá'ís of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies* (Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies Series).

Duane L. Herrmann (Topeka, Kansas) has published *By Thy Strengthening Grace: The First One Hundred Years of the Bahá'í Faith in Topeka: 1906-2006*, which was awarded the Ferguson Kansas History Book Award for 2007 for its contribution to advancing Kansas history. Herrmann is also featured on the Web site for the Kansas Center for the Book and on the State of Kansas poetry Web site.

ABS—Japan

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Newly emerging religious organizations are attracting millions of believers. The presentation then related the Bahá'í teachings to Japanese religious attitudes and examined insights from the Bahá'í Faith, drawing upon previously conducted surveys as well as data from Mr. Sonda's own study.

The final presentation was Koga Sugimoto's "Unity and Consultation: A Case in Producing a Concert." Sugimoto is producing a concert to be held in Tokyo sponsored by an organization that helps the disabled enter the workforce and become independent. Sugimoto tried to create a piece which incorporated instruments which would not normally be thought to go together, and thus overcome a kind of artificial "barrier" between instruments—in short, "unity in diversity." The musicians have been holding meetings to become prepared to express the theme of the concert, and the meetings have become forums for "consultation" aimed at generating consensus. Thus, the Bahá'í perspective is interwoven in the very fabric of the concert.

After the conference, a group of attendees visited Meiji Shrine guided by Hiroshi Tsunoi.

—Report by Sandra Fotos

Bahá'ís needed to serve at World Centre

At this moment, positions are open in several departments of the Bahá'í World Centre inclusive of but not limited to:

- Human Resource Management Specialists—experienced or qualified recruitment or human resource management specialists.
- Managers—experienced managers, able to develop and facilitate operational plans, manage budgets, serve on management committees, supervise staff, and have strong communication and computer skills. Experience in industries such as mechanical/electrical engineering, trades, horticulture, or landscaping is beneficial.
- Office Managers—individuals experienced in office administration and organization. Excellent skills in written English, the ability to prioritize and to work independently as well as with a group are essential.
- Translators—experienced or qualified translators fluent in English and one or more of the following: Persian, Arabic, or French.
- Writers—individuals experienced with writing, either for academic, journalism, or business purposes.

If you would like to find out about other positions and skills needed at the World Centre, or how to apply, visit <bahai.bwc.org/service> or contact the Office of Personnel via email at <serve@bwc.org>.