

ABS Bulletin

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

“Rethinking human nature”

34th Annual Conference to be in Vancouver

The beautiful city of Vancouver, British Columbia, has been chosen as the site of the 34th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America, which will be held 12–15 August 2010 on the theme “Rethinking Human Nature.”

How can Bahá'í scholarship contribute to the emergence of a new consensus regarding human nature?

How we see social reality depends largely on our assumptions, but much contemporary discourse implicitly or explicitly assumes that human nature is self-interested and competitive and that human relations are necessarily conflict based. In economics, political science, sociology, education, law, international relations, and even religious studies, theories have been built upon these assumptions.

Consequently, social institutions, media representations, the arts, and popular culture largely reflect and reinforce them.

Despite this prevailing world view, new understandings of human nature are emerging at the margins of many academic disciplines. These acknowledge the human potential not only for egoism but also for altruism, not only for competition but also for coopera-

tion. Such emerging scientific understandings are further supported by the world's great religious systems, which offer spiritual and social practices designed to cultivate our altruistic and cooperative potential. Yet these scientific and religious insights continue to be eclipsed by an entrenched model of human nature based on egoism and conflict.

Mindful of the complementary insights of both science and religion and in collaboration with like-minded individuals, Bahá'ís can draw upon both the Bahá'í writings and emerging knowledge in various disciplines to articulate and advance new models of human nature. The experiences of the Bahá'í community and others can be investigated to lend support and insight to these efforts. The annual ABS conference is one venue where scholarship and ongoing collaborative efforts can be fostered.

You are invited to explore these and related questions at the 34th ABS Annual Conference.

Appendix

“Indeed, so much have aggression and



Canada Place, Vancouver (Photo: Tourism Vancouver)

conflict come to characterize our social, economic and religious systems, that many have succumbed to the view that such behaviour is intrinsic to human nature and therefore ineradicable.

“With the entrenchment of this view, a paralyzing contradiction has developed in human affairs. On the one hand, people of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but their longing for peace and harmony, for an end to the harrowing apprehensions tormenting their daily lives. On the other, uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive and thus incapable of erecting a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system

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News from student workshops

Louhelen

Over the weekend of 30 October–1 November, the Association for Bahá'í Studies cosponsored a College Student Weekend at Louhelen Bahá'í School in Davison, Michigan (photo



above). The focus of the weekend was participation in the “discourses of society”—being present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on governance, the environment, the equality of men and women, human rights, etc. Participants explored putting the Five Year Plan framework into action on campus, the social spaces for discourse available to students, the ways in which studies in Bahá'í scholarship and in an academic discipline increase capacities to participate effectively in both fields, and what it means to “achieve coherence” in these two arenas of service.

Young scholars gathering with John Hatcher

The first of a series of gatherings for young scholars, sponsored by the ABS and led by John Hatcher, Professor Emeritus of the University of South Florida, was held on 24 October at the Hatchers' farm in Plant City (photo below). The gatherings, to be held one Saturday each month, will explore topics including the Bahá'í texts on the importance of scholarship; research techniques and terminology for use in applying Bahá'í teachings to research papers, theses, and dissertations; deepening an understanding of Bahá'í concepts related to fields of study; challenges faced by Bahá'í students and scholars in confronting materialist and relativistic attitudes in particular fields; cultivating one's own scholarly voice through workshops and peer critiques; acquiring a deeper understanding of Bahá'í theological and philosophical concepts through audio and video talks by esteemed speakers; learning how to collaborate with other scholars; and enjoying the company



of others who desire to integrate their Bahá'í life with their chosen field of study.

For more information, contact Lucia Hatcher, tel.: 813-717-7742; email: <lhatcher@tampabay.rr.com>.

Annual conference call

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giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on co-operation and reciprocity.

“As the need for peace becomes more urgent, this fundamental contradiction, which hinders its realization, demands a reassessment of the assumptions upon which the commonly held view of mankind's historical predicament is based.

Dispassionately examined, the evidence reveals that such conduct, far from expressing man's true self, represents a distortion of the human spirit. Satisfaction on this point will enable all people to set in motion constructive social forces which, because they are consistent with human nature, will encourage harmony and cooperation instead of war and conflict” (The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* [1985]).

“Throughout history—and despite theologically or ideologically inspired assurances to the contrary—power

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The *ABS Bulletin* (ISSN 0840-6138) is published quarterly by the Association for Bahá'í Studies, a nonprofit scholarly organization with 1833 international open memberships and 113 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

International Environment Forum conference session

“The essential role of religion in fostering a sustainable world”

The second plenary session, organized by the International Environment Forum (IEF) at the 2009 annual ABS conference in Washington, DC, was a three-pronged approach to “the challenge of sustainability.” Peter Adriance, an IEF board member and an external representative of the American Bahá’í community, made a compelling argument for the importance of spirituality in the environmental dialogue. He began with an illustrated meditation from many faith traditions, from the Bhagavad-Gita to Chief Seattle to Bahá’u’lláh’s ever-resonant call that “the earth is but one country. . . .”

Following this devotional period, Mr. Adriance sketched a quick history of the Bahá’í community’s contributions to the global discourse on sustainability. For example, it made a substantial contribution in 1991 in a statement on the proposed Earth Charter, in which it maintained that “the world’s religious communities have a major role to play in inspiring [the necessary qualities for sustainable development].” In fact, much of Mr. Adriance’s career has paralleled this growing level of interaction between the Bahá’ís and many governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

For example, in 2002 Gary Gardner (of Worldwatch Institute) wrote a paper, “Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World,” that explicitly linked the effects and influence of religion to environmental issues. It was the first time Worldwatch had written about religion in its twenty-five years. (This later became a chapter in *State of the World 2003*, a major annual publication of the Institute, and Gardner continued to write in this vein. He lists five key “assets” that religious communities offer to the

work of sustainability: strong capacity to shape the worldviews of members; moral authority; the sheer numbers of their adherents, a critical mass for making change; material resources in support of the same; and capacity to build and reshape and repurpose community.

Tony Deamer, a Bahá’í in Vanuatu, is cited early in Gardner’s 2006 book *Inspiring Progress* as an inventor and community activist, someone whose long-time commitment to the Faith was fundamental to the ethical and effective work he was doing to create sustainable practices in his island nation.

While the Bahá’í International Community has been making its contributions to the discourse on environmental issues (and human rights, racism, development, etc.) for decades, there are many other examples of this movement. Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-founder of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, said, “No other group of institutions can wield the particular moral authority of the religions.” In 2008, the Sierra Club published its first report on the engagement of religious institutions, called *Faith in Action*: “Lasting social change rarely takes place without the active engagement of communities of faith.” In an attempt to show the energy available in faith community, the Rev. Sally Bingham founded “Episcopal Power and Light,” which quickly widened its base in renaming itself “Interfaith Power and Light.” Mr. Adriance also mentioned the Unitarian Universalist church’s “Green Sanctuary Program,” which holds that “these environmental crises may be the greatest moral challenge facing humanity in the 21st century.” On a lighter but no less committed note, Jewish community initiatives have taken such titles as “How Many

Jews Does it Take to Change a Lightbulb?” (promoting the move away from incandescent bulbs) and “Take a Scientist to Synagogue.” Not least, the IEF itself, a Bahá’í-inspired forum for knowledge sharing, education, and information exchange, is among the many faith-based projects that are making efforts, from neighborhoods to nations, to green their practices and raise the consciousness of their communities.

Mr. Adriance then spoke of the need to balance scientific and spiritual insights. Scientist Gus Speth, Dean of the Yale School of Forestry, had once believed that science could solve the earth’s pollution problems. He no longer does. He told an evangelical group in 2008: “I now see that we need a cultural and spiritual transformation” and that religious communities are indispensable to this process.

Despite the public sense that evangelical forms of Christianity, for example, and scientists are inevitably hostile, there are growing collaborations and “meetings of the minds” between these two ostensibly enemy camps.

The Bahá’í community’s major response is to develop a global network of training institutes and supporting activities, bringing spiritual and other forms of education to families and neighborhoods. Certainly the raising of ecological consciousness at the grassroots is among the things such institutes can foster. In the words of the Universal House of Justice, in a May 2001 message, “Humanity’s crying need . . . calls for a fundamental change of consciousness . . . that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family.”

—Report by Jay Howden

Annual conference call

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has been largely interpreted as advantage enjoyed by persons or groups. Often, indeed, it has been expressed simply in terms of means to be used against others. This interpretation of power has become an inherent feature of the culture of division and conflict that has characterized the human race during the past several millennia, regardless of the social, religious, or political orientations that have enjoyed ascendancy in given ages, in given parts of the world. In general, power has been an attribute of individuals, factions, peoples, classes, and nations. It has been an attribute especially associated with men rather than women. Its chief effect has been to confer on its beneficiaries the ability to acquire, to surpass, to dominate, to resist, to win.

“In its traditional, competitive expression, power is as irrelevant to the needs of humanity’s future as would be the technologies of railway locomotion to the task of lifting space satellites into orbits around the earth.

“The analogy is more than a little apt. The human race is being urged by the requirements of its own maturation to free itself from its inherited understanding and use of power. That it can do so is demonstrated by the fact that, although dominated by the traditional conception, humanity has always been able to conceive of power in other forms critical to its hopes. History provides ample evidence that, however intermittently and ineptly, people of every background, throughout the ages, have tapped a wide range of creative resources within themselves” (Bahá’í International Community, *The Prosperity of Humankind* [1995]).

Call for presentations

Proposals are invited for presenta-

tions on (but not limited to) the above themes, as well as themes pertaining to creative processes and concepts within the performing arts, visual arts, and other modes of artistic expression.

Presentations must explore an original question or proposition through a clearly described method or approach. Proposals must outline the presentation in detail and provide sufficient background on the topic and on the presenter’s qualifications for the review panel to judge the value of the contribution. A broad range of qualifications is recognized, beyond purely academic and/or professional. Proposals must be for substantially original work, unpublished and not previously presented.

While many presentations are in the style of talks, the use of the arts and other diverse approaches is also encouraged. Presentations should be seen as a collaborative process, where the speaker engages conference participants in discussion on new work, which further advances that work.

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 website, and you can also contact the ABS if you would like further assistance with preparing a proposal.

Proposals must be submitted

online (go to <www.bahai-studies.ca>). Potential presenters unable to submit online may contact the Association for Bahá’í Studies, 34 Copernicus St., Ottawa, ON Canada K1N 7K4; tel.: (613) 233-1903; fax: (613) 233-3644; email: <abs-na@bahai-studies.ca> for information on alternate means of submission. The deadline for submitting proposals is **1 April 2010**.

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. Reservations must be made directly with the conference hotel, the Hyatt Regency Vancouver, 655 Burrard Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 2R7; tel.: 604-683-1234; toll-free reservations number: 800-233-1234. Mention the Association for Bahá’í Studies conference to receive the special conference rate.

Room rates: \$129 single/double; \$149 triple; \$159 quad. Rates are guaranteed only until **30 June 2010**. From 1 to 16 July the rates increase by \$10.00. Reservations made after the cut-off dates will be based on availability at the hotel’s prevailing rates. Conference rates are extended to four days before and after the conference dates.

2009 annual conference CDs/DVDs now available

If you weren’t able to attend the Annual Conference in person, you can now order CDs/DVDs of the conference plenary presentations—along with all the other publications of the Association for Bahá’í Studies—at our online store, on the ABS Web site. You can visit the store by going to <<http://www.bahai-studies.ca/publications.php>>. Now you can register for ABS conferences, start or renew your membership or affiliate subscription, give one as a gift, and purchase ABS literature and CDs/DVDs of conference sessions all in one place—at the ABS Web site!