

# ABS Bulletin

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

## 30th Annual Conference report

About 1100 people attended the 30th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America in San Francisco over the weekend of 10–13 August. They came to hear eight plenary presentations and choose from over 60 simultaneous sessions on the theme of “Religion and the Evolution of Consciousness.” Thirty people attended from outside North America, representing 12 countries. Of note was the attendance of about 300 students.

Response from participants has been very positive, emphasizing the high quality of the plenary presentations and the overall coherence and accessibility of the theme.

The conference helps with several goals of the Association, including providing a venue for established and emerging scholars as well as opportunities to receive feedback on works in progress, to network, to give and receive mentoring, and of course a chance to consult at the Annual General Meeting. It is also a chance to showcase artists in the community, and a fine evening program was prepared for Friday night, with newer and more experienced artists, and fea-

turing the inimitable Red Grammer. Open-stage coffee houses were also held on three nights.

A special session was held for possible contributors to the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* by new editor Nancy

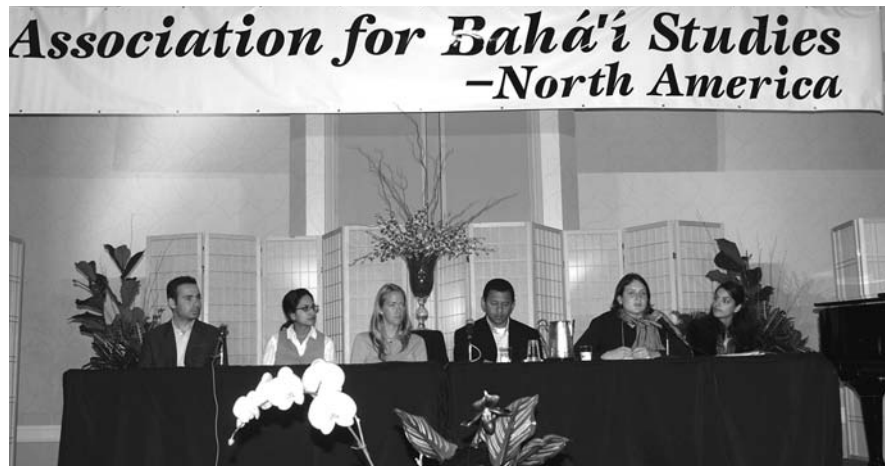
and breakout sessions raised questions that were often addressed in subsequent plenary talks.

The theme of “Religion and the Evolution of Consciousness” was elaborated in the theme statement along

two main subthemes. First, presenters were invited to explore religion itself as a principal force impelling the development of human consciousness. This theme could be addressed through the study of religious history and teachings, through interdisciplinary studies of religious reformation, and through comparisons of complemen-

tary systems. Religion's role in the evolving relationships between the individual and society in fostering values and goals of social justice, and the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting social cohesion and peace could be examined. Closer to home, systematic learning in the context of

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*Young scholars panel: David Diehl, Shabnam Azad, Rachel Enslow, William Silva, Anne Gillette, and Shahla Maghzi-Ali*

Ackerman, and a session was also held for young scholars, where the new workbook *Scholarship, Service, and Social Action in the Context of the Divine Plan* was introduced (it can be downloaded at <<http://www.bahai-studies.ca/resources.php>>).

The strong plenary presentations set the tone for the conference, contributing to the cohesion of the plenary and simultaneous session programs. While breakout presentations need not be on the theme, over half of them addressed at least one of the suggested subtopics. Participants could thus find further discussion of plenary content in a breakout presentation,

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## Annual conference

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the Five-Year Plan could be explored.

Given the nature and role of religion, specific examination and critique of our emerging global civilization was the second main subtopic suggested. Within the community, presenters could consider the role of the core activities and of capacity building through the Bahá'í Writings in fostering a global civilization. In the world community, the nexus between spiritual values and technology could be explored, along with the impact of the interaction of science and religion upon social advancement.

In the first plenary, John Grazel, the new Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, directly addressed the nexus of spiritual values and technology through his topic of the union of religion and consciousness. Science, he argued, has been captured by forces of material power and gain. Its connection to conscience has been obscured by a linear model describing a continuum of scientific activity from pure research to direct application, but excluding the scientist's responsibility for research outcomes.

Grazel revised an alternative model originally proposed by Philip Stokes to establish the relationship between application and pure research in all science. Grazel proposed that motivations beyond both pure research and application and relating higher goals of conscience also had to become an intrinsic part of science. An anthropologist and lawyer with 27 years of experience in development work, Dr. Grayzel opened by noting the existence of science in indigenous societies, whose different social and cultural context often leaves it unrecognized.

This divergence between Western science and other science, which also stems from false distinctions between religions, and false dichotomies

between values and research, had been explored earlier in several presentations on "alternative" health practices. Ingrid Hauck explored physical and metaphysical understandings of the body in Western and Eastern religions, and the different perceptions and approaches to healing they allow. Joseph Nga gave an engaging lecture on the differences between West African holistic healing and Western medicine, the growing evidence linking emotional and physical well-being, and the difficulty of acknowledging such links in the cultural and economic context of Western science. Neda Rafati provided an overview of emerging links between mental health and spirituality, a topic further developed by Nossrat Peseschkian and Christian Heinrichs.

Other related breakout sessions addressed the direct impact that religious consciousness can have on scientific and scholarly practice. This is the inherent central focus of the Bioethics and Health Science Special Interest Group. In highly popular sessions, David Smith examined the importance of the spiritual transformation of the physician, and Beth Bowen reviewed a Bahá'í consultative process on those spiritual and ethical issues that affect medical practice.

Robert Kim-Farley and Sandra Bean drew attention to the contribution that spiritual principle can make in overcoming racial disparities in health and HIV/AIDS counseling. Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, presenting on "Science and the Soul," summarized the emerging exploration of religious values in medicine in medical schools, and the new understandings it is creating.

The subtheme of religion and the evolving relationship between the individual and society was ably addressed by Roshan Danesh's plenary



*Roshan Danesh*

presentation on "Church and State in the Bahá'í Faith." In an informal but rigorous talk, he traced the origins of the debate to eleventh-century European Christian society, emphasizing that the very phrase "church and state" cannot capture the Bahá'í conception of either religion or governance. He related the social concept of "shared meaning," as the basis for law, to Bahá'u'lláh's practice of gradually revealing guidance and enacting laws according to the capacities of the believers. Bahá'í discussions of religion

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and governance must acknowledge that the relationship between the Revelation and governance will evolve, and that its features are dependent upon new shared meanings and understandings of the Faith, which can only emerge with time. We must be cautious about trying to find the “right answer.”

Marie Gervais’s examination of religion and multiculturalism in Canadian education most directly complemented Dr. Danesh’s talk. She examined four case studies of childhood religious experience to demonstrate how they could not be addressed under conventional divisions of the secular and sacred in education. Numerous breakout presentation sessions also addressed issues of social values and governance within the Bahá’í or the greater communities.

Peter Terry’s well-attended presentation on the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice was engaging, creatively conveyed as a dialogue with eminent Bahá’í scholar Udo Schaefer (whose responses were read). Subtle aspects of governance, infallibility, and our cultural assumptions were raised, and clearly much more time was desired for discussion.

Engineers Farjam Majd and Saba Mahanian contrasted social systems built upon conscious intelligence versus those built upon instinct. Martha Absher discussed how epistemic change could affect the political processes fostering gender equality. Economics student Reed Harvey examined the practical consequences of the amoral basis of neoclassical economics, while Nousha Etemad had participants explore the economic benefits of integrating spiritual values, which contrast with conventional

assumptions of the causes of profit.

In a panel on the University as an institution, Hossain Danesh presented the experience of a new Non-Governmental Organization, Gordon Naylor discussed the ins and outs of interacting with local government in establishing a Bahá’í-inspired university, and Pierre-Yves Mocquais explored the qualities of scholars in a very well-received presentation on *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Harold Rosen, with Shahrokh Monjazeb, explored the possibilities of a Bahá’í post-secondary academy.

Turning to the topic of the effect of Bahá’í principles and practice on existing governance, Ken Cabot analyzed how principles of cluster formation might change existing neighborhood organization and practice which



Behrooz Sabet

enable passive school segregation. Jeffrey Huffines also focused conference participants outward, introducing the work of the Bahá’í International Community and engaging

with critical social concerns in a workshop based on the new document *The Search for Values in an Age of Transition*.

The subtopic of creating a more profound conception of unity through conceptions of true human nature was most directly addressed by Janet Khan in her Balyuzi lecture on rank and station, by Behrooz Sabet in his plenary presentation on the emergence of global ethics, and by Ibrahim Amanat’s breakout presentation on “The Ego and the Soul.” Dr. Amanat, a practicing psychiatrist, was perhaps the only presenter to address, though



Shahla Maghzi-Ali

indirectly, the complex issue of evil, as redefined in *One Common Faith*.

Presenting the 24th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, “Rank and Station: Reflections on the Life of Bahíyyih Khánúm,” Dr. Khan first provided an overview of the concepts of rank and station, and their gradual emergence and eventual identification with authority and power in Christianity and Islam. She identified features of the Bahá’í Revelation and in the character of Bahíyyih Khánúm that prevented the abuse of rank and authority, justified her rank, and made her an effective administrator. Through Bahíyyih Khánúm’s humility; her availability to others; her willingness to learn, adapt, and to foster innovation, as well as her unwillingness to use power either impose her will or seek vengeance for past wrongs, she was able to discharge the tremendous responsibilities assigned her by the newly appointed Guardian in a manner which fostered social cohesion.

Dr. Amanat drew upon conceptions of the self in psychosocial literature, mystical Islamic writings, and the Seven Valleys. The emergence of the ego and selfish identities and roles was explored to explain socially dysfunctional behavior and communication. The solution, however, was not improvement of the self, but death of the self—a more radical idea.

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## Annual conference

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Morality within the emerging global civilization was more specifically Dr. Sabet's concern, and he outlined a complex and fascinating model of reality in which ethical behavior is an emergent reality. That is to say, ethics emerge when spiritual teachings are realized in social and economic systems. The market system itself can be viewed as a moral discipline and practice. In this regard, he postulated, the Bahá'í Faith's integrative model is not naturalistic, but neither is it metaphysical in the traditional use of the word. "Spirituality," he argued, "can be defined as a process that begins with knowledge and ends in moral action; and the moral action, in the process, becomes one with the knowledge—a true praxis."

At the heart of such change is a reconceptualization of human nature and religion, which many presenters addressed in diverse sessions. In addition to Ibrahim Amanat's presentation, William Barnes delivered a conceptually dense but very stimulating overview of new theories that see consciousness as intrinsic to the universe. David Wellman gave a clear and accessible overview of the underlying unifying features of science and religion, and how the Writings challenge our conceptions of both; Ron Shigeta reviewed the "Selfish Gene" concept; and Stephen Friberg continued his exploration of conceptions of evolution.

Parallels between counseling psychology and the goals of the Faith were explored by Taravat Ostovar, while Justice St. Rain presented an intriguing model of consciousness, both presentations engaging participants in discussion. Phillip Tussing struggled through technical difficulties to present an original work on prayer, the scientific understandings of language, and the concepts of neuro-

linguistic programming. Inspired by last year's plenary talk on neuroscience, the Science and Religion Special Interest Group organized an impressive panel on "The Neuroscience of Consciousness," with invited speakers. They introduced and explored recent theories and evidence which seem to take neuroscience beyond strictly materialist conceptions.

The role of religion and the divine in inspiring the arts was examined by Jalal Quinn, who used her own paintings to discuss "Saneh', The Fashioner"; Anne Perry, who examined examples of religious inspiration in the arts within and without the Faith; and Payman Dehghani, who proposed historic literary foundations for Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

One of the more original presentations regarding the reconceptualization of religion was Susan Maneck's, which moved beyond discussion of laws and successorship to examine "The Covenant as Responsiveness." Ian Kluge also continued his profound examination of Buddhist ontology, connecting it to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the unity of religions, while Nadema Agard used a unique approach through the arts and readings from Native American authors and visionaries to show the compatibility of Native American and Bahá'í beliefs, and John Steere compared the relatively unknown Gospel of Thomas with the Hidden Words. Finally, sociologist David Diehl, with Ron Shigeta, gave the only presentation which analyzed rising receptivity to religious matters, examining the impact of "practical spirituality" in American Christianity.

The complexity of modernity and its current crisis was addressed by sociologist Hoda Mahmoudi in her



Jeffrey Huffines

plenary presentation on "The Permanence of Change." While both positive and negative changes are associated with modernity, modernity has also been diagnosed as an attempt to control, and to create, a world without surprises. Postmodern criticisms of modernity reject both the tendency to control and the ideal of a social direction or goal underlying modernist theories. However, this criticism has produced a contradiction in which individual freedoms and diversity become primary values, yet lack the social solidarity for their realization. Dr. Mahmoudi then outlined the capacity of the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual conception of social change to address the negative aspects of modernity.

Behrooz Sabet continued the examination of modernity in his deep exploration of *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concepts of modernity, and their under-acknowledged contribution to contemporary Iranian society. Others presented some of the problems of modernity in more detail. Theodore Breton showed how the laissez-faire capitalist conception of economic growth is invalid, but that a role for education can possibly

be integrated into broader definitions of market economics. Sylvia Kaye examined the benefits and limitations of reparative justice in South Africa, and Shamil Fattakhov with Trip Barthel described and evaluated a moral education program in Russia and the U.S. Both looked more specifically at how Bahá'í principle could apply to concrete social dilemmas. Trip Barthel also attempted a correlation of world events to propose 1992 as a pivotal year in the movement toward the Lesser Peace.

Holly Hanson and her four collaborators had participants identify the social concerns of their peers and attempt to formulate understandings and explanations through an examination of the Writings. In a wholly different approach, architect Barbara Ruys addressed the transformation of society and consciousness through a workshop on the concept of Beauty. Last, but not least, Bahman Nadimi addressed social evolution through parallels with the controversial model of Intelligent Design.

Member of the Continental Board of Counsellors Farzin Aghdasi and Member of the Universal House of Justice Peter Khan both addressed scholarship and social change in the context of the Five-Year Plan, from the plenary stage. Dr. Aghdasi examined false dichotomies, the nature of learning, the scholar, new science, epistemology, and spiritual enterprise.

To address the contemporary gap between faith and reason, he identified a hierarchy of sciences, from physical sciences, life sciences, neuroscience, behavioral/social/psychological sciences, and sciences of intuition and insight. These reflect the qualities of constraint and emergence: upper levels must conform to the laws of the lower levels (constraint), but they exhibit laws not reducible to the lower levels (emergence). One of the most memorable points identified the qualities of a scholar by contrast-



Janet Khan, 24th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecturer

ing Bahá'u'lláh's two Tablets to Mánikchí Sáhíb, recently translated and published in *The Tabernacle of Unity*. The Counsellor suggested that, by using Mírzá Áqá Ján's voice in the second Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh allowed a different discourse, masked His ascendancy, and preserved Mánikchí Sáhíb's dignity, while answering his questions.

In his presentation Dr. Khan emphasized the importance of education in a society which is placing stresses upon educational systems, and admonished Bahá'ís not to fall into similar traps or to confuse the priority given the core activities with exclusivity, to the detriment of other needs, such as the "inescapable duty," assigned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of acquiring knowledge.

The Guardian, Dr. Khan noted, described a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing relationship between secular knowledge and the Bahá'í teachings, and stated that education is necessary for "efficient service." Bahá'í scholarship is multidisciplinary, including the correlation of the Teachings to social issues, and also theological, historical, and other approaches.

Combining scholarship and the core activities also contributes to the long-term development of a global

civilization. This is because the core activities address a 6,000-year-old pattern of "hyperactive leaders" and "hyper-passive followers." As the Institute process creates a community with more engaged members, scholars can assist with the emergence and mentoring of new scholars.

Dr. Khan's talk was reinforced by the Young Scholars panel, which has been a feature of the last four conferences. Panelists Shahla Maghzi-Ali, Shabnam Azad, David Diehl, Rachel Enslow, Anne Gillette, and William Silva stressed the integration of education with professional and social lives, and identified specific qualities, attitudes, and schools of thought that aided their studies and connected the Faith to their work and colleagues. The panel deliberately left most of their time for questions from the floor, and much panel content developed as a result.

Two breakout presentations also focused directly on the core activities. Vicki Abel examined the changing relationships between people of different class and educational background in a single C cluster in Iowa, and described how the Institute process improved confidence and participation.

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Nazanin Zargarpour engaged a large group in a workshop in order to consider the relevance of approaches in education that foster continual improvement to the current endeavors of the Bahá'í community.

David Piff offered a thought-provoking analysis of the story-telling practices of early Western Bahá'ís, sounding a cautionary note about the limits of certain types of story-telling, and generating a lively discussion.

Not all breakout presentations were as directly related to the theme, of course, and other notable presentations addressed Bahá'í history, race unity and ethnic diversity, unity, theology, in-depth study of the Writings, and community concerns such as marriage and parenting.

Joy Wiczorek and Ron Shigeta continued their examination and development of marriage training initiatives, a presentation complemented by Daniel Lord's social critique of modern pressures on marriage and legal trends leading to its individualization. Educator Belinda Hill gave a well-attended and well-received presentation on current research on child development. Marriage and family sessions are always well attended, and



*Holly Hanson*

are often not addressed from a scholarly viewpoint in the community. Finally, Duane Herrmann's overview of the Bahá'í Faith under Nazi Germany revealed, in its large attendance, a real hunger for histories of the diversity of the Bahá'í community, and a continuing fascination with this distinct marker of modern world history.

Shahrokh Monjazeb presented a fine exposition on the historical detail surrounding Bahá'u'lláh's letters to nineteenth century political rulers. He also participated with Michele Thelen-Steere, Tuli Rode, and Siamak Motahari in their examination of The Seven Valleys and personal transformation.

John Richard Davidson and Salman Oskooi provided different

models for studying and deepening, through correlating the Platonic idea of the brain with the teachings, on one hand, and through ensuring comprehensive examinations of Writings on controversial topics, on the other. Irshat Madyarov and Barbara Loeding continued their examination of the intricacies and intimacies of student needs which affect distance learning.

The reestablishment of a Special Interest Group on Race Unity and Intercultural Issues produced the first extended session on this topic in several years. Paula Drewek gave a practical and clear presentation on integrating a college. The SIG coordinator Camille Henderson gave an engaging session on achieving race unity. She noted that many young people attended the SIG business meeting looking for a discussion. At least three other breakout sessions also addressed race and intercultural issues, so clearly this is a timely rebirth of the SIG.

In the arenas of theology and Bahá'í history, there were many fine examinations of the lives of Central Figures. Jack McLean's paper (read by Peter Terry) used the life of the Báb to examine heroism; essay competition winner Missagh Ziaei examined 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a paradigmatic teacher of the Faith; and Omid Ghaemmaghami presented eloquently, to a packed room, on the station and function of the twelve Imams.

Overall, the greater coherence and higher level of presentations noted this year can be attributed to—in addition to the plenary speakers themselves—the new review process and conference structure reflecting the work of the SIGs on one hand, and the inspiring theme on the other.

*—Report by Kim Naqvi, with thanks to all those who contributed insights and information*

## ABS has a new online store

If you weren't able to attend the Annual Conference in person, you can now order the audio CDs of the conference plenary presentations—along with all the other publications of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—at our new online store, on the ABS Web site. You can visit the store by going to <http://www.bahai-studies.ca/publications.php>.

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