

ABS Bulletin

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

33rd Annual Conference reports

About a thousand people attended the 33rd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America held 13–16 August at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D. C. The conference participants represented (in addition to the U.S. and Canada) Australia, Austria, Belarus, Bermuda, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, Puerto Rico, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom.

The conference was marked by several unique features, including the first collaboration at the conference level with another agency, the International Environment Forum (IEF). The conference theme of “Environments,” with its broad consideration of natural, built, and social/cultural environments, had a strong focus on current affairs and scholarship, both in its plenary and its

simultaneous breakout sessions. Breakout presentations were not limited to the theme, and other notable contributions, for example, included a panel on Bahá'í apologetics and continuing explorations of how Bahá'ís can address the “new atheism.”

The seeds for collaboration with the IEF were sown several years ago,



Mark Perry (Photo by Lucienne François)

with internal consultation in the Forum, and came to fruition when the theme of “Environments” became timely for the Association for Bahá'í Studies. With several years of collaboration with other agencies under its belt, the IEF's organizers were in a position to make a strong contribution to the larger conference.

The conference took its inspiration from a quotation from the Bahá'í Writings: “We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside and say that once one of these



Payam Akhavan (Photo by Lucienne François)

is reformed, everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.”

In his keynote address on Thursday, Arthur Lyon Dahl, President of the International Environment Forum and retired Deputy Assistant Executive Director of the United Nations Environmental Program, explained that the conference “explores the relationship between our outer and inner environments, between the planet and our

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Kit Bigelow (Photo by Lucienne François)

Annual conference

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souls, between science and spirituality.”

“We still look at economic issues separately from social or environmental questions despite all the efforts to integrate them,” he said, calling for a transformation of environments from the inside out.

Dr. Dahl pointed to grassroots community development as part of the creative solution we must embrace, noting as part of this process the culture of learning and community development nurtured over the past decade in Bahá’í communities around the world. This process, he said, will “determine the sustainability of our relationship with our local environment,” adding that “self-sufficiency may be a distant memory.”

Science does not have the answers, he reminded the audience, saying that there is a “spiritual danger in the pride to think that we can know everything through science.” Science uncovers the facts—for example, that smoking causes lung cancer—but is powerless to change behavior. What changes behavior is spiritual and cultural transformation.

The call to action, he concluded, must include fostering and encouraging a new generation of generalists able to integrate knowledge across disciplines to lead societal and environmental transformation at all levels, from the individual to the family and community, nation, and planet. “We are all challenged to equip ourselves for this task, to consider creatively

how spiritual principles can guide us in laying new intellectual foundations for social change.”

Friday morning’s panel introduced a more general audience to current thought on the role of human maturity in effecting change.

Peter Adriance reviewed the growing recognition by environmental activists that religious organizations can and need to play a role. Geographer Peter Brown of McGill University challenged the largely Bahá’í audience to engage with a radically different perspective on humans and nature, at one point defining human distinction as its “amphibious” nature; we live both in time and outside of time, and therefore relate to the future differently.

Arthur Dahl responded to Dr. Brown’s comments, and session chair Tahirih Naylor moderated additional questions from the audience. A transcript of Dr. Dahl’s talk and copies of his slides can be viewed at <http://iefconf2009.wordpress.com/2009/07/25/transforming-environments/>, and Dr. Brown’s slides can be viewed and downloaded at <http://iefconf2009.wordpress.com/category/economy/>.

On Saturday morning Soli Shahvar, of the University of Haifa, presented his recent work on the Iranian Bahá’í



The Young Scholars Panel (Photo by Evan Wilder)

schools in a plenary session, and addressed the deeper issue of missing Bahá’í history in a breakout session.

Dr. Shahvar had been intrigued by the paradox of Bahá’í schools emerging under the oppressive Qajar dynasty, then being abolished under the supposedly more liberal Pahlavi dynasty.

His unique perspective as an Israeli Jew of Iranian background raised questions in his mind that many Bahá’ís, who have grown accustomed

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ABS Awards 2009

The Association for Bahá’í Studies–North America Award for Distinguished Scholarship–Book Category was presented to John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat for their book, *Adam’s Wish: Unknown Poetry of Tahirih*. The Award for Distinguished Scholarship–Graduate Thesis Category was presented to Donna Hakimian for her master’s thesis, “Resistance, Resilience, and the Role of Narrative: Lessons from the Experiences of Iranian Bahá’í Women Prisoners.”

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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Lucienne François.

The 27th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture

“A painting is a set of relationships. Artists work in the space in the hope that what they produce will be filled with meaning,” said Otto Donald Rogers, addressing the 33rd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies. Mr. Rogers, whose works hang in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada, as well as in Europe and the United States, delivered the 27th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture.

During his address, images of eight of his most recent works were projected on huge screens beside him, encouraging the audience to “appreciate the static.” “We artists wonder,” he said, “at viewers who read the title of a work, spend a few seconds, and then move on.” In our hectic lives, we have become unable to appreciate stillness. “Motion,” he said, “is one form of the creative act, and stillness is another.”

He took as his topic “The Artist and the Grammarian,” explaining the dichotomy in this way—the artist symbolizes risk taking, leaping into space, whereas the grammarian assesses risks and hesitates before that space. He focused on four overarching themes—the gift of the intellect, opening or invitation, process, and form.

Mr. Rogers described art as a relationship between the object and the viewer; in that relationship is meaning. The viewer is able simultaneously to see texture, light, and form in a work of art—this intellectual and spiritual ability is a metaphor for learning, and for the culture of learning in which we are engaged as Bahá’ís, he said—one can simultaneously be learning the verities of the Faith, acquiring knowledge of its history, and acquiring zest to share what one is learning.

Another metaphor for this learning, he noted, is found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s description of the relationship between the singer and the listener. When a lis-

tener hears music, there is no actual transfer of anything material, so this connection must therefore have spiritual existence.

A painting is a series of relationships. Artists work in the space, in the hope that what they produce will be filled with meaning. Mr. Rogers reminded the audience that even scientists still do not, in fact, know what “space” is. In the past it was called “the ether.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has called this space the love of God, which, were it to be withdrawn, would cause the collapse of the physical universe.



Otto Donald Rogers (Photo by Evan Wilder)

Cezanne, Mr. Rogers noted, was one of the first painters to leave gaps in his paintings to allow the empty canvas to appear, making it possible for the mind to move into his paintings. “Space is not simply a curtain that hangs behind everything, physicists have found, but it has an intelligence and form. Recent research on brain function has revealed interesting insights. Physicists had thought that the brain’s some two billion neurons are connected in one long string. Yet now, with the development of high-powered microscopes, they have discovered that each neuron is bonded by its own memory. One cluster of neurons is bound to another by some type of memory, but they do not touch.” So scientists have

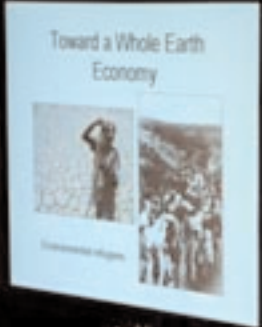
concluded that the vacant gaps, the synaptic place between cells is where the information is contained. These spaces are the secret sites of communication. Likewise, a painting is about the space between things, the way the dark relates to the light, the fast to the slow, stillness to motion, and all happening simultaneously.

He explained his personal artistic process: “I walk into the studio and I see an empty canvas.” This empty canvas is physically bound in space, and intellectually open to the process and form of art. “I have to keep [this space] alive and together so it doesn’t fly off the edges. One must be absolutely precise,” he said. He compared keeping this space alive to the fine tuning of a musical instrument. The use of this space is important, he added. “The mystic knower in Bahá’u’lláh’s Seven Valleys said ‘the death of self is needed here,’ and I think of this every time when I go into the studio. I bring my mind to that edge and I allow the process to move me forward, I run to stay behind the process, to stay up with it. The process has a mind of its own.”

He then likened the artistic process to community building; the process of artistic creation is iterative as is the process of creating community. He appealed especially to Bahá’í youth, to use electronic media and social networking to communicate and create bonds of a faith community much as the early Christians used woodcuts to illuminate their texts with elegance and beauty. We can use illumination, art, in our efforts to transform human hearts.

He concluded with this passage from Bahá’u’lláh: “That which he hath reserved for himself are the cities of men’s hearts.” The believers, the Bahá’ís, are the actual keys to unlock the gates of those cities.

—Report by Sandra Blaine





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Photos Evan Wilder and Lucienne François



Peter Brown (Photo by Evan Wilder)

to the everyday exposure to their own history, sometimes forget to ask.

Likewise, his attention to the appalling absence of Bahá'í history in Iranian historiography contrasted with a tendency for many Bahá'ís to accept this practice as unfortunate, but normal, and illustrated the greater freedom that researchers who are not Bahá'ís have to challenge this Iranian practice as a travesty of academic scholarship. (See page 7 of this *Bulletin* for more about Dr. Shahvar's presentation.)

Dr. Shahvar was followed by a unique panel on social and cultural environments. Social environment is a broad-ranging topic, and was addressed from multiple angles by Kit Bigelow, of the U. S. Office of External Affairs, who spoke on the critically important role of language in creating environments for viable social processes; Mark Perry, formerly of the University of Beirut, who addressed the social and environmental future of the city; and Payam Akhavan, of McGill University's Faculty of Law, who challenged the participants to reconsider their interpretation of the Iranian persecution of the Bahá'í community as solely based on religion, and to consider the impli-

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Announcements

ABS–Japan Annual Conference

The Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies–Japan will be held 19–20 September 2009 at the Tokyo Bahá'í Center. The conference theme is “Ideal Society for the 21st Century.” There will be ten presentations and a workshop on Art and Meditation.

For more information and to register, contact Kimiko Schwerin, e-mail: <kimiko.schwerin@gmail.com>.

Tahirih Justice Center Bahá'í Service Fellowship

The Tahirih Justice Center is a Bahá'í-inspired 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that seeks to enable women and girls who face gender-based violence to access justice, with a particular emphasis on immigrant women.

The Tahirih Justice Center engages in pro bono legal representation and advocacy in cases that champion the rights of women and protect them from international human rights abuses, with legal advocacy including both direct service to individual women and larger efforts to transform policies, develop regulations, and set precedent so that systemic change will ensure the long-term protection of women from violence.

The Center is founded on the belief that the achievement of equality between women and men is necessary if society is to progress and is inspired by the principles of the Bahá'í Faith.

The Tahirih Justice Center is currently accepting applications from Bahá'ís interested in social work case aide/Bahá'í fellowship at

the Tahirih Justice Center. The Center is looking to fill a two-year fellowship from 2009 to 2011 (international candidates will be applying for a 12–18 month fellowship).

For more information on the Tahirih Justice Center and its mission, please visit the Center's Web site: <www.tahirih.org>.

Queries regarding this fellowship may be directed to the Managing Social Worker: Allison Medina, e-mail: <allison@tahirih.org> (please write in the subject field: Bahá'í Service Fellow).

Desert Rose Bahá'í Studies Conference Call

Desert Rose Bahá'í Institute in Eloy, Arizona, is hosting its first Annual Southwest Bahá'í Studies Conference as the program for its traditional Thanksgiving School, 26–29 November.

The theme is “Exploring Our Innate Creativity.” Bahá'í artists and scholars from all fields are invited to participate. All interested persons are welcome. Those wishing to present should submit an abstract of 80–120 words describing their paper or performance.

Presentations will be either 30 minutes or 45 minutes and presenters should specify the time length needed. Those wishing to organize sessions on particular subjects, panels, workshops, etc., should submit a written description.

All abstracts and descriptions may be sent to the conference organizers at <richarddodge2@msn.com>. Information on lodging and other arrangements may be obtained from <lodging@drbi.org>. ☪

Bahá'í schools played an important role in the modernization of Iran

In his conference plenary presentation, “Opening and Closing the Door: The State and Bahá'í Schools in Iran,” Soli Shahvar, Director of the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, Israel, explained the important role that the schools established by Bahá'ís played in Iran's emergence as a modern state. His research question was: Why would the Qajar regime, which so persecuted the Bahá'ís—allow these schools to open and operate—and allow them to exist throughout Iran?

Unlike Christians, the Bahá'ís opened their schools to all, including students who were not their co-religionists.

Turning to the motivation for Bahá'ís to open schools, Dr. Shahvar acknowledged the Bahá'í religion's emphasis on education, and that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had specifically encouraged the Iranian Bahá'í community to emerge from obscurity into the open. “Many non-Bahá'í students attended the schools, and some of them even converted,” said Dr. Shahvar. The schools played an important role in the growth of the Bahá'í community in Iran.”

But in December 1934, after flourishing for decades, the Bahá'í schools were closed. Dr. Shahvar explained that the official reason given was that the schools, which had closed for a Bahá'í Holy Day, were sanctioned for closing on a date that was not an official state-declared holiday. The Bahá'ís had disregarded a previous warning for such a closing, and this had enraged Reza Shah. Shoghi Effendi's strategy was to seek public recognition of the independent nature

of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran including requesting full religious freedom in matters strictly related to their beliefs, as was the practice in Iran for other religions. Bahá'ís remained obedient citizens of the state, but simply pressed for the freedom to practice their religion.

The shah opposed this recognition of the Bahá'í religion as independent. The first National Spiritual Assembly of Iran had been elected on 26 April 1933—a major stage in the institutional development of the Iranian Bahá'í community and another motivating factor in Reza Shah's decision to close the schools. According to Dr. Shahvar, other factors in the schools' closure included the pressure of anti-Bahá'í elements within the Pahlavi state; Reza Shah's growing opposition to Bahá'í universalism against Pahlavi nationalism; as well as Bahá'í religious application—in contrast to the shah's secular application—of education; friendly relations between the Bahá'ís and foreign elements, especially the British; the perception of Bahá'ís as disloyal, and thus as meriting harsh punishment; the growth of the Bahá'í community both geographically and socially (a large number of Muslim students attended the Bahá'í schools).

Bahá'ís, he noted, were scapegoats in the domestic power struggle. Bahá'í women were the first to appear without chadors in the streets, against cultural norms. However, Bahá'ís were protected at one point by Reza Shah in a move designed to irritate the clerics.

Dr. Shahvar projected on the two large screens in the lecture hall historic photos of Bahá'í schools across Iran, including a 1908 photo of the



Soli Shahvar (Photo by Evan Wilder)

Ta'yid Boys School; photos of the Tarbiyat Girls' School in Tehran; the Vahdat-i-Bashar Boys School in Kashan; and a 1928 photo of the Tavakkul Girls' School in Qazvin.

The Bahá'í schools were popular for a number of reasons, he said. These schools served the Iranian state's need for modern schools and education. In addition, non-Bahá'ís attended for many reasons. In remote parts of Iran, these schools were the only schools providing modern education, and in the cities the Bahá'í schools were superior, providing—along with a good education—English-language instruction and an atmosphere of inter-communality that was otherwise missing in Iranian education. He believes that the Bahá'í schools influenced the arts and sciences in Iran, as well as, notably, the emancipation of women. “Iran might have been more democratic today, more respectful of human rights, had these schools remained open,” he said.

Dr. Shahvar said the Bahá'ís comprise the largest religious minority in Iran, and so the question naturally arises, for a scholar specializing in Iran: Why are the Bahá'ís rarely if ever mentioned? Bahá'ís were among the country's diplomats, for example—why are they ignored? His aim is to tell their story, to elucidate their

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cations of such a reinterpretation for Bahá'í identity. If Bahá'ís see the origin of persecution as also reflecting a more general, universal pattern of the powerful, but corrupt, seeking a scapegoat, this allows them to redefine their role in a society which is itself oppressed. In brief, the Bahá'í community's previous role and identity as a generative force for positive social change can be reestablished.

Otto Donald Rogers's Balyuzi lecture was a highlight of the conference for its challenge to the community to consider the arts as both an intellectual and spiritual endeavor. Addressing four themes—the intellect, movement in space, process, and form—he took the audience on a detailed journey of the creative process as a means of exploring of realities that exist on the cusp of the material and spiritual.

The talk itself was preceded by a beautiful singing of the Tablet of Ahmad, to which Mr. Rogers, deeply moved, made several references as an illustration of his theme. Four sets of Mr. Rogers's abstract works were displayed for 15 minutes each during the talk, allowing the audience to consider his thesis that universal realities are captured in abstract art, and that visual art must be carefully examined to be appreciated. (For more on the Balyuzi Lecture, see page 3 of this *Bulletin*.)

Finally, the conference was closed by presentations from Ann Boyles,

member of the Continental Board of Counsellors and a panel of young scholars.

Dr. Boyles addressed the nature of social changes required in the Bahá'í community through a detailed analysis of five factors identified in Michael Karlberg's book, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* as necessary to cultural change. These include de-naturalizing current cultural practices, changing psycho-structural structures, and socio-structural dimensions. In other words, practices of thought, speech, social organization, and behavior need to change profoundly to reflect a new definition of and vision for the Bahá'í community. This process can in part be seen in section XI of the Bahá'í International Community's publication, *Century of Light*.

The Young Scholars Panel included Anisa Khadem Nwakuchu, Maame Nketsiah, and Adam Ludwin, and chaired by Jian Khodadad. The panel was remarkable for its engagement with current theory: Ms. Khadem with the attempt to have religion taken seriously in development studies; Ms. Nketsiah with the gap between theory and practice; and Mr. Ludwin with the potential overlaps and synergies between the Bahá'í teachings, studies at the Harvard Business School, and the process of innovation.

In all, this year's plenary presentations can be said—and were said—to



Tahirih Naylor (Photo by Evan Wilder)

have challenged the audience a little more than in some years, and the breadth and depth of the theme provided for a diversity of topics from a common base.

—Report by Kim Naqvi
and Sandra Blaine

☞ *More conference reports to come in the December issue of the Bulletin!*

Bahá'í schools

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role. "As a scholar," he said, "my aim is to get to the truth, to provide a balanced picture. The role of Bahá'ís in Iranian history is very clear and the story needs to be told."

Dr. Shahvar's book, *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'ís and Modern Education in Iran 1899–1934*, was recently published by I. B. Tauris Academic Studies.

—Report by Sandra Blaine

Order conference DVDs online

If you weren't able to attend the Annual Conference in person, you can now order 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 DVDs of conference sessions all in one place—at the ABS Web site!

Members' News

A-M. Ghadirian (Montreal, Quebec) has published *Creative Dimensions of Suffering* with Bahá'í Publishing. It discusses scientific, psychological and spiritual aspects of creativity and resilience amidst suffering and adversity.