

The Role of Religion in Society


How faith addresses the challenges facing today's world

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION
Universal House of Justice announces new institution

GALVANISED BY THE WORD OF GOD
Communities distinguished by their devotional character

MAN OF THE TREES
Pioneering British environmentalist remembered

REMEMBRANCE DAY
Bahá'ís represented at Cenotaph for first time



Welcome to UK Bahá'í

To be alive at this time, as the vision of Bahá'u'lláh takes shape with every passing day, is truly astonishing. The UK Bahá'í is thrilled to share in this edition the momentous message of the Universal House of Justice, announcing the inauguration of the Bahá'í International Development Organisation. This new institution for social and economic development "will grow and evolve over the decades and centuries ahead according to the needs of humanity and under the direction of the House of Justice until the material and spiritual civilization anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh is realized in this contingent world."

During this period of increasing injustice and affliction, every Bahá'í knows that the remedy needed by the world in its present day afflictions is the long-term, sustainable prescription offered by Bahá'u'lláh, the All-Knowing Physician. Today that prescription is being followed, step by step, by Bahá'ís the world over, demonstrating the vital role that religion has to play in society, which is the theme of this issue.

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introduction

The Role of Religion in Society

Once considered a private matter, religion has re-emerged in public discourse as a force that can decisively shape and structure our lives.

IN THESE TROUBLED TIMES, it seems that the materialistic perspectives that have dominated conversations and decision-making are slowly being surpassed by an acceptance that there has always been, and will ever be, a spiritual dimension to life. Individuals, institutions and communities around the world are seeking an alternative lens through which to view reality, and find workable solutions to our social ills.

The fundamental contribution that religion offers is the development of human consciousness – recognition of our spiritual and material realities, the growth of our own spiritual maturity and relationship with God, and in the Bahá'í Revelation, an awareness of the oneness of humanity. Religion has always provided humanity with values and instructions that promote social good, and inspire progress. It raises our awareness of our inherent capacity for good deeds, and provides guidance about how to cultivate these capacities in ourselves and in others.

Harnessed maliciously, however, religion can be a source of dissension, used as a means of justifying behaviour that undermines material and spiritual progress. But the abuse of such a profound source of virtue is unsustainable. Freed from misconceptions, manipulations and misinformation, true religion awakens hearts to the possibility of a better world. In providing us with the knowledge of who we are as human beings, each successive chapter in the progressive revelation of God's will for His creation provides us with a greater knowledge of our capacities.

The tools, knowledge, and insights contained in religion

are unparalleled in their power and profundity. Without such an all-encompassing system of values and virtues, humanity will continue to flounder in chaos and confusion, unable to harness its power to unite every continent and every people. As Bahá'u'lláh states, “Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein.”¹

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, cited by Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.187





The Universal House of Justice

9 NOVEMBER 2018

DEARLY LOVED FRIENDS

A **S THE PROCESS** of the disintegration of a lamentably defective world order gathers momentum in all parts of the planet, engendering hopelessness, confusion, hostility, and insecurity, the hearts of the friends everywhere must be assured, their eyes clear-sighted, their feet firm, as they work patiently and sacrificially to raise a new order in its stead. The guidance of Bahá'u'lláh is the foundation upon which you build. His instruction is clear: “This servant appealeth to every diligent and enterprising soul to exert his utmost endeavor and arise to rehabilitate the conditions in all regions and to quicken the dead with the living waters of wisdom and utterance, by virtue of the love he cherisheth for God, the One, the Peerless, the Almighty, the Beneficent.” His divine remedy has been prescribed: “God, the True One, beareth Me witness, and every atom in existence is moved to testify that such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth have been clearly set forth by Us and are revealed in the Holy Books and

Tablets by the Pen of Glory.” And His assurance is engraved on every faithful heart: “The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.”

During the ministries of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the first community of sufficient size that could begin to systematically apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to unite material and spiritual progress was that of the believers in the Cradle of the Faith. The steady flow of guidance from the Holy Land enabled the Bahá'ís of Iran to make tremendous strides in but one or two generations and to contribute a distinctive share to the progress of their nation. A network of schools that provided moral and academic education, including for girls, flourished. Illiteracy was virtually eliminated in the Bahá'í community. Philanthropic enterprises were created. Prejudices among ethnic and religious groups, aflame in the wider society, were extinguished within the community's loving embrace. Villages became distinguished for their cleanliness, order, and progress. And believers from that land were instrumental in raising in another land the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár with its dependencies designed to “afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to

the ignorant.” Over time, such efforts were augmented by scattered initiatives of other Bahá'í communities in various parts of the world. However, as Shoghi Effendi remarked to one community, the number of believers was as yet too small to effect a notable change in the wider society, and for more than the first half century of the Formative Age the believers were encouraged to concentrate their energies on the propagation of the Faith, since this was work that only Bahá'ís could do—indeed their primary spiritual obligation—and it would prepare them for the time when they could address the problems of humanity more directly.

Thirty-five years ago, circumstances within and outside the community combined to create new possibilities for greater involvement in the life of society. The Faith had developed to the stage at which the processes of social and economic development needed to be incorporated into its regular pursuits, and in October 1983 we called upon the Bahá'ís of the world to enter this new field of endeavor. The Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá'í World Centre to assist us in promoting and coordinating the activities of the friends worldwide. Bahá'í activities for social and economic development, at whatever level of complexity, were at that time counted in the hundreds. Today they number in the tens of thousands, including hundreds of sustained projects such as schools and scores of development organizations. The broad range of current activities spans efforts from villages and neighborhoods to regions and nations, addressing an array of challenges, including education from preschool to university, literacy, health, the environment, support for refugees, advancement of women, empowerment of junior youth, elimination of racial prejudice, agriculture, local economies, and village development. The society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause has begun to be more systematically expressed in the collective life of the friends as a result of the acceleration of the process of expansion and consolidation, especially in advanced clusters. Beyond this, of course, countless believers, through their professional and voluntary efforts, contribute their energies and insights to projects and organizations established for the common good.

Once again, then, we find that forces inside and outside the Faith have made possible a new stage in the work of social and economic development in the Bahá'í world. Therefore, on this sacred occasion of the Festivals of the Twin Birthdays, we are pleased to announce that the Office of Social and Economic Development now effloresces into a new world-embracing institution established at the World Centre, the Bahá'í International Development Organization. In addition, a Bahá'í Development Fund will be inaugurated, from which the new organization will draw to assist both long-standing and emerging development efforts worldwide; it will be supported by the House of Justice, and individuals and institutions may contribute to it.

A five-member board of directors will be appointed which will function as a consultative body to promote and coordinate the efforts of the worldwide community in social and economic development. The directors will serve for a term of five years beginning on the Day of the Covenant.

Operating at the spiritual and administrative centre of the Faith, the board will consult with the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre to ensure that the development work is coherent with the many endeavors of the Bahá'í world. The new institution will begin by assuming the functions and mandate previously carried out by the Office of Social and Economic Development and then gradually grow in capacity to discharge them on an expanding scale and at higher levels of complexity. It will reinforce the efforts of Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide to extend and consolidate the range of their activities. It will help to strengthen institutional capacity for social and economic development in national communities, including through the creation of new agencies and the emergence of advanced development organizations. It will promote, on an international scale, approaches to development and methodologies that have proven effective. It will keep abreast of findings in the development field and explore their application in consonance with spiritual principles with assistance from Bahá'ís with relevant training. It will form networks of resource persons and such institutional arrangements across continents as are necessary for carrying out its various lines of action. Above all, like the Office of Social and Economic Development before it, its primary purpose will be to facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the Teachings of the Faith.

Upon the Arc on Mount Carmel that surrounds the resting places of members of the Holy Family, Shoghi Effendi anticipated both the raising of edifices and the establishment of international institutions—administrative, scientific, and social—that would flourish under the auspices of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. This new institution for social and economic development will grow and evolve over the decades and centuries ahead according to the needs of humanity and under the direction of the House of Justice until the material and spiritual civilization anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh is realized in this contingent world.

Ultimately, of course, the work of Bahá'í social and economic development rests in the hands of the friends everywhere. To take full advantage of the opportunities emerging, one need look no further for encouragement and insight than to the perfect Exemplar of the Bahá'í teachings. Consider His words: “We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfill his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice.”

– *The Universal House of Justice*



feature article

A Vision of Hope & Order in a Disrupted World

*Religion is an essential element of the life of humanity,
propelling the advancement of civilization.*

HUMANITY TODAY IS at the limit of a social order that is unable to meet the compelling challenges of a world that has shrunk to the level of a neighbourhood. Our connection to each other is transcending traditional bounds of culture, nationality, and community – a change that must radically reshape human organization.

On this increasingly interconnected planet, nations find themselves caught between cooperation and competition. Propelled by competing ideologies, people everywhere are plunged into one crisis after another – brought on by war, terrorism, prejudice, oppression, economic disparity, and environmental upheaval. Too often, the well being of humankind is compromised for the self-interest of nations and individuals.

“Chaos and confusion are daily increasing in the world. They will attain such intensity as to render the frame of mankind unable to bear them. Then will men be awakened and become aware that religion is the impregnable stronghold and the manifest light of the world,” wrote ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a Tablet.¹

Throughout history, it is the world’s great faiths that have animated and inspired civilizations. True religion affirms the existence of an all-loving God and the oneness of humanity, seeking to bring out the noblest qualities and aspirations of the human being. Religion has fostered the promotion of reason, science, and education. Its moral principles have been translated into universal codes of law, regulating and elevating human relationships.

Bahá’u’lláh – as the latest in a series of Divine Educators Who have guided humanity from age to age – provides for us today a vision of a unified world. At the heart of His message are two core principles: firstly, the incontrovertible truth

that humanity is one, and secondly, that all great faiths have come from one common Source and are expressions of one unfolding religion.

The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh directly address the problems of our contemporary world. He provides a moral framework that points the way to the next stage of human social evolution. He calls on us to recognize our common humanity, to see ourselves as members of one family, to end estrangement and prejudice, and to come together. By doing so, all peoples and every social group can be protagonists in shaping their own future and, ultimately, a just and peaceful global civilization.

All around the world, there are communities, heeding this call, that are learning to transcend the traditional barriers that divide people. Inspired by Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, they are striving for progress both material and spiritual in nature. They are concerned with the practical dimensions of life, as well as with the qualities of a flourishing community like justice, unity, and access to knowledge.

Social action projects are addressing issues, such as education, health, or protection of the environment, that affect villages, towns, and cities in countries across the globe. These constructive initiatives range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by a handful of friends to complex and sophisticated programmes of social and economic implemented development by Bahá’í-inspired organizations. And vital to the success of these efforts is the mobilization and involvement of young people. Time and again, it is found that the willingness and energy of youth becomes the driving force behind a prospering community.

It is not just in grassroots endeavours that those engaged with the work of carrying forward Bahá’u’lláh’s vision for a united humanity are finding receptivity to the idea that it is a spiritual awakening that will be required to bring mankind

out of the confusion and fear by which it is currently gripped.

National and international governing institutions are recognizing religion's enduring presence in society and are increasingly seeing the value of its participation in efforts to address society's most challenging problems. This realization has led to increased efforts to engage religious leaders and communities in decision making and in carrying out various plans and programmes for social betterment.

It is now beginning to be understood that religion is an essential part of humanity's collective life. It is a cohesive force in society and a system of knowledge that has, together with science, propelled the advancement of civilization. With the

conviction of the vital role that religion must play in society and a unique power to release the potential of individuals, communities, and institutions, the Bahá'í community is committed to the long-term process of bringing about a materially and spiritually coherent civilization, one that will require the contributions of countless individuals, groups, and organizations for generations to come.

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Compilation on *Peace*, no.26

Below: Highlights from the opening of the local Bahá'í House of Worship in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, July 2018.



Scotland

Shetlanders galvanised by prayer of the Báb

The new spiritually and materially prosperous society envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh has at its heart the Word of God and the power of Divine assistance. The call to establish a community distinguished by its devotional character is being responded to around the United Kingdom and Ireland in many diverse ways.

IN LERWICK, SHETLAND, the Bahá'ís host a devotional meeting every three weeks that consists of saying the prayer of the Báb – “Is there any remover of difficulties” – 500 times. This gathering has been running for more than three years. This intense and focused meeting galvanises each of the participants.

The motivating force behind this devotional was to attract spiritual power to the community's efforts and to reach out to a new generation of youth. It began when two friends from Shetland recalled a devotional held many years ago in Aberdeen and decided to revive the format for their own community, with the aim of increasing activity and also harnessing a more focused energy.

Jane McKay, who was instrumental in restarting the devotional, recounts that the intensive prayer sessions empowered her, giving her greater strength to overcome life's challenges. This was a feeling that seemed common among members of the community: a craving for a space for concentrated prayer. Thus, though the devotional is held by the Lerwick Local Spiritual Assembly, those from around Shetland are welcomed to join in.

Prior to each gathering, Jane reads the Tablet of Ahmad, keeping in mind the community, family members and the wider circle of friends and connections. The participants each recite, “Is there any remover of difficulties” ten times until they reach 500. They keep count using matchsticks, with ten prayers to each match. “That box of matches must be pretty potent by now!” says Jane.

Each devotional takes around an hour and a quarter. After the prayers, there is a calm period where the participants have refreshment. This is a time to build friendships and socialise.

“Everyone who visits my home comments on how peaceful it is and this is a direct result of the prayer sessions,” says Jane. “We feel energised and renewed after every session.”

“The prayers have become an essential part of my life. I hadn't realised really how much we need spiritual food to become rounded human beings. They've been tremendously effective.”

England

Creating a sacred space

In Northamptonshire, friends focus on inviting the wider community to an inclusive, accessible, public devotional.

IN THE HOPE OF attracting local people to meet with the Bahá'í community and participate in community building, the Wellingborough Spiritual Assembly launched a series of public devotionals, that could then lead to neighbourhood devotionals and other activities.

The meetings, held in the town centre's beautiful, 15th century tithe barn, have given the Bahá'í community a warm and welcoming space to which they can invite their friends and neighbours. Flyers and posters have been distributed in the town, and a number of people who have seen them – or who have read short articles in the local press – have been attracted to attend a meeting, and then returned for more.

The devotionals have combined Bahá'í texts with other sacred writings, poetry and music, centred around themes, such as The Power of Unity, Reflections on Beauty, True Knowledge and Healing.

What is particularly special is that a booklet of the readings accompanies each session, produced as a gift for each person to take home with them. This programme of quotations and artwork has been a special source of inspiration. Art sessions between the devotionals have attracted many friends from the wider community to participate in creating the booklets. These workshops have become the basis of another new weekly, craft-based devotional, hosted by two new members of the community.

Through these meetings, the Bahá'ís have been able to create deeper ties of friendship and fellowship, not just with newcomers but with each other.



England

Baby devotionals

A rewarding act of service

RELIGION CAN BE expressed in a myriad of creative ways in response to the needs of a community. In Islington, London, there was a need for an activity that could involve even the youngest members of the community. Seeking to establish a way to bring prayers to their baby, who was only six months old at the time, one family decided to begin what became known as the 'Baby Devotional'.

As there were no similar groups in the area, around a dozen families expressed an interest in joining. For children under five, there is no formalised programme of learning and so the community began to develop one together, accompanying one another as they explored how to create materials that would engage their young attendees. Even after the family moved to Barnet, the baby devotionals continued to be popular, with some parents travelling for more than an hour in order to attend.

In the beginning, the organisers would choose a virtue and then find prayers that related to that virtue. Music became an integral part of the gatherings, as it became evident that this is what kept the babies engaged.

Part of the power of these devotionals is that it triggered other corresponding events. At first, the organisers explain, they tried to follow the devotional with a brief deepening on a quotation relating to the virtue that had been the theme of the meeting. However, it soon became clear that the babies were becoming restless during this time, so the deepening was then carried out in a separate coffee morning with the parents.

As the children have grown, their capacity to concentrate has also developed. The devotional has organically begun to incorporate other elements, such as songs, stories and activities, which encourage the young attendees to advance their understanding of the virtue. By putting actions to quotations, and beginning to memorise prayers, the children are being introduced to concepts that they will become more familiar with during children's classes. As some of the children are becoming old enough to engage in a children's class, consultations are beginning around developing this.

"The baby devotional has been such a rewarding act of service," says Shayda Youssefian-Kaul. "In terms of watching the children develop; seeing them all recite the prayers that we repeat each time; how engaged they are with the activities; learning the quotations; and hearing from the parents how they have been practising them at home."

"We've had a number of instances of families joining the group where a child has been exceptionally shy or reserved, but has come alive in the class and responded incredibly positively to the prayers, even asking their parents if they can say prayers at home. We've also seen how some parents,

who although at first were sceptical of the class, are now fully participating with their children and recognising the value of the classes for their family."



Ireland

Moments of calm in Letterkenny

Irish friends take a break from busyness

IN LETTERKENNY, IRELAND, devotionals take on a more meditative air. The community use a meditation course called Calm, which was developed by a Bahá'í. Being guided by the CD, the community and their friends meditate for half an hour together before reading prayers and passages from the Writings of the Faith and reflecting on them.

They take inspiration from the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves."

These devotionals started after the community began to identify friends who would enjoy a prayerful atmosphere and benefit from learning how to meditate, taking a break from the busyness of life. It was also a simple way to share the central concept of prayer.

One participant, Bahíyyih Devine, says that the format of the devotionals ensures that the reflections, and even the more social conversations, remain elevated due to the spiritual effect of prayer and meditation among the friends. "This deep and focused time to reflect on the word of God, facilitated through the peace of meditation, has allowed for the friends' love of the Writings to grow, and their understanding of central concepts to increase," she says.

"Personally, I have gained a lot from attending these meditation devotionals. I felt more prepared to pray ardently after having the period of meditation. Inviting our friends to this open space has allowed us to develop deeper bonds and friendship. It has definitely motivated me to try to incorporate more meditation into my daily life as a Bahá'í youth."

feature article

Religion: An evolving concept

The word “religion” invokes many different thoughts and emotions from people, some of these based on personal experience whilst others are perhaps more speculative in nature. UK Bahá'í has been talking to friends from across the United Kingdom about how the Teachings have shaped the way they view the role of religion in their own lives.

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH presents a unique understanding of religion, what it is to be “religious”, and the fundamental role religion plays in the advancement of society. Indeed, it has shaped the way that many individuals who have come into contact with the Bahá'í Faith view the role of religion in their own lives.

“I didn't really used to be religious,” says Shria Suchak, who discovered the Bahá'í Faith around three years ago. “My family were Hindus, but it was more of a cultural thing. I think that's how it is for a lot of people where it provides a cultural identity. When I started to investigate the Bahá'í Faith, people would ask me if I believed in God before and it was only then I realised I'd never really actually thought about it or the relationship that we have with our Creator.”

“Before I became a Bahá'í I felt religion was a bit like a prison,” says Yousef Hanif, who started exploring the Bahá'í Faith in 2016. “There were a lot of ‘do's and don'ts, a lot of fear, confusion and guilt. That's what I felt religion was like before; it just didn't make sense a lot of the time. But it was also peaceful. I found the concept of faith could give you a certain light in your life that you couldn't get elsewhere. But it was always mixed with weird superstitions that I didn't understand. So, religion to me had this positive side, but also a negative side.”

“To me, religion used to mean just something that people were born into and were obliged to follow out of tradition,” comments Emily Beaney who had identified as agnostic prior to coming into contact with the Bahá'í Faith. “A lot of it seemed ceremonial, simply for show or even nonsensical. I found religion to be not particularly relevant to the time that we live in and sadly inward-looking or divisive. There also

didn't seem to be much of a role for youth.”

Yousef felt religion was a very personal thing – “for you and your own salvation and that's why you would be religious. I do think it had an effect on my morals and how I interacted with people in a more positive way.”

“I didn't used to really think much about religion and the wider interaction with society,” adds Shria. “Whenever it came up it was always in a negative light. But I could see how it could impact groups and communities in a very positive way, but this was never what was portrayed in the media. But the Bahá'í Faith has shown me how religion can provide a framework to make us protagonists for making positive changes in the world, that could change the perception of the role religion has to play in society. Religion is transformative and should be a unifying force.”

“Definitely, the Faith has provided insights into how religion will help heal the world,” says Yousef. “Religion is for the benefit of the whole world and not just for our personal salvation. Before learning about the Bahá'í Faith, I didn't have any idea how the religions were all connected. Bahá'u'lláh has taught me how all the world religions are rooted in the Word of God and that religion isn't here to imprison us but to empower us.”

“Has the Bahá'í Faith changed my perception of religion? Totally!” says Emily. “The Bahá'í Faith addresses the needs of the time we live in. As a youth, I find it is an empowering Faith, with a balanced emphasis on ‘being’ and ‘doing’. It is a worldwide religion and I have never felt so connected to positive global change. I have learnt so much from becoming a part of the Bahá'í Faith and am so grateful to have Bahá'u'lláh in my life.”



international news

New Maori prayer book connects hearts with the divine

The publication of a Bahá'í prayer book in the Maori language was commemorated at a local Maori community meeting grounds near Hamilton, New Zealand.

WHILE TRANSLATING BAHÁ'Í writings into his native Maori language, Tom Roa encountered a conundrum. This deeply spiritual indigenous language has a word for spirit but not for soul.

“In the Bible this word, *wairua*, means soul and spirit. But in *The Hidden Words* they are two distinct ideas. So, we had to make a distinction,” explains Dr. Roa, professor of Maori and Indigenous Studies at the University of Waikato, referring to efforts to translate one of Bahá'u'lláh's most well-known works.

The resulting word for soul, *wairua-ora*, is a combination of the word for “spirit” and a word meaning “living” – living spirit. This was one of the many complexities of translating Bahá'í writings to the language of the indigenous people

of New Zealand. A 14-year effort, during which two other major translations of Bahá'í works were published in Maori, culminated in the release of the first substantial Bahá'í prayer book in that language.

Providing access to prayers in Maori was a key motivation for the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand when it undertook the process in 2004. A small team of Bahá'ís worked with Dr. Roa, who has translated other spiritual texts into the Maori language, including the Bible and the Quran.

The translation work began first with *The Hidden Words* and Bahá'u'lláh and the *New Era* by J. E. Esslemont.

“The prayer book was the jewel,” says James Lau, a member of the translation team. “All our efforts were crowned with the jewel.” Mr. Lau explains that the translation process was not simply a technical task. The team became very unified over the years, exploring profound spiritual themes through

their efforts to understand and translate spiritual concepts into the Maori language.

“The Bahá'ís were committed to the idea that there should be a Maori prayer book, and I am happy to have been part of that process,” Dr. Roa says. “The Maori-speaking Bahá'ís are thankful that they can talk to God using their language.”

As with many of the world's indigenous cultures, the Maori culture has many deeply spiritual concepts and ideals.

“In the ancient prayers of the Maori, there is a phrase *Matangi i Reia*,” explains Huti Watson, who is Maori and a member of New Zealand's National Spiritual Assembly. “It describes a place in the heavens and means ‘the perfumed gardens.’ This is a concept that Bahá'u'lláh also talks about. Having prayers in Maori links us more to the reality of these words.”

Mrs. Watson said she recently noticed a Bahá'í prayer

translated into Maori being circulated on Facebook. The prayer, written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about children, was being posted by mothers.

“People would say, ‘Wow this is beautiful. This is exactly what I want,’” Mrs. Watson notes.

This endeavor comes amid broader efforts to revive the Maori language. Dr. Roa, who has been at the forefront of these efforts, says that Maori speakers are a declining share of New Zealand's population. Maori people make up only 15 percent of New Zealand's population, and only a fifth of them can have a conversation in Maori, Dr. Roa notes.

However, there is a growing interest in learning the language: “In the first half of the 20th century, many of our elders spoke of being punished physically for speaking Maori in school. Now we have schools crying out for teachers of Maori.”

*Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have
been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh
unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle
thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men*

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH



feature article

Man of the Trees: Pioneering Environmentalist Remembered

Richard St. Barbe Baker, who was best known as St. Barbe, was a pioneering environmentalist and early British Bahá'í who had a far-reaching vision and initiated practices that have become common and widespread today.

THE OXFORD-BASED International Tree Foundation is in the midst of an ambitious plan – to plant 20 million trees in and around Kenya’s highland forests by 2024, the organization’s centenary. That goal is one of the many living expressions of the ideals espoused by Richard St. Barbe Baker (1889-1982), founder of the organization. A re-evaluation of this influential environmental pioneer is now under way, thanks to the work of the International Tree Foundation and the publication of a new biography. The recent attention comes at a time that

the consequences of global climate change are increasingly apparent to humanity.

“Long before the science of climate change was understood, he had warned of the impact of forest loss on climate,” writes HRH The Prince of Wales in the foreword of the new biography about St. Barbe. “He raised the alarm and prescribed a solution: one third of every nation should be tree covered. He practised permaculture and agro-ecology in Nigeria before those terms existed and was among the founding figures of organic farming in England.”

Having embraced the Bahá'í Faith as a young man in

1924, throughout his adventurous life, St. Barbe found in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the embodiment of his highest aspirations for the world. His deep faith was expressed in a love for all forms of life and in his dedication to the natural environment.

“He talks about the inspiration he received from the Faith and from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá,” explains Paul Hanley, the author of the new biography about St. Barbe, titled *Man of the Trees: Richard St. Barbe Baker, the First Global Conservationist*. “St. Barbe had a world-embracing vision at a time when that wasn’t really common. His frame of reference was the whole world.”

St. Barbe noted this connection with Bahá'u'lláh’s vision of the oneness of humanity when he went on pilgrimage to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh.

“(H)ere at Bahjí (Bahá'u'lláh) must have spent his happiest days. He was a planter of trees and loved all growing things. When his devotees tried to bring him presents from Persia the only tokens of their esteem that he would accept were seeds or plants for his gardens,” St. Barbe later wrote in his diary, quoted in Mr. Hanley’s book.

St. Barbe then recalled a passage from Bahá'u'lláh’s writings: “Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.’ Yes, I thought, humankind, humanity as a whole. Was it not this for which I had been striving to reclaim the waste places of the earth? These were the words of a planter of trees, a lover of men and of trees.”

St. Barbe also maintained a sustained contact with Shoghi Effendi, who encouraged him in dozens of letters and sought

his advice when selecting trees for Bahá’í Holy Places in ‘Akká and Haifa. St. Barbe described how the inscribed copy of *The Dawn-Breakers* that Shoghi Effendi sent him became his “most treasured possession.”

“I would read it again and again, and each time capture the thrill that must come with the discovery of a New Manifestation,” St. Barbe wrote.

The International Tree Foundation, which St. Barbe originally named *Men of the Trees*, is just one of many organizations he established in his lifetime. It is estimated that, as a result of his efforts, the organizations he founded, and those he assisted, some 26 billion trees have been planted globally. He was so dedicated to tree planting, in fact, that he took an international trip at age 92 to plant a tree in memory of a close personal friend, a former prime minister of Canada. St. Barbe died a few days after accomplishing the purpose of that trip.

“I think people should know about Richard St. Barbe Baker because his legacy still lives on,” says the Foundation’s chief executive, Andy Egan.

“Today we try to walk in St. Barbe’s footsteps,” adds Paul Laird, the Foundation’s programme manager. “We have a sustainable community forestry program, which reaches out and tries to work particularly with groups and local community-based organizations that are close to the real situation—the people themselves doing things for themselves, who understand the threats of land degradation and forest loss, and what that actually means for them.”

From early childhood in England, St. Barbe was attracted to gardening, botany, and forestry. He would run among





his family's trees, saluting them as if they were toy soldiers. Later, as a young man awaiting the start of his university classes in 1912, he took a job as a logger where he lived in Saskatchewan, Canada. He could no longer treat the trees as his friends.

"This area had been virgin forest and one evening, as I surveyed the mass of stricken trees littering the ground, I wondered what would happen when all these fine trees had gone," St. Barbe wrote at the time. "The felling was wasteful, and I felt sick at heart."

That experience would be a defining one for St. Barbe. He decided to study forestry at Cambridge University, beginning a lifetime dedicated to global reforestation. Afterward, he moved to British-ruled Kenya, where he set up a tree nursery. While there, he witnessed the effects of centuries of land mismanagement.

Working as a colonial forester, St. Barbe was expected to employ top-down forest management practices. This went against the practices of the indigenous Kikuyu people, who used a traditional method of farming where they burned down trees to create rich soil. St. Barbe wanted to encourage a form of agriculture that promotes the growth of a forest conducive to farming while also protecting the soil from erosion and respecting the culture and wisdom of the local population. The tribal leaders were not open to the planting of new trees, calling this "God's business."

To honour the traditions of the Kikuyu people and promote an awareness of their significant role in tree planting and conservation, St. Barbe looked to one of their long-held traditional practices – holding dances to commemorate

significant moments. From this integration of cultural values and environmental stewardship was born the Dance of the Trees in 1922.

"So instead of trying to push them and force them into tree planting, he said let's make this consistent with the culture. So he approached the elders there, discussed it with them and they had this Dance of the Trees which led to the formation of the Men of the Trees," says Mr. Hanley.

Along with the Men of the Trees' co-founder, Chief Josiah Njonjo, St. Barbe developed a deeper understanding of the important ecological, social, and economic roles of trees in the life of humanity.

"Behind St. Barbe Baker's prescience was his deep spiritual conviction about the unity of life," Prince Charles writes. "He had listened intently to the indigenous people with whom he worked."

St. Barbe's ventures into what is now called social forestry were looked upon with some scepticism. As a colonial forester, he was expected to protect forests that belonged to governments.

"He was extraordinary in that he broke through that," says Mr. Laird. "He saw that fundamentally these forests belonged to the people of Kenya and you needed to work with the people to conserve the forests."

This community-led approach remains core to the work of the International Tree Foundation.

"His caring nature for all life is something that really shines through," says Mr. Egan. "He very much helped to give birth to this idea that it wasn't just a professional thing about planting trees. It was something that ordinary people

in communities could and should be doing. In a way they're in the best place to actually protect the forests...so their role should be very much recognized and supported and celebrated."

In researching St. Barbe's biography, Mr. Hanley discovered that the forester "was definitely very advanced in his thinking. And his whole philosophy of the integration and unity of human society, but also of the natural world, were fairly radical concepts at the time."

When St. Barbe first encountered the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in 1924, he found his ideas of nature and humanity confirmed. A Christian with a deep respect for indigenous religious traditions, St. Barbe recognized the truth in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about oneness – the oneness of religion, the oneness of humankind, and the interconnectedness of all life. The Faith's writings also employ imagery from nature to help convey spiritual truths.

"I began to read some translations from the Persian," St. Barbe wrote, reflecting on his pilgrimage to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. "In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love.' I was enthralled by the sublimity of the language. Here was beauty personified."

In 1929, while on a mission to establish a branch of the Men of the Trees in the Holy Land, St. Barbe travelled to Haifa to visit Bahá'í sacred sites. Pulling up in his car outside of the home of Shoghi Effendi, St. Barbe was surprised to see the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith coming out to welcome him and handing him an envelope. It contained a subscription to join the Men of the Trees, making Shoghi Effendi the organization's first life member.

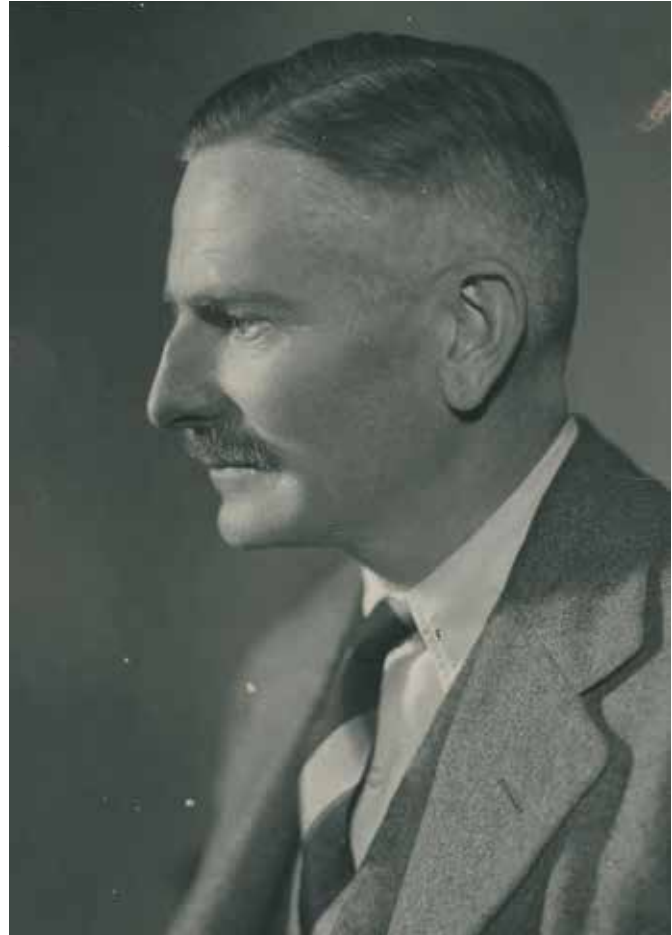
"He talks about the meeting with the Guardian as the most significant moment in his life, and it really...galvanized him," says Mr. Hanley.

Through a continued correspondence, Shoghi Effendi encouraged St. Barbe's efforts. For 12 consecutive years, he sent a message to the World Forestry Charter gatherings, another of St. Barbe's initiatives, which were attended by ambassadors and dignitaries from scores of countries.

St. Barbe's work took him to many countries. He was appointed Assistant Conservator of Forests for the southern provinces of Nigeria from 1925 to 1929. He also planned forests on the Gold Coast. In the United States, he launched a "Save The Redwoods" campaign and worked with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to establish the American Civilian Conservation Corps which involved some six million young people. After World War II, St. Barbe launched the Green Front Against the Desert to promote reforestation worldwide. One expedition in 1952 and 1953 saw him trek 25,000 miles around the Sahara, leading to a project to reclaim the desert through strategic tree planting. In his late 80s, St. Barbe traveled to Iran to promote a tree planting programme. He stopped in Shiraz where he was asked to inspect an ailing citrus tree at the House of the Báb.

The Men of the Trees grew into the first international non-governmental organization working with the environment. By the late 1930s, it had 5,000 members in 108 countries, and its own journal for members, titled *Trees*.

"Originally it was created because it seemed that St. Barbe



started—but then it developed."

Today, *Trees* is the world's longest-running environmental journal.

Successive generations of environmentalists have credited St. Barbe as igniting their passion for their work.

"Sometimes it was the little things he did—like writing an article, or doing a radio interview—that would connect with some youth in some distant country," says Mr. Hanley. "And several of these people went on to become very significant figures in the environment movement."

"His legacy is probably related to the fact that he was indefatigable," Mr. Hanley adds. "It was quite incredible—thousands of interviews, thousands of radio broadcasts, trying to alert people to this idea, and it really did have an impact on the lives of many people who have gone out and protected and planted trees."

St. Barbe's pioneering thinking can be particularly valuable now as humanity grapples with the challenges presented by climate change. Indeed, one of humanity's most pressing challenges is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can live in harmony with the planet and its resources.

"It is now clear that had we heeded the warnings of St. Barbe Baker and other visionaries, we might have avoided a good deal of the environmental crises we face today," Prince Charles writes. "Richard St. Barbe Baker's message is as relevant today as it was ninety years ago and I very much hope that it will be heeded."

the arts

In Edinburgh, Musical About Slavery Raises Consciousness

An “amazing story of vision, heroism, boldness, courage and audacity” inspires conversation and action

DETERMINED TO BREAK FREE from the shackles of slavery, Henry Brown undertook a dangerous journey. The year was 1849, and he was one of the three million enslaved people living in the United States. He shipped himself in a wooden crate from a plantation in the southern state of Virginia to the northern city of Philadelphia. Slavery was already outlawed there, and a group of abolitionists received him, helping to secure his liberation.

This summer, his extraordinary story was vividly brought to life at Edinburgh’s world-famous Fringe Festival. A new stage musical, *Henry Box Brown*, thrilled and challenged audiences during a 21-day run at the city’s prestigious Assembly Rooms.

The show’s creator, Mehr Mansuri, a Bahá’í, wanted to take on the subject of racial inequality. In view of the cardinal Bahá’í principles of the oneness of humankind and the elimination of all forms of prejudice, the subject of racial equality has been dear to Ms. Mansuri’s heart. Drawing on the arts as a powerful medium for raising consciousness, she and her colleagues have created an experience that stimulates constructive conversation and inspires action and social change.

“I was searching for a story for a musical that would touch on a hero in American history from African descent,” says Ms. Mansuri who, with her family, escaped persecution as a child for being a Bahá’í in her native Iran. Settled in New York, she has been taking theatre into public schools for two decades.

Ms. Mansuri was at a book fair with her nephew when she first came across the story of Henry Brown in a children’s picture book. It immediately struck a chord with her.

“The wounds are so deep, and we often feel so inadequate to open wounds we can’t close,” she says. “It’s really difficult and painful to conduct any discourse on the subject of race and not feel ill-equipped to do it.”

The show’s director, Ben Harney, describes how he was attracted to the story.

“The piece was very intriguing to me,” Mr. Harney, a Tony Award-winning actor, explains. “It’s an amazing story of vision, heroism, boldness, courage, and audacity. And the backdrop is a very merciless and unfriendly set of circumstances, and the cost is high.... I really was touched, moved, and inspired by the piece.”

In 1848, after his children and pregnant wife were sold to new owners in North Carolina, Henry Brown resolved to escape slavery no matter the brutal punishment he might receive or the other risks of the journey. With the help of a white clergyman and a slave-owning gambler, Henry Brown was packed into a box — 3 feet long, 2 feet 8 inches deep, and 2 feet wide — and had himself shipped 300 miles to freedom by boat and train.

While Henry Brown is the show’s protagonist, he is not its only hero. The musical invites the audience to think about the nature of real change — how it is brought about by the courageous actions of numerous individuals, like the ones in the story. It seeks to engage audience members and encourage them to see themselves also as protagonists of meaningful change for the betterment of the world around them. After a performance, audience members are given an opportunity to discuss the themes in the musical, and each is asked to make a personal pledge of action. “Then we send their pledges back to them in four months and invite them back, so hopefully the theatre becomes a kind of village that comes together again,” says Ms. Mansuri.

One of the show's cast, Najee Brown, noticed audience members taking these conversations and pledges to heart.

"I know 100 percent that people are walking away feeling like they learned something, and that's probably the most important part," Najee Brown says. "How do I apply what I just saw to my everyday life? How do I make a difference after watching this?"

The impact of *Henry Box Brown* is heightened by the rich musical selections that run throughout it. Its musical score revives a number of 19th-century spirituals.

"All these songs have come from oppression, from forgiveness of the oppressors, songs that distracted you from the brutality of the life that you were in," says Jack Lenz, the show's musical director and co-composer and a Bahá'í.

"All of these songs are connected to God, which is really what music is for, why we have it. It has always been connected with the worship of God and universality of sentiment and feelings, the recognition of what it is to have this sustaining power in your life, and especially if you lived through slavery."

The musical brought together 16 performers – including world-class gospel and R&B singers from New York's Christian Cultural Center, and leading Off-Broadway performers – who have become keenly aware of the resonance the show has for modern audiences.

"It's very timely, and that's both wonderful and kind of unfortunate, in that it has elements of a story that seem to click so consistently with things that are coming out in our world today," reflects Mr. Harney. "The story of this man who was subjugated and yet who was literate... who ultimately got to the point where it was too much. I mean, what an amazing idea. I'll mail myself!"

Najee Brown says that "the conversations get really heavy, and sometimes I have to take a step back."

"You're tackling a lot of heavy subjects about what they say – you know, racism, unity – and I learned a lot about the way people think. And I've learned patience because not everybody understands why things like this are important. But these conversations help put things in perspective."

Following its international premiere run in Edinburgh, *Henry Box Brown* will tour through 25 cities in the United States, starting last month in Flint, Michigan. It is hoped that throughout the United States the show will continue to stimulate thoughtful conversations and inspire people to act in constructive ways. Good theatre should do just that, explains Mr. Harney.

"There's a lot of resonance, and levels and layers of things that become subject matter for education and conversation and social activism," he says.



our spiritual heritage

A New Cycle of Human Power

From 4-29 September 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited London and Bristol, where He offered Bahá'u'lláh's Message to people from every background – the old, the young, the rich and the poor. With persistence and passion, He embodied the role of religion in society, as a source of love and unity.

WHILE 'Abdu'l-Bahá sojourned in London, he addressed large audiences in places of worship and of social service. The pastor of the City Temple, Holborn – the Reverend R. J. Campbell – introduced the Master in the most kindly terms to an overflowing congregation, followers of Christ who, Reverend Campbell explained, “respect every movement of the Spirit of God in the experience of mankind”.¹

It was at that historic moment that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, giving His first ever public address, proclaimed that we are in an age when “the sea of the unity of mankind is lifting up its waves with joy”.² In other words, religion renewed in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has brought forth a new age, “a new cycle of human power”³ where every individual can be empowered to play their part in uniting and advancing society, to live lives where daily effort can be made to put unity and joy into action.

'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that in this age “the East is enlightened, the West is fragrant, and everywhere the soul inhales the holy perfume”⁴ and that “in this country the standard of justice has been raised; a great effort is being made to give all souls an equal and a

true place”.⁵

In order to reinforce this message further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá concluded by saying “There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one. Let us worship Him, and give praise for all His great Prophets and Messengers who have manifested His brightness and glory”.⁶

Today the City Temple describes itself as “an international church in the heart of London, bringing together people from many different nations in unity with each other and with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.”⁷ Not far from where it stands is the former Passmore Edwards' Settlement where the Master also spoke. The work of the Settlement led by Mary Ward (1851-1920) focused on social service provision to the urban poor through the liberal arts, vocational training and campaigning for social justice. Its work continues to this day. The Mary Ward Centre offers adult education to all, encompassing everything from computing to ukulele classes.

Further down the road from the original Settlement is Coram's Fields, a charity for children set up with the prominent help of Mary Ward's daughter, which creates a safe place

for children through play and the outdoors. They offer a seven-acre park and playground which is only for children and their parents, as well as a small city farm and after-school and holiday programmes.

It is in these special spaces that the Master moved and taught. The spirit of service and worship in these places is still thriving.

As we go about our daily lives in a country blessed with a unique spiritual legacy and a present informed by the good deeds of the past, we too can strive to contribute to giving “all souls an equal and a true place”⁸ in our country, fostering “real communication between the hearts and minds of men”,⁹ and creating the day when “the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers”.¹⁰

Notes: ¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p.17,

² ibid. p.19,

³ ibid.,

⁴ ibid.,

⁵ ibid. p.20,

⁶ ibid.,

⁷ www.city-temple.com,

⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p.20,

⁹ ibid. p.19,

¹⁰ ibid. p.20

By the time these lines appear,
'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás will have
left our shores, but the memory
of his gracious personality is a
permanent possession. His influence
will be felt for many days to come,
and has already done much to
promote that union of East and West
for which many have long yearned.

'Abdu'l-Bahá in London



life of society

Religions remember the casualties of war

2018's Remembrance Service on 11 November was particularly poignant, falling on the 100th anniversary of the ending of World War I, and including, for the first time, representatives from the Bahá'í community, along with six other 'minority' faith groups.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS now, the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of Public Affairs has enjoyed a good relationship with Lord Bourne, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. He facilitated this year's diversity of faith representatives, in order to more accurately reflect the changing face of our society.

Miles Green, a Bahá'í from Beaconsfield, and Annabel Djalili from the Office of Public Affairs, took their place at the Cenotaph, along with the Royal Family, the Prime Minister, former Prime Ministers, members of the Cabinet, Commonwealth High Commissioners, and other significant figures from the worlds of government, diplomacy and religion.

Mr. Green, a former Foreign and Commonwealth Office official, had a long and distinguished career as a diplomat. He wore his grandfather's and his father's medals from both world wars, as well as his own.

The event was followed by a reception at the FCO where the Bahá'í representatives had the opportunity to participate in many uplifting conversations where the theme of peace was explored, as was the desire to build a stronger and more united

society, and to acknowledge the need for deeper friendships amongst people of all faiths and none. The Bahá'í guests were also able to tell the new Secretary of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – the Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright MP – how greatly the Bahá'í community valued participating in such an important national commemoration. Mr Wright, in return, expressed how important it was to welcome the new representatives, not only to acknowledge their efforts during wartime, but more significantly, because they contribute so much towards building mutual understanding and community cohesion today.



IN MEMORIAM

Shahpoor Monadjem (1933-2018)

Shahpoor Monadjem, a former Counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre, passed away on 15 November 2018 in Maringá, Brazil. He was 85 years old. The following day, the Universal House of Justice wrote to all National Spiritual Assemblies.



THE PASSING OF Shahpoor Monadjem, distinguished and greatly loved servant of the Blessed Beauty, has brought much sadness to our hearts. We call to mind, at this moment, his immense dedication to the teaching work, knowledge of the Faith, and insight into the application of its principles. These qualities were much in evidence when he was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil and during the decade he served as a Continental Counsellor in the Americas. As a member of the International Teaching

Centre, his talents and energies were determinedly focused upon the worldwide propagation and protection of the Faith. The wide-ranging services he undertook in his lifetime also included the promotion of the Right of God as a Deputy Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. A kindly and gentle soul, good-humoured and brimming with creative inspiration, he was also blessed with considerable administrative abilities, honed in many different settings, which he deployed with great

effect in service to the Cause of God.

To his dear wife, Bahareh, and to his children and grandchildren we extend our condolences and an assurance of our supplications in the Holy Shrines for his soul's blissful passage into the realms of the eternal. We also ask that memorial gatherings be convened in his honour in all Houses of Worship and in Bahá'í communities across the world.

– *The Universal House of Justice*

Further Reading

The fundamental challenge before humanity at this stage in its development is the creation of a civilization in which all peoples and cultures can participate – a civilization that represents a fusion of the material and spiritual imperatives of life.

The website of the worldwide Bahá'í community, www.bahai.org, has excellent articles on the role of religion in society.

These include:

An Ever-Advancing Civilization: www.bahai.org/beliefs/god-his-creation/ever-advancing-civilization/

Science and Religion: www.bahai.org/beliefs/god-his-creation/ever-advancing-civilization/science-religion

The Prosperity of Humankind: www.bahai.org/documents/bic-opi/prosperity-humankind

Religion and World Order: www.bahai.org/documents/essays/holley-horace/religion-world-order

Knowledge and Civilization In this essay first published in *The Bahá'í World 1997-1998*, Dr. Farzam Arbab writes that the scale at which knowledge must be generated and applied if humanity is to be ushered into an age of true prosperity calls for society to develop the means for all its members to have access to knowledge: www.bahai.org/documents/essays/arb-ab-dr-farzam/knowledge-civilization



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