

banner



Bahá'í Journal UK

Journal of the Bahá'í Community of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Volume 19, No.4 – September, 2002 / 159BE

LARGE PRINT / Standard Print. Association of Bahá'í Studies – English Speaking Europe

Fundamentally Speaking

Report on the Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies – English-Speaking Europe, London, 8th–9th June, 2002



THE WORD “Fundamentalism”, as it is popularly understood, means strictly following the fundamental doctrines of a religion, often in a very literal way with little room for interpretation or discussion. It is a term that almost always carries negative connotations since fundamentalist attitudes and behaviour invariably encourage separateness and can, at worst, give rise to intolerance, conflict and extreme acts of violence.

This year's fascinating annual conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies – English Speaking Europe, held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London's Russell Square June 8-9 – explored the theme of fundamentalism from many diverse perspectives. It was a topical and stimulating subject which, in raising many challenges to fundamentalist thinking, posed important questions about the imperative need for every believer to independently investigate the truth for themselves and study the Writings in a spirit of open-minded enquiry.

The special guest speaker, Dr Bahíyyih Nakhjavani, from France, gave two inspiring presentations. The first explored the relationship between fear and fundamentalism – how attitudes become entrenched when change forces populations to fear the unknown. She explored the subject of fear in the Bahá'í writings, including how it can be overcome, and demonstrated how the potential for fundamentalism exists in any theory that leads to a dead-end mindset. Her second talk looked at how we need to learn to recognise and accept that there are multiple meanings in the language we use. She explored the dangers in humanity's attempts to control or reduce the complex nature of life by reducing things to their literal meaning.

Ismael Velasco, from Nottingham, asked the question in his paper about whether there is such a thing as a Bahá'í fundamentalist. Since the term has been used among some academics writing about the Faith, he proposed that it would be timely for Bahá'ís to begin a process of self-examination, individually and collectively, and talk about what the term might mean so that we are able to give answers to such remarks. Roger Prentice, from Northumberland, in a presentation on education, drew attention to a statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which says,

“When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail ... development and growth are inevitable.”

(Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 197)

He asserted that fundamentalism prevents health because it attacks diversity, kills potential in people and denies a whole set of freedoms.

Among the other topics presented during the weekend were: the methods by which Bahá'ís read and interpret the history of the Faith; how contemporary thinkers view the possibility and desirability of world government; whether or not Bahá'í behaviour fits into a pattern of attitudes and activities which the secular world describes as fundamentalist; the letter of the Universal House of Justice to the world's religious leaders; and women's education.

In her opening remarks to the conference, Dr Wendi Momen stressed the importance of Bahá'ís learning to correlate the teachings of the Faith to the needs of society so that it can be assisted in incorporating Bahá'í ideals into policy making. This practice of correlation was best demonstrated in a paper by Dr Masoud Afnan on the ethical issues surrounding the unborn child. He gave a fascinating overview of the latest research and understanding of the process of fertilization and the development of the embryo and then asked questions about when conception actually begins, when the soul “attaches” itself to a body and the implications for all this on research using embryos.

During the discussion afterwards, Dr Stephen Lambden spoke of the metaphysical issues surrounding the soul and its association with the body. This brought together many strands, including the complementary relationship of science and religion and the contribution that Bahá'í scholarship can make to the influencing of policy makers.

In conclusion, this was an excellent conference, attended by a wide variety of people of diverse backgrounds and interests, including a good number of youth. The papers demonstrated most effectively the need for all Bahá'ís to increase their knowledge of the fundamental verities of the Faith so that they can develop understandings, practices and responses which do not endanger them by risking falling into the same traps as other groups in society.

Report by Rob Weinberg and Barney Leith

Association of Bahá'í Studies – English-Speaking Europe

E-mail: abs@bahai.org.uk

ABSESE WebSite: www.breacais.demon.co.uk/abs/, BSR Website: bahai-library.org/bsr/

