

**The ABS RELIGIOUS STUDIES SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP, BI-ANNUAL SEMINAR in NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE, JANUARY 11-13, 2002.**

The meeting opened with a brief review of Baha'i scholarship as undertaken in the UK by a number of academically trained individuals who had met over twenty years--in fact, it was noted that this was the 30th year of such Newcastle gatherings. They began with just a small group of individuals discussing largely historical matters pertaining to Babi and Baha'i history and evolved by the early 1980's into a wider range of discussions with participants coming from religious studies and Persian and Middle-Eastern studies backgrounds.

Participants in this 2002 seminar came from a number of European countries, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, the United States, and a number of localities in England and Scotland.

**Morten Bergsmo**, a European international lawyer, has served as an academic in China, Europe and North-America, came to the seminar especially to consult about the problem of the Bahai law and the lack of work which has been carried out in this respect. As an international lawyer currently working at the Hague, he found it virtually impossible to consult about Baha'i legalism, particularly as centered in the (Arabic) Kitab-i Aqdas (al-Kitab al-Aqdas, c.1873 CE) of Baha'u'llah, because very little research and writing had been carried out in this respect. The terminology, for example, used to speak about Baha'i law uses at least four different Arabic words in the Kitab-i Aqdas, and a non-specialist in the languages would find themselves unable to proceed confidently because of a lack this lack of commentary upon the Most Holy Book. It was pointed out that `Abdu'l-Baha' divided religion into two parts: the legal/socio-economic dimension which changes from age to age, and the spiritual teachings such as the golden rule which remain eternally relevant.

Presentations included papers by **Armin Eschraqi**, a doctoral candidate at the university of Frankfurt, whose work centered on his doctoral dissertation on the Bab's tablet, the Risalah-i nubuwwat-i khaṣṣah, the Bab's treatise in exposition of the nubuwwat, or prophethood of Muhammad for the then-governor of Isfahan, the crypto-Georgian eunuch Manuchihr Khan (d.1847 CE), who according to the Dawn-Breakers and other sources became a devoted Babi, offering the Bab a vast fortune for the propagation of his nascent religion--an offer which the Bab refused.

**Stephen Lambden** presented some pages from his doctoral thesis, "Some Aspects of Isrā'īliyyāt and the Emergence of the Babi-Bahai interpretation of the Bible." The material he presented centered upon the Bab's transcendence of the problem of the belief in the finality of prophethood in Islam, خاتم النبيين , khātam an-nabiyyīn (Q.33:40). He

showed how, in his first major work, the *Qayyūm al-asmā'* (mid-1844), the Bab rewrote in an interpretive fashion, the afore-mentioned Qur'anic passage, the *khātam an-nabiyyīn*, in a way which no longer necessitated any kind of finality in the succession of divine messengers.

**Moojan Momen**, in his paper “Messianic Concealment and Theophanic Disclosure” discussed the way in which the Manifestation of God at times hides or conceals his true elevated status and usually later comes to clarify his divine nature. He made some critical comments about Nader Saeidi's treatment of these issues contra Juan Cole in his 2002 book *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland).

**Roger Prentice**, a Baha'i educationalist from NE England, spoke about the importance of dialogue in educational philosophy. He favored a holistic approach, in which the educator engages in dialogue with the educated person, in order that both may become spiritually and philosophically aware. His slant on this issue tends to replace the Ruhi institute and such educational methods, by engaging with the mind and the spirit of the participant and the seeker after truth, be they child or adult. This is fully in line with the statements of the UHJ to the effect that multiple educational philosophies are encouraged within the international Bahai community. There is no single way to either deepen or educate Baha'is or others.

**Sholeh Quinn** gave a presentation on different versions of Vahid Darabi's conversion to Babism, paying particular attention to Mulla Ja'far Qazvini's history, and the account in the *Tarikh* (History) of Nabil-i Zarandi (d.1892 CE), in the Shoghi Effendi edited redaction entitled 'The Dawn Breakers'. The significance of Vahid's words “*sahib-i shamshir nistam*” or “I do not have a sword,” and the Bab's reply, which was to give him a sword, was much discussed. Questions about Babi jihad and pacifism were openly discussed from various points of view.

**Ismael Velasco** gave a paper on Baha'u'llah's first scriptural Tablet to Napoleon III (d. 9th January 1873) dating from the late Edirne or Adrianople period, ca. 1868. He had found a French translation of this Tablet by the French Baha'i Hippolyte Dreyfuss (1873-1928) in his book *Le Oeuvre de Baha'u'llah* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1923-8). This first Tablet is much shorter than the better-known and longer (largely translated into English), second Tablet to Napoleon III.

A special session was devoted to Baha'i book collecting and publishing. The head of the UK., BPT spoke about the present state and evolution of publishing within the UK, and the editor of George Ronald Press, Wendi Momen, member of the UK.,NSA, spoke on

GR's publishing activities. It was pointed out that William Sears, *Thief in the Night* is the most successful book of all time. Stephen Lambden shared rare and valuable treasures from his Baha'i library in order to foster interest in Baha'i book collecting.

Evening social gatherings took place at the Lambden-Quinn residence, where seminar participants partook of Indian takeaway food and continued scholarly discussions well into the night.

Without the active and enthusiastic support of the UK NSA, members of which National body often participate in the Newcastle seminar, the present positive state of Baha'i scholarship would not have come to so positive a realization.

SQ and SL (slightly revised 2016).