

Association for Baha'i Studies (English-speaking Europe)

International Conference on 'Fundamentalism'

8-9th June 2002

*The Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London,
28 Russell Square, London, WC1B 5DS*

Conference Information: walking distance (in order of proximity) to the following Underground Stations:
Russell Square, Euston, Euston Square, Goodge Street, King's Cross.

Please note: car parking not advised.

Registration from 9.30am - Pre-registration not necessary

Contact: Jane Aldred 01225 447254/475291 [jane.aldred@iplbath.com] for further information, including
map/directions to the venue.

Conference cost £10 ABS-ESE members; £15 non-members [concessions £12]

All for one or both days

Speakers and their Abstracts

Dr Bahiyih Nakhjavani

Abstract:

Fear and Fundamentalism

What are the spiritual conditions that give rise to our individual and collective fears? How does the climate of fear underlie fundamentalist attitudes? What is the relationship between "the fear of God" and fundamentalism? This is not a sociological analysis of the subject from a religious or political point of view but an attempt to understand what Bahá'u'lláh tells us about the spiritual roots of fear itself.

Biopic:

Bahiyih was born in Iran, raised in East Africa, educated in the UK, and has lived and worked in the States, Canada, Cyprus and most recently France. She teaches Literature at University and specializes in language course foreign students of art and graphic design; she writes film scripts and novels. Her Baha'i books include 'Asking Questions', which is about fundamentalism. She does not regard herself as a scholar.

Ismael Velasco

Abstract:

'Baha'i Fundamentalism': Reading the Label

The concept of Bahá'í fundamentalism has surfaced recurrently in academic literature and fora. The use of this concept will be reviewed and evaluated and its potential value and pitfalls assessed.

Biotic:

Ismael Velasco's interests within the area of Bahá'í studies, lie particularly in historical, religious and Middle Eastern studies, and in the broad field of community development. Active on various electronic lists for Bahá'í studies, Ismael serves as faculty to the Wilmette Institute and his work in Bahá'í scholarship has been or is due to be published by the Irfan Colloquium, the Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin, Kalimat Press, Landegg International University, and the Gender Studies Forum. With a degree in History from the University of Edinburgh, Ismael works professionally in the field of community development managing a regeneration partnership in Nottingham.

Sholeh A Quinn

Abstract:

Historical Literalism and Bábi-Bahá'í Studies

This purpose of this paper is to examine historical literalism, a phenomenon related to "fundamentalism." It opens with an introductory explanation of historical methodology, discussing why it is important to contextualize historical sources. The paper shows how neglecting this essential methodological task leads to historical literalism. It takes the audience through a basic exercise in historical contextualization, using the example of Nabil's Narrative. The paper highlights one misunderstanding of historical methodology drawn from a published article on the Báb's childhood and an Internet discussion of that same article. It concludes with a discussion of some of the criticisms made against Bahá'ís engaged in historical methodology and explains why such assumptions are unfounded.

Biopic:

Sholeh Quinn is Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History at Ohio University.

Oliver Scharbrodt

Abstract:

Fundamentalism as Revolt Against Modernity? - A Comparative Perspective

The term 'fundamentalism' is widely used to refer to activist, militant and terrorist movements with a religiously-defined ideology. Terrorism, intolerance, backwardness and narrow-mindedness are usually associated with fundamentalism. It is a 'bad word' whose pejorative connotations are exploited to discredit followers of religious beliefs considered to be anti-modern. Recent scholarship has discussed whether apart from its popular understanding the term 'fundamentalism' can be used in an academic context to describe similar phenomena in all major religions in the 20th century from a 'value-free' perspective. Although most scholars approach the term 'fundamentalism' with unease, it has been proven to be most useful in describing certain religious movements in Christianity and Islam but also in other religions like Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism from a comparative perspective. This paper will present common features of fundamentalist movements which scholarship has deduced as 'family resemblances' in comparative studies. Finally, the attempt will be made to discuss whether and to what extent these features can be applied to the Bahá'í Faith.

Biopic:

Oliver studied Comparative Religion, Islamic Studies and Philosophy at the University of Bonn and did an MA in Oriental and African Religions at SOAS. At the moment, Oliver is doing a PhD at SOAS - a comparative study of the Bahá'í Faith and Islamic reform movements in 19th century Middle East.

Geeta Gandhi Kingdon

Abstract:

Women's education: How does it matter?

While there is consensus in the social science literature that women's education matters very much to a range of social and economic development outcomes - such as economic growth, fertility and child mortality rates, and child health and education - there is less agreement about the mechanisms through which women's education has its impact on these outcomes. This paper considers how women's education matters to their fertility and to their children's education, taking into account both economic

and non-economic pathways. It evaluates the so-called bargaining power mechanism in the light of Bahá'í teachings about the purpose of women's education. It considers whether education has to raise women's earnings in order for its benefits to accrue, and examines the trade-off between the economic and non-economic mechanisms through which women's education acts.

Biopic:

Geeta Kingdon is a Research Officer at the Department of Economics, University of Oxford. Her research interests include economics of education and labour economics and she has worked on these issues with a specific focus on India and South Africa.

Roger Prentice

Abstract:

Fundamentalism - An Educational Perspective.

This presentation sees fundamentalism as that which prevents true education and human development. The true nature of education, from a Bahá'í perspective, is seen as *'the cultivation of the human spirit, through harmonised diversity, in service of the Divine Will.'* The true nature of religion is suggested as being *"the communal state of loving uncertainty in relation to Ultimate Reality."*

Various forms of definition of fundamentalism are acknowledged but the case is made that it is not appropriate to see fundamentalism as simply another normal point of view, e.g. the opposite of 'liberalism'. Instead suggestions are made toward a definition of fundamentalism as pathology – that which dis-eases spiritual health.

Next fundamentalism is discussed as a state that is forbidden in Bahá'í writings.

How it is that fundamentalism causes disease within the individual and within the body politic is discussed along with some of the elements that might constitute an 'immune system'.

Finally the presentation ends with a suggestion as to what it is that can solve the problem of fundamentalism in both the educational and political realms.

Biopic:

Roger Prentice, as a teacher and teacher educator, has a long-standing interest in education and in what the Bahá'í Writings might offer toward 'a new model of education', which is the subject of his doctoral thesis.

Barney Leith

Abstract:

An End to Pluralism? The Universal House of Justice's Message to the World's Religious Leaders.

The message of April 2002 addressed by the Universal House of Justice to the world's religious leaders sets out the Bahá'í teachings on the unity of religion and critiques the claims to exclusivity and finality that "in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence". I argue that this message can be read as challenging the radically pluralist assumption that lies at the root of much current interfaith dialogue in the UK and elsewhere.

Biopic:

Barney Leith was brought up as a Christian, but has been a Bahá'í all his adult life. He makes no claim to scholarly prowess but has long been involved with inter faith work in a non-academic way at local and national levels, especially since he was first elected as Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly in 1998. He represents the UK Bahá'í community on a number of major inter faith organizations, notably the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

Abstract:

The Association of the Soul with the Physical Body, with Implications for the Moral Status of the Embryo

There is no clear statement currently available in the Bahá'í Writings about the nature and the timing of the association of the soul with the physical body, with specific reference to biological processes. Some Bahá'ís (e.g. Savi) have considered that the soul is present from the zygote stage, but no justification is given for this assumption. The Universal House of Justice has indicated that there is currently no Bahá'í definition or physical correlate of "conception", the point at which the Guardian states that the soul enters the body.

Since the 1970s, scientists have had routine access to human gametes and embryos, culminating in the birth of the first test-tube (in vitro fertilisation, IVF) baby in 1978. Currently tens of thousands of embryos are banked in freezers world wide, with some destined for replacement into the uterus, but a large number destined "to be allowed to perish". Some of these latter embryos will become the subject of experiments, and some will become a source of stem cells. These outcomes are now commonplace and routine.

It is therefore of the utmost importance for society in general, for IVF scientists and doctors, and for current and prospective patients to consider the moral status of the embryo. The Bahá'í Faith will be required to take a stance in view of the widespread availability of the technique and the public concern for embryos. On an individual basis, the Universal House of Justice has left the issue as a matter of conscience. On a corporate basis, the principles established from the Bahá'í Scripture need to be presented in a consistent and useful manner.

There are 3 approaches in the literature, which attempt to address the issue of the timing of soul association.

The first argues that specific biological events are in themselves morally significant, and hence define the point of soul association.

The second draws a parallel with the end of life, i.e. the end of soul association, with inferences for the beginning of life.

The third expounds the theory that all human life is sacred, that all humans have a right to life, and therefore all human life should be preserved. Further there are ethical and legal principles for protecting the most vulnerable in society. This approach rests on a belief of the absolute right to life.

A common reaction, as opposed to an approach, is that somehow we know what is right and what is wrong. This is an intuitive approach and relies usually on extolling what is considered to be natural. A positive affirmation would be said to be in keeping with the dignity of man, and a negative the opposite. The latter sometimes goes by the onomatopoeic term – the "yuk" factor. Those who advance this line of reasoning rarely rely on argument, but appeal to sentiment.

All three approaches, along with the "yuk" factor reaction, when critically assessed in isolation, are problematical and give rise to inconsistencies, thereby limiting their usefulness. This critical analysis will be the subject of this paper.

Biopic

Masoud Afnan is a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist and Director of Infertility Services at the Birmingham Women's Hospital. He is part of a team involved with stem cell research, and cell nuclear transfer techniques. Masoud has been working in the field of infertility and in vitro fertilisation since 1983. Currently, he is interested in applying the principles of moral philosophy or ethics as tools for addressing difficult issues which are left to our own conscience.

Stephen N Lambden

Abstract:

Fundamentalism, Hermeneutics, and Religions of The Book

In this paper I shall focus upon ways in which text focused or 'scriptural fundamentalism' has had negative, disruptive effects upon the intellectual and spiritual life of adherents the major Abrahamic (to use Qur'anic terminology) ahl al-kitab ("people of the Book"), namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As the Bábí-Bahá'í religion(s) is pre-eminently a scripture based "religion of the Book" it will be well to heed lessons from the past, lest the spiritual and intellectual life of the Bahá'í community be compromised by fanatical, anti-intellectual and fundamentalist elements. In this paper I shall first (loosely) define fundamentalism as it is historically rooted in a Christian literalist view of biblical scripture. The cases of the Scottish Protestant, Aberdeen then ultimately Cambridge University lecturer William Robertson Smith (1846-1894) will be outlined as will that of the American Catholic lecturer on the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament" = OT) Henry A. Poels (1868-1948). This will be followed by a few notes pertinent to Thomas, Kelly Cheyne (1841-1915), also a specialist on the Hebrew Bible, a champion of "higher criticism" and the "hallowing of criticism" and one who in later life was a professed Bahá'í. Then some aspects of a typically fundamentalist hermeneutical orientation will be sketched, critiqued and contrasted with the multi-faceted Bahá'í scriptural hermeneutical perspectives which leave no room for fanatical fundamentalist elitism, dogmatism or anti-intellectualism.

Biopic:

Stephen Lambden was formerly lecturer in Bahá'í studies at Newcastle University; he has been doing full-time Bahá'í studies for over 20 years.

Wendi Momen

Abstract:

Fundamentalist Thinking and the Achievement of a World Government

A preliminary look at what fundamentalist thinking in international relations and political theory might be and how this might influence the establishment of world government.

Biopic:

Wendi has a degree in Economics from LSE (1974) and a PhD in International Relations (Foreign Policy) also from LSE (1978). She currently serves as Treasurer on the NSA
