

AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Baha'i community

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Unleashing student potential

The true task of a teacher is not to impart knowledge, but rather to create an environment in which students can achieve their full potential.

That was the view put forward by Professor Duane Varan, Foundation Chair in New Media at Murdoch University, when he presented the 2002 Clara and Hyde Dunn Memorial Lecture on the subject "Unleashing Student Potential" in Sydney on 29 October.

The philosophy has demonstrated its effectiveness, as Professor Varan was awarded the prestigious Prime Minister's Award for University Teacher of the Year in December 2001.

Professor Varan, who has been a Baha'i all his life, said that his philosophy of teaching was inspired by a quotation contained in the statement of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995.

The statement defined the real purpose of development as "laying foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness".

Professor Varan concluded that education had a similar purpose.

"Human potential is a deep, deep well", he said. "The vast majority of us don't ever reach our potential. When you push people to achieve their fullest potential, they discover themselves".

"The tragedy of our higher education system is that most people don't ever discover themselves".

Professor Varan described his own learning unit at Murdoch as an environment where students who may be very average at the beginning could achieve their full potential. "When you allow people to achieve their potential, great things can happen", he said.

Professor Varan criticised the practice of "normal distributions", which anticipates that the marks earned by students in an average class can be plotted in a bell curve, with the majority clustered around the middle. He described this as a "mediocre approach to excellence".



"To me a normal distribution is a sign of failure as a teacher", he said, "because the teacher has not made a difference".

"Our great challenge is to break the notion that it's about students competing with each other. Otherwise, students will perform at their level of expectation, and the result is mediocrity".

Role in social discourse

Of all the challenges facing universities in Australia today, Professor Varan said, the one that disturbed him most was the degree to which the academy had become irrelevant to the social discourse of our times.

"Our society is negotiating difficult issues and struggling to come to terms with its ideas about immigration, multiculturalism, foreign policy, our place in the world", he said.

"But where is the academy? We are silent. The discussion is facilitated by talkback radio".

Professor Varan pointed out that the very disciplines traditionally involved in such discourse - the humanities such as philosophy - were those that had suffered most in recent times in Australian universities.

He called for a "spiritual renaissance" in higher education in Australia to reverse this trend.

The Clara and Hyde Dunn Lecture is named in honour of the founders of the Australian Baha'i community and dedicated to the ideals they championed.

Service remembers victims of Bali attacks

A devotional service was held at the Baha'i House of Worship in Mona Vale on Sydney's northern beaches on 20 October to mark the national day of mourning for the victims of the recent terrorist attacks in Bali.

"The Australian Baha'i community mourns the victims of the terrorist attacks in Bali and offers its deepest condolences to their families and friends", said community spokesperson Natalie Mobini.

"We also pray for the speedy recovery and healing of all those who were injured in these horrific attacks".

A public invitation to attend the service was taken up by many locals from the surrounding area, who heard readings selected from the

scriptures of all the world religions.

Similar events were hosted by the Baha'i community in other parts of the country.

The condolences of the Baha'i community over the attack were also shared through a letter to the editors of major metropolitan newspapers.

"At this time of grief and uncertainty about the future", the letter read, "we would like to share with our fellow Australians our confidence that the future of humanity can be brighter than the present.

"The Scriptures of our Faith contain the assurance that 'these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the Most Great Peace shall come'."

New officer appointed

Tessa Scrine has been appointed as the new Government Relations Officer for the Australian Baha'i community.

Her duties will involve representing the Baha'i community to the commonwealth government in a wide range of areas. In addition she will provide current information on the situation of the Baha'i community in Iran, where the Baha'i Faith continues to suffer persecution.

She will also work with other non-government organisations with similar interests in areas such as peace, the advancement of women, and social and economic development.

Ms Scrine has previously worked as a public servant for the Commonwealth and ACT governments.

In the 1990s she underwent a major change in career focus and devoted much of her time to parenting her three daughters.

She has also been involved in the non-government sector in the fields of reconciliation and refugee issues, and served for six years as President or Vice-President of the Executive Committee of the Canberra Montessori School.

Ms Scrine will be based at the ACT Baha'i Centre, where she can be contacted on (02) 6287 2211 or email tessa.scrine@bnc.bahai.org.au

Ms Scrine replaces Michael Curtotti, who has worked as the Government Relations Officer since 1998. Mr Curtotti will be taking up legal duties, as well as continuing his involvement in the area of human rights.



Finishing touches are added to a new centre designed to meet the needs of the Baha'i community in Sydney.

Located in Derby Street, Silverwater, the purpose-built centre contains classrooms, an 800 seat auditorium, a gymnasium and office facilities. It will be officially opened in 2003.



Margo goes gold, again

The oldest woman competitor at the World Masters Games says, "Don't call me old, unless you stick a 'g' in front of it".

Margo Bates, a 92-year-old swimmer, proved true to her word, winning five gold medals in the 50, 100 and 200 metre freestyle and backstroke events at the Games, which were held in Melbourne in October.

This brings her tally to more than 80 gold medals in the five years since she took up competitive swimming at the age of 87. She is also the holder of five swimming world records.

Back home in Hervey Bay, Queensland, Margo has been a member of the local Baha'i community for some 40 years. Outside her training schedule (four mornings a week) - when she is not indulging her other interests in singing and tap dancing - Margo serves as



a member of the elected local Baha'i council.

Last year Margo was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her support of the Masters Games as well as her voluntary community service and fundraising work. She is believed to be the first Australian Baha'i to receive this honour.

Baha'i character a first

The ABC's new flagship drama MDA has brought the Baha'i Faith to mainstream television, with one of its main characters being a Baha'i.

23-year-old actress Petra Yared (The Secret Life of Us) plays Layla Young in the medico legal drama, which has aired on primetime Tuesday nights since August this year.

It's believed to be the first time that such a character has been seen on Australian television.

The character of Layla is half Persian, half Australian and regularly talks about the Baha'i Faith and her beliefs.

Actress Petra Yared is currently starring in the Australian feature film, Blurred. She says that the role stirs up questions from everybody, especially the actors, but she'd never heard of the Baha'i Faith before she auditioned for the part.

"I said to my agent, 'what's a Baha'i?' And she said, 'I don't know'. I said to my boyfriend, 'what's Baha'i?' And he didn't know!" said Yared.

"I looked it up... and came across a quote... 'If religion... is the cause of conflict... or anger or something, then the holy thing to do would be to get rid of your religion'."

"I remember thinking, 'this is wicked, this is a good religion!'"

The ensemble cast of MDA is headed by leading Australian actor Kerry Armstrong (Lantana) and has seen the successful return to television of 1980s pop icon Jason Donovan.

MDA won its preliminary ratings timeslot and with a solid showing so far, a second series is expected next year.



Baha'i education classes growing

There are now over 4000 students attending Baha'i education classes in Australian state schools, according to a report prepared by the National Office of Baha'i Education.

The classes were first taught in New South Wales some 15 years ago and have since spread to Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria, and Western Australia, where they are offered as an alternative within the religious education program in government schools.

While the classes were originally started by Baha'i parents who wanted their children to learn about their own religion, almost 90% of the students now attending the classes come from families that do not profess the Baha'i Faith.

Growing appeal

According to the national education development officer for the Baha'i community, Judy Beames, many non-Baha'i parents choose the classes for their children because they are attracted by the emphasis placed on the oneness of religion.

"The students are taught to respect all the major religions of the world and to understand that no matter what religion one has, we all worship the same God - only the name and form of worship differ", she said.

"We find that many parents who are not Baha'is themselves value this approach to religious education for their children".

Parents also appreciate the focus placed on the development of virtues such as kindness, honesty and love, Ms Beames explained.



"Baha'is believe that every child is a storehouse of virtues waiting to be developed", she said.

"By noticing when a child is practising a virtue, and by calling a child to a virtue, we support them in their spiritual development.

"Baha'is believe that the development of spiritual qualities in individuals is the foundation of a peaceful world".

A community service

Ms Beames stressed that the classes are offered as a service to the community, and do not seek to convert or indoctrinate the children.

"One of the fundamental principles of Baha'i education is to facilitate the development of the capacity to think, independently and objectively, and actively seek truth by this means", she said. "So students are encouraged to question and explore".

Teachers of the classes are accredited and go through a standard approval process, which includes fulfilment of any state education department requirements. "Teachers are encouraged to undertake continuous training and we offer training courses on a regular basis", she said.

After serving as the national education development officer for the past five years, Ms Beames is about to take up a new position as moral education coordinator for the Baha'i community of Tanzania.

She will be replaced in December by Kath Podger, a visual arts teacher and community artist from Sydney.

Further information about Baha'i education classes can be obtained from the Office of Baha'i Education, 173 Mona Vale Road, Ingleside, NSW 2101 or email education@bnc.bahai.org.au

Mission Statement

- Baha'i education classes aim to contribute to the awakening and development of the spiritual nature of every child attending the classes, complementing the material and physical education provided by schools.
- In Baha'i education classes the development of spiritual attributes or virtues common to all the world's major religions are emphasised.

In addition Baha'i education classes attempt to develop within the students the knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes required to be world citizens and to embrace the equality of all peoples regardless of race, religion, nation, class, or gender.

- Students participating in Baha'i education classes explore ways in which they may be able to contribute to society and serve humanity.

- Baha'i education classes in state schools are based on the teachings of Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith.
- Baha'i education classes are open to all students regardless of their cultural or religious background subject to parental approval.
- Baha'i education classes are offered in a spirit of service as a contribution to spiritual and moral education in the Australian community.

Foreign minister talks peace

Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer was the guest speaker at a seminar on "Australia and peace in the 21st century" hosted by the Baha'i community of Campbelltown, South Australia on 16 November.

In his remarks, Mr Downer called on Australians, world citizens and nation states alike to "unite and struggle together if we are to contain the forces of evil in the world".

He acknowledged that the hundred years of war that marred the 20th century had still not inspired the formula for peace in the 21st century.

As individuals, communities and nations we could no longer afford to be indifferent, he said.

The intolerance and ethnic chauvinism brought about by extremists and their supporters must be addressed through the cooperation of nation states, according to Mr Downer.

Countries like Australia needed to invest increasing amounts of diplomatic energy and resources if we were to succeed in containing conflict.

Mr Downer also called for reform and increased funding to key areas of the United Nations in order to improve its capacity to address conflict in the world.

International cooperation

The theme of international cooperation was taken up by Dr David Chittleborough, a senior appointed member of the Baha'i community in Australia, who was the second guest speaker at the seminar.

Dr Chittleborough argued that the enormous changes that had affected the world in the last century were evidence of a single trend: the growing "interdependence and integration of humanity".



Foreign Minister Alexander Downer with Dr David Chittleborough

The rise of the realisation that "we are a single people, rich in diversity, living in a common homeland" called for a more universal and equitable world order, he said.

The primacy of the nation state above all else must give way to a world federation of nations headed by a world parliament, the members of which would be elected by the people of the world.

While reorganisation of the world's political and administrative system was important, however, Dr Chittleborough argued that peace would not emerge unless fundamental prejudices dividing humanity were addressed.

He pointed in particular to religious prejudice, with religious strife, division and bigotry remaining very apparent, largely unaddressed, and apparently fuelling much tension and violence in the world.

Dr Chittleborough called for a concerted effort on the part of religious leaders to work to overcome religious prejudice.

Seminar organisers said they were very pleased by the public interest shown in the event, which attracted an audience of more than 200 people.

Reconciliation: a spiritual issue

The central issues in the reconciliation process are essentially spiritual in character, according to a submission by the Australian Baha'i Community to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee's Inquiry into the Progress towards National Reconciliation.

This means that true reconciliation will require the promotion of basic spiritual values and attitudes, it says.

Despite notable achievements, the submission describes progress towards reconciliation as "slow and marked with setbacks".

"The recent resurgence of divisive racial attitudes in Australia, the increased number of racial incidents, and the unrelieved deprivation faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make the need for solutions ever more pressing", it says.

"Healing the wounds and building a society in which people of diverse backgrounds live as members of one family are the most urgent issues confronting Australia today. Our nation's peace and prosperity and our standing in the international community depend to a great extent on their resolution".

Racism the fundamental barrier

Racism remains the most fundamental barrier to full national reconciliation, according to the submission.

The "mental illusions" that have given rise to racism must therefore be confronted and contrasted with the reality that "there is only the one human race. We are a single people, inhabiting the planet Earth, one human family bound together in a common destiny."

Barriers of prejudice should be removed through positive measures to foster association at all levels between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians, the submission argues.

The submission also advocates a national program of education emphasising the values of tolerance, brotherhood, appreciation for cultures other than one's own, and respect for differences.

"Education is not only the shortest route out of poverty; it is also the shortest route out of prejudice", it points out.

Setbacks in the reconciliation process should not be allowed to lead to new rationalisations for entrenching racial separation, it warns.

"It is only at the most profound level of our shared humanity that we will find solutions".

Justice and rights

Acceptance and application of the principle of justice is the fundamental basis for reconciliation, according to the submission.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians remain the most underprivileged group in Australian society on virtually every index, and justice demands that this situation must not continue.

Justice also requires the recognition of human rights. The submission advocates a formal process of human rights education in Australia in order to enhance progress towards recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A principle that needs to be given greater prominence in the reconciliation process is the equality of men and women.

Only when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are welcomed as full partners with men in all fields of endeavour will conditions that promote real justice and reconciliation prevail, it says.

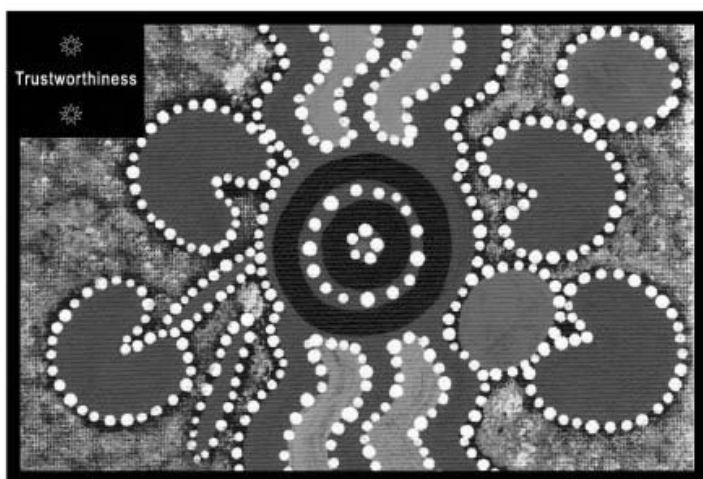
The submission concludes that reconciliation requires effort and contribution from all of us.

"Social change begins with the individual", it says. "Sweeping social changes may be proposed or worked for, but no plan will have a lasting effect unless it is built upon an inner revolution, a dramatic change in the attitudes of the individual".

A series of free postcards has been designed to share principles of the Baha'i Faith with a new audience.

Featuring nine original designs by nine Baha'i artists, the postcards explore themes such as hope, justice, integrity and unity.

Trustworthiness by Emily Johm (NT)



Religions must be involved at UN

Religions must become more actively involved in the work of the United Nations for the sake of the peace and prosperity of the world.

That's the message of a statement issued by the Baha'i International Community to the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in South Africa from 26 August to 4 September.

Titled "Religion and Development at the Crossroads: Convergence or Divergence?" the statement argues that the United Nations has yet to grasp both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world.

Religion has been the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the people of the world, according to the statement, and it has unlimited power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment.

"It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society... can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support," it says

"The United Nations will only succeed ... to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualisation, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs".

Confronting religious fanaticism

The statement acknowledges the destructive power of religious animosities and fanaticism, and places the onus for addressing them squarely on religious leaders themselves.

"Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilisation", it says.

"Until the religions of the world renounce fanaticism and work whole-heartedly to eliminate it from within their own ranks, peace and prosperity will prove chimerical".

"The responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders", it continues. "It is they who must raise

their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth".

Possible next steps

As a first step towards substantively engaging religion with the United Nations, the statement suggests the hosting of a gathering of religious leaders convoked, perhaps, by the Secretary-General.

On the agenda, it suggests, could be a call by the leaders for a convention on freedom of religion and belief, similar to the International Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This would signal the willingness of religious leaders to accept freedom of conscience for all people, significantly reducing tensions in the world.

The gathering could also discuss the foundation of a permanent religious forum within the United Nations system, patterned perhaps on the new Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, as an important initial step towards fully integrating religion into the work of the UN.

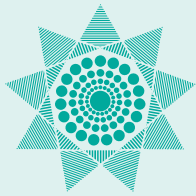
The statement acknowledges that the acceptance of religion as a UN partner must be gradual, and that religious hostilities will not be eliminated any time soon.

However, it argues, "the desperate needs of the human family make further delay in addressing the role of religion unacceptable".

The full text of the statement can be found at www.bic-un.bahai.org/02-0826.htm.

*Equality by
Saeed Granfar (QLD)*





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International news

Peace education: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Graduate students of a Baha'i-sponsored university in Switzerland have completed a pilot program in peace education for teachers, students and parents at schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The graduates from Landegg International University devised the two-year Education for Peace Project to train present and future generations of children and youth to become peacemakers. Their goal: to break down the cycle of violence that has so often consumed their communities in the past.

Formally launched in June 2000, the project introduced concepts of peace, unity and inter-ethnic harmony into all major topics of the school curriculum, so that peace education is not seen as an add-on course, but becomes an integral part of the student's experience. The process also involved parents, with a view to transforming entire communities.

In its first year, the project worked directly with some 400 teachers, administrators and support staff in six schools, serving around 6000 children and youth.

"We provide training on a new understanding of human nature, which teaches that there is a latent potential within human beings to create a civilisation of peace", said Sara Clarke, the project's administrator in Bosnia. "From there, we focus on the dynamics of conflict, the prerequisites of peace, and what it takes to create a culture of healing".

The project even boasts an Australian connection: Dr John Davidson, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Tasmania and member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Australia, is a member of its affiliate faculty.

The project has won praise from educational administrators and specialists in Bosnia. The



Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina recommended the project "to all nations for consideration, as a model of society oriented towards peace, cooperation and development" in a statement issued to all heads of state and delegations to the United Nations Special Session on Children held in New York in May.

Zerina Ibricic, a biology teacher at the Third Primary School in Ilidza, where seven out of every ten children have lost one or both parents through ethnic conflict, said the project has helped students see that "hate is not good for living and that we should continue to live together with others of different ethnicities".

Dijana Jujic, a teacher at the Ivo Andric Primary School in Banja Luka, said "This project is the only thing that gives me hope for the future of this country".

Project administrators are hopeful that project funding will be extended so that it can be expanded into many more schools throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina and into neighbouring republics.

There is even potential for broader expansion. In August the program was presented to Israeli and Palestinian educators at a training seminar hosted in Geneva as a model of successful post-war inter-ethnic reconciliation.

Further information on the project can be obtained from <<http://efp.landegg.edu>>
- UK Baha'i Review