

Some Observations Concerning the Baha'i Chair for World Peace

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I should like to thank the Association for inviting me to make a presentation on the Baha'i Chair for World Peace, which I have the honor to represent on this short trip to Japan. There is much that should be said about this important and newly established institution. However, as time is short, I propose to limit myself to a few highlights and brief discussion of some of the more obvious subjects that might be of interest to the present gathering. The points I will touch on are the significance of the Chair, its functions and work program, and its relationship to the Baha'i community, including most especially, Baha'i scholars.

It seems to me there are at least three observations that should be made with regard to the significance of the Chair in the context of the evolution of the Baha'i community. The first, of course, is that it represents an early step in the process of obtaining academic recognition of the Baha'i Faith as a worthy subject for study, one of the main goals of this Association. What is especially noteworthy is that, in this case, Baha'i studies are not limited to what is sometimes referred to as the "religious ghetto," but are seen as immediately relevant to the great practical questions concerning the achievement of world peace. There can be little doubt that a major contributing factor to this process has been the prestige that the Baha'i Faith has won as a great moral and intellectual force in the world as a consequence of the immense courage and spiritual strength of those suffering persecution in Iran after the revolution of 1978.

My second observation concerning the significance of the Chair relates to its location and the timing of its establishment. Its location is in the capital city of the most powerful and influential nation on earth, the United States, which, according to the Baha'i Writings, has a very special destiny in leading the nations of the world to both the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace. Opportunity to consult with those of influence in the government of this nation is clearly greatly enhanced by this special location. The timing of its establishment is equally remarkable. It happened at the end of the Cold War, the third of the great global conflicts of the Twentieth Century, which for more than forty years had prevented humanity from taking proper advantage of the United Nations agreement which concluded the Second World War. Its establishment was also only a few years before the end of the second Christian millennium, which, 'Abdu'l-Baha said, would see the end of war between nations.

A third significant aspect of the Chair is the fact that the initiative for its establishment came from outside the Faith. This clearly adds to the respect with which the Chair is seen by the rest of the world, i.e., it is not likely to be seen as simply a self-serving instrument of a particular religion. The original initiative came from Professor Edward Azar, a Lebanese Christian and a distinguished scholar in the field of peace studies who had recently, on invitation, established the Center for International Development and Conflict Management [CIDCM] at the University of Maryland, a leading center of higher learning in the United States. Laboring to help restore peace in his own war-torn land, he had met in the early eighties, Professor Bushiri, who at that time was Head of the Department of English at the American University of Beirut as well as Cultural Advisor to President Gemayel. As a result of their friendship, Professor Azar became familiar with "The Promise of World Peace", which, as you will recall, was released by the Universal House of Justice in 1985, the UN Year of Peace, just a few months after Mikhail Gorbachev became Secretary-General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Professor Azar was so inspired by this statement that he wrote to the Universal House of Justice in 1988, proposing the establishment of a Baha'i Chair for World Peace at the CIDCM. He had the full support of the

University, which is known for its progressive and innovative approaches to education and for its access to generous sources of funding.

Eventually the Chair was established in 1993 on the basis of an agreement between the University and the US National Spiritual Assembly, acting on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. The agreement provided for a seven-member board, five nominated by the National Spiritual Assembly and two by the University, which would advise the latter on policy and administration of the Chair. The Assembly was also given responsibility for preparing a list of candidates for the Chair, with appropriate academic qualifications and with good standing in the Baha'i community. The latter provision, which was suggested by the University, gives safeguard against the Chair being occupied by someone who might be hostile to the Faith.

I should now like to say a few words about the Chair's functions and its work program. The Chair has been given three broad functions. First, it is to provide inter-disciplinary research, courses and seminars on Baha'i texts with regard to causes of conflict and the peaceful resolution of such conflicts. Second, it is to organize a public forum for discussion of the issues raised in "The Promise of World Peace". Third, it is to establish links with other institutions which have academic programs in peace studies, including provision of technical assistance to help set up such studies. With regard to fund raising, it was agreed that the Baha'i Community would be responsible for raising an endowment of \$1.5 million, which would be matched equally by the University. The University would also provide facilities, such as the building and various support services.

Since its inauguration in April 1993, the Chair has undertaken a heavy program of activities made possible by the drive and energy of Professor Bushnui, who had been selected for the post by the University. In the first academic year, an honors course on "The Spiritual Heritage of the Human Race" was presented and attended by some 22 students. It is planned to publish the text of the course in book form in the near future. The course has been so well received that the University is considering a proposal to make it a basic requirement for all undergraduate students—a response to the widely perceived need to strengthen the spiritual dimension of public education in the USA. A second course on "The Religious Approaches to Peace" is in the planning stage. In April, 1994, the Chair cooperated with the History Department and the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies in sponsoring a peace forum entitled "When Empires Fall: Religion, Ethnicity, and the Possibilities for Peace", with participation by scholars from all around the world, Baha'i and non-Baha'i alike. Academic contacts, including technical assistance, have been established with the Baha'i Academy at Landegg, Switzerland, which *inter-alia* provides a certificate program in World Order Studies with the University of Indhore, where there is also a newly-established Chair for Baha'i Studies, with the University of Nur at Santa Cruz, Bolivia, with the College of Micronesia, and with Makerere University in Uganda.

A crucial factor in these early days of the Chair is to reach the endowment goal as soon as possible. The Baha'i Chair itself has raised nearly \$1 million towards the goal of \$1.5 million. Non-Baha'is may and do contribute to this fund raising activity because it is in support of a University of Maryland facility, not a Baha'i institution as such, obviously an important factor at this time when the highest priority for Baha'i fund raising is in support of the Arc. The University, itself severely constrained by the present general crisis in public finances in the United States, has not been able, so far, to match the endowment directly, but is paying interest on what was promised and is providing agreed services in kind. In addition the Chair has been allocated a high proportion of special funds provided by the State of Maryland to encourage private financial support for the University. A separate financial issue is the establishment of a scholarship fund of \$50,000 for less well-off students, for which so far some \$20,000 has been raised. Clearly, during these early days, before the endowment is fully funded, the Chair

is obliged to operate on a shoe string, with a few underpaid staff having to work unreasonably hard, and with the possibility that opportunities for desirable projects will be lost.

I should like now to say a few words about how the Chair relates to the Baha'i Community and, in particular, to Baha'i scholars and such bodies as the Association for Baha'i Studies. Clearly there is an opportunity for a great deal of cooperation in terms of mutual support in research and provision of intellectual resources. However, there is a need for great care in such activity to respect the independence of the Chair and to remember that the Chair reports to, and is managed by, the University, and that failure to observe this convention, even when the intent is well-meaning, could be most damaging. The main point to stress is that Baha'i scholars, including, of course, members of the Japanese branch of ABS are warmly encouraged to offer their services, and to be in contact directly with the Chair to that purpose.

Whilst on this subject of scholarship, I should like to finish, with your permission, on a note of caution, because, as we all know, we are venturing into risky if exciting and rewarding territory. As Baha'is, we have to constantly remember what it is to be a Baha'i scholar—we are to be different from the academic world around us in certain important respects, as was so clearly spelt out in the statement on scholarship of the Universal House of Justice in 1979. We have to deal with the particular problem of ego associated with academia, with excessive and negative competition, and with narrowness of perspective. We need to focus on the purpose of Baha'i scholarship which is to promote the well-being of humanity by illuminating the spiritual principles of the Faith. Past experience, especially in the field of Baha'i history, suggests the need to carefully review our motivations, to take a broad view of the facts, and to avoid like the plague a conviction that we are the experts, the authority. The latter hubris is something that is made more difficult to avoid when there is excessive praise and adulation by other Baha'is. Moderation in all things!