

**Greater Boldness: Radical Storytelling  
With Canadian Bahá'í Women**

by

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## Abstract

Despite the generally anti-religious stance of many feminist scholars, religions which advocate and implement gender equality may enable female believers to resist oppressive norms. This thesis describes the Bahá'í faith as one such religion. An emancipatory vision of gender is enunciated in its central scriptures, and has been implemented, albeit to varying degrees, throughout the faith's history around the world. The author argues that activism for gender equality has diminished in recent years in the Canadian Bahá'í community, and describes the testing of storytelling-based consciousness-raising workshops as a means to increase Canadian Bahá'í women's promotion of the advancement of women.

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This thesis is dedicated to my daughter Ruth. May she stand on my shoulders.

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*“The winds of change blew softly, curling through the mind.  
It is in the mind first we wake to the whisper of yearnings.  
And hear from the depths a voice calling...”*

*from “Change.” written during the workshop series  
by one of the participants.*

## Introduction

Feminism is rife with contentious issues, which are assiduously studied, problematized, contextualized, deconstructed, and otherwise wrestled with by the ever-growing ranks of feminist scholars and practitioners. These thinkers have challenged academic and social practices throughout the Western world. Their ideas have blown through the musty halls of academia like a great invigorating gust of air, eliciting much refreshment and pandemonium.

Most of the feminist discourse, however, has either been anti-religious, envisioning religion exclusively as an agent of patriarchy or social control, or has ignored religion without acknowledging or defending this omission. As many feminist scholars seem to be influenced by socialist views, this tendency has largely gone by unchallenged.

In recent years, questions about this pattern of silences and quick dismissals and calls for a more nuanced treatment of the role of faith in women's lives and in the women's movement have been raised, often by First Nations or black feminists, who recognize that religion has played a key role in sustaining the identity and cohesion of their communities. Ursula King has observed that these feminists, "whilst sharply criticizing the negative features ... nonetheless accept certain important parts of religion, especially its spiritually empowering, transforming, and healing aspects."<sup>1</sup>

In this spirit, I have in this thesis undertaken an investigation of the influence of the Bahá'í faith on Canadian female believers' experience of gender. In the first chapter, I introduce the feminist study of religion and survey a range of feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula King, Women and Spirituality, (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), p. 35.

efforts to define and/or create woman-positive belief systems. In the second chapter, I present the Bahá'í faith as an example of one such system of belief, and argue that the vision of gender enunciated in its central scriptures may act as an emancipatory force in the lives of Bahá'í women. The third chapter is dedicated to describing the implementation of this egalitarian vision in Bahá'í communities around the world over the faith's one hundred and fifty-odd year history. Although oppressive cultural contexts and prevailing social norms have influenced the community's ability and inclination to clearly interpret and apply this vision of gender, I argue that many Bahá'í women have been empowered and enabled by their faith to resist and challenge oppressive gender norms. Equality-seeking has furthermore been consistently undertaken and supported by many Bahá'í men and administrative structures. I propose, however, that this radicalizing and emancipatory influence of the faith on the believers' awareness of and activism on gender issues has been maintained in the developing world but has significantly diminished in the West since the faith's arrival at the turn of the century. In the fourth chapter, I present and describe research undertaken to test my central thesis: that increasing Canadian Bahá'í women's access to their history of activism through a series of consciousness-raising workshops based on radical storytelling may remedy this slippage in the community's promotion of the advancement of women.

Pursuing such a study under the auspices of a Canadian Studies program is somewhat difficult; the Bahá'í community is international in character, and although Canada's particular sociological and geographical characteristics must have influenced the emergence and form of the Canadian Bahá'í community, it does not appear to be clearly differentiated from Bahá'í communities in Australia, the United States, or, for the most part, Europe. Although there may indeed be subtle, distinctively Canadian Bahá'í characteristics, they have not yet been discovered and investigated; the corpus of Bahá'í scholarship addressing the Canadian experience is minute. The big fish in this tiny pond is Will C. van den Hoonaard, a sociologist at University of New

Brunswick, upon whose admirable work sections of this thesis have heavily relied. I have further sought to reinforce the “Canadian-ness” of this project by conducting my own research and testing my community intervention locally; the extent to which my findings are influenced by their location is, however, questionable. Similar observations and results would probably be obtained in many Bahá’í communities throughout the western world. As such, references to American and European Bahá’í scholarship and western Bahá’í women’s experience must periodically stand in for unavailable purely Canadian sources. Hopefully, this thesis will go some way toward alleviating this dilemma for future students of the Canadian Bahá’í community.

## Chapter One: The Feminist Study of Religion

### *Approaches and Methods in Feminist Scholarship*

The academy seems to be resistant to change, to cling to old habits of thought and customs. Nonetheless, for the past thirty years, the roguish seed of feminism has been thriving in this ordered garden, resisting all attempts to uproot it, blurring the neat borders between disciplines, infiltrating and upsetting carefully composed beds of theory, forcing scholars off the well-trodden paths to struggle in the thickets of thorny new questions. Even its proponents are unsure what to call it: while Ursula King says “feminism is both a new academic method and also a new social vision,”<sup>1</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, in her exhaustive study, Feminist Methods in Social Research, concludes that “feminism is a perspective, not a method.”<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the case may be, feminism has radically altered the face of scholarship, challenging the rules for both the definition of knowledge and its pursuit. It insists that women’s experiences and opinions must be considered, arguing that to ignore women is

not simply to ignore a significant subgroup within the social structure. It is to misunderstand and distort the entire organization of that society. Incorporating women’s experiences into our social analysis involves far more than adding another factor to our interpretation and thus correcting an admittedly glaring oversight. It forces us to reconsider our understanding of the most fundamental ordering of social relations, institutions and power arrangements within the society we study.<sup>3</sup>

Such a fundamental re-orientation will entail both “changing the criteria for what counts as knowledge”<sup>4</sup> and “the transformation of traditional processes of writing,

<sup>1</sup> Ursula King, “Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion,” Religion and Gender, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, Feminist Methods in Social Research, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, Disorderly Conduct, (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989), p. 19.

teaching, learning, and thinking”, a transformation which is “inextricably connected to the subversion of the substance of patriarchal thought.”<sup>5</sup>

But to ‘subvert patriarchal thought’ is a complicated task. The exclusion of women’s experience of the world from what has been traditionally counted as knowledge has undermined many women’s confidence and magnified their doubts, such that they “...have little alternative but to believe the myths men have created.”<sup>6</sup> There is, thus, no unity of thought or purpose among women in general. Among feminist scholars, too, there is much dissension; and in their determination not to oppress one another, this dissension is permitted to flourish.

Nonetheless, for the most part, feminist scholars seem to agree on the principle that “constructing knowledge about ourselves [women], with ourselves as the focal point, is a high priority in the quest to end women’s oppression. But we must be free to do it in our own way.”<sup>7</sup> To that end, feminist scholars have proposed and used a number of innovative research theories and strategies, re-evaluating the utility of “experience, intuition, and evaluation as alternative modes of knowing,”<sup>8</sup> and turning their attention to new groups of women, behaviors, and forms of data overlooked or unexamined by traditional scholarship.<sup>9</sup> As Shulamit Reinharz has noted,

Most feminist researchers who develop original methods do not argue that these methods meet the norms of science....rather, they ignore the debate about science and strive to find methods that fit their definition of feminism.<sup>10</sup>

The creativity and experimentation of feminist scholars in their quest for new,

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Maguire, Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach. (Amherst: The Centre for International Education, 1987), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, “Introduction,” Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Spender, “Learning to Create Our Own Knowledge,” Convergence 13, 1-2 (1980), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Maguire, Participatory Research, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

inclusive research orientations and tools has gradually coalesced into an ever-evolving, yet distinct set of practices, which (depending which feminist you ask) may or may not be a methodology, but which nonetheless has certain identifiable characteristics. Six of these will now be introduced.

### *Personalized*

The first tenet of feminist research is that it must acknowledge the personal sources of our work. Rather than write about women's experience abstractly or in the third person, feminist scholars are bidden to use personal experience as "the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions, and the source for finding people to study."<sup>11</sup> Whereas in traditional research, such personal experience is "thought to contaminate a project's objectivity", in feminist research, "it is relevant and repairs the project's pseudo-objectivity."<sup>12</sup> In other words, it prevents the construction of a pretense of objectivity, which, as noted by Patricia Maguire, "supposes a kind of schizophrenic researcher...told to separate feeling from knowing."<sup>13</sup>

The personalization of one's work is also seen as a safeguard against false generalizations. As stated by June O'Connor, "It is not enough to tell me what you see. I want to know where you are standing as you see and speak, and also why you stand there."<sup>14</sup> Plaskow and Christ note that, paradoxically enough, it may be through this avoidance of generalizations, this "articulation of particularity and what seems to be difference, that connection and universality are suddenly revealed."<sup>15</sup> Recognizing that "all knowledge is mediated through the body and that feeling is a profound source

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> Maguire, *Participatory Research*, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> June O'Connor, "The Epistemological Significance of Feminist Research in Religion," *Religion and Gender*, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Plaskow and Christ, "Introduction," p. 5.

of information about our lives,"<sup>16</sup> feminist scholarship challenges the boundaries not just between "impersonal" and "personal" scholarship but between "objective" and "committed" scholarship as well. As Christ and Plaskow point out, "writing addressed to our embodied selves may call for different forms and strategies than writing addressed to dispassionate intellects."<sup>17</sup> The researcher's confession and honoring of his or her own personal interests, perspectives, and biases is one of feminist scholarship's most fundamental challenges to traditional research methods.

### *Committed*

The corollary to the personalization of feminist scholarship is its engagement. Feminist scholars assume the oppression of women, and seek to transform, as well as to understand, women's experience.<sup>18</sup> As Patricia Maguire notes, feminist researchers are trying to change the role of the social scientist from spectator and/or detached advisor to involved activist. "The feminist researcher cannot study women's struggles from a safe distance. Instead, she [sic] must be a consciously partial and passionate frontline participant in the work to construct a just world."<sup>19</sup>

Researchers express their commitment to change in a variety of ways: some argue that "the very act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change because the paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their powerlessness."<sup>20</sup> Others include strategies for disseminating or implementing the findings of their research in their project methodologies, or use the research process itself as a social development tool. The vast majority of feminist researchers,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jolley Bruce Christman, "Working In The Field As A Female Friend," Anthropology and Education Quarterly 19, 2 (June 1988), p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Maguire, Participatory Research, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods, p. 191.



however they may realize it, would agree with Maguire's belief that "our research must go beyond documenting 'what is' to proposing an alternative and imaginative vision of what 'should be'."<sup>21</sup>

But while there is virtual unanimity on the goal, there is less clarity on the means; a lot of feminist researchers have insisted that something must be done to advance the equality of women and men, but few have suggested precisely what to do, or how. This lack of agreement on means to effect change may arise from feminist scholarship's emphasis on diversity and the lack of a generally accepted system for mediating and uniting the plurality of women's experiences and views. As pointed out by Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail,

theory is abstract and generalized, while reality is unique and conjunctural. At best, theory can give only a very general sense of how to go about achieving change. Certainly it gives no prescription.<sup>22</sup>

### *Non-Objectifying the Subjects*

The rejection of 'objectivity' has also affected feminist scholars' relationships with their research subjects. Infuriated by the ubiquitous objectification of women in patriarchal societies, many feminist scholars express a commitment to the ideal of non-objectifying researcher-participant relationships, in which "the distinction between the researcher(s) and those on whom the research is done disappears. To achieve an egalitarian relationship, the researcher abandons control and adopts an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk."<sup>23</sup>

Such egalitarian relationships, mirroring life in their "continuous processes of attachment and separation, involvement and detachment, identification and

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<sup>21</sup> Maguire, *Participatory Research*, p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, "Feminist Practice: Organizing for Change," *Feminist Organizing For Change*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, p. 181.

individuation,"<sup>24</sup> demand that the researcher relinquish power over and distance from their research subjects. This requires the abandonment of most traditional methods of data gathering. In their stead, some feminist methodologists ask "feminist researchers to engage in 'conversations' with women which, in form, reflect the feminist research purpose of co-operatively creating a 'sociology for women'."<sup>25</sup> In these 'conversations', the researchers are further expected to "project a genuine acceptance of the participant's viewpoint" in order to create a safe situation for the researched.<sup>26</sup>

The extent of the practicability of these egalitarian ideals is a point of some debate in feminist circles. While anti-objectificationism is a common feminist cause, there are those who argue that research projects need not appear to be and can not truly be democracies, and that pledging to "project a genuine acceptance" of the views of research participants may run contrary to the overriding goals of honesty and furthering the emancipation of women, when, for instance, the participants manifest internalized oppression. Nonetheless, while the application of this idea may be contested, the underlying principle would be accepted by the majority of feminist scholars, and their research designs would make some attempt to accommodate it.

### *Working As An Insider*

Some feminist scholars have replaced the traditional objectification of research subjects with an "epistemology of insiderness,"<sup>27</sup> in which the researchers examine their similarities and differences with the research subject(s) in order to place themselves on a continuum of 'insiderness/outsiderness.' According to Jolley Bruce Christman, "this perspective stresses that it is not the scientific detachment of the

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<sup>24</sup> Christman, "Female Friend," p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> A. Oakley, cited in Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Christman, "Female Friend," p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, p. 260.

researcher that ensures validity, but knowledge of where one is along as many dimensions of that continuum as possible."<sup>28</sup>

While many feminist scholars advocate alertness to the sameness and/or otherness between the researcher and the participants, some further propose that researchers should cultivate affinity with their subjects; that is, they should actively seek 'insiderness.' As Shulamit Reinharz explains,

The requirement that feminists establish rapport stems from the ideology that women experience relationships through an ethic of care, and that feminists, in particular, are supposed to be able to establish intimate relations with women because of our political awareness. Put even stronger, feminists are supposed to feel toward other women as if they are their sisters, the presumption being that sisters have profound positive relations and shared interests.<sup>29</sup>

This demand for involvement and intimacy with the research subjects may be premised on the notion that such relationships are less likely to be exploitative; however, Reinharz has cautioned that the demand for rapport "may have led us to put on blinders compelling us to see gender as the most salient characteristic of a woman, even when the woman sees it otherwise."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, while supporting the ideal of rapport, Christman has expressed concern that her research may in fact become an abuse of friendship;

A woman gave her story to me in an act of friendship over tea at a kitchen table...I still took it away from the kitchen table and set it in a context that served my research purposes.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Researcher as Research Subject*

Some feminist researchers try to avoid this possibility of exploitation by turning to themselves as research subjects, thus exposing their own vulnerability to

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<sup>28</sup> Christman, "Female Friend," p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, p. 265.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 266.

<sup>31</sup> Christman, "Female Friend," p. 78.

scholarly examination. This often occurs as the researchers seek to identify their own subjective positions by sharing their experiences of the research process. By disclosing “the kind of person that we are, and how we experience the research,”<sup>32</sup> feminist scholars hope to reveal the conscious and unconscious filters through which they have sifted the raw research data.

These attempts to level the researcher-subject hierarchy may be criticized for failing to produce substantive equality and for focussing on the wrong end of the problem; as Patricia Maguire insists, “Liberation will come when ordinary women share power rather than when powerful women share vulnerability.”<sup>33</sup> Voluntary vulnerability on the part of the researchers does not necessarily preclude the possibility of exploitation.

While some feminist scholars see self-study as a necessary complement to work with external research subjects, others focus solely on their own experience, arguing that it is the only voice they are entitled to represent and that they may express truly. This ultimate extension of subjectivity is seen as the most accurate, albeit limited, form of research.

## *Sources*

Feminist scholars run into a whole other complex set of problems when they turn from ‘live’ research to the study of texts; the main issue being that academic sources “record male activities and male deeds in accounts ordered by male values. What we know of women’s past are those things men considered significant to remember, seen and interpreted through a value system that places men at the centre.”<sup>34</sup> Ursula King has noted that this problem is compounded by the fact that

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> Maguire, *Participatory Research*, p. 104.

“women are not only readers of androcentric texts, they are also writers and creators of such texts when they are schooled in and express themselves through the dominant modes of thinking of their age.”<sup>35</sup> This problem in the literature has led feminist researchers away from traditional sources on a search for alternative records of women's voices and experiences. This exploration is described by Plaskow as beginning

by taking seriously everything which is an authentic reflection of women's experience. By everything, I mean letters, diaries, artwork, dreams, literature by and about women, and so on -- all of our hidden history, anything which expresses women's experience of ourselves as opposed to male definitions of women's experience.<sup>36</sup>

A rich body of feminist theory has developed around the use of non-scholarly sources, including oral tradition and the like. This body of work includes discussion of how to interpret silences in the texts, to sense the discursive tensions under which the texts have been produced, and to read 'against the grain' of androcentric texts to unearth information about women's experience.

The six characteristics of feminist research that have been discussed - its tendency to be personalized, committed, and non-objectifying; and to encourage working as an insider, taking the researcher as a subject, and using alternative sources - are among the many contested characteristics that various scholars would ascribe to the field. New theories and methods are constantly being developed, tested, and criticized, as feminist researchers seek more insightful analyses and more effective tools for social change. The foregoing survey, however, will suffice for the project at hand, and we can now turn our attention to examining how these alternative approaches have crystallized in the field of the feminist study of religion.

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Jewish Memory From A Feminist Perspective," Weaving the Visions, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> King, "Gender and the Study of Religion," p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Plaskow, "The Feminist Transformation of Society," Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion, ed. Rita Gross, (Missoula, Montana: Scholar's Press, 1977), p. 27.

## *Perspectives In the Feminist Study of Religion*

### *A Context of Androcentrism*

The most notable characteristic of feminist work in religious studies is its premise that it exists “within an academic power structure which is not only male, but white, heterosexual, middle and upper class, for the most part Christian, and not particularly hospitable to feminism.”<sup>37</sup> Feminist scholars in religion argue that the discipline has so far really only dealt “with women and feminine imagery as *they are thought about by the males being investigated*,”<sup>38</sup> and insist that the androcentric appearance of investigated religions may be at least in part attributable to androcentrism in the eye of the beholder.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the common concern that their work must “rely to a great extent on texts and data created or described by men,”<sup>40</sup> feminist scholars argue that the traditional theoretical frameworks for the study of religion are unfit for the analysis of women’s experience:

The unconscious androcentric presuppositions undergirding almost all work done to date in the history of religions causes serious deficiencies, especially at the primary level of data-perception and gathering, and this deficiency in turn generates serious deficiencies at the level of model-building and theorizing whenever any hint of sexuality or sexual imagery is present in the data being analyzed.<sup>41</sup>

Feminist scholars further complain that “at present there is often no recognition of women as agents and participants in their own right in most literature surveys in the field of religious studies.”<sup>42</sup> They argue that the discipline has become “over-intellectualized” and “text-heavy,” and insist that religious scholars must recognize “the subjectivity and reflexivity of religious studies.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> King, “Gender and the Study of Religion,” p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Rita Gross, “Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History and Religions.” *Beyond Androcentrism*, p.10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> King, “Gender and the Study of Religion.” p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Gross, “Androcentrism and Androgyny,” p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> King, “Gender and the Study of Religion.” p. 1.

## Secularism

Despite their readiness to condemn the androcentrism of traditional approaches to religious studies, feminist scholars have not been quick to propose alternative theories and methodologies, nor have they challenged the fundamental secularism of the discipline; as Penelope Margaret Magee notes, “the academy is essentially secular and even the most Derridan post-structuralists do not tend to deconstruct the secular-sacred binary opposition.”<sup>44</sup> This underlying secularism is reflected in feminist scholars’ approaches to religious scriptures, in which it is assumed that the texts “are not verbally inspired revelation nor doctrinal principles but historical formulations within the context of a religious community.”<sup>45</sup> The texts are thus taken as cultural artifacts.

It does seem peculiar that feminist theory should have blown down the house of academe and yet left standing the central pillar of secularism. The notion that scholars can and should proceed as if a Divine Being may or may not exist would seem to call for the same pseudo-detached ‘objectivity’ already rejected by feminist theorists as requiring a “schizophrenic researcher” whose feeling is separate from knowing. This skip in feminist theory probably arises from a general discomfort with religious ideas, which “are seen as anomalous or difficult to approach from the viewpoint of much feminist theory and practice.”<sup>46</sup> An explanation for this discomfort is offered by King, who argues that many feminists

see religion as an external institution, authority and power structure which keeps people in a state of dependence and thereby prevents them from acquiring autonomy and the will to actively shape their life and take full responsibility for it.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Penelope Margaret Magee, “Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches To Gender And Religion.” *Religion and Gender*, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “In Search of Women’s Heritage.” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

This anti-religious tendency is confirmed by Marilyn Chapin Massey and James Massey, who describe “a remarkable parallel” between the positions taken by some of the leaders of anti-religious humanism and “significant viewpoints among contemporary feminist religious thinkers.”<sup>48</sup>

As a result of its discomfort in the field, Naomi Goldenburg notes that early feminist scholarship “did little more to address religious matters than to point out how traditional religions reinforced the subjugation of women.”<sup>49</sup> King appears to support this position, maintaining that feminist historians have not always paid the role of religion in women’s lives due attention.<sup>50</sup> In recent years, however, the feminist study of religion has begun to be taken more seriously, as some scholars have recognized that “religion is not reducible to its cultural matrix”, that it “constitutes an inalienable part of human life,”<sup>51</sup> and that “the religious, social, and political are closely interrelated and cannot be separated.”<sup>52</sup> At the same time, new voices have joined the field:

Many aspects of traditional religion and spirituality have been called into question and deeply challenged by feminist writers. This challenge is not only addressed to religions from without, but also from within, as quite a few women who are strongly committed to a religious faith have developed a growing feminist consciousness. This enables them to criticize religion from within probably more effectively than secular women can do from without.<sup>53</sup>

The impact of these faith-committed scholars on the underlying secularism of the feminist study of religion remains to be seen.

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<sup>47</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Marilyn Chapin Massey and James A. Massey, “Feminists on Christianity: Some Nineteenth-Century Parallels,” Beyond Androcentrism, p. 269.

<sup>49</sup> Naomi R. Goldenburg, “Jung After Feminism,” Beyond Androcentrism, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> King, “Gender and the Study of Religion,” p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Rita Gross, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 33.



## *Activism*

As in most fields, feminist scholars in religion generally undertake their work with the explicit objective of social change.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, by working with a text that “is not just a document of past history but functions as scripture in present day religious communities,” feminist studies in religion are, like women’s studies, “by definition already ‘engaged’,” in that they “share both the impetus of historical biblical studies and an explicit commitment to a contemporary group of people, women, who, either religiously or culturally, are impacted by the traditions of the Bible.”<sup>55</sup> This observation would probably also apply, albeit to varying degrees, to feminist Islamic studies in the Qu’ran, Hindu studies in the Vedas, Jewish Studies in Torah and midrash, etc.

While some scholars channel their activism into “identifying the religious sources of women’s oppression and proposing changes in order to bring about women’s emancipation,”<sup>56</sup> others, who are perhaps less anti-religiously inclined, express it by helping women to “find inspiration and strength in the rich historical data available now on the religious activities of women in the past.”<sup>57</sup>

Many feminist scholars in religion are also expressly committed to examining the diversity of women’s religious experiences. Judith Plaskow states that “the real impact of our criticism of the universalizing tendency of much theology should be to send us delving more and more deeply into the experiences of all kinds of women,”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Plaskow, “Transformation of Society,” p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Women’s Heritage,” p. 37.

<sup>56</sup> Marjorie Proctor-Smith., “In the Line of the Female’: Shakerism and Feminism,” Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions, ed. Catherine Wessinger, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>57</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Plaskow, “Transformation of Society,” p. 27.

and Plaskow and Christ call “the increasing chorus of minority voices...the single most important development in feminist work in religion in the last ten years.”<sup>59</sup> It is unclear how this welcome to the diversity of women’s voices and experiences would hold up if the minority voices in question came to disagree with the fundamental approach of feminist scholarship in religion.

Feminists writing in religious studies can be roughly divided into two main camps; the reformers, who tend to focus on the transformation of existing ‘mainstream’ religions, and the revolutionaries, who advocate moving out of the mainstream altogether into a variety of religious alternatives. In the next few pages, both of these positions will be briefly examined in turn.

### *Women in Mainstream Religions*

In my reading of the literature, three main feminist perspectives on the position of women in mainstream religions seem to emerge. First, there are those who argue that “in mainstream religious traditions most women are marginalized.”<sup>60</sup> This marginalization is apparent in the exclusion of women from leadership and educational opportunities, and in women’s relationship to their faith’s institutional structures. Feminists of this view tend to campaign for reforms to ensure that women and men have the same access to such opportunities.

Second, there are those who propose that “women’s religious lives and roles should be investigated and understood as a *pattern of exclusion and participation*,” in which

at the most generalized and abstract level, both males and females have access to the same experiences and expressions of sacrality. However, on the

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<sup>59</sup> Plaskow and Christ, “Introduction,” p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Wessinger, “Introduction - Going Beyond and Retaining Charisma: Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions.” Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions, p. 1.

concrete, most everyday and visible dimensions of the religious situation, that overarching sacrality is reached and expressed by differing, parallel, and mutually exclusive modes of religious experience and expression.<sup>61</sup>

Proponents of this view argue that both men and women have their own exclusive religious 'turfs', and that men are marginalized in women's religious sphere as much as women are marginalized in men's. Their work, then, focuses on revaluing and researching women's "modes of religious experience and expression" rather than on getting the same treatment for both genders.

Finally, there are those feminist scholars who take the "gynocritical approach" of studying women as "agents creating their own structures of meaning."<sup>62</sup> That is, they focus on women as makers of religious systems rather than as inert victims within oppressive structures created by men. As Ruth Compton Brouwer points out, women's situations are rarely so one-sided;

Some writers on the subject have emphasized the restrictive and pernicious aspects of women's involvement in mainstream religion...More typically, they have been interested in exploring those aspects of religious ideology and activity that American women were able to use to enlarge their own lives. In religious institutions, sexism was given divine sanction. Even so, [as] historians such as Nancy Cott have maintained, there were abundant opportunities within them for women to find fulfillment.<sup>63</sup>

Scholars with this view call for "the formulation of a feminist heuristic framework or model that allows for the oppression as well as for the historical agency" of women in mainstream religious traditions.<sup>64</sup>

Each of these three positions impels their supporters toward different lines of action, or, occasionally, to the same action for different reasons. Thus, feminists working to reform mainstream traditions are following a variety of agendas. Tracing

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<sup>61</sup> Gross, "Androcentrism and Androgyny," pp. 15-16.

<sup>62</sup> King, "Gender and the Study of Religion," p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, *New Women For God*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women's Heritage," p. 31.

who is doing what based on which ideology would be a dizzying piece of work, quite beyond the scope of this thesis. Let it suffice, then, to crack the lid just enough to get a whiff of what is going on.

One line of feminist action within mainstream traditions involves moving beyond motherhood as the wellspring of women's spiritual resources. In nineteenth century North America, the search "to establish a place for women in religious terminology, imagery, and values"<sup>65</sup> led to the sacralizing of motherhood and motherly virtues of self-sacrifice and love, epitomized by the work of Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who promoted the image of women as "finer, more tender and devoted, and less open to temptation than men,"<sup>66</sup> and thus responsible for the moral and religious edification of society through their uplifting influence on their children and husbands. While the idea of female moral superiority represented progress in the status of women, in recent years it has been rejected by some feminist scholars as confining women to the maternal role and perpetuating hierarchal thinking. In its stead, feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether argue that women in mainstream traditions should develop communities based on sisterhood, as "sisterhood stands for the opposite of male hierarchies and power structures of dominant and subordinate. It is associated with communal egalitarian values."<sup>67</sup> More radical thinkers like Mary Daly have also made the building of sisterhood the focus of their strategies for religious reform.

Another line of attack taken up by some feminists in the field involves altering and/or adding to a faith's scriptures in order to ensure that women's experiences are reflected. They argue that reclaiming women's religious history through "the search for roots, for solidarity with our foresisters, and finally for the memory of their

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<sup>65</sup> Gayle Kimball, "From Motherhood to Sisterhood: The Search for Female Religious Imagery In 19th and 20th Century Theology," Beyond Androcentrism, p. 259.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 259.

<sup>67</sup> Ruether, cited in Ibid, p. 263.

sufferings, struggles, and powers as women”<sup>68</sup> will provide “materials to challenge existing religious authorities and structures by demanding full participation as well as public recognition of the many-sided and varied work already done by women in religious institutions.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, they echo Carol Christ’s insistence that “psychic damage is done to the sexual identity of those who never find the experience of their own sex reflected in the text or tradition, and who must always appropriate texts and traditions mediated through the experiences of those of the opposite sex.”<sup>70</sup> As a solution, they propose that scholars produce supplemental scriptures expanding and reworking women’s stories from a feminist perspective, through a process of “remembering and inventing.”<sup>71</sup>

On a related tack, many feminists working within mainstream traditions pour a great deal of energy into “God-talk”, or the search for acceptable labels for the Divine. According to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, patriarchal religions - that is, Christianity and Judaism at least, if not all “organized” religions - project “a God of violence, wrath, vengeful pride and judgement:” a God whose teachings focus on life after death (due to men’s preoccupation with hunting) and who demands obedience and submission (which is what men want from women). Current feminists add that this God and His patriarchal religions are characterized by hierarchal dualities.<sup>72</sup> As Christ and Plaskow note,

We not only call God “Lord,” “King,” and “Father,” and think of “him” as “big and old and tall and grey bearded and white,” we also conceptualize God as radically separate from and more perfect than humanity and nature, and we think of ourselves as “godlier” than the rest of nature because we think of ourselves as created in the image of God.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Women’s Heritage,” p. 35.

<sup>69</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> Carol Christ, “Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection,” Beyond Androcentrism, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> Plaskow, “Jewish Memory,” p. 47.

<sup>72</sup> Kimball, “Motherhood to Sisterhood,” p. 261.

Despite the glaring Eurocentrism of these arguments, and the self-contradictory claim that patriarchal religions are inferior because of their allegiance to hierarchal dualities, many feminists support this analysis of traditional God-language, and insist that the internalization of this male God has induced women to evoke “cosmic support of male rulership of the earth” and to renege on their “own woman identity.”<sup>74</sup>

The way out of this situation, they claim, is to “remind ourselves that all theological naming is really a naming-toward; all honest talk about divinity has an “as if” embedded in it.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, God-naming is really just metaphor making. However, as mainstream religions have only permitted one metaphoric relationship, that of father and child, to represent the Divine-human interaction, the model of father has come to be identified with God, and, thus, lost its metaphoric power and become idolatrous.<sup>76</sup> This “dead metaphor”, then, must either be replaced or supplemented by other names for God, names which, the feminist scholars suggest, should represent the female and/or feminine aspects of the Divine, and which would better reveal the “fundamental bisexuality or androgyny” of the Creator. The upholders of this view then go on to suggest a range of new terminologies.

### *Women Outside of the Mainstream*

For many feminists, these and other efforts to root androcentrism out of mainstream faiths prove insufficient. Carroll Smith-Rosenburg argues that the more assertively feminist one is, the less easily one remains in mainstream religions, and the more likely one is to pursue alternative modes of religious expression.<sup>77</sup> This pursuit of religious alternatives has given rise to all sorts of religious experimentation,

<sup>73</sup> Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, “Naming the Sacred,” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 95.

<sup>74</sup> Nelle Morton, “The Goddess as Metaphoric Image,” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 112.

<sup>75</sup> Marcia Falk, “Notes on Composing New Blessings: Toward A Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer,” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 131.

<sup>76</sup> Sally McFague, “God As Mother,” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 139.

<sup>77</sup> Smith-Rosenburg, *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 134.

innovation, appropriation, and adaptation, as feminists have sought acceptable vehicles for connection with the sacred. Often, the resulting religious constructions are called “marginal,” although, of course, the location of marginality depends on where one has placed the centre.

The eurocentrism which appears to plague the feminist study of religion results in the conflating of Christianity (or, at best, Judeo-Christianity) with mainstream belief, although most women in the world and an ever-increasing proportion of women in North America and Europe do not come from Judeo-Christian cultures. Furthermore, while the literature of feminist religious exploration does document the appropriation of certain practices and ideas from “Eastern” faiths, there appears to be little feminist investigation of non-Judeo-Christian major world religions as potential religious options. The experiences of Western women who become Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Bahá’í, etc., or women who cross between Christianity and Judaism, appear not to have received much attention from feminist scholars. This may be a reflection of an underlying feminist anti-religiousness, which assumes that women’s participation in such “organized religions” entails their co-option by patriarchal structures.<sup>78</sup> If all religions are developed by cultures, and all cultures are patriarchal, such an assumption may be justified; however, these premises and their supporting arguments do not seem well represented in the literature.

Instead, studies of feminist religious exploration tend to focus on new religious movements with generally Christian origins, founded by women. Historically, these studies examine such groups as the Shakers, Theosophists, Quakers, and Christian Scientists, which emerged in North America in the nineteenth century, and attracted many “first wave feminists”, who found consolation and inspiration in the teachings of a Father-Mother or genderless God. The denial of the existence or significance of the body in some of these movements held the promise of further liberation for women whose bodies had been “conceived as the site of sinfulness and a sinful nature,”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wessinger, “Going Beyond and Retaining Charisma,” p. 1.

while a concomitant emphasis on chastity or celibacy provided relief from child-bearing in a time with little birth control technology.<sup>80</sup> The emphasis on immanence and direct communion with the Divine without the mediation of a male clergy further empowered and attracted early feminists.

Currently, however, most feminist exploration outside of the Judeo-Christian mainstream has moved farther away from its theological roots. New feminist theologies and spiritual alternatives tend to prefer Goddess to God; to affirm both the body and the spirit; and to emphasize immanence, finding the Divine within, community, and connectedness.<sup>81</sup> There is an increasing insistence, perhaps championed most notably by Mary Daly and her supporters, that women must leave the church en masse and forge their own non-hierarchical, empowering religious communities based on sisterhood and a new feminist theological vision. At the same time, woman-positive Wiccan covens are becoming increasingly popular in feminist circles, promising a return to pre-Christian and presumably egalitarian or matriarchal traditions. Another emerging feminist religious trend involves blending a variety of Hindu, Buddhist, First Nations, and New Age beliefs and practices into a flexible, often agnostic, pantheist, or animist, unstructured "personal" faith.

These movements, typically discussed under the rubric of "feminist spirituality," are described by Cynthia Eller as accepting anything that makes women stronger as valid, and as assuming "that women have access to an unperverted spirituality, one that can prove revolutionary not only to women, but to the world."<sup>82</sup> In this regard, they seem to bear a surprising resemblance to nineteenth-

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<sup>79</sup> Susan M. Setta, "Denial of the Female - Affirmation of the Feminine: The Father-Mother God of Mary Baker Eddy," *Beyond Androcentrism*, p. 295.

<sup>80</sup> Proctor-Smith, "Shakerism and Feminism," p. 26.

<sup>81</sup> Wessinger, "Going Beyond and Retaining Charisma," p. 14.



century Christian movements promoting the moral superiority of women. They also reflect the anti-hierarchalism of current feminist thought in their anti-authoritarianism and anti-institutionalism; as Catherine Wessinger points out, the resulting heterogeneity and diffusion of the movement may reduce its long-term viability.<sup>83</sup>

## *Conclusion*

The emergence of alternative feminist methods of scholarship, and their application by feminist scholars to the study of religion, has taken on a sense of urgency fueled by both the continued oppression of women and by the current spiritual climate. According to Ursula King, people - both women and men - are in search of "wholeness" and a "sense of meaning and purpose which can direct their thoughts and actions."<sup>84</sup> While it may be argued that this is the eternal human condition, she suggests that our spiritual angst is unusually severe, as "questions never asked before, problems never encountered in the past, possibilities never envisaged confront us in most unsettling and perturbing ways."<sup>85</sup> Mainstream religions, which "have given countless millions a pattern and a language with which to make sense of their own selves, of others, and of the world around them"<sup>86</sup> have been rejected by many feminists and are seen by others as in need of radical renewal; in any case, they are not the source of comfort and confidence that they once might have been for many people. As new questions multiply and old answers fail, the contemporary world suffers "an immense spiritual hunger."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Cynthia Eller, "Twentieth-Century Women's Religion As Seen In The Women's Spirituality Movement," *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, p. 173.

<sup>83</sup> Wessinger, "Going Beyond and Retaining Charisma," p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> King, *Women and Spirituality*, p. 36.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

This spiritual hunger may be one motivating force behind the increasing ranks of feminist scholars who are turning their attention to the study of religion. These scholars, however, are also motivated by their recognition that "gender and religion are closely interrelated as our perceptions of ourselves are shaped by and deeply rooted in our culturally shared religious and philosophical heritage, even when this is rejected."<sup>88</sup> As it becomes further apparent that women's position in religion often reflects, however obliquely, their status in society, and that religious systems both "reflect and reinforce cultural values and patterns of social organization,"<sup>89</sup> feminists seeking the transformation of society find religion increasingly impossible to ignore.

The main goal of feminist religious revision and innovation has often been to develop belief systems in which women exercise both 'spiritual or moral authority and administrative, institutional authority; while charismatic women have from time to time gained some religious power through their "direct experience of the sacred", they are typically "not deemed capable of exercising religious leadership in the ways that are institutionally routinized" in "patriarchal" religions.<sup>90</sup> Catherine Wessinger has argued that "routine, non-charismatic religious leadership by women" may be possible in religions which perceive the Divine as androgynous, bisexual, or unanthropomorphized; temper or deny the Christian doctrine of "the Fall"; deny the need for ordained clergy; do not see marriage and motherhood as the only proper sphere for women; and promote " a social expectation of the equality of women."<sup>91</sup> In the next chapter's discussion of the vision of gender enunciated by the Bahá'í teachings, it will be demonstrated that the Bahá'í faith fits within these criteria.

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<sup>88</sup> King, "Gender and the Study of Religion," p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Wessinger, "Going Beyond and Retaining Charisma," pp. 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

However, Wessinger is quick to point out that “even when leadership may be shared equally by men and women in a religious institution, this does not mean that power is as well.”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Ursula King, women’s leadership roles tend to decline over history and within each faith over time.<sup>93</sup> In chapter 3, we shall explore whether or not this observation holds true in the Bahá’í community.

In recognition of the impermanence of leadership gains made by women, many feminists seek a more fundamental shift in religious thinking, arguing that a “feminine ethics” based on moral feelings, desire, and non-judgmental moral reception must be developed to counterbalance the “masculine ethics” of moral reasoning which have been dominant. One main feature of such a “feminine ethics” is the honoring of difference; as Christ and Plaskow state,

Feminists envision a world of connection and relationship (not dualism, division, and hierarchy), a world in which pluralism and diversity (not monolithic unity) are celebrated as contributing to the richness of the whole.<sup>94</sup>

Such a world cannot emerge solely from gynocentric religious innovations, based only on the experience of women; as Anne E. Carr argues, following the feminist deconstruction of error and reconstruction of reality from a feminist perspective, we must work to develop general theories and unifying frameworks based on the experiences of both genders.<sup>95</sup> Feminist religious innovation must therefore ultimately move toward including men and male experience as “contributing to the richness of the whole.”

Many women of color and First Nations feminists now entering the debate would also argue that the vision of such a world cannot emerge in a discourse which privileges the voices of white, upper and middle class, educated, North American

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> King, *Women and Spirituality*, p. 40.

<sup>94</sup> Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, “Transforming the World.” *Weaving the Visions*, p. 269.

<sup>95</sup> King, “Gender and the Study of Religion,” p. 13.

women. De-centering academia and the West could be an important step toward realizing a feminist transformation of religious thought, and would require that feminists continue to look critically at each other's work.<sup>96</sup>

In general, however, the specific goals of feminist research and activism in religion are necessarily vague. Shulamit Reinharz explains that "vagueness is warranted because our vision and imagination are limited by current experience."<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, this vagueness seems to pose no deterrent to the ranks of intrepid feminist scholars and activists committed to questioning and creating knowledge to transform our religious views and practices. In this great venture, feminists are both mutually supportive and contradictory. However, as Ursula King observes,

The important fact which all feminists have in common, whether they be antireligious, inclined to reform or revolutionary recasting, is the deep conviction that a new spirit is needed, a different approach to symbols, myths and rites capable to reflect and express their new experience of self, world and cosmos today.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>97</sup> Reinharz, Feminist Methods, p. 178.

<sup>98</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 36.

## Chapter Two: The Bahá'í Vision of Gender

As Ursula King described in the previous chapter, many feminists, spurred by a widespread and "immense spiritual hunger", are seeking palatable religious belief systems. Their search has resulted in efforts to either reform familiar religious traditions, or to design creative religious innovations. While many women may be fulfilled by the results of these processes, many others are left unsatisfied. In this chapter, the Bahá'í faith will be introduced - a new dish, as it were, on the religious buffet - which offers a vision of gender that many of those "spiritually hungry" may find appealing.

### *A Brief Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith*

The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia in 1844, when a young merchant called the Báb declared himself as a spiritual reformer, and heralded the immanent arrival of the Promised One, whose teachings would usher in a new world order. He did not advocate Islamic renewal; rather, he claimed a new, independent Divine revelation. He attracted many followers, both male and female, thousands of whom were killed as heretics. Ultimately, the Báb himself was executed in 1850.

Three years later, one of the most prominent of the Báb's followers, an imprisoned nobleman who came to be known as Bahá'ú'lláh, had a vision in which he discovered that he himself was this teacher whose advent the Báb had predicted. Upon his release from prison, he and his family were banished to Baghdad. Shortly following their arrival, Bahá'ú'lláh withdrew to the mountains and lived for two years in seclusion. During this period, he began revealing a body of work to which he continued to add throughout his life, and which would eventually fill many volumes,

including a Book of Laws, the Book of the Covenant, hundreds of tablets and prayers, as well as shorter pieces. These writings of Bahá'ú'lláh, which have been preserved in the original, constitute the central scriptures of the Bahá'í faith, in addition to the writings of the Báb, and those of Bahá'ú'lláh's son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In 1863, after a peaceful interlude, Bahá'ú'lláh and his family were further banished from Baghdad. Prior to their departure, he publicly proclaimed himself to be the Promised One foretold by the Báb. As he had already been operating as the *de facto* leader of the Bábi community, the vast majority accepted his claim and declared themselves to be Bahá'ís (literally, followers/seekers of the light/glory). After some time in Constantinople (Istanbul) and Adrianople (Erdine, Turkey), he and his family were ultimately consigned to the Ottoman prison-city of Akka, on the Mediterranean coast in Palestine. There Bahá'ú'lláh lived the rest of his life, gradually moving from his cell, to house arrest, to a small estate on the outskirts of the city, where he died in 1892.

Although the authorities had hoped by these imprisonments to crush this faith in its infancy, they were not successful. A steady stream of pilgrims came on foot from Persia, and carried tablets and letters back and forth. Thus, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá assumed leadership of the Bahá'í community in 1892, as stipulated by his father's will, the community was already established throughout the Middle East and had spread to parts of Africa and India.

In the early 1900's, following a revolution in Turkey, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was freed after 58 years of imprisonment. Shortly thereafter, he travelled to Egypt, Europe and America. During his tenure, the Bahá'í faith spread to North and South America, Australia, Japan, Hawaii, Europe, and parts of Africa. Following his death in 1921, Guardianship of the Bahá'í faith fell to his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, upon whose

passing leadership of the Bahá'í community was taken on by an administrative system designed by Bahá'ú'lláh. This system of appointed advisors and authoritative elected assemblies at the local, national, and international level has administered Bahá'í affairs since 1963, and operates at the international level from the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.

Today, 80% of all Bahá'ís are found in the Third World and over 1400 social and economic development programs are offered world-wide. According to the Britannica Yearbook for 1992, the Bahá'í faith is the second most widely spread religion in the world.<sup>1</sup> Some of the central principles of the faith include: that there is one, unknowable Creator; that all religions have emanated from this same Creator and are therefore inherently one; that science and religion must agree; that truth must be independently investigated; that women and men are fundamentally and absolutely equal; that prejudices based on race, creed, nationality, and colour must be abolished; that extremes of wealth and poverty must cease; and that education must be universal. Bahá'í laws, although not particularly numerous, include the requirement of daily prayer and an annual period of fasting; prohibit extra-marital sex and the use of drugs and alcohol; and set simple guidelines for commemorating Bahá'í marriages and deaths. In addition, the Bahá'í scriptures describe the purpose of life, the nature of the soul, the requisites of spiritual growth, and provide responses to most theological and many practical questions. The Bahá'í teachings do not advocate separation from this world but rather require active engagement in the world and an ethic of service. Bahá'ís seek the transformation of civilization and the realization of world peace in a unified global society. They do not see their faith as the final answer but anticipate the arrival of another divine teacher in the distant future.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in W.C. van den Hoonaard, "The Bahá'ís in Atlantic Canada: A Retrospective On A New Religious Movement," (unpublished paper, 1992), p. 2.

## *Women and Men in the Bahá'í Teachings*

Unlike other major world religions, the Bahá'í scriptures unequivocally assert that "women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."<sup>2</sup> Both are created in the likeness of God;<sup>3</sup> the distinction between male and female is described as "an exigency of the physical world" which "hath no connection with the spirit."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the human soul has no gender. "To accept and observe a distinction which God has not intended in creation", Bahá'ís are counselled, "is ignorance and superstition."<sup>5</sup> Thus, men and women are described as essentially the same.

At the same time, Bahá'í scriptures acknowledge that this reality is not reflected by past or current circumstances. The systematic subordination of women, as evidenced in lack of access to opportunities for education; violence and abuse at home and in society; discrimination in income-producing opportunities and family decision-making; inequality in, or exclusion from, economic and political power structures; male control (and unaccountable use of) family resources; and sole, socially unsupported responsibility for child-rearing, are all "undermined by explicit Bahá'í laws and social principles."<sup>6</sup> As pointed out by Martha Schweitz,

Bahá'í laws and principles go beyond the notion of equal opportunity to create societies which systematically and institutionally value both motherhood and the participation of women in public affairs, societies which embody and

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<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, not previously translated, cited in Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," *Equal Circles: Women and Men in the Bahá'í Community*, ed. Peggy Caton. (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, "The Effect of Philosophical and Linguistic Gender Biases on the Degradation of Women's Status in Religion," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 8, 1 (Sept - Dec 1997), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Women: Bahá'í Writings on the Equality of Men and Women*. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), # 10.

<sup>5</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 280-281.

<sup>6</sup> Martha L. Schweitz, "Bahá'í Law and Principle: Creating Legal and Institutional Structures for Gender Equality," *The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs*, (Bahá'í International Community, 1995), p. 46.



express both the feminine “ethic of care” and the masculine “ethic of rights,” which strive both to preserve relationships and to promote justice.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in addition to stating equality as a spiritual reality, the Bahá’í writings assert that it must become practiced, and include provisions for ensuring that it does.

The vision of equality enunciated in Bahá’í teachings “is not based on women’s enjoying the same position as men, as if the position of men were the divine standard by which the position of women should be measured,”<sup>8</sup> but rather envisages “a new age...less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals...an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.”<sup>9</sup> This transformation of society is seen as a natural manifestation of Divine Justice, rather than “a grudging concession” to women’s persistent demands, thus removing “the need for women to apologize for seeking it or to adopt manipulative techniques in their quest for it.”<sup>10</sup>

Activism to promote the advancement of women, then, is described as a clear consequence of “the impact of the most great manifestation, and the power of the teachings of God.”<sup>11</sup> In the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh,<sup>12</sup> we are told, “women are advancing side by side with the men. There is no area or instance where they will lag behind....Such will be their elevation that, in every area of endeavour, they will occupy the highest levels of the human world.”<sup>13</sup> Women are called upon to enter the full range of professions, arts, and occupations, including traditionally male preserves

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ross Woodman, “The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá’í Faith,” The Journal of Bahá’í Studies, 7, 2, (June-Sept. 1995): 76.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Esselmont, Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era. (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 149

<sup>10</sup> Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, Advancement of Women. (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1998), p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Women, # 52.

<sup>12</sup> The time from Bahá’u’lláh’s arrival until the advent of the next Divine Messenger.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks. (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 182.

such as law, politics, agriculture and industry.<sup>14</sup> Women are not, however, expected to participate in armed combat.<sup>15</sup>

The emancipation of women is further identified as “one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace.” In an often-quoted statement, the Bahá’í international governing body asserts:

The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one-half of the world’s population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the work-place, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such a denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge.<sup>16</sup>

As the realization of world peace and interpersonal unity are highly valued in the Bahá’í teachings, this places a heavy imperative on promoting the advancement of women. The domination of males and “so-called male attributes” such as force, aggression, territoriality, and the like, are seen as largely responsible for the dire crises now facing humanity.<sup>17</sup>

### *Why Inequality Exists*

Bahá’í theology argues that God successively sends Divine guidance to us through Manifestations, which appear at humanity’s various developmental stages, reiterate the same essential spiritual teachings (albeit in varying degrees of sophistication), and provide social laws appropriate to the needs of the time. Some Bahá’í authors maintain that, while previous religions taught spiritual equality, the Bahá’í faith is the first to teach social equality.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Women, # 27. Participation in battle is described as ‘not worthy of women.’

<sup>16</sup> The Universal House of Justice, To The Peoples of the World: A Bahá’í Statement on Peace, (Ottawa: The Association for Bahá’í Studies, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> John S. Hatcher, “The Equality of Women: The Bahá’í Principle of Complementarity,” The Journal of Bahá’í Studies, 2, 3, (1989-1990): 57.

In any case, the Bahá'í writings clearly describe women's history of oppression, while at the same time highlighting women's agency in shaping history, despite their circumstances. 'Abdu'l-Bahá often recounted the exploits of past notable queens, female philosophers, poets, warriors and scientists, as evidence of women's inherent equality, and further stated that

it is well established in history that where woman has not participated in human affairs the outcomes have never attained a state of completion and perfection....every influential undertaking of the human world wherein woman has been a participant has attained importance. This is historically true and beyond disproof even in religion.<sup>19</sup>

Generally, the appearance of inequality is attributed by the Bahá'í writings to two causes. The first and most frequently noted of these is lack of education and opportunity. "She is the coadjutor of man, his complement and helpmeet," 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

Both are human; both are endowed with potentialities of intelligence and embody the virtues of humanity. In all human powers and functions they are partners and coequals. At present in spheres of activity woman does not manifest her natal prerogatives, owing to lack of education and opportunity. Without doubt, education will establish her equality with men."<sup>20</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá often emphasized that women would demonstrate an equal capacity for scholarship and the same capacities and abilities as men if given equal access to education.

The second cause for the appearance of inequality mentioned by the Bahá'í writings is the importance of force and bodily strength in previous ages. "The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind," 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

Bahá asserts.<sup>21</sup> In another passage, he elaborates:

In former ages, men enjoyed ascendancy over women because bodily might reigned supreme and the spirit was subject to its dominion. In this radiant age, however, since the power of the spirit hath transcended that of the body...this physical distinction hath ceased to be of consequence...Today, therefore, there is no respect or circumstance in which a person's sex provideth the grounds for the exercise of either discrimination or favor.<sup>22</sup>

### *Reproduction, Sexuality, and the Family*

As already noted, many aspects of Bahá'í law appear to support this lack of 'discrimination or favor'. Although a thorough examination of this topic exceeds the present need, it may be worthwhile to briefly discuss the Bahá'í laws regarding sexuality, reproduction, and the family, as an area in which the seeds of inequitable treatment are often deeply rooted.

Refraining from extra-marital sex is clearly required of both men and women by Bahá'í law, and no differentiation between the genders is made in this regard. By extension, sexual harassment and sexual assault in any context, including within marriage, are both condemned, as is female genital mutilation.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the concept of 'ritual impurity', particularly as applied to menstruating women, is abrogated by Bahá'í scriptures.

Marriage is highly recommended for Bahá'ís but is not obligatory.<sup>24</sup> Many marital practices which historically have harmed women, such as polygamy, long engagements and child betrothal, are forbidden, and, while not encouraged to do so, both women and men are free to condition marriage on their partner's virginity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Esselmont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 10.

<sup>23</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated May 3 1936 to an individual believer, cited in Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life, (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1983), #4.

Either sex is explicitly given the right to freely choose their partner and to propose marriage, but the consent of both partners' parents must be obtained before the union can take place. The marriage vow consists of a mutual confession of submission to God's will, rather than submission to one another. A small dowry is prescribed, given by the man to the woman, symbolizing her right to independently own property.<sup>26</sup> Although strongly discouraged in the scriptures, both women and men have the right to seek divorce. Thus, many of the inequities ingrained in marriage customs worldwide are abrogated by Bahá'í law.

Regarding reproduction, Bahá'í texts assert that the soul joins the body at the moment of conception and the fetus is fully human. Thus, abortion "merely to prevent the birth of an unwanted child" is forbidden. However, deciding whether or not to terminate a pregnancy is left "to the consciences of those concerned,"<sup>27</sup> and the texts anticipate that there will be circumstances in which abortion is warranted, either by medical concerns or in cases involving rape. In the latter case, should a woman decide to keep the resulting child, under Bahá'í law she is free to claim financial support from the father, while he is given no parental rights.<sup>28</sup>

As a corollary, Bahá'í men and women are free to use birth control; however, as the primary purpose of marriage is seen as the production of children, permanent sterilization or the use of birth control to prevent any reproduction is not supported by Bahá'í scriptures.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 115, citing Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb'i'Aqdas, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 74-75. The value of this dowry is less than that of many engagement rings.

<sup>27</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Ireland, March 16, 1983, cited in Helen Hornby, Lights of Guidance, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), # 1154.

<sup>28</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Various references by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, pp. 346-349.

A considerable body of Bahá'í texts address the inner workings of the family, which is seen as "the nation in miniature", and thus highly influential in society.<sup>30</sup> According to the Bahá'í ideal, the family should be neither patriarchal nor authoritarian. The writings assert that the mother, father, and children each have their rights, obligations, and prerogatives, and that authority must not be exercised arbitrarily.<sup>31</sup> Decision-making is to be achieved consultatively, with each partner deferring to the other at times, and neither dominating the other.<sup>32</sup>

Both women and men are expected to have a profession, calling, or occupation. In addition, however, women are told that they should, if possible, "be with the baby to train and nurture it in its earliest days and months."<sup>33</sup> The early education of children is discussed primarily as the responsibility of the mother, "whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such conditions as would be most conducive to both his [the child's] material and spiritual welfare and advancement."<sup>34</sup> Bahá'í men have a corollary responsibility for supporting the family while women are primarily engaged in childrearing.<sup>35</sup>

Although apparently quite traditional, this division of labour differs from current norms in several respects. First, women are given the right to decide on how to combine mothering with other occupations, as well as the right to decide that homemaking is their occupation. As a corollary to this, childrearing is seen as more important than remunerative work:

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<sup>30</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 22 September 1983, Lights of Guidance, # 740.

<sup>31</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, 28 December 1980, Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1986, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), no. 272.5e.

<sup>33</sup> The Universal House of Justice, Women, # 95.

<sup>34</sup> Shoghi Effendi, Dawn of a New Day, p. 202, cited in Judy A. Maddox, "Two Career Couples," Equal Circles, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Schweitz, "Bahá'í Law and Principle," p. 43.

O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God's sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined.<sup>36</sup> In combination with the previously discussed principles for decision making, this orientation ought to ensure that husbands do not have greater power in the family than their (perhaps temporarily) non-wage earning wives.

Women are thus given primary responsibility for childrearing, but they are not given sole responsibility; indeed, men's duties in this regard are seen as so weighty that a father who neglects his responsibility to educate his children "forfeits his right of fatherhood."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, 'childrearing' does not include all other domestic tasks usually assigned to women. This is exemplified by Bahá'u'lláh himself who, in contravention of prevailing social norms, is known to have cooked for his family over several years.<sup>38</sup> It is also worth noting that spouses are clearly permitted to switch roles if they so choose.

### *Differences Between Women And Men*

Although, as previously mentioned, women and men are spiritually identical, several passages in the writings seem to imply inherent and permanent gender traits. While these distinctions may apply only to our current state, in which the masculine and feminine elements are not balanced within women and men, it is interesting to note that "in each of these distinctions, the feminine attributes cited are viewed not as signs of weakness or as alternative virtues, but as additional and as indications of superiority."<sup>39</sup> It is also worth noting that while women and men appear to be considered "equal and different and the same",<sup>40</sup> both sexes are expected to develop all the human qualities.

<sup>36</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), # 114.

<sup>37</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, paragraph 48.

<sup>38</sup> Lady Blomfield, The Chosen Highway, (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975), p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Hatcher, "The Equality of Women," p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> O'Neil, "Commentary," p. 81.

In this context, it is interesting to examine the qualities particularly associated with women in the Bahá'í texts. One such area is their abundance of faith: 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, "in some respects, women have astonishing capacities; they hasten in their attraction to God, and are intense in their fiery ardour for Him."<sup>41</sup> He further commented that:

In this day the duty of everyone, whether man or woman, is to teach the Cause. In America, the women have outdone the men in this regard and have taken the lead in this field. They strive harder in guiding the peoples of the world, and their endeavors are greater.<sup>42</sup>

While this acknowledgement of women's capacity is significant, women excelling in religiosity falls within traditional Western gender norms.

'Abdu'l-Bahá asserted that women were superior to men in several other respects, including receptivity, intuition, tenderness and susceptibility of heart, mercy, love, service, sympathy, philanthropic tendencies, responsiveness to the needy and suffering, and opposition to war.<sup>43</sup> While the foregoing may traditionally be associated with women, other statements offer less-common praise, citing women's "mental alertness"<sup>44</sup> and saying: "women are most capable and efficient";<sup>45</sup> "they may be even superior to the men, versed in sciences and yet detached";<sup>46</sup> "the woman has greater moral courage than the man; she also has special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis"<sup>47</sup>; and, "the woman indeed is of greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 104.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. # 105.

<sup>43</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp.161 and 184; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p.149; and Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 284.

<sup>44</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Esselmont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p.149.

<sup>45</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 284.

<sup>46</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 13.

<sup>47</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Abdu'l-Bahá in London, (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 102-103.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



In addition to these differences in characteristics, the Bahá'í writings envisage some difference of functions, as illustrated by the previous discussion of gender roles in parenting. On this topic, the House of Justice<sup>49</sup> has said:

Equality between men and women does not, indeed physiologically it cannot, mean identity of functions. In some things women excel men, for others men are better fitted than women, while in very many things the difference of sex is of no effect at all.<sup>50</sup>

and in the same vein:

That men and women differ from one another in certain characteristics and functions is an inescapable fact of nature and makes possible their complementary roles in certain areas of the life of society; but it is significant that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that in this Dispensation "Equality of men and women, except in some negligible circumstances, has been fully and categorically announced."<sup>51</sup>

One 'negligible circumstance' which bears closer examination is the participation of women in positions of Bahá'í leadership. As there are no clergy in this faith, community leadership is taken on by two institutions, each of which operates at the local, regional, national, and international levels. One of these institutions consists of advisors, appointed for set terms, who act as individuals but have no power to enact decisions; the international level of this institution is the highest ranking office in the Bahá'í administrative structure.<sup>52</sup> The other institution consists of elected councils, which collectively decide on all matters concerning the community, but whose individual members have no special status or authority. The decisions of the council at the international level, the Universal House of Justice, are taken by Bahá'ís as divinely inspired. Women and men are equally eligible for membership in all of these positions except the House of Justice.

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<sup>49</sup> The Bahá'í international administrative body whose joint statements are authoritative.

<sup>50</sup> From a letter to an individual believer from the Universal House of Justice, 24 July 1975, Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986, no. 166.2.

<sup>51</sup> The Universal House of Justice, Introduction to the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, by Baha'u'lláh, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Known as "Hands of the Cause."

This exclusion, to many observers, does not seem 'negligible'. Women's access to positions of leadership is seen as an essential indicator of a tradition's patriarchal tendencies. However, several mitigating factors bear consideration before a prejudicial interpretation of this exclusion is adopted.

When asked to explain this exclusion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded that the reasons for it would become clear in the future.<sup>53</sup> Bahá'ís have been assured that it does not stem from some lack on the part of women, nor does it imply superiority on the part of men.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, a "fundamental principle" of the Bahá'í teachings is that whenever a group of people is singled out for some role or station in the faith it is *not* because of their intrinsic superiority.<sup>55</sup>

While in the secular world, leadership, responsibility, and control are associated with power and privilege, and such offices are actively sought by individuals, this is not the case in the Bahá'í system. Electioneering and campaigning are forbidden by the election structures, and individual ambition is seen as rendering candidates unsuitable. No one seeks membership on Bahá'í governing councils. Those elected to serve in such capacities may benefit from the respect associated with their office, but enjoy no consequent personal rewards. Indeed, given the demands of the position, few Bahá'ís sacrifice as much and have as little personal autonomy as those serving on the Universal House of Justice.

Viewed in this light, it is possible to concede that this exclusion may not be inconsistent with belief in the equality of women and men: rather than being offensive, it is merely puzzling. It is also worth noting that the House of Justice is envisaged as working in the future as part of a tripartite elected system of world government: women have not been excluded from membership in the legislative and executive arms of this system.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hatcher, "The Equality of Women," p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p.131.

<sup>55</sup> Shoghi Effendi, Advent of Divine Justice. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), pp.14-16.

## *Approach to Promoting Equality*

The Bahá'í writings indicate that establishing the equality of women and men will require broadly-based change. "It has widespread implications," the House of Justice has said, "which affect and remold all dimensions of human activity. It calls for a fundamental change in the manner in which people relate to each other..."<sup>57</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized that the required transformation of economic, social, and legal structures, as well as underlying attitudes, is now timely, and must not be put off to some future date.<sup>58</sup>

The writings clearly require Bahá'ís to show initiative in promoting the required change, beginning within the community, which many believers see as a sort of workshop "where men and women from diverse backgrounds attempt to put this, among other Bahá'í teachings, into practice."<sup>59</sup> As one Bahá'í author has pointed out, "though they are avowed adherents, Bahá'ís themselves are engaged in a gradual process of discovering the full implications of the teachings they espouse."<sup>60</sup> The shape and success or failure of the community's efforts on this front will be examined in chapter three; interpreting these efforts, however, requires some background information about methods and approaches to equality-seeking recommended by the Bahá'í writings.

The writings contain several practical suggestions for promoting the development of "full partnership" between women and men, and modifying those "harmful habits" which obstruct progress toward this goal.<sup>61</sup> The suggested

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<sup>56</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> From a letter to an individual believer from the Universal House of Justice, 24 January 1993, published in *The American Bahá'í*, 24, 17, (23 Nov. 93): 10-11.

<sup>58</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 163.

<sup>59</sup> Judy Filson, "Their Cry Shall Rise: A View of Sexual Equality." *Bahá'í Canada*, 11, 1, (March/April 1989): 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

techniques share three characteristics. First, they adopt a gradual, phased approach, implementing “long term... systematic plans.”<sup>62</sup> As described by the House of Justice,

Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one’s self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.<sup>63</sup>

This strategy, of course “has provided abundant ammunition to antagonists of the Bahá’í faith,”<sup>64</sup> who may interpret small steps as indicators of hypocrisy or weakness of resolve. From the Bahá’í perspective, however, gradual implementation is the only way to ensure lasting results.

A second characteristic of the Bahá’í approach is that it requires broadly-based change. The oppression of women is not seen as an isolated phenomenon, but as existing within a mesh of unhealthy social and individual practices; rather like a presenting symptom of a systemic illness. Effectively and universally establishing equality thus requires that “it is pursued in conjunction with all the other aspects of Bahá’í life.”<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the Bahá’í approach to promoting equality is characterized by a “conviction that change must be a unifying force, leading towards full partnership of men and women - and beyond this to the unity of the human family.”<sup>66</sup> Maintaining unity is believed to attract “spiritual blessings” and to reinforce the efficacy of our

<sup>61</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 39.

<sup>62</sup> Janet A. Khan, “Religion as an Agent for Promoting the Advancement of Women at all Levels.” The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs, pp. 4-5.

<sup>63</sup> From a letter to an individual believer from the Universal House of Justice, 25 July 1984.

<sup>64</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 126.

<sup>65</sup> From a letter to an individual believer from the Universal House of Justice, 25 July 1984.

<sup>66</sup> Ann Boyles, “Towards the Goal of Full Partnership: One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Advancement of Women,” The Bahá’í World 1993-1994: An International Record. (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre Publications, 1994), p. 238.

initiatives. As instructed by the House of Justice,

To maintain this unity, Bahá'í men and women must work together co-operatively, in striking contrast to the adversarial and denunciatory attitudes which distinguish so much of the movement for equality of the sexes in the larger society...

...Bahá'ís should realize that the Bahá'í approach to truth-seeking is consultative and not adversarial, and that contention between men and women is counter-productive in the endeavour to promote equality.<sup>67</sup>

This orientation toward change challenges widely accepted and ingrained traditions of adversarial methods. The prescribed emphasis on unity, however, "is not to be confused with complacency about conduct that does not correspond to that which is prescribed in the Bahá'í teachings."<sup>68</sup> As one Bahá'í author points out,

Avoiding contention...doesn't mean avoiding examining the many issues, historical, spiritual, psychological, economic and social....Nor does it mean women should delay efforts to implement the principle until everyone seems ready for it....The willingness to change, to discard long-held traditional attitudes, is the test of a person's capacity to be affected and transformed by the Word of God.<sup>69</sup>

Several strategies incorporating these three characteristics are recommended in the writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself frequently used analogies, rhetorical questions, direct challenges, and historical examples in his arguments for the equality of women and men.<sup>70</sup> Education is often cited as the single most important intervention for promoting equality, with the provision that both sexes must follow the same curriculum, and that if resources are insufficient for universal education, priority must be given to female students.<sup>71</sup> The Bahá'í technique for decision making through consultation is further seen as a powerful tool for promoting the advancement of women, as it requires that all be free to make contributions "without fear of being

<sup>67</sup> From a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly from the Universal House of Justice, 5 June 1994.

<sup>68</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> Filson, "Their Cry Shall Rise," p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

belittled, humiliated, insulted, or ignored.”<sup>72</sup> However, few blanket prescriptions are offered. Bahá'ís are urged to “consider varied and imaginative approaches to relating Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings on this subject to the social customs and cultural traditions of particular populations,” and are reminded that

In many areas of the world women need to be encouraged to arise and play their part. Without such encouragement they may well continue to remain in the background....It is of particular concern that we demonstrate within our global community the equality of men and women in our daily lives.<sup>73</sup>

The ‘varied’ approaches recommended often include an emphasis on the use of the arts, which are described in Bahá'í scriptures as an extremely powerful change agent.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to these suggestions regarding approaches to promoting equality, the Bahá'í writings comment on whose responsibility it is to do so. In general, “all Bahá'ís are required, as a matter of personal belief, to commit themselves to implementing it in their personal conduct, to encouraging its practice by others, and to fostering the means by which it is reflected in the operation of the institutions of society.”<sup>75</sup> However, men, women, and the Bahá'í administration are each given specific obligations in this regard.

Bahá'u'lláh himself, speaking to Bahá'í men, has said,

The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness, and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the objects of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God.<sup>76</sup>

Men are given particular responsibility for promoting the advancement of women, and for exorcizing their “assumption of superiority”, which is described as depressing

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from the International Teaching Centre to All Counsellors, 5 February 1995.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *‘Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 93.

<sup>75</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 39.

<sup>76</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Women*, # 58.

women's aspirations and inducing a sense of hopelessness.<sup>77</sup> "When men own the equality of women," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights."<sup>78</sup>

Women likewise are given specific responsibility for the promotion of equality; But while this principle of equality is true, it is likewise true that woman must prove her capacity and aptitude, must show forth the evidences of equality. She must become proficient in the arts and sciences and prove by her accomplishments that her abilities and powers have merely been latent. Demonstrations of force...are neither becoming nor effective in the cause of womanhood and equality.<sup>79</sup>

It is worth noting that 'demonstrations of force', by either women or men, would, in the Bahá'í context, be considered inappropriate in any case other than self-defence. On the other hand, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has commented that "among the miracles which distinguish this sacred dispensation is this, that women have evinced a greater boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith"; and Shoghi Effendi, his successor, has pointed out that this 'boldness' must "be more convincingly demonstrated...".<sup>80</sup> While force is not advocated, neither is meekness.

The final agency given specific duties in the promotion of equality is the Bahá'í administration. 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed that "the members of the Spiritual Assemblies should do all they can to provide encouragement to the women believers. In this dispensation one should not think in terms of 'men' and 'women'...".<sup>81</sup> Likewise, the appointed administrative agents are given specific responsibility for fostering activity which promotes the advancement of women in the community.

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<sup>77</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 76-77.

<sup>78</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 238.

<sup>80</sup> From a letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies from the Universal House of Justice, 25 May 1975. Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1968, no. 162.32.

<sup>81</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 19.

## *The Feminine*

In order to properly understand the Bahá'í vision of gender, it is necessary to investigate both its treatment of women and its perspective on the feminine, as the oppression of one is often associated with the deprecation of the other. Conversely, the elevation and reinterpretation of the feminine is seen by many feminists as essential to the advancement of women.

In the Bahá'í writings, a variety of feminine images may be found, including the association of the earth with the feminine, as "the Queen of Carmel", God's holy mountain,<sup>82</sup> and the virtue of trustworthiness, which is "personified as a celestial beauty."<sup>83</sup> However, the most developed feminine imagery emerges in discussions of God and Divine Revelation.

In Bahá'í theology, God is viewed as genderless and unknowable;<sup>84</sup> where the source language permits, the Creator is referred to with gender-neutral pronouns. We access this unknowable Creator by way of Revelation dispensed through various Manifestations of God over time. This Revelation, in Bahá'í scriptures, is personified by the "Maiden of Heaven," who may be equated with the biblical Sophia, the "Spirit of God."<sup>85</sup> She is the "personification of the Holy Spirit...she embodies connection to God in a form of luminous beauty whose central characteristics are joy, brightness, purity, and glory."<sup>86</sup> As a feminine archetype, she is neither ethereal nor sterile; as one commentator has noted, "she enables us to...tap into the root of transformation - the feminine power of the Revelation to give birth, to create anew."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Paula Drewek, "Feminine Forms of the Divine in Bahá'í Scriptures," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 5, 1, (March-June 1992): 19.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Sours, "The Maid of Heaven, The Image of Sophia, And the Logos Personification of the Spirit of God In Scripture and Sacred Literature," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4, 1, (March-June 1991): 50.

<sup>84</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 49; Rouhani Ma'ani, "Linguistic Gender Biases," p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> Sours, "The Maid of Heaven," p. 50.

<sup>86</sup> Drewek, "Feminine Forms," p. 19.



In addition to Revelation's feminine personification, the voice of revelation, the text itself, is feminized as the "Mother Word" which "is the channel of divine power, of transformation... as well as of the wonderful arts and sciences on which civilization prides itself. It is the power of life in the world of creation."<sup>88</sup> Relative to this Word, the believers are conceptualized "as children at the breast, taking our fill."<sup>89</sup> The feminine thus is associated with the voice of revelation, and with its 'inner meaning'.<sup>90</sup>

This feminizing of Revelation has led one Bahá'í author to suggest that:  
Progressive Revelation [is] the continuous and ceaseless Feminine unfolding of the Masculine Will of God through an unending procession of Messengers in which the Divine Marriage of the Masculine and Feminine has taken place.<sup>91</sup>

While caution must be observed - these musings take place in commentary on the scriptures, and are in no way authoritative - it is clear that the writings offer powerful images of the feminine Divine, and that these images occur in interaction with masculine forms. This interaction occurs in a context of both/and, rather than either/or.<sup>92</sup> This portrayal thus models the complementarity between the masculine and the feminine advocated by the Bahá'í writings, and offers images of the feminine Divine located not in physical fecundity - with which the feminine has long been associated - but rather in images of spiritual fecundity, which may hold greater liberating potential.<sup>93</sup>

It bears mentioning that the maleness of the known manifestations of God (considered by Bahá'ís to include Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, Mohammed, Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, and others, from the beginning of human history) is

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> Woodman. "The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith." p. 94.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>92</sup> Drewek, "Feminine Forms," pp. 16-17.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

unrelated to “the spirit which they manifest, which is sexless”, and which, if anything, is most likely to be portrayed in feminine terms.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh himself clarified this point, saying

were He to pronounce one of the leaves<sup>95</sup> to be the manifestation of all His excellent titles, unto no one is given the right to utter why or wherefore, and should one do so he would be regarded as a disbeliever in God and be numbered with such as have repudiated the Truth.<sup>96</sup>

As a common component of philosophical discourse at the time of the Bahá'í revelation, the central figures of the faith occasionally adopted terminology which divided creation into “active” and “passive” elements. Typically, corresponding associations to the masculine and the feminine were applied, with the feminine (and thus women) ubiquitously linked to the passive element. However, in the Bahá'í scriptures this paradigm is handled differently: humanity and God and the Divine manifestations are conceived of as all simultaneously active and passive, masculine and feminine; both elements have equal roles, and neither is more associated with women than with men. While the feminine is often seen exclusively as a passive or receptive element in other traditions, in the Bahá'í cosmology it serves “as an *active principle* which creates, empowers, rears, and nourishes.”<sup>97</sup> In this revision of the relationship between the active/passive and the masculine/feminine, “they so inform and infuse each other that their difference is now a manifestation of their sameness.”<sup>98</sup>

Before concluding this investigation of the feminine in Bahá'í scriptures, it is worthwhile to briefly consider the writing's treatment of the female body. Most significant, perhaps, in this regard, is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá abrogates entirely the ancient association of the Original Sin with women and the feminine, thus healing “a radical

<sup>94</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, “Linguistic Gender Biases,” p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> “Leaves” is a common appellation applied to women in the Bahá'í writings.

<sup>96</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p.185.

<sup>97</sup> Drewek, “Feminine Forms,” p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> Woodman, “The Role of the Feminine in the Bahá'í Faith,” p. 83.

inner split between the physical and spiritual worlds” in which the body became “the enemy of the soul, engaging it in a state of perpetual warfare.”<sup>99</sup> One of the most pervasive and powerful underpinnings of the oppression of women is thus knocked out in the Bahá’í teachings.

### *Interpretation and Conclusion*

The Bahá’í scriptures, in my view, enunciate a vision of gender with powerful liberating potentialities. Accessing this vision, however, requires interpretation; and interpretation can sometimes be problematic.

The most serious difficulties in this regard arise from language itself. Those revealing scripture must clothe God’s perfect will in human, imperfect languages. Many - if not all - languages currently in use were developed in patriarchal contexts, by men in societies with masculinist values. The reader of scripture must therefore be wary of language’s ability to distort meaning and subtly perpetuate inequities.<sup>100</sup> Happily for the Bahá’ís, the Universal House of Justice is empowered to dispense authoritative clarifications and explanations of the meaning of texts which are unclear due to linguistic changes.

An example of this problem may be found in the translation of references to God from the original Persian or Arabic into English, in which God-names tend to have been masculinized, both by the use of “He” in its generic sense and by the de-emphasizing of feminine or neutral God-names (Creator, Fashioner, Nurturer, Consoler, Beloved, etc.).<sup>101</sup> The generic ‘He’ is particularly troubling to many believers, as current trends in feminist thought and language usage have argued strongly against such use. However, the Bahá’í administration does not intend to re-

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>100</sup> Rouhani Ma’ani, “Linguistic Gender Biases,” p. 56.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

translate the texts using gender-neutral terms, perhaps because their primary concern is to remain scrupulously faithful to the source documents. Bahá'ís envision the eventual creation of a world auxiliary language, in which, it is hoped, such troublesome gender associations will not exist.

Another dilemma confronting Bahá'ís in their interpretation of the teachings is that, while all of the central texts are widely available in many languages, a great deal of the Bahá'í scriptures is still unavailable in English, as linguists painstakingly labor to accurately translate the original documents. This mass of untranslated material includes many tablets written by Bahá'u'lláh to or about Bahá'í women, which have not yet been published even in the original language.<sup>102</sup>

Nonetheless, the believer takes it on faith that whatever is as yet untranslated will not fundamentally contradict that which already is; if the appearance of a contradiction were to emerge, the House of Justice would provide the necessary reconciliation. Indeed, as one Bahá'í author has noted, “no enlightened believer in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation will accept a prejudicial interpretation of the holy text.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, the teachings' egalitarian vision of gender appears secure.

At the end of chapter one, Catherine Wessinger's criteria for religions which promote women's leadership were introduced: that they envision an androgynous, bisexual, or unanthropomorphized God; that they temper or deny the doctrine of “the Fall”; that they deny the need for ordained clergy; that they don't confine women exclusively to domestic roles; and that they promote a social expectation of equality. In this chapter, it has been demonstrated that the Bahá'í teachings meet these criteria, and promote the advancement of women not only in religion but also in the secular world.

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<sup>102</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, “Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority,” p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, “Linguistic Gender Biases,” p .55.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that many Bahá'í women - and men - have experienced these teachings as a powerful promoter of gender equality in their own lives. In order to be effective, however, a teaching must be both understood and implemented. In the next chapter, we will consider the extent to which this has actually happened.

## Chapter Three: Bahá'í Women's Experience of Gender

### *Eastern Origins*

Iran - then Persia - in the late 1800s was not a nice place to be a woman. As described by Ann Boyles,

women were treated as chattel or as mere reproductive vessels, were held virtually as domestic prisoners, and were not deemed worthy of any formal education that would equip them for any role in greater society - or indeed, that would adequately prepare them to be the educators of their own children....<sup>1</sup>

Women were subject to the authority of their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. The inner area of the home, in which women spent most of their lives, "did not even have windows opening on the outside world," and any attempt to seek education was seen as "contrary to chastity."<sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when asked about the status of women in the Orient, said;

The community of women was so abased in the East that, in the Arabic language, when a mention was made of them in conversation one would say: 'Far be it from thee to be a woman,' as one would say: 'Far be it from thee to be a donkey.' In the Turkish language, it was said: 'Exalted be thy presence from the mention of a woman.' And in the Persian language, when talking about a woman one would say: 'May there be no relationship'; moreover, the word 'woman' was used as a synonym for 'weak'.<sup>3</sup>

While rural women, given the exigencies of their local economies, may have faced somewhat milder restrictions on their movement, the oppression of women was ubiquitous and unquestioned.<sup>4</sup> Women lived in a totally separate sphere; this

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<sup>1</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not previously translated, cited in Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody, "Islamic Women," Women And World Religions. (Englewood Cliffs,

separation was enforced by the veil, which was (and is) worn by all women outside of their quarters, and which points to pervasive oppressive beliefs about women's bodies and sexuality.

Constant veiling emphasized women's lack of any public identity. Indeed, as one author points out;

A woman's existence was only properly acknowledged...in relation to one or more of the male members of the family. Any attempt to discuss the events of a woman's life was interpreted as an intrusion on the privacy of that man, who had the prerogative of ensuring that the women of his household remained concealed and protected.<sup>5</sup>

Birth dates, names, and any other personal information about women's lives was rarely recorded.

Bábí and Bahá'í historians of the time, all of whom were male, would thus have had great difficulty adequately researching the lives of their female co-religionists. It is unlikely, however, that such attempts were made; as Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani has noted, the attitudes of these early historians "were so conditioned by customary practices and unjust traditions of the time that they did not notice the struggles of most of the early women believers; or if they did, these appeared so insignificant to them that they did not warrant professional historical treatment."<sup>6</sup> Demographic information about early Eastern Bahá'í women, their social standing, ages, and backgrounds, or even how many there were, remains unavailable.

Thus, current attempts to investigate the impact of early Eastern Bahá'í women's faith on their experience of gender are fraught with difficulties. Nonetheless, it is clear that the central figures of the faith both modelled to their followers and urged them to uphold a vision of gender which differed sharply from the prevailing norms.

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New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Perhaps the earliest intimation of this alteration of gender norms can be seen in the Báb's relationship with his wife, Khadijih; although his texts say little or nothing about women's rights, he treated his wife with extreme respect and affection, and allowed her to be the first to recognize his Divine calling.<sup>7</sup> Upon her death, custodianship of their marital home, one of the holiest spots for Bahá'í pilgrimage, passed to her sister, Zahra, and her descendants.<sup>8</sup> This clearly contravened social customs regarding both the possession of property and the holding of important religious offices.<sup>9</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh supported the advancement of women both in his personal relationships and in lengthy correspondences, in which he often confided in women, showed trust in their judgement and actions, honoured and praised them, and conveyed his respect and affection.<sup>10</sup> In one tablet addressed to the women of Iran, he assures them, "Soon will the pageantry of tyranny be rolled up and the panoply of justice be unfolded...".<sup>11</sup> Other tablets encouraged and praised the boldness of women who, though married to Muslims, became followers of Bahá'u'lláh, thus exposing themselves to dire consequences. Female believers were often referred to as "handmaidens", a title which Bahá'u'lláh stated "far excelleth aught else that can be seen in the world."<sup>12</sup> He further wrote that "the names of handmaidens who are devoted to God are written and set down by the Pen of the Most High....They excel over men in the sight of God."<sup>13</sup> His dismissal of men's superiority as an "idle fancy" and frequent praise of women's courage and devoted services as believers sharply contrasted the prevailing notions about women and their treatment by traditional religious authorities.

<sup>7</sup> H.M. Balyuzi, Khadijih Begum: The Wife of the Báb, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), pp. 10-14.

<sup>8</sup> This house was destroyed by Iranian authorities after the Islamic Revolution in the late 1970's.

<sup>9</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp.148-151.

<sup>11</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, previously untranslated tablet, cited in Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 252.

<sup>13</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, Women, # 4.



'Abdu'l-Bahá extended this record of implementation. In his own home, his daughters and granddaughters received lengthy educations, often being sent abroad for further studies, and being called upon to serve as translators and commentators in his many interviews with English-speaking visitors.<sup>14</sup> He frequently demonstrated his trust in the capacity of women by giving them responsibility and authority in important undertakings, which often involved giving direction to both men and women.<sup>15</sup> Despite pressure from many of the Eastern believers, he neither took a second wife nor permitted his followers to do so. He corresponded at length with many women, in both the East and the West, and often condemned the oppression of women in his homeland. Speaking at a suffrage meeting in America in 1912, he clearly demonstrated his recognition of Eastern women's abilities, saying:

Today, among the Bahais of Persia, there are many women who are the very pride and envy of the men. They are imbued with all the excellences and virtues of humanity. They are eloquent, they are poets and scholars and embody the quintessence of humility. The whole Orient bears witness to their greatness. In political matters they have been able to withstand the abilities of men. They have given their lives and forfeited their possessions in martyrdom for humanity. Their glory, honor and traces will last forever. Truly the pages of the history of Persia are illumined by the lives of such women.<sup>16</sup>

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledged that women in his homeland were terribly oppressed, he encouraged them to strive for education and advancement. In one letter, he urges, "do not consider thyself to be insignificant by doubting what a handmaiden living behind the veil can do...",<sup>17</sup> and in another he asserts that "in the countries of Europe and America the maidservants of the Merciful have won the prize of excellence and advancement from the arena of men...Ye, who are the blessed leaves from the East, should burn more brightly...Arise, therefore, and exert yourselves..."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, pp. 160, 183.

<sup>15</sup> One example of this is his selection of Sakinih Sultan to oversee the distribution of food relief he had gathered during World War 1, when Palestine was threatened with famine (a service for which he was subsequently knighted by the British). For more information on Sakinih Sultan, see the appended workshop materials.

<sup>16</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Star of the West, 3, 8, (August 1, 1912): 20.

<sup>17</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 101.

Bahá'ú'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's actions to foster the advancement of women were wide ranging, and a thorough examination of them would go far beyond the purview of this thesis. The extent to which these actions affected the lives of Eastern early Bahá'í women, however, is hard to determine. The vast majority of these women were illiterate; thus, men controlled their access to the Bahá'í writings, and, as Ma'ani has noted, "men were little concerned with the needs of women."<sup>19</sup> In fact, Ma'ani suggests that the Bahá'í community of the time may have actively resisted disseminating and implementing Bahá'ú'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's demands for the advancement of the status of women;

The problem of educating men and women in Iran to champion the injunction of Bahá'ú'lláh to equality was a colossal one. The male Bahá'ís did not exert much conscious effort to promote this aspect of the Teachings. When they talked about it, they were more apt to dwell on what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "minor differences" between men and women than on the abolition of male superiority. And it was as hard to bring the conscious awareness of this principle to the attention of the female believers as it was to the men. If Bahá'ú'lláh had not firmly and explicitly revealed the principle of sexual equality, the oppression of women in the name of religion would certainly have continued in full force to this date.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, it is clear that some awareness of this teaching was reaching the Eastern community, and that it was making quite a splash; copies of talks on women's rights given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America in 1911-1912 reached Persia shortly thereafter, and led some Persian women to "advocate the immediate abolishment of the veil, as well as women's full participation in administrative affairs." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, fearing that such rapid change would divide the community and expose it to increased persecution, counselled the women to patience and less controversial measures, advising them not to do anything "contrary to wisdom."<sup>21</sup> Despite this advice, some

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. # 100.

<sup>19</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Susan Stiles Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith." Religion and Women.

experimenting with mixed groups of men and unveiled women did occur; in such cases, everyone was generally so embarrassed that traditional norms were hastily re-established.<sup>22</sup>

As Ma'ani points out, the contribution of many Eastern women to the development of the Bahá'í community consisted mainly of their "vast capacity for suffering in acquiescence", their "self-effacement and self-sacrifice," and the "strong offspring" they left behind to carry forward "the vital work of the Faith, while their own services remained unrecognized and unsung."<sup>23</sup> While such services were undoubtedly essential to the success and sustenance of the Bahá'í community, they do not appear to have held much liberating potential for the women rendering them.<sup>24</sup> However, some early Eastern female believers also seem to have been empowered by their faith to take on quite unconventional roles.

The most celebrated of such women is undoubtedly Tahirih.<sup>25</sup> Famous among her co-religionists and renowned in 19th-century European artistic and Orientalist circles, her bold contravention of gender norms made her notorious in Persia, where her fiercely anti-clerical poems are nonetheless still widely regarded as literary masterpieces.<sup>26</sup> She was neither a dutiful daughter, in that she continually opposed her father's theological views; nor a successful wife and mother, as she left her husband and sons and eventually obtained a divorce; nor a coquette, using her (widely remarked) beauty for power, as she refused the Shah's offer of marriage.<sup>27</sup> Her

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ed. Arvind Sharma, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that such services, although apparently within the range of traditional gender norms, may have been experienced as liberating if the women involved independently chose to carry them out, rather than passively accepting them as an imposed expectation.

<sup>25</sup> Biographical information on Tahirih may be found in the appended workshop materials.

<sup>26</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," pp. 247-248.

<sup>27</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 213.

overwhelming - and perhaps only - passion was her faith. Claiming an "inner awareness of God's purpose," she attracted and instructed hundreds of men and women in the Bábí teachings and instituted a number of innovations within the community, including occasionally appearing unveiled at gatherings.<sup>28</sup> In response to those outraged by her rejection of the dictates of 'chastity', the Báb named her Tahirih, "the Pure One", thus expressing his tacit approval and rebutting her critics.

While most of her biographers have dwelt on Tahirih's interaction with men in the public sphere, she also attracted and galvanized many early Bábí women, some of whom have been acknowledged as historically important figures in their own right.<sup>29</sup> The circle of women which continually surrounded her, according to Susan Stiles Maneck, was

perhaps the first group of women in those regions to have attained an awareness of their deprivations as women. Yet Tahirih's activities did not represent a woman's liberation movement in the modern sense. For Tahirih, removing the veil was primarily an act of religious innovation. Neither the writings of Tahirih nor the Báb concern themselves with the issue of women's rights as such. Apparently Tahirih experienced the Báb's revelation as liberating, whether or not it addressed itself to the status of women per se.<sup>30</sup>

Whether or not she intended to be a crusader for the advancement of women, it is clear that many of her contemporaries experienced her as such. Indeed, in Moslem circles, the story of her audacity and eventual execution became a cautionary tale about the dangers of educating women.<sup>31</sup> Bahá'í texts also generally portray Tahirih as a gender equality activist; indeed, Shoghi Effendi calls her "the first woman suffrage martyr."<sup>32</sup> Her dying words, reportedly "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women," would seem to support such an interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, see the story of Shams-i-Duha in the appended workshop materials.

<sup>30</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 214.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Stiles Maneck, "Tahirih: A Religious Paradigm of Womanhood," Journal of Bahá'í Studies, 2, 2, (1989-1990): 51.

<sup>32</sup> Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 75.

Tahirih has been discussed by some Western commentators as the “paradigm of the ideal woman” in the Bábí/Bahá’í dispensation.<sup>34</sup> Her conflicts with various male believers have been construed as signifying a “meeting of archetypes, the clash of elements, a confrontation of vast proportions whose psychological as well as spiritual significance has rocked us for generations since.”<sup>35</sup> In addition to inspiring women who knew her personally, her story has influenced successive generations of Bahá’í women. Thus, her historical importance is certainly recognized, and her life is to some extent mythologized.<sup>36</sup> Her record appears to have been similarly revered in the early Eastern communities.

If we accept for the moment that she may serve as a “paradigmatic ideal of womanhood for Bahá’ís,” it is interesting to consider the implications of this paradigm, which, according to Maneck,

suggests that women are encouraged to be assertive, intelligent, eloquent, passionately devoted to causes, and yet, still beautiful. Absent are many of those qualities generally found in other feminine ideals: devotion to family, modesty, gentleness, and submissiveness.<sup>37</sup>

The operation of such a paradigm in the community would likely have influenced the restrictions placed on other early Eastern Bahá’í women, possibly by fueling their latent activist tendencies. It may also be that the extreme (for the time) radicalism of this paradigm provoked resistance to change and greater gender conformity than might have otherwise existed among some community members of both sexes.

Tahirih is not the only early female believer known to have dramatically challenged gender norms; records also indicate that a few Bábí women disguised

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>34</sup> Maneck, “Tahirih,” p. 40.

<sup>35</sup> Bahiyiyih Nakhjavání, *Asking Questions*. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990). pp. 57-58.

<sup>36</sup> I am concerned that such mythologizing actually diffuses the potency of her story as a source of inspiration for current women by reducing one’s ability to identify with her struggles and victories.

<sup>37</sup> Maneck, “Tahirih,” p. 52.

themselves as men in order to participate in armed conflicts.<sup>38</sup> However, most women's challenges to tradition took a more subtle course. While less well known to modern Bahá'ís, such women may in fact have provided more accessible role models to their peers and may be more representative of the average early Eastern Bahá'í woman's experience.

One woman whose life was entirely transformed by the Bahá'í faith was Bahiyyih Khanum, daughter of Bahá'ú'lláh and Asiyih Khanum, who is described by Bahá'ú'lláh as possessing a "station such as none other woman hath surpassed."<sup>39</sup> While Tahirih may be the star of the Bábi years, Bahiyyih Khanum is "the outstanding heroine of the Bahá'í Dispensation."<sup>40</sup> Her life in no way followed the pattern which, as a daughter of Persian nobility, she might have expected, as her father's claim to an independent revelation from God precipitated the family's destitution, successive exiles, and eventual settlement in a prison-city in Palestine. Despite the many deprivations she sustained, she reportedly remained serene, affectionate, generous, affable, and kind; sustaining, comforting, and bringing joy to others, while managing the domestic affairs of what became a very large and complex household. At the same time, she cultivated a wide range of social relationships which served to protect her loved ones.<sup>41</sup>

While these services seem more in line with conventional notions of 'ideal womanhood', it is noteworthy that she did not marry, and, in fact, is reported to have asked her father's permission to remain unmarried in order to continue in her chosen lifestyle. Bahá'ú'lláh is reported to have replied that he knew no man worthy to marry such purity as his daughter.<sup>42</sup> Thus, like many early Western believers, Bahiyyih

<sup>38</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 218.

<sup>39</sup> Bahá'ú'lláh, cited in Bahiyyih Khanum: The Greatest Holy Leaf - A Compilation, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), p.3.

<sup>40</sup> Shoghi Effendi, cited in Bahiyyih Khanum, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 31, 34-35.

Khanum achieved a greater degree of autonomy than she might otherwise have expected only by sacrificing the opportunity to have a spouse and bear children. That she was empowered to make such a choice, in a time and culture when women usually had little or no influence on their own marital status, suggests that the gender norms operant in her life were, relative to her context, quite liberal. This impression is confirmed by the fact that, in addition to her domestic responsibilities, she was on several occasions the international leader of the Bahá'í community, as regent for both her brother, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and her grandson, Shoghi Effendi, during their absences from the Bahá'í World Centre. In addition, she carried on lengthy correspondences with women from both the East and the West, in which she frequently encouraged them to develop their intellectual and spiritual capacities.<sup>43</sup> Several other female members of the household, including 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wife, Munirih, carried on similar correspondences urging female believers to act outside of traditional gender norms.

It is difficult to find examples of more 'everyday' early Eastern female believers whose lives illustrate the extent to which their faith affected their ability to resist oppressive gender norms. However, several initiatives promoting the advancement of women (however obliquely) undertaken in the early Persian Bahá'í community suggest that Tahirih and Bahiyyih Khanum's experiences should not be interpreted as isolated instances of quasi-liberation, but rather as indicators of the emancipatory influence of the Bahá'í faith in the lives of many early female Eastern believers. Three such initiatives will be briefly described.

The first of these was the establishment of women's assemblages throughout Iran between 1910 and 1917, by a committee for the liberation of women which had been formed by the wives of two very prominent Bahá'ís.<sup>44</sup> The status of their

<sup>42</sup> The Spoken Chronicle of Bahiyyih Khanum, Daughter of Bahá'ú'lláh, The Chosen Highway, p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Both were married to Hands of the Cause, and thus fairly immune to community criticism.

husbands in the community undoubtedly enabled them to agitate for equality more aggressively than many other women without exposing themselves to the reproach of more conservative elements in the community. Women's assemblies were intentionally designed to foster the advancement of women by raising their level of knowledge and competence; their mandate, as set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, included the discussion of educational methods, logical analysis and organization of religious arguments, oration, medicine and health, general education in the various branches of knowledge, and the cultivation of virtues such as constancy, perseverance, strength, determination, and firmness of purpose. In addition, the assemblages were advised to address the needs of girls and to avoid frivolous topics, while the participants were counselled to take one another seriously and encourage each other.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, contention with men was discouraged as counter-productive; 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged the members of the women's assemblages to be patient, saying, "this newly born babe is traversing in one night the path that needeth one hundred years to tread."<sup>46</sup> I have been unable to find an explanation for the termination of the assemblages after 1917; a combination of factors, including increasing persecution of the community, may have come into play. Nonetheless, these early consciousness-raising groups must have had a lasting impact both on their participants and on the community's reputation as a promoter of the advancement of women.

Another Bahá'í endeavour which advanced the status of women was the opening of a women's clinic and gynecology department at a Bahá'í hospital in Tehran, at a time when Persian women were totally deprived of skilled medical care. In 1908, a group of male Bahá'í Persian doctors, concerned about women's health, asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá to help them find a Western Bahá'í woman doctor to work with them. Soon after, Dr. Susan Moody, an American, arrived in Tehran. For 15 years she treated women of all religions and social classes at her clinic and in the hospital, where she served as

<sup>45</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, pp. 187-190.

<sup>46</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Women, # 13.



superintendent and head of gynecology.<sup>47</sup> In addition, she held classes for mothers and tried to establish a school of nursing.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, she was joined by another female Bahá'í doctor and a nurse, who assisted her in these labours.<sup>49</sup> In 1925, conditions in Iran forced her to return to the West; but three years later, at the age of 77, she returned to Iran, where she continued treating women until her death in 1934.

As a Western woman in Persia, Dr. Moody may have enjoyed a greater degree of equality and inviolability than she could have expected among men of her own race. Her engagement with men as peers and her activism to promote Eastern women's interests must have challenged conventional gender norms and inspired and empowered the local Bahá'í women. Thus, the benefits of this initiative went beyond the obvious improvements in women's access to medical care. It may be construed from this example that the status of Eastern Bahá'í women was positively affected both by the intervention of their Western female co-religionists and by activities undertaken on their behalf by male Bahá'ís, whose concern and interest in women's well-being must be attributed at least in part to their new-found faith.

A third Bahá'í project which affected Eastern women's experience of gender involved increasing women's access to education. At the time, there were no educational institutions for women and girls in Persia. The Bahá'í writings emphasize the necessity for education, and indicate that women's education is more important than men's; however, although the community had been running very successful boys' schools in various parts of the country since 1897, schooling for girls was only offered by a handful of Persian women on an informal basis. In the early 1900's a group of Bahá'í women in Tehran, including Dr. Susan Moody and Munirih Khanum, one of the women instrumental in establishing women's assemblages, began agitating for the

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<sup>47</sup> Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, "The Interdependence of Bahá'í Communities: Services of North American Bahá'í Women to Iran," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 4, 1 (1991): 23-24.

<sup>48</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 258.

<sup>49</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 226.

establishment of a formal school for girls.<sup>50</sup> With the assistance of endowments and scholarships from many Western Bahá'í women, including the Canadians Harriet McGee and May Maxwell,<sup>51</sup> the Persian community soon opened a formal girls' school, which "eventually became one of the finest girls' preparatory schools in Iran,"<sup>52</sup> attracting both Bahá'í girls and the daughters of many prominent families.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, 12 girls' schools were established across Persia, often including kindergartens; despite anti-Bahá'í prejudices, almost half the students and some of the faculty were not believers.<sup>54</sup>

A few Western Bahá'í women, including the Americans Dr. Genevieve Coy and Lillian Kappes, were recruited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to ensure that the girls' schools used modern teaching methods; several Persian early graduates, such as Ishráqíyyih Dhabíh and Rúhangíz Fath-'Azam, also took on teaching roles.<sup>55</sup> In 1911 one such graduate, Ghodsia Ashraf, went to Chicago to pursue graduate studies in educational psychology, becoming the first Persian woman to do so. Upon her graduation she returned to teach in the girls' schools; that she also established the Women's Society for Progress and promoted the advancement of women in a variety of ways suggests a clear devotion to women's emancipation and challenging gender norms.<sup>56</sup>

The curriculum offered to girls, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was to include "the various branches of knowledge...sciences and arts and all the wonders of this pre-eminent time...", and to be the same as that offered to boys.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, the

<sup>50</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 184.

<sup>51</sup> Will C. van den Hoonaard, "Early Bahá'í Schools In Iran," *Bahá'í Canada*, 11, 5 (Jan-Feb 1990): 9.

<sup>52</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 226.

<sup>53</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 186.

<sup>54</sup> van den Hoonaard, "Early Bahá'í Schools In Iran," p. 9. There were also 14 Bahá'í-run boys' schools, suggesting that male privilege in education was not yet totally eradicated.

<sup>55</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 186.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193.

<sup>57</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *A Compilation on Bahá'í Education*, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, (Victoria, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), p. 284.

Persian Bahá'í girls' schools used an innovative and broadly-based curriculum, including laboratory-based sciences.<sup>58</sup> Girls were allowed to sing, dance, and pray aloud, none of which were routinely permitted in society, and had gymnastics and recesses, which would not be offered in other schools for over 15 years.<sup>59</sup>

In addition, the girls' schools offered a program of continuing education for mothers of students and older women, through monthly conferences which attracted 300-400 participants. Although the programs were not particularly radical, using drama, plays and demonstrations to inform and instruct on topics within women's traditional sphere, the act of gathering women for explicitly educational purposes must have had a significant impact.<sup>60</sup>

When, in 1934, the Bahá'í schools were shut down by the government, the community instituted private classes for Bahá'í boys and girls based on a 17-year curriculum of moral and religious education, involving over 4000 students across Persia.<sup>61</sup> As a result of these educational initiatives, by 1973, despite a national literacy rate of 15%, every Bahá'í woman in Persia under the age of 40 was literate.<sup>62</sup> The impact of access to education on the status of Bahá'í women was overwhelming, fundamentally challenging the confinement of women's bodies and minds to domestic concerns and paving the way for their entrance into the public sphere.

These initiatives, and the individual examples cited earlier, suggest that many Bahá'í women in the cradle of the faith were, to a surprising extent, enabled by their faith to resist or (to some degree) escape the crushing confinement of traditional gender norms. Understanding the operation of the Bahá'í faith as an emancipatory force in

<sup>58</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 184.

<sup>59</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 254.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. and Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 191.

<sup>61</sup> van den Hoonaard, "Early Bahá'í Schools In Iran," p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 254.

their lives would require painstaking research using alternative sources; as Maneck notes,

...women had their own networks, self-sustaining and self-led, within which religious ideas could be disseminated and promulgated, apart from the observation of men.... Women's networks must be painstakingly reconstructed on the basis of oral histories. Literary sources will not, by themselves, enable us to obtain a full picture of the role of women in early Bábí-Bahá'í history...<sup>63</sup>

Although women in the early Eastern community faced many restrictions which would chafe the modern reader, (for instance, exclusion from the official public administration of the Bahá'í community), relative to their context, they were offered revolutionary possibilities through allegiance to their faith. The early Eastern community clearly struggled and to some extent succeeded in beginning to practice the vision of emancipation it espoused. Could the same be said of the early Western Bahá'í communities?

### *Early Western Development*

To properly consider this question, we must first set the faith's Western debut in context. The turn of the century throughout the Western world was characterized by social unrest and rapid change. The last frontiers in North America had recently been settled and urbanization and industrialization were accelerating.<sup>64</sup> The upper and middle classes flocked to lectures and clubs to analyse the processes of change which were transforming the socio-cultural landscape, and to be soothed by great theories and explanations offered by intellectuals whose status and credibility approached and at times surpassed that of the clergy. As pointed out by Ursula King, "questions never asked before, problems never encountered in the past, possibilities never envisaged" confronted them, and continue to confront us "in most unsettling and perturbing ways."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 218.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith: Beginnings in North America." *World Order*, 18, 4, (Summer 1984): 7.

All of this unease manifested itself in vigorous religious questioning and transformation. Millennialism became widespread and many expected the immanent return of Christ. The massive increase in the extremes of wealth and poverty caused moral outrage, resulting in a Protestant Social Gospel movement based on a theology of social change.<sup>66</sup> At the height of this movement in Canada, in the late 1910's, it "espoused prohibition, women's suffrage, civil service reform, bureaus of social research, expansion of cooperatives, and the decline of party-based government."<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, an increasing emphasis on science, precipitated by Darwinism, among other forces, and reinforced by the growth of the intellectual culture, posed a major challenge to the churches. Debates over the inerrancy of the Bible polarized traditional and liberal Christians into separate camps, setting the stage for the later development of Fundamentalism.<sup>68</sup> The first World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 perpetuated deeply rooted notions of Occidental superiority but at the same time sparked questioning around issues of tolerance: what some promoted as open-mindedness was condemned by others as apostasy.<sup>69</sup> It would take many years for most Christians to stop damning the heathens, but ecumenism slowly began its ascent. In response to these tensions, the American Bahá'í historian Robert Stockman has observed that:

Some reacted to the changes of modernity by rejecting modern science and insisting upon absolute acceptance of the Bible. Others rejected churches and dogma and became agnostics. Still others fell between these extremes and became uncertain about their belief. Yet most continued to consider themselves evangelical Protestants.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 37.

<sup>66</sup> Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith: Beginnings in North America," p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Will van den Hoonaard, The Origins of the Bahá'í Community of Canada, 1898-1948. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith: Beginnings in North America," p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Religious seeking became widespread, and many - particularly in America - turned to new religious alternatives, such as Theosophy, New Thought, Unity, Shakerism, and a variety of metaphysical, mystical, and revivalist movements.

While such religious experimentation also occurred in Canada, we were, then as now, less religiously diverse than the States and more religiously conservative; almost 90% of the Canadian population in 1901 was Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian. This figure remained relatively constant through the first half of the century.<sup>71</sup> Thus, though the winds of religious change blew on both sides of the border, the Canadian tempest was somewhat milder.

At the same time, the constructions of femininity and women's roles were also radically changing. The cult of 'true womanhood' or 'virtuous womanhood' was in full ideological force throughout North America. The 'New Woman' ran her home with scientific efficiency and skill, creating havens of moral rectitude in which upstanding citizens were lovingly and firmly molded. Women became the embodiment of delicacy, purity, and respectability, while men were considered active, worldly, effective, and oddly uncivilized. Hers was a glorified and entirely separate private sphere; however, this private sphere gradually came to include a certain level of social activism. This ideal, as described by Stockman,

defined women as loving exemplars and promoters of Christian virtues, educators of a virtuous next generation, and perfect homemakers. This role was not altogether a passive one - the sphere of 'virtuous' activities... came to include women's involvement in voluntary associations aimed at improving society and in professions that educated and nurtured, such as teaching and nursing. Nevertheless, the ideal of virtuous womanhood implied the exclusion of women from politics, voting, business, and other male-dominated activities that seemed incompatible with the emotional nature, pure idealism, and moral rectitude that were assumed to dominate woman's character.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> van den Hoonaard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 295.

<sup>72</sup> Stockman, "The Bahá'í Faith: Beginnings in North America," p. 18.

In the minds of many, this ideal also included religious roles, inasmuch as women were considered the moral guardians of their families. Women's public prayer, testifying and preaching; the temperance, social purity, prison reform, and abolition movements; the proliferation of overseas missions; and, ultimately, suffrage, all stemmed from women's extension of this moral guardianship from the private to the public sphere.<sup>73</sup>

Religion was instrumental to the mobilization of women. Indeed, Carroll Smith-Rosenburg has pointed out that:

Ironically, during the very years when the new bourgeois men began to proselytize for the confining Cult of True Womanhood, wild, religious women created a public and powerful role for themselves as a female conscience and moral voice crying out in a wilderness of male corruption.<sup>74</sup>

Religion thus provided women with the *content* of a revolution; but as J. Gordon Melton has further noted, religion also provided the *form*: "in the nineteenth century, religion provided a context in which women could organize and from which feminist impulses could be generated. Before there were women's clubs, women's schools, and women's rights groups, women's mobilization began in the churches."<sup>75</sup> This view is echoed by King, who observes that "women took to the public platform on behalf of religion long before they were stirred by politics."<sup>76</sup>

The changes in the Protestant church in the first half of the 19th century had created a Christianity in which "the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit, not the moral and orderly progress of the fathers, signified piety....individual mystical experiences broke through the boundaries between divine and human, female and male."<sup>77</sup> Women were able to lead prayer, to speak in tongues, and even at times to

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<sup>73</sup> Wessinger, Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions, p.10.

<sup>74</sup> Smith-Rosenburg, Disorderly Conduct, p.130.

<sup>75</sup> J. Gordon Melton, "Emma Curtis Hopkins: A Feminist of the 1880s and Mother of New Thought," Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions, p. 89.

<sup>76</sup> King, "Gender and the Study of Religion," p. 18.

mount the pulpit. Toward the end of the century, the mainstream, traditional churches began becoming less radical, precipitating both the separation of several evangelical sects and the protests of many women, who began to resist their marginalization and to seek positions of religious leadership. Often, these ambitions could only be realized through allegiance to the new evangelical sects or the ever-expanding host of mystical and other religious movements, in which women's charismatic leadership tended to be more readily accepted. Again, as Smith-Rosenburg observes,

To implement their newfound sacred and social responsibilities more effectively, many respectable women moved beyond individually inspired behavior to form a score of untraditional - indeed, iconoclastic - organizations.<sup>78</sup>

Although these organizations allowed women to achieve some authority based on "direct experience of the sacred"<sup>79</sup>, and despite the fact that some of them, such as the Shakers and the Universal Friends, were founded by women, most of them ultimately denied women administrative or organizational power.

Thus, when a Syrian Bahá'í businessman arrived in Chicago and began offering classes on the new religion in 1895, many women were seeking a mode of religious expression which would satisfy their hunger both for God and for emancipation, and were willing to leave the mainstream churches in order to find it. Within two years, his classes had attracted 100 converts; by January of 1898, there were 225 Bahá'ís in Chicago. Among these early followers were several Canadians, including Kate Cowan Ives, a transplanted Newfoundlander, who declared her faith at the age of 22 and was the first Western woman to remain devoted throughout her life; and Aimée Montfort, a "stylish and well-educated" French-Canadian schoolteacher. She became very active in the Chicago community, serving as president of the Women's Assembly of Teaching and offering abundant hospitality. She was married to an eccentric anarchist, Honoré

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<sup>77</sup> Smith-Rosenburg, *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 129.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>79</sup> Wessinger, *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, p. 1.



Jaxon, the former secretary of Louis Riel, who had also become a Bahá'í; they returned briefly to Canada in 1907-1909. After the First World War Aimée left her husband, possibly with his blessings, as many anarchists saw marriage as a form of female slavery.<sup>80</sup>

The first Bahá'í in Canada, however, was Edith Magee, of a prominent Irish-British family of London, Ontario. Members of her family had first heard of the faith at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893; during subsequent visits to Chicago, Edith, at the age of 17, declared her faith. Upon her return to London in 1898, her mother, 15 year old sister Harriet, and two maternal aunts also became converts. In 1899, they formed a Bahá'í study group, which attracted the local US consul and his family. By about 1900, there were 9 Bahá'ís in London.<sup>81</sup>

In 1902, the Magees left Canada for New York City, where Edith married a prominent journalist. She, her sister, and mother seem to have remained active both in the New York Bahá'í community and in the early development of a Bahá'í school at Green Acre, in Maine.<sup>82</sup> The family, which was raised in an "atmosphere of tolerance and universality",<sup>83</sup> also appears to have been involved in the women's movement; as van den Hoonard notes,

Edith Magee had a deep interest in the women's suffrage movement and participated in marches. On more than one occasion, her husband had to call upon his many contacts among New York policemen to stand by to rescue Edith from any violence during suffrage marches on Fifth Avenue.<sup>84</sup>

Her sister, Harriet, was also active as secretary of the Women's Unity, a group of Bahá'í women dedicated to improving the conditions of their Eastern female co-religionists.

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<sup>80</sup> van den Hoonard. *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, pp. 17: 20-21.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

The Magee's departure was soon followed by the US consul's move abroad, and the London Bahá'í community dissipated. Credit for establishing the first permanent Canadian Bahá'í community is thus given to May Maxwell of Montreal, an American who became Bahá'í in Paris. She had been raised as a Unitarian, which inclined her to openness to new religious ideas; had been given to religious dreams since childhood;<sup>85</sup> and had refused all schooling after the age of 14, as she "felt distinctly there was another way of acquiring knowledge."<sup>86</sup> Her parents did not get along; thus, May was living with her mother in her friend Phoebe Hearst's apartment in Paris in 1898, when Hearst and some American friends came through the city.<sup>87</sup> The group's ostensible purpose was a trip down the Nile, but May soon ferreted out their intention to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Palestine. May promptly became a believer, and, although bedridden with chronic ailments for the previous two years, as part of the legion of middle-class female Victorian invalids, she persuaded Hearst to allow her to join the group of Bahá'í pilgrims.

Following what must have been a remarkable pilgrimage,<sup>88</sup> May returned to Paris as the only Bahá'í in Europe. Within a year, there were 14 Bahá'ís in Paris; by 1901, the community had doubled. In 1902, May married Canadian architect William Sutherland Maxwell. He had been wooing her since 1899, but May, unwilling to leave Paris until its Bahá'í community was secure, had put him off for two years until 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent word that she could go. This delay in her wedding set the course for her marriage, in which she was to consistently place her faith over her role as wife and mother, directly contravening the conventional construction of womanhood and asserting the primacy of her individual beliefs.

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Stockman, The Bahá'í Faith In America: Origins 1892-1900 Volume 1. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 141.

<sup>86</sup> Marion Holley, "In Memoriam - May Bolles Maxwell," Bahá'í World 1938-1940, v. 8, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1942), p. 631.

<sup>87</sup> From a public talk by Ruhiiyyih Rabbani (Mary Maxwell) in Pierrefonds, Quebec, 1995.

<sup>88</sup> See Sophie Tamas, "Women's Roles in the Early Western Bahá'í Community," for a more detailed study of this pilgrimage.

After her marriage, she settled in Montreal, and set about forging the first Canadian Bahá'í community. It soon became a hub of activity and the "main stimulus to the growth of the Bahá'í faith in Canada" for the next thirty years.<sup>89</sup> May left her home hundreds of times on teaching trips, crossing Canada from coast to coast and venturing all over America, often unaccompanied by her husband, who, for many years, was not a Bahá'í. According to oral tradition, she eventually gave him an ultimatum; she was going to continue in the course of her religious life, and he could join her if he chose, but she would not wait around for him to do so. This sort of assertiveness was, needless to say, far from what one would have expected from a woman at the time, and remained beyond the reach of most married Bahá'í women. Finally, he declared in 1908.<sup>90</sup>

In 1909, the Maxwells went on pilgrimage, and prayed for a child: this wish was granted shortly thereafter, when May had a daughter, Mary, who would be her only child. At the same time, May worked as an activist for the juvenile justice system, single-handedly maintained a children's milk station, was active in racial amity work, and established a Montessori school, the first in Canada, in her own home.<sup>91</sup> According to her daughter, May was also at the time "a flaming suffragette."<sup>92</sup>

In 1912, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited America, May arranged for his visit to Montreal. Later, she became a conduit for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablets to the Canadian Bahá'í community. When he died in 1921, she became prostrated with grief, so that "for a year we did not know if she would live or die or lose her mind."<sup>93</sup> However, she was restored to health by another pilgrimage, during which she met the Guardian, Shoghi

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<sup>89</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 35.

<sup>90</sup> This date is contested by others, who claim he declared in 1903. Conclusive evidence of either claim has not been seen by this writer.

<sup>91</sup> Holley, "In Memoriam," p. 636, and van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 36.

<sup>92</sup> From a public talk by Ruhyyih Rabbani, (Mary Maxwell), Pierrefonds, Quebec, 1995.

<sup>93</sup> Ruhyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*, (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 150.

Effendi, successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "From that time," her daughter writes, "the love of my mother's heart became entirely centered in the Guardian."<sup>94</sup>

Thereafter, May once again travelled across North America and throughout Europe teaching the faith. In 1937 her daughter married Shoghi Effendi. She reports that:

it had always been my mother who was the famous Bahá'í...she had been...one of the Master's earliest and most distinguished disciples and greatly loved by Him. I mention this because Shoghi Effendi once said to her... that had I not been May Maxwell's daughter he would not have married me.<sup>95</sup>

May Maxwell also served in a great variety of prominent administrative capacities, at the local and national levels, throughout her life.

In 1940, at the age of seventy, May Maxwell decided to go to South America to teach the faith. After securing the blessing of Shoghi Effendi and her husband for the enterprise, she enthusiastically embarked on the journey. Just over two weeks following her arrival on that continent, she died in Buenos Aires.

For her remarkable services, May Maxwell has been called the "spiritual mother" of the Canadian Bahá'í community.<sup>96</sup> Among the many believers she attracted to the faith were Dr. Rose Henderson, an internationally published Irish Canadian social activist in the labour and peace movements and agitator for the rights of women and children, who was one of the first women in Canada to obtain a Ph.D.,<sup>97</sup> and Marion Jack, an artist from St. John, New Brunswick, who fostered Bahá'í communities in the Arctic and the Maritimes, as well as several large Canadian cities, served as a governess in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household, and taught the faith in

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, 1965:22, cited in van den Hoonard, Bahá'í Community of Canada, p. 35.

<sup>97</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá'í Community of Canada, pp. 38-40.

Bulgaria for 24 years, remaining at her post despite terrible difficulties and deprivations brought on by the Second World War.<sup>98</sup>

Canada's early Bahá'í community, like many transplanted religious movements, relied on women to spread the faith and was predominantly urban.<sup>99</sup> Despite persistent efforts to attract male believers,<sup>100</sup> female converts generally outnumbered men by two to one,<sup>101</sup> and constituted nearly 70% of the Canadian community for much of its first fifty years.<sup>102</sup> Very few of these women were married; although a non-Bahá'í spouse does not seem to have slowed down May Maxwell, most married Bahá'í women were either less indomitable or had less tolerant husbands, and were able to offer only limited services to their faith. There were only a few Bahá'í couples, many of whom were childless; what children there were tended not to be integrated into community activities. The community was thus focussed on adults rather than families.<sup>103</sup>

Although initially attracting members of the upper class, the faith gradually spread to those in managerial positions. The community eventually became predominantly lower-middle class.<sup>104</sup> In addition, the Bahá'í community seems to have "attracted the 'creative' class, consisting of artists and the like."<sup>105</sup> By 1947, the community was 75% Anglo-Saxon; 5% were African or West-Indian Canadians; 5% were German or Swiss; and Francophones, Scandanavians, and Jews each constituted 3% of the community.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, pp. 104; 123-124.

<sup>99</sup> Will C. van den Hoonard, "The Bahá'í Community of Canada: A Case Study in the Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements to Western Societies," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 7, 3 (March-June 1997): 35.

<sup>100</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 73.

<sup>101</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 221.

<sup>102</sup> van den Hoonard, "Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements," p. 23.

<sup>103</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 237.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, pp. 242-245.

<sup>105</sup> van den Hoonard, "Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements," p. 26.

As van den Hoonard has noted, although many Bahá'ís before the 1920's had prior allegiances to Theosophy, Methodism, or Rosicrucianism, "it is clear that liberal Protestantism was the principal anvil upon which the Bahá'í community was initially forged."<sup>107</sup> This Protestant flavour persisted despite changes in the community's class composition, and influenced believers' interpretation of Bahá'í teachings, producing an emphasis on the individual, organization, and the so-called Twelve Principles of the Bahá'í faith (rather than, for instance, mystical union with the Divine through prayer). This Protestant slant, combined with the dearth of children and families and the absence of ritual and congregational prayer, must have contributed to the faith's lack of appeal to Catholics, who comprised only 4% of the Canadian community in 1921, and 12% in 1947.<sup>108</sup>

Despite this grounding in traditional churches, community members often had quirky tendencies. Many new Bahá'ís had histories of activism in social reform or racial amity work, were suffragists, advocates of 'health fads' or the fight against fluoridation, were defenders of new technologies, or took up similar controversial causes in addition to their espousal of the Bahá'í faith. Thus, many believers would have been considered a bit odd even without their 'exotic' religion; their faith "increased or reinforced, not lessened, certain unpopular or deviant lifestyles; these lifestyles provided a modicum sense of community."<sup>109</sup> Such unconventional views may have occasioned the disapproval of more conservative elements both within the community and without; in America, where a similar situation existed, one early (and unfailingly devoted) adherent complained that,

The Cause has seemed to draw to its ranks great numbers of people who have become formerly imbued with all sorts of doctrines and philosophies, fads and fancies, from "woman's pre-eminence" to "re-incarnation", from anarchy and grosser forms of socialism to divine communications and special wires from the Infinite.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 245.

<sup>107</sup> "Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements," p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The appeal of the faith to many activists was enhanced by the flexibility of the teachings; very little of the scriptures were available in authorized translations, and believers had considerable latitude to interpret the teachings in ways which supported their preferences.<sup>111</sup> Many such believers may have seen “the Bahá’í Faith as a confirmation of *their* personal ideas about anticipated social change”<sup>112</sup> and as an extension of their commitment to the social gospel movement.<sup>113</sup> Bahá’ís highlighted those teachings “that would speak to the larger cultural frame,” including liberal Biblical interpretations, the equality of women and men, an emphasis on achieving universal peace and eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty, and a tacit individualism.<sup>114</sup> Early believers were thus unaware of a distinctly Bahá’í moral code: the faith could accommodate the most flamingly radical activists as well as conservative church-goers who saw themselves as “morally normative.”<sup>115</sup>

The Bahá’í community therefore had very fuzzy boundaries. Until the 1930’s, many Bahá’ís maintained active membership in their churches.<sup>116</sup> The community advocated active engagement in the wider society; indeed, many Bahá’ís “maintained extensive ties to other circles, often keeping these circles deliberately separate from the Bahá’í community.”<sup>117</sup> The flexibility of the teachings and the permeability of the community allowed it to co-exist with the wider society in relative harmony, despite the range of views espoused by the believers.

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<sup>110</sup> From a letter by Thornton Chase to Charles Mason Remey, 19 January 1910, cited by Stockman, “The Bahá’í Faith: Beginnings in North America,” p. 26.

<sup>111</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá’í Community of Canada, p. 30.

<sup>112</sup> van den Hoonard, “Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements,” p. 23.

<sup>113</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá’í Community of Canada, p. 30.

<sup>114</sup> van den Hoonard, “Transplantation of Non-Western Religious Movements,” p. 29.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

While some were drawn by the allure of the faith's social teachings, many new Bahá'ís were persuaded by the charisma of individual teachers, such as May Maxwell. In addition, van den Hoonard asserts that;

Some came to the new religion as a result of their spiritual search or were attracted by the diversity of its membership. Others were initially drawn to Bahá'í gatherings by mystical impulses, while others saw their first Bahá'í involvement as a relief from boredom or as a means of associating with people quite unlike themselves...<sup>118</sup>

By the 1920's, the faith began to interest other believers, particularly youth, on the strength of its political teachings, rather than its mystical or Christian aspects.<sup>119</sup>

The Bahá'í teachings on gender must also have been attractive to many of the over 550 Canadians who became believers during the community's first fifty years.<sup>120</sup> However, exactly what these teachings were remained unclear to Western Bahá'ís for some time. Although they asserted that Bahá'ú'lláh advocated gender equality, the first teachers of the faith in the West, as Eastern males, had infused the teachings with their own gender biases, including the assumption that women could not serve on elected administrative bodies.<sup>121</sup> This led to segregated assemblies and occasioned much conflict in some communities in the States, most notably Chicago, as the 'official' men's assemblies often lacked financial support,<sup>122</sup> while the parallel women's assemblies represented the vast majority of the community members and thus held considerable power.<sup>123</sup> While many communities, particularly smaller ones, always had mixed assemblies, on which women and men served interchangeably in all roles, the more 'mature' Chicago assembly's gender segregation may have been upheld by some as an

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<sup>118</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá'í Community of Canada, p. 82.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

<sup>121</sup> Peggy Caton, "Introduction," Equal Circles: Women and Men in the Bahá'í Community, ed. Peggy Caton, ( Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1987), p. xv.

<sup>122</sup> Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 223.

<sup>123</sup> R. Jackson Armstrong Ingram, "Recovering a Lost Horizon: Women's Contributions to North American Bahá'í History," Equal Circles, p. 36.



ideal to be emulated.<sup>124</sup> Any inclination to do so would have been stymied by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's dissolution of all-male assemblies and demand that mixed assemblies be elected in their stead during his visit to the West in 1911-1912.

The Canadian Bahá'í community at the time existed as a northern branch of the much larger American community. Thus, while segregated assemblies were not, to my knowledge, elected in Canada, their implications for 'proper' Bahá'í gender roles and the furor they caused must have affected Canadian believers.

During his travels in America and Europe, and his visit to Montreal, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made many public talks on the advancement of women. Often, he was hosted on such occasions by non-Bahá'í women's and suffrage organizations. His speeches on the matter were widely published in English, thanks to the development of a Bahá'í newsletter which served all of North America and parts of Europe. These speeches are frequently cited to this day in elucidations of the Bahá'í view of gender. By 1912 the Bahá'í perspective on this matter, as described in detail in the previous chapter, would therefore have been accessible to the Western community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá further elaborated and explained the Bahá'í position on gender equity to the community through his responses to scores of letters written to him by (mostly female) Western believers; this process of explanation and encouragement was continued by Shoghi Effendi upon the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the availability of clear statements of the Bahá'í vision of gender, equality was obviously not fully implemented in this infant community, as evidenced by the fact that although only 25-33% of the believers were male, men were seven times more likely than women to receive full obituary articles in the *Canadian Bahá'í News* upon their deaths.<sup>126</sup> An article by Dr. Orrol Harper on the equality of women

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>125</sup> For more details, see Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 204.

<sup>126</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, pp. 238-239.

and men in the 1925 *Bahá'í Year Book*, while not authoritative, suggests that at least some members of the community were struggling to reconcile the Bahá'í teaching with their own gender biases. In this article, men of colour (Indians and Arabs) or women themselves are framed as the agents of women's oppression, but white men escape blame; changes in the status of women are attributed to women's self-improvement and realizations, rather than accommodating shifts in social, political, legal, and economic structures; women's paid work is glamourized and conceived of as appropriate only in those occupations which resemble women's traditional roles; veils are described as protective rather than oppressive; masculinity and femininity are equated with men and women; equality is described as women attaining what men have, rather than a radical paradigm shift; and emancipation is seen as more-or-less achieved.<sup>127</sup> The publication of these views, which clearly contradict Bahá'í scriptures, suggest that the community's interpretation of the Bahá'í vision of gender was significantly affected by prevailing social norms. On the other hand, publishing ventures in the early community tended to be run by men; thus, male voices may have been privileged. Printed records of conservative gender attitudes thus may not represent the practiced gender norms in the community, which likely differed from place to place and depended to a large degree on the attitudes and aptitudes of the individual believers in each group.

Indeed, historical evidence appears to support the argument that early Western Bahá'í women generally found their faith emancipating. Examples of individual heroism far beyond women's traditional purview are too numerous to recount; however, such exceptional services were usually available only to Bahá'í women who were unmarried or childless.<sup>128</sup> Some of these women may even have had greater liberty than men, who were often constrained by their financial obligations; as

<sup>127</sup> Dr. Orrol Harper, "The Equality of Men and Women," *Bahá'í Year Book*, vol. 1, April 1925-April 1926. (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1926), pp. 147-153.

<sup>128</sup> Armstrong Ingram, "Recovering a Lost Horizon," pp. 33-34.

Jackson Armstrong Ingram has noted, "Bahá'í women as a group had more material resources, and the freedom that goes with them, at their disposal, than men."<sup>129</sup> Of course, the vast majority of unmarried women at that time were not wealthy widows or women of leisure, but rather supported themselves with low-paying, low-status jobs.

Nonetheless, women were both numerically and actually dominant within the community. The husbands of married active Bahá'í women, such as the Canadian Laura Davis, would occasionally be referred to by community members as "Mr. Laura Davis," in a telling reversal of traditional terms.<sup>130</sup> Van den Hoonard, in his study of the first fifty years of Canadian Bahá'í history, found that women were as likely as men to give public talks and to lead formal and informal teaching activities, and that there appears to have been no systematic differences in topics addressed by men and women.<sup>131</sup> Women's representation on Canadian local assemblies generally reflected their proportion of the community, often surpassing 50%; and, while assembly secretaries were virtually always female, women also often served as chairperson.<sup>132</sup> It is worth noting in this regard that the office of secretary in a Bahá'í assembly holds the greatest responsibility, and is not merely a clerical function. Women were more likely than men to be appointed to committees, although often within gender appropriate spheres, and two-thirds of those who moved to new areas to found Canadian Bahá'í communities were women.<sup>133</sup>

In America, the dominance of women was supported by patronage networks, in which wealthy Bahá'í women would sponsor those less fortunate either for specific or extended services; although such arrangements remained private, patronesses in the community attained considerable power and prestige and were often elected to

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, pp.39-40.

<sup>130</sup> van den Hoonard, *Bahá'í Community of Canada*, p. 106.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 239.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 240.

community offices. Men were rarely involved in this system, as those with money tended to render services themselves, rather than sponsoring others to do so; and those requiring patronage seldom sought it from patronesses. However, men were sponsored on a few occasions, usually by virtue of their relation to an established female client. While the patronesses were simply fulfilling their socially expected philanthropic role, their largesse bound together networks of women attached both to their sponsors and horizontally to one another.<sup>134</sup> Although the Canadian manifestation of this phenomena has not been studied, given the integration of the two communities at the time, it is probable that the existence of these American networks influenced the Canadian community and that some Canadian women both gave and received patronage.

Another alleged aspect of the American community which likewise has not been studied in Canada but which may have influenced Bahá'í women's experience of gender on both sides of the border was the supposed existence of an esoteric women's theology, which was taught only to women judged able to comprehend it, and elaborated on the Bahá'í writing's statement that "work is worship" to develop "a concept of the socially reconstructive power of 'service'."<sup>135</sup> This theology presented a gender-integrated concept of the deity (in keeping with the Bahá'í scriptures but not, perhaps, with the community's common understanding thereof), and provided an "explicitly sexual" symbology through which individual devotional and mystical experiences could be interpreted.<sup>136</sup> Proponents of this theology were exclusively female and tended to be recipients of patronage, rather than patronesses; their intellectual authority therefore cut across networks of financial authority.<sup>137</sup> While such a theology undoubtedly had more to do with individual creativity than with

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<sup>134</sup> Armstrong Ingram, "Recovering a Lost Horizon," pp. 42-43.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, pp. 44-45. I say "alleged" because the source article provides neither bibliography nor footnotes and the author has not responded to requests for references.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

revealed scripture, its existence suggests that many early Bahá'í women had no qualms about challenging traditional gender norms, and indeed elaborated upon the tenets of their faith in ways which they may have believed would increase their ability to do so. Alternatively, this phenomenon points out that the early Western believers were often more enthusiastic than they were knowledgeable as Bahá'ís.

Whether or not we judge the early Bahá'í women as having resisted oppressive norms, it is clear that their male co-religionists often found them distressingly dominant. Correspondence between two of America's most prominent early Bahá'í men includes the following complaint:

women are emotional, uncertain, unsteady, unwise in business affairs, carried away by 'devotion', given to dreams and imaginations, and I am convinced that as long as the Cause in this land is so largely in the hands of women, it CANNOT PROSPER....As long as the 'feminine element' dominates the movement, it cannot be carried on wisely and well.<sup>138</sup>

To be fair, it must be noted that this passage was written before authoritative Bahá'í scriptures regarding the equality of women and men were generally available; nonetheless, that such a sentiment would be both felt and written (albeit privately) indicates that some Bahá'ís were offended by women's newfound leadership and independence. Such records may, in fact, provide compelling proof that gender norms were being widely challenged within the community, as docile, compliant women would hardly have occasioned such upset.

Further evidence that men were distressed by women's dominance is offered by the August 20, 1910 issue of *Bahá'í News*, which contains the statement that "nine-tenths of the active workers in the Cause in the West are women," as well as a letter complaining that in most Bahá'í localities women performed the bulk of the work, holding Bahá'í meetings in the early afternoons when men were unable to attend.

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<sup>138</sup> Letter from Thornton Chase to Charles Mason Remey, January 19, 1910. National Bahá'í Archives (USA), cited in Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 241.

“Women,” the correspondent alleged, “were simply content to attend meetings, but men needed to do work and very few localities were organized for ‘efficient work’.”<sup>139</sup> Men appear to have been jealous of women’s ability to meet frequently, as many women either worked from home or had flexible schedules. (The incompatibility of evening meetings with childcare, and thus their inconvenience for women charged with that duty, was not noted by male commentators.) Armstrong Ingram has argued that Bahá’í men saw women’s dominance as “a threat to the rational control of the development of the movement”, as rationality was exclusively attributed to men.<sup>140</sup> While Canadian examples of the foregoing are not available, it seems likely that a similar situation existed.

This male angst may be the proverbial ‘smoke’ which points irrefutably toward the existence of a fire; in this case, what was burning was traditional gender norms. Whether early Western Bahá’í women were feminists who embraced the faith to further their own preconceived notions of equality, or were traditionalists whose contravention of gender norms arose solely from religious devotion, it is clear that the early Western Bahá’ís were active in promoting the advancement of women and strove to implement this central Bahá’í teaching in spite of their attendant fears. It could be argued that this community was merely caught in the tide of first-wave feminism then sweeping the West, but the persistence of women’s leadership within the community, and the extent to which women’s services challenged conventional norms, suggest that this was not the case. Equality has always been a central Bahá’í teaching; that it was then in vogue in the West was merely a happy coincidence, which probably both hindered and helped the new Bahá’ís in their struggle to understand and practice their beliefs.

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<sup>139</sup> Bahá’í News, cited in Maneck, “Women In The Baha’i Faith,” p. 221.

<sup>140</sup> Armstrong Ingram, “Recovering a Lost Horizon,” p. 38.

Has the Bahá'í community continued to strive to implement its belief in the equality of women and men? The present project does not allow a thorough response to this question, but a cursory examination suggests that communities around the world have worked toward this goal.

### ***Implementing Equality in Iran***

In Iran, the cradle of the Bahá'í faith, special care has been required in the implementation of equality, as the community continues to be vulnerable to persecution at the hands of fanatic elements within the clergy and government. As explained by Janet and Peter Khan, "Bahá'í actions to emancipate and educate women were liable to be stigmatized as encouraging immorality, and thus to be used by those who opposed the faith as excuses for reinstating repressive measures."<sup>141</sup> The community therefore has had to be careful in its approach to controversial gender roles. In the time of Bahá'ú'lláh, when many Iranian Bahá'ís were being killed, Iranian Bahá'í women were cautioned against pioneering to open new Bahá'í communities. Later, when persecutions eased somewhat, 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged them to arise in this capacity; and in 1954, as the situation became even more secure, Shoghi Effendi encouraged them to "outdo men" as pioneers and to "demonstrate greater courage, audacity, and detachment than their male counterparts," asking that they meet or exceed the achievements of their Western counterparts.<sup>142</sup>

Cautious action, however, is not the same as inaction. The Iranian community's efforts during the first part of this century have been mentioned earlier. Its ongoing educational programs were enriched by the formation of the National Committee for the Progress of Women in 1944 which organized women's activities

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<sup>141</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 207.

<sup>142</sup> Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Ibid*, p. 211, and Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," pp. 19-20.

throughout Iran and established a four-year plan with the specific goal of administrative equality. This committee published a monthly women's magazine and held classes and conventions to promote women's interests. Women had for some time been voting in Iranian Bahá'í elections; in 1954, they became eligible for office. Although only two women were observed among the hundred delegates at an Iranian Bahá'í National Convention in 1970, by the early 1980's, when Bahá'í assemblies were banned and the members of the National Assembly executed, the chairperson of that body was a woman, Zhinous Mahmoudi, a physicist who was the head of Iran's meteorological bureau.<sup>143</sup>

Further evidence that Bahá'í women continued to resist oppressive gender norms comes from Judith Goldstein, an anthropologist who did field work in Iran in the mid-1970s. Maneck, reporting on this study, says:

She found that Bahá'í women, unlike the women of other communities, associated freely with men and participated nearly equally in religious gatherings. The principle of the equality of men and women was a frequent topic of discussion, used to establish the superiority of the Bahá'í teachings. Noting that for Bahá'ís, "eloquence is a cultivated virtue; one might argue that it becomes a substitute for public, communal ritual,"...she goes on to say, "Bahá'í women conduct religious discussions in a manner quite different from the style of more traditional women's conversation. The skillful use of metaphor and command of argument can be seen...The Bahá'í women's active stance is expressed in eloquence."<sup>144</sup>

Thus, the Bahá'í community in Iran, despite the attendant dangers, seems to have persisted in its allegiance to the advancement of women, and Bahá'í women appear to have been thereby empowered to resist oppression.

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<sup>143</sup> Filson, "Their Cry Shall Rise:," p. 5, and Maneck, "Women In The Baha'i Faith," p. 227.

<sup>144</sup> Maneck, "Tahirih," p. 52, citing Judith Goldstein, "Interwoven Identities," p. 206.



## *Implementing Equality Internationally*

In the past one hundred and fifty years, Bahá'í communities have sprung up in 232 countries around the world and have attracted believers from over 2,100 different ethnic and tribal groups.<sup>145</sup> Currently, the majority of Bahá'ís live in so-called Third World countries, with the largest communities in India, East Africa, parts of Southeast Asia, and the Andes. Bahá'ís constitute up to one-quarter of the population of some South Pacific islands.<sup>146</sup>

Many of these communities have developed within cultures which have long histories of severe gender inequality; in response, Bahá'ís at the institutional and individual levels have undertaken projects to improve the status of women. While some of these projects are initiated at the local level, others are developed by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), which has worked independently and in collaboration with UN agencies and other NGOs to promote gender equality since the 1950's. This work has included active participation in the UN's conferences on the status of women in 1975 /Mexico City, 1980/Copenhagen, 1985/Nairobi, and 1995/Beijing.<sup>147</sup> Since 1992, the BIC has continued its efforts through its Office for the Advancement of Women, which has its headquarters in New York and branches around the world, and which is mandated to collaborate with NGOs on projects supporting the advancement of women, as well as advising national Bahá'í assemblies about opportunities for service and collaborative efforts in this area.<sup>148</sup> These Offices are supplemented in Europe by a Task Force for Women which works to train women across the continent as leaders of social change and organizes conferences to that end.<sup>149</sup> In addition, many Bahá'í

<sup>145</sup> Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women, "The Status of Women in The Bahá'í Community," The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs, (Bahá'í International Community, 1995), p. 87.

<sup>146</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá'í Community of Canada, p. 11.

<sup>147</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 242.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p. 247.

communities have committees charged with promoting women's interests at the local and/or national levels.

While an exhaustive accounting would exceed our present purpose, some of the projects undertaken by these various Bahá'í agencies are listed below. In countries where it is a prevalent practice, Bahá'ís have opposed female genital mutilation through "an ongoing program of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information."<sup>150</sup> In rural India, Bahá'í projects offer education in marketable skills, family planning, health and hygiene, literacy, and appropriate technologies, and seek to unite women by breaking down caste barriers; one such project is credited with the elimination of guinea worm from 300 villages as female graduates initiated clean-water programs.<sup>151</sup> Similar projects are run by communities in Africa, Latin America, and Australasia. In Zambia, where 20% of girls go to school, the Bahá'ís provide secondary schooling, using a broad curriculum which emphasizes sciences and agriculture; while in Uganda, women's five-day courses in marketing, bookkeeping, and financial management are offered.<sup>152</sup> Other African projects include teaching women how to plant and prepare soybeans as an affordable protein source.<sup>153</sup>

Bahá'í-sponsored health education projects in Malaysia between 1989 and 1994 supported the eradication of scabies, lice, and worms; improved children's dental care; promoted vitamin supplementation, prenatal care, and breastfeeding; and shared information on child development and safe motherhood, while encouraging women to become change-agents within their communities.<sup>154</sup> Another project, run in Cameroon, Bolivia, Malaysia, Brazil, and Nigeria, taught women action research skills to use in analysing local gender norms and developing appropriate behavior-change

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<sup>150</sup> Bahá'í International Community, "Ending Violence Against Women," The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs, p. 29.

<sup>151</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, pp. 251, 254.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

interventions utilizing traditional media such as music, dance, and drama; the resulting interventions, which focussed on female illiteracy, men's mismanagement of family finances, and women's unfair burden of work, have proven extremely successful in changing gender norms and have led to many community improvements, such as latrines, kitchen gardens, and literacy classes. Although this project has been run by the Bahá'ís, believers make up 1-10% of the affected communities, and people of all faiths are involved.<sup>155</sup>

Numerous conferences and seminars have been sponsored by Bahá'ís throughout the "developed" and "developing" world, with topics including domestic violence, sexual abuse, aboriginal women's concerns, and combining careers with motherhood, in places such as Peru, El Salvador, and Liberia, as well as Barcelona, California, Australia, Edmonton, and the Netherlands.<sup>156</sup> Other activities in the "developed" world include offering consciousness-raising-type groups for teenage girls; a Bahá'í women's internet forum; and a Bahá'í women's scholarly periodical published in Japan.<sup>157</sup> In addition, literacy programs are offered to recent immigrants by communities in America and Australia and to Turkish women by the Bahá'ís of France.<sup>158</sup>

Further Bahá'í sponsored activities to support women's emancipation have taken place in Costa Rica, Dominica, Italy, Nepal, Greece, and many other countries. In a 1994 survey of National Bahá'í Assemblies, over half reported holding specific events focussed on women's issues at least once annually over the past six years; topics addressed at such gatherings included promoting equality, women in leadership, marriage and family life, parenting, and Bahá'í women's history. The survey also found

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, pp. 258-260; and Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," pp. 260-263.

<sup>156</sup> Anonymous, "The Bahá'í Faith in the Eyes of the World," Bahá'í World 1994-1995: An International Record, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1995), pp. 155-156, and Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 264.

<sup>157</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 264.

<sup>158</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 254.

that, due to special encouragement, more women than men participated in the literacy programs offered by 38 national communities.<sup>159</sup>

Such systematic and widespread efforts to promote equality have been mandated by the Universal House of Justice's plans for the development of the international Bahá'í community since the mid-1970's.<sup>160</sup> The House of Justice has also ensured that the community continues to strive for women's equal representation in Bahá'í administration. In 1951 Egyptian Bahá'í women received the right to hold office, as did their Iranian co-religionists in 1954; ever since, Bahá'í women around the world have been encouraged to vote for and serve on all local and national assemblies. As one author notes, such service is far from trivial:

The very act of becoming a Bahá'í is the first major personal decision for most women in rural areas.... Because of their functions in serving on Bahá'í administrative bodies and in voting and being voted for and elected, women have made great strides in a largely male dominated society. An increasing number of local Bahá'í assemblies have women as members and local assemblies with all women members have also been reported.<sup>161</sup>

As this quotation suggests, a significant degree of women's administrative participation has been achieved in Bahá'í communities. Recent statistics (1997) indicate that women make up an average of 37% of Bahá'í National Assemblies, ranging from 17% in Africa to 51% in North America. In 41% of cases, a 1994 study found women serving as National Assembly secretaries, arguably the most powerful national administrative post.<sup>162</sup> While these numbers are far from satisfactory, it should be noted that the global average for women's participation in national secular governments is below 10%.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> Office for the Advancement of Women, "The Status of Women," pp. 84-85.

<sup>160</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, pp. 230-232.

<sup>161</sup> Khan, Advancement of Women, p. 238, citing "Achievements of the Bahá'í Community in Advancing the Status of Women," in Bahá'í World 1994-1995, p. 401.

<sup>162</sup> Office for the Advancement of Women, "The Status of Women," pp. 82-85.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

A recent study of local assemblies around the world indicates an average of 40% female membership, with women serving as secretary on over one-half and as treasurer on one-third of the surveyed assemblies.<sup>164</sup> Women are also well represented among appointed administrators; in 1994, they constituted 47% of Auxiliary Board Members, who work on the regional level, and 50% of their Assistants.<sup>165</sup>

Such projects and statistics suggest that the equality of women and men is indeed gradually being implemented in Bahá'í communities around the world, and that many Bahá'í women abroad have, by virtue of their faith, challenged oppressive gender norms to some degree. Furthermore, it would appear that such efforts have benefitted and are continuing to benefit both Bahá'ís and the wider society, as the subjugation of women is challenged by Bahá'í undertakings both within the community and without. Most of the described efforts have been initiated in "undeveloped" countries; and, considering that women have a much lower rate of representation in Bahá'í administration in such areas, one could conclude that this concentration of effort is warranted. Does this imply, however, that the Bahá'í community is now less active than it once was in promoting the advancement of women in the West? Has this affected Canadian Bahá'í women's experience of gender?

### *Implementing Equality in the Current Canadian Bahá'í Community*

Canadian and American feminist scholars regularly churn out reams of statistics which indicate that the equality of women and men has not yet been achieved in the economic, political, legal, medical, or social spheres. Their vigilance in these efforts is heightened by fears of a growing Western 'feminist backlash' which may threaten gains already secured. In Canada, these fears coalesce in the form of REAL women and similar groups, which, in the view of many feminists, assume the form of the women's

<sup>164</sup> Office for the Advancement of Women, "The Status of Women," pp. 84-85.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. pp. 82-85.

movement while working counter to its aims. In the international sphere, many feminist efforts have been 'hoisted on their own petard', as representatives of other cultures turn the movement's own moral relativism against it in their rejection of projects to improve the status of women as enactments of Western ideological imperialism.

Dissension has also developed within the movement itself, as modes of thought emphasizing difference - intended to create solidarity between women (as opposed to men) - instead create division, as indices of identity other than gender compete for primacy. Contentious feminist positions, such as the general rejection of 'organized religion' as inherently patriarchal, have further marginalized the movement in our predominantly Christian Canadian society. This marginalization has been furthered by widespread angst over perceived economic crises buffeting the Canadian economy; this angst has created governments inclined to cut rather than support 'non-essential' programs, such as those fostering the advancement of women. At the same time, significant progress in the emancipation of women has been achieved, and equality's apparent ideological ascendancy in Canadian society continues unchecked.

Against this complex background, the Canadian community of about 15,000 Bahá'ís is chugging along in its own efforts to implement equality.<sup>166</sup> At the 1998 National Convention, a group of more than 80 believers from across the country gathered for a lunch-hour discussion of the advancement of women in their communities. Their reports of local initiatives included participating in a variety of consciousness-raising type groups, often with other ostensible purposes, such as quilting; offering dinner parties with prominent women speakers; hosting concerts to support women's shelters; working on women's issues with multi-faith groups, like-minded NGOs, academics, and artists; teaching women business skills through a mentoring program; offering women financial planning workshops; convening regular

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<sup>166</sup> van den Hoonard, Bahá'í Community of Canada, p. 2.

gatherings, both large and small, to discuss gender issues; supporting and mentoring groups of female artists; hosting community celebrations of Mother's Day and International Women's Day; hosting retreats for businesswomen and women in shelters; fostering a club for pre-teen girls to celebrate 'coming of age'; and volunteering in Native communities.<sup>167</sup>

Nonetheless, it was my observation that participants in this meeting were dissatisfied by the community's record of gender activism, and were more inclined to emphasize what remains to be done rather than recounting its victories. At the same time, many participants expressed hesitation about collaborating with non-Bahá'í feminist groups, which are perceived as having "extreme" views. They further raised the need for greater involvement by men in Bahá'í efforts to promote the advancement of women, and for greater access to information about Bahá'í women's history.<sup>168</sup>

The Bahá'í administration also appears to be unsatisfied; at the repeated urging of the international administration, local and national governing bodies in Canada continue to encourage the community to redouble its efforts in support of the advancement of women. The March/April 1989 issue of *Bahá'í Canada*, published by the National Assembly, contained the following appeal:

We cannot allow deep-rooted prejudices about women to shape our behaviour; we cannot allow men or women to continue the slighting jokes, innuendoes and attitudes which reflect inequality; we cannot listen to and value the thoughts of men more than women; we cannot continue to allow women to be the sole or frequent providers of food and child care at Bahá'í functions; we cannot continue to give men the more prominent positions at Bahá'í functions; we cannot value our son's education more than our daughters; we cannot downgrade the position of motherhood; we cannot prevent women from achieving professional and scholarly progress. If we continue

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<sup>167</sup> From a letter to all those who attended the Advancement of Women meeting at the Bahá'í National Convention, from Karen Sepers, Coordinator, Advancement of Women, Bahá'í Community of Canada Department of External Affairs, 24 July 1998.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

to do these things we have broken a promise to Bahá'u'lláh - that is, to safeguard, uphold, promote and practice the equality between men and women...<sup>169</sup>

The inclusion of such an appeal suggests both an institutional interest in promoting equality and a community-level lack of profound commitment and action in this regard; after all, if the community were not falling short, it would not invite such a strongly-worded exhortation. The Canadian National Assembly's concern about the community's implementation of equality has persisted despite women's equal representation in local administration and current numerical dominance on the National Assembly.

A recent (1995) study of "the current status of the Bahá'í community in Canada in implementing the Bahá'í teachings on the equality of men and women" suggests that the National Assembly's concerns are not unfounded.<sup>170</sup> In this study, Deborah and Will van den Hoonaard discovered that the community neither has a united vision of equality and its indicators, nor has the ability to define habits which impede the advancement of women.<sup>171</sup> Three different approaches to the issue emerged. The first of these seems "mainly to support the *status quo*....[and] emphasize unity in the family, suggesting that the implementation of equality might threaten that unity"; in the secular context, such views "normally indicate a rejection of equality."<sup>172</sup> Advocates of this approach defend traditional labour divisions as representing gender preference and are more-or-less satisfied by the gender norms currently operant in the wider society.<sup>173</sup> Another approach evident within the Canadian community posits the

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<sup>169</sup> Bahá'í Canada, 11, 1, (March/April 1989): 6-7, citing a letter by the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia to the Bahá'ís of Australia, published in Australian Bahá'í Bulletin, # 367, (August 1988), p. 3.

<sup>170</sup> Deborah and Will. C van den Hoonaard, Exploring Near-To-The-Heart Issues: The Equality of Men and Women in the Canadian Bahá'í Community (A Preliminary Report), (unpublished: 29 January 1998), p. A1.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. A4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. A3-A4.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. A4.



need for limited changes, such as the provision of childcare at Bahá'í events to facilitate women's full participation, or women and men performing tasks traditionally associated with the other gender. Finally, a third approach, advocated by a smaller percentage of the community, asserts the need for fundamental change, including the revaluing of women's traditional work.<sup>174</sup> As Maneck notes, support for this range of interpretations may be derived from selective readings of the Bahá'í scriptures.<sup>175</sup>

The study also observed that (in)equality in the community is virtually always discussed in terms of its manifestation in personal or familial experience, rather than the community or wider society; as such, the van den Hoonards conclude that the community is still "inward looking."<sup>176</sup> Concern about inequality in the domestic sphere was common among believers, as was a troubling tendency to generalize scriptural guidance on women's roles in childrearing.<sup>177</sup>

Despite this focus on the family, some criticism of community practices also emerged, particularly concerning the division of labour, which, according to some believers, assigns "glory work" like public speaking, MCing, and chairing events to men, while women are expected to perform "grunt work" such as cleaning, hospitality, and child care.<sup>178</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, the authors also found that women are perceived as more likely to volunteer time in other organizations, thus establishing a 'female face' for the community in the public sphere.<sup>179</sup> The study further noted "a general paucity of specific activities in the community that promoted the equality of women and men. If there were such events, it was found that the men do not often attend them."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p. A3.

<sup>175</sup> Maneck, "Women in the Bahá'í Faith," pp. 211-212.

<sup>176</sup> van den Hoonard, Exploring Near-To-The-Heart Issues, p. A2.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, p. A3. That is, *all* women are primary educators of *all* children, rather than each solely of their own.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, pp. A6, A8.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, p. A7.

Female participants identified the need for men to step back, not patronize, and to discreetly encourage women; to practice feeling-centered communication, and to be overtly anti-sexist in their marriages and workplaces.<sup>181</sup> Male participants were less able to identify concrete needs, although some suggested that men also required encouragement. Women in general seemed more familiar with pertinent writings, and found it much easier to engage in discussion of equality issues. Nonetheless, many of the women participating in the study praised the Bahá'í community's achievements in the area of equality; they were much more likely to do so than men, who tended to be more critical and also more likely to cite their own personal contributions to the cause.<sup>182</sup>

The believers generally were cautious and ambivalent about collaborating with other organizations in promoting the advancement of women, perhaps because many of them are perceived as excluding men.<sup>183</sup> This reticence is also attributed to the community's fear of accusations of hypocrisy arising from women's exclusion from the House of Justice.<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, some community members, particularly youth, appear hesitant to expose the community's efforts to promote equality to the scrutiny of secular feminists, fearing that the Bahá'í community's apparently good record lacks substance.<sup>185</sup>

Despite these mostly depressing findings, the researchers noted that gender dynamics within participant groups had been universally respectful, that men had tended to neither interrupt nor contradict women's statements, and that it was

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p. A5.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. For instance, the women wanted men to vocally oppose sexist advertising.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. p. A6. This may suggest a touch of defensiveness among Bahá'í men, or women's greater interest in encouragement and not finding fault. On the other hand, it is much 'safer' for a woman to say that women are not being oppressed than it would be for a man to do so.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. p. A8.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid. p. A7.

generally 'safe' for women to make their contributions. The fact that such a study was commissioned by the National Assembly further suggests an abiding dedication to improving the status of women in the community. In general, however, the van den Hoonards' study seems to have found that the Canadian Bahá'í community's response to gender issues is predominantly conservative.

This perception of conservatism is corroborated by several observers in other Western communities. Three common explanations seem to emerge. One school of thought appears to attribute it to inherent flaws in the Bahá'í teachings and/or the community's interpretation thereof; for instance, Maneck cites "cultural barriers, rigidity of certain administrative structures, conceptions of authority, and literalistic interpretations of scripture."<sup>186</sup>

Others point to insufficient effort or resistance to change within the community;

Bahá'ís have been struggling for nearly a century and a half to bring the status of women up to the level of men. In some countries, genuine efforts by men and women to hasten the process of women's emancipation have borne favorable results. In other places, negligible efforts have been made and little progress realized. In a few countries the men cling fanatically to their traditional privileges and actively prevent women from developing their potential, delaying the realization of the ideal of the equality of men and women. Even this conscious resistance, however, shows that the men can no longer simply take their superior status for granted and indicates progress in the cause of womanhood.

There are some Bahá'ís who believe that since Bahá'u'lláh has willed the equality of men and women, it will no doubt be realized some time in the future - probably hundreds of years from now in the Golden Age of the Dispensation when humanity will have come fully of age and will have attained the zenith of its maturity....The question is, however, how long men and women who are attached to the opposite way of life will create delay.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Maneck, "Women in the Bahá'í Faith," p. 227.

<sup>187</sup> Rouhani Ma'ani, "Religion and the Myth of Male Superiority," p. 22.

Proponents of this view usually perceive such resistance and heel-dragging as indicators that the Bahá'í teachings have been insufficiently internalized by community members. Thus, blame is assigned to the community, not the teachings themselves.

On the other hand, some authors argue that the community's apparent conservatism is not problematic, but is rather a natural consequence of the community's gradual approach to activism. As described by Janet and Peter Khan, and discussed in detail in the previous chapter, this approach

is characterized by the implementation of the spiritual principle in an evolutionary manner over a long period of time, sustained by a commitment to fundamental change and nurtured by educational programs designed to assist individuals and communities to gradually bring attitudes and actions into conformity with the spiritual principle...While the approach may not satisfy the impatient, it has the advantage of leading to enduring change.<sup>188</sup>

Defenders of this perspective, unruffled by the evidences of ongoing oppression, insist that the Bahá'í community must provide a non-judgmental and safe environment in which we encourage one another in our efforts to learn how to collectively implement equality.<sup>189</sup> Their confidence is bolstered by the conviction that the Bahá'í administration will neither allow unwarranted deferral and procrastination in the implementation of equality, nor permit acts of flagrant sexism by individual Bahá'ís to continue unchecked.<sup>190</sup> The process of change is bound to be incomplete, they argue, as "the habits of centuries must be changed, and the disruption to traditional practices must be addressed. Through the Bahá'í teachings," they maintain, "both men and women are being assisted to transform the most personal aspects of their domestic lives and the most intimate of their social relationships...Much has been accomplished...but much more remains to be done."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 52.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279-281.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

Regardless of their explanation for the community's conservative tendencies, most commentators grant that there is substantial need for improvement in its implementation of equality. One commonly identified need is for generally accepted indicators of progress. As pointed out by Ann Boyles, arriving at a clear, broad understanding of 'the advancement of women' requires a consideration of the variety of ways in which this process can be understood, particularly given the global reach of the Bahá'í community.<sup>192</sup> Statistical measures are only of limited assistance, as Bahá'í institutions are expected to uphold the principle of equality regardless of their gender composition.<sup>193</sup> Furthermore, numerical parity may convey the appearance of progress, without necessarily entailing any underlying shift in the dominance of masculine values.

In the absence of such clear indicators, as Peggy Caton has noted, "concepts of 'spiritual' or 'essential' equality may be abstractly applied to conditions of the greatest practical inequality without any seeming contradiction to those who do so."<sup>194</sup> She asserts,

The Bahá'í community must go beyond words and rhetoric: we must examine our behavior and attitudes and ask if they truly reflect the equality we so confidently proclaim we have. Too often we have settled for premature answers, for stereotypes of both gender identity and equality. Instead of regarding the subject as closed and settled, our further development requires us to keep an open mind, to regard equality as a process, one that will always call for questioning, probing, and seeking new understandings.<sup>195</sup>

The rigorous self-examination Caton advocates depends upon the adoption of clearly described indicators of progress in the advancement of women. Defining such indicators, would, of course, be a difficult and contentious project, and universally applicable ones may not be appropriate at this point; however, in the absence of such

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, pp. 267-268.

<sup>192</sup> Boyles, "Towards the Goal of Full Partnership," p. 251.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 236.

<sup>194</sup> Caton, "Introduction." Equal Circles, p. xi.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, p. xx.

indicators, significant progress in the community's efforts to promote equality is unlikely to occur. The presence of these indicators in the Bahá'í discourse would further facilitate qualitative assessment of gender equity projects, which currently tend to remain unevaluated, severely limiting the community's ability to learn through experience.

On a related tack, authors in the field have also suggested that the community may need to reconsider its location of inequality. The Bahá'í administration has consistently urged the believers to actively promote the advancement of women, "most especially in those parts of the globe where the rights of women are traditionally and persistently denied."<sup>196</sup> Such statements are usually perceived as assigning priority to Bahá'í gender activism in non-Western countries. They may further be interpreted as implying that such work in the West is not required, despite clear statements to the contrary.<sup>197</sup>

Accordingly, it is not uncommon for Canadian Bahá'ís to assert that equality in the West has already been achieved.<sup>198</sup> Bahá'í authors - who may be more aware of the feminist social critique, and thus offer a more sophisticated gender analysis - are unlikely to espouse this belief, and may take pains to contradict it. For instance, Ann Boyles asserts;

In the "developed" world, the paradigm shift to equality of the sexes may not be as dramatically evident as in other parts of the planet, but the changes, while perhaps more subtle, are crucial to any significant permanent improvement in the status of women. How are husbands and fathers in Bahá'í families actively supporting the advancement of women? How are they addressing the issue of

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<sup>196</sup> Janet A. Khan, "Promoting the Advancement of Women," p. 2.

<sup>197</sup> Such as, "the entire Bahá'í world is committed to encouraging and stimulating the vital role of women in the Bahá'í community as well as in the society at large," (from the Universal House of Justice to All National Spiritual Assemblies, 1975).

<sup>198</sup> The author has personally encountered many Canadian Bahá'ís - interestingly, all men - with this opinion, and has been at public talks where knowledgeable Bahá'í speakers have asserted this view unchallenged.

labor patterns in homes where women are making attempts to “enter the great arena of laws and politics”? Are Bahá’í women encouraged to adopt leadership roles?...an ongoing discussion and promotion of the issue of equality and the encouragement of women is crucial in Bahá’í communities all over the world...<sup>199</sup>

Such assertions may only have a limited impact on the persistence of naive and erroneous beliefs within the community, unless concerned believers undertake systematic programs of consciousness-raising. In this vein, Boyles goes on to say that the Bahá’í community must advance further in its concentrated study and understanding of the materials available on the subject. It must learn to use the sacred writings as the measure of behavior .... development of consultative skills is necessary. ...Finally both women and men must adopt a new understanding of the concept of service....the quality of audacity ... needs to be developed in concert with the humility of servitude - a delicate and challenging balance!<sup>200</sup>

As discussed earlier, such broadly-based and thorough educational projects are uncommon in the Canadian community, and will probably remain so as long as we lack clear indicators of (in)equality and perceive it as a non-Western problem.

Some authors in the field have also noted that Bahá’í women need greater access to education:

Bahá’í women have yet to become fully as well educated as men. In this respect, Bahá’í families, for the most part, do not yet ensure that daughters are at least as well educated as sons. Bahá’í communities must encourage women to become equally capable with men in presenting the Faith publicly, in pursuing Bahá’í scholarship, and in becoming renowned for their deep knowledge of Bahá’í teachings.<sup>201</sup>

This deficit is particularly troubling as priority is clearly and incontrovertibly assigned to the education of girls and women in the Bahá’í scriptures. It may therefore indicate the extent to which the community is shaped by the wider society rather than its faith.

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<sup>199</sup> Boyles, “Towards the Goal of Full Partnership,” pp. 272-273.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Filson, “Their Cry Shall Rise,” p. 12.

Other authors, such as Anne Gordon Atkinson Perry and Susan Stiles Maneck, have highlighted the needs of Bahá'í women seeking to combine their careers or callings with motherhood. Perry notes that many women are chronically fatigued or depressed by the sacrifices such juggling of duties requires in our unsupportive social context,<sup>202</sup> while Maneck asserts that this juggling has placed great stresses on Bahá'í women, who seek excellence both in their careers and as mothers, and are thus prone to "supermom syndrome."<sup>203</sup> This phenomenon is compounded by the community's tendency to adopt troublesome interpretations of the scriptural exaltation of motherhood; as Lata Ta'eed points out, these writings have served as justification for an exaggerated emphasis on women's 'feminine' and maternal attributes.<sup>204</sup> This, in turn, has undermined support for women seeking to develop their 'masculine' attributes in non-maternal endeavors. Furthermore, it has perpetuated the assignment of women to traditionally feminine roles - hospitality, childcare, and "grunt work" - within the community, and prevented men from developing their domestic aptitudes. While the vast majority of Canadian women are similarly confronted by 'double day' or 'triple day' workloads, combining paid employment, childcare, and perhaps eldercare, as well as domestic work, the Bahá'í community has yet to find ways to help women negotiate and discharge these competing obligations.

While several Bahá'í authors thus readily point out the shortcomings of the Western community's efforts to advance women's interests, few offer specific practical remedial suggestions. This author was able to find two. First, a few authors advocate the development of 'role models' for Bahá'í women, drawn from the community's history, which would "exemplify a paradigm that Bahá'í women who are devoted to their families may draw strength from."<sup>205</sup> Doing so effectively would depend upon

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<sup>202</sup> Anne Gordon Atkinson Perry, "Author's Response to Commentary on 'Women In Art', by Roxanne Lalonde," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 5, 1 (March-June 1992): 82.

<sup>203</sup> Maneck, "Women in the Bahá'í Faith," pp. 211-212.

<sup>204</sup> Lata Ta'eed, "Sex, Gender and New Age Stereotyping," *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, 4, 1 (1994): 65-66.



the community's ability to perceive the heroic potential of domestic work. Obviously, Tahirih's story would not be particularly helpful in this capacity.

The other suggestion, brought forward by Trevor Finch, is that Bahá'í thinkers and writers should, "with compassion, courage, and enthusiasm," foster "dialogue with feminists and women's groups and movements." Finch calls this an "urgent priority," and goes on to say:

So much emotion, frustration and energy could be refocussed to constructive ends among the world's women, and so much Bahá'í complacency could be transmuted to an awareness of human need if dialogue were entered into on a wide-ranging and depth-plumbing basis.<sup>206</sup>

As discussed earlier, the Canadian community seems reluctant to do so, for a variety of reasons. Finch acknowledges this reluctance, and even affirms that some of the community's fears are not unfounded:

So much of what Bahá'ís write is not ground-breaking, but distinctly treading in others' footsteps. In many ways we, as Bahá'ís, are far behind in developing our thinking in the realm of equality and gender studies, much less enacting our newly-developed thought processes. Our timid explorations may well seem naïve to the outside world, if not childish...<sup>207</sup>

However, he insists that this collaboration must take place, and that it would increase the efficacy of projects to promote the advancement of women both within the community and without, as the experience and insights of the secular women's movement informs and reinvigorates Bahá'í efforts, and the Bahá'í "spirituality... and non-confrontational lines of action" help heal the rifts among secular feminists.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Trevor Finch, "Unclipping the Wings: A Survey of Secondary Literature in English on Bahá'í Perspectives on Women," *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, 4, 1 (1994): 14.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

## *Conclusion*

In the face of this litany of complaints about the implementation of equality in the Canadian and Western Bahá'í communities, one must consider whether we are witnessing the vigorous self-criticism of a healthy, self-aware, striving community, or the evidences of failure. As many religious scholars have noted, "despite initial reforms in gender roles, religions generally adapt to their social environ, lose their ability to transform society, and come to mirror society at large."<sup>209</sup> While it would be easy to argue that this has not happened in the developing world, the ability of the Bahá'ís to transform or challenge Western social norms certainly appears to have diminished over time. This may be a skewed perception; our current faults may be easier to find than those in our past. On the other hand, perhaps we inflate the significance of certain past events and personages to create a history of gender activism that never was. There is no objective seat from which to fairly judge; certainly the author does not claim one.

Nonetheless, the vision of gender offered by the Bahá'í teachings does appear to have had a significant practical impact upon the constraints faced by female believers early in the faith's history, both in the East and the West, and in communities around the developing world. This impact must be attributed both to the vision of gender enunciated in the Bahá'í scriptures and to the believers' willingness to implement this vision, a willingness informed by the conviction that equality is the will of God, and that efforts to promote it will be assisted by Divine grace. Such conviction may, in fact, provide stronger commitment to the cause of women's advancement than secular motivations.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Gould, cited in Katherine K. Young, "Introduction." *Religion and Women*, p. 33. Original source information not provided.

<sup>210</sup> Khan, *Advancement of Women*, p. 270.

But it is harder to assess the impact of their faith on current Canadian Bahá'í women's ability to resist oppressive social norms. From some perspectives, it may appear that the community is in fact behind the general society in its attitudes toward the advancement of women; this view, however, presumes that the wider society is leading in a direction which the Bahá'ís seek to follow, rather than steadily pursuing a nearby but intersecting course. It may be more prudent, then, if we must judge, to do so against the community's own scriptural vision. Against this measure, in the author's view, the Canadian Bahá'í community appears to be on the right track but perhaps moving too slowly.

## Chapter Four - Test Intervention

Whereas a traditional researcher might now be inclined to end up this thesis with a sorrowful summation that 'activism among Bahá'í women in the West was once remarkable but is now, sadly, on the decline,' or similar dismal musings, with a melancholy satisfaction that their underlying cynical western liberal irreligious worldview has not been challenged by their findings, the feminist researcher (theoretically, at least) ought to be saying, "alright, now, so what do we DO about it?"

### *Feminist Action Research Methods in A Bahá'í Context*

As discussed in chapter one's introduction to feminist scholarship, understanding situations and transforming them are seen as inseparable. Most feminist research could therefore be described as 'action research', which seeks to generate both knowledge and change. This, of course, immediately raises several problems. Figuring out who gets to decide what is going to change, and how, can cause wavering in even the most stiffly principled feminist researcher. Working as an insider, with non-objectified subjects, using alternative sources, in a personalized, committed manner, sounds lovely, but most researchers are hard-pressed to sincerely value their research subjects' goals as much as or more highly than their own. The fact that "research participants bring their own purposes to any study".<sup>1</sup> and that these purposes may be at odds with those of the researcher, is enough to bring the progress of many projects to a shuddering halt. Theoretical loopholes such as the idea of "false consciousness" allow some feminist researchers to place priority on their own visions of what ought to change while at the same time maintaining the semblance of a non-hierarchical, non-exploitive, non-objectifying research dynamic.

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<sup>1</sup> Christman, "Female Friend," p. 78.

And so, as I move from musing about the situation of Canadian Bahá'í women into doing something about it, I must skirt some treacherous ground. Happily, this is facilitated by the fact that this project's research subjects and I are all Bahá'ís. While antithetical to most traditional forms of research, this 'insiderness', with its implied involvement and intimacy, would be considered ideal by many proponents of feminist research. This similarity between the researcher and research subjects itself is not enough to ensure that our goals and visions converge. The relevant (and perhaps only) point of similarity between myself and my subjects is our religious faith. Therefore, in addition to my own and my subjects' perhaps contesting views of what ought to change and how, it is possible - perhaps even unavoidable - to introduce the point of view enunciated by Bahá'í scriptures, which serve as an external authoritative voice valued by all parties. Thus, deciding what to change is a process of jointly seeking to understand and conform oneself to what is believed to be the will of God, rather than a simple contest between individuals. This radically transforms the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched, as 'authority' is posited in neither, but rather in God. As clergy are forbidden in the Bahá'í faith, I as the researcher am unlikely to be conflated with that authority.

This would certainly raise the hackles of most feminist researchers, who, as discussed in chapter one, tend to adopt the ubiquitous secularism of the academy, and would raise fears that our deference to our conception of God is simply another form of female submission to an external patriarchal structure, a pernicious snare of religious false-consciousness keeping us back from the autonomy and independence that might be ours. (The valuing of autonomy and independence as the ultimate good is rarely, if ever, interrogated.) However, the ethic of feminist research requires that the subjects themselves have some control, and that the research serves their best interests. If the research subjects have identified their 'best interests' as seeking conformity with a code

of conduct enunciated by a body of scripture, what right do I or any researcher have to contradict and undermine their faith?

It could be argued that only a co-religionist ought to undertake feminist research among believers, lest a secular researcher unwittingly give rise to crises of faith. Given that many religious people value their convictions more highly than life itself, this could be considered a grievous harm to the research subjects. At the same time, blind dogmatism or fanaticism seems inherently repulsive. Walking the line between promoting open inquiry and undermining faith is a tricky undertaking. Subjects may feel ashamed to voice devotion to a secular researcher, and embarrassed to voice doubts to a co-religionist. In either case, it behooves the researcher to be very careful.

In working with Bahá'í women, however, I am helped out of this corner by several aspects of our belief system. One of the central tenets of the Bahá'í faith is the independent investigation of truth. As stated in the scripture:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart, how it behooveth thee to be. Verily, justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.<sup>2</sup>

Vigorous questioning and interrogation of one's beliefs and choices is an integral part of the ideal Bahá'í life and is quite common in the community. There is, of course, a vital difference between doing so within a context of faith or within a context of skepticism; the scriptures also advise believers to "weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bahá'ú'lláh, Hidden Words. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 4.

Thus, although I would not engage a group of Bahá'í women in a discussion of whether or not a Bahá'í teaching were true, we could happily discuss our various perceptions and understandings of Bahá'í teachings, and analyse our community's efforts to implement them. In fact, Bahá'í gatherings are regularly held in most communities for this express purpose, which, given the lack of clergy, is, along with independent study of the texts, prayer, and reflection, an essential component of Bahá'í life.

As indicated in chapter two, the equality of women and men is clearly enunciated by Bahá'í scriptures and its promotion is endorsed as an essential activity by both the scriptures and current administrative bodies. Thus, further community interventions initiated along these lines are unlikely to occasion any disquiet in the community - indeed, a feminist critique of the community is most likely to be welcomed as a helpful and essential service, despite the trauma it might entail. While resistance to change is likely in some quarters, it is unlikely to receive institutional support.

This clement reception, however, depends very much upon the means employed: contention and conflict are categorically forbidden in Bahá'í scriptures.<sup>4</sup> This runs contrary to the orientation of some feminist interventions, which actively cultivate anger among participants, as a supposed catalyst for change. Feminist projects which accept or support gender segregation (as with lesbian separatists) or which engage in 'male-bashing' would be totally inappropriate in a Bahá'í context. This point is asserted in guidance issued by the Bahá'í supreme governing body in 1994:

Those Bahá'ís who devote themselves to the promotion of the equality of the sexes, through speeches and articles, should be aware that such a process will be facilitated if it is carried out without disruption to the unity of the believers, in order that spiritual blessings are attracted to the community and its

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<sup>3</sup> Bahá'ú'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

endeavors reinforced. To maintain this unity, Bahá'í men and women must work together cooperatively, in striking contrast to the adversarial and denunciatory attitudes which distinguish so much of the movement for equality of the sexes in the larger society.<sup>5</sup>

One should not infer from the foregoing that the Bahá'ís would sacrifice equality for the sake of unity; in fact, the scriptures clearly note that true unity without justice is impossible.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the Bahá'í position appears to argue that consultative, non-adversarial methods are simply more productive. Feminist interventions must respect this preference if they are to be effective in this community.

A final aspect of the Bahá'í belief system pertinent to the design of community intervention methodology concerns individual behavioral and attitudinal change. Any process which seeks to alter human behavior is premised on assumptions (usually unstated and unexamined) about the nature of human beings. The Bahá'í world view proposes that every human is "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value."<sup>7</sup> These 'gems' are the latent human capacity to emulate the virtues of God. The development and manifestation of this latent capacity is as close as one can come to 'knowing' God, and, along with contributing to the development of society, constitutes the purpose of life. Any project which is seen as furthering these objectives is therefore likely to attract highly motivated participants.

Fostering the expression of these virtues in ourselves is an individual responsibility, and is pursued (with varying degrees of diligence) through prayer, meditation, service, education, and striving to live in accordance with the Bahá'í teachings, all of which requires persistent effort to change behaviors and attitudes.

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<sup>5</sup> The Universal House of Justice, in a letter to a National Assembly, dated 5 June 1994. Cited in a letter from the International Teaching Centre to all Counsellors, 5 February 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Bahá'í International Community Office of Public Information. The Prosperity of Humankind, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Bahá'ú'lláh. Tablets of Bahá'ú'lláh, p. 162.



This effort is informed by the scriptural advice that “the attainment of any object is conditioned on knowledge, volition, and action.”<sup>8</sup> This behavior change methodology appears identical to the “Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills Model” developed by William Fisher, originally in support of an AIDS/HIV risk reduction program, but applicable to any project seeking behavioral change. The central supposition of this model is that behavioral change can be stimulated by “interventions that are conceptually based, comprehensively focussed on the provision of... information, motivation, and behavioral skills, and targeted at empirically identified, group-specific needs in each of these areas.”<sup>9</sup>

The behavioral and attitudinal changes required for the realization of gender equality are, thus, likely to be framed by Bahá'ís in terms of what virtues must be developed (by whom), and, to that end, what must be known, what must be wanted, and what must be done. Feminist action researchers working in the Bahá'í community would be well advised to consider this view of behavioral change in designing their project methodologies.

In summary, feminist researchers are, of course, free to practise whatever methods they choose in their efforts to produce change as well as papers. However, projects undertaken in a Bahá'í context are more likely to succeed if:

- 1) God's will, as articulated in Bahá'í scriptures, is taken as the arbiter of what changes ought to be made, taking precedence over both the researcher's and the research subjects' views.
- 2) Interrogation of scriptures and community practices takes place within a faith-positive context.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> William A. Fisher, “Understanding and Promoting AIDS Preventative Behavior: A Conceptual Model and Educational Tools.” The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, 1, 3, (Fall 1992): 100.

- 3) Unity and gender collaboration are supported by the project design.
- 4) Behavioral change is framed as a process of fostering the expression of virtues through specific knowledge, volition, and actions.

### *Feminist Methodology Models Used In This Project*

Within these parameters, I have proceeded to attempt to 'do something' to encourage Bahá'í women to become more active promoters of the advancement of women. In so doing, I run no risk of imposing my own agenda on the research subjects, as by their profession of faith they have - wittingly or not - adopted this objective as their own.<sup>10</sup>

While it is undeniably convenient to thus allow a 'higher authority' to set an uncontested objective, one must still decide how to approach this objective. To that end, I have called upon the practical (though less authoritative) methodological guidance of several feminist action research theorists. Among the plethora of approaches they suggest, two seemed particularly appropriate for my purposes.

### *Radical Storytelling*

The first particularly inspiring bit of the discourse concerns reclaiming women's history through storytelling. A variety of feminist scholars - many of them working in religious studies - have converged upon this theme. As articulated by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, this approach rests on the premise that "all the

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<sup>10</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Canadian Bahá'ís may have widely divergent views of what constitutes 'promoting the advancement of women'. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of this objective, however it is defined, is rarely if ever contested, as its clear scriptural mandate is generally known in the community.

institutions of our culture tell us - through words, deeds, and even worse silence - that we are insignificant. But our heritage is our power."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the "search for roots, for solidarity with our forefathers, and finally for the memory of their suffering, struggles, and powers as women"<sup>12</sup> is framed as an essential prerequisite to the promotion of gender equality:

In order to develop as persons who can manifest egalitarian values, women must search for their "stolen identity", for past sources of strength and identity on which to build.<sup>13</sup>

This process requires alternative sources and/or alternative readings of androcentric histories, as practitioners are urged "to notice the footprints and the shadows and the remnants that provide glimpses into stories that have not been showcased in the texts that have been preserved".<sup>14</sup>

In addition to finding these stories, however, advocates of this view argue that the stories must be told. Judith Plaskow, in her feminist study of Judaism, asserts that Information about the past may be instructive and even stirring, but it is not transformative until it becomes part of a community's collective memory, part of what Jews call to mind in remembering Jewish history.... Feminist historiography can open up new questions to be brought to the past and new perspectives to be gleaned from it. It must be combined, however, with feminist midrash, or storytelling, and feminist liturgy<sup>15</sup> before it becomes part of a living feminist Judaism.<sup>16</sup>

Storytelling, then, both orally and in print, becomes a tool for connecting women's history with their present experience, and a remedy for the dissonance between "the holes in the text and many women's felt experience."<sup>17</sup> It also presumably relieves

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<sup>11</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women's Heritage," p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Kimball, "Motherhood to Sisterhood," p. 264.

<sup>14</sup> O'Conner, "Feminist Research in Religion," p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> As there is no liturgy in the Bahá'í context, this recommendation seems non-transferrable.

<sup>16</sup> Plaskow, "Jewish Memory," p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

the “psychic damage” done to “the sexual identity of those who never find the experience of their own sex reflected in the text or tradition, and who must always appropriate texts and traditions mediated through the experiences of those of the opposite sex.”<sup>18</sup> Feminist storytelling provides an affirmation that the religious community “is a community of women and men, and it has never been otherwise”,<sup>19</sup> an affirmation which in turn empowers women to “challenge existing religious authorities and structures by demanding full participation as well as public recognition of the many-sided and varied work already done by women in religious institutions.”<sup>20</sup>

While Bahá'í women are not, in my view, confronted by inherently patriarchal administrative structures, the believers who enact Bahá'í administrative principles naturally carry with them the baggage of a sexist society. Thus, as discussed in chapter three, there are things going on in the Bahá'í community which could benefit from the type of challenges and demands which such storytelling is supposed to inspire. Furthermore, as my background is in theatre and playwrighting, and I have used historic storytelling with some success in past workshops, this method seemed particularly suited to my skills and preferences. While the study of Bahá'í history is encouraged among the believers, and storytelling occasionally occurs in Canadian Bahá'í gatherings, storytelling from a feminist perspective - which I have called 'radical storytelling', in recognition of its change-orientation - has never been systematically introduced as a catalyst for behavioral and attitudinal change in the Canadian Bahá'í community. I decided to make it a central component of my community intervention.

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<sup>18</sup> Christ, “Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature,” p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Plaskow, “Jewish Memory,” p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> King, Women and Spirituality, p. 41.

### *Gathering the Stories*

I have been able to find only one article about Bahá'í women's experience in the academic press, written by Susan Stiles Maneck, and published in Religion and Women, edited by Arvind Sharma. While this article is undeniably helpful, I object to some of the author's assumptions and resultant analyses, and its examination of Bahá'í women's history is far from exhaustive.

One is therefore compelled to rely for the most part on Bahá'í histories from non-academic sources. And, while several such histories exist, they are primarily androcentric texts, particularly those addressing early Bahá'í history in the Middle East. The absence of Bahá'í women in the records of this period (with a few notable exceptions) is so marked that it has led at least one historian, Peter Smith, to conclude that the faith was originally a male preserve and that generally women learned of the faith from their menfolk. Although women's prominence increased over time, he argues that men were the primary carriers of religion, while women ensured the religious socialization of children.<sup>21</sup> This uncritical reading of the texts denies the existence of women's "own networks, self-sustaining and self-led, within which religious ideas could be disseminated and promulgated, apart from the observation of men,"<sup>22</sup> networks which remained invisible to men and for the most part unrecorded in historical texts, but which nonetheless must have significantly shaped the course of Bahá'í history.

Every early Eastern Bahá'í historian was, to my knowledge, male. Given that they wrote in a society in which the mere mention of a woman's name was an insult to

<sup>21</sup> Peter Smith, The Babi and Bahá'í Religions. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 92-93.

<sup>22</sup> Maneck, "Women in the Bahá'í Faith," p. 218.

her chastity, the fact that women are discussed at all in their texts is itself remarkable. Women's appearances were usually warranted by extraordinary acts of courage or boldness in the promulgation or defense of their faith, or by their relationship to and service alongside prominent men. Women who did not contravene gender norms almost never appear in print, and those who did are praised for doing so. However, this does not necessarily indicate a nascent feminist consciousness among Eastern early Bahá'í historians. On the contrary, Canadian Bahá'í historian Will C. van den Hoonard has argued that, as early Eastern believers tended to view the Bahá'í principles as a *fait accompli* by their very enunciation rather than as an articulation of a state to be achieved through ongoing conscious effort, historians were exceedingly unlikely to conceptualize the violation of gender norms by Bahá'í women as part of a general struggle for emancipation.

More modern works in Bahá'í history strive to represent the role of women more accurately. Two Bahá'í professors, Robert Stockman and Will van den Hoonard, who have recently published histories of the Bahá'í faith in America and Canada respectively, have also published papers investigating the significance of gender in early Western Bahá'í history, and strive to provide some gender analysis in their texts. However, the tendency to valorize individual heroic women while ignoring their social contexts regrettably continues in most of the recent work in Bahá'í history. Even when ostensibly focussing on women's history, Bahá'í authors tend to recount the astonishing exploits of heroic and peculiar individuals, disassociated from their social or even familial contexts, and without reference to the surrounding changes and tensions in gender roles, even when their subjects were direct participants in political women's movements. Perhaps because of androcentric squeamishness about the private sphere, or in a misplaced desire to respect the privacy of their subjects, most texts dwell only on their subjects' stalwart Bahá'í services and triumphs in the face of adversity.

While finding fault with anyone, particularly dead revered historical figures, would be extremely inappropriate in a Bahá'í context, the authors' histories run the risk of presenting an assembly of de-humanized two-dimensional caricatures of women. In my view, such treatments are unlikely to inspire anything except perhaps feelings of inadequacy in the current Bahá'í female reader. In order for us to be able to identify with our fore Sisters, and draw inspiration from them, they must not be "othered" by the text. This may require a more nuanced treatment, in which their familial contexts, their relationships, their physicality, and their less-laudable emotions and reactions are acknowledged as well as their sterling qualities and achievements. In fact, it could be argued that the story of their struggles is meaningless unless one also sees what they struggled against.

The issue of "authenticity" in Bahá'í history is complicated by the fact that the central figures of the faith also wrote histories, and that their versions of "what happened" are generally taken as true. However, these same central figures themselves pointed out that their texts were far from complete. Nonetheless, Bahá'í historians are unlikely to write supplementary histories which in any way cast doubt on the story as told by the central figures of the faith. Any text which did so would certainly not be well received by the community. I wonder if perhaps historians, anxious about their treatment of these quasi-scriptural sources, might not have steered too wide a berth around them. The community might in fact be much better served if historians would set about offering a lush profusion of histories, from a range of subjective angles, padding and intersecting with the "official" history, worrying less about citations and facts and not contradicting authoritative texts, and more about texture and depth and increasing the range of perspectives which are represented.

These problems led me inevitably toward alternative sources. There are some female-authored secondary historical sources, mostly articles, many of which are quite similar to the sources discussed above. A few really interesting feminist voices have emerged, most notably the work of Bahíyyih Nakhjavani. Unfortunately few of these voices are well-known or influential in the community, and examples of their work are hard to find.

This leaves us with primary sources. The aforementioned problems in the secondary material reflect to some extent the limitations of the available primary sources. The case of early Western Bahá'í women may be typical: even though they made up two-thirds to three-quarters of the Bahá'í community in the West and frequently organized their own events, their organizations have left scant archival records. Few examples of their correspondence, account books, minutes, or letterhead exist; what is available is often scrawled on the back of lists and letters, suggesting that women's organizations were accustomed to a level of informality which did not lend itself to painstaking records-keeping.<sup>23</sup> It is also possible that any existing records were not recognized as important and simply were not kept.

Given the trend in the earlier part of this century for women to carry on long and intimate correspondences and to keep diaries, one could hope that these sources would be available; unfortunately, few have come to light. This may be due to reticence on the part of the women, as there are accounts of them destroying their own diaries and correspondence, presumably because their contents were deemed unseemly, or, as some of the women themselves explained, "were best forgotten." As Sara Mills points out in Discourses of Difference, late-Victorian women writing about

<sup>23</sup> Stockman, "Women in the American Bahá'í Community, 1900-1912," World Order, 18, 4, (Summer 1984), p. 17.



their own lives faced overwhelming discursive tensions as they attempted to make their mark in the public sphere without being seen to depart from their respectable roles in the private sphere. The difficulty inherent in negotiating these discursive tensions has greatly reduced the quantity and quality of material available to researchers. Many of the personal papers which did not end up in the coal grate are still in the hands of the women's relatives and, for whatever reason, have not been made available to scholars,<sup>24</sup> while those existing in archives are dispersed over several continents and are difficult to access.

More problems emerge in the treatment of the available diaries, letters, travel journals, and first-hand accounts by women. Occasionally, they will be published as-is, with a brief introduction providing a few biographical details about the authors. These publications, however, seem to be taken as touching memoirs rather than sources of historical facts. Bahá'í historians, who generally do not locate their own subjectivity, appear much more likely to authenticate their accounts of what "really happened" by references to other men's unadmittedly subjective accounts, rather than drawing upon these alternative primary sources. At times, it seems that women's accounts of events experienced first-hand are perceived as less authoritative than men's second-hand accounts. Newsletters, bulletins, and other official reports from the time thus tend to provide the richest field in which to dig around for stories; however, although most of them would have seemed fair at the time of writing, they now appear marred by obvious androcentric biases.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, assembling stories is for me a process of chasing shadows and mapping footprints. Jewish and Christian feminist historians, trying to piece together their foresters' stories from a history far more distant, have suggested a process of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this point, see page 80.

'remembering and inventing together'; but I find that I balk at the idea of inventing, and, given that my stories are only about one hundred years dead, rather than thousands, reviving them without recourse to my own creativity may be more possible.

And yet it is not an easy task. Aside from the technical problems discussed above, the process of sifting through texts for glimpses into an unknown fabric of lives is emotionally difficult, particularly when seeking the stories of early Persian Bahá'í women. The few details that endure are often bloated with sadness. One gets edgy on a diet of so much deprivation: what I am denied by the texts; what the women whose stories I seek were denied. There is a constant fear of imposing too much of my own interpretation onto these women, who seem enigmatic to me, but probably saw themselves as quite straightforward. The Persian women I know seem as far from this past as I am, but I wonder if they might not have clearer insights into how they felt, in the same way as the flavour of my great-grandmothers' and aunties' prejudices and perceptions and passions is familiar to me. So often I see the women whose stories I seek only as posed in a moment of valour, but I am repulsed by the idea of compiling these static monuments into a sort of Disney-tour of prominent Bahá'í women. Yes, they were noble and upstanding in their sacrifices, but I yearn for them to be familiar.

At one point it occurred to me that assembling these stories was like walking down a street at night, looking in windows at a variety of scenes; but on this street 98% of the curtains are drawn, and I can see into only a few windows. Those few do not occur at random, but because what was going on inside served the vision of a historian and a culture, represented what they wanted me to see and believe about the people on this street. What I can observe in one window, however dimly, may be nothing at all like what is going on in the dark next door.

Eventually, despite all the attendant difficulties, I compiled the content for stories which I thought might be suitably inspirational and empowering. They are, inevitably, biased and partial. The second bit of methodological guidance I have taken from feminist action researchers concerned how to deliver these stories to their intended recipients.

### *Consciousness-Raising*

I have developed some strong opinions, over the course of my experience as a workshop facilitator, about effective strategies for sharing information with groups, and among these opinions is the view that one's methods matter a lot more than one's content. For this project, I wanted to ground my methods in something a bit more defensible than 'it just felt right'. I was therefore quite happy to discover that what tends to 'feel right' to me overlaps significantly with the method feminist scholars describe as consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising, which originated in post civil-war American women's educational study groups,<sup>26</sup> now refers to "meetings by small groups of women over an extended period of time for the purpose of discussing personal experiences without professional leadership. In these meetings, women attempt to articulate a political analysis that will facilitate change."<sup>27</sup> Consciousness-raising has been described as "a unique feminist method" because it enables women to discuss and understand their experiences from their own viewpoints,<sup>28</sup> and to "make sense of the world in ways which do not support male supremacy and which therefore promote *our* self-esteem and personal growth."<sup>29</sup> Marilyn and James Massey have identified it as an ideal site

<sup>26</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, p. 220.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>29</sup> Dale Spender, "Learning to Create Our Own Knowledge," *Convergence*, 13, 1-2, (1980), p. 17.

for the feminist religious experience, which they (somewhat narrowly) define as “getting in touch with the body and with deeply buried feelings and emotions.”<sup>30</sup>

While consciousness-raising has been commonly used by the women’s movement as a liberation strategy, it is less often implemented by feminist researchers in their community interventions,<sup>31</sup> perhaps because it requires a significant time commitment. Nonetheless, a modified consciousness-raising methodology appeared right for my project. Elements of the model which I particularly wanted to incorporate into my work include its emphasis on exploring and regaining the lost self, both directly and through accessing our history; its aim of promoting self esteem and personal growth; its fostering of open discussion and sharing among women; its inclusion and honoring of the body and emotion; and its focus on articulating analyses which promote change.

### *Intervention Methodology*

And so, finally, we come to the planning of our community intervention, in which we shall see if radical storytelling with a modified consciousness-raising group of Canadian Bahá’í women increases their level of activism in the promotion of the advancement of women.

My first task was to decide how to assemble a group. As I have been unable to determine how most consciousness-raising groups recruit their members, and how the duration of the group’s existence is decided, I am unsure how far from the original model I have strayed in these respects. I decided to target Bahá’í women in Ottawa, as a medium-large, ethnically mixed, readily accessible community, not unlike dozens of

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<sup>30</sup> Massey and Massey, “Feminists on Christianity,” p. 283.

<sup>31</sup> Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research*, p. 103.

Bahá'í communities across Canada. Left to my own devices, I devised a recruitment strategy which combined a general invitation for women to apply to participate, published in the local Bahá'í newsletter, with personal invitations to apply sent out to a randomly-chosen fifth of the Bahá'í women in Ottawa (which came out to 25 invitations.) On the invitations, I emphasized that all were welcome to apply, but that space was limited, and a group of participants most representative of the community's diversity would be chosen from the pool of applicants. As "consciousness-raising group meetings" would sound unfamiliar and perhaps intimidating to many Canadian Bahá'í women, the project was billed as a series of workshops. Copies of recruitment materials are attached in appendix one.

I also took it upon myself to arbitrarily set the duration of the required commitment to five weekly meetings. Bahá'ís tend to be very busy people, and I felt that I would be unlikely to find many women willing to take on an open-ended time commitment. Furthermore, I myself was unwilling to do so, and felt that the demands of my project did not warrant it.

As I was the researcher, and I was convening the groups, and I was offering stories, it behooved me to clarify the extent of my leadership in the group. Without treading too heavily on the toes of the feminist power-sharing ethic, I decided to clearly assume the role of a facilitator. In addition, I called upon the services of a co-facilitator to assist me in leading some exercises, independently lead others, and at other times participate equally with the members of the consciousness-raising group. This co-facilitator, Faye Dupras, with whom I have worked extensively in the past, would, I hoped, diffuse the focus on a single leader and bridge the gap between 'the leader' and 'the led', as well as collaborating with me in planning exercises and activities for the group.

While recovering the lost self, through the consciousness-raising discussion, nicely complements the process of recovering our lost stories,<sup>32</sup> a story alone does not a transformative group process make. Adding storytelling to the sharing of personal views and experiences usually characteristic of consciousness-raising groups could leaven the discussion, broadening its base to help maintain a constructive focus on affirmation and change, but we still had to decide how to use and present the stories in order to maximize their effectiveness, and what other activities and exercises to combine them with.

Hashing out the procedural details of what would be provided in each of the five workshops was an extremely laborious process which took several months. In addition to the aspects of consciousness-raising groups which I wished to retain, and my focus on storytelling, I wanted to ensure that the group process would appeal to all learning styles. My co-facilitator and I therefore painstakingly drafted workshop outlines which drew upon a wide range of facilitation and instruction strategies. These outlines, and the materials which supported the workshops, are all appended.

One of my early decisions was that participants were to receive workbooks. This enabled us to provide a lot of content - pertinent scriptural extracts, poetry, articles by feminist Bahá'í scholars, and excerpts from primary sources containing "seed stories" (the raw materials for story-building) - without compressing everything into the two or three hours per week of our group's meetings. Each week would have its bundle of 'homework' readings, which supported and supplemented the workshop's content, and which were accompanied by a sheet of questions designed to stimulate a deeper analysis of the homework material. The workbooks also contained a compilation of Bahá'í prayers using feminine language and/or images for the

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<sup>32</sup> Kimball, "Motherhood to Sisterhood," p. 265.

participants to use at the opening and closing of the meetings, and to be available for use in their private worship.

The provision of primary-source “seed stories” in the workbooks was part of a two-pronged approach to storytelling. At each workshop, participants would both have a story told to them and receive the seeds of a story on paper, still buried in its source materials. In each case, the subject of the former would be an Eastern Bahá’í woman, and the latter, Western. My hope was thereby to demystify the story-building process, to suggest that many stories remain hidden in the texts, and to encourage participants to see themselves as potential story-builders.

I divided Eastern and Western stories thus for two reasons. First, if a participant’s curiosity is piqued by the “seed stories”, they are far more likely to be able to find further information on the subjects if they have been drawn from our Western and more recent history. My second reason for this approach was that it seemed to reflect the nature of our relationship to our predecessors: as we move closer temporally and geographically to ourselves, our understanding of characters and events necessarily becomes more fragmented, complex, and conflicted. Thus, the clippings and columns of the Western seed stories provide an informational and experiential bridge between the smooth, polished narratives of our more distant Eastern foresters in their stories as told, and the jagged discontinuities we experience in our own lives.

Another early major decision concerned how I was going to present my tellings of the stories, and which stories I would tell. For the first workshop, I needed a story broad enough to introduce a range of women’s issues and themes, accessible enough to work with an audience which at that point might still be somewhat reserved and

passive, and controversial enough to engage their interest. No one story seemed big enough. Instead, being a playwright, I wrote a one-act play, which my co-facilitator and I would present as a staged reading at the first workshop. The play introduces participants to two Bahá'í women from 1910, and allows them to eavesdrop as they sit on the front porch of their cabin at the first Bahá'í school in North America, going over a copy of the first issue of the first Bahá'í newsletter published in the West. My composite characters are able to voice a range of views (some of which I myself perhaps would not advocate) on a wide array of issues, accessibly condensing a huge amount of information about the position of women in the early Eastern and Western Bahá'í communities into a half an hour of often humorous dialogue. Their at times provocative gender analysis touches on many historic events, personalities, and places; as many of these references may be unfamiliar to participants, glossaries were provided for their perusal prior to the play's presentation. The play was to be followed by open discussion of the thoughts and feelings it had stimulated. This, along with the initial welcomes and introductory exercises, would take up the entire first session.

In the second workshop, I wanted to explore ideas of masculinity and femininity. To support this objective, I decided to tell the story of a generally unknown woman named Sakinih Sultan. Early in her life, Sakinih was married to a man who, along with six of his co-religionists, was killed for his beliefs in a particularly gruesome manner; because of this connection, her grandson wrote a fairly detailed account of her life. Her story may be as close as the sources get to an account of the life of a fairly ordinary early Bahá'í woman. After the telling, participants were to brainstorm characteristics of Sakinih Sultan. This would lead into brainstorming and discussion of masculinity and femininity, as manifested in the story, after which participants would be asked to explore their own understandings of the masculine and



the feminine, individually and in pairs, and to consider how they are manifested in their own characters.

This exploration would then be carried into an art activity. A wide array of art supplies - papers, paints, glues, fabrics, colored glass, metals, wood, brushes, pens, pencils, etc - would be laid out prior to the workshop, and each participant given a comfortable work station. For the remainder of the workshop, participants would be free to work/play with the art supplies. Their official mandate would be to create something which represented their relationship to the masculine and feminine within themselves; however, they'd be free to do whatever they liked.

The theme for the third workshop was unveiling, and the obvious choice for a story was Tahirih, whose literal unveiling was one of the pivotal moments in the development of our community. She was an ardent champion of the rights of women, and utterly unconventional. Her story would provide a perfect stimulus for the group's exploration of the role of veils and veiling in our own experience. The story, however, would require careful treatment. Most participants would already be familiar with standard presentations and interpretations of Tahirih's life, interpretations which lionized Tahirih but left the hearers static, gazing up. Through a subversive re-telling of the story, I hoped to point out the gaps in our knowledge of this supposedly-known foresister, to highlight neglected questions and parts of her story, and to bring her closer to the participants, so that they might feel both reverence and affinity.

To accomplish this, I planned to combine a careful scripting of her story with participatory theatre. By veiling participants, limiting their right to speak, altering their seating, and using mirrors, participants were to be kinesthetically drawn into the storytelling. After the telling, participants would be given a series of quick free-writing

triggers exploring their relationships with veils, both literal and metaphoric. This would be followed by a ritualized unveiling, after which we would be free to speak and discuss our experiences. The final element of the workshop would involve each participant, without feedback, sharing their art piece from the previous session with the group.

The fourth workshop would focus on boldness, submission, and powerlessness. I decided to tell the story of Shams i Duha, one of the many women who appear on the periphery of Tahirih's story. Although she achieved a certain degree of fame, her story is still widely unknown. She thus stands somewhere between Sakinih Sultan and Tahirih in terms of familiarity. Her story combines instances of both "ordinariness" and exceptionality, allowing us to question the othering of heroic figures. Furthermore, her status as Tahirih's friend provides an opportunity to challenge atomized interpretations of history, and to present an alternative telling which highlights the network of relationships through which many early Bahá'í women supported and sustained one another's activism.

The telling would be followed by small group work and whole group brainstorming which interrogated concepts of boldness, submission, and powerlessness, with a focus on how they appeared in Shams i Duha's actions. Subsequently, participants would be offered a participatory theatre exercise, in which they kinesthetically experience transformations from powerlessness to submission and from powerlessness to boldness. The workshop would end with a guided visualization which furthered their reflection on the workshop's themes. (Both the participatory theatre exercise and the visualization are described in detail in the workshop outline contained in appendix two.)

At the fifth and final workshop, after a great deal of deliberation, I decided not to tell a story at all; at this point, the participants' own stories had to become central, if they were to consider what changes and actions they personally could undertake to promote the advancement of women. We had to be grounded in the here and now, but at the same time, not limited by it; all too often, what is meant to be an empowering and supportive sharing of experiences and feelings turns into a mutually depressing commiseration which inflates our feelings of grievance and powerlessness without reinforcing the positive aspects of our lives. While sharing one's pain has a legitimate place, it can easily stray into confession and back-biting or gossip, all of which run counter to Bahá'í principles, and the design and limited duration of this project did not allow for a sustained support-group situation in which such a process may be more adequately handled. I decided that it would be more productive to promote discussion which turned our attention to fertile ground in which growth might be fostered.

To that end, I planned to ask participants to discuss and contribute to the listing and mapping of activities promoting the advancement of women on the global and local scales, both within and outside of the Bahá'í community. As a corollary, they would individually write down what was promoting their own advancement on a 'self-map', and share one of those items with the group.

Subsequently, the group would create a joint-poem describing their vision of an equal world (described in detail in the attached workshop outline.) Comparison between the objectives thus compiled, and the actions listed and mapped in the previous exercise, would, I hoped, reveal which of our objectives have been neglected by the activity already ongoing. This information would feed into a brainstorm of further activities which might be undertaken to promote the advancement of women. Each participant would then choose one item from this brainstorm to add to their 'self-

maps' as a new undertaking, a 'gift to themselves.' I would then collect the self maps, which, along with a transcription of their joint-poem, a copy of their brainstorm of activities which could promote the advancement of women, their listing of what in themselves they keep veiled, a certificate of participation, and a post-intervention evaluation form, would be mailed out to them about two months later.

The workshop would end with discussion, celebration (by way of food), introduction to an annotated bibliography of sources used in preparing the project, and the filling out of evaluations.

## *Results*

This section will summarize what actually happened, and assess whether or not all these laboriously crafted methods actually worked.

### *What Happened*

My first job was to find a group. With the assistance of a community membership list, provided by the Ottawa Local Spiritual Assembly, invitations to apply were mailed out to a random sample (every fifth woman on the list) and the workshop series was advertised in the local newsletter. Within a few days, I received about fifteen calls from interested women. Ultimately, eleven of them applied for the workshops. As I had space for them all, and as they represented a good cross-section of the community, all of them were accepted.

Ten of the twelve had received invitations by mail, and the other two applicants came from an outlying community and had heard about the workshops 'through the

grapevine'. Thus, the newsletter posting was quite ineffective - probably more so because the ad gave a wrong phone number. Quite a few women called or approached me at Bahá'í events to express their interest but inability to attend; many of them said they would want to attend a subsequent run of the series. Perhaps greater response would have been achieved if the workshops were offered in the fall or winter, when most people are at home. Another factor cooling the community's response may have been that several multi-week 'training programs' had recently been offered in Ottawa as part of a new national Bahá'í strategy for promoting community education; the local Bahá'ís may have had their fill of workshops for the time being, or may already have fully committed their time to such programs.

There is anecdotal evidence that some women in the community felt that they "weren't qualified" to participate in the workshops. Although the wording of the advertising, which asked them to "apply" to attend, specified that all were encouraged to apply and that the application process was only being used to ensure the diversity of the group, the idea of applying seems to have intimidated some women, leading them to believe that participants ought to have some special knowledge or experience. Their own fear of rejection prevented them from applying. This is particularly regrettable, as such women may well have benefitted the most from the workshops.

While I would have loved to know other women's reasons for not attending, I could not think of a way of soliciting this information without running the risk of making them feel embarrassed. As deepening one's knowledge of Bahá'í teachings and ability to implement them carries such an emphasis in the community, many women who chose not to attend may have felt guilty about it, and I did not want to add to their burden by asking for an explanation.

In the end, eight women showed up at the first workshop. They ranged in age from 28 to 60, with an average age of 40. Four were married, one separated, one divorced, and two single. Two were of Persian descent, one Polish, one African-American, and four 'WASP'. While five of them had been Bahá'ís for twenty years or more, one of them had been Bahá'í for three years, one for a year, and one for four months. Half of the group said that they were moderately active in the community, while two members said they were slightly more so, and two said slightly less. When asked if they would call themselves feminist, five said yes, two said maybe, and one said no, with the comment that it would "depend on the definition of 'feminist'". Several of the women were quick to add that they were not "radical feminists."

Seven of these eight women returned for the remaining four weekly workshops. Although I initially had planned for a group of a dozen or more, ultimately the small group size lent itself to the creation of greater intimacy and allowed individuals more space to participate in discussions. Any fewer, though, would have been difficult to work with. Most of the participants did not know each other well prior to the workshops, although two of them had a history of prior social contact with me.

Space for the group meetings had been arranged at the Ottawa Bahá'í Information Centre, in downtown Ottawa. Participants preferred this location, perhaps because it is easily accessible by bus. It also had the advantage of being a fairly neutral space, and providing lots of room for our theatre and art exercises. However, the space was far from ideal. Most problematic was the lack of privacy; twice, other meetings were being held at the same time at the other end of the large open area, and on several occasions, loud conversations between info centre staff and drop-in visitors threatened to disrupt the workshops. I found it particularly awkward when the interruptions occurred during the play or the telling of a story, making it

extremely difficult to keep participants immersed in the dramatic experience. Even when we managed to be alone in the centre, the heavy traffic outside the door and the clanking of the cantankerous furnace provided constant background noise. The space was also full of fumes from an adjoining acrylic nail emporium (not connected to the Bahá'ís). Finally, its cavernous size did not foster a cozy atmosphere; this last problem was somewhat remedied by tucking the group into a partially enclosed corner and turning off many of the lights. If the group had not clearly expressed its preference for the centre, I certainly would have moved the workshops to a more propitious location. Nonetheless, I am very grateful to the Ottawa Assembly for graciously allowing me to use its centre.

The group agreed upon Wednesday evenings at 7:00 as a mutually convenient time. On two occasions, a participant was absent, due to either travel or illness. In the future, I might prefer to offer the workshops on a weekend afternoon, to facilitate the attendance of mothers of young children, and to avoid group 'burn out' after a long day at work. Fatigue, in both the participants and myself, cropped up from time to time, and required that we adjourn by ten p.m. whether or not we were ready to do so. While six of the participants reported that the length of the workshops (2.5 hours) was 'just right', one participant found them too long; an afternoon time slot would probably have avoided this problem.

Although the five week commitment may have dissuaded many women from applying, the participants seemed to have no problem with it; while five reported that the number of workshops was 'just right,' two were eager for more, commenting "Want more of everything!" and "I realize a workshop must end at some point and it ended with great closure but I would encourage another or another few..."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Quotes from participants taken from summary of evaluation forms. See Appendix Three.

Although participants seemed engaged and satisfied, I felt that the first workshop got off to a slow start. The 'sacred objects' exercise (see appendix), which was meant primarily to break the ice and introduce participants to one another, was not well understood by participants (and thus probably not well explained or conceived by me). I was interested to observe the range of objects which represented the feminine and the sacred to participants - they ranged from the conventional (lace, pearls, rose petals) to the quirky (a cantaloupe). Participants were quite guarded with one another, and the workshop's format was not participatory enough to draw them out, nor did the sacred objects exercise create a sense of intimacy and trust.

Furthermore, I was feeling harried, as I'd arrived too late to set the space up calmly, and had been thrown off by finding that we would be sharing the centre with others. In consequence, my co-facilitator and I were not quite 'in sync' with each other when we performed the play - our timing and delivery was a bit off - so although the group thought it was wonderful, we were both a bit disappointed, as we knew from previous performances that it could be much better. Nonetheless, after a few hiccups, a lively discussion ensued, and participants seemed to go home satisfied and eager to return, unburdened by the knowledge of just how great it could have been.

The second workshop was not so shaky. Participants were seated in a corner which provided greater intimacy, and they seemed much more comfortable with one another. At the same time, my expectations and anxiety level were much lower. At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked if they had any questions or comments based on their homework readings; in this and all subsequent workshops, the homework seemed to have been well received and read. Participants generally had one or two things to say about the readings, but then were ready to move on.



While this workshop's story was very well received, participants had some difficulty with the ensuing discussion of masculinity and femininity, and tended to talk across one another and in abstract terms. Partially, this was my fault - I should have framed the discussion differently - but it also may have been due to discomfort with the topic, which could be quite contentious and emotional. It may be that participants were not adequately prepared for this degree of disclosure and thus kept their comments bloodless and ethereal. This lack of grit and realism frustrated at least one participant, who urged greater honesty. Nonetheless, all participants contributed to the discussion.

The art work/play which followed was very popular. Although one or two of the women insisted that they "weren't creative" or "weren't artistic", all of them really got into it, and many of them did not want to go home. The art seemed to relax participants, who worked calmly, laughing and chatting with one another, and appeared to take great pleasure in it. Two of the participants identified this as their favorite workshop; one mentioned that she "liked the sharing, the loving, the creating," while the other explained that "it was unexpected and I never have time to do art despite that I enjoy it very much. It seems to be low on my priority list." Several of the women were surprised by how much they enjoyed both the process and the artworks they produced. It was enormously gratifying to see them taking so much pleasure from the exercise, but also sad to observe how we deprive ourselves of such simple, restorative activities in our daily lives.

The third workshop, in which participants were involved in the telling of the story of Tahirih, was dogged by interruptions, which diffused its impact to some extent. Nonetheless, the veiling was very powerful, and two of the participants identified it as their favorite part of the series. Participants seemed quite moved, readily responded to my direction throughout the exercise, and then were quite eager to talk

about the experience. While the freewriting exercise generated a lot of insights, it would have been better if I had planned to do something with the results beyond compiling them on a flipchart and including transcriptions of them in their post-workshop mail-out packages. The workshop could also have benefitted from greater use of pertinent scriptures.

By the fourth workshop, the group was working very well. Thankfully, this time, there were no interruptions and we had the centre to ourselves. Participants were able to engage with the storytelling and subsequent discussion. However, they particularly seemed to enjoy the participatory theatre exercise and the guided visualization. Enough trust had been established that they were ready to use their bodies. In the theatre exercise, some of the participants were a bit self-conscious, in that they could not totally forget about the appearance of what they were doing, even though they were unobserved. However, they vocalized this and recognized that it needed to be overcome. All of us were surprised by how effective and moving the exercise was, and how it transformed our emotional states.

The visualization was also very effective. Afterwards, participants were calm and reflective, and spontaneously shared their experiences in the visualization - some of them quite personal - with a great deal of mutual respect and trust, in an atmosphere that was real without being grim. Two of the participants identified this as their favorite workshop; one because of the "relaxation and expression through our bodies", while the other said,

I felt free to express my inner-self during the tableau exercise and was happily surprised at the concrete connection between concentration and stance and the energy felt and created within, as well as projected. It gave me a sense of connection with everyone. The visualization revealed virtues I must continue to work on and ones I have succeeded at.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

The fifth and final workshop began with a lot of laughter; the group was happy to see one another again, and very comfortable together. One participant brought lilies, while another brought a poem that she had written based on her experiences with the group. The initial mapping exercise was semi-successful; a less awkward route to the same results would be preferable. It may have been more effective if participants had a more active role in the exercise and it somehow involved motion. The self-map component of the exercise, although greeted with some confusion, was ultimately more successful, perhaps because it was participatory.

The joint poem exercise was similarly well received, and produced quite moving results. However, the group had a bit of trouble when asked to compare the joint poems' statements of objectives with their self maps' statements of what is already happening; either the activity needs to be described more clearly, or it needs to be redesigned, or both. Perhaps the joint-poem exercise would work better if placed in an earlier workshop, so that it could be synthesized and analysed by the facilitator(s) before being presented as a catalyst for discussion.

Despite the bumpy ride, the participants were able to stay on track. Their ultimate brainstorm of things which could be done to promote the advancement of women was very fruitful, and all of them were quite taken aback by the paucity of activities they were able to identify in the local Bahá'í community. The workshop ended on a positive, action-oriented note. The participants lingered afterwards, chatting, unwilling to see the process end.

### *Was It Effective?*

Part of my initial task, in designing the methodology for this project, had been to select means of evaluating its impact. As this would be a single test, with a small group, only very provisional, limited results could be hoped for; nonetheless, I was determined to seek results more substantive than 'how it felt' and whether or not everyone seemed to have a good time. This thesis has asked if radical storytelling with a modified consciousness-raising group of Bahá'í women will increase their activism in the promotion of the advancement of women; it behooves me to try and provide at least the beginnings of an answer.

My evaluation methodology was quite simple. Participants filled out a questionnaire at the first workshop, which gathered personal information, as well as gauged their attitudes toward the advancement of women; this questionnaire was intended to provide a sort of "base line" profile of the group prior to the intervention. At the final workshop, participants filled out an evaluation form, which sought their opinions about the series, their advice, and their assessment of its impact. Roughly six weeks after the final workshop, participants received a post-workshop evaluation form, which asked what they retained from the workshops, what impact the series had had on them, and again gauged their attitudes toward the advancement of women. These formal evaluation tools are appended, and were, of course, supplemented by discussion and my own sense of how things were going.

Participant evaluations from the last workshop were generally positive. While one participant found the series only "moderately interesting", all others rated it very or extremely interesting. A range of workshop components were identified as most memorable. Four participants mentioned the stories and the play; as one commented, "I had never come across such amount of incredible story telling dealing with the

feminine role.” Three participants were particularly struck by the group’s discussions, noting both that the diversity of the participants had “broadened my knowledge and understanding,” and that they’d developed a new appreciation for “how definitions of words can separate us and threaten compassion.” Two participants identified the art and theatre exercises and our shared joy and “belly laughter” as most memorable, and two indicated that they were most impressed by the hard work, “creativity, honesty, and talent” of the facilitators. Finally, and most gratifyingly for me, one participant said that she’d remember “a sense of empowerment” the most, while another said she’d remember “the advancement of women and to keep working and not to give up.”

All participants reported that the workshops had been a worthwhile experience. One said, “this is the most profound workshop I have been a part of in the Bahá’í community or elsewhere.” Three highlighted the storytelling as particularly useful; one said “I have always felt disconnected from Bahá’í herstory and this helped me take ownership”, while two mentioned that the stories had provided courage, new role models, and new energy to act and serve. In the same vein, two other participants described the workshops as empowering or inspiring action; one even asserted that the workshops “helped open my eyes to feminism.” Three participants also noted that “the coming together of all of us as strong women” was joyous and exciting, and had increased their love for themselves and their Bahá’í sisters.

All of this would seem to indicate that the series had quite an impact on the participants; however, perhaps paradoxically, all but one of them indicated that the series had changed or challenged their views only to a slight or moderate degree. At the same time, none of the participants reported feeling uncomfortable with the information shared - which may suggest good facilitation and judgement on my part, but could also imply that my approach should have been more direct and hard-hitting. One participant said she was uncomfortable with what she perceived as “generalizing

perceived as “generalizing women as having low self esteem,” while another confessed:

Actually, I felt, maybe, I revealed more than I was expected to at times and was surprised at how I felt moved to talk and share – something I don’t always do comfortably.

I was quite pleased by this comment, as it implies that an open, trusting group dynamic was successfully established.

Participants were also asked for their advice about the workshops’ design. While most were content with the amount of storytelling, two wanted more creative exercises, three wanted more visualizations, and four wanted more discussion. The most frequently suggested change to the series was to include more discussion which referred to Bahá’í scriptures and adhered to the principles of consultation.<sup>35</sup> Journal keeping and sharing was also suggested in support of this aim. One participant wanted greater clarification of the connection between the individual workshops and the series’ overall goals, while another asked that the intersection of race and gender be drawn into the discussion, and felt that there was too much emphasis on differences between women and men.

Although two participants thought that opening up the workshops to mixed groups would be preferable, the majority were quite adamant that woman-only workshops provided a necessary ‘safe space’. At the same time, four participants suggested that running a separate parallel men’s workshop series, with occasional practical win-win joint exercises, would be ideal, as men also need an opportunity to share and to change, and “we need to experience success in gender unity”.

Post- workshop evaluation responses, obtained two months after the final session, were also overwhelmingly positive. Several participants noted that the

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<sup>35</sup> Consultation is characterized by the frank, open, dispassionate and cordial expression of views, followed by the adoption of a decision, either unanimously or by majority vote, which all are expected to fully support.

workshops left them feeling “more liberated” or “more emancipated”; as one of the women wrote, “the workshops “had the effect of making me feel more free to be me - open, determined, etc.”<sup>36</sup> In their pre-workshop questionnaires, participants unanimously assessed the Bahá’í community as doing moderately well in its efforts to practice equality (giving a grade of 3 on a 5 point scale); however, an overwhelming majority in the post-workshop evaluations indicated that it was ‘very important’ that the community increase its efforts in this regard.<sup>37</sup> Although prior to the workshops many of the participants had mixed or negative feelings about feminism, after the series four felt that it was “very important” that they increase their activism on gender issues, one felt it was “urgent,” and one felt it was “moderately important.”

Participants’ comments suggest that the workshops increased both their awareness of women’s oppression and their capacity and inclination to work against it. One participant said the workshops “were empowering for me as a Bahá’í and as a woman...[they] made me feel, and still make me feel that there is hope,” while another stated that they had “reinforced in me the idea that women’s roles and visibility and acceptance must be focussed on.” One woman said,

I pay particular attention to the role of women, my role as a woman and the voices of others when discussing the advancement of women. I feel compelled to move towards bringing this issue up everywhere...

Yet another commented that since the workshops she felt less burdened by destructive baggage, and intended to increase her efforts to empower men as promoters of equality. Participants mentioned a range of personal plans for promoting equality, including bringing it up at community consultations; proposing it as a topic for discussion in the Local Assembly and/or its committees; integrating it into childrens’ classes curriculum; giving talks; using “feminine” prayers at Bahá’í gatherings; and attending or hosting related workshops and events.

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<sup>36</sup> All quotes taken from summary of post-workshop evaluation responses, attached in appendix three.

<sup>37</sup> Five said it was “very important”; one called it “urgent”, and one called it “moderately important.”

While personal activism was recognized as “the only way society can change,” some participants expressed qualms about their ability to take on new tasks, citing time constraints, personal baggage, hectic schedules or the demands of single motherhood. One participant consequently noted that she felt able to promote her own advancement, but perhaps not the advancement of women in general. Typically, however, such concerns were raised as inconveniences which complicated but did not prevent greater activism.

The following comment was particularly interesting, as it suggests that the workshops may have provoked shifts in both the degree of activism and the methods used;

It also had an effect on the thinking process - your approach in the workshops was very organized, very systematic presentations, and perhaps now I think in a more systematic way. It had not occurred to me before but now I apply my capacity for systematic thinking and organization - that I use in my work as a scientist - to promoting the advancement of women.

The post-workshop evaluations thus suggest that the intervention may have both increased and altered participants' activism on gender issues.

Many participants identified a concomitant increase in their attachment to their co-religionists: one said “I feel a closeness to my Bahá'í brothers and sisters in rising to this challenge, particularly my sisters”; another stated “it made me feel bonded to other Bahá'í women [and] relieved to experience such expressions of an understanding of women's oppression”; while a third said “I feel closer to the workshop participants - especially the organizers. I also feel closer to the Bahá'í women of the past.” Two participants identified this closeness as the most memorable aspect of the series; one was particularly impressed by “the coming together of some strong, loving women in the community who are concerned for their well-being when it comes to equality. And



are willing to roll up their sleeves to help in this process.” The opportunity to network was further identified as a valuable consequence of the series.

Several participants further expressed an increased connection to the faith itself. One woman commented, “I imagine I think more as a Bahá’í should think or perhaps how I think a Bahá’í should think,” while another said “It made me think there’s much work to do and...the best way to do it is through the Faith.” One participant explained;

I’d like to get more involved in the Bahá’í community’s activities too - when I work with Bahá’ís there is more excitement and spirit and encouraging one another - but in non-Bahá’í organizations I often get burned out or discouraged as there is too much resistance to feminism.

The deepening of participants’ faith and interest in community involvement appears to be an unanticipated result of the workshop series. One woman suggested that this involvement itself constituted a significant “step in the right direction” in terms of promoting equality. The following participant’s comment emphasizes this point:

The workshops especially suggested to me the need to keep closer contact with Bahá’ís. It was very joyful and when we are happy we can do more...together we can do more.

On a more specific level, participants were again likely to refer to the storytelling, play, and other uses of the arts as memorable components of the series. The use of veils in the third workshop’s storytelling was experienced as particularly powerful. One participant noted;

The workshops’ emphasis on how more than what was very nice especially for me who comes home exhausted - it made us feel comfortable, made it interesting. The workshops did not stuff us with knowledge and information but were teaching us through experience. I remember the journey you took us on.

Suggested changes for future runs of the workshop series included more meditation; less emphasis on gender differences; an improved meeting place; a weekend (rather

than week-night) time slot; a different approach to the discussion of sexuality;<sup>38</sup> offering a pre-arranged follow-up plan; and lengthening the series in order to incorporate a broader analysis of gender issues. Four participants said they would change nothing.

## *Discussion*

Several points raised in the foregoing presentation of this project's results bear further discussion. First among these is the group's composition. As previously described, a variety of somewhat complicated methods were used to recruit participants. The group thereby assembled was problematic in two regards: first, as participants were self-selecting, their attitudes toward gender issues were already somewhat more radical than the 'average' Canadian Bahá'ís. This concern is borne out by comparing the views expressed by participants in their pre-workshop questionnaires to the range of attitudes found in the Canadian Bahá'í community by Will and Debbie van den Hoonaard's study, *Exploring Near To The Heart Issues*. Extracts from these questionnaires suggest that participants were aware of inequable practices in the community, as judged by the following indicators:

The percentage of women serving in visible capacities in the community. The voices of women at feasts are silent. Very little respect for 'mothers' as educators. There is a struggle for power; men have a hard time stepping down... there's a long way to go!

Willingness of the Bahá'í community to use this principle as a basis for teaching systematically and publicly. Failing support and sometimes murmurs of discontent when women-only or women-oriented events are run. Failure to support International Women's Day...

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<sup>38</sup> I had broached this topic in workshop one's play, in which the characters discuss the sexual activeness of Bahá'u'lláh as the father of 15 (or so) children and the implications of this for our understanding of the purity or impurity of sex and the (female) body.

Tasks, duties, performed in traditional ways, ie., women in kitchen, caring for children. Consultation dominated by men's way of thinking.

Freedom/courage to express oneself freely. Number of women on the institutions.

Equality is being worked on but more needs to be done. I think men need to work toward this goal harder. They need to be more educated.

I have witnessed unwanted sexual advances. I have heard destructive jokes. ...I know spousal abuse takes place in this community. I also know it is addressed at times.<sup>39</sup>

While the van den Hoonaards also found community members apt to raise such issues, they concluded that the majority of Bahá'ís would be inclined to make more conservative criticisms. This project, then, may have successfully increased the activism of women already more-or-less aware and engaged in the promotion of equality; how successful it would be with a group of reluctant learners or 'anti-feminist' Bahá'ís remains to be seen. Those most in need of consciousness-raising are unfortunately also those most unlikely to voluntarily attend.

The second problem with the group was its size. Although the smallness of the group ( seven participants and two facilitators ) enabled us to become quite intimate with one another, it also increased the participants' exposure and made my job more difficult. These are not serious concerns; however, it is worth considering why so few women sought to participate. It is likely that some women were put off or confused by the required 'application' process; future offerings of the workshop series, free from academic requirements, can eschew such recruitment techniques and adopt the less intimidating come-one, come-all approach common to many Bahá'í events. It may simply be that I offered an unattractive opportunity; but as many women expressed

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<sup>39</sup> All quotes taken from summary of questionnaire results, attached in appendix three.

their interest in the project, I do not believe this to be true. It is more likely that the small attendance reflects a broader problem of community support for Bahá'í educational gatherings, in which the same core of active believers are likely to support all endeavors, while the majority remain peripherally involved in community life. While the Bahá'í community is well aware of this tendency, and often self-critical in this regard, it may be that this problem is endemic to all organizations and that the Bahá'ís' proportion of active believers is relatively high. Nonetheless, the problem of community transformation becomes insurmountable if one is confined to working with seven people at a time. In order for the workshop series to effect enduring change in the implementation of equality in the Canadian community, many people must participate. The likelihood of this happening is further diminished by the existence of several ongoing efforts to promote other equally imperative Bahá'í objectives within the community. Alternative or supplemental methods for disseminating the workshops' information may thus be advisable, such as offering the sessions at Bahá'í summer or winter schools, giving condensed presentations at feasts and other community meetings, or preparing and distributing related print materials.<sup>40</sup>

A third aspect of this project which may be reconsidered in future renderings is the location and timing. The space chosen for this offering of the series had obvious shortcomings; rather than consulting the group and following its suggestions, I would in future be inclined to immediately re-locate if in my view the space was unsuitable. A mid-sized dance studio would be ideal; a home could also be effective. I would furthermore follow participants' suggestions regarding the series' timing and resist offering the workshop on a week night.

Fourth, several changes in workshop design seem advisable. I would be inclined to add two or three workshops to the series, in order to facilitate the increased

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<sup>40</sup> "Feasts" are the community's regular meetings, held every 19 days at the start of a Bahá'í month.

use of the scriptures and hand-outs contained in participants' workbooks, to include more meditation and discussion, and to more thoroughly address the intersection of race and gender and women's experience of sexuality and body image.

I would further aspire to offering an adapted parallel series of men's workshops, perhaps with a male co-facilitator, which could run simultaneously and permit some joint mixed-gender activities. Work with Bahá'í men on gender issues is an essential pre-requisite for community-wide activism; continuing to offer equality-promoting activities for women alone may perpetuate the notion that implementing equality is primarily women's responsibility. My failure to offer a parallel male-stream in this first test of the workshop series is an unfortunate consequence of practical and time constraints.

In addition to these modifications of the structure of the workshop series, I would be inclined to introduce a few specific changes in curriculum. The joint-poem activity, which investigates indicators of equality, would be moved from the last workshop to the first, to replace the weaker 'sacred objects' opening exercise. The discussion of masculinity and femininity in the second workshop would be integrated into a kinesthetic exercise; this and several other components of the series would be re-designed in order to include greater use of pertinent scriptures. Participatory methods for the first workshop's play, the final workshop's mapping exercise, and all storytelling would be adopted. The results of freewriting and brainstorming would become more integrated into subsequent activities within the workshops, and journaling and follow-up activity planning would be added to the program. Finally, on a more incidental note, I would photograph participants' artwork produced in workshop two for my records.

I would also undertake to challenge participants' views more directly, particularly their hesitancy to collaborate with non-Bahá'í feminist groups; this would likely require a direct interrogation of the issue of women's service on the House of Justice. I am emboldened in this course by the participants' reports that the workshops challenged or changed their views only slightly. Given the trust and openness which prevailed, I am inclined to believe that the group would have tolerated a deeper investigation of awkward or painful topics. (Of course, going too far in this direction would jeopardize healthy group dynamics). It is also possible that the participants' self-report in this regard may be somewhat misleading; the materials presented may have confirmed or increased their ability to implement their views without necessarily being perceived as changing or challenging them.

I would also not hesitate to counter allegations of man-bashing or emphasizing difference. One participant in the series raised these sobering charges in her evaluations; however, neither my co-facilitator nor the other participants shared this view, and, while I may delude myself, I had expressly sought to avoid conveying such messages. This may be an instance of projection; in any case, I would in future respond promptly and directly to such perceptions.

A sixth issue raised in the presentation of results which bears further discussion is my evaluation methods. The single largest flaw in this intervention, in my view, was the poor relationship between the pre-workshop questionnaire and the post-workshop evaluation tools, which were designed months apart. In future offerings, the questionnaire will be re-worked to address more directly the indicators of attitudinal and behavioral change which the evaluations seek to assess. This weakness in the questionnaire significantly limits my ability to categorically assert that the workshops achieved their intended purpose. Nonetheless, at least three conclusions

may be drawn from the evaluations: first, the use of radical storytelling as a change-agent among Bahá'í women appears to both increase their dedication to act as promoters of the advancement of women and to strengthen their attachment to the Bahá'í community by enabling them to access and interpret their history; second, participatory arts-based community intervention methods foster participants' engagement and investment in the process of change and are likely to be remembered; and finally, groups of Bahá'í women may easily and eagerly establish a sense of sisterhood, characterized by open, supporting, loving communication and connection, which they find empowering and inspiring, and often lacking in their lives.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I proposed that religion can be an emancipatory force in the lives of women, and that the Bahá'í faith has acted as such, increasing the capacity of early female believers in the East and the West and current Bahá'í women around the world to resist oppressive gender norms. This liberating influence may be attributed to the faith's egalitarian vision of gender, which is clearly enunciated in its central scriptures. The implementation of this vision, I have argued, has differed over time and space, and has been affected by the community's maturity and cultural context. Conservatism on gender issues has surfaced in the current Canadian Bahá'í community; this thesis sought to test the efficacy of consciousness-raising groups based on reclaiming Bahá'í women's history as a means to counter this trend by increasing activism in the promotion of equality.

Despite the aforementioned limitations of the project, the community intervention methods tested seem to have significantly increased participants' awareness of gender issues and activism in the promotion of the advancement of women. In addition to benefitting from the workshops' curriculum, I was surprised to find that participants appear to have been inspired by the systematic activism modelled by me and my co-facilitator in the course of this project. The intervention seems also to have had the unanticipated effect of increasing participants' attachment to their faith and to the Bahá'í community. If, as van den Hoonaard has noted, the community tends to lack informal bonds, this sense of connection may be rare and precious indeed, and is perhaps itself worth all the bother. (After all, one of the prime objectives of consciousness-raising is building a sense of 'sisterhood.')

The fact that the workshops' critique of the implementation of equality in the community enhanced



rather than dampened participants' faith further suggests that this intervention has respected the beliefs and perspectives of the participants and has helped them further their own aims, in keeping with the dictates of action research.

From my own perspective, I found the process of designing and delivering the series unexpectedly challenging and full of learning. I felt quite unfit to lead the participants, all of whom were older (and perhaps wiser) than me; I was greatly assisted by their patience, support, and encouragement. The success of the venture is further attributable to the ideas, intelligence, and experience of Faye Dupras, my co-facilitator, whose unfailing creativity and audacity shaped many of the most effective components of the series, and whose presence in the workshops was immeasurably helpful. In the future I would certainly begin collaborating with her earlier in the planning process.

At the end of any such project, many questions must remain unanswered. As I bring this process to a close, I wonder if this endeavour runs the risk of adding to the burden of imperatives and duties already borne by Bahá'í women, and if this risk is mitigated by the fact that this final burden is the duty to free ourselves. I seek a paradigm in which this process gives them wings, gives "greater boldness," not just guilt at insufficiency and a babysitter bill.

I wonder, too, how meaningful such efforts can be in a community so disperse and diverse as the Canadian Bahá'ís. Nonetheless, I am encouraged by the ubiquitous institutional and individual support this project has received. I would guess that the scope of my efforts to increase the implementation of equality in the community will be limited only by my own tenacity and vision; if I should aspire to continue this project on the regional or national scale, I would likely be able to obtain further tangible and intangible community support. Deciding on the most efficient, effective, and enjoyable

means to continue this project will take some thought; in addition to offering further workshops, I may invest some time in preparing print materials for wider distribution, to quickly increase widespread access to women's stories and a gendered analysis of Bahá'í history. I am convinced, however, that text alone will not prove sufficiently transformative.

I look forward to collaborating with non-Bahá'í feminists, whose years of consciousness-raising work may inform further efforts to increase the implementation of equality in Canadian Bahá'í communities, institutions, workplaces and homes, among Bahá'í children and men and women of all ages and ethnicities. I also look forward to consulting the many knowledgeable and experienced Bahá'ís around the world whose labours in this field pre-date my own, so that we may collectively conceive means to transform academic Bahá'í dialogue on equality into widespread grassroots activism. Encouraged by the success of this early test venture, I hope to expand and extend my own small efforts in this regard, sustained by my belief that in so doing I promote not only finite ideas and interests, but rather that I lend my will and effort to the immutable plan of God.

**Appendix One:**

**Participant Recruitment Materials**

In support of my thesis,

**Greater Boldness: Radical Storytelling with Canadian Bahá'í Women**

I will be offering a series of five workshops  
with storytelling from Bahá'í women's history  
reflections on women's experience in the Bahá'í community  
and discussion of ways to promote the advancement of women.

The workshops will be offered on Wednesday evenings, 7 - 10 pm,  
July 22 to August 19, at the Ottawa Bahá'í Info Centre.

Any interested Bahá'í women are welcome to apply for a space in the program.  
However, the size of the workshop is limited, and I will be trying to assemble a group  
which represents the range of diversity in the community.

Please let me know if you are interested by July 18 by  
calling me at \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your support of this initiative!

Sophie Tamas

*What is this?*

Dear Friend,

This is an invitation. I am hoping that you will consider applying to participate in a series of five workshops I am offering in support of my thesis. These five workshops will include storytelling from Bahá'í women's history, reflections on women's experience in the Bahá'í community and discussion of ways to promote the advancement of women.

*Why are you inviting me?*

This is the first time I have offered these workshops and I will be trying to evaluate their effectiveness and see how they could be improved. My hope is that they can become a powerful tool for the promotion of the advancement of women in the Bahá'í community. But in order to really find out if they work, I need to have a very diverse group of participants....not just people who would usually go to this kind of thing, but every kind of Bahá'í woman. So in addition to advertising the workshops in the Gem, I have randomly picked 30 women in the Ottawa community and have sent out personal invitations, to encourage them to consider applying for the workshop series. And you are one of the lucky thirty!

*So what would I have to do?*

Well, you would have to commit to coming to a workshop at the Bahá'í Info Centre, every Wednesday night, 7 to 10 pm., from July 22 to August 19. All interested Bahá'í women are welcome to apply for a space in the workshops, but I can only work with a small group. Twenty participants who represent the greatest range of diversity will be chosen from all applications received. But if you are not chosen, don't despair! I will offer the workshops again once my research and thesis are finished.

*I want to apply. What now?*

If you want to apply, please phone me at \_\_\_\_\_ by July 18 at the latest! On July 19 I will call you back to let you know if you have been selected as a participant or if you are on the waiting list.

*Thank you for your support!*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your interest in the Bahá'í women's storytelling workshops. This series of workshops is being held to test the effectiveness of historic storytelling as a tool for furthering the advancement of women in the Bahá'í community. The results of this test case will be used to support my graduate thesis at the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University.

As a participant in this series, you will be asked to fill out a short questionnaire on your views about the progress of the equality of women and men in the Bahá'í community. The workshops themselves will be participatory and will make use of the arts. It will be important for you to be able to commit to coming to all five weekly workshops, which will be held at the Ottawa Bahá'í Info Centre. Meetings will last from 2 to 3 hours.

At the last meeting, you will be asked to evaluate the series. While quotes from your questionnaires, evaluations, and group discussions may be used in my thesis, your identity as a group participant will not be revealed. Your feedback will also be used to develop the workshops for broader use in the Bahá'í community.

As a research initiative under the supervision of the School of Canadian Studies, this project has been given clearance by an ethics review board. Should you have any concerns or questions about the project, you may feel free to contact my graduate supervisor, Julien Smith (Canadian Studies), at 520-2366, or my thesis supervisor, Joe Ramisch (Religion), at 520-2100. You are also welcome to call me with any questions, at 256-6766.

Thank you for your support of this project. If you would like to confirm your willingness to participate in the workshops, please university regulations require that you sign a consent form, which will be distributed at the first workshop meeting.

Sincerely,

Sophie Tamas

Appendix Two:

The Workshops

### Consent to Participate - Storytelling Workshops Series

I have read the information letter describing the purposes and the tasks involved in participation in a study on the use of historic storytelling as a tool for the advancement of Bahá'í women, which is being conducted by Sophie Tamas of the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University. I further understand that should the information I provide be used in publications or for teaching purposes, my identity will be protected. I acknowledge that I may withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_





We all have our own ideas about what women and men are really like, and what women's and men's roles should be.

What is your opinion?

Has membership in the Bahá'í community changed your ideas about what women and men are like and what their roles should be? How?

## Prayers for Women

*Wert thou to perceive the sweetness of the title  
'O My Handmaiden'  
thou wouldst find thyself detached from all mankind,  
devoutly engaged day and night in communion  
with Him Who is the sole Desire of the world.*

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 254-255

O Thou who art the chosen one among women!

He is God; glorified is the splendour of His light. The verses in this Tablet are revealed for the one who hath believed in the signs of her Lord and is reckoned among such as are wholly devoted unto Him. Bear thou witness that verily no God is there but Him, Who is both my Lord and thine, and that no other God besides Him existeth. He is the Bountiful, the Almighty.

Yield thee thanks unto God, for He hath graciously aided thee in this Day, revealed for thee the clear verses of this Tablet, and hath numbered thee among such women as have believed in the signs of God, have taken Him as their guardian and are of the grateful. Verily God shall soon reward thee and those who have believed in His signs with an excellent reward from His presence. Assuredly no God is there other than Him, the All-Possessing, the Most Generous. The revelations of His bounty pervade all created things; He is the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Selections from the Writings of the Bab, 163.

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O Lord! Help this daughter of the Kingdom to be exalted in both worlds; cause her to turn away from this mortal world of dust and from those who have set their hearts thereon and enable her to have communion and close association with the world of immortality. Give her heavenly power and strengthen her through the breaths of the Holy Spirit that she may arise to serve Thee. Thou art the Mighty One.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Prayers and Tablets for the Young, 19.

•

O my Lord, my Beloved, my Desire! Befriend me in my loneliness and accompany me in my exile. Remove my sorrow. Cause me to be devoted to Thy beauty. Withdraw me from all else save Thee. Attract me through Thy fragrances of holiness. Cause me to be associated in Thy Kingdom with those who are severed from all else save Thee, who long to serve Thy sacred threshold and who stand to work in Thy Cause. Enable me to be one of Thy maidservants who have attained to Thy good pleasure. Verily, Thou art the Gracious, the Generous.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í Prayers, 32-33.

Magnified be Thy name, O Lord my God! Behold Thou mine eye expectant to gaze on the wonders of Thy mercy, and mine ear longing to hearken unto Thy sweet melodies, and my heart yearning for the living waters of Thy knowledge. Thou seest Thy handmaiden, O my God, standing before the habitation of Thy mercy, and calling upon Thee by Thy name which Thou hast chosen above all other names and set up over all that are in heaven and on earth. Send down upon her the breaths of Thy mercy, that she may be carried away wholly from herself, and be drawn entirely towards the seat which, resplendent with the glory of Thy face, sheddeth afar the radiance of Thy sovereignty, and is established as Thy throne. Potent art Thou to do what Thou willest. No God is there beside Thee, the All-Glorious, the Most Bountiful.

Cast not out, I entreat Thee, O my Lord, them that have sought Thee, and turn not away such as have directed their steps towards Thee, and deprive not of Thy grace all that love Thee. Thou art He, O my Lord, Who hath called Himself the God of Mercy, the Most Compassionate. Have mercy, then, upon Thy handmaiden who hath sought Thy shelter, and set her face towards Thee.

Thou art, verily, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Merciful.

Prayers and Meditations. 147-148.

•

Thou seest, O my God, how the wrongs committed by such of Thy creatures as have turned their backs to Thee have come in between Him in Whom Thy Godhead is manifest and Thy servants. Send down upon them, O my Lord, what will cause them to be busied with each others' concerns. Let, then, their violence be confined to their own selves, that the land and they that dwell therein may find peace.

One of Thy handmaidens, O my Lord, hath sought Thy face, and soared in the atmosphere of Thy pleasure. Withhold not from her, O my Lord, the things Thou didst ordain for the chosen ones among Thy handmaidens. Enable her, then, to be so attracted by Thine utterances that she will celebrate Thy praise amongst them.

Potent art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. No God is there but Thee, the Almighty, Whose help is implored by all men.

Prayers and Meditations, 196.

Glory to Thee, O my God! One of Thy handmaidens, who hath believed in Thee and in Thy signs, hath entered beneath the shadow of the tree of Thy oneness. Give her to quaff, O my God, by Thy Name, the Manifest and the Hidden, of Thy choice sealed Wine that it may take her away from her own self, and make her to be entirely devoted to Thy remembrance, and wholly detached from any one beside Thee.

Now that Thou hast revealed unto her the knowledge of Thee, O my Lord, deny her not, by Thy bounty, Thy grace; and now that Thou hast called her unto Thyself, drive her not away from Thee, through Thy favor. Supply her, then, with that which excelleth all that can be found on Thine earth.

Thou art, verily, the Most Bountiful, Whose grace is immense. Wert Thou to bestow on one of Thy creatures what would equal the kingdoms of earth and heaven, it would still not diminish by even as much as an atom the immensity of Thy dominion. Far greater art Thou than the Great One men are wont to call Thee, for such a title is but one of Thy names all of which were created by a mere indication of Thy will.

There is no God but Thee, the God of power, the God of glory,  
the God of knowledge and wisdom.

Prayers and Meditations, 156-157.

O God! The trials Thou sendest are a salve to the sores of all them who are devoted to Thy will; the remembrance of Thee is a healing medicine to the hearts of such as have drawn nigh unto Thy court; nearness to Thee is the true life of them who are Thy lovers; Thy presence is the ardent desire of such as yearn to behold Thy face; remoteness from Thee is a torment to those that have acknowledged Thy oneness, and separation from Thee is death unto them that have recognized Thy truth!

I beseech Thee by the sighs which they whose souls pant after Thee have uttered in their remoteness from Thy court, and by the cries of such of Thy lovers as bemoan their separation from Thee, to nourish me with the wine of Thy knowledge and the living waters of Thy love and pleasure. Behold Thy handmaiden, O my Lord, who hath forgotten all else except Thee, and who hath delighted herself with Thy love, and lamented over the things that have befallen Thee at the hands of the wicked doers among Thy creatures. Do Thou ordain for her that which Thou didst ordain for such of Thy handmaidens as circle round the throne of Thy majesty, and gaze, at eventide and at dawn, on Thy beauty.

Thou art, verily, the Lord of the Judgment Day.

Prayers and Meditations, 78-79.

Praised be Thou, O Lord my God! Thou art He Who hath created all things through a word uttered by Thy behest, and fashioned the entire creation through the power of Thy sovereignty and might. The mightiest of men are abased before the revelations of Thy glory, and they who are endued with strength tremble when faced with the evidences of Thy might. Every man of insight is bereft of vision when confronted with the effulgence of the glory of Thy face, and he who is possessed of riches is poor and desolate when beholding the plenteousness of Thy wealth.

I implore Thee by Thine All-Glorious Name, wherewith Thou didst adorn all the denizens of the kingdom of Thy revelation and the inmates of the heaven of Thy will, to grant that my soul may be attracted by the sweetness of the melody of the Bird of Heaven that chanteth amidst the branches of the tree of Thy decree that Thou art God, that there is none other God beside Thee.

Cleanse me with the waters of Thy mercy, O my Lord, and make me wholly Thine, and cause me to approach the Tabernacle of Thy Cause and the adored Sanctuary of Thy Presence. Ordain, then, for me all the things Thou didst ordain for the chosen ones among Thy handmaidens, and rain down upon me that which will illuminate my face and enlighten my heart.

Thou hast power to do what Thou willest, and Thou ordainest what Thou pleasest.

Prayers and Meditations, 138-139.

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Magnified be Thy name, O Thou in Whose grasp are the reins of the souls of all them that have recognized Thee, and in Whose right hand are the destinies of all that are in heaven and all that are on earth! Thou doest, through the power of Thy might, what Thou willest, and ordainest, by an act of Thy volition, what Thou pleasest. The will of the most resolute of men is as nothing when compared with the compelling evidences of Thy will, and the determination of the most inflexible among Thy creatures is dissipated before the manifold revelations of Thy purpose.

Thou art He Who, through a word of Thy mouth, hath so enravished the hearts of Thy chosen ones that they have, in their love for Thee, detached themselves from all except Thyself, and laid down their lives and sacrificed their souls in Thy path, and borne, for Thy sake, what none of Thy creatures hath borne.

I am one of Thy handmaidens, O my Lord! I have turned my face towards the habitation of Thy mercy, and have sought the wonders of Thy manifold favors, inasmuch as all the members of my body proclaim Thee to be the All-Bounteous, He Whose grace is immense.

O Thou Whose face is the object of my adoration, Whose beauty is my sanctuary, Whose court is my goal, Whose remembrance is my wish, Whose affection is my solace, Whose love is my begetter, Whose praise is my companion, Whose nearness is my hope, Whose presence is my greatest longing and supreme aspiration! Disappoint me not, I entreat Thee, by withholding from me the things Thou didst ordain for the chosen ones among Thy handmaidens, and supply me with the good of this world and of the world to come.

Thou art, verily, the Lord of creation. No God is there beside Thee, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful.

Prayers and Meditations, 163-164.

•

Magnified art Thou, O Lord my God! I ask Thee by Thy Name which Thou hast set up above all other names, through which the veil of heaven hath been split asunder and the Day-Star of Thy beauty hath risen above the horizon, shining with the brightness of Thy Name, the Exalted, the Most High, to succor me with Thy wondrous help and to preserve me in the shelter of Thy care and protection.

I am one of Thy handmaidens, O my Lord! Unto Thee have I turned, and in Thee have I placed my trust. Grant that I may be so confirmed in my love for Thee, and in fulfilling that which is well-pleasing unto Thee, that neither the defection of the infidels among Thy people, nor the clamor of the hypocrites among Thy creatures, may avail to keep me back from Thee.

Purge Thou mine ear, O my Lord, that I may hearken unto the verses sent down unto Thee, and illuminate my heart with the light of Thy knowledge, and loose my tongue that it may make mention of Thee and sing Thy praise. By Thy might, O my God! My soul is wedded to none beside Thee, and my heart seeketh none except Thine own Self.

No God is there beside Thee, the All-Glorious, the Great Giver, the Forgiving, the Compassionate.

Prayers and Meditations, 142.



O Thou Whose face is the object of the adoration of all that yearn after Thee, Whose presence is the hope of such as are wholly devoted to Thy will, Whose nearness is the desire of all that have drawn nigh unto Thy court, Whose countenance is the companion of those who have recognized Thy truth, Whose name is the mover of the souls that long to behold Thy face, Whose voice is the true life of Thy lovers, the words of Whose mouth are as the waters of life unto all who are in heaven and on earth!

I beseech Thee, by the wrong Thou hast suffered and the ills inflicted upon Thee by the hosts of wrongful doers, to send down upon me from the clouds of Thy mercy that which will purify me of all that is not of Thee, that I may be worthy to praise Thee and fit to love Thee.

Withhold not from me, O my Lord, the things Thou didst ordain for such of Thy handmaidens as circle around Thee, and on whom are poured continually the splendors of the sun of Thy beauty and the beams of the brightness of Thy face. Thou art He Who from everlasting hath succored whosoever hath sought Thee, and bountifully favored him who hath asked Thee.

No God is there beside Thee, the Mighty, the Ever-Abiding, the All-Bounteous, the Most Generous.

Prayers and Meditations, 13.

•

O Thou, at Whose dreadful majesty all things have trembled, in Whose grasp are the affairs of all men, towards Whose grace and mercy are set the faces of all Thy creatures!

I entreat Thee, by Thy Name which Thou hast ordained to be the spirit of all names that are in the kingdom of names, to shield us from the whisperings of those who have turned away from Thee, and have repudiated the truth of Thy most august and most exalted Self, in this Revelation that hath caused the kingdom of Thy names to tremble.

I am one of Thy handmaidens, O my Lord! I have turned my face towards the sanctuary of Thy gracious favors and the adored tabernacle of Thy glory. Purify me of all that is not of Thee, and strengthen me to love Thee and to fulfill Thy pleasure, that I may delight myself in the contemplation of Thy beauty, and be rid of all attachment to any of Thy creatures, and may, at every moment, proclaim: "Magnified be God, the Lord of the worlds!"

Let my food, O my Lord, be Thy beauty, and my drink the light of Thy presence, and my hope Thy pleasure, and my work Thy praise, and my companion Thy remembrance, and my aid Thy sovereignty, and my dwelling-place Thy habitation, and my home the seat which Thou hast exalted above the limitations of them that are shut out as by a veil from Thee.

Thou art, in truth, the God of power, of strength and glory.

Prayers and Meditations, 126-127.

•

Glorified art Thou, O Lord my God! Thou art He the fire of Whose love hath set ablaze the hearts of them who have recognized Thy unity, and the splendors of Whose countenance have illuminated the faces of such as have drawn nigh unto Thy court. How plenteous, O my God, is the stream of Thy knowledge! How sweet, O my Beloved, is the injury which, in my love for Thee, and for the sake of Thy pleasure, I suffer from the darts of the wicked doers! How pleasing are the wounds which, in Thy path and in order to proclaim Thy Faith, I sustain from the swords of the infidels!

I beseech Thee, by Thy name through which Thou turnest restlessness into tranquillity, fear into confidence, weakness into strength, and abasement into glory, that Thou of Thy grace wilt aid me and Thy servants to exalt Thy name, to deliver Thy Message, and to proclaim Thy Cause, in such wise that we may remain unmoved by either the assaults of the transgressors or the wrath of the infidels, O Thou Who art my Well-Beloved!

I am, O my Lord, Thy handmaiden, who hath hearkened to Thy call, and hastened unto Thee, fleeing from herself and resting her heart upon Thee. I implore Thee, O my Lord, by Thy name out of which all the treasures of the earth were brought forth, to shield me from the hints of such as have disbelieved in Thee and repudiated Thy truth.

Powerful art Thou to do what Thou pleasest. Thou art, verily, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

Prayers and Meditations, 212-213.

My Lord! My Lord!

Thou hast caused me to hear the Call, guided me unto the sea of favor, awakened me through Thy fragrant breeze, and quickened me by the spirit of Thy greatest guidance. I thank and praise Thee for this. O my Lord! O my Lord! Verily, I am athirst; do cause me to drink from the fountain of Thy grace. O my Lord! O my Lord! Verily, I am ill; do heal me by the antidote of Thy mercy.

O my Lord! O my Lord! Verily, I am sick; do Thou cure me through Thy favor. O my Lord! O my Lord! I am needy; do enrich me through Thy compassion. And I am poor; render me prosperous by the treasury of Thy Kingdom. O my Lord! O my Lord! Increase my hope in the court of Thy holiness, and grant my wishes by thy favor and grace. Confirm me to deliver Thy Cause, enable me to call in Thy Name, and cause me to show forth the proofs of Thy Manifestation. Strengthen me to promote Thy Word, dilate my breast by serving Thy maid-servants and being humble and submissive before Thy beloved ones. O my Lord! Verily, I am impotent; do strengthen me by Thy power. I am lost in indigence; do confer on me Thy greatest favor. Make me as one of the maid-servants who diffuse Thy fragrances, who worship Thy Kingdom, who bow down in the worshipping-places of Thy unity, who kneel down on every dust which is related to the threshold of Thy beloved ones, and who serve in Thy vineyard, speak Thy praise and are attracted to Thy love. Verily, Thou are the Giver, the Powerful, the Mighty!

Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 616-17

Blessed is the mother who bore thee and the breast whose milk suckled thee and the bosom wherein thou wert nurtured, because thou hast apprehended the Day of the Lord, hast prepared thyself to enter in unto His kingdom, hast set thy face singly toward His Gracious Countenance, hast believed in the Manifest Light, hast rejoiced in the Abundant Grace, hast responded to the Voice of thy Lord with a sincere and beating heart and hast presented thyself from those regions at the Glorious Threshold and hast marked thy forehead with the pure, holy, fragrant Tomb, the breaths of whose sanctity are spread abroad throughout the lands as fragrant musk is diffused unto the distant place! Then thank thy Lord, the Merciful, the Clement, for this great salvation and exceeding grace!

Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 114

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*As to thee, O handmaid of God, softly recite thou this commune to thy Lord, and say unto Him:*

O God, my God! Fill up for me the cup of detachment from all things, and in the assembly of Thy splendours and bestowals, rejoice me with the wine of loving Thee. Free me from the assaults of passion and desire, break off from me the shackles of this nether world, draw me with rapture unto Thy supernal realm, and refresh me amongst the handmaids with the breathings of Thy holiness.

O Lord, brighten Thou my face with the lights of Thy bestowals, light Thou mine eyes with beholding the signs of Thine all-subduing might; delight my heart with the glory of Thy knowledge that encompasseth all things, gladden Thou my soul with Thy soul-reviving tidings of great joy, O Thou King of this world and the Kingdom above, O Thou Lord of dominion and might, that I may spread abroad Thy signs and tokens, and proclaim Thy Cause, and promote Thy Teachings, and serve Thy Law, and exalt Thy Word.

Thou art verily the Powerful, the Ever-Giving, the Able, the Omnipotent.

Selected Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 174

*"O faithful ones!" Bahá'u'lláh specifically enjoins, "Should ye visit the resting-place of the Most Exalted Leaf, who hath ascended unto the Glorious Companion, stand ye and say:*

Salutation and blessing and glory upon thee, O Holy Leaf that hath sprung from the Divine Lote-Tree! I bear witness that thou hast believed in God and in His signs, and answered His Call, and turned unto Him, and held fast unto His cord, and clung to the hem of His grace, and fled thy home in His path, and chosen to live as a stranger, out of love for His presence and in thy longing to serve Him. May God have mercy upon him that draweth nigh unto thee, and remembereth thee through the things which My Pen hath voiced in this, the most great station. We pray God that He may forgive us, and forgive them that have turned unto thee, and grant their desires, and bestow upon them, through His wondrous grace, whatever be their wish.

He, verily, is the Bountiful, the Generous. Praise be to God, He Who is the Desire of all worlds; and the Beloved of all who recognize Him.

Cited in Shoghi Effendi, *Messages To America*, 35

•

Thine handmaid, O my Lord, hath set her hopes on Thy grace and bounty. Grant that she may obtain that which will draw her nigh unto Thee, and will profit her in every world of Thine. Thou art the Forgiving, the All-Bountiful. There is none other God but Thee, the Ordainer, the Ancient of Days.

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 133-134

•

O kind Lord! O comforter of anguished hearts!

Send down Thy mercy upon us, and Thy grace, bestow upon us patience, give us the strength to endure.

The Greatest Holy Leaf

O thou Kind Bestower, O Nourisher of our souls and hearts!

We have no aim, except to walk Thy path; we have no wish, except to bring Thee joy.  
Our souls are united, and our hearts are welded, each to each. In offering Thee our  
thanks and praise, in following Thy ways and soaring in Thy skies, we are all one.

We are helpless, stand Thou by us, and give us strength.

Thou art the Protector, the Provider, the Kind.

The Greatest Holy Leaf

•

*This prayer was revealed by `Abdu'l-Bahá for the Consort of the King of Martyrs.*

He is God!

Thou seest, O my Lord, the assemblage of Thy loved ones, the company of Thy friends, gathered by the precincts of Thine all-sufficing Shrine, and in the neighborhood of Thine exalted garden, on a day among the days of Thy Ridván Feast--that blessed time when Thou didst dawn upon the world, shedding thereon the lights of Thy holiness, spreading abroad the bright rays of Thy oneness, and didst issue forth from Baghdád, with a majesty and might that encompassed all mankind; with a glory that made all to fall prostrate before Thee, all heads to bow, every neck to bend low, and the gaze of every man to be cast down. They are calling Thee to mind and making mention of Thee, their breasts gladdened with the lights of Thy bestowals, their souls restored by the evidences of Thy gifts, speaking Thy praise, turning their faces toward Thy Kingdom, humbly supplicating Thy lofty Realms.

They are gathered here to commemorate Thy bright and holy handmaid, a leaf of Thy green Tree of Heaven, a luminous reality, a spiritual essence, who ever implores Thy tender compassion. She was born into the arms of Divine wisdom, and she suckled at the breast of certitude; she flourished in the cradle of faith and rejoiced in the bosom of Thy love, O merciful, O compassionate Lord! And she grew to womanhood in a house from which the sweet savors of oneness were spread abroad. But while she was yet a

girl, distress came upon her in Thy path, and misfortune assailed her, O Thou the Bestower, and in her defenseless youth she drank from the cups of sorrow and pain, out of love for Thy beauty, O Thou the Forgiver!

Thou knowest, O my God, the calamities she joyfully bore in Thy pathway, the trials she confronted in Thy love, with a face that radiated delight. How many a night, as others lay on their beds in soft repose, was she wakeful, humbly entreating Thy heavenly Realm. How many a day did Thy people spend, safe in the citadel of Thy sheltering care, while her heart was harried from what had come upon Thy holy ones.

O my Lord, her days and her years passed by, and whenever she saw the morning light she wept over the sorrows of Thy servants, and when the evening shadows fell she cried and called out and burned in a fiery anguish for what had befallen Thy bondsmen. And she arose with all her strength to serve Thee, to beseech the Heaven of Thy mercy, and in lowliness to entreat Thee and to rest her heart upon Thee. And she came forth veiled in holiness, her garments unspotted by the nature of Thy people, and she entered into wedlock with Thy servant on whom Thou didst confer Thy richest gifts, and in whom Thou didst reveal the ensigns of Thine endless mercy, and whose face, in Thine all-glorious Realm, Thou didst make to shine with everlasting light. She married him whom Thou didst lodge in the assemblage of reunion, one with the Company on high; him whom Thou didst cause to eat of all heavenly foods, him on whom Thou didst shower Thy blessings, on whom Thou didst bestow the title: Martyrs' King.

And she dwelt for some years under the protection of that manifest Light; and with all her soul she served at Thy Threshold, holy and luminous; preparing foods and a place of rest and couches for all Thy loved ones that came, and she had no other joy but this. Lowly and humble she was before each of Thy handmaids, deferring to each, serving each one with her heart and soul and her whole being, out of love for Thy beauty, and seeking to win Thy good pleasure. Until her house became known by Thy name, and the fame of her husband was noised abroad, as one belonging to Thee, and the Land of Sád (Isfahán) shook and exulted for joy, because of continual blessings from this mighty champion of Thine; and the scented herbage of Thy knowledge and the roses of Thy bounty began to burgeon out, and a great multitude was led to the waters of Thy mercy.

Then the ignoble and the ignorant amongst Thy creatures rose against him, and with tyranny and malice they pronounced his death; and void of justice, with harsh

oppression, they shed his immaculate blood. Under the glittering sword that noble personage cried out to Thee: "Praised be Thou, O my God, that on the Promised Day, Thou hast helped me to attain this manifest grace; that Thou hast reddened the dust with my blood, spilled out upon Thy path, so that it puts forth crimson flowers. Favor and grace are Thine, to grant me this gift which in all the world I longed for most. Thanks be unto Thee that Thou didst succor me and confirm me and didst give me to drink of this cup that was tempered at the camphor fountain [Qur'án 76:5] --on the Day of Manifestation, at the hands of the cupbearer of martyrdom, in the assemblage of delights. Thou art verily the One full of grace, the Generous, the Bestower."

And after they had killed him they invaded his princely house. They attacked like preying wolves, like lions at the hunt, and they sacked and plundered and pillaged, seizing the rich furnishings, the ornaments and the jewels. She was in dire peril then, left with the fragments of her broken heart. This violent assault took place when the news of his martyrdom was spread abroad, and the children cried out as panic struck at their hearts; they wailed and shed tears, and sounds of mourning rose from out of that splendid home, but there was none to weep over them, there was none to pity them. Rather was the night of tyranny made to deepen about them, and the fiery Hell of injustice blazed out hotter than before; nor was there any torment but the evil doers brought it to bear, nor any agony but they inflicted it. And this holy leaf remained, she and her brood, in the grip of their oppressors, facing the malice of the unmindful, with none to be their shield.

And the days passed by when tears were her only companions, and her comrades were cries; when she was mated to anguish, and had nothing but grief for a friend. And yet in these sufferings, O my Lord, she did not cease to love Thee; she did not fail Thee, O my Beloved, in these fiery ordeals. Though disasters followed one upon another, though tribulations compassed her about, she bore them all, she patiently endured them all, to her they were Thy gifts and favors, and in all her massive agony--O Thou, Lord of most beauteous names--Thy praise was on her lips.

Then she gave up her homeland, rest, refuge and shelter, and taking her young, like the birds she winged her way to this bright and holy Land--that here she might nest and sing Thy praise as the birds do, and busy herself in Thy love with all her powers, and serve Thee with all her being, all her soul and heart. She was lowly before every handmaid of Thine, humble before every leaf of the garden of Thy Cause, occupied with Thy remembrance, severed from all except Thyself.



And her cries were lifted up at dawntide, and the sweet accents of her chanting would be heard in the night season and at the bright noonday, until she returned unto Thee, and winged her way to Thy Kingdom; went seeking the shelter of Thy Threshold and soared upward to Thine everlasting sky. O my Lord, reward her with the contemplation of Thy beauty, feed her at the table of Thine eternity, give her a home in Thy neighborhood, sustain her in the gardens of Thy holiness as Thou willest and pleasest; bless Thou her lodging, keep her safe in the shade of Thy heavenly Tree; lead her, O Lord, into the pavilions of Thy godhood, make her to be one of Thy signs, one of Thy lights.

Verily Thou art the Generous, the Bestower, the Forgiver, the All-Merciful.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Memorials of the Faithful, 179.

## Workshop One: An Introduction to Bahá'í Women's Issues

- as people gather
  - tea and cookies
  - distribute binders
  - fill out questionnaires and consent to participate forms
  
- welcome to the workshop series
  - who I am
  - why I am doing this
  - what my approach/methods will be
  - what is expected of the participants
  - opening prayer(s)
  
- introducing ourselves: sacred objects exercise
  - bring an object that represents to you the sacred and the feminine
  - in pairs, introduce self and explain your chosen object
  - each participant introduces partner to the whole group
  - objects are displayed in central space
  
- "Green Acre Front Porch" play presentation
  - participants read glossary of background information
  - play is presented as a staged reading, with props and costumes
  - silent free-writing: thoughts, feelings, and questions evoked by the play*<sup>1</sup>
  - discussion
  
- review of homework readings and "Some Questions to Ponder"
  
- closing prayer
  
- hand outs: "Green Acre Front Porch" Glossary: supplementary Star of the West excerpts: readings relevant to women's issues that the group may be unfamiliar with from Bahá'í scriptures

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<sup>1</sup>In this and all workshop outlines, italics are used to indicate changes or additions I intend to include in subsequent offerings of the workshop series.

### Green Acre Front Porch

*Spring 1910, at a summer resort in Maine. Two rocking chairs sit on a low platform, a small table and lamp between them. In one of the chairs sits Mildred, with a book. She looks at a pocket watch.*

Mildred: Oh, it's a fine time to be gone like this, isn't it, and a right long time she's been gone now, too. Past half an hour. And I'll just pop over, she said, back in a tik. And what if you turn your ankle, I said, what if it gets dark, with the rain coming on? What rain, she says, and I says, oh, I know rain, my dear, what with the rainstorms I've seen, up there in Newfoundland, caught out in a storm with the rain coming down like God's wrath, and knowing that the men are still out there in the boat. They'll be coming home with salt boils and half dead with cold if they're coming home at all. Oh, I know a storm coming when I smell one. But, Millie dear, she says, I'll be quite alright. The dear Lord, and all that, and I says, the dear Lord helps those who help themselves, and then doesn't she up and go. *(stands, looking for Pru)* Tsk.

*Pru enters, carrying a tea tray and a bundle of papers under her arm. Millie sits.*

Pru: *(calls out)* Were you looking for me, then?

Millie: No.

Pru: Sorry to worry you.

Millie: Just stretching my legs.

Pru: Sarah did want to chat.

*(Pru puts the tea tray on the table; they sit)*

Millie: Wasn't worried a bit.

Pru: You know how she gets lonely. And then I had to wait for the kettle.

Millie: What've you got there?

Pru: Well. What took so long is, after Sarah'd got herself all settled down, and we'd had our chat, and I'd made my excuses, see, I told her you'd be worried, on account of a rain coming -

Millie: Not at all.

Pru: And she said fiddlesticks, if it was going to rain, she would have felt it in her bad hip, but I told her you could smell it -

Millie: In any case -

Pru: Well, and then I got the tea all ready to bring back to surprise you, don't you like it?

Millie: Very kind of you, m'dear.

Pru: And then just as I was leaving, who should arrive.

Millie: The postman?

Pru: So Sarah said I should stay, in case there was something for us, you know, and so I did, but then the tea got bitter from sitting too long, so I had to throw it all out and start over. But look at this.

Millie: Well, will you look at that. Bahá'í News, volume 1 number 1. Who'd have thought.

Pru: Isn't it something?

Millie: It's a piece of history, that's what. And look, at the top, there: Gertrude Buikema, editor.

Pru: Why d'you suppose they put Albert's name first?

Millie: Because he's more important, of course! Well, well, well.

Pru: Would you like some tea?

Millie: Oh, yes, please, dear.

Pru: Sarah's not so well. (*pours the tea*)

Millie: No?

Pru: No. I wouldn't be surprised if...well. You know there's been talk of a sanatorium.

Millie: You can never be too careful, I always said. All it took was one bad fall.

Pru: It's a shame, really.

Millie: How's her spirits, then?

Pru: Muddled, I'd say.

Millie: After all she's done.

Pru: She's afraid they'll lock her up.

Millie: Now who would do such a thing?

Pru: Well, you know how you get to thinking once you've been cooped up too long.

Millie: Paranoid.

Pru: It's her nerves.

Millie: Poor dear.

Pru: Why don't you read us a bit, then.

Millie: Poor Sarah. I really should go see her.

*Millie starts reading.*

Millie: Well, will you look at this.

Pru: Sweet looking fellow. But rather melancholy, isn't he.

Millie: It's the Master's poor dear dead brother.

Pru: You don't say!

Millie: "We were imprisoned in the barracks, without any substantial change in our manner of life, for two years. During this time none of us left the prison." Can you imagine the smell?

Pru: There must have been toilets and bathtubs, surely. In that climate?

Millie: In a prison, though? Three bare rooms, that's what Lua said, and eighty-some people sharing them.

Pru: Lord have mercy.

Millie: "One evening towards the end of the second year, my younger brother came, as was his habit, to write for his Father. But as he was not very well, and as others of the family were also ill, the Blessed Perfection (Baha'o'llah) told him to go and come later. So he went up to the flat roof of the barracks, where we were accustomed to walk, and which was our only recourse for fresh air and exercise." Imagine, walking on the roof.

Pru: Rather dangerous, I'd say.

Millie: "He was walking up and down repeating Tablets and gazing at the sky, when he stumbled, lost his balance, and fell through the opening to which the ladder from below led up.

Pru: Good God.

Millie: The room into which he fell had a lofty ceiling; it was the living room of the family. No one was in the room at the time, but hearing his cries, some of the family rushed in and found him in a heap on the floor with blood pouring from his mouth."

Pru: Oh, heavens.

Millie: "We took him up and laid him on his mat. He was perfectly conscious. Later the Blessed Perfection came and remained with him. The physician was sent for; he said that there was no hope."

"My brother lived for thirty hours." Thirty hours! I hope the dear boy had something for pain!

Pru: A slug of scotch, at least.

Millie: Would they have had such a thing?

Pru: Perhaps opium.

Millie: You don't think?

Pru: It is marvellous for pain.

Millie: Well, I hope they had something. "When he was about to pass away the Blessed Perfection said to him: "What do you desire? Do you wish to live, or do you prefer to die? Tell me what you most wish for." My brother replied: "I don't care to live. I have but one wish. I want the believers to be admitted to see their Lord. If you will promise me this, it is all I ask." Can you imagine? "The Blessed Perfection told him that it would be as he desired."

"The death of this youngest and favorite child - of a very gentle and sweet disposition - nearly broke his mother's heart. We feared for her reason." Well, I should think so. Can't you picture it, Pru, her raging around them dingy rooms? The wind howling in the bars? Beating her fists on the walls, tearing her hair, and all that? Orientals are so passionate, you know.

Pru: It's like Shakespeare, or one of your Brontë novels. I'd go mad.

Millie: "When the Blessed Perfection was told of the condition of his wife, he went to her and said: "Your son has been taken away by God that his people might be freed.

His life was the ransom, and you should rejoice that you had a son so dear to give to the Cause of God." When our mother heard these words she seemed to rally, and after that she did not shed a tear." How can that possibly be?

Pru: She'd given her husband to God already. You'd think that was enough to ask of one woman.

Millie: He was her sixth lost, too.

Pru: Sixth?

Millie: First Kazim, then two 'Ali-Muhammad's, and another boy in Tehran.

Pru: How did she lose them?

Millie: Who knows. Men don't keep track of that sort of thing, do they. They don't write it down. It mustn't be important. Not to them, anyway.

Pru: Maybe its too private.

Millie: And then the fifth, in Baghdad. Bahiyyih Khanum remembered how he went.

Pru: It was that Mirza Yahya, wasn't it, keeping the doctor away and letting the boy die?

Millie: That's the one. And him just a babe in arms. They all knew he was dying, too, but what could they do? That Yahya was in charge, what with Bahá'u'lláh being up in Kurdistan, and the women couldn't just call the doctor themselves, not in those days.

Pru: So then he died.

Millie: Yahya gave his wee body to a stranger in the street. Bahá'u'lláh's own son. To this day they don't know where he lies.

Pru: You'd think she would have lost him, what with losing her house, and Bahá'u'lláh going to prison, and living in fear with the three kids and not a soul to



care for her, and then three months going to Baghdad in the dead of winter, sick and hungry and all? And pregnant through all that? It's a wonder she didn't miscarry. And then to lose him anyway, on account of that person.

Millie: You wonder if He knew, up there in the mountains. If an angel told him, or something. Bahá'u'lláh's own son. You'd think God would have wanted Him to know.

Pru: But then He'd have come back, surely. It was two years He was gone, Millie.

Millie: She can't have borne it.

Pru: It must be the hand of God touched her or something, to give her the strength.

Millie: Seeing as most of the time the hand of God lived down the hall.

Pru: Tsk! But it's something to think about, isn't it, Him having all those kids? Cause, you know, they didn't just come from thin air.

Millie: And there was seven more from the other two wives. 'Course, most of them died too. But still, that's 15 kids.

Pru: It's a far cry from the virgin Jesus, isn't it.

Millie: Prudence!

Pru: But it makes you think. It can't really be a sin, then, can it.

Millie: (*teasing*) Why don't you ask one of the Persians.

Pru: Sure. But it does make you wonder, you know, all those people saying the body's a vessel of sinfulness, and all that.

Millie: Especially a woman's.

Pru: Funny no one mentions it.

Millie: Makes them too squirmy, I'd guess.

Pru: But we're not Christian Scientists, you know. Denying the body, and all that. I say, deny all you want, it's not going anywhere, and it's a good thing too. It's not evil, you know.

Millie: Old habits die hard.

Pru: But they don't die at all if you don't think they ought to.

Millie: Give it time, Pru. We're just babies.

Pru: Stubborn ones at that.

Millie: Some of us more so than others.

*(Pru sighs)*

Millie: Shall I go on, then? "Reception to Dr. Moody in Tehran," it says. A party for Susan. It's from the "Maidservants of God in Tehran, to the maidservants in Washington, DC, and in other cities of the West." Now then. "He is God. O ye sons and daughters of God! May our lives be a sacrifice to you!" Tell me, Pru, have you ever in your entire life begun a letter like that?

Pru: Don't be snippy.

Millie: I'm just saying. It's so peculiar. "In this Day the maid-servants of Baha have gathered in this house this morning and are engaged in reading the Tablets and discussing spiritual matters with Dr. Moody." That means they'd be having a good old gab, I'd guess.

Pru: Oh, they're much too devout for that.

Millie: Women are women. And men too.

Pru: Oh, don't start.

Millie: "She presented to us the photograph of Mrs. Henrietta Clark Wagner, which was sent for Fareeza Khanum. It gave us great happiness and pleasure when we looked upon it. Those who were present in the meeting kissed it many times and it

was as though that spiritual sister was present among us.” Oh, that’s a little much, don’t you think?

Pru: Millie.

Millie: “We read Tablets and conversed until lunch time, and after the lunch the girls of the Bahai school chanted for us with a beautiful melody the Tablet of the Clarion.”

Pru: Which one is that?

Millie: Don’t know. “We missed all of you. Afterward this maid-servant of Baha and other maid-servants of the Cause of God, and some of the remnants of the martyrdoms of Yazd, served tea.” Imagine saying who served the tea.

Pru: Isn’t that romantic, Millie? Wouldn’t you much rather be called a “remnant of so-and-so,” than a plain old widow?

Millie: If a woman dies, d’you suppose they call her husband a remnant?

Pru: I doubt it.

Millie: “After the tea Dr. Moody sang a holy commune. The meeting was overflowing with joy and fragrance, and this maid-servant read one of the Tablets of Abdul-Baha. About 4:30 p.m. the men began to come, and the grandson of the “Beloved of the Martyrs” of Isphahan was present and chanted for us a glorious Tablet with a sweet melody.” (*reading ahead*) And then there’s a bit about the picture of the Purest Branch, how it was hard to find, but the Master told her to get it for the American believers, and so on. “We hope that the news of America will reach us often and that you will communicate with us regularly. Upon ye be Baha,” etc. It says 106 women and 14 men signed it.

Pru: So at least 106 women in Tehran can write their own names.

Millie: Thank God. What’s next...the Unity Band is still at it...12 women writing to Women’s Assemblies in the Orient.

Pru: The same as last year?

Millie: Isabella Brittingham, Pauline Barton-Peeke, Ida Finch, Henrietta Wagner, Marie Botay, Harriet Latimer, Louise Waite, Elizabeth Stewart, May Maxwell -

Pru: Where's May writing?

Millie: Zanjan. Wherever that is. Leslie O'Keefe, Claudia Coles, and Emma Goodale.

Pru: I'd love to do something so noble as that. I'm just not reliable enough.

Millie: You do lots of other noble things, Pru. Besides, we can't afford the postage. Is there more tea?

Pru: D'you like it, then? It's meant to be good for the digestion. (*refills cup*) The Swami left it for Sarah.

Millie: Oh, don't tell me that, I was just liking it.

Pru: Is that a new Tablet?

Millie: Seems to be. The first time published, it says.

Pru: How nice.

Millie: It's a long one, too.

Pru: Don't read it out. I'll take a walk this afternoon, and sit somewhere beautiful and read it myself. Maybe by the river. Oh, it'll be so lovely and calm. And the wind'll whisper in the pines...it'll be just like the wind is whispering the Blessed Beauty's tablet to my inner being. Don't you think?

Millie: You won't be taking my Bahá'í News out in the rain.

Pru: It's not going to rain, even the postman was saying so.

Millie: Oh, the postman. Have you taken a shine to this postman, then?

Pru: I have not.

Millie: Oh, look, here's an interesting bit. Oh, sorry. I won't read it.

Pru: Oh, go ahead.

Millie: You sure? "O People! The word must be demonstrated by the deed, for the righteous witness of the Word is action. The former without the latter shall not allay the thirst of the needy nor open the doors to the sight of the blind. The Heavenly Wise One proclaimeth: A harsh word is like a sword, but gentle speech is like unto milk." Oh, that's lovely. "The children of the world attain to knowledge and better themselves through this. The Tongue of Wisdom says: Whosoever possesses Me not, has nothing. Pass by whatever exists in this world and find Me. I am the Sun of Perception and Ocean of Science. I revive the withered ones and quicken the dead. I am the light which illumines the path of Insight. I am the Falcon of the Hand of the Almighty; I bear healing in My wings and teach the knowledge of soaring to the Heaven of Truth."

Pru: That's so beautiful, Millie!

Millie: Are you sure you want me to go on? Even without the pine trees, and all?

Pru: Go on.

Millie: "O Friend! As there were few ears to hear, so for some time the Pen has been silent in its own chamber and to such a degree that silence has preceded utterance." Now, what do you suppose that means?

Pru: We'll ask Lua, when she gets back.

Millie: "Say, O People! Words are revealed according to capacity, so that the beginners may make progress." That's us, I suppose. "The milk must be given according to the measure, so that the babe of the world may enter into the realm of grandeur and be established in the Court of Unity."

Pru: That's quite a lot of talk of breast milk, isn't it?

Millie: I suppose so. You don't think of it, do you.

Pru: The Holy Scriptures as breast milk. God nursing the world. It's quite an image, you know. A far cry from the God we grew up with, isn't it.

Millie: Oh, look. They've set the convention program. Had a meeting at Corinne True's.

Pru: Now, there's a few folk around there who could use a close reading of this here tablet, don't you think? Seeing how it goes on about moderation of speech, and all that?

Millie: It's a shame, that whole mess. Good men and women wasting their breath fighting each other when they just ought to be getting on with God's work.

Pru: And it's been such a long time. Nearly ten years now, isn't it, with the separate Assemblies in Chicago, and who knows where all else. Going on over silly things, really, like where to put the centre, what meetings to hold, for pity's sake. Husbands and wives fighting over it.

Millie: It's ridiculous, really. I mean, the men's assembly may feel it's right, calling itself a House of Justice, and all, and for all I know right they may be. But when three quarters of your community is women, it's just good sense to mind their toes a little.

Pru: Not that all the women were up in arms. There was Ida Brush, as good as saying the woman's place is in the home. Which got all the suffragists going, didn't it.

Millie: Of course it did. And such cliquiness. Each little group of women with their own axe to grind. Of course, men are just the same. But you don't catch folks saying so, now, do you.

Pru: But you have to admit, the men were good, for the most part, even in 1902, when they got hold of Corinne's Tablet saying the House of Justice was just for men. They didn't lord it over the women, I heard. And if there was grumbling, folks kept it to themselves. Such lovely letters from the Master to set things right.

Millie: But really, Pru. Women are good for more than making cakes and decorations.

Pru: I know. It's hard on them, I'll grant you that. Some feel it's not right, still, women not having a say in things, at least, not officially, like. But we do do more than cakes, Millie, you have to admit. There's a lot of care to the sick and needy goes on on account of us women.

Millie: Corinne showed me a tablet, Pru. She got it last year. And it says, plain and simple, that the Universal House of Justice is for men only, and that everything else, including the Spiritual Assemblies, is for men and women both. She showed that men's assembly, but they just don't see it. They think they're a House of Justice, Pru, they're so used to being our lord and master that they can't see the word of God plain for what it is.

Pru: Millie.

Millie: They told Corinne that they weren't going to put women on the Assembly, and that they weren't going to publish her tablet, neither, for fear of stirring up "misunderstandings". Misunderstanding, my eye.

Pru: Now, now.

Millie: I mean, really.

Pru: Don't upset yourself.

Millie: It's just so plain that God wanted it one way, and here we go straight off doing things the other way, and I just don't see how that's going to do anything to help us reach all those poor people out there with God's love, when we can't even sort out a stupid thing like this amongst ourselves.

Pru: Tsk.

Millie: They even checked the translation, Pru.

Pru: They must think they're a Universal House of Justice.

Millie: But they're not, He even said, in 1902, remember, there was that tablet, calling them the spiritual assemblies, or a house of spirituality, or a spiritual house, or whatever, but not a House of Justice.

Pru: They mean well, Millie.

Millie: They're wrong.

Pru: Well, it's not for you to tell them. We must support the assemblies, dear.

Millie: I know.

Pru: Corinne's got you all worked up.

Millie: She does not.

Pru: The Master will set it all right, Millie. You wait and see. I'd be willing to bet he's got something up his sleeve. But you mustn't go on about it. It's no better out in San Francisco, you know, where the women run everything. Mason was saying the men can't get a foot in the door because the women are having all the Baha'i meetings in the daytime when they're at work.

Millie: Of course they're in the daytime. The women can't get out at night, can they! Who'd mind the children?

Pru: But really, it's not fair to the men.

Millie: Phooey.

Pru: We mustn't argue. It's too bad for our black little souls.

Millie: The aura reader who was here last week distinctly said that my soul was magenta. So there.

Pru: Purple with rage, no doubt.



Millie: Oh, phooey.

Pru: Anyhow, what's next? You're taking forever to get through it!

Millie: Well, if you'd stop interrupting me. Let's see. "Persia. In a letter from the Bahai Assembly at Mashad, Persia, dated October 18, 1909, is the following:"

Pru: (*teasing*) Do you suppose they have women on *their* assemblies, Millie?

Millie: Well, they should! "The latest news which has happened in these parts, is that two villages in the Province of Khorassan, called Hassar and Namag" ...I suppose they mean, at these two villages... "five sanctified souls were martyred, and four of our spiritual sisters were assaulted and wounded, and they have cut off the ears of one of the believers; while other Bahais have been the subjects of persecution, pillage, etc." My God, Prudence. What do you suppose they mean by "etc?"

*Pause*

Pru: I think it's started to rain.

Millie: There's another letter from Susan, with a picture. Gosh. Will you look at them, Pru. "Please redeem a promise I have made to the sisters here that their photo should be copied and spread in America," she says. "I think I mentioned that this is an important event in their lives; they have thrown down one rule. *for once*, that is, to show their faces to the world." My God. "I cannot describe to you how they are deprived. Again today I was in a home - the wife's *mother* was closely veiled because the husband's young brother was in the room; and later all the women left the room because two men friends of the family were coming. I could stay and enjoy hearing the newcomers tell of a recent trip to Russia, etc. On leaving I went to say good bye to the women - their rooms are in an entirely separate court, as if in another house. A man servant passed just as I raised the heavy curtain to leave, and all the women screamed and pulled down their veils, or drew the "chadur" up over their mouth and nose."

Pru: That's ridiculous. She can't be serious.

Millie: Ridiculous, yes, and evil besides, if you ask me.

Pru: But who would ever say, alright, now, look, Mrs. So and So, just put your head in this black bag, there you go, never mind that it's hotter than blazes. It's preposterous!

Millie: So are corsets.

Pru: That's not the same at all!

Millie: Oh, isn't it?

Pru: They think women are fools. Or maybe think we're really clever, but wicked, like witches or devils. But nobody modern thinks that, certainly nobody American. Harriet Beecher Stowe said women are morally superior, and we're responsible for the spiritual upliftment of our husbands and the next generation. That's why we've got to have the vote, so we can clean out all the corruption and meanness in the government. It's not the same at all.

Millie: That wasn't Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Pru: It was too!

Millie: Well, anyhow, it's the flip side of the same coin. They might say we're worse than men, they might say we're better, but you sure won't catch them saying we're equal. And a woman's place is the home, same as ever.

Pru: But look at Susan, I mean, there's a woman who's a doctor! On the other side of the world, for pity's sake, and she's independent, the same as any man. Or look at us, even. I mean, we don't depend on anybody, but God and our friends.

Millie: But how many Bahá'í women do you know with husbands?

Pru: Not many.

Millie: There's a few, aren't there, but most of them keep home, don't they? Have to keep up appearances. Oh, sure, there's some do alright, like Lua or May, I guess, but if he's not Baha'i, or not progressive, like, she's done for, isn't she? Or if she's got kids? Who's going to raise them up? The maid? And who's going to pay the bills? Old spinsters we'll be, old maids, eating bread crusts.

Pru: Millie.

Millie: And where would we be if it weren't for our Sarah, I ask you, taking us in? Back on our brothers' doorsteps like a couple of beggars. Like beggars, I say! And what kind of freedom is that?

Pru: It's better than Mother had.

Millie: Well, I'll grant you that.

Pru: But they don't mean to be wretches.

Millie: And the Romans didn't mean to kill the Messiah.

Pru: So what do you propose we do with them, Millie?

Millie: Prove them wrong, I guess. Nicely. Oh, I'm all for marches and blowing up buildings, I am, I'd like a stiff riot as much as the next girl. But you know, they'll just say it's us getting hysterical, just like a woman, they'd say, and that's it, then. So you do it nice, like the Master, coming up soft, yes sir, no sir, please and thank you, sir, minding your manners, keeping your wits about you, so they don't see it coming.

Pru: You're making speeches, again.

Millie: Well, I just get steamed.

Pru: They're already grumbling about us women being too pushy, you know, and taking things over. Taking advantage.

Millie: They're scared of getting a plateful of what they've been dishing out since who knows when. And lucky for them it's not women running the show, or they might just be getting it. But it's God's will, isn't it, not yours and mine. And He's not inclined to be spiteful.

Pru: D'you think God would mind me wearing trousers?

Millie: I can't see why He'd care in the slightest, you scandalous girl.

Pru: More tea?

*End.*

**"Green Acre Front Porch" © Sophie Tamas 1998.**

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## Glossary

### *Green Acre*

A Bahá'í school in Eliot, Maine, on the Piscataqua River. Green Acre was founded as a resort hotel in 1890 by Sarah Farmer and four business partners. By 1894, Sarah had turned it into a retreat for the study of comparative religion. Lectures on science, business, languages, etc. were offered along with courses in dozens of religious traditions. Famous mystics and swamis such as Vivekananda frequented Green Acre during this period. By 1901 Sarah's partners had become critical of her increasing emphasis on the Bahá'í teachings, and Green Acre was beset by legal and financial trials. In 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent a week at Green Acre and asserted that it would be the site of the first Bahá'í university. Gradually the role of ascetics, spiritualists, and fortune tellers waned as Green Acre became solely devoted to Bahá'í teachings. From its inception, the arts played a prominent role in Green Acre's activities, with classes in pottery and a range of crafts; many pageants, plays, musicals, and poetry readings; a stream of resident painters; and weekly dances. In its early days, many Bahá'í women would spend the summer resting at Green Acre as it's water and air were deemed healthful and restorative; this phenomena occurred within the context of the late-Victorian women's spa movement, in which many upper and middle class women became chronic invalids as a means to escape the confinements of a proper Victorian woman's life. Spas and retreats like Green Acre gave such women physical and intellectual stimulation and freedom from their domestic obligations.

### *Sarah Farmer*

Founder of Green Acre, the only surviving child of well-to-do and free-thinking parents, whose home was a station on the underground railroad. The Farmers were transcendentalists and gave a great deal to charity. Her mother Hannah was a prominent abolitionist, philanthropist, and early feminist, who founded a country retreat for unwed mothers and poor working women from the Boston slums, while her father was an electrical engineer and prolific inventor. In 1900 Sarah went on pilgrimage, met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and became a Bahá'í. She single-handedly ran Green Acre, with the financial backing of her friend Phoebe Hearst, until 1907, when she became an invalid as the result of a bad fall. In 1910 she went to a sanatorium, returning briefly to Green Acre for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1912,

during which he directed a few of her friends to find a legal means to get Sarah out of the sanatorium. Eventually it became apparent that she was being held against her will, and in 1916 a group of Bahá'ís obtained a warrant for her release and kidnapped her from the sanatorium against the protests of her doctors. She was very glad to be back among her friends and things, and died peacefully a few months later.

### *Bahá'í News*

The first newsletter of the Bahá'í community in the West was started in March 1910. In 1911 its name changed to *Star of the West*, and in 1922 to the *Bahá'í Magazine*. It eventually included a Persian section and had a substantial circulation in both the West and the East. It was a key tool for the consolidation of Bahá'í communities. Issues from March 1910 to March 1924 were bound and published by George Ronald in 1978. These newsletters are a source of many delightfully surprising nuggets of history.

### *The Purest Branch*

Named Mihdi, he was the second-last child of Asiyih Khanum and Bahá'u'lláh. When the family left Tehran in 1853, in the dead of winter and with scant provisions for the journey, Asiyih was persuaded to leave Mihdi, then about 3 years of age, with her grandmother, as he was too weak to make the difficult journey. He was reunited with his family seven years later. He was a faithful Bahá'í, and often served as his Father's secretary. He was about 20 years old when he died.

### *Moves and Some Major Events in the Life of the Holy Family*

- 12 Nov. 1817 Bahá'u'lláh born in Tehran
- June 1848 The conference at Badasht
- Aug. 1852 Síyáh-Chál
- 12 Jan. 1853 Banished to Baghdad
- 10 Apr. 1854 Bahá'u'lláh retreats to Kurdistan
- 22 Apr. 1863 Ridvan garden
- 3 May 1863 Banished to Constantinople
- 16 Aug. 1863 Arrive in Constantinople
- 12 Dec. 1863 Arrive in Adrianople
- 12 Aug. 1868 Depart Adrianople

- 31 Aug. 1868 Arrive 'Akká
- 23 June 1870 The death of Mirza Mihdi
- 4 Nov. 1870 The family moves to house arrest
- June 1877 Bahá'ú'lláh moves to Mazráih
- Sept. 1879 Bahá'ú'lláh moves to Bahji
- 1886 Asiyih Khanum dies
- 29 May 1892 Death of Bahá'ú'lláh

### *Christian Scientists*

In the late 1800s, a great deal of religious experimentation was going on in the United States. Swedborgians, Theosophists, Spiritualists, Shakers, and many others sought new religious solutions for the dilemmas of the time. Women's access to leadership roles in these new religious movements was often greater than in traditional churches. Christian Science emerged during this period under the leadership of Mary Baker Eddy, who, among her other teachings, promoted the concept of the body as an illusion and referred to the Divine as a "Father-Mother God."

### *Susan Moody*

This early Bahá'í woman is famous for her years of service in Iran. She was born in New York in 1851 to an upper-class, conventional Scottish family. After working for a time as a school teacher, she began medical school, but broke it off to study music, painting, and sculpture for several years in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and Paris, before finally completing her training as a doctor. In 1903 in Chicago she was taught the Bahá'í Faith by Isabella Brittingham, and became a confirmed believer, soon opening the first Bahá'í Sunday School in Chicago. In 1908 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked her to go to Iran to serve as a doctor. She stopped in Akka en route and arrived in Tehran in 1909, soon learning Persian (Farsi), and sending many letters home describing women's condition in the East and her work there. Over the next fifteen years, she established a hospital, serving as its superintendent and head of gynecology, and initiated the opening of a girl's school. In 1925, conditions in Iran forced her return to America. In 1928, the Guardian asked her, at 77 years old, to return to Iran. She did so, and remained working there until her death in 1934.

### *The Unity Band*

A group of American women, formed in the early 1900's, which sought to increase amity and unity between Bahá'í women of the East and the West by corresponding regularly with Women's Assemblies in a variety of cities in Iran. Interest in such East-West exchange was fairly common at the time, as Orientalism was very popular in everything from home decor to scholarship. Generally, however, it took the form of missionary work, premised on notions of Western cultural and religious superiority. Ironically, this claim to superiority was often supported by comparing the oppression of women in the East to the "liberty" of women in the "enlightened" West. Contemporary texts often described in lush, creative detail the dissipation and debauchery of the East, and the "sensual" nature of Orientals was seen as another sign of Western superiority. Women's initiative in missionary efforts in the East was reinforced by their newfound legitimacy as the spiritual guardians of their race ( see "Harriet Beecher Stowe", below). However, unlike most such efforts, which sought to impose a Western, "superior", white. Christian belief-system on Eastern lands, Western Bahá'ís in East-West ventures were new converts to an (at the time) essentially Eastern religion, whose teachers and leaders were virtually all Persian. As such, although most of the Western Bahá'ís concerned probably shared many of their culture's prejudices about the East, Bahá'í East-West organizing, which was very active in the early 1900s, did not simply represent another example of Western cultural imperialism.

### *Corinne True*

A prominent early Bahá'í woman. Born in 1861, she married and bore 8 children. Although strictly raised by her father, a Presbyterian minister, the deaths of five of her children and her husband led her to seek spiritual alternatives, turning to Unity, Divine Science and Christian Science before becoming a firm Bahá'í in 1899. Following her first pilgrimage in 1907, she became a central supporter of the Temple building campaign, handling the massive project's finances and writing many progress reports for the Bahá'í News. She received many letters from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and was one of the key figures in the debate over women's participation in Bahá'í administrative bodies. She made nine pilgrimages in all, and was elected to the first American National Spiritual Assembly in 1922. In 1952 the Guardian named her a Hand of the Cause of God. She was an ardent teacher and travelled widely for the faith in Europe and North America. She died in 1961, in her one hundredth year.



### *Women's Assemblies*

In the early 1900s, as Bahá'í communities in the West began organizing themselves, there was a great deal of debate over women's eligibility to serve on communities' elected executive committees, and about what such committees should be called. In some communities, women and men served together until about 1902, after which women were deemed ineligible. These decisions were based on misinterpretations of poor translations of guidance from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The debate over women's representation on elected councils in the Bahá'í community reflected the larger suffrage battle raging in America at the time. Among Bahá'ís, however, the issue was further complicated by the fact that women made up two-thirds to three-quarters of the early Western community; thus, despite the male governing councils, the real power in the community lay with women. Often, these women organized parallel "Women's Assemblies," which took on responsibility for teaching campaigns, philanthropic work, fundraising, corresponding with Eastern communities, and a variety of other duties, sometimes including catering and hosting events planned by the "official" (men's) assemblies. Relations between men's and women's assemblies were at times cooperative, and at other times hostile. Many letters were sent to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Bahá'ís of differing views, asking for His guidance, which when received inevitably emphasized the need for unity and cooperation between women and men in the community. By about 1911, the Master had become quite blunt in His call for single, mixed-gender governing councils. A thorough analysis of this aspect of Western Bahá'í history has not yet been published; however, you may refer to Robert Stockman's article "Women in the American Bahá'í Community, 1900-1912," in *World Order*, Winter 1993-1994, for some of the relevant tablets and additional information.

### *Ida Brush*

A prominent member of the Chicago Bahá'í community in the early 1900s. In 1909 she wrote a paper, based on her interpretation of tablets by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which argued that women and men should have separate spheres, and that men's and women's assemblies' complementary functions paralleled that of a husband and wife. Her paper went on to support the popular Victorian ideals of "virtuous womanhood" and "educated motherhood" (see below), ignoring writings which indicate that women should engage in trades and professions and avoiding reference to the central Bahá'í teaching of the equality of women and men. This paper appears to have represented the views of a minority of Bahá'í women. However, it is interesting to note that when, in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked the Chicago Bahá'ís to re-elect a mixed assembly, both Ida Brush and Corinne True were among the women elected.

*Harriet Beecher Stowe*

A prominent Victorian author, one of several contributors to the “cult of virtuous womanhood”. She and her sister Catherine Beecher enunciated a new vision of women as the spiritual saviors of their families via their edifying influence as mothers. Defenders of this view, while usually maintaining that the woman’s place was the home, argued that through proper performance of their child-rearing and wifely duties women in fact had a significant, if not central, role in the shaping of society. While the equality of women and men was not suggested, women were described as inherently morally superior, as the “moral guardians of the race.” This view was used to defend women’s suffrage and their leadership in the prohibition and abolition movements.

Photograph of Susan Moody with a group of Persian Bahá'í Women

from Bahá'í News volume 1 #2 (April 9, 1910), p. 9.



*"Dearest Eva:*

*Please redeem a promise I have made to the sisters here that their photo should be copied and spread in America. I think I mentioned that this is an important event in their lives; they have thrown down one rule, for once, that is, to show their faces to the world.*

*I cannot describe to you how they are deprived.*

*Again today I was in a home - the wife's mother was closely veiled because the husband's young brother was in the room; and later all the women left the room because two men friends of the family were coming...*

*On leaving I went to say good-bye to the women - their rooms are in an entirely separate court, as if in another house. A man servant passed just as I raised the heavy curtain to leave, and all the women screamed and pulled down their veils, or drew the 'chadur' up over their mouth and nose...*

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá re: Women's Assemblies

Bahá'í News volume 1 #5 (June 5, 1910), pp. 10-11.

HE IS GOD!

*O thou daughter of the Kingdom!*

Thy letter was considered. On account of the lack of time, a brief answer is given.

The Spiritual Assemblies which are organized for the sake of teaching the Truth, whether assemblies for men, assemblies for women or mixed assemblies, are all accepted and are conducive to the spreading of the Fragrances of God. This is essential. Likewise the public meeting in which, one day during the week, the believers gather, to be engaged in the commemoration of God, to read communions and deliver effective speeches, is acceptable and beloved. But now it is utterly impossible to establish the House of Justice, which is mentioned in the Book of Akdas; nay, rather, it is impracticable and not to be thought of. That is for the time when the Cause is proclaimed and the Commands of God have become effective. Therefore, now is not the time for the House of Justice, which must be established by general election. Its mention is not permissible and its realization impossible.

Endeavor ye as much as possible that differences may not arise in the affairs; let not every insignificant matter become the cause of disagreement. If such a condition exists, the end will be complete dispersion.

The believers and the maid-servants of the Merciful must all consider how to produce harmony, so that the unity of the human world may be realized; not that every wholly unimportant subject become conducive to differences of opinion. It is my hope that the friends and maid-servants of America become united on all subjects and not disagree at all, for disagreement destroys the foundation of the Cause of God. If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right. For this difference will produce demolition of the Divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs; but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is unity, the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.

Upon thee be Baha El-ABHA!

(Signed) ABDUL-BAHA ABBAS.

## Abdu'l-Bahá re: Women's Assemblies (2)

Bahá'í News, volume 1 #9, (August 20, 1910)

The letters of Mr. Remey, published in this issue, and the following extract from a Tablet to a believer in Persia, should receive the careful perusal of the men who are interested in the progress of the Cause in the Occident:

You have written regarding the Assembly of Women. Undoubtedly, show ye great effort in this matter, and make constant endeavor in the expansion of its spheres, and know ye of a certainty that it will be crowned with great success. This subject is pregnant with far-reaching results and when it is directed in a benefitting manner, such women will be trained in that Assembly that the whole world will be astonished by their eloquent speeches and fluent utterances, and they will silence and discomfort the orators of the East and the West. Today the women in the West lead the men in the service of the Cause, summon the people under the shade of the Blessed Perfection, and loosen their tongues in eloquent lectures, delivery of wonderful proofs and the elucidation of new arguments.

(Signed) ABDUL-BAHA ABBAS.

We can testify that the above statement is the truth. Nine-tenths of the active workers in the Cause in the West are women. This should not only encourage the women of the East, but should awaken the men of the West to their duty in the field of service.

Ghodsia Ashraf  
Extacts from a Speech

Bahá'í News volume 2 #7-8, (August 1, 1911)

I have come to America as the first Persian woman who has left her country to be educated abroad. I have heard that the Americans have much sympathy and affection for the Persians, who are so eager to study at this time. I am sure you will be glad to hear something about the wonderful progress they are making, but as I know more about the ladies, I like to tell you about them.

Persia has been very sick, and she could not be cured by any means; but in recent years—five or six years ago—she was awakened and she is now ready for progress. You wonder why I say this, but it is because Persia has had its constitution only three years while some other countries have had it for a longer period.

I am proud of the Persian women, for they have done many great things in this short period. We had no girls' schools in Persia, except the missionary schools and the Catholic schools, but the Persian women never went to the schools until five years ago. Then they began to open schools for themselves. The Mohammedan clergy would not let them go to school; they did not know even anything about their religion because they did not have any education. Several years ago some of the men had education. After the constitution they began to open schools, and especially in the city of Teheran, from which I have come. It is very hard in Persia to get able teachers, but Persian girls are making great progress in spite of this difficulty. The girls in America are educated, but I have this great news to tell you—as you are very affectionate to the Persians—that the Persian girls are making great progress. One girl in a school knows three languages already. All this seems wonderful to me because they are not accustomed to education, but they now go to school and do such good work that it seems wonderful. The women did everything they could to get the constitution, and especially they wanted the constitution to have education. So now they are making great progress. I am not a sample of the Persian girls, but I can tell you they are advancing very rapidly.

My object in speaking especially of the education of the girls is because, in my opinion, the education of the girls is the most important thing, for they are the mothers of the children and therefore should be educated to teach their children. If they are not educated, how can their children be different from them? So they are trying to get freedom, and with freedom, education. As the American friends are helping them, I hope they will get both. When I was leaving Persia all the friends came to me and told me to give their greeting to the Americans. I am very fond of telling the good news, but I am sorry that I cannot talk and so I beg your pardon for my poor English. I came to America that I may be educated in your great country and go back and help my sisters in Persia.

### Some Questions to Ponder

(ponder v. think over, consider; muse, be deep in thought.)

How do you think the women in the picture with Susan Moody felt about their situation?

•

The tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá was written to Louise Waite of Chicago in answer to a question. What might her question have been?

Why do you suppose 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered her the way he did? What does this suggest about our approach to equality issues in our communities?

•

The extract from a tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá cited in vol.1 #9 makes several assertions about the role of women in the Bahá'í community.

This tablet was initially sent to a believer in Persia. What impact do you think it might have had?

What does the editor's comments about the extract suggest about the condition of the community in the West?

•

The Unity Band was a group of Western Bahá'í women who wrote monthly letters to women's assemblies in Persia. (A male believer in Persia received and distributed the letters.) In 1911 the Unity Band sponsored a graduate of Susan Moody's girls' school to come to America to pursue higher education, in order to return to Persia and work as a teacher.

The attached account of her arrival states the hope that "...from now on many others will come every year to... be imbued with the principles of social freedom and equality and carry back the same to their own sisters."

The article describes in detail the oppression of women in the East, but makes no mention of the oppression of women in America. Why?

### Supplementary Readings - Workshop One

Blessed are ye, O ye stars who are beaming with the light of the love of God! Blessed are ye, O ye lamps lighted with the fire of the love of God! Blessed ye are, O ye who are attracted to the Kingdom of God! Glad-tidings be unto you, O you who are severed from aught else save God! Blessed ye are, O ye pure and chaste ones! Glad-tidings be unto you through the gift of the Covenant, from the light of which all regions are illuminated! Be rejoiced that the lights of the Sun of Truth are shining forth unto all parts; be gladdened at the gifts of your Lord, which have surrounded all the universe; dilate your breasts by chanting the verses of God, and console your eyes by witnessing the bounties of the Supreme Concourse.

By God, the True One, verily, the angels of heaven praise you every morn and eve from the loftiest apex, and announce to you a favor which will surely appear as clear and lucid as the sun in mid-day. Then your faces will shine with a light which will gleam forth unison and harmony, in diffusing the fragrances of God, in preaching the Beauty of El-ABHA, and promoting the word of God. Let each one of you be attracted to the love of the other, so that ye may become as fountains flowing from one source, stars beaming with one life, myrtles verdant and flourishing by the abundance of one rain. By this your hearts will be purified, your consciences illumined, your souls made clear, your banners hoisted, and ye will become signs of guidance among the maid-servants, standards of chastity and piety throughout all the nations of the earth, and the appearances of the gifts of your Lord among women.

Verily, I implore God to gaze upon you with the eye of His mercy, to raise you through a godlike power, to move you by the breezes of His glory, to make you fluent in irrefutable and divine proofs and arguments, to sever you from the world and all therein, to purify and sanctify you from every material grade, and enable you to diffuse the bounties of the Divine Worlds.

*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 29-31.*



The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh also proclaim equality between man and woman, for He has declared that all are the servants of God and endowed with capacity for the attainment of virtues and bestowals. All are the manifestations of the mercy of the Lord. In the creation of God no distinction obtains. All are His servants. In the estimation of God there is no gender. The one whose deeds are more worthy, whose sayings are better, whose accomplishments are more useful is nearest and dearest in the estimation of God, be that one male or female.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 375.*

Know thou, O handmaid, that in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favoured, whether man or woman. How many a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.

The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.

*Selected Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 79.*

Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.

*Paris Talks, 133.*

Question: What is the status of woman in the Orient?

Answer: The status of woman in former times was exceedingly deplorable, for it was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant. It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world. Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made prisoners of the household. The houses did not even have windows opening upon the outside world. Bahá'u'lláh destroyed these ideas and proclaimed the equality of man and woman. He made woman respected by commanding that all women be educated, that there be no difference in the education of the two sexes and that man and woman share the same rights. In the estimation of God there is no distinction of sex. One whose thought is pure, whose education is superior, whose scientific attainments are greater, whose deeds of philanthropy excel, be that one man or woman, white or colored, is entitled to full rights and recognition; there is no differentiation whatsoever. Therefore, the status of women in the East has undergone change. At present they attend schools and colleges, pursue the ordinary curriculum and day by day are becoming indispensable to men and equal to them. This is the present condition of womankind in Persia.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 166.*

"Hear thou Me once again," He reassures her [Navváb], "God is well-pleased with thee, as a token of His grace and a sign of His mercy. He hath made thee to be His companion in every one of His worlds, and hath nourished thee with His meeting and presence, so long as His Name, and His Remembrance, and His Kingdom, and His Empire shall endure. Happy is the handmaid that hath mentioned thee, and sought thy good-pleasure, and humbled herself before thee, and held fast unto the cord of thy love. Woe betide him that denieth thy exalted station, and the things ordained for thee from God, the Lord of all names, and him that hath turned away from thee, and rejected thy station before God, the Lord of the mighty throne."

*Messages to America, 35.*

In this Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the women go neck and neck with the men. In no movement will they be left behind. Their rights with men are equal in degree. They will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs. Rest ye assured. Do ye not look upon the present conditions; in the not far distant future the world of women will become all-refulgent and all-glorious, For His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh Hath Willed It so! At the time of elections the right to vote is the inalienable right of women, and the entrance of women into all human departments is an irrefutable and incontrovertible question.

No soul can retard or prevent it.

But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. For example, at the time when the community is taking up vigorous defensive measures against the attack of foes, the women are exempt from military engagements. It may so happen that at a given time warlike and savage tribes may furiously attack the body politic with the intention of carrying on a wholesale slaughter of its members; under such a circumstance defence is necessary, but it is the duty of men to organize and execute such defensive measures and not the women--because their hearts are tender and they cannot endure the sight of the horror of carnage, even if it is for the sake of defence. From such and similar undertakings the women are exempt.

As regards the constitution of the House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the men. He says: `O ye men of the House of Justice!' But when its members are to be elected, the right which belongs to women, so far as their voting and their voice is concerned, is indisputable. When the women attain to the ultimate degree of progress, then, according to the exigency of the time and place and their great capacity, they shall obtain extraordinary privileges. Be ye confident on these accounts. His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh has greatly strengthened the cause of women, and the rights and privileges of women is one of the greatest principles of `Abdu'l-Bahá. Rest ye assured! Ere long the days shall come when the men addressing the women, shall say: `Blessed are ye! Blessed are ye! Verily ye are worthy of every gift. Verily ye deserve to adorn your heads with the crown of everlasting glory, because in sciences and arts, in virtues and perfections ye shall become equal to man, and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior'.

*Paris Talks, 184.*

## Workshop Two: Masculine and Feminine

- tea and cookies
- opening prayers
- discussion of the homework readings from last workshop
  
- Story: Sakinih Sultan
  
- Brainstorm: what characteristics of Sakinih Sultan are revealed by the story?
  - record on flipchart
  
- What is the nature of masculinity and femininity?
  - present two or three relevant selections from Bahá'í scripture
  - open discussion
  - attempt to categorize Sakinih Sultan's listed characteristics as masculine or feminine
- Individually list your own most prominent characteristics
  - in pairs, attempt to categorize them as masculine or feminine
  
- Art Project
  - arrange work space for each participant and tables of supplies: glues, fabrics, a variety of paints, colored glass pieces, a variety of papers, wood, brushes, pencils, pens, crayons, tape, wire, etc.
  - participants are asked to make something beginning with the idea of representing their relationship to the feminine and the masculine in themselves
  
- introduction of this workshop's homework readings
- closing prayer
  
- hand outs: "The Rise of Women" (Marzieh Gail); article on Susan Moody; extracts from the Bahá'í writings about the feminine/women and their characteristics

### The Story of Sakinih Sultan

In the house of 'Abdullah Pasha, there is a large room on the second floor. This room has carpets on the floor, and couches around the walls, and enormous arched windows all down one side, letting in the bright mediterranean sun and the ocean breeze. In this room, early every morning, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his household gathered to share dawn prayers. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sat on the right hand corner of a couch beside the window, with his family around him, and the families of martyrs whom he'd taken under his care spread out around the room. Here, for an hour each day, they would listen to the children chant, while 'Abdu'l-Bahá supplied forgotten words; and they would play with the parrot Bahiyyih Khanum had taught to say, "Shoghi Jun"; and they would drink their morning tea.

The tea came from a tall, shining samovar, standing by the door on a Persian tea-cloth. A happy-faced woman with deep dimples in her cheeks and thick black braids sat on the floor behind the samovar. Every morning, there she sat and served the tea, from time to time throwing a lump of sugar to the sparrows which flew in and out of the open windows. And the pilgrims came and went, and the fortunes of the faith swung from peril to peril, from victory to betrayal, and the members of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own family rose up against him and fought, and all the while, every morning, Sakinih Sultán served the tea.

She was the eldest daughter of nine children born to a respected Bahá'í family of Yazd. As a child, she probably ran and played quite freely; but from about the age of nine, she would have been confined to the home and involved in domestic work. At the age of 13, her mother arranged her marriage to a Bahá'í silk-weaver, Ali-Asghar, aged 23. At the time, marriage at such an age was seen as normal; she moved into her husband's home, and came under the authority of her husband and his mother. She probably knew very little about sex, and nothing about birth control; but she must have learned quickly, because within the year, she was the mother of a little girl named Faitimih.

And so her life went; nursing, sewing, cooking, cleaning, working with the women of the household, and listening at curtains when the men spoke of the outside world, a world she saw only through lattices and veils. Perhaps she was content.

Perhaps her men-folk permitted her a certain power of influence in their decisions about her life; perhaps she never missed walking outside unattended, riding a horse, looking a stranger in the eyes, laughing out loud in the street, going swimming, or reading and writing.

We'll never know. But we know she loved her husband, in her own way. And we know that he went out one spring day when she was fifteen to meet 6 other Bahá'ís. And we know that the next-door neighbors told the police about this meeting, and that they were raided, and arrested, and that they refused to recant their faith. The seven men had their bellies split open, their organs pulled out, bits of their bodies cut off for trophies, and their heads put on spikes carried through town by a mob. And we know that Sakínih Sultán was sitting with her mother-in-law in a room on the ground floor when suddenly they heard the music and shouting of the mob outside their door, and that the next thing she knew her husband's head had been tossed through the window and rolled at their feet.

We are told that then Sakínih fainted. But her mother-in-law picked up her son's head off the floor, took it to the washstand and cleaned it, and gave it back to the mob, saying, that which we have given to God we do not ask back.

The other believers in Yazd were scared for their own skins and hid, so they were abandoned with no food and no water, and the mob howling outside, until some Dutch merchants took pity on them and sent in provisions.

So Sakínih was a widow, and all her male kin were dead or dispersed. We, who may speak to strangers, and go out unescorted, and act on our own behalf in the public sphere, can we imagine what it was like for Sakínih without a man to represent her? She was an embarrassment, an aberration, something suspect and pathetic. Her family urged her to remarry, but she did not wish it. She had a message sent to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, asking for his help, pleading. And he said, come. But how? Women could not travel alone; nor could they travel with men who were not kin, so it was two years before she could find an appropriate escort, two years before she and her four year old daughter Fatimih made the long trip west to Akka. At first, she lived with Munirih Khanum's sister, Gawhar, who was married to one of her uncles, but soon she was asked by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to come and live in his household.

So Sakínih became one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trusted servants. Her daughter, Fatimih, grew up in the Holy family and it is said that she was the first girl among them to go to school, learning reading and writing from the Nazarene Sisters in Haifa and

studying calligraphy with the eminent Mishkin-Qalam. Fatimih was clever and gifted in hand-work and embroidery, and made 'Abdu'l-Bahá several coats, including one that was his favorite. One day, when Fatimih was in her late teens, Gawhar came to Sakínih to arrange the marriage of Fatimih to her son Badi Effendi. 'Abdu'l-Bahá approved the match; and Sakinih saw her daughter go off to Cairo to start her married life.

Joy and pain embrace. Nine months later, Fatimih bore a son; but she took fever after the delivery and ten days later she was dead. But Sakínih was in Lebanon, looking after Mirza Abu'l-Fadl and Shoghi Effendi in his first years at University, so she missed both the labouring and the funeral of her only child. All that was left was her newborn grandson. By custom, she had no claim to him; the children went with their fathers. But customs had a way of yeilding to kindness and good sense in the house of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, so Sakínih was given the baby. And she raised him in the home of the Holy family, while her black braids turned grey, and the samovar bubbled, and the tea was served. In 1945, she died. The grandson she raised, Labíb Shahíd, was a faithful Bahá'í all his life, and is the one who has left us her story.

(Based on information found in The Diary of Juliet Thompson, by Juliet Thompson; The Shell and The Pearl, by Roger White, and references cited therein; and Daily Lessons Received At Akka, by Helen Goodall and Eila Goodall Cooper, 1908.)

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"The Rise of Women", from Dawn Over Mount Hira, pp. 128-136  
by Marzieh Gail

AFTER 'WOMBAT' IN THE BRITANNICA, we come to 'Women, Diseases of'.

This is the first reference to 'Women'. The idea of women being chronic invalids seems to the Encyclopedia the most pertinent fact about them.

Man, of course, fares very differently. He is not pluralized, but occurs proudly in the singular. His first heading is: 'Man, Evolution of'. He stands for all humanity, and he isn't even sick.

The Britannica was written primarily by men. We live in a man's world; that is the matter with it.

No religion prior to the Bahá'í Faith taught sex equality. The Old Testament says to woman, of her husband 'and he shall rule over thee'.<sup>1</sup> Under Mosaic law, it is true that mothers are to be honoured along with fathers, and daughters may inherit – in the absence of sons. But women are of less account than men. They may not even serve as witnesses in civil or criminal cases. They pray to give birth, not to daughters, but to sons.

Marriage according to the Old Testament is polygamous. There is no legal limit in Mosaic law to the number of wives and concubines a man may have. If a man wishes a divorce, he carries out the provisions in Deuteronomy 24:1, as follows: 'When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her; then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.'



Even after the express prohibition of polygamy by Rabbi Gershom B. Judah, 'The Light of the Exile' (960-1028 A.D.), many of the Jewish peoples continued to practise it; the Jews of Spain, for example, were polygamous as late as the 14th century A.D. The Jewish Encyclopedia, under polygamy, states:

*In spite of the prohibition against polygamy and of the general acceptance thereof, the Jewish law still retains many provisions which apply only to a state which permits polygamy. The marriage of a married man is legally valid and needs the formality of a bill of divorce for its dissolution, while the marriage of a married woman is void . . .*

There is no justification for reading sex equality back into the New Testament. It is not there.

Jesus healed women along with men; He praised a woman's faith and her love, He condemned the scribes 'which devour widows' houses'; He conversed with a woman in the same tones He used to men; He gave such women as do the will of the Father the rank of His mother and sister; He reiterated the Old Testament commandment to honour father and mother; He forgave the woman taken in adultery; and He softened the curse of the Old Testament: 'in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children' with: 'as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world'.<sup>2</sup>

He protected women from the lust of men; and He saved them from being cast aside in divorce, except for adultery: 'And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.' Again: 'And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another she committeth adultery.'<sup>3</sup>

But nowhere in the New Testament do we find any slightest indication as to the sexes being equal. On the contrary, the New Testament declares woman the inferior: '[man] is the image and glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.'<sup>4</sup> 'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.'<sup>5</sup> 'Let your women keep silence in the

churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak . . . And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.’<sup>6</sup> ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so *let the wives be* to their own husbands in everything.’<sup>7</sup>

Christian practice down to our times has been based on the belief that woman (Eve) is the destroyer of God’s image, man; that she is the devil’s gateway and a painted hell – see the Church fathers for these and other metaphors; that she is mentally and physically deficient; that marriage is evil, although preferable to licence; that children are born in sin. Chivalry and the worship of Mary, both imports from the East, had little appreciable effect on the status of the average Christian woman.

Anyone who believes that Christianity teaches sex equality has only to study the history of the Woman Suffrage movement. The dates alone tell the story. An early, revered landmark in the evolution of women’s rights is Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, inspired by France’s ‘Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity’ and brought out in 1792. On July 19, 1848, the first Women’s Rights Convention met at Seneca Falls, New York, at the home of Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton. However, the famous gathering at Badasht, Khurásán, Persia – which posterity will recognize as an irrevocable break with the past, and in the course of which woman’s equality with man was unforgettably proclaimed – antedated this by a few days, or weeks.<sup>8</sup> It was at Badasht that the great Ṭáhirih (Qurratu’l-‘Ayn) appeared without her veil, and with solemn triumph, in the heart of a Muslim nation, addressed the stupefied gathering, crying out: ‘This day is . . . the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder.’<sup>9</sup>

Freedom for women was so dear to Ṭáhirih that she died for it. She was ‘the first woman suffrage martyr’. In August, 1852, she gave up her life, executed for her life’s work. In her last moments she said, ‘You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.’<sup>10</sup>

In 1867, in the case of *Chorlton v. Ling*, it was sought to establish that women were persons and as such entitled to the Parliamentary vote. The Married Women’s Property Acts were passed in

Great Britain in 1882 and 1893; prior to this the wife's legal existence was merged with her husband's: 'My wife and I are one, and I am he,' expressed it. (The reader should, however, refer to Mary R. Beard's *Woman as Force in History* for a thorough study of the field; as her title indicates, the author shows that women, far from being at all times a subject sex, have actively shaped history. This thesis is familiar to Bahá'ís; see for example a discourse delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912.)<sup>11</sup>

In the United States, the 19th Amendment, enacted August 26, 1920, gave American women the right to vote. It reads: 'The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.'

The New Testament does not teach monogamy nor condemn polygamy. John Milton's brilliant *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* establishes this. He states:

*In the definition which I have given [of marriage], I have not said, in compliance with the common opinion, of one man with one woman, lest I should by implication charge the holy patriarchs and pillars of our faith, Abraham, and the others who had more than one wife at the same time, with . . . adultery; and lest I should be forced to exclude from the sanctuary of God as spurious, the holy offspring which sprang from them, yea, the whole of the sons of Israel, for whom the sanctuary itself was made. For it is said, Deut. xxiii.2. 'a bastard shall not enter into the congregation of Jehovah, even to his tenth generation.' Either therefore polygamy is a true marriage, or all children born in that state are spurious; which would include the whole race of Jacob, the twelve holy Tribes chosen by God.*

Milton denies the 'twain shall be one flesh' verses, so often advanced as meaning monogamy (e.g. Matthew 19:5), any such connotation; he says in part, 'the context refers to the husband and that wife only whom he was seeking to divorce . . .' He advances Exodus 21:10 as clearly showing the sanction of polygamy: 'If he take him another wife, her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage shall he not diminish.' And he adds: 'It cannot be supposed that the divine forethought intended to provide for adultery.'

Milton continues:

*That bishops and elders should have no more than one wife is explicitly enjoined I Tim. iii.2. and Tit. 1.6. 'he must be the husband of one wife,' . . . The command itself, however, is a sufficient proof that polygamy was not forbidden to the rest, and that it was common in the church at that time.<sup>12</sup>*

Muhammad was the first modern feminist. The Qur'an gives women many and specific rights. As learned Muslims and Islamists have not failed to point out, this Book grants spiritual equality to believers of either sex:

*Truly the men who resign themselves to God (Muslims), and the women who resign themselves, and the believing men and the believing women, and the devout men and the devout women, and the men of truth, and the women of truth, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the men who give alms and the women who give alms, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the chaste men and the chaste women, and the men and the women who oft remember God: for them hath God prepared forgiveness and a rich recompense.'<sup>13</sup>*

In the Qur'an, Adam is as guilty as Eve; Satan seduced them both and in another passage Adam is the one deceived. In women God has placed 'abundant good'. Men are bidden to 'reverence the wombs that bear you'.<sup>14</sup>

Women inherit and own property and act as witnesses; they receive alimony and widows also receive a provision. Divorce is discouraged; according to a *ḥadīth* (oral tradition) it is lawful, but abhorred by God; arbitration is enjoined to forestall divorce: 'And if ye fear a breach between man and wife, then send a judge chosen from his family, and a judge chosen from her family: if they are desirous of agreement, God will effect a reconciliation . . .' The love between man and wife is one of the signs of God: 'And one of His signs it is, that He hath created wives [mates] for you of your own species, that ye may dwell with them, and hath put love and tenderness between you.'<sup>15</sup>

Women are to be protected from lust;<sup>16</sup> men are to live 'chastely . . . and without taking concubines'.<sup>17</sup> Monogamy is enjoined, since the Text states: 'marry *but* two, or three, or four; and if ye *still* fear that ye shall not act equitably, then one only'.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere

the text of the Qur'án states that such equitable action would be impossible: 'And ye will not have it at all in your power to treat your wives alike, even though you fain would so do . . .'

In spite of woman's tremendous advance under Islám, in the law of Muḥammad, as in that of Moses and Jesus, men are superior to women and the wife is subject to the husband; the Qur'án teaches:

*Men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God hath gifted the one above the other, and on account of the outlay they make from their own substance for them . . . chide those for whose refractoriness ye have cause to fear . . . and strike them: but if they are obedient to you, then seek not occasion against them.*<sup>19</sup>

Other verses show that women 1300 years ago had not achieved equality with men.<sup>20</sup>

We cannot foresee where the Bahá'í principle of sex equality will lead; it is new, and connotes vital changes in the social structure. Up to now, man – and at times, perhaps, women, for the matriarchate in its broader sense is arguable – has been dominant. Now at last a male-female check and balance system is established.

Anyhow, the implications are important for world peace. Man's domestic dominance may well have been a contributive cause of war; the home pattern of aggression, resentment and retaliation is similar to that which on the world scale develops as war. Moreover, most languages are weighted with the idea of male superiority, and the child is taught to disparage female opinion, which means also to disparage woman's antipathy to war.

Here are some aspects of the picture as envisaged by Bahá'ís: 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that not only man, but woman, is created in the image and likeness of God: "The "image" and "likeness" of God applies to her as well.' He shows that stages of life lower than man do not treat the female as inferior:

*Among the myriad organisms of the vegetable and animal kingdoms, sex exists but there is no differentiation whatever as to relative importance and value . . . If we investigate impartially we may even find species in which the female is superior or preferable to the male . . . The male of the date palm is valueless while the female bears abundantly . . . The male of the animal kingdom does not*

*glory in its being male and superior to the female. In fact equality exists and is recognized. Why should man, a higher and more intelligent creature deny and deprive himself of this equality the animals enjoy?*<sup>21</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*God does not inquire 'Art thou woman or art thou man?' He judges human actions. If these are acceptable at the threshold of the Glorious One, man and woman will be equally recognized and rewarded.*

And elsewhere:

*In some countries man went so far as to believe and teach that woman belonged to a sphere lower than human. But in this century which is the century of light . . . God is proving to the satisfaction of humanity that all this is ignorance and error; nay, rather, it is well established that mankind and womankind as factors of composite humanity are co-equal and that no difference in estimate is allowable . . . The conditions in past centuries were due to woman's lack of opportunity . . . She was . . . left in her undeveloped state.*<sup>22</sup>

Few persons or institutions today practise the Bahá'í teaching of educating the daughter rather than the son if it is impossible to provide education for both; during the war, for example, crowded American schools were not unknown to favour male candidates, neglecting the female. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*The education of woman is more necessary and important than that of man, for woman is the trainer of the child from its infancy . . . The mothers are the first educators of mankind; if they be imperfect, alas for the condition and future of the race.*<sup>23</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not accept the argument of male superiority based on the size of the brain:

*Some philosophers and writers have considered woman naturally and by creation inferior to man, claiming as a proof that the brain of man is larger and heavier than that of woman. This is frail and faulty evidence inasmuch as small brains are often found coupled with superior intellect and large brains possessed by those who are ignorant, even imbecile.*<sup>24</sup>

The Master affirms that woman should not be considered inferior because she does not go to war, and adds:

*Yet be it known that if woman had been taught and trained in the military science of slaughter she would have been the equivalent of man even in this . . . But God forbid! . . . for the destruction of humanity is not a glorious achievement . . . Let not a man glory in this, – that he can kill his fellow-creatures; nay, rather, let him glory in this, that he can love them.*<sup>25</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes a striking difference between man's psychology and woman's. He states that man is more inclined to war than woman; that woman, once she becomes fully effective in society, will block war. Women, then, do not derive from warfare the psychological satisfactions obtained from it by men, and their repugnance to war should be implemented to keep the peace:

*Strive that the ideal of international peace may become realized through the efforts of womankind, for man is more inclined to war than woman, and a real evidence of woman's superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of Universal Peace.*<sup>26</sup>

*The mother bears the troubles and anxieties of rearing the child; undergoes the ordeal of its birth and training . . . Therefore it is most difficult for mothers to send those upon whom they have lavished such love and care, to the battlefield . . . So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world . . . war will cease; for woman will be the obstacle and hindrance to it. This is true and without doubt.*<sup>27</sup>

What 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches regarding the effect of constant negative environmental suggestion on woman should be especially pondered. Everywhere woman is battered down by depressing suggestion – that she is sick, rattle-brained, incompetent, that she ages quicker than man, and so on. One sees here the same type of poisonous social suggestion which attacks black American citizens.<sup>28</sup> This gifted people (whom North America will some day recognize as one of her most valuable population elements) is continually being told in thousands of subtle ways – in books, linguistic expressions, movies, the theatre, from lecture platforms – by the majority that they have no future, must stay in their 'place', are

biologically unfit, etc. The wholesome suggestion established by black leaders – successful artists, writers, educators, sports champions and the rest – is extremely important. A fact is irrefutable; it is there for people to see. In the same way one successful woman gives the lie to all the old husbands' tales of woman's inferiority:

*The only remedy is education, opportunity; for equality means equal qualification . . . the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, as if her attainment to equality was creationally impossible . . . If a pupil is told that his intelligence is less than his fellow-pupils, it is a very great drawback and handicap to his progress. He must be encouraged to advance . . .*<sup>29</sup>

Since work in future will be allotted only on the basis of knowledge and skill, there is no need to particularize here; it is interesting, however, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá especially recommends the 'industrial and agricultural sciences' for women.<sup>30</sup>

Polygamy inevitably connotes woman's inferiority. Monogamy is Bahá'í law. The marriage contract is a partnership of two equals; neither agrees to obey the other, and neither belongs to the other; one individual cannot own another.

Women, under Bahá'í law, are accorded a few exemptions in their religious observances. Furthermore, a few restrictions apply to women: women inherit a lesser share than men, although this is not mandatory if an individual prefers to distribute his property otherwise,<sup>31</sup> and women do not serve in the Universal House of Justice, although they serve on the Local and National Houses, and the members of the last-named elect the members of the Universal body. Of this non-membership in the Universal House of Justice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said the reason 'will presently appear, even as the sun at midday'.<sup>32</sup> It does not affect woman's status of equality, since the highest rank a Bahá'í can attain, that of Hand of the Cause, is open to women as well as men.



1. Genesis 3:16
2. Luke 13:12; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:47 and Matthew 26:13; Luke 20:47; John 4:10; Matthew 12:50; Matthew 19:19; John 8:11; Genesis 3:16; John 16:21
3. Matthew 12:50; Matthew 19:19; Mark 10:12
4. 1 Corinthians 11:7-8
5. 1 Timothy 2:12-14
6. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35
7. Ephesians 5:22-24
8. The incident of Niyála, which occurred just after the Conference at Badasht, took place about July 17, 1848. (*Dawn-Breakers*, p. 301)
9. *Dawn-Breakers*, p. 296
10. *God Passes By*, p. 75
11. *Promulgation*, pp. 131-2
12. John Milton, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, translated by Charles R. Sumner, (Boston, 1825), pp. 302-23, passim.
13. Qur'án 33:35. Rodwell's translation.
14. *ibid.* 7:20; 20:118; 4:23; 4:1
15. *ibid.* 4:8 and 4:13; 2:282; 2:233 and 2:242; 2:241; 4:39; 30:20
16. *ibid.* 24:30
17. *ibid.* 5:7. This is Rodwell's translation; Sale parallels Rodwell here; A. Yúsuf 'Alí translates, 'Chastity, not lewdness, Nor secret intrigues.' A fourth version is, 'Without taking (other) companions.'
18. Qur'án 4:3. A. Yúsuf 'Alí's note on this reads: "The unrestricted number of wives of the "Times of Ignorance" was now strictly limited to a maximum of four, provided you could treat them with perfect equality, in material things as well as in affection and immaterial things. As this condition is most difficult to fulfil, I understand the recommendation to be towards monogamy.' (The Holy Qur'án I, 179, n. 509)
19. Qur'án 4:38. A. Yúsuf 'Alí translates: 'beat them (lightly).' Sale: 'and chastise them.' Wife beating was of course legal in Christian countries. Yúsuf 'Alí's translation of 4:38 begins: 'Men are the protectors . . . of women, Because . . . They support them'; he translates 2:228: 'But men have a degree (of advantage) over them.' His note on 2:228 shows clearly the non-equality involved: 'The difference in economic position between the sexes makes the man's rights and liabilities a little greater than the woman's . . . in certain matters the weaker sex is

entitled to special protection.' (op. cit., I, 90, n. 255). The Bahá'í Faith, it goes without saying, does not consider one sex 'weaker' than the other. (Cf. *Promulgation* pp. 72-3)

Sale translates the passages: 'Men shall have the preeminence above women . . .' (4:38) and 'the men ought to have a superiority over them' (2:228). A leading contemporary Islamist translates: 'Men are in charge of women (lit., they are standers over them)' (4:38) and comments on the meaning of 2:228: 'Man is the creditor, woman the debtor.'

20. Qur'án 43:17-18; 2: 228
21. *Promulgation*, pp. 72-3
22. *ibid.* p. 129
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.* p. 277
25. *ibid.* p. 72
26. *ibid.* p. 278
27. *ibid.* p. 130
28. In the United States, the rise of women is in fact bound up with the rise of the American Negro race. It was to emancipate the black that early women leaders needed public platforms – and were opposed by the churches, who suffered them not to teach. This parallel development is thought-provoking: one oppressed group arising to serve the other; both, so far and to a certain extent, victorious.  
 Certain of the words addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to women are identical in sense with those He spoke to the black people; to the latter He said: 'In the estimation of God there is no distinction of color; all are one in the color and beauty of servitude to Him. Color is not important; the heart is all important . . . The mineral kingdom abounds with many-colored substances and compositions but we find no strife among them on that account. In the kingdom of the plant and vegetable, distinct and variegated hues exist but the fruit and flowers are not in conflict for that reason . . . In the animal kingdom also we find variety of color . . . They do not make difference of color a cause of discord and strife . . . They know they are one in kind.' And again: ' . . . the accomplishment of unity between the colored and whites will be an assurance of the world's peace.' (*Promulgation*, 41-43). And further: ' . . . every man imbued with divine qualities . . . is verily in the image and likeness of God.' (*ibid.* p. 67)
29. *Promulgation*, p. 73
30. *Promulgation*, p. 277
31. The Universal House of Justice, *Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, 1973), p. 43, p. 46, item O, and pp. 60-61, note 25
32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, (3 vols., Bahá'í Publishing Society, Chicago, 1909-1916), vol. I, p. 90

### Some Questions to Ponder

How does Gail's account of the history of women's rights make you feel?

Gail suggests that "everywhere woman is battered down by depressing suggestion - that she is sick, rattle-brained, incompetent, that she ages quicker than man, and so on", and 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "...the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, as if her attainment to equality was creationally impossible...". How have you been affected by "depressing suggestion" and men's assumption of superiority?

Do you think women have already achieved equality?.

A Bahá'í Pioneer of the East and West - Doctor Susan I. Moody  
(The Hand-Maid of the Most High)  
Amatu'l-A'lá

by Jessie E. Revell

"IN reality," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "faith embodies three degrees: to confess with the tongue; to believe in the heart; to give evidence in our actions." In writing a brief account of the life of Dr. Susan I. Moody the real faith, as quoted here, is outstanding.

She was born November 20, 1851 in Amsterdam, New York, of Scotch-Covenanter parents. Here she received the usual schooling and orthodox religious training of the "best" families of the day. After graduating from Amsterdam Academy, she taught school, later entered the Women's Medical College in New York City. After her parents passed away, she made her home with her brother in Chicago where she studied music. Still later, Dr. Moody studied painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago, then for three years in the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, then under the great painter Chase, in New York and finally, in the art schools and studios of Paris, but she was not, however, to make art her life work for instead of following the professional art career, for which she was well qualified, she finally yielded to the constantly increasing urge which she felt and concluded her study of medicine, graduating from a Chicago medical college.

During those early days of her life in Chicago, she met friends who were attending the first classes formed for the study of the Bahá'í Revelation, which classes she joined but did not become a confirmed believer until 1903, after making an intensive study of the teachings with Mrs. Isabella D. Brittingham, for the privilege of

whose teaching Dr. Moody was always exceedingly grateful.

The first Bahá'í Sunday School in Chicago was conducted by Dr. Moody and later she was one of the group of Bahá'í sisters who traveled up and down the outskirts of Chicago's north side in search of the best location for the now famous Bahá'í Temple in Wilmette, Illinois.

About 1908 a party of American Bahá'ís traveled to Írán to visit the Bahá'ís in that land, and while there some Íránian doctors asked if it would be possible to induce an American woman doctor to come to Tíhrán, Írán, to live, for the purpose of caring for the women of Írán who at that time were so deprived of skilled medical care. Stopping in 'Akká, Palestine, on their return, the Americans communicated this wish to 'Abdu'l-Bahá who asked them if they knew of such a doctor. The name of Dr. Moody was presented, and she received word without delay from 'Abdu'l-Bahá telling her she had been chosen for this great medical work in Írán. "I knew then," Dr. Moody often remarked, "why I had felt the urge so strongly to study medicine; I was obliged to study medicine in order to come to Írán." When the call came from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, she proceeded immediately on her journey.

Enroute to Írán, Dr. Moody stopped in the Holy Land to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá and receive from Him the necessary instructions and encouragement for the work ahead of her. At the time of parting He said, "You will need patience." He also further stated that He was sending her to Írán and whether living or dead He would always



Dr. Susan I. Moody, 1851-1934.

be with her. During that visit with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Dr. Moody made a vow which was, "All that I am and have, and all that I hope to be and have, I dedicate to Thee, O God." She also said that those three days in the Holy Land with the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, were all her life.

Dr. Moody arrived in Tíhrán November 26, 1909. 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentioned to some pilgrims the great love with which the Bahá'í of Írán had greeted Dr. Moody when she arrived in Írán, saying that between Enzeli, on the Caspian Sea, and Tíhrán there were nineteen relay stations and at sixteen of these there were Bahá'ís gathered to greet the western Bahá'í. Soon after her arrival a reception was given to her and Dr. Moody then knew she had an eternal home in the hearts of these dear friends.

During her fifteen years of service to the Cause in Írán, many were her difficulties and hardships but she had an inflexible

determination to accomplish what 'Abdu'l-Bahá wished her to do.

Often she prayed for the supreme patience which 'Abdu'l-Bahá had prescribed. She soon became fluent in the Íránian language. Frequent were her letters to America, explaining her work, enclosing photographs and telling of the lack of freedom and education of the Íránian women, of the custom of wearing the veil, etc., of the Bahá'í work of establishing a hospital, a girl's school and a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár there. In a Tíhrán newspaper in 1910 appeared the following:

"DOCTOR MOODY—AMERICAN LADY— not only does she know medicine, but also gynecology, obstetrics and women's diseases. Her good qualities and kind attributes, her love for her Persian oriental sisters, are all equal. Every day from morning till noon she is in her office, No. 10 Avenue Aladauleh, receiving her patients for consultation, examination and treatment, ex-

cepting Friday and Sunday afternoons, when she goes to the Hospital Sehat (Hospital of Health), where she meets the patients of the higher and wealthier class.

"We give the utmost thanks and gratitude to such a noble woman, to such a respected person, whose presence here is a great privilege to the country of Persia. On account of the great care of this blessed person, the sick of all nationalities, Moslem, et al., become well. We beg of God to keep this blessed and respected person with us."

Aside from her medical work, there was ever present in her mind the most important question of the education of girls. Often she would say, "My heart aches for the neglected ones." She found that many of the Bahá'í men were in full sympathy with her views and through Bahá'í co-operation and consultation a girl's school was started with an attendance of thirty pupils. It has now an enrollment of several hundred and is known as the Tarbiyat School for Girls. Someone has declared it to be "the greatest among all the schools in Tíhrán." One of the activities most dear to the heart of Dr. Moody was the raising of funds for an additional building. She wished this fund to be known as the "Kappes Memorial Fund" in memory of Miss Lillian Kappes, the first American Bahá'í teacher who died in Írán after giving nine years of untiring service to the School. Dr. Moody not only started the Tarbiyat School for the secular education of girls, she also founded the Bahá'í study classes for girls and herself visited these classes every Friday. These study classes were managed by trained teachers and in these classes many who started years ago in the first course are now teaching others.

Dr. Moody was loved and honored by thousands of people in her life time, among them being Major Robert W. Imbrie, who offered protection to the Bahá'ís and who suffered martyrdom by fanatical Muḥammadans. During the epidemic of influenza, the famine and a variety of dreadful conditions, Dr. Moody wrote to America, "Oh, what a mercy that we are alive and awakened and trying to serve in the Kingdom of Abhá." The secret of Dr. Moody's noble

and self-sacrificing life was the fact that it was built on the solid foundation of the Word of God. She had a keen spiritual perception, a pure and undefiled conception of the Bahá'í teachings, and a desire to render instant obedience. She was humble, selfless, and her sense of justice was outstanding.

After fifteen years of unique service in Írán, Dr. Moody returned to America until conditions in Tíhrán would improve and enable her to resume her work. Accompanied by Miss Elizabeth H. Stewart she made a visit in Haifa and there the writer joined them. Dr. Moody was the first of the four American Bahá'í women to go to Írán and survived the longest.

Dr. Moody, Miss Stewart and the writer arrived in New York City in January, 1925, where the Bahá'ís had arranged a reception at the Hotel Waldorf Astoria. Calmly, yet with the dramatic emphasis which always surrounds one who has actually participated in stirring events, Dr. Moody related her experiences in Tíhrán. After this reception she remarked to the writer, "To return to America and receive such love from the friends, is worth more than any sacrifice one could make."

That the remarkable work of Dr. Susan I. Moody in Tíhrán had made her a public figure in this country was well illustrated by extensive articles which appeared in the press. While in Oakland, California, she took a short trip in an aeroplane and the press published her picture with her pilot and an article in part as follows: "According to Dr. Moody, who contrasts her entry into Tíhrán, the capitol of Írán, in a coach and four where she went to spread the gospel of hygiene to the Muḥammadan women, and her exodus in a "flivver" of doubtful vintage twenty years later, she sees no reason why aerial transportation should hold any fears for the women of today."

During her stay in America from January, 1925, to November, 1928, Dr. Moody was interesting friends to help with the work she, together with the Tíhrán friends, expected to continue on her return to Írán, the Kappes Memorial School. She was a member of the Revell household in Phila-

delphia for about a year and during that time although she was then past 75 years of age, yet young in spirit and progressive and active, she studied Esperanto with a class.

In 1928, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Cause, sent the following instructions to Dr. Moody: "I pray that you may soon in the company of a capable and devoted American co-worker, resume your historic labors for our beloved Cause in Tíhrán." Following this suggestion on November 17, 1928, Dr. Moody, then 77 years of age, left for Irán, accompanied by Miss Adelaide Sharp of San Francisco, California, who volunteered her services at the Tarbiyat School in Tíhrán. To Dr. Moody's historic career in Tíhrán was now to be added the final chapter of complete consecration to Bahá'í service. They conferred with Shoghi Effendi in Haifa en route to Irán. Dr. Moody, named by 'Abdu'l-Bahá "Amatu'l-A'lá" which means the handmaid of the Most High, wrote of the welcome in Tíhrán in part as follows: "The friends came singly, in groups, committees, assemblies, more than seven hundred the first week, and still we are greeting many new and old friends, both women and men. Words fail to express the joy of our 'homecoming.' I wish you might have seen how that love overflowed in gifts, potted vines, plants, flowers, silver vases, confectionery, sweets of all kinds. Do you wonder why the two Americans were overwhelmed?" After her return to Tíhrán, due to age, her health gradually weakened but she continually worked for the Kappes Memorial School, and the friends called on her constantly. At the end of her life when asked for some statement from her regarding her service to keep for posterity, Dr. Moody said, "Let it go, let it pass into the Infinite."

Shoghi Effendi cabled to America as follows: "Passing dearly beloved Susan Moody deprives Bahá'í world (of the) far-famed pioneer who, through her indomitable spirit, ceaseless services, earned unique distinction. (She) forged first link in (the) chain uniting (the) spiritual destinies (of the) cradle of our faith (i.e., Persia) and (the) community (of its) stalwart defenders in (the) great American Republic. (I am)

instructing Persia rear monument perpetuating memory (of) her noble mission. (I) am gladly defraying whatever expense incurred as token (of) my admiration for community (i.e., America) to which she originally belonged and on which her sacred life shed imperishable lustre. Advise holding befitting Memorial gathering (in) Temple Foundation Hall."

Her funeral was attended by hundreds of Bahá'í friends. Scores of school girls, with flowers in hand walked in procession through the city for at least one mile to Gulastán-i-Javíd (Perennial Garden), the burying ground of the Bahá'ís.

Bahá'u'lláh in one of His Tablets says: "The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God and stood unwaveringly firm in His path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him." (VI, 483-6)

## Some Questions to Ponder

Susan Moody received “the usual schooling and orthodox religious training”. What enabled her to become so unusual and to do such unorthodox things?

Susan studied music, painting, sculpture, and medicine, at a time when most women were unable to get more than the most basic education. What factors in Susan’s life made her studies possible?

Revell says that “During her fifteen years of service to the Cause in Irán, many were her difficulties and hardships but she had an inflexible determination to accomplish what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wished her to do.” What do you think some of her hardships and difficulties might have been?

There was only one Susan Moody. What do you suppose happened to most Persian women when they became ill?

Revell says that Susan wrote many letters describing her work and the lack of freedom women faced in Persia. Some of these letters were published in the Bahá’í News in America, and many of them describe the difficulties Susan faced in trying to establish a school for girls. However, Revell also says that Susan “...found that many of the Bahá’í men were in full sympathy with her views”. If the Bahá’í men supported this idea, why did it take Susan years of determined effort to establish a girls’ school? Why did Susan have to work so hard at fundraising for an additional building? Why did teachers have to be sent from America? Why were there no Bahá’í classes for girls, either, until Susan started them and personally saw that they were maintained?

Given all of these facts, why do you suppose Jessie Revell nonetheless writes that the local Bahá’í men were in “full sympathy with her views”? Furthermore, why doesn’t Revell mention how the local Bahá’í women felt about Susan’s work?

Revell attributes Susan’s successes to her “keen spiritual perception, a pure and undefiled conception of the Bahá’í teachings, and a desire to render instant obedience”, and describes her as noble, self-sacrificing, humble, selfless, and with “an outstanding sense of justice.”

Given the work that Susan accomplished, what other qualities do you think she must have had?

Why has Jessie Revell chosen to emphasize that Susan was noble, humble, selfless, obedient, and spiritually perceptive?

What do you suppose Susan’s private life was like? What had she given up in order to do what she did?



### Supplementary Readings - Workshop Two

Now in the two lower kingdoms of nature we have seen that there is no question of the superiority of one sex over the other. In the world of humanity we find a great difference; the female sex is treated as though inferior, and is not allowed equal rights and privileges. This condition is due not to nature, but to education. In the Divine Creation there is no such distinction. Neither sex is superior to the other in the sight of God. Why then should one sex assert the inferiority of the other, withholding just rights and privileges as though God had given His authority for such a course of action? If women received the same educational advantages as those of men, the result would demonstrate the equality of capacity of both for scholarship.

In some respects woman is superior to man. She is more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more intense.

It is not to be denied that in various directions woman at present is more backward than man, also that this temporary inferiority is due to the lack of educational opportunity. In the necessity of life, woman is more instinct with power than man, for to her he owes his very existence.

If the mother is educated then her children will be well taught. When the mother is wise, then will the children be led into the path of wisdom. If the mother be religious she will show her children how they should love God. If the mother is moral she guides her little ones into the ways of uprightness.

It is clear therefore that the future generation depends on the mothers of today. Is not this a vital responsibility for the woman? Does she not require every possible advantage to equip her for such a task?

Therefore, surely, God is not pleased that so important an instrument as woman should suffer from want of training in order to attain the perfections desirable and necessary for her great life's work! Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven. Dignity before God depends, not on sex, but on purity and luminosity of heart. Human virtues belong equally to all!

*Paris Talks, 160.*

God is the Creator of mankind.

He has endowed both sexes with perfections and intelligence, given them physical members and organs of sense, without differentiation or distinction as to superiority; therefore, why should woman be considered inferior? This is not according to the plan and justice of God. He has created them equal; in His estimate there is no question of sex. The one whose heart is purest, whose deeds are most perfect, is acceptable to God, male or female. Often in history women have been the pride of humanity--for example, Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was the glory of mankind. Mary Magdalene, Ásíyih, daughter of Pharaoh, Sarah, wife of Abraham, and innumerable others have glorified the human race by their excellences. In this day there are women among the Bahá'ís who far outshine men. They are wise, talented, well-informed, progressive, most intelligent and the light of men. They surpass men in courage. When they speak in meetings, the men listen with great respect. Furthermore, the education of women is of greater importance than the education of men, for they are the mothers of the race, and mothers rear the children. The first teachers of children are the mothers. Therefore, they must be capably trained in order to educate both sons and daughters. There are many provisions in the words of Bahá'u'lláh in regard to this.

He promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman. Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Without equality this will be impossible because all differences and distinction are conducive to discord and strife. Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it. Mothers will not give their sons as sacrifices upon the battlefield after twenty years of anxiety and loving devotion in rearing them from infancy, no matter what cause they are called upon to defend. There is no doubt that when women obtain equality of rights, war will entirely cease among mankind.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 175.*

Today among the Bahá'ís of Persia there are many women who are the very pride and envy of the men. They are imbued with all the virtues and excellences of humanity.

They are eloquent; they are poets and scholars and embody the quintessence of humility. In political ability and acumen they have been able to cope and compete with representative men. They have consecrated their lives and forfeited their possessions in martyrdom for the sake of humanity, and the traces of their glory will last forever.

The pages of the history of Persia are illumined by the lives  
and records of these women.

The purpose, in brief, is this: that if woman be fully educated and granted her rights, she will attain the capacity for wonderful accomplishments and prove herself the equal of man. She is the coadjutor of man, his complement and helpmeet. Both are human; both are endowed with potentialities of intelligence and embody the virtues of humanity. In all human powers and functions they are partners and coequals. At present in spheres of human activity woman does not manifest her natal prerogatives, owing to lack of education and opportunity. Without doubt education will establish her equality with men.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 136.*

Therefore, strive to show in the human world that women are most capable and efficient, that their hearts are more tender and susceptible than the hearts of men, that they are more philanthropic and responsive toward the needy and suffering, that they are inflexibly opposed to war and are lovers of peace. Strive that the ideal of international peace may become realized through the efforts of womankind, for man is more inclined to war than woman, and a real evidence of woman's superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of universal peace.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 284.*

O handmaid of God!... To the mothers must be given the divine Teachings and effective counsel, and they must be encouraged and made eager to train their children, for the mother is the first educator of the child. It is she who must, at the very beginning, suckle the newborn at the breast of God's Faith and God's Law, that divine love may enter into him even with his mother's milk, and be with him till his final breath. So long as the mother faileth to train her children, and start them on a proper way of life, the training which they receive later on will not take its full effect.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 138.*

Equality between men and women does not, indeed physiologically it cannot, mean identity of functions. In some things women excel men, for others men are better fitted than women, while in very many things the difference of sex is of no effect at all.

*The Universal House of Justice, 24 July 1975, to an individual believer*

You will see that the directive is for the friends to be engaged in an occupation which will be of benefit to mankind. Homemaking is a highly honorable and responsible work of fundamental importance for mankind....

*The Universal House of Justice, 16 June 1982*

There are times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other.

*The Universal House of Justice, December 1980, to the Bahá'ís of New Zealand*

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities of both body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.

*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 149.*

The woman indeed is of greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work. ... The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she also has special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis....

*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, 102-103*

In some respects, women have astonishing capacities; they hasten in their attraction to God, and are intense in their fiery ardour for Him.

*'Abdu'l-Bahá, Compilation on Women, 37.*

Among the miracles that distinguish this sacred dispensation is this, that women have evinced a greater boldness than men when enlisted in the ranks of the Faith.

*'Abdu'l-Bahá, Compilation on Women, 42.*

### Workshop Three: Unveiling Women's History

-tea and cookies as participants gather

-Story: Tahirih

- have art from previous workshop on side table, covered
- have blank paper and a pencil on each participant's seat
- have a candle and one rose in middle of floor
- have seating at one end of the room, facing a big mirror, placed such that all participants can see one another in it
- explain exercise and ask for silence to begin
- veil participants and facilitator(s)
- ask for an opening prayer
- seat participants in front of mirror and light candle
- tell story of Tahirih (no discussion or questions allowed)

-Free-writing

- using the supplied paper and pencils, and still veiled, participants silently free-write for two minutes on each of these questions:
  - what is it like to look at something veiled?
  - what is it like to be behind a veil?
  - what can you see or do while veiled?
  - what in ourselves do we keep veiled?
- participants remove veils (maintaining silence)
- using the "Unveiled I" guidesheet in their workbooks, and a supplied bin of colored pens, participants free-write for a further 5-10 minutes on unveiling
- during this freewrite, unveil artworks and place in centre of room

-Discussion

- share responses to the freewriting questions
- discuss impact of veiling and silence on their experience

-Sharing Artworks

- each participant presents/explains their work to the group

-group is asked NOT to respond (question, thank, congratulate, etc.)

-Closing Remarks: the representation of Tahirih in the story reflects the gender biases of the historian; likewise, what we conceal or reveal reflects our gender biases; thus much of women's experience and feminine values are erased from our records of history and our public selves; this harms the advancement of women.

-introduction of this workshop's homework readings

-closing prayer

-handouts: "Magic Mama", by Marge Peirce; excerpts from Asking Questions (Bahíyyih Nakhjavání); articles about Genevieve Coy; extracts from the Bahá'í writings on self-knowledge

## The Story of Tahirih

We know so little about the women in our history, but there's one woman we remember. We name our daughters after her, we write small plays about her from time to time, and that woman is Tahirih.

So what do we know about this famous Tahirih?

Well, for a start, unlike most women of the time, including the great Asiyih Khanum, we know when Tahirih was born, in 1817. We know this only because someone thought to note down that Tahirih and Bahá'u'lláh were exactly the same age.

It's also pretty common knowledge that she was born in Qazvin, a city of honey-colored brick, bound by running water, in the gracious home of a very religious family, who named her Fatimih Umm Salamih, but called her Zarrin-Taj, Crown of Gold.

She was pretty and pleasant and clever, we're told, but these things are often said about nice little girls. What's more interesting is that her family fostered her cleverness instead of punishing her for it. She was allowed to eavesdrop on her brothers' lessons, and before long her father and uncle, who were both priests, were letting her listen in as they taught Moslem scripture to large classes of men. Even when she started butting in and contradicting them from behind the curtain, instead of kicking her out, they admitted their error and the truth of her point.

Remember, this was at a time when women were considered only slightly brighter than donkeys, and many clergy seriously doubted that women even had souls.

So how did this happen for Tahirih? Perhaps, whatever their faults, her father and uncle bore a greater allegiance to knowledge than they did to custom. Or perhaps the women of the household recognized Tahirih's gifts and used their covert power to persuade the men to make an exception for her, maybe just to get this strange child out of their hair, or maybe because they really loved her. Or maybe Tahirih was just so gifted that none of them could bear to waste such a frighteningly brilliant mind. One of her brothers has written "We, all of us, her brothers, her cousins, did not dare to speak in her presence, so much did her knowledge intimidate us."

Imagine, this, from a Persian brother, who ought to come first in all things, and be waited on by his sisters. How admiration and resentment must have coiled together in their hearts.



But even the indomitable Tahirih did not always get her way. And it's less well known, but true, that she was married against her will to an older cousin, also a priest, when she was 13 years old.

Think, for a moment, of someone you know, who is 13 years old.

When we come to this, her married life, history draws back in silence.

We know he opposed her views.

We know he gave her three sons.

And we know, after some years, she became a heretic.

You may have heard of this part; how she found some books by the controversial Shayki thinker, Siyyid Kazim, hidden in a relative's library, and, much to everyone's dismay, declared that she agreed with him, that the Promised One was indeed at hand. Her family thought this was ridiculous.

When she told her uncle she wanted to be the first woman to serve the new Prophet when He appeared, because Iran had sunk so low and women were educated so poorly, her family thought this was preposterous.

But when she started corresponding with Siyyid Kazim, and he named her Qurratul'l-Ayn, Solace of Mine Eyes, her family must have begun to get frightened.

But even in this, history mustn't be telling the whole truth, because how does a married woman send and receive letters from a stranger, a man, without an accomplice? Some male close relative who either loved her so well or was so under her thumb that he would do her bidding, no matter how outrageous. We know she was beautiful, and frank to a fault, but she also must have been able to charm the angels out of heaven when needs be, and must have had her allies, because there's no other explanation for how she got her way so often, how they didn't just beat her to a pulp.

And how she got her husband and father, suspicious as they were, to let her go off with her sister and brother-in-law to Karbila after 13 years of marriage. It's a pilgrimage to the holy shrines of the Imams, they're thinking, maybe it'll bring her back to the true Islam. Did they know her so little? Did they not know that Karbila was the home of Siyyid Kazim, the hotbed of Shayki thinking? Maybe they thought, there's no risk, here is her home, and her three sons, and everything she knows, abandoning all this would be unthinkable, even for her, even the indomitable Tahirih would not go so far as this.

Unthinkable, indeed.

And yet again, they misjudged her.

And history has glossed over this tear in the fabric of custom, has not inquired or speculated or discussed how or why she could do such a thing.

But the fact is, she got to Karbila, and went straight to Siyyid Kazim's school, and found that he was ten days dead.

She was 26 years old and already her poetry and scholarship was famous in Persia. Her brother-in-law, the only man with her whose authority she had to worry about, became a Shayki.

Remember, things were a mess. Siyyid Kazim was dead, his students were arguing about what to do, and a bunch of them decided they ought to go out and look for the Promised One. Her brother-in-law went with them.

History has found this unremarkable. In fact, most people know nothing about this whole period, and her role in getting rid of the only male relative with her that we know about is unknown. But this apparently left her for the first time in her life essentially unsupervised.

She and her sister moved in to Siyyid Kazim's house, with his family, and she took over the teaching of Siyyid Kazim's students.

Every day, she taught classes of men, from behind a curtain. Remember, this is Persia, where a woman's name could not be spoken by anyone other than close relatives. Allowing hundreds of strangers to hear her voice, let alone instructing them, was seen as blatantly immoral. If ever a shred of evidence of impropriety could have been found, Tahirih would certainly have been branded a whore and killed. But somehow in this, as in so many things, she prevailed.

But what is even less well known than this, and less remarked upon, is that at the same time, Tahirih also gathered and taught classes of women. She and her sister, and Maryam, the sister of Mulla Husayn, and Shams-i-Duha, whom you'll hear about next week, and who knows how many other women, locals and pilgrims, whose names history has not found worth mentioning, met and Tahirih taught them to read, and to write, to and analyze scripture, and to question the texts, and to question their culture, and their veils, and the power of their clergy.

And when, one night, Tahirih had a dream in which a young man stood in the sky reading verses from a book, and later found those same verses in a commentary by the Báb, when she then declared her faith in Him as the Promised One, and wrote to Him, and was accepted by Him as one of the Letters of the Living, the first group to become aware of Him, when this came to pass, naturally, Tahirih and her sisters taught the townswomen this too.

It was like spreading sparks in a dry field.

And the men of Karbila knew fear, and the clergymen were sweaty in their cloaks,

because it is the women who pass on the culture to the next generation, and they could feel the grip of their power slipping. The ignorance of women was their greatest weapon, and Tahirih was taking it from them.

On the anniversary of the death of the Imam Husayn, when all of Karbila - if not all Iraq and Persia - wept and wore black, Tahirih wore bright party clothes to celebrate the arrival of the Promised One. This final flouting of convention was more than they could bear, and Tahirih was put under house arrest for three months.

The history books do not note the irony of this punishment: how different is house arrest from a life in which you cannot leave your home without the permission of your father or husband, and without a close male relative as your escort? In this the rural women and the poor had greater liberty - their labour was needed outside or in the fields. But city women - like Tahirih - this was how they lived their lives. Nor did she suffer isolation; we're told that it was while under house arrest that she learned of the planned gathering of Babis at Badasht, so news and messages still reached her.

After three months Tahirih negotiated a release. How, we do not know. Soon after, she and her companions - a group of clever, unconventional, astonishing women, women who were never silent in their lives but whom history has given no tongue - she and who knows how many of them left Karbila. How many townswomen grieved behind their veils that day, while the priests led a mob to pelt Tahirih's howdah with rocks?

She had not seen her sons for three years, but she did not go home. Instead, she began working her way toward Badasht, seeking permission from local officials to travel, to enter a city, to leave. Her movement still depended on her ability to bend men to her will. This was not freedom; you are not free when your liberty depends on your skill at winning the indulgence of men.

At first, she got as far as Baghdad, where she had to wait for permission to leave the country. In the meantime, of course, she got busy. We're told that the leaders of the Shi'ih and Sunni Moslems, and the leaders of the churches and synagogues in Baghdad all came to argue with her, and all came away impressed and silenced. By a woman! Her former students in Karbila heard that she was teaching in Baghdad and many came to hear her, and many became devoted followers of the Bab. And all the while, she and her friends were gathering women, and teaching them literacy and scripture, teaching them to learn and to think for themselves.

Of course, it couldn't last, and soon enough she was under house arrest again, in the home of the Judge of Baghdad. This judge has said of her, "I see in her such knowledge, education, politeness, and good character as I have not seen in any great men in this century." Who knows if he, or any of the men who were forced to recognize Tahirih's abilities, then saw their own female kin any differently.

Before long, we're told, Tahirih was off, with thirty people seeking to go with her. In the first village she stopped at, 1200 people volunteered to do her bidding. In Kirmanshah, the Governor himself became a Babi, and the mayor and opposing priests took fright and had her party dumped in the desert at night with nothing but their veils and the clothes on their backs.

But you may know all this already. History rushes on, recounting such acts, skipping toward Badasht, while her greatest gift goes unnoticed, unmentioned, because it happened between women. It could be the best thing she ever did. Such a small, simple thing. But a few years later, in the cold of winter, a small family would be coming to Baghdad, hungry, frost-bitten, poor, with two small children, two brothers, one of them weak from long imprisonment, and one woman, enormously pregnant, and so weak and sickly that her husband was doing the cooking and her brother-in-law doing what cleaning and shopping he could. This family would move into tiny, squalid rooms in Baghdad, destitute and friendless. But within a few hours, the doors would open on women, veiled, smiling, bringing provisions, welcoming them, touching the swollen belly, clucking and rustling and doing what women do. They were friends Tahirih had made in Baghdad, Arabs, who came now and befriended the family of Bahá'u'lláh in their time greatest need.

But the story marches on. In Hamadan a messenger came from her father, asking her to come home.

Asking? Telling? Begging? All we are told is that she dispersed her followers and went, though unwilling, back to Qazvin.

How the women received her we cannot say. No one has written whether her mother and sisters and sisters in law and aunties wept and kissed her in a flurry of skirts and black braids and stories to fill in the years, the showing off of new babies, the recounting of injuries, deaths, births, and marriages, good fortune and bad, or if they received her coldly, drawing back from this woman-once-known, now stranger, strange in word and deed, her every direct look and firm step, the boldness of her carriage

marking her as other, her difference hanging between them like a reproach. And if they feared and wondered at her, whispering, watching her over their embroidery, and falling silent as she passed by, was she heart-broken and lonely for her soul-sisters, for their grit and laughter and intelligence and love? For that handful of Babi woman-friends whose presence bore witness that she was not crazy? Perhaps she was stronger, maybe she was one of those torches that burns hot and ruthless, burning away all need for human love and understanding, in the blaze of their single-minded devotion, in the white-hot purity and peace of their sacrifice. Or maybe she came home and wept in her mother's lap, her back heaving as she sobbed out the fear and frustration of being everywoman's hero, the weight of so many futures pressed on her small, plump shoulders.

History decided that this was insignificant. But it tells us how the men received her; that they gathered in a study, and her father, uncle, and husband argued with her, pushed her to recant her faith.

Her father must have loved her still. He said, "If you, with all the learning and intelligence you have, were to claim to be the Bab or even more than that, I would immediately agree with you and believe in you - but what can I do when you choose to follow this young man from Shiraz?" The agony in his heart, his twisting hands, his powerlessness.

She replied, "With the knowledge which I have it is impossible that I could be mistaken in recognizing Him Who is the Lord of the Worlds, Him Whom all people are waiting for. I have recognized him by the proofs of reason and the facts of knowledge. But this knowledge of mine is only a drop, compared with the great ocean of knowledge which is the Bab's." Knowledge I taught you, he is thinking, facts which you learned at my knee, O my daughter. He is asking himself, did I do wrong?

Her husband, who was now the mujtahid, tried to assert his claim over her, to snare her in the coil of his right by marriage to rule her person, to force her back into his home.

She was not compliant. "Say to my presumptuous and arrogant kinsman," she said, "to my proud and false-hearted husband, "If your desire had really been to be a faithful mate and companion to me, you would have hastened to meet me in Karbila and would on foot have guided my howdah all the way to Qazvin. If you had done that, I would have aroused you from your sleep of heedlessness and would have shown you the way of truth. But this was not to be. We have been apart for three years. Neither in this world nor the next can I ever be associated with you. I have cast you out of my life forever."

And so she dumped the mujtahid.

He fought it, of course, and tried to defame her, but somehow she prevailed. His fury cooled, perhaps, or she simply wore him down, but eventually he gave up and divorced her.

Do you think then that he allowed her even to see her three sons?

The third man there to challenge her was an uncle, and his approach was simple. He beat her. He cursed the Bab, and beat her, and she said to him, "O Uncle!" speaking very calmly, she said "I see your mouth filling with blood."

And then history says no more.

A thin trickle of her blood drips on the tile in the ringing silence of history, where writers turn away, ashamed, from the battered woman.

Tahirih's uncle became driven to squash the Babis, and her defiance inflamed his resolve. Perhaps you have heard this. Finally, a fellow mulla, outraged by the man's torture of innocents, caught him alone at his prayers in the mosque, and buried a dagger in his mouth, killing him.

The mulla confessed, but her uncle's heirs had a taste for blood, and every Babi they could find in Qazvin was jailed, then attacked by a mob. Their bodies were hacked into bits, and nothing was left to be buried.

But the blood that they thirsted for the most was Tahirih's. She had predicted this coming, they reasoned, and so she must be behind it.

She was confined to her father's house while her fate hung in the balance.

And then, we are told, Tahirih took a stand. "If my cause be the cause of Truth," she wrote to her husband, "and the Lord whom I worship be none other than the One True God, He will deliver me from this house before nine days have passed. If God does not deliver me from here, you are free to do what you wish with me."

And then she prayed. Perhaps she was crazy, to say such a thing.

Perhaps he sneered, and gloated, her husband, at the chance to kill this woman who had shamed him and to prove the falseness of her God in one fell swoop, or perhaps his heart shook as he picked up the gauntlet she'd cast.

If it did, he needn't have worried on her behalf.

History notes she was rescued, by the efforts of Bahá'u'lláh. And while that is true, there is more to the story than this, and probably more yet that will never be known.

To some things, men were blind. Those standing guard saw no threat in the stooped, veiled form, begging at the door for bread; it was, after all, just a woman, one black scurrying form among many, unworthy of notice. And once in the hall, no longer stooped, she was just one more veiled servant. She kept her hands steady, her step calm. When she softly opened the cellar door, no one stopped her, and when two black shrouded forms slipped into the street some time later, in no hurry, heads together, no man of honor would think of approaching them, forcing them to speak their names or show their faces in public. They would have laughed if it were not so dangerous. Who was to know it was Tahirih that walked by, and Khatun-Jan, her sister-in-law, a fellow Babi, who delivered her?

Who was to know, but the other women. Surely, as they crossed the courtyard, among the playing children, and passed the others, drawing water, spinning, chopping lamb, or mending, sitting on cushions drinking tea, surely there was a shiver of silence, a whispering of curses or blessings at their backs. But none of them barred the way, none whispered a word to the guard. Their silence changed the course of history, and so we see that even in Persia in such times women have always held some unwritten power. We are not and never have become sheep, even when forced to appear so.

Khatun Jan guided her friend safely through the city to a carpenter's house by the walls, where her husband waited. At nightfall they went over the wall, Tahirih hefting her considerable weight, and then to a slaughterhouse, where horses waited, and the beating adrenalin of an all-night gallop to Tehran.

History does not pause here, in its rush to the reckoning at Badasht, but consider what it might have been for them, that night: to straddle a horse, the wind whipping at their clothing, the stars and the pounding of hoofs and the dust and the exultation - had they ever been so close to the feeling of freedom? Had they ever even been on a horse? And then in the gates of Tehran at dawn, the heart-pounding moment as they slid under the glance of the guard, down the street into Bahá'u'lláh's home, Asiyih there to receive them, the laughter and nursing of saddle sores and then the deep, sweet sleep.

This is worth remembering, in my view. That night deserves its place in the history books. And Khatun-Jan, who made it happen; she flares up at the edge of sight and disappears, sinks back into that underground river of women who pushed history forward, whose stories and names died with them.

And so on it goes. We see Tahirih, with the young 'Abdu'l-Bahá in her lap. Perhaps you know the rest of the story. That she knew the station of Bahá'u'lláh then, when it was years before that veil would be lifted. That her quiet act of appearing unveiled at Badasht, her announcement, "this is the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder - I am the Word which the Promised One is to speak, the Word which shall put to flight the chiefs and nobles of the earth!", that this act was the pivot that swung the Babis into the next dispensation.

You must know she was imprisoned again in the mayor's house, but they could not keep the women from coming to her, that even in the midst of a wedding party they would cluster around her like moths to a flame, and they would learn. The Shah himself told her that he'd marry her and make her the guardian of all of his women, if only she'd become a good Moslem. She refused, of course, politely. When he found out they'd killed her behind his back, the history books say that he wept.

And kill her they did, of course. First they argued, one priest after another, until finally she told them, "Your reasoning is like that of an ignorant and stupid child. How long will you keep repeating these stupidities and lies?"

And then she prepared for death. She had always loved make-up, and pretty dresses, and perfume, and candies, sweet and beautiful things. She was 36 years old and she dressed for her death like a bride, carefully, in white silk.

She prayed alone through her last hours, and did not weep, and went to her death quite calmly, we're told. When the guard came at night to take her, she kissed the women of the mayor's house goodbye, her friends and would-be jailers for the past three years. They sent along a son to make sure she was not raped, and he stood by and watched the drunken soldiers bicker, watched her hand the man a silk scarf, saying "you can kill me if you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women, " watched him strangle her with it, her limbs jerking, and quieting, watched the man kick her body in the side and chest, his boot-prints ugly on the white dress. And then he stepped forward, and saw that she was lowered into a half-dug well, and buried. The image of her white hand, upturned on the earth, of a pale crumple in the well, seared into his memory.



This is the story we're told, of a woman who died by the words of her own mouth, dropped like a stone in a well, like a stone that spread ripples on an underground river, ripples that turned into waves, waves that turned into a torrent of women with stories and voices and names that are breaking the surface of history, that are pushing through veils, to hear one another, and be heard.

(Based on information found in Tahirih The Pure One, by Martha Root; The Babi and Bahá'í Religions, ed. Moojan Momen; Dawn Over Mount Hira and Other Essays, by Marzieh Gail; Robe of Light, by David Ruhe; and The Dawn Breakers, by Nabil-i-Azam.)

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Freewriting Aid

Unveiled I....

feel

am

want

need

seek

believe

“Magic Mama”

from My Mother's Body, by Marge Piercy

© Alfred A. Knopf, 1988

The woman who shines with a dull comfortable glow.  
The woman who sweats honey, an aphid  
enrolled to sweeten the lives of others.

The woman who puts down her work like knitting  
the moment you speak, but somehow gets it done  
secretly in the night while everyone sleeps.

The woman whose lap is as wide as the Nile  
delta, whose flesh is a lullaby  
of goosedown petals lacking the bite

of menace real lullabies ride on  
(if the bough breaks, birds  
and butterflies pecking out his eyes).

Whose own eyes are soft-focus mirrors.  
Whose arms are bolsters. Whose love  
is laid on like the municipal water.

She is not the mother goddess, vortex  
of dark and light powers with her consorts.  
her hungers, her favorites, her temper

blasing the corn so it withers in the ear.  
her bloody humor that sends the hunter fleeing  
to be tracked and torn by his hounds,

the great door into the earth's darkness  
where bones are rewoven into wheat,  
who loves the hawk as she loves the rabbit.

Big mama has no power, not even over herself.  
The taxpayer of guilt, whatever she gives  
you both agree is never enough.

She is a one-way street down which pour  
parades of opulent gifts and admiration  
from a three-shift factory of love.

Magic mama has to make it right, straighten  
the crooked, ease pain, raise the darkness,  
feed the hungry and matchmake for the lonesome

and ask nothing in return. If you win  
you no longer know her, and if you lose  
it is because her goodness failed you.

Whenever you create big mama from another  
woman's smile, a generosity of spirit working  
like yeast in the inert matter of the day,

you are stealing from a woman her own ripe  
grape sweet desire, the must of her fears,  
the shadow she casts into her own future

and turning her into a diaper service,  
the cleaning lady of your adventure.  
Who thanks a light bulb for giving light?

Listen, your mother is not your mother.  
She is herself and unmothered. It is time  
to take the apron off your mind.

Excerpts from Asking Questions, pp. 86-103  
by Bahíyyih Nakhjavání

“When Táhirih enters the room filled with eighty men, many of whom are scholars and trained priests, and when they see she is unveiled, they have to face their own lust, their own cupidity, their own narrow-mindedness and greed. That is why some of them leave and never return. That is presumably why one of them slits his throat with horror. ...”

“Veils, according to Bahá’í terminology, are those delusions that we carry around based on false assumptions or misconceptions of reality. When choices or decisions are perceived through such a delusive medium the outcome is generally dim. Neither we nor anyone else benefits and frequently great harm is done. What is alarming about this process is that we very often assume the veil without questioning its validity. You might almost imagine that there was something in us inclined towards veils, but maybe that thought too is an illusion. It is like believing that a certain state is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ just because we have never seen an alternative to it. The most disturbing consequence of veils is that we think by their means we are avoiding choices when in fact we are giving ourselves false ones. ...”

“To accept [veils] is to become a prisoner of false premises; to impose them on others reveals how much a prisoner one is oneself. Not surprisingly, one’s own veils can be rent only by oneself; they are self-delusions and require self-knowledge if they are to be removed. However well-meaning our friends, however supportive the community around us, however enlightened the society or utopian the world, we remain swathed so long as our individual will is not engaged.

There is in the symbol of the veil another less abstract fear, a cultural connotation which also leaves its traces in a Bahá’í context. The veil in Islamic countries has traditionally been associated with female exclusion. It is a woman’s thing. Not only does it separate her from the power centers of society, bound to a narrow and domestic world but it also symbolizes her vulnerability to men outside her world. Her veil provides her with the appearance of unassailable virtue and protects her from lascivious and greedy eyes. The reason she wears it is because she believes the eyes must be greedy, men must be lascivious and her virtue will be assailed. The veil, therefore, summarizes all that women feel and fear in a male-dominated society.

Finally, there is a third aspect to the word, in the present context which concerns the idea of oppression. Veils have this connotation not only because of their association with women but also because of the mental and psychological oppression

they symbolize for anyone. The veil is the fear that separates us from the light, that chokes the light itself, that cloaks the mind's eye in chosen doubt instead of darkened certainty. We are both unknown to ourselves and unknowing when we are veiled. Ignorance encourages fear, even when freely chosen. ..."

"Táhirih was the daughter of a mullá, and due to her extraordinary intellectual abilities, had earned herself the education of a priest; but she was a woman, and it is this conjunction between women and fear touched upon earlier that we must finally explore. The fact of Táhirih's femininity could never have been far from people's thoughts at Badasht. It would have been difficult for men of such a time and place, with their background and education, trained as so many were to become priests, to have totally ignored her sex in revering her knowledge. Many indeed chose not to revere her knowledge because of her sex. Even if a number of them succeeded in abstracting her totally into a myth - 'the very incarnation of Fátimih' - her face was a sufficient symbol, within the Islamic tradition, of her sexuality. Small wonder then that some of those present 's'enveloppèrent la tête de leur vêtement pour ne point voir le visage de son Altesse la Pure.' [hid their heads in their clothes so as not to see the face of the Pure One]

No doubt, therefore, a large percentage of that audience, unaware of the immense spiritual significance of the One in Whose presence they were sitting, uncertain even in retrospect perhaps that the episode might have been 'a God-sent test designed to separate the true from the false and distinguish the faithful from the disloyal', saw the confrontation between Quddús and Táhirih primarily on sexual grounds. Should Quddús refuse to submit to the request of a woman because she was his inferior? Could a woman possessed of such immense spiritual powers be a man's superior? For some present, Quddús would have been perfectly justified in the rudeness of his reply, the arrogance of his refusal, simply because of his sexual superiority. Even the implicit violence written across his face at Táhirih's cataclysmic entrance - 'holding the unsheathed sword in his hand, his face betraying a feeling of inexpressible anger...as if he were waiting for the moment when he could strike his fatal blow at Táhirih' - seems to reverberate with this implied sexual outrage, a violence that in psychological terms is rooted in the threat of castration, the impulse to punish by rape.

We cannot underestimate the sexual impact of this confrontation or ignore the flood of intense and pent-up sexual emotions that surge within this episode. We should not too hastily push its significance into dimly understood abstractions or adopt Shoghi Effendi's terminology without recognizing its roots. None of the issues he raises - the 'departure from the time-honored traditions', the 'revolution

in...outlook, habits, ceremonials and manner of worship' - can be fully grasped if we try to dilute the basic challenge posed by the principle of sexual equality in this context. It was not Táhirih's station only, nor her action merely, not even her words that caused the consternation; it was her body. It is one thing to accept the concept of equality as a theory; is it quite another to be told what to think by that female body, by someone like your wife or your mother or your sister. The profound threat which this imposes on men, the fear it incites which has its roots in some earlier time, some deeper and subconscious issues, all add fuel to the fires of fanaticism that raged about the Bábí community. The women too would fear such ideas with equal if not more virulent ferocity. They would cling to their veils and revile their sisters who did not, because by their antagonism they could prove their faithfulness to the old law thereby earning honor, as Delilah did, from the old priests. The veil was, finally, the symbol of sexual fear." ...

"It might be useful one last time to consider the stirring call of this 'trumpeter' as Shoghi Effendi calls her, 'the noblest of her sex [whose] call...was the death-knell of the twelve hundred year old law of Islam.' Here she is, a woman, claiming to be that immaculate, hitherto all-male Word 'which the Qá'im is to utter'. She is claiming to be the Word that has been associated with the station of the Son of God whose interpretation has depended on those lesser sons of God, the priests. She is claiming to be everything which in past dispensations has been associated with patriarchy: the symbol of God's Revelation, God's Word and God's Law. ..."

"It is an earth-shattering claim. If she is the Word, and the Qá'im is to utter it, is not her expression and her defiance of the old order, her unrestraint and courage in embracing the new, the very message of the age? In what way, then, does this message challenge the men and women that hear it?"

### Some Questions to Ponder

Bahíyyih Nakhjavani describes veils as “those delusions that we carry around based on false assumptions or misconceptions of reality.” How do we veil ourselves? What impact does this have?

How do we remove veils?

Why are we veiled?

Táhirih forced those at Badasht to confront their fear of a woman's body. Does this fear still persist? In what form? How does this effect our lives? How can it be confronted?



"Genevieve Lenore Coy"  
Obituary from Bahá'í World XIV (1963-1968)

Dr. Genevieve Coy, for more than half a century, served the Bahá'í Faith selflessly and unceasingly with distinction in a wide variety of roles, as pioneer, teacher, administrator and author. To have known Genevieve Coy was to have found a confidant and friend, and to have had one's horizons expanded beyond the limitations of self. She was keenly interested in the spiritual capacity within the individual, the creative energy with which the Teachings tell us all men are endowed, and through her written articles and spoken discourses Dr. Coy endeavoured to bring others to this awareness of their latent capacities.

Before she came into contact with the Bahá'í Faith in 1911, Dr. Coy composed a poem, "Let Me Know Life", published in the early Bahá'í magazine, *Star of the West* (Vol. XXI, No. 4, July 1930, p. 101), of which the editors wrote: It was as if she had previously reached out subconsciously for truth and had arrived at an attitude of mind and spirit which made the truth of the Bahá'í Cause a complete fulfillment of her spiritual aspirations." One felt that Genevieve Coy's Bahá'í service was her grateful response to that fulfillment.

Of the many articles contributed by Dr. Coy to Bahá'í publications over the years, none is more precious than the account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, made between September 1-8, 1920, in company with Mabel and Sylvia Paine, and Cora Grey. Genevieve recounted this visit in several issues of *Star of the West* (Vol. XII, Nos. 10-13, Sept.-Nov. 1921, pp. 163-214). From her touching word portrait of the Master is derived, too, a portrait of Genevieve Coy:

"It is very difficult to remember much of what He said. Indeed, it was almost difficult to listen! I wished only to look and look at the beauty of His face! For that was what impressed me first, the exquisite beauty of the Master. It was like the most beautiful pictures we have of Him, with life and color added. His is a face of living silver—the wonderful silver of hair and beard, and the blue of His eyes. The side face is majestic and sweet and loving. It was that which we saw most of the time. The full face is more dignified; to me it seemed more awe-inspiring. And yet, when He smiled, it was most exquisitely friendly, and human! But He looked very, very tired . . . and yet the weariness was not, I think, a weariness of spirit. I cannot tell why I felt that way, partly because He can reach, as no one else can, the infinite sources of spiritual strength



*Genevieve Lenore Coy*

"I had no desire to speak to the Master; there was nothing that I could say. I do not know what happened in my mind and heart. There was no shock, no surprise, no sadness, no thought of my own faulty past. But I came to understand that for one who has been long in His presence, there can be no desire except to serve Him; that one's life would be happy only if one pleased Him; that one would be sad only if one grieved Him. I felt then that I had begun to learn—that the will to serve was becoming greater, as I had prayed that it might. . ."

In 1921, after the passing of Miss Lillian Kappes who had served as director of the Farbiyat School for girls in Tíhrán, the Master asked whether someone from the American Bahá'í community could be sent to Persia to carry on her work. "The Annual Convention of last year (1921) with His confirmation chose Miss Genevieve L. Coy, a specialist in the education of gifted children and teacher of psychology in one of the great State Universities, who his spring took her Ph.D. at Columbia University, New York," states the account of this incident in *Star of the West*. "During the year he has been studying Persian and preparing for her work of teaching English to the children in Tíhrán. She sailed from New York for Egypt,

May 10, 1922. She will stop in the Holy Land on her way to Persia." Under her able directorship the school continued to grow in reputation and stature and became the foremost institution of its kind in Persia. Dr. Coy's description of the Tarbiyat School appeared in an article entitled "Educating the Women of Persia", *Star of the West*, Vol. xvii, No. 1, April 1926, p. 50.

Upon her return to the United States, Genevieve Coy made a highly effective contribution to the work of the Cause, serving for a number of years on the Spiritual Assembly of New York City. A friend describes this period: "I had the privilege of serving on the Spiritual Assembly at a time when Genevieve was chairman. I was deeply impressed by her sensitivity to others; how she drew out the timid Assembly member and, with loving kindness, subdued the too vocal member. She was boundless in her patience with others. She was never quick in passing judgment but always considered the motives of the individual. It is obvious that her educational background, her training as a doctor of psychology, gave her a deep insight into areas of thought and behaviour with which the average believer was unfamiliar. Her compassionate and warm nature drew many to her for counselling.

"Not only was she a fine administrator, but an outstanding teacher as well. Her own thirst for knowledge was contagious and a like thirst rapidly developed in her students. She made any topic so interesting that soon one became fascinated with the Writings on the subject. Early in the Ten Year Crusade I remember that Dr. Coy gathered a large number of believers at the New York Bahá'í Centre and had each one select for study one of the pioneer goals of the Plan. We were asked to go to the public library and return with all the information we could obtain about our particular subject. Genevieve made an adventure of learning. As a result of that research project, many of the participating believers pioneered to distant goals during the Crusade."

Mr. H. Borrah Kavelin has provided this tribute to Genevieve Coy:

"I have the deepest admiration for Genevieve Coy with whom I was associated in service on the Spiritual Assembly of New York City from 1941 onward. Bahá'u'lláh has written: *'O Son of Man! For everything there is*

*a sign. The sign of love is fortitude under My decree and patience under My trials.'* Fortitude, patience, detachment and integrity are the qualities that best describe the life and service of this devoted, highly competent and faithful maidservant of Bahá'u'lláh. Suffering for many years from a physical disability which caused her to walk with what must have been a painful limp, Genevieve Coy was always the essence of radiance and serene acceptance of God's Will.

"As a distinguished educator in the field of psychology, she was able to relate herself closely to the Teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His example in dealing with the various problems that came before the Spiritual Assembly in the City of the Covenant, New York. She served on the Assembly for many years and was a tower of strength for all who sought her wise counsel. By nature, she was modest and self-effacing, but in relation to matters affecting the Faith she was a model of courage, conviction and assurance. Although shy, she had a wry sense of humour and was always a pleasant and cheerful companion.

"Her entire life was an example of total dedication to the Faith. Assuredly, her passing was an unqualified passport to the Abhá Kingdom where loving arms awaited her arrival."

A contemporary of Genevieve Coy records:

"Those of us who had the privilege of serving with Dr. Coy at Green Acre Bahá'í School of which she was senior administrator and chairman of the program committee, would perhaps single out this contribution as one of her great services to the Faith, if not her greatest. She transformed Green Acre from a vacation place, where people of different religious and philosophical persuasions met, to a school of education. Her experience as principal of the Dalton School in New York City, one of the first progressive schools in the United States, and her deep understanding of the Writings, contributed much to the success of Green Acre during the years she administered it. She was always considerate in her planning of the programs of Green Acre, taking into account the needs of those who were just approaching the Faith and of those confirmed and longstanding believers 'who had read everything'. She found a way of including everyone in the classes and curriculum and, avoiding rigidity, allowed for creati-

vity and exploration. But study one *must* if he or she were to remain at Green Acre. The school could well be a memorial to Genevieve Coy."

In 1957, Dr. Coy retired from the Dalton School and looked forward to the freedom retirement would bring, but after six months she had had all she wanted of retirement and at the Intercontinental Conference held in Chicago in May 1958, she was one of those who came forward to the platform and volunteered to pioneer to Alaska or Africa. Her physician suggested the warmer climate. She left immediately for Salisbury, Rhodesia. Her concluding years of service were to be performed on a third continent. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Rhodesia has written:

"Genevieve Coy came to South Africa as a pioneer very late in her life but was of tremendous service to the Faith during the period she lived here. While in Salisbury she lived at the National Bahá'í Centre for a time, enabling many Bahá'í friends to benefit from her vast knowledge of and experience in the Faith. She wrote two correspondence courses which were and are in wide use, one on Bahá'í History and one on character development entitled 'To Live the Life.'

"Genevieve was a devoted and dedicated soul, serving Bahá'u'lláh under great physical stress in the last years of her life in Salisbury. She was sadly missed by all when she passed away on July 31, 1963. How fitting that she was laid to rest next to the first African woman to accept the message of Bahá'u'lláh in Rhodesia!"

Genevieve Coy's life was a rich and faithful exemplification of one of her favourite passages from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*"How wonderful it will be when the teachers are faithful, attracted and assured, educated and refined Bahá'ís, well-grounded in the science of pedagogy and familiar with child psychology; thus they may train the children with the fragrances of God. In the scheme of human life the teacher and his system of teaching plays the most important role, carrying with it the heaviest responsibilities and most subtle influence."*

(*Star of the West*, vol. XVII, No. 1, p. 55)

DOROTHEA MORRELL REED

**"Here Is The Perfect Silence"**

by Genevieve Coy

Here is the perfect silence.

Above the white and blue of ancient walls,  
The silver censer of the moon swings in mid-heaven  
Faint fragrance of white jasmine is the spirit of all love  
Set free, - a still white flame within the crystal air.

Upon the seaward slope, the grove of giant pines  
Is etched in majesty against the moonlit night;  
Those tall black trunks are bars across the argent light,  
A high barred window set against the sky.

At sunset, when I knelt within the Shrine  
The windows to the west were walls of fire.  
Within my soul the flame of His great Name  
Was like a flashing sword, that severed all my past.

From this eternal moment -  
I knew myself before the Face of God,  
Too terrible His glory and too great His power!  
How shall one drop resist the ceaseless tide  
Of His celestial sea?

But now, when night is deep upon the land  
And the calm beauty of the moon  
Moves softly through the vast ethereal arch,  
Peace breathes through every atom of air  
And draws each living spark to one pure unity.

The Timeless holds this instant in His hand:  
"Be still, be still, and know that I am God!"

Here is the perfect silence.

## "The Need For The Education of Women In The Near East,"

by Genevieve Coy

WHEN an American woman reads in the books of Baha 'Ullah that both boys and girls should receive an education, she is likely to say to herself, "Of course! We have always believed that." When appeals come to us to contribute to schools for girls in the East, we think, "Yes, that is very good. I should like to help a little with that." But not until we have actually seen with our own eyes the condition of women in the East do most of us appreciate how great is the need for such schools. When a Western woman has lived for only a few weeks in the Orient she comes to a vivid realization of how fortunate it is for her, as a woman, that she was born in the Occident.

Suppose yourself to be an Eastern woman: what will your life be like? As a child you practically never play with boys. Your brothers have boy-friends; you have girl-friends; but the two groups never mix. You probably do not go to school, but if you do, there are never any boys there. And yet, with this ignorance of boys and men, you realize as you grow older that you must marry. There is no other occupation for you to enter; all the positions as clerks, teachers, doctors, etc., are filled by men. The life of an unmarried woman in the East is perhaps a little worse than that of the married one. You know that your parents will choose a husband for you; he may be twice as old as you are; he may be ugly, repulsive, cruel. But you will have no

choice in the matter. Unless your father and mother are unusually kind and progressive, you will be given to the man who pays the most money to your parents. Love and companionship in marriage, as understood in the West, are not even thought of in connection with your betrothal. On the wedding-day, after the ceremony, your husband entertains his men-friends; you have a party for the ladies. Not until after that will you meet your husband. Then imagine what he may be? Will he be kind, or cruel? Will he smile on you, or frown? How many other wives will he bring home to share the house with you?

After marriage, how will you spend your time? You must attend to the household; later you must care for the children. You may be interested in pretty dresses, in an occasional ladies' party. You will not read many books and magazines because you have had so little education. You will have few interests in common with your husband. You may never go for walks, or for bicycle rides, or for a swim in the sea. All these are impossible because you must wear a veil everywhere. Perhaps you go for an occasional carriage-ride, but, even though it be along a country road, you must have a constant sidelong glance looking for men, and should one of those wily creatures appear, down must go your veil.

A few stories about Eastern women may serve to make these conditions more vivid. In a certain city a young

girl who had been brought up by an uncle was married to a very old man. As was natural, she had no love for him, and she soon lost her heart to a young man whom she met secretly. Her husband learned of her love for the young man, and one day killed his wife, her uncle and himself. He killed his wife because of her love for the young man; himself, to escape punishment for the murder of his wife; the uncle, because he "should have brought the girl up better, so that she would not fall in love." A young Mohammedan girl became a widow, and later fell in love with a Christian. Her father had the young man killed, whereupon the mother of the Christian had the young widow brought into court and accused of the murder. It was only the intervention of influential friends that saved the girl from prosecution for a crime that had caused her the utmost horror and misery. A young girl was married by force to a relative whom she disliked very much. She was very unhappy and soon became ill. A child was born, but it died because of the weakness of the mother. For this girl there is no future but ill-health, misery and unhappiness. Such stories as the above may occasionally be told of young women in America, but in many parts of the East they are the rule rather than the exception.

Imagine the effects on the moral and spiritual life of a country in which such an attitude toward women prevails. There is no encouragement for the development of the finer, higher qualities in women. Man, lacking the utmost of aspiration that woman can give, fails to attain his own highest development. The early years of the children's lives are half wasted, because the mother is little more than a child herself. The whole social structure suffers from the lack of the intelligent service of half of the population. In this connection Abdul Baha says: "Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in re-

ligion and in society they are a very important element. As long as women are prevented from attaining to their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs."

The remedy for these evils lies in the education of the women of the East. Westerners can never understand the situation fully enough so that they may prescribe treatment. But when the girls and women of the Orient begin to share the educational advantages which are free to millions of children in America, they will be able to develop solutions for their own problems.

There are few schools for girls in the East and all of these are, by Eastern standards of money values, very expensive. To send a six or seven year old girl to a good school in Haifa, Palestine, costs \$150.00 a year for tuition. By the time the child is twelve years old it is necessary to send her to some distant school for the higher courses. A year in a school in Beyrout or Cairo costs at least five hundred dollars. I am told that to send a girl of Palestine or Syria to school for twelve years costs about four thousand dollars. Even in America only a small percentage of parents can afford to spend that sum in order that the child may graduate from high school. Of the Bahai parents of Haifa very few can afford such an expenditure and the same is doubtless true of all towns and cities of the East.

But even suppose that parents can afford to send a girl to the best schools the country provides, will the result be a satisfactory education? The Bahai friends of the Orient answer this question in the negative. They appreciate the education and training given by these schools, but they regret that the teaching in them is sectarian and limited, rather than universal and inclusive. They desire for their children an education which is free from all suggestion of racial prejudice. In the schools of the future they would teach not the re-

religious ideals and history of any one faith, but the fundamental truths of all the great religions of the world. An understanding and appreciation of the principles of the abolition of prejudice, of economic justice and of universal peace must become so deeply rooted in the child that no experience can shake her allegiance. Her whole nature should be interpenetrated with the ideal of the oneness of mankind and all that that implies. The lack of such a training in spiritual principles is especially unfortunate at the adolescent period, an age at which it is absolutely necessary here in the East to send the girls to schools at a distance. In the schools of the United States some of the universal ideals taught by Baha 'Ullah and Abdul Baha are being gradually introduced into the program of studies. It may be that in the future all these principles will be taught in the public schools and private schools devoted to such a program may never be needed. But in the Orient for many years to come the teaching of these ideas and attitudes will be found only in the private school, endowed by men and women who believe that the oneness of mankind" is a living reality.

In conclusion let me suggest briefly some of the elements which education for Eastern girls should contain: (1) Girls should be trained to be intelligent about their own health; this should include the introduction of games, sports, etc.; (2) the only "professional" life for Oriental girls will for a long time to come be that of wife and mother. They should be thoroughly educated in the elements of home economics—the uses and preparation of foods, the making and buying of clothing, the care and training of children, etc.; (3) in-

struction should be given in languages, literature, science, history, art, music, etc., which will prepare the girl to be a companion to her husband and a teacher of her children. At the same time these studies will arouse her interest in social situations and problems; they will also provide her with different kinds of recreation for her leisure hours; (4) the whole life of the school should tend toward a truly spiritual education, toward the ideals and habits of honor, kindness, love, service, reverence, etc. To these may be added such direct instruction in spiritual matters, religious history, etc., as may seem wise.

Of the four types of education suggested only the third is well provided for in most of the present schools for girls. Jenabe Fazel tells a story of a girl who had had only this type of training. She married, but she took no thought or care for the physical well-being and comfort of her husband. All day long she read books and magazines. One day, in some disgust, her husband said to her, "Do you think that literature will clothe me, and mathematics feed me?"

It is to the future Bahai schools that we must look for a well-balanced material and spiritual education for Eastern girls. In the founding of such schools it is the privilege of Western girls and women to assist. Through such help the Eastern women will be aided in obeying the instructions of Abdul Baha when he says, "Woman must endeavor to attain greater perfections, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all things in which she had been backward so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment."

## “Genevieve Coy,”

by O.Z. Whitehead

Not a great deal is known about Genevieve Lenore Coy's early childhood, but she was born in 1886 in a village near Chicago, Illinois. All we have is a comment she wrote later in life which states that, for reasons she could no longer clearly recall, she had, as a child of seven or eight years old, developed a great fear of death, for which she apparently had produced the following intriguing solution:

I thought a great deal about how I could avoid it, and finally decided that the best thing to do was to pray ardently that Christ would come again during my lifetime. I understood, from the teaching I had received in Sunday School, that when He came we would all be 'caught up into Heaven' with Him. If this could happen to me, I could avoid dying!<sup>1</sup>

While still a child, Genevieve became a serious student and remained one for the rest of her life. Deeply interested in spiritual matters, Genevieve wrote the following poem, most likely before reaching twenty:

Let me know Life!--  
Where sunlight sweeps the earth and seas tumultuous  
Fling banners of white shattered foam  
In challenge to the high veiled gods  
Who nod above that glorious strife --  
Let me know Life!  
  
For never by the dreaming rivers have I prayed  
With clasping hands, to those old sleeping gods.  
For peace and soft content --  
The future I have loved and not the past.  
Then rise! thou Guardian of the Future, rise!  
From far free ends of earth where dawn  
Has found Thee ready at Thy work  
Through the glad tumult of uprising millions, come!  
I hail a God with laughter on His lips  
And morning in His eyes.<sup>2</sup>

However, during the five years prior to 1911 when she first heard of the Bahá'í Cause, Genevieve seems to have experienced a period of reaction and disillusionment, becoming a sceptic and a materialist. At that time she was both teaching and studying in 'a great American university'. She subsequently related:

The very words 'God', 'spirit', 'faith', came to have an utterly disagreeable connotation to me . . . I was left with no standards, save a strongly unavoidable devotion to my work . . . Life looked utterly black to me, and I would gladly have disappeared from existence . . . And then, when it seemed that I had come to the end of the road, and that there was only darkness ahead, -- then the light came! I heard the story of the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá . . . All during the following days and nights those two great names rang in my ears, and a glory, as of a new dawn, seemed to fill my heart wherever I went. I read the books they had written. I talked with men and women who had come to love them; and then, like a gift from an unseen hand, came the realization that this glorious new vision was for me, as well as for the others.<sup>3</sup>

On 9 January 1919 in Haifa, Palestine, Shoghi Effendi translated this beautiful, encouraging Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

To the maid-servant of God, Genevieve L. Coy,  
Columbus, Ohio -- Upon her be [Bahá'u'l-Abhá]  
*He is God!*

O thou who hast sought guidance from the Kingdom of God!

Thy letter, dated October 24th 1918, was received. The purport was conducive to happiness. Praise be unto God, thou hast been freed from the fetter of agnosticism (I know nothing) which is indicative of utter ignorance, and hast hastened to the Realm of 'Verily, I know everything!' For heavenly souls acquire the power of perception and ultimately reach unto a station at which they comprehended the realities of things. Formerly they were agnostics; later on they became true and firm believers. My hope is that thou mayest attain such a station.

In that city, although the fire of the love of God has not yet been set ablaze, soon it shall become aflame, blessed souls shall enter the divine Kingdom, shall arise with righteous aim and chaste deeds in the service of the world of humanity, shall raise the call of the Kingdom and shall ignite a candle in every heart.

I pray in behalf of the inhabitants of that city and beg for them the light of supreme guidance, that spirits may be illumined and hearts be gladdened by the glad-tidings of God.

Upon thee be [Bahá'u'l-Abhá].

(Signed) ['Abdu'l-Bahá Abbás].<sup>4</sup>

In August 1920 Genevieve and three of her close friends, Mabel Payne, her daughter, Sylvia Parmelee, and Cora Grey, sailed from New York City on the first stage of their journey to the Holy Land. A vivid, moving account of their pilgrimage, by Genevieve entitled 'A Week in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's House', appeared in four consecutive issues of the Bahá'í magazine *Star of the West* from 8 September 1921. On the arrival of the four ladies at the old Western Pilgrim House in Haifa, late in the afternoon of Wednesday, 1 September 1920, the distinguished American believer, Emogene Hoagg, who had been a guest of the Master's since early in the summer, showed them to their rooms. The next day at lunch they were told that the Master would see them at four o'clock that afternoon outside the Tomb of the Báb. Genevieve recorded: 'As we rode up the steep road towards the Tomb, there was a strange mixture of love and dread and longing in my heart.'<sup>5</sup>

When the Master walked toward us, it seemed to me that I had seen Him come just that way at some previous time . . . It was a moment that one would prolong if one could . . . It is very difficult to remember much of what He said. I wished only to look and look at the beauty of His face! . . . The side face is majestic and sweet and loving . . . The full face is more dignified; to me it seemed more awe-inspiring. And yet when He smiled, it was most exquisitely friendly and human! But He looked very, very tired . . . And yet the weariness was not, I think, a weariness of spirit . . . I do not know



what happened in my mind and heart . . . But I came to understand that for one who has been long in His presence, there can be no desire except to serve Him; that one's life would be happy only as one pleased Him; that one would be sad only as one grieved Him.<sup>6</sup>

Early in the morning of Saturday, 4 September, soon after Genevieve and Cora had left the Tomb of the Báb, where they had spent perhaps an hour in prayer and meditation, during which an 'exquisite peace' had filled their hearts, the Master sent word that He wanted to see them in the house near the Tomb where 'Abbás Qulí, its caretaker, lived. The two ladies joined Him there eagerly, of course, and without delay. Genevieve has written:

The Master told us to eat. As we ate, He was silent . . . His beautiful profile was outlined against the window; his gaze seemed to dwell on distant 'Akká, - and I could not but think of those long years of imprisonment that He had spent in barred 'Akká. Some slight vision of all He had suffered swept over me. I knew then, beyond all question, that I had found Him as the Master. My spirit knelt in humility at His feet.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning, in the dining-room of the Western Pilgrim House, the Master gave the four American ladies this important advice:

You have come here, and every day you try to improve . . . You must become pure in heart. Then when you return to America, you must carry spirituality and inspiration with you. You must be like Jacob who inhaled the fragrance of the garment of Joseph from a distance. But more than that, you must be one who carries the garment, who spreads the fragrances of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Late that same afternoon the ladies again visited the Tomb of the Báb. Genevieve has written:

While the tall, black-robed Bahá'í from 'Ishqábád [in Russian Turkistán] chanted the Tablet of Visitation in Persian, the Master stood in the doorway, and the room was filled with a divine radiance of Love. At the threshold of that Tomb one may lay all burdens down. Life becomes simple and straight because one feels surrounded with Divine Love.<sup>9</sup>

On Monday morning at eight o'clock the Master sent Emogene Hoagg, the four other American ladies and some members of His household to 'Akká. Genevieve has described their visit to the Tomb of Bahá'u'lláh in these words:

We found ourselves in a large room, with a garden in the center. At the west end there were several windows, and floods of light poured down upon us from the glass windows in the roof. In the north-[east] corner of the room, a curtained door led into the Tomb itself . . . We knelt in the space before the door. I prayed . . . for the power to serve His Cause. Then I prayed for various people I knew who were in need of a vision of the greatness of God's love. And then for the Bahá'í friends in America<sup>10</sup> . . . Finally [Diyá Khánúm] . . . went to the front of the room, and opened the curtained door . . . Time's passing ceased for us. My very breathing was a dedication of myself to [Bahá'u'lláh].<sup>11</sup>

In *The Perfect Silence*, a powerful poem which Genevieve wrote, probably some years later, she has again referred to this same experience:

At sunset, when I knelt within the Shrine  
The windows to the west were walls of fire.  
Within my soul the flame of His great Name  
Was like a flashing sword, that severed all my past.  
From this eternal moment -  
I knew myself before the Face of God . . .<sup>12</sup>

Late in the morning of the next day the Master invited Cora and Genevieve to His room. After first expressing His regret that He had not been able to see more of them during their visit, He explained: ' . . . it is not the length of time that one spends here that is important. Some people stay a short time, and then go and do great service. Other people are here a long time, and they learn nothing.'<sup>13</sup> At this same meeting the Master blessed the ringstones and the rosaries which the two ladies had bought in Haifa and received from them letters which some American friends had written Him.

That evening after dinner the Master said good-bye to the four . . . pilgrims. He told them 'that His love, thoughts and prayers, would go with' them and said to give 'His love and greetings to all the Bahá'ís in America'.

Genevieve has related, 'I knew that I would not see Him again, but I felt no sadness or grief. His love . . . poured in a radiant flood about me, and held me suspended in a priceless moment, when time stood still, and I lived in eternity.'<sup>14</sup>

Later, at the annual Bahá'í Convention in spring 1921 Genevieve was chosen, with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approval, as director of the Tarbiyat School for Girls in Tíhrán, Persia - to replace Lillian Kappes who had died the previous December. During the next year Genevieve continued her work in psychology, obtaining her Ph.D. at Columbia University, New York. She used this time to gain some knowledge of Persian and prepare herself, as best she could, to teach children who spoke that language.

On her way to Tíhrán Genevieve made a second pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Since almost two months before her arrival there the Guardian had already left his home in Haifa for a necessary rest and extended his visit to Europe, she did not have the great happiness of meeting him.

In her Journal of 1 June 1922 Genevieve wrote:

To come back to the Pilgrim House is to come back home. Its dear peace and quiet fill one's heart. I love its high-ceilinged rooms - the faint fragrance that greets one - the cleanliness - the tiled floors, the beautiful rugs. As I sit here writing, I can see the top of the Master's house, above the wall.<sup>15</sup>

At six o'clock next morning Genevieve and Dr Luṭfu'lláh Ḥakím left the Pilgrim House and climbed up the Mountain of the Lord. On reaching the Shrine of the Báb, they entered it together. She has recorded: 'To be again in that place . . . what words can tell what it means to one's heart and spirit? It is so perfectly natural and easy to pray there . . . One realizes God so near, that one needs make no effort to find Him.'<sup>16</sup>

Directly after they had left the Shrine of the Báb, Genevieve and Luṭfu'lláh visited that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. She remarked: 'The Master's spirit dwells there in peace and love. One knows as never before the victory of life that never ceases, but only changes its form.'<sup>17</sup>

For the little over one year that she remained in Tíhrán, Genevieve served as Director of the Tarbiyat School for Girls. During this period she worked hard to establish it as ' . . . the foremost institution of its kind in Persia'.<sup>18</sup> Her efforts to teach there, however, were only partially successful. As the distinguished writer, Marzieh Gail, has remarked, 'She was perhaps too much of a scholar to teach girls from a relatively simple environment for more than a limited length of time.'<sup>19</sup> Genevieve's speciality was more in the education of gifted children and as a teacher of psychology.<sup>20</sup>

In a persuasive and informative article entitled 'The Need for the Education of Women in the Near East', which appeared in *Star of the West* of October 1922, after first describing the unhappy condition of most Eastern women, caused by cruel and inhuman customs and by lack of even minimal education for them, Genevieve concluded:

It is to the future Bahá'í schools that we must look for a well balanced material and spiritual education for Eastern Girls. In the founding of such schools it is the privilege of Western girls and women to assist. Through such help the Eastern women will be aided to obey the instructions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He says: 'Women must endeavor to attain greater perfections, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all things in which she had been backward so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment.

In her instructive article, 'Educating the Women of Persia', which was published in *Star of the West*, May 1926, Genevieve gave much praise to the important services which the Bahá'í teachers of the Tarbiyat School were performing for the young girls in Tíhrán. To prove her point, among other statements she wrote: 'A reactionary Minister of Education said to the principal of another school, "The Tarbiyat School is the best school for girls in Tíhran. Alas that they are Bahá'ís!"'<sup>22</sup>

On her return to the United States early in 1924 Genevieve settled in New York City near Greenwich Village. She was soon afterwards engaged as a teacher of psychology at the Dalton School, one of the first progressive ones in America. Around this time she contemplated marriage, but some difficulty arose and she did not do so. Throughout the thirty-three years that she lived in New York City she served the Cause of God unceasingly. Elected almost every year to the Local Spiritual Assembly, she was often either chairman or secretary of this body.

Doris Holley, who for many years lived near Genevieve, once told me: 'I loved and admired Genevieve. She was just, kind, honourable, dependable and unprejudiced. She was a real scholar with a fine intellect. She really lived the life.'

Genevieve spent every summer at Green Acre, the first Bahá'í Summer School in America. An estate of almost two hundred acres, Green Acre is situated on the bank of the Piscataqua River, in Eliot, Maine, about four miles from the Atlantic Ocean and near to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. At this famous, attractive school, where, in the course of His immortal journey to the American continent, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stayed for one week, Genevieve, from all available accounts, did most valuable teaching and administrative work. A contemporary of Genevieve's recorded:

Those of us who had the privilege of serving with Dr Coy at Green Acre Bahá'í School of which she was senior administrator and chairman of the program committee, would perhaps single out this contribution as one of her great services to the Faith, if not her greatest. She transformed Green Acre from a vacation place, where people of different religious and philosophical persuasions met, to a school of education . . . She found a way of including everyone in the classes and curriculum and, avoiding rigidity, allowed for creativity and exploration. But study one *must* if he or she were to remain at Green Acre. The school could well be a memorial to Genevieve Coy.<sup>23</sup>

Doris Holley has further remarked: 'Genevieve did not believe that the classes at Green Acre should be composed of lectures, but that the one in charge should encourage a general discussion. She was very good at bringing out other people.'

About 1940 Genevieve was afflicted with a progressive disease in her hip-bones. Although this disease, which must have been painful, caused her to limp, she never allowed it to interfere with either her Bahá'í service or her professional work.

Aside from the articles to which I have already referred, for over a period of more than twenty-five years, Genevieve contributed a number of stimulating essays – first to *Star of the West*, and subsequently, from 1935 onwards, to the newly established *World Order*.

In 'Science in the Child's Curriculum', which was published in January 1925, she asserted:

The true scientist is impersonal in his attitude. He learns to live above envy, jealousy, and hatred: . . . This attitude of unselfishly working toward an ideal is one that all Bahá'í young people will need to cultivate. In the great Kingdom of the future there can be no place for self-seeking, pride, and conceit.<sup>24</sup>

In 'Children's Purposes and Education', which she wrote three years afterwards, Genevieve concluded:

Many of us who became Bahá'ís after a childhood and youth in which much of our effort was spent in avoiding blame and winning praise, find it very difficult to acquire an attitude of not giving undue importance to what other people think and say of us . . . But if we can be wise enough to so train our young children that they are not too eager for our praise nor too concerned by our blame, we shall perhaps have given them a little help on the road to real freedom and happiness . . . the happiness that comes when one loses one's self utterly in an activity which calls for the highest effort one can give.<sup>25</sup>

In 'Spiritual Freedom' which appeared in March 1930, Genevieve has stated her belief that the only way in which we can find freedom from 'the dark slavery of the opinion of others' is to say to ourselves:

'What would the Master think about that? What would the Master do under those circumstances?' If we earnestly try to do what He would do, the only approval we need seek is His approval; the only censure we need dread is our own inner conviction that we have done something the Master could not praise.<sup>26</sup>

In 'Mental Health and New World Order', an article which appeared in three instalments in *Star of the West* during 1932, Genevieve persuasively concluded:

In the Bahá'í way of life all the essentials for mental health are found. In accepting the Bahá'í Faith each has realized that in it he has discovered a movement in which his own desires and abilities can be most completely unified . . . He is compelled neither by fear, nor by desire for profit or position . . . He knows himself to be part of a spiritual unity so great that he can give no place in his nature to disintegrating fears and self-centeredness . . . The true Bahá'í attains mental health . . . as he becomes an active, efficient, happy part of the great spiritual harmony of life.<sup>27</sup>

In 'Unity of Races', an essay on one of the seven unities emphasized by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was published in 1937, Genevieve declared:

Bahá'u'lláh has given mankind a Divine Plan for world order. But this plan cannot function until men realize that the only power which should control the lives of humanity is spiritual law. When they turn to the great spiritual Educators to learn this law, they will cease to desire personal or national or racial power. Then racial prejudice will gradually disappear, and we shall be ready to enter into the age of the oneness of mankind.<sup>28</sup>

In 'Education for a New World Order', which was published a few months later, she explained that Bahá'ís 'do not think of

education as something that ends when the student leaves school. We see it as a life-long experience of training oneself away from indulgence in private values and striving for special privilege and of movement toward a life of fellowship and unity.<sup>29</sup>

Continuing to stress this same important subject in 'The Development of the Creative Individual', which appeared in 1941, Genevieve wrote:

The Bahá'í gradually becomes aware that only the creative and courageous individual is able to play an active part in the building of this new world fellowship and cooperation. For this reason, he strives to change his old habits of inertia, conformity with tradition, and acceptance of old patterns of behavior. He learns to ignore the criticism of those who do not understand his purpose, and judges his own behavior in terms of the Bahá'í standard: 'Does this action increase unity and fellowship among all those whom its results may touch?'<sup>30</sup>

Late in June 1953 I left Los Angeles to live in New York. A few days after my arrival there, on the evening of 24 June, at the Feast of Rahmat [Mercy], I first met Genevieve in the Bahá'í Centre of that city, located in an ordinary office-building on West 57th Street.

When the devotional part of the Feast was over Genevieve, as chairman of the local Spiritual Assembly, left her seat among the other believers and walked with a limp to a position facing them. Although she was in her middle sixties, except for her limp she showed no other signs of physical frailty. Her face had a warm, sensitive expression. Standing very straight in front of perhaps a hundred and fifty believers, she spoke to them in a clear, gentle, but positive tone on what was of much concern to that community and to the rest of the Bahá'í world.

As most American Bahá'ís know, in his famous cablegram of 29 April 1953, addressed to the Forty-Fifth Annual Convention of the American Bahá'í Community, Shoghi Effendi called upon the believers in that community to fulfil twenty-four vital tasks in his recently launched World Spiritual Crusade. The first task which he outlined was that of sending at least one Bahá'í to twenty-nine different territories not yet opened to the Cause of God.<sup>31</sup>

On the following 13 May he again cabled this same community: 'Strongly urge intending pioneers to scatter as widely as possible, settle even territories, islands not specifically assigned to United States.'<sup>32</sup>

By the evening of the Feast just mentioned no Bahá'í had so far left New York City in accordance with the Guardian's instructions. On this occasion, however, Genevieve first announced with enthusiasm that Rose Perkal was preparing to settle in Kodiak Island and then in the same tone asked her to say a few words to the friends about her plans. This lady, a charming Bahá'í of Jewish background, rising from her seat in the back of the room, said most happily that she hoped to be on her way to that island before the end of the month.

Gradually some of the believers moved from New York City to live in other places. In March 1954, after the Spiritual Assembly had declared its second vacancy since the beginning of the crusade, I was elected to this body. Although I had not yet been a member of the Bahá'í Community for a full five years, I now had the privilege of serving on an Assembly with Genevieve, along with Borrah Kavelin, now a member of the Universal House of Justice and at that time a member of the American National Assembly, as well as other Bahá'ís of wide experience in the Cause. For a few months I acted as recording

secretary. Since I had never done any work of this nature before I wrote the minutes certainly in more detail than was necessary, and also in rather an unusual style. When I read them to the Assembly the other members of that body laughed with good-natured amusement. Instead of being critical, Genevieve said to me personally that my minutes were uniquely written and that I should not try to change them at all.

In November 1954, because by that time, owing to dispersal, the size of the community had considerably decreased, the Assembly gave up the old centre on West Fifty-Seventh Street and moved to two rooms, neither of them very large, in the Hotel Parkside on Twentieth Street, overlooking the attractive and historic Gramercy Park. Despite her advanced age, and the demanding position of principal which she now held at the Dalton School, Genevieve never failed to attend a meeting. Undoubtedly tired at times, she still did not show it. Whether serving as chairman or as secretary, she was calm and moderate in her manner. She listened carefully to what each member wanted to say and never tried to override anyone with an opinion of her own. No problem, however serious, that came before the Assembly seemed to disturb her. On the contrary she took obvious pleasure in trying to help in its solution.

One morning in the summer of 1954, at Green Acre, after I had guided a session there and was about to do the same for another, Genevieve said to me privately, 'You made your session so dull.' She had spoken to me in such a direct, honest and friendly way that I did not feel hurt. Although I had not come to this admission on my own account, I realized that her statement was obviously correct. Acting upon her advice I began to plan how I might be able to make my next session more interesting.

Whenever I saw Genevieve at Green Acre, she seemed relaxed and happy. In the course of several conversations which I had with her, we spoke frankly together on a variety of subjects. Never adhering to conventional beliefs, she always expressed what I thought was a broad, humane and balanced point of view.

In June 1956 Genevieve retired from the Dalton School. After spending the following July and August as a teacher and an administrator at Green Acre, she accepted an invitation from her close friends, Rafi and Mildred Mottahedeh to stay at their home in Stamford, Connecticut, so that she could help them establish a Spiritual Assembly in that town.

On the morning of 4 May 1958, at the Intercontinental Conference which was held at the Eighth Street Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, Genevieve, at the age of seventy-two, among a hundred others, offered to pioneer either in Africa or Alaska. Since her doctor felt that she should live in a warm climate, with the enthusiastic approval of the Pioneer Committee for the American Community she left immediately for Salisbury, Rhodesia.<sup>33</sup>

According to a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of that country, which Dorothea Morrell Reed has quoted in her loving tribute to Genevieve, for part of the last five years of her life, all of which she spent in Salisbury, Genevieve lived in the National Bahá'í Centre. While staying there she always made herself available to believers and enquirers alike. As a result, of course, they were able 'to benefit from her vast knowledge and experience in the Faith'.<sup>34</sup>

While she was living in Salisbury Genevieve wrote a short but valuable book entitled *Counsels of Perfection*. Referring to this work as a course, she describes it as 'primarily a set of suggestions as to how we may develop our characters in such a way that we increase the friendliness, the kindness, and the love which will bring greater unity among mankind'.<sup>35</sup> This book contains much practical advice, all beautifully confirmed by well-chosen quotations from Bahá'í Scripture. Written with deep conviction, *Counsels of Perfection* is bound to encourage all serious readers to try not only to mature themselves, but to help others in the same pursuit.

In the first chapter, called 'The Prison of Self', she states that 'self-love covers all those attitudes and actions which tend to separate us from other human beings . . . Often we do not recognize that certain acts are expressions of self-love'.<sup>36</sup> She then devotes the remainder of this instructive chapter to an analysis of certain ways in which people show their self-love. In one section she explains:

Our competitive culture makes it extremely difficult for a person to free himself from the cult of having to be first . . . If a man spends his energy in making the best possible use of his abilities, without worrying whether he is first, or fifth, or tenth, his accomplishment is likely to be greater than that of an equally gifted but competitive person, and, more important, he does not divide those around him by treating them as rivals . . . The true Bahá'í must make every effort not to become entangled in the web of competition.<sup>37</sup>

In the second chapter, 'Strive for Gentleness and Love', Genevieve has written:

Radiate joy to others . . . A person who possesses deep inner happiness and tranquillity actually remakes the contours and lines of his face, so that he cannot fail to be a joy-bringer to others. In one school in which I worked there was a woman in charge of the bookshop who radiated joy and good-will. If I passed her in the corridor and we merely exchanged 'good mornings', I felt the day had suddenly become brighter, and the world was a better place in which to live.<sup>38</sup>

In Chapter VI, 'The Use of Money', Genevieve states:

All the things of use and beauty which man can make from the materials God has provided are for his enjoyment, provided that they do not separate him from God. This proviso places on each individual the responsibility of deciding whether a given purchase might decrease his nearness to God. The regular, necessary expenditures of every day fall into a pattern, and we do not need to search our hearts every time we go to the shops for food. But the unusual, the large purchases need to be examined carefully to make sure that we are spending 'for the love of God'. This is the Bahá'í standard.<sup>39</sup>

In Chapter VIII, 'Education in the Home', Genevieve remarked:

The education of children in the home is one of the most important of human activities. But this does not mean that parents should be overly serious in their relations with their children. The members of a family should enjoy being together, so that the home is a place of 'joy and delight'. A sense of humour will cause many approaching emotional storms to disappear into laughter.<sup>40</sup>

In a concluding passage of the final chapter, 'Joy Gives Us Wings', the author has written with power and simplicity:

When you have acquired a deep inner conviction that you will continue to live through the unthinkable ages of eternity, you can begin to live in the eternal kingdom while still on this earth. You will be less impatient when God's plan seems to be unfolding slowly. When you have tried your best, but a certain plan has not succeeded in increasing the welfare of others, you will be able to accept this apparent failure with tranquility, knowing that if the plan was good, what you tried to do will eventually come to pass . . . This effort to live in eternity, here and now, is a true preparation for the death of the body, which you will welcome as a 'messenger of joy'.<sup>41</sup>

During the last years of her life, aside from the ailment already mentioned with which she had been burdened for over twenty years, Genevieve suffered from a deadly disease. Despite this fact, instead of relaxing her efforts, she continued to serve the Cause of God with all her remaining strength. She died on 31 July 1963. The first white woman ever to be buried in a cemetery for Africans in Rhodesia, her remains lie next to those of the first African woman to accept the message of Bahá'u'lláh in that country.<sup>42</sup>

In reply to my question 'What would you say were Genevieve's most noteworthy qualities?' Doris Holley replied: 'Her love for people and her sense of justice.'

I have no doubt that Genevieve is now happy in the Abhá Kingdom in the presence of her Lord.

- 1 Coy, *Counsels of Perfection*, pp. 170-1.
- 2 *Star of the West*, vol. XXI, No. 4 (July 1930), p. 101.
- 3 *ibid.* vol. XIII, No. 5 (August 1922), p. 122.
- 4 *ibid.* vol. X, No. 2 (9 April 1919), p. 28.
- 5 *ibid.* vol. XII, No. 10 (8 September 1921), p. 167.
- 6 *ibid.* No. 11 (27 September 1921), pp. 179-80.
- 7 *ibid.* No. 12 (16 October 1921), p. 196.
- 8 *ibid.* p. 197.
- 9 *ibid.* p. 198.
- 10 *ibid.* p. 204.
- 11 *ibid.* No. 13 (4 November 1921), p. 251.
- 12 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 645.
- 13 *Star of the West*, vol. XII, No. 13 (14 November 1921), p. 213.
- 14 *ibid.* p. 214.
- 15 *ibid.* vol. XIII, No. 10 (January 1923), pp. 282-3.
- 16 *ibid.* p. 283.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 327.
- 19 Letter from Marzieh Gail to author (April 1978).
- 20 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 327.
- 21 *Star of the West*, vol. XIII, No. 7 (October 1922), p. 179.
- 22 *ibid.* vol. XVII, No. 2 (May 1926), p. 50.
- 23 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 328.
- 24 *Star of the West*, vol. XV, No. 10 (January 1925), pp. 298-9.
- 25 *ibid.* vol. XIX, No. 7 (October 1928), pp. 211-12.
- 26 *ibid.* vol. XX, No. 12 (March 1930), p. 362.
- 27 *ibid.* vol. XXIII, No. 6 (September 1932), pp. 183-4.
- 28 *World Order*, vol. II, No. 12 (March 1917), p. 451.
- 29 *ibid.* vol. VIII, No. 6 (September 1917), p. 230.
- 30 *ibid.* vol. VII, No. 7 (October 1917), pp. 234-5.
- 31 Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 107.
- 32 *ibid.* p. 109.
- 33 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 328.
- 34 *ibid.*
- 35 Coy, *Counsels of Perfection*, p. 2.
- 36 *ibid.* pp. 7-8.
- 37 *ibid.* pp. 8-9.
- 38 *ibid.* pp. 23-4.
- 39 *ibid.* p. 60.
- 40 *ibid.* p. 100.
- 41 *ibid.* p. 173.
- 42 *The Bahá'í World*, 1963-8, vol. XIV, p. 328; and a letter from Rosemary Sala to the author (22 June 1978).

### Some Questions to Ponder

What did you know about Genvieve Coy before looking through these readings?  
Why?

What do you still not know about her?

Do you think Genvieve Coy would have considered herself a heroine?

Do you consider her one?

Why or why not?

Are you heroic?

### Supplementary Readings - Workshop Three

Qurratu'l-Ayn was a Persian woman without fame and importance-- unknown, like all other Persian women. When she saw Bahá'u'lláh, she changed completely, visibly, and looked within another world. The reins of volition were taken out of her hands by heavenly attraction. She was so overcome that physical susceptibilities ceased. Her husband, her sons and her family arose in the greatest hostility against Bahá'u'lláh. She became so attracted to the divine threshold that she forsook everything and went forth to the plain of Badasht, no fear in her heart, dauntless, intrepid, openly proclaiming the message of light which had come to her. The Persian government stood against her. They made every effort to quiet her, they imprisoned her in the governor's house, but she continued to speak. Then she was taken and killed. To her very last breath she spoke with fervid eloquence and so became famous for her complete attraction in the path of God. If she had not seen Bahá'u'lláh, no such effect would have been produced. She had read and heard the teachings of scriptures all her life, but the action and enkindlement were missing. All women in Persia are enveloped in veils in public. So completely covered are they that even the hand is not visible. This rigid veiling is unspeakable. Qurratu'l-Ayn tore off her veils and went forth fearlessly. She was like a lioness. Her action caused a great turmoil throughout the land of Persia. So excessive and compulsory is the requirement for veiling in the East that the people in the West have no idea of the excitement and indignation produced by the appearance of an unveiled woman. Qurratu'l-Ayn lost all thought of herself and was unconscious of fear in her attraction to God.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 251*

True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.

*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas, 156-157.*

The spirit of holiness beareth unto thee the joyful tidings of reunion;  
wherefore dost thou grieve? The spirit of power confirmeth thee in His  
cause; why dost thou veil thyself? The light of His countenance doth  
lead thee; how canst thou go astray?

*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic) p. 34*

At the time of the appearance of Him Whom God will make manifest the most distinguished among the learned and the lowliest of men shall both be judged alike. How often the most insignificant of men have acknowledged the truth, while the most learned have remained wrapt in veils . Thus in every Dispensation a number of souls enter the fire by reason of their following in the footsteps of others.

*Selections from the Writings of the Báb, 91.*

Beware lest ye suffer one another to be wrapt in veils by reason of the disputes which may, during your night, arise among you as a result of the problems ye encounter or in consideration of such matters as your loftiness or lowliness, your nearness or remoteness.

*Selections from the Writings of the Báb, 131.*

O SON OF MAN!

The light hath shone on thee from the horizon of the sacred Mount and the spirit of enlightenment hath breathed in the Sinai of thy heart. Wherefore, free thyself from the veils of idle fancies and enter into My court, that thou mayest be fit for everlasting life and worthy to meet Me. Thus may death not come upon thee, neither weariness nor trouble.

*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic), 63.*

Burn ye away the veils with the fire of My love, and dispel ye the mists of vain imaginings by the power of this Name through which We have subdued the entire creation.

*Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 66*

The Cause is manifest, it shineth resplendent as the sun, but the people have become veils unto themselves. We entreat God that He may graciously assist them to return unto Him.

*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 79.*

Say, take heed lest the overpowering might of the oppressors alarm you. The day is approaching when every emblem of vainglory will have been reduced to nothingness; then shall ye behold the invincible sovereignty of your Lord ruling over all things visible and invisible. Beware lest the veils deter you from the outpourings of His bounty in this Day. Cast away the things that keep you back from God and persevere on this far-stretching Way. We desire naught for you but that which profiteth you as hath been recorded in His Preserved Tablet.

*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 266*

Unto Thee be praise, O Lord my God! I entreat Thee, by Thy signs that have encompassed the entire creation, and by the light of Thy countenance that hath illuminated all that are in heaven and on earth, and by Thy mercy that hath surpassed all created things, and by Thy grace that hath suffused the whole universe, to rend asunder the veils that shut me out from Thee, that I may hasten unto the Fountain-Head of Thy mighty inspiration, and to the Day-Spring of Thy Revelation and bountiful favors, and may be immersed beneath the ocean of Thy nearness and pleasure.

*Prayers and Meditations, 4.*

O Thou Who art the Lord of all names and the Maker of the heavens! I beseech Thee by them Who are the Day-Springs of Thine invisible Essence, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious, to make of my prayer a fire that will burn away the veils which have shut me out from Thy beauty, and a light that will lead me unto the ocean of Thy Presence.

*Prayers and Meditations, 317.*



O PEOPLES of the earth! Verily the true God calleth saying: He Who is the Remembrance is indeed the sovereign Truth from God, and naught remaineth beyond truth but error, and naught is there beyond error save fire, irrevocably ordained...

O Qurratu'l-'Ayn! Point to Thy truthful breast through the power of truth and  
exclaim:

I swear by the One true God, herein lieth the vicegerency of God:

I am indeed the One Who is regarded as the Best Reward  
and I am indeed He Who is the Most Excellent Abode.

*Selections from the Writings of the Báb, 66.*

O my spiritual loved ones! Praise be to God, ye have thrust the veils aside and recognized the compassionate Beloved, and have hastened away from this abode to the placeless realm. Ye have pitched your tents in the world of God, and to glorify Him, the Self-Subsistent, ye have raised sweet voices and sung songs that pierced the heart. Well done! A thousand times well done! For ye have beheld the Light made manifest.

and in your reborn beings ye have raised the cry,

'Blessed be the Lord, the best of all creators!'

Ye were but babes in the womb, then were ye sucklings, and from a precious breast ye drew the milk of knowledge, then came ye to your full growth, and won salvation.

Now is the time for service, and for servitude unto the Lord.

Release yourselves from all distracting thoughts, deliver the Message with an eloquent tongue, adorn your assemblages with praise of the Beloved, till bounty shall descend in overwhelming floods and dress the world in fresh greenery and blossoms.

This streaming bounty is even the counsels, admonitions, instructions,  
and injunctions of Almighty God.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 318.*

O ye maid-servants of the Merciful! Leaves of the Tree of Life!

Thank ye the Lord, for He hath removed the covering from off your insight, illuminated your eyes by witnessing the Sun of Truth, purified your souls, and hath quickened your hearts through the holy fragrances which are being diffused from the garden of the kingdom of His Great Glory!

O ye maid-servants of the Merciful! It is incumbent upon you to soar up with wings of joy and happiness unto the apex of exultation and gladness; for He hath assigned unto you the greatest guidance in the Day of Resurrection, and hath crowned you with the diadem of glory and divine honor among the women of the whole world, and hath chosen you above the queens of the world for His great bounty.

Verily, the crowns which are on the heads of the noble women -- the queens of the world -- all their bases will be finally broken, their gems scattered away, their luster removed and will become as dispersed dust. But your magnificent crowns are everlastingly brilliant and permanently glorious and mighty and their gems scintillating throughout cycles and ages.

This is the highest gift! This is the greatest bestowal! Thank ye your Lord for this great bounty and favor! O ye maid-servants of the Merciful! verily, your Lord, the Supreme, is calling upon you from His Ancient Kingdom and announces unto you such glad-tidings, whereat the hearts of the angels of heaven rejoice.

It is incumbent upon you to strip yourselves of every old garment (i. e., old beliefs and past customs). It is incumbent upon you to be severed from this contemptible earthly world. It is incumbent upon you (to seek after) the Kingdom, in this great Day!

Purify ye your hearts, sanctify your souls and cleanse your spirits; so that ye may attain to this great success. Then ye will become the angels of heaven, will enter among the Supreme Concourse and will permanently abide in the paradise of union (with God), and will be associated with the Beauty of El-ABHA.

## Workshop Four: Greater Boldness

- tea and cookies
- opening prayers
- feedback from previous workshop; responses to the readings
- introduce homework readings for this workshop
  
- Story: Khurshid (Shams i Duha)
  
- Exploring Submission, Powerlessness, and Boldness
  - break into groups
  - using “Some of What Shams i Duha Did In Her Life” worksheets, participants categorize her actions as examples of submission, powerlessness, or boldness
  - on flipchart, whole group brainstorms characteristics of submission, powerlessness, and boldness
  - introduce ideas: powerlessness as imposed; submission as chosen; submission and boldness as the passive and active forms of the same spiritually healthy condition
  - participants revisit their categorizations on the worksheets
  - collective categorization of “Some of What Shams i Duha Did In Her Life” on the flipchart
  
- Tableaux - Transitions from Powerlessness to Submission and Powerlessness to Boldness
  - participants move to a clear area in the room
  - participants stand at one end of space
  - when ready, a participant moves to the other end of the room, says “powerlessness”, and represents that state with her body
  - when ready, a second participant joins the first, representing powerlessness with her body, and touching the first participant
  - when the second participant is in position, she says “two”
  - once she has said this, another participant may join in
  - this continues until all participants are in
  - then the first participant extracts herself, looks at the group, goes to the other end of the room, says “submission”, and represents that state with her body

- she is joined one by one by the other participants, as before
- once this representation is complete, the first participant crosses the room, and begins another representation of powerlessness
- once this is complete, the first participant again crosses the room, to begin a representation of boldness
- once this representation is complete, the first participant extracts herself, crosses the room, and says, "one out"
- the other participants follow likewise, one by one, silent until all participants are out
- group shakes-out and talks about exercise

#### -Guided Visualization

- participants lie down on blankets
- facilitator asks participants to close eyes, be aware of breathing (deep and through nose), talks them through tensing then relaxing each part of the body one by one
- participants asked to visualize lying in warm sweet grass, then covered and filled with different colors, one after another, and to consider how each color feels; if it represents submission, powerlessness, or boldness
- participants are guided up through a field, across meadow, into a path in a forest, and asked if path is clear or obstructed, forest is dark and rainy or light and calm; and reassured that they are safe
- participants find creek and leave path to follow it; it broadens into a river and leads them to the ocean
- they cross the beach and enter the ocean and start to swim; they are told that though this may seem scary they can feel the strength of their bodies and their ability, and they are able to swim well
- they arrive at an island, which is a safe comfort place for them (they choose one from their own experience)
- in this comfort place, they are asked to remember times in which they experienced powerlessness, submission, and boldness
- they leave the comfort place, find themselves back in the field, and lie down again in the grass
- the facilitator brings them out of the visualization

#### -closing prayer

- handouts: extracts from "Bahá'í News" (Mason Remey's and Mr. Wilcott's letters): articles about Marion Jack; Bahá'í writings on boldness, submission, and powerlessness

### The Story of Shams-i-Duha, or Khurshíd

Shams -i-Duha, the Morning Sun, named Khurshíd, was an orphan, raised by her grandmother in the home of her cousin, Isfahan's leading mujtahid, who recognized her talents and character and gave her a thorough education in the sciences, arts, and theology. And pity the poor mujtahid; like Tahirih's father, he could not help teaching a child so clever, but deep down they must have known that they were sowing the seeds of their own undoing. When she came of age - that is, when she was about twelve - Khurshíd married Hadí. And this was a lucky match, for Hadí was a free thinker, who recognized her intellectual capacity and studied the Shayki teachings with her. Before long, the couple went to Karbila with Hadí's brother Muhammad-Alí to study with Siyyid Kazim. In Karbila, Khurshid bore a son, 'Ali, and a daughter, Fatimih, but at the same time she attended all of Siyyid Kazim's classes with her husband and brother-in-law, listening to the lectures and asking questions from behind a curtain.

When the cry was raised that the Báb had declared Himself in Shiraz, Khurshid immediately believed; but while her husband and brother-in-law at once left Karbila to join Him, Khurshid had to stay in Karbila with her children. To make matters worse, Siyyid Kazim soon died; but within a week, Tahirih arrived in Karbila with her sister. Khurshid, the mother and sister of Mulla Husayn, and Tahirih spent most of the next three years together, deepening and teaching and kicking up trouble in Karbila with Tahirih as their ringleader. Finally, it was too much for the mullas; they broke into the women's house and seized Khurshid, thinking she was Tahirih; they abused her, and cursed her, and dragged her through the streets, beating her with clubs and rocks and assaulting her repeatedly, until Tahirih heard of the mistake and sent word - "I am at your disposal, do not harm any other."

The women were put under house arrest that dragged on as the government tried to decide what to do with them. Finally, Tahirih proposed that they leave Karbila, and so Khurshid and her children and mother in law and Tahirih and Mulla Husayn's sister went from town to town, from Baghdad to Kirmanshah to Hamadan, arriving, teaching the Faith to many of the leading men and all of the townswomen, and staying in each place until the mullas incited a mob to drive

them out. Finally, they came to Qazvin, where Tahirih was obliged to return to her father's house, and where Khurshid's husband Hadí, who had been with the Bab in Máh-Kú, was waiting for her.

So Khurshid left Tahirih, and went with Hadí back to their hometown of Isfahan; but no sooner had they arrived than Hadí left again to go to the conference at Badasht with his brother. How Khurshid must have longed to go, knowing that her friend Tahirih would be there! But she stayed in Isfahan. On his way back from Badasht, her husband was attacked by a mob and died of his wounds in a ruined caravanserai. His brother Ali buried him by the side of the road and kept walking.

Khurshid stayed in Isfahan, teaching the women and becoming famous for her cleverness and persuasive arguments. There were in Isfahan three brothers, who were very wealthy and respected, and who were also Babis; it was by their financial assistance that the Holy Family was saved from starvation in its earliest days in Akka. Because of Khurshid's marvellous reputation, the eldest of these brothers sought to marry her daughter Fatimih. Khurshid then came to live in his house, where her teaching work increased. All the women of Isfahan flocked to her door. Khurshid became the grandmother of a little boy, Abdul-Husayn, and became known as the Bahá'í's Lady of Light.

The family was famous for its support of the Bab, and taught boldly in the face of the mullas of Isfahan, but they were so well-loved that most people thought them immune from persecution. And they may have been, too, if the leading mujtahid of Isfahan had not owed them eighteen thousand tumans, and decided that killing them off was easier than repaying his debt. When the mob finally came, they stripped the house, torturing, beating, cursing, and mocking the women and children, imprisoning the men, not even sparing the infants at the breast. The women and children fled to the homes of friends and relations, but were refused sanctuary. Finally, they took shelter in the outer room of a telegraph office, where they sat for a few days with no money and no food, until the scandal of their presence in the quarters of Europeans shamed their families into take them in. Khurshid's son-in-law and his brother became the King of Martyrs and the Beloved of Martyrs, and now they came after her. She hid in the home of her brother, a

Moslem but a pious and reclusive man who took no interest in the persecutions. Finally, however, she was found, and her brother was told to take her to the Governor's house. He waited outside while she was taken to the women's quarters, where the governor kicked and beat her into unconsciousness, all the while calling his wife, saying, now look at the Bahá'ís 'lady of light,' saying, this is what happens to women who step out of line. Saying, see how this woman fills me with fear, how her words scare me so badly I kick her teeth in to make her stop speaking.

The women mopped up the blood, and put Khurshid to bed in one of their rooms. But her brother pleaded with the governor, saying, look, her only sin is her kinship to her son-in-law, she is beaten to the point of death, let me take her home to die there. And the governor said, she is one of the great leaders and heroines of the Bahá'ís, she will just cause another uproar. But her brother promised she would not say another word, and that, indeed, she would soon die and be no more trouble to anyone.

So he took her home, but Khurshid was not so quick to die, and inconvenienced everyone by staying alive, praying and greiving by day and by night, and the mob would not leave her alone. Now, you must understand, her brother was a hermit, and much distressed by the commotion around his house and the misery of his sister. So he resolved to take her to Mashad on pilgrimage, and this he did. And every morning he went to the mosque, and every night returned, speaking to no-one, and if he noticed his sister's improvement, and the constant shortage of tea, he did not ask. He was either oblivious or willingly blind, for as soon as he left each morning, the house filled with women, their chadors puddled on the floor, children too small to tell tales on their hips, and Khurshid moving among them, teaching them to read, telling them about her new faith, sending them home as Babís. And each evening they faded back into the streets before her pious brother came home in a haze of prayer.

This went on for some time, and the townspeople in this zealously anti-Babí town became quite aggitated, before her brother finally took action. But although he had the right to do with her as he wished, and to kill her if he liked, he did not reproach her, did not speak a harsh word. He quietly took her back to Isfahan without

warning, and sent her to live with her daughter, where her boldness would trouble him no longer. So Khurshid was back with her daughter and grandson, back in Isfahan, and back in business, teaching and proclaiming the faith as loudly and as often as she could. And just as the government was about to rise up again to silence her, word came from Akka that she, her daughter, and grandson, were to come and take refuge with the Holy Family.

And so they made the long trip, and Khurshid knew peace for a time. But soon her grandson died of TB, and then, before long, Bahá'u'lláh passed away, and Khurshid, under this final, insufferable blow, released a life's worth of grieving, ending her days bedridden, praying, telling stories to her attendants, until finally she packed her gear and passed into the Abha Kingdom.

(Based on information found in Tahirih the Pure One, by Martha Root; Robe of Light by David Ruhe; Memorials of the Faithful by 'Abdu'l-Bahá; and The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, by Moojan Momen, ed.)



**Letter from Charles Mason Remey**  
**To the Members of the House of Spirituality of Bahá'ís, Chicago, Illinois**  
 From Bahá'í News volume 1 #14 (Nov. 23, 1910), p. 3.

Dear Brothers -

...Of the forty and more centres which we have visited on this present tour, but very few are organized for efficient work. In most places the work is carried on by the women almost entirely. The fact that in many places the meetings are held in the early afternoon would indicate the absence of many men. Wherever we have gone we have tried to stir up the men to organized effort. Now, if you could work for this end with all of the organized assembled in the country, I am sure that a great work would be accomplished. In order to hold and interest men they must be kept busy. Women naturally gravitate together in meetings even when there is no work doing, but men do not. Just now the men are most in need of being reached.

In some assemblies they have started organizing Women's Meetings before organizing the men and women together, thus accentuating, rather than ministering properly, to the difficulty. Only today I had a letter from a good maid-servant saying that the only man in her assembly had refused to come to meetings because he was the only man present. I mention this because this condition is typical of that in most of the assemblies of America. No one can gainsay that the dear maid-servants have far more zeal than we have, but I know that in many places the men are simply waiting for men to show them how to work and what to do.

Now, brothers, if you can through correspondence arouse the men in the various assemblies to organization, you will indeed do a work for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In most places the men are doing but little. As soon as they are organized and working together they will bring in more men - and so on.

The work of organization is, I feel, especially necessary in the early growth of an assembly. I have seen the ill-effects of unorganized efforts which have been allowed to run along indefinitely...

From what I have seen in my recent travels I know that the Bahais throught the coutry would hail with delight and respond to a plan of simple organization which you could suggest. Now is the time for such a move. The results of it will be far-reaching. All the people need is a good suggestions and a little encouragement...

Dear brothers, I know you will understand my motive so I will not apologize to you for giving so much advice.

Yours in His Service,  
 Charles Mason Remey

Letter from John H. Wilcott  
From Bahá'í News volume 1 #14 (Nov. 23, 1910)

With issue No. 9 of the BAHAI NEWS, a slip with the following wording was sent to the men on our mailing list:

Dear Brother—Please read Mr. Ramey's letter published in this issue of the BAHAI NEWS. A statement of what you are doing and planning to do for the advancement of the Cause in your vicinity will be a source of encouragement and may suggest ways and means to the men of other communities who are interested in the progress of the Cause of EL-ANNA in the West. A letter from you will be appreciated. Sincerely yours in His Service,  
THE EDITORS.

A few interesting letters were received. One of them we publish herewith, believing it will demonstrate what can be accomplished for the spread of the Cause, no matter how adverse the conditions. We are pleased to present this letter from Mr. John H. Wilcott, who will be remembered as a former active member of the Kenosha, Wis., Assembly:

Kendall, Mont., Sept. 12, 1910.

To the BAHAI NEWS.

Dear Servants of Abdul-Baha:—I know you will be pleased to hear from this part of the West. Although the work of giving the Message is rather slow, we allow no opportunity to pass. Mother and I are the only Bahais around here that we know of, and up to this time we have only had cowboys, shepherds and a few ranchers to talk to, who live many miles apart. My nearest ranchman owned 27 miles long of land which has now been sold to the railroad company. This is the way I react these people, which may seem strange to you: First of all, my claim is just where every one has to make their roundup. Hundreds of cattle are around us all the time. I have a full cowboy's suit, and I am out with the boys and seem to be as tough as they are, so not to be a tenderfoot. From one to eight come to my tent daily and I am now called "the preacher" for miles around. Well, this is something new to the boys—some one to talk of God to them—and yet I seem like one of them. They tell it all over and I frequently meet a new one who has heard of us. One old sheep-keeper, who used to come and rest under a tree in my yard while watching his sheep eat, and to whom I would then talk, regretted so greatly the life he had lived that he told me he was going away from this life after living here thirty years. Before leaving, he came to bid us good-bye and we gave him a good meal. I think the seed had started to grow.

Many of the cowboys shoot game and bring it to us. Of course we have to feed many of them at times, but that is the only way we can reach them. At first some of them did not want to hear anything of God—said there was no God—but after some of the great hidden mysteries were explained to them, they became interested, and you would be surprised to see us sitting on a log outside, or in the tent, until 10 o'clock at night.

My dear mother is the only doctor around here for forty-five miles. The land is now all taken up and settlers are coming in

rapidly. The cowboys told them that mother was a diploma doctor, so they have started to come after her, traveling from fifteen to twenty miles. She is not a bit slow in giving the Message. A few weeks ago when it was warm, a cowboy came and was resting by the tent. He asked mother if she had anything to read. She gave him one of our Bahai books. He cursed and said: "That is religion. Haven't you any papers?" So she gave him a newspaper from Santa Anna, which was sent to us by a missionary there, to whom I am trying to give the Message, but who has not been able to grasp it yet. Well, this paper told about God, and the cowboy, after looking at it for a while, said: "Why, this is religion—just as bad as the other book." Mother said: "This is all we have here. We live for God." When I came in with a bunch of prairie chickens he said to me: "Hello, preacher! This is a great place—nothing to read." I replied that I had just what he wanted, and going to my trunk, brought a book called "Indian Wars and Brave Deeds." Well, you should have seen that man! He was very much pleased and called for a few days until he had finished reading it. He then said: "If there is a God,

why did He let those Indians kill those poor people in such a way?" That gave me an opportunity, and now the man begins to read Bahai books and does not curse any more in our tent. I enjoyed reading Mr. Ramey's letter in the BAHAI NEWS. I was very much impressed with his statement that when one is out trying to give the Message, he needs encouragement from the other believers. I find it so here and feel that the friends should think more of this. A little of my experience would convince one of the truth of this statement. I have received one letter from Johnstown, two from Chicago, and a few from Mrs. Goodale, of Kenosha, that put new life into me to do more work.

Any literature regarding the Cause will be gladly accepted and handed to some of the new settlers here. These cowboys are all good fellows and tired of this life. They are seeking for something and do not know where to get it—it is this Message. So when any one goes out to try to give the Message, let us encourage them. In a place like this God is not known. They believe there is no God, no heaven or hell, because they have been taught so. It is not easy and one should be encouraged.

This country is wild with rattlesnakes and wolves. I have killed many snakes, but as the country is now being settled the snakes are disappearing. One was in our tent last night. We heard him rattle. We dare not sleep with an arm outside of the bed, it is getting cold; the mountains are covered with snow and we had four inches of it. We are still in a tent, but I am building a log house. Frost killed nearly all we had, but God giveth and God taketh away—praise His Name! When I go for mail, I carry a gun because of wild steers. Every one carries a gun because of cattle and snakes.

My mother is 70 years old and keeps up quite well. We have lots of hay on the ground in the tent to keep our feet warm, but we have been laid up with colds. Everything here has to be hauled from Lewistown, forty-five miles. Our nearest place is Kendall, a small town, 5,800 feet high in the mountains—a gold mining town—about ten houses built on rocks on the side of the hill. Oil costs 50 cents a gallon, potatoes 4 cents a pound, etc. Before this cold weather came I used to lie in bed in the morning and take my gun from the side of my pillow and shoot sage hens or prairie chicken. They destroyed my garden, and four or five times a day I used to go around the garden to drive them out and also the rabbits.

I have taken some pictures and send you one of myself now as I go among the boys. Here comes another old shepherd who likes to come here—I can hear his voice over the hill calling the sheep, so I must stop writing.

We send all our Bahai love and ask your earnest prayers.  
Your servant in His Name, JOHN H. WILCOTT.



### Some Questions to Ponder

What does Mason Remey's letter suggest about the state of the Bahá'í community in 1910?

What do you think about John Wilcott's letter as an example of what men are "doing and planning to do for the advancement of the Cause"?

What was John Wilcott's mother's name?

Do you know any women like her?

Do you think she would have considered herself bold?

## "Marion Jack"

Obituary from Bahá'í World, Comp. of vols. I - XII, pp. 657-660.

### *Cablegram from the Guardian:*

Mourn loss (of) immortal heroine, Marion Jack, greatly-loved and deeply-admired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (a) shining example (to) pioneers (of) present (and) future generations (of) East (and) West, surpassed (in) constancy, dedication, self-abnegation (and) fearlessness by none except (the) incomparable Martha Root. Her unremitting, highly-meritorious activities (in the) course (of) almost half (a) century, both (in) North America (and) Southeast Europe, attaining (their) climax (in the) darkest, most dangerous phase (of the) second World War, shed imperishable luster (on) contemporary Bahá'í history.

(This) triumphant soul (is) now gathered (to the) distinguished band (of her) co-workers (in the) Abhá Kingdom: Martha Root, Lua Getsinger, May Maxwell, Hyde Dunn, Susan Moody, Keith Ransom-Kehler, Ella Bailey (and) Dorothy Baker, whose remains, lying (in) such widely scattered areas (of the) globe as Honolulu, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Tíhrán, Isfáhán, Tripoli (and the) depths (of the) Mediterranean (Sea) attest the magnificence (of the) pioneer services rendered (by the) North American Bahá'í community (in the) Apostolic (and) Formative Ages (of the) Bahá'í Dispensation.

Advise arrange (in) association (with the) Canadian National Assembly (and the) European Teaching Committee (a) befitting memorial gathering (in the) Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. Moved (to) share with (the) United States (and) Canadian National Assemblies (the) expenses (of the) erection, (as) soon as circumstances permit, (of a) worthy monument (at) her grave, destined (to) confer eternal benediction (on a) country already honored (by) its close proximity (to the) sacred city associated (with the) proclamation (of the) Faith (of) Bahá'u'lláh.

Share message all National Assemblies.

Haifa, Israel,

—SHOGHI

Marion Jack, "immortal heroine," "shining example to pioneers," passed from this life on March 25, 1954, in Sofia, Bulgaria, where she had been living for twenty-four years as a pioneer of the Bahá'í Faith. Her

remains are buried in the British cemetery there. The Guardian's tribute, expressed in his cablegram of March 29, attests the high station which this "triumphant soul" has attained.

Marion Jack's services in the Bahá'í Faith began early in the new century. Born in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, on December 1, 1866, of a prominent family, she received much of her education in England and particularly in France, where she studied art. Landscape painting was her special field. Some of her paintings are preserved in the Holy Land at the World Center of the Faith.



Marion Jack.

She first learned of the Faith at a social gathering during her student days in Paris. Charles Mason Remey writes of this first introduction:

"My first remembrance of Marion Jack was when we were students in the Latin Quarter in Paris. She was studying painting, I, architecture, and I used to see her in the 'Quarter' along the boulevard on Mont Parnasse. In the Quarter lived a Mme. Philippe who kept a Pension where a number of girl students lived. Mme. Philippe gave dancing parties at infrequent intervals. It was at one of these affairs, a fancy dress dance, that I met Marion. She was dressed in a fiery red costume that she had made

herself of crinkled tissue paper topped off by an enormous 'Merry Widow' hat decorated with large yellow paper flowers . . . It was as we danced and sat out between dances that I told Marion of the Bahá'í Faith. She was, as many were in those early days, afire with the Faith then and there, all at once. Marion met the Bahá'ís, came to meetings in my studio and elsewhere, and that was the beginning of her belief."

From this time forward, her life was dedicated to the service of the Faith. She spent some time in 'Akká and was there in 1908, where she taught English to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandchildren. She continued her painting while she was there.

By 1914 she had returned to North America. She was one of the first to respond to the call of the Divine Plan of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, performing pioneer service in Alaska and teaching in Toronto, Montreal, and many other places. She also spent a good deal of time in Green Acre, Eliot, Maine, helping with the teaching work at the Bahá'í School and continuing her painting.

Many friends remember this joyous, wholly dedicated soul from those days. Impressed by her gracious charm, her understanding, her twinkling sense of humor, everyone who recounts some association with her does so with a smile which seems to spring spontaneously from the mention of her name. "Jackie," as she was affectionately called, was ageless in her complete at-home-ness with young and old alike, was beloved wherever she went, drawing all to her and to each other through the quality of her faith, love and devotion to the Cause and to her beloved Guardian.

One of her Green Acre friends writes: "She was such a lovely person—so joyous and happy that one loved to be with her. Her shining eyes and beautiful smile showed how much the Bahá'í Faith meant to her . . . We used to love to go to her studio and talk with her, also to see her paintings of the Holy Land and familiar Green Acre landscapes. . . . She always entered into any plan with zest. . . . If we could all radiate happiness as did Jackie, I am sure we would attract more people to the Faith."

In 1930 Marion Jack returned to Haifa and following this visit went to Sofia, Bulgaria, where she spent the remainder of her life. During the earlier years of this period she attended the German Summer School and undertook teaching missions to Vienna and Budapest. In Sofia she held frequent meetings that were well attended by people of prominence and capacity. As World War II approached, and all who could fled the country, the Guardian suggested that she go to Switzerland or to some safer place. She pleaded to be allowed to remain at her post, preferring, as she put it, to "remain at the switch." Living on a small pension, which did not always reach her in recent years, suffering serious deprivation, aged and in poor health, she remained at her post. It was not without reason that 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to call her "General Jack."

One of the friends writes of these days: "She was much sought out and beloved everywhere she went. As the so-called Iron Curtain dropped, fewer people attended her meetings because of fear of the government. Towards the end of her life even her closest friends no longer went to see her, except one Bahá'í. . . . During the last months of her severe illness, I wrote Miss Jack almost every week and in her last letter she bade me goodbye, hoping for a reunion in the Kingdom. When Miss Jack still corresponded, her letters were always cheerful, most spiritual and even humorous. . . . The British Consulate called her 'our friend.' . . . She was a consecrated Bahá'í teacher, full of charm, understanding, gaiety and humor."

One of her devoted students, who became a Bahá'í through her, writes of the later years in Sofia:

"I met Miss Jack in June, 1938, in Sofia. I had left Austria when Hitler took over and found a temporary position in Sofia, waiting for my visa to the United States. I noticed her in the restaurant where I took my luncheon and she impressed me immediately with her friendly smile that she had for everybody. One day when her regular waiter who spoke English had his day off, the hostess asked me to serve as interpreter and from that day on, I shared the luncheon table with her regularly. It did not take long

before she invited me to join a small group of her friends with whom she had discussions in her hotel room, and that was how I met the Faith.

"Her room was a museum, full of her pictures, books and papers all over. We sat wherever there was some place—on 'the' chair, the bed, on the floor, and she always had some refreshments for her guests. The discussions on the Faith were handicapped by the complicated language question. Marion had no Bahá'í literature in the Bulgarian language, few people understood English, and her favored book, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Paris Talks*, had to be translated by one person from French into German or English and by somebody else into Bulgarian. It was fun, but how much of the original spirit remained was questionable.

"Marion had to be very careful in the choice of her guests. Bulgaria had one official State Religion, the Greek Orthodox Church, and only a few other religions were permitted, like Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist and Islám. Every Faith that was not permitted was forbidden and meetings like ours were illegal. State employees had to sign loyalty oaths stating their adherence to the legal Faith and we had one girl who worked for the government.

"When World War II broke out, Marion had to discontinue her meetings. Sofia became the center of European spy systems. Neither she nor I (a German citizen of secondary quality) could dare to be seen together. I kept contact with her indirectly through 'neutral' Bulgarian citizens. She was in financial difficulties because her funds did not get to her. But her spirit was unbroken.

"In October, 1940, when I finally got my visa for the United States, I dared to call her on the phone and even to see her. She had moved to a cheaper hotel. Her room was probably too small for two people and we met in the hotel lobby. I told her of my plan to go to the United States by the complicated way, crossing the Black Sea to Odessa, through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad and across the Pacific from Japan to the United States. I invited her to come along and promised that I would take care of her. But she declined. She told me that the Guardian had permitted her to go to Switzerland rather than to wait for the German invasion in Bulgaria which was expected daily. She considered it her duty to stay in Sofia and would neither seek security in Switzerland nor in her native Canada, nor the United States.

"We exchanged letters until Bulgaria became part of the Iron Curtain and she indicated that it was too dangerous to receive my letters and to write to me."

In a letter dated June 17, 1954, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the British Isles, the Guardian, through his secretary, extols the standard set by Marion Jack as a pioneer:

"To remain at one's post, to undergo sacrifice and hardship, loneliness and, if necessary, persecution, in order to hold aloft the torch of Bahá'u'lláh, is the true function of every pioneer.

"Let them remember Marion Jack, who for over twenty years, in a country the language of which she never mastered; during war and bombardment; evacuation and poverty; and at length, serious illness, stuck to her post, and has now blessed the soil of the land she had chosen to serve at such cost with her precious remains, every atom of which was dedicated to Bahá'u'lláh. Perhaps the friends are not aware that the Guardian, himself, during the war on more than one occasion urged her to seek safety in Switzerland rather than remain behind enemy lines and be entirely cut off. Lovingly she pleaded that he would not require her to leave her post; and he acquiesced to her request. Surely the standard of Marion Jack should be borne in mind by every pioneer!"

In a letter to the European Teaching Committee, dated May 24, 1954, through his secretary, the Guardian also stressed the quality of Marion Jack's services to the Cause and the heroic conditions under which she lived and worked:

"He would suggest that, when writing to the European centers, you share with the believers the glorious example of the life of Marion Jack. Young or old could never find a more inspiring pioneer in whose footsteps to walk, than this wonderful soul.

"For over thirty years, with an enlarged heart, and many other ailments she remained at her post in Bulgaria. Never well-to-do, she often suffered actual poverty and want: want of heat, want of clothing, want of food, when her money failed to reach her because Bulgaria had come under the Soviet zone of influence. She was bombed, lost her possessions, she was evacuated, she lived in drafty, cold dormitories for many, many months in the country, she returned, valiant, to the capital of Bulgaria after the war and continued, on foot, to carry out her teaching work.

"The Guardian himself urged her strongly, when the war first began to threaten to cut her off in Bulgaria, to go to Switzerland. She was a Canadian subject, and ran great risks by remaining, not to mention the dangers and privations of war. However, she begged the Guardian not to insist, and assured him her one desire was to remain with her spiritual children. This she did, up to the last breath of her glorious life. Her tomb will become a national shrine, immensely loved and revered, as the Faith rises in stature in that country.

"He thinks that every Bahá'í and most particularly those who have left their homes and gone to serve in foreign fields, should know of, and turn their gaze to, Marion Jack."

As requested by the Guardian, a Memorial gathering was held for Marion Jack in the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, the program prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in association with the Canadian National Bahá'í Assembly and the European Teaching Committee, on July 3, 1954. Among the over two hundred Bahá'ís attending were representatives from the Canadian Bahá'í Community. To permit more of the Canadian Bahá'ís to share in a Memorial to Marion Jack, a time had been set aside at the Canadian National Bahá'í Convention, on May 1, 1954, for the Canadian friends to gather for commemoration and prayers.

In their tribute to Marion Jack, published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada as an insert to their *Bahá'í News* of April, 1955, are cited the following Words of Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings*, p. 319):

*"When the victory arriveth, every man shall profess himself as believer and shall hasten to the shelter of God's Faith. Happy are they who in the days of world-encompassing trials have stood fast in the Cause and refused to swerve from the Faith."*

(XII, 674-7)

Bahá'í News - re: Marion Jack  
from Star of the West volume 13 #5 (August 1922)

LIKE one of the wandering apostles of old, Miss Marion Jack has been travelling from city to city in the vast northern half of the North American continent, quietly telling those she met of the Glad Tidings of the new day of unity. She has been to Alaska and the great Northwest. Her home is in New Brunswick. Her father was a general. Abdul Baha often called her a general, too. She is seeking to muster one by one the soldiers of the army of light, who, as the wise Zoroaster three milleniums ago predicted would at the end of three thousand years vanquish the forces of darkness and set up the Kingdom of God, "the Wise Lord" upon earth.

Recently Miss Jack has been sowing the seeds of that Kingdom in eastern Canada. *The Hamilton Spectator* contains a long, beautifully written interview with her, presenting with great charm the Bahai message of world brotherhood. It describes "her sojourn in the little prison city of Palestine whither she went to sit at the feet of the Persian noble who led the selfless life, and labored for the realization of the true religion of Christ in this world of today.

"Miss Jack stated that she was studying art in Paris and London when she first became interested in the Bahai movement. The fame of the remarkable man whose message had been carried to all countries and to all religions so impressed her that the urge to visit him became too insistent to be disobeyed. In 1908 she journeyed to Acca, the Turkish convict town, where, for forty years Abdul Baha had suffered imprisonment for his principles. Miss Jack recalled the fact that Acca was the ancient city dubbed by Napoleon 'this grain of sand,' and the resistance of which to his forces, he declared, prevented him from being master of the whole world.

"For six months Miss Jack had the privilege of association with Abdul Baha, teaching his four lovely daughters English; learning from him the basic principles of the cause of Baha 'Ullah and seeing hourly for herself the selfless life of the spreader of the gospel. She declared that it was a most precious experience, and one which had illumined her whole life. Last fall, at the age of seventy-seven, Abdul Baha passed on, leaving his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the guardian of the movement. From all over the world had come pilgrims of every race and creed to sit at the feet of Abdul Baha, and Miss Jack related many remarkable instances of the unifying power of this expounder of the word. . . .

"The Bahai revelation comes as the confirmation of these truths of the religions of the past and in its teachings the people of the various religions find the fulfillment of the sacred teachings of the past, and also the solution of the great latterday problem of religious unity, for the Bahai teaching confirms and completes all religious teachings which have gone before, and offers a practical philosophy which meets the present-day spiritual needs of humanity.'"



### Some Questions to Ponder

How well do you think Marion Jack “fit in” in St. John, New Brunswick?

Why do you think Marion Jack never married?

How would her early life have been different if her family were poor?

How do you suppose she coped with fear? Loneliness?

How does her example of boldness and submission make you feel?

### Supplementary Readings - Workshop Four

O thou handmaid aflame with the fire of God's love! Grieve thou not over the troubles and hardships of this nether world, nor be thou glad in times of ease and comfort, for both shall pass away. This present life is even as a swelling wave, or a mirage, or drifting shadows. Could ever a distorted image on the desert serve as refreshing waters? No, by the Lord of Lords! Never can reality and the mere semblance of reality be one, and wide is the difference between fancy and fact, between truth and the phantom thereof.

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye.

Rely upon God. Trust in Him. Praise Him, and call Him continually to mind. He verily turneth trouble into ease, and sorrow into solace, and toil into utter peace.

He verily hath dominion over all things.

If thou wouldst hearken to my words, release thyself from the fetters of whatsoever cometh to pass. Nay rather, under all conditions thank thou thy loving Lord, and yield up thine affairs unto His Will that worketh as He pleaseth.

This verily is better for thee than all else, in either world.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 177.*

Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.

*Bahá'í Administration, by Shoghi Effendi, pp. 63-64*

O ye Cohorts of God! In the moment of catastrophe, find ye patience, resignation and submission. The more the calamities are intensified the less become ye disturbed.

*Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 45*

In the Name of God, the Exalted, the Most High  
The source of all good is trust in God, submission unto His command, and  
contentment with His holy will and pleasure.

*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pp. 153-155*

Inspire them, O my Lord, with a sense of their own powerlessness before Him Who is the Manifestation of Thy Self, and teach them to recognize the poverty of their own nature in the face of the manifold tokens of Thy self-sufficiency and riches, that they may gather together round Thy Cause, and cling to the hem of Thy mercy, and cleave to the cord of the good-pleasure of Thy will. Thou art the Lord of the worlds, and of all those who show mercy, art the Most Merciful.

*Prayers and Meditations, 47*

... the resourcefulness and incredible audacity of Zaynab, a village maiden, who, fired with an irrepressible yearning to throw in her lot with the defenders of the Fort, disguised herself in male attire, cut off her locks, girt a sword about her waist, and, raising the cry of "Yá Sáhibu'z-Zamán!" rushed headlong in pursuit of the assailants, and who, disdainful of food and sleep, continued, during a period of five months, in the thick of the turmoil, to animate the zeal and to rush to the rescue of her men companions...

*God Passes By, 35.*

O thou handmaid of God! In this day, to thank God for His bounties consisteth in possessing a radiant heart, and a soul open to the promptings of the spirit.

This is the essence of thanksgiving.

As for offering thanks by speaking out or writing, although this is indeed acceptable, yet when compared with that other thanksgiving, it is only a semblance and unreal; for the essential thing is these intimations of the spirit, these emanations from the deep recess of the heart. It is my hope that thou wilt be favoured therewith.

Depend thou upon God. Forsake thine own will and cling to His, set aside thine own desires and lay hold of His, that thou mayest become an example, holy, spiritual, and of the Kingdom, unto His handmaids.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 179.*

O thou who hast bowed thyself down in prayer before the Kingdom of God! Blessed art thou, for the beauty of the divine Countenance hath enraptured thy heart, and the light of inner wisdom hath filled it full, and within it shineth the brightness of the Kingdom. Know thou that God is with thee under all conditions, and that He guardeth thee from the changes and chances of this world and hath made thee a handmaid in His mighty vineyard....

As to thy respected husband: it is incumbent upon thee to treat him with great kindness, to consider his wishes and be conciliatory with him at all times, till he seeth that because thou hast directed thyself toward the Kingdom of God, thy tenderness for him and thy love for God have but increased, as well as thy concern for his wishes under all conditions.

I beg of the Almighty to keep thee firmly established in His love, and ever shedding abroad the sweet breaths of holiness in all those regions.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 122.*

O thou who art advancing toward the Kingdom of God!

Verily, I supplicate God to illuminate thy heart through the light which is shining from the Supreme Concurrence that His mightiest power may strengthen thee to be firm, steadfast, submissive and lowly before the Kingdom of God, and to be an example of good deeds among the ma'idservants of the Merciful. And I beseech Him to make thy breast a clear mirror to reflect the light of the spirit of God.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 121.*

Rally your hearts, make firm your steps, trust in the everlasting bounties that will be shed upon you, one following another from the Kingdom of Abhá.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 85.*

Perseverance is the magnet that will, in these days, attract the promised blessings of the Almighty Author of our beloved Faith. Unity and harmony constitute the basis on which the structure of these activities can securely rest. Self-sacrifice, audacity, undeviating adherence to the essentials of the Faith, will reinforce that structure and accelerate its rise.

*Dawn of a New Day, by Shoghi Effendi, p. 99*

No time or effort should be wasted. All, young and old, must be aroused to a new consciousness of their collective responsibilities. A greater measure of self-sacrifice, a greater audacity, a greater reliance on the sustaining grace of Bahá'u'lláh, are required to lend the necessary impetus to the progressive unfoldment and ultimate fruition of this dynamic process which the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, labouring in the heart of a world encircling empire, have set in motion.

*Unfolding Destiny, by Shoghi Effendi, pp. 186-187*

## O SON OF MAN!

Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven, yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face.

*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic), 39-41*

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness. Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection. This, verily, is the truth, the certain truth. We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We, verily, are the All-Knowing. Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.

*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 63*

None can escape the snares He setteth, and no soul can find release  
except through submission to His will.

*The Kitáb-i-Íqán, 251*

Furthermore each and every one is required to show obedience, submission and loyalty towards his own government. Today no state in the world is in a condition of peace or tranquillity, for security and trust have vanished from among the people. Both the governed and the governors are alike in danger. The only group of people which today submitteth peacefully and loyally to the laws and ordinances of government and dealeth honestly and frankly with the people, is none other than this wronged community.

*Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 293*

## Workshop Five: Activism

- tea and cookies
- feedback from last workshop's homework
  
- pass out Bahá'í readings on activism taken from this workshop's homework; each participant reads one aloud
- read aloud the letter from the International Teaching Centre to All Counsellors - 5 Feb. 1995 re: promoting the advancement of women (contained in workbooks)
  
- Mapping What is Promoting the Advancement of Women
  - post large laminated world map
  - read aloud speech from Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women (Beijing, 1998) listing Bahá'í activities around the world; put colored stickers on map everywhere that an activity which is promoting the advancement of women is mentioned
  - ask participants if they know of other activities and map them
  - map non-Bahá'í or joint activities with different colored stickers
  - post a local map; ask participants to similarly help map local activities, listing them on a flip-chart as well
  - pass out self-maps (a stylized outline of a woman, with large hands, heart, and head) in self-addressed envelopes
  - ask participants to map onto the drawing what is happening to promote the advancement of women for themselves: what they are thinking or learning (on the head); what they are feeling (on the heart); what they are doing (on the hands); and what is happening around them (on the area around the figure)
  - invite participants to each share one thing from their self-maps
  
- In An Equal World I....
  - each participant receives an empty envelope with the beginning of a sentence and a corresponding icon on the front
  - the sentences read "In an equal world I will feel...."; "In an equal world I will know..."; "In an equal world I will see..."; "In an equal world I will hear...", "In an equal world I will learn..."; "In an equal world I will teach..."; "In an equal world I will say..."; "In an equal world I will do..."; "In an equal world people will believe..."
  - each participant also receives a bundle of blank cards, each of which corresponds to one of the envelopes
  - participants asked to write clearly, in colored pen, and silently
  - facilitators put on some quiet background music*

- participants find the card matching the envelope they have, and on it write their response to the sentence fragment on the envelope; when they are finished, they put their card in the envelope
- when all have written their first card, pass the envelopes
- this continues until all the cards are in the envelopes
- then each participant opens the envelope they have, and reads out the cards inside, as a kind of joint-poem
- facilitators post the cards in columns on the wall

#### -Linking Vision and Action

- participants are asked to compare their self-maps of what is happening to promote the advancement of women in their own lives with the posted joint-poems, and to put colored stars on the cards on the wall which indicate objectives which are being supported by the activities listed on their self-maps
- *put stars on cards indicating objectives which are being met by local activities, referring to flipchart list created earlier*
- re-group the joint-poem cards on the wall, clustering those with lots of stars (objectives that are being worked toward) and those with few stars (that are not already being worked toward)
- in group discussion, analyze the gaps in what is being done
- brainstorm on the flipchart activities which could help address some of the neglected objectives, referring to a broad range of resources (the arts, Bahá'í administrative institutions, secular sources, etc), locations (in the family, at work, etc.) and modes (with others, alone, with children, etc.)
- invite each participant to chose one item from this brainstorm and add it to their self-map as a new undertaking to promote the advancement of women; have participants tell one another what this gift to themselves is to be
- collect self-maps and envelopes (mail out along with transcription of above brainstorm and post-workshop evaluation forms one to two months later)

#### -closing prayers and song

- introduce annotated bibliography and homework readings
- pass out certificates of participation and a tasty treat
- participants fill out evaluation forms (without facilitator present)

-handouts: annotated bibliography of workshop sources; Excerpts from a speech by Bani Dugal Gujral, of the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women, Beijing 1998; Excerpts from a letter by the International Teaching Centre to All Counsellors, 5 Feb. 1995; selections from the Bahá'í Writings on the advancement of women



**Working for the Advancement of Women**  
 from a letter from the International Teaching Centre  
 to all Counsellors, 5 February 1995.

“We would like...to draw your attention to the guidance the House of Justice contained in a letter dated 5 June 1994 written on its behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, which underscores in the following terms the fundamental differences between the “Bahá’í approach to the equality of the sexes and that advocated by others who are striving passionately for social and attitudinal change”:

Those Bahá’ís who devote themselves to promotion of the equality of the sexes, through speeches and articles, should be aware that such a process will be facilitated if it is carried out without disruption to the unity of the believers, in order that spiritual blessings are attracted to the community and its endeavours reinforced. To maintain this unity, Bahá’í men and women must work together co-operatively, in striking contrast to the adversarial and denunciatory attitudes which distinguish so much of the movement for equality of the sexes in the larger society.

And, in that same letter,

Bahá’ís should realize that the Bahá’í approach to truth-seeking is consultative and not adversarial, and that contention between men and women is counter-productive in the endeavour to promote equality.

In many parts of the world women need to be encouraged to arise and play their part. Without such encouragement they may well continue to remain in the background. Indeed, it may not occur to them that their actions will make a marked difference in the advancement of the Faith at this critical moment in its history. The House of Justice has in recent years urged that encouragement be given to Bahá’í women and girls to participate in their communities, and has appealed to Bahá’í women to arise and demonstrate the importance of their role in all fields of service to the Faith.

It is of particular concern that we demonstrate within our global community the equality of men and women in our daily lives. ...This entire issue is therefore destined to become one of the focal points of the external affairs activities of many National and Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world.

### **What are Bahá'ís Doing to Promote the Advancement of Women?**

From a speech by Bani Dugal Gujral  
of the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women  
at the UN Beijing Women's Conference, June 1998.

"Over 40 Bahá'í communities worldwide have established special offices and committees for the advancement of women that undertake projects both independently and jointly with other like-minded organizations. In Australia, the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of women is working closely with coalitions of national women's organizations to support taskforces on 'Women and Peace' and 'Women in Decision Making', two of the critical areas identified in the Beijing Platform for Action. In the Federated States of Micronesia seminars have drawn indigenous women and high-ranking government officials together to commemorate International Women's Day. In Germany the Bahá'í Women's Forum has formed a number of topic groups to promote the discussion of issues such as "women and art", "the advancement of men", and "violence against women"; and in Denmark meetings have been held on 'Women and AIDS' and female genital mutilation.

Many Bahá'í projects focus on changing attitudes. In Chad, a rural radio program devotes one hour a day to programs for the advancement of women in the Moissala region. In Austria, a nationwide series of seminars on such themes as "Encouragement," "Change", and "Service" has raised the awareness of the connection between women's issues and other important issues. In Singapore, where women were often unable to participate in Bahá'í community activities because they were caring for children, men have begun sharing child care responsibilities so the women can participate in activities of their choice.

Educating women and girls has long been a priority for Bahá'í communities. In Equatorial Guinea, the Bahá'í community, in cooperation with the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, co-sponsored functional literacy courses for women, whose topics included reproductive health, nutrition, and basic mathematics. In Zambia, a residential International Secondary School emphasizing science and agriculture has been established for rural girls in grades 8-12. The school, which provides an internationally recognized certificate, also incorporates moral education and community service into its curriculum. In Senegal, Bahá'í women teach women in a neighboring village practical skills for generating income or improving their daily

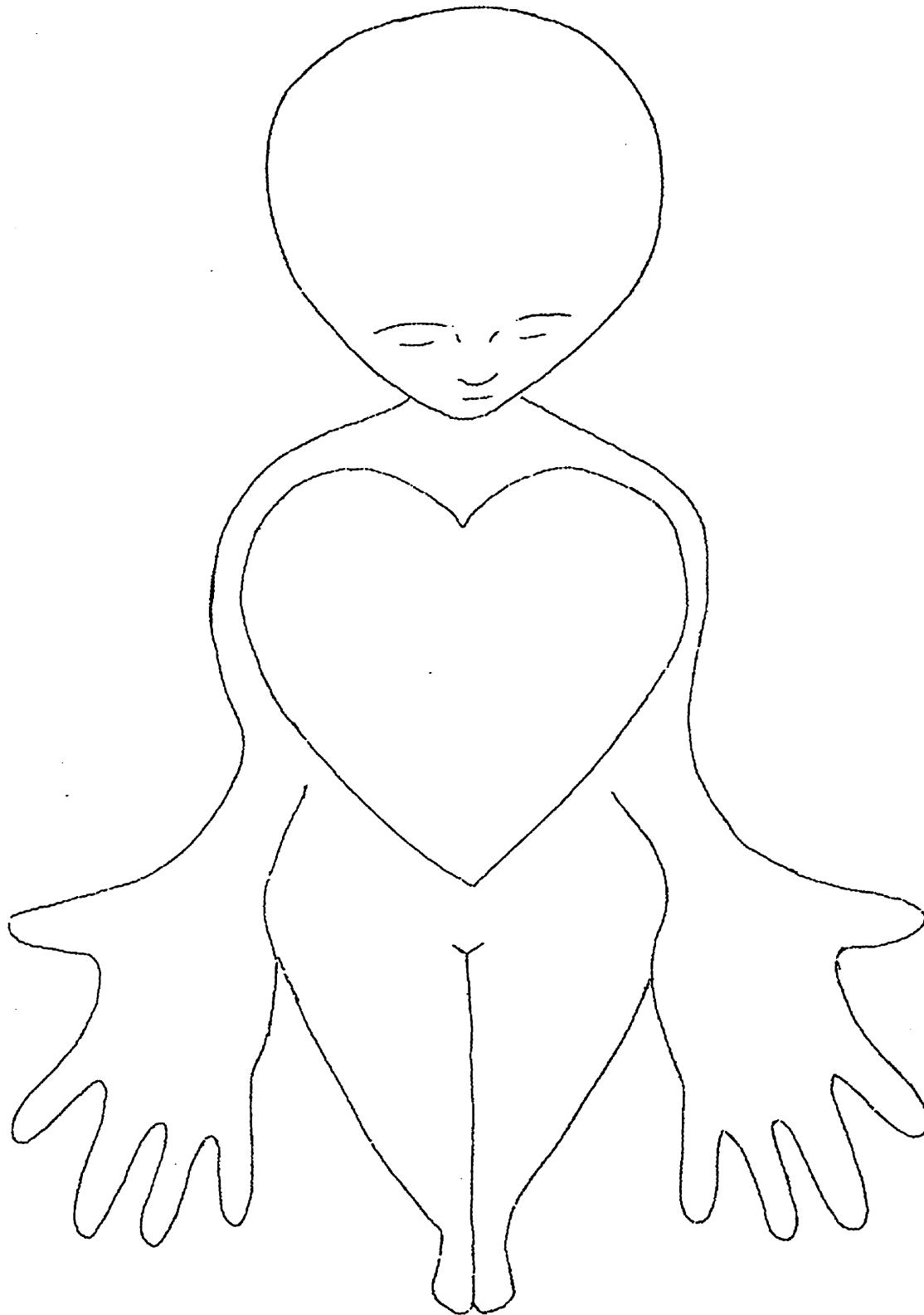
lives. In Ghana, the Bahá'í community participated in the first Global Women's Trade Fair and Investment Forum, including conducting a workshop on "12 Essential Values of a New Age Business Woman." They are also using consultation and team building exercises to strengthen the skills and capacity of the community and build better business linkages.

To seek an end to domestic violence, the Bahá'í International Community initiated a symposium on "Strategies for Creating a Violence-Free Family", which was co-sponsored by UNICEF and UNIFEM. Forty experts from all over the world and from diverse professional disciplines met to develop guidelines for addressing family violence. A project aimed at engaging men in improving the status of women in Cameroon, Bolivia and Malaysia resulted in a documented decrease in domestic violence. Developed by the Bahá'í International Community and funded by UNIFEM, the "Traditional Media" project taught communities research techniques and consultative skills which they used to investigate the status of women in their own communities, and devise plans to improve the situation. They used traditional media such as songs, dance and stories to engage the larger community in discussion of these issues. In India, tribal women are also being taught to use dance workshops to share their concerns about problems of alcoholism and illiteracy.

Some Bahá'í communities have undertaken to influence policies relating to women and children. The Bahá'í National Women's Committee in the UK worked with other religious groups to win passage of legislation in March 1997 that would bring to justice UK citizens involved in the exploitation of children overseas. In the United States, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís co-chairs an NGO working group composed of more than 100 organizations. This working group is advocating Government ratification of the UN Convention of Women, urging the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and supporting a strong US position on the violations of the rights of women in Afghanistan.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which Bahá'í communities - both women and men - are attempting to promote equality, to develop women's capacities, and to ensure women's full participation in the affairs of the world. The process may be slow, but we are convinced that eventually both wings will attain their full strength and the bird of humanity will wing its flight to unimagined heights."

Self-Map Form



### Supplementary Readings - Workshop Five

Woman must endeavour then to attain greater perfection, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all in which she has been backward, so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment.

In Europe women have made greater progress than in the East, but there is still much to be done! When students have arrived at the end of their school term an examination takes place, and the result thereof determines the knowledge and capacity of each student. So will it be with woman; her actions will show her power, there will no longer be any need to proclaim it by words.

It is my hope that women of the East, as well as their Western sisters, will progress rapidly until humanity shall reach perfection.

God's Bounty is for all and gives power for all progress. When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights! One of the principles then of Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of sex.

Women must make the greatest effort to acquire spiritual power and to increase in the virtue of wisdom and holiness until their enlightenment and striving succeeds in bringing about the unity of mankind. They must work with a burning enthusiasm to spread the Teaching of Bahá'u'lláh among the peoples, so that the radiant light of the Divine Bounty may envelop the souls of all the nations of the world!

*Paris Talks, 160.*

O thou maid-servant of God! Verily, the tongue of the Supreme Concourse uttereth the praise of those women who are the glory of men; women who have forgotten themselves, have abandoned their own rest, attached their hearts to the Kingdom of God, raised their voice in the Name of God, diffused the signs of God and uttered clear arguments and firm proofs concerning the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Trust thou in this promise...

*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 693.*

O thou who art illuminated by the Light of Knowledge!

Verily, I beseech God and supplicate Him to increase thine assurance, thy knowledge and thine attraction and enkindlement by the fire of the love of God, day by day.

O maid-servant of God! Clothe thyself with the cuirass of assurance, so that thou mayest endure the arrows of suspicion which are successively pouring from the tongues of the heedless ones. Be a lamp, the light of which may dispel the darkness, and a real standard which may remove the doubts of the veiled people. Turn thou unto the Kingdom of thy Lord, the Ancient, and seek for confirmation at every moment and time, so that lights may shine forth unto thee from the kingdom of mysteries, and the angels of the Kingdom may come unto thee in succession, with a power from the Realm of Might. Verily, thy Lord shall assist thee and strengthen thee in that whereby thy breast will be dilated among the maid-servants of the Merciful One!

*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 599.*

O maid-servant of God! Know thou, the first bounty from the True One is love, unity and harmony, and without these all the deeds pass in vain and give no result. Love is the result of the Manifestation and the glorious purpose of the rising of Light on the Mount, in the Sinai of the Forgiving Lord.

It is incumbent upon you (to act) with merciful harmony and spiritual unity, so that the bounties of your Lord may embrace you and make you as waves in this sacred, moving sea. This is seemly of the believing women! This is the spirit of the assured women! This is the light of the peaceful women! This is the ultimate wish of the attracted women!

Verily, I beseech God to illumine thy sight by witnessing the light of hopes and cause thee to speak His praise among the maid-servants, and to make thee steadfast in this path, on which feet have slipped through the power of tests.

*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 183.*

O SON OF MY HANDMAID !

Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds. In this wise We counsel you in this holy and resplendent tablet.

*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh (Persian), #76*

And let it be known once more that until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible. For the world of humanity consists of two parts or members: one is woman; the other is man. Until these two members are equal in strength, the oneness of humanity cannot be established, and the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality. God willing, this is to be so.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 77.*

But while this principle of equality is true, it is likewise true that woman must prove her capacity and aptitude, must show forth the evidences of equality. She must become proficient in the arts and sciences and prove by her accomplishments that her abilities and powers have merely been latent. Demonstrations of force ... are neither becoming nor effective in the cause of womanhood and equality. Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful. By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation. Undoubtedly God will confirm her in her efforts and endeavors, for in this century of radiance Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed the reality of the oneness of the world of humanity and announced that all nations, peoples and races are one.

*Promulgation of Universal Peace, 284.*

As to the terminology I used in my letter, bidding thee to consecrate thyself to service in the Cause of God, the meaning of it is this: limit thy thoughts to teaching the Faith.

Act by day and night according to the teachings and counsels and admonitions of Bahá'u'lláh. This doth not preclude marriage. Thou canst take unto thyself a husband and at the same time serve the Cause of God; the one doth not preclude the other. Know thou the value of these days; let not this chance escape thee. Beg thou God to make thee a lighted candle, so that thou mayest guide a great multitude through this darksome world.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 100.*

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye.

Rely upon God. Trust in Him. Praise Him, and call Him continually to mind. He verily turneth trouble into ease, and sorrow into solace, and toil into utter peace.  
He verily hath dominion over all things.

If thou wouldst hearken to my words, release thyself from the fetters of whatsoever cometh to pass. Nay rather, under all conditions thank thou thy loving Lord, and yield up thine affairs unto His Will that worketh as He pleaseth.  
This verily is better for thee than all else, in either world.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 177.*

O handmaid of God, peace must first be established among individuals, until it leadeth in the end to peace among nations. Wherefore, O ye Bahá'ís, strive ye with all your might to create, through the power of the Word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals. This is your task.

*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 246.*



The principle of the equality between women and men, like the other teachings of the Faith, can be effectively and universally established among the friends when it is pursued in conjunction with all the other aspects of Bahá'í life. Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.

*From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice  
to an individual believer, July 25, 1984.*

## Annotated Bibliography of Some of the Workshops' Sources

*Brief, totally subjective descriptions of the texts are provided to assist anyone interested in finding further reading on subjects addressed in the workshops.*

'Abdu'l-Bahá. Memorials of the Faithful. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971.

This book provides short accounts of the lives and exploits of several outstanding early Eastern believers, including a couple of women. Because it's written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, not many people will argue the accuracy of the facts as he tells them. Full of good information but not light reading.

Afnan, Abu'l-Qasim. Black Pearls. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988.

This really interesting book tells the stories of several of the servants who worked in the houses of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. I loved reading it! It's short and readable and full of stuff I'll bet you didn't know.

Bahá'í World. (various articles) 1926 - 1994, vols. 2-21. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928-1995.

You can find fabulous things in the Bahá'í World - reports of what was going on in Bahá'í communities everywhere that year, obituaries of prominent Bahá'ís, writings, maps, photos, Bahá'í sheet music, poetry, lists of languages in which the Bahá'í writings are published, you name it. The obituary section is a particularly good source of biographical information about many early Bahá'ís. It's nice to have one lying around for a bit of good browsing - but they are quite expensive. Researchers can find all the volumes in the library at the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, et al. Women. compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Thornhill: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1986.

The basic collection of most things out there in the Writings about equality and women. If you buy one book on the subject, make this it.

Balyuzi, H.M. Khadijih Begum: The Wife of the Báb. Oxford: George Ronald, 1981.

This is a very slim, very precious book, which Balyuzi himself considered his greatest accomplishment. It sets out all we know about her, which isn't much. I find it very moving to read.

Blomfield, Lady. The Chosen Highway. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975.

This marvelous, readable book gives the basic story of Bahá'í history - as recounted by Bahiyyih Khanum and recorded by an early English woman believer. Full of stories and tidbits that don't appear in other texts. This one is probably my personal favorite. I highly recommend it.

Gail, Marzieh. Dawn Over Mount Hira and Other Essays. Oxford: George Ronald, 1976.

This is a really interesting book full of essays on a variety of subjects. Marzieh Gail is an excellent writer and a deep thinker, who has made many significant contributions to Bahá'í scholarship. It is not, however, a book all about women.

Gail, Marzieh. Khánum: The Greatest Holy Leaf. Oxford: George Ronald, 1981.

Small, but so far the most complete biography of Bahiyyih Khanum out there.

Momen, Moojan, ed. The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts. Oxford: George Ronald, 1981.

This is a heavy one. My recommendation: don't read this unless you are doing some serious research or are a committed history fan.

Nakhjavani, Bahiyyih. Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990.

This book can be confusing, but it is also very exciting and full of new ideas. It is worth making the effort to get through it as Nakhjavani offers insights into a wide range of Bahá'í topics. Her feminist analysis is refreshing and inspiring.

Root, Martha. Tahirih the Pure. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1981.

The most comprehensive biography of Tahirih that I have found. Some critics complain that it can be hard to tell where the facts end and Martha Root's speculation begins. On the other hand, I can't help wondering if they'd be so doubting if the book had been written by a man. Anyhow, it is very easy to read and full of interesting information.

Ruhe, David. Robe of Light. Oxford: George Ronald, 1994.

This book tells part of the story of early Bahá'í history, focussing on the life of Bahá'u'lláh. What's nice about it is that it is easy to read, the language is not too flowery, and the story is contextualized by vivid descriptions of where things were happening, as well as the usual accounting of what was happening.

Star of the West. March 1910 - March 1917, vols. 1-7. Oxford: George Ronald, 1978.

Bless the folks at George Ronald, who gathered and published the earliest issues of Star of the West, the first Bahá'í newsletter in North America. These volumes make for interesting browsing, and are an invaluable source for researchers. I wouldn't try to read the whole thing, however.

Stockman, Robert H. The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins 1892-1900, Volume 1. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985.

Stockman, Robert H. The Bahá'í Faith in America: Early Expansion 1900-1912, Volume 2. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985.

Stockman's work is full of well-researched information. Because he is a professor, his books are more acceptable "academic sources" than most Bahá'í literature. This does not, however, mean that they make the greatest read for the average Bahá'í. The reader must be on the look-out for -- and willing to question -- Stockman's interpretation of events. You may also have to do your own gender analysis. And be warned: these are two long books.

Stockman, Robert H. "Women in the American Bahá'í Community, 1900-1912." World Order 25, 2 (Winter 1993-1994): 17-34.

This is a very informative, interesting article, which raises as many questions as it answers. Definitely worth reading if you have an interest in the role of women in early Western Bahá'í history, and aren't quite ready to commit to the whole story as presented in the histories mentioned above.

van den Hoonard, W.C. "The Question of Gender in Canadian Bahá'í History." Presented to the North American Bahá'í History Conference, Wilmette, Illinois, June 1994.

This paper is a small part of van den Hoonard's work on gender in the Canadian Bahá'í community. It's unpublished so don't bother trying to find it. I think there is a book on the way on the same topic. Whether or not you agree with him, it is worth finding out what he thinks.

White, Roger. The Shell and the Pearl. Oxford: George Ronald, 1994.

This is a lovely little book, which actually sets out to tell the story of Sakinih Sultan's husband, but indirectly also tells us her story.

Whitehead, O.Z. Some Bahá'ís To Remember. Oxford: George Ronald, 1983.

Whitehead, O.Z. Some Early Bahá'ís Of The West. Oxford: George Ronald, 1976.

Both of these O.Z. Whitehead books are collections of short biographical essays about early Western Bahá'ís. He's also written one which only tells women's stories. He appears to present only the known facts about his subjects' lives, with little interpretation. The books are easy to read and provide interesting glimpses into the lives of our forebearers.

### Workshop Evaluation Form

*Your feedback is very important. Please take a few moments to fill this out, by circling the response that best describes your opinion.*

Did you find the workshops interesting? (not really) 1 2 3 4 5 (very)

Did the workshops change or challenge your views? (no) 1 2 3 4 5 (yes)

Did the information shared make you uncomfortable? (never) 1 2 3 4 5 (often)  
If so, which part, and why?

Was one of the workshops your favorite? no yes (which?) \_\_\_\_\_  
If you had a favorite, what did you like about it?

How did you like the workshops' length? too long just right too short

How do you feel about the number of workshops? too many just right too few

Was the workshop facilitator easy to understand? (no) 1 2 3 4 5 (yes)

Did you wish there were more or less of the following, or were you happy with the amount of time spent on:

storytelling? less just right more

creative exercises? less just right more

discussions? less just right more

visualizations? less just right more

What is the main thing that you think you might remember from the workshops?

What do you think should be changed to improve the workshops?

Do you feel like coming to the workshops was worthwhile for you? Why?

Do you think the workshops would be more effective if there were both men and women participants? Or separate workshops for men-only?

**Post-Workshop Mail-Out Package***In an equal world I...*

In an equal world I will see adolescence transformed  
peace come to humanity  
all colors in a magical swirl  
humans reach their ultimate station.  
In an equal world I will see men working for the advancement of women  
and women working toward the advancement of men.  
In an equal world I will see world peace -  
the result of true equality.  
In an equal world I will see myself and my body as it truly is  
the dirt on the floor and the dishes in the sink  
at the same time as my brother.  
In an equal world I will see him in the passenger seat  
and her driving the car  
and him not telling her what to do.  
I will see female prime ministers and presidents on TV.  
I will see sisters and brothers working together.  
I will see everyone encouraging one another  
rather than competing  
I will see the feminine and masculine qualities celebrated.  
In an equal world I will see justice.  
In an equal world I will see a place of peace.

In an equal world I will hear men and women rejoicing together  
and there will be no need for women's groups.  
In an equal world I will hear many women  
talking and laughing and singing  
and giving praise.  
In an equal world I will hear that women everywhere  
will be free to be whatever they wish,  
with support from their families, their communities, their governments.  
In an equal world I will hear words of encouragement, night and day.  
In an equal world I will hear boys and men crying  
and women's voices.  
In an equal world I will hear no negative words  
about what women can do, and what they can't.  
In an equal world I will hear mezzos, basses, sopranos, tenors, altos  
in harmony.  
In an equal world I will hear myself referred to as she  
in written text.  
In an equal world I will hear the laughter.



In an equal world I will say nice things and I will not swear.  
 In an equal world I will say what is on my mind without fear.  
 In an equal world I will say what I feel and be responded to with compassion  
 I will say what I like (within reason)  
 without fear of being labelled feminist or butch.  
 I will say all what is in my heart.  
 I will say all that I can to promote the equality of women and men  
 and speak up to support others  
 when they take a stand for equality.  
 In an equal world I will speak without pain of the past  
 or anger that has limited women  
 and be compassionate to men at all times.  
 In an equal world I will say  
 'darling, it's your turn to do the housework.'  
 I will say clearly what I want  
 and not be called a NAG.  
 In an equal world I will say what I feel out loud  
 without apology or fear  
 I will say what I want to say  
 not what you want to hear.

In an equal world I will do the things that I need to do  
 to advance the cause of all humanity-  
 learn, love, play, rest, explore, understand, share, create.  
 I will do my very best.  
 I will do what needs to be done  
 but there will still be some me left over  
 to do what wants to be done.  
 In an equal world I will do nothing more than I am doing now.  
 I will do my best to develop all my potentialities  
 and encourage others to do the same.  
 In an equal world I will do what I need to do  
 to achieve my goals  
 regardless of my gender.  
 In an equal world I will do what I want to do  
 and I will not be weighed  
 or judged because I am a woman and ought not to.  
 In an equal world I will experience the full meaning, benefit, and fulfillment of harmony.

In an equal world I will feel in possession of myself  
 I will feel safe  
 I will feel love.  
 I will feel happy.  
 In an equal world I will feel at ease, safe, and free  
 to go anywhere in the world that I choose.  
 I will feel the happiness of women and men in harmony.  
 I will feel relaxed and confident.  
 I will feel enlightened.  
 In an equal world I will feel radiant, resplendent, fortified.  
 I would love to know what I will feel in an equal world.  
 I will feel safe.

In an equal world I will know when I have not achieved my goals  
 it has been because of my lack of.....  
 rather than limitations planted before me.  
 In an equal world I will know that the mysteries of privilege are no longer a barrier,  
 but will be visible, plain as day  
 I will know who I am in the universe.  
 I will know that I am no more or less safe because I am a woman  
 I will know I am created noble  
 I will know my brothers are a lot like me.  
 In an equal world I will know happiness.  
 In an equal world I will know peace.  
 In an equal world I will know what I know now -  
 that I am equal to all other humans.  
 I will know I belong and am fully accepted.  
 I will know that no mountain is too high and no piece of cake too big to eat.  
 I will know if lack of equality was an excuse or not.

In an equal world I will teach science.  
 I will teach without fear to minds that wish to learn, to myself and others,  
 free from the muddled confusion of today.  
 In an equal world I will teach equality by my actions,  
 treating others as I wish to be treated.  
 In an equal world I will teach by showing not by telling.  
 I will teach myself kindness.  
 I will teach my song to anyone who cares to learn it, man or woman.  
 In an equal world I will teach that together we can do more.  
 In an equal world I will teach my child nothing can stop her or him  
 from achieving her or his goal but her or his own mind.  
 In an equal world I will teach all the spiritual qualities and virtues  
 that need to be nurtured and acted in our behaviour  
 regardless of gender.  
 I will not teach if I don't want to.  
 I will teach pride, confidence, out loud!

In an equal world I will learn to have patience with those  
 who perpetuate the injustice of inequality.  
 I will learn to be equal is not to be the same.  
 I will learn softness  
 and being wrong and ok at the same time.  
 I will learn how to use the table saw.  
 In an equal world I will learn how to acquire and nurture virtues within me  
 regardless of my gender,  
 how to celebrate and acknowledge our differences in harmony.  
 I will learn how to express  
 my feminine and masculine sides  
 without reprisal, to obtain balance.  
 I will learn of our great history, with men and women,  
 children and older people working towards  
 our collective coming-of-age.  
 I will learn to walk hand in hand.  
 I will learn how to better cope with life.  
 I will learn my herstory.  
 In an equal world I will learn to love myself.

In an equal world people will believe they can do  
 whatever they put their minds to.  
 People will believe that both men and women  
 worked together to achieve it.  
 People will believe in each individual's capacity to fulfill their destiny  
 and to rise to the zenith of their potential.  
 In an equal world people will believe in our strength.  
 People will believe that each individual  
 has equal rights in the family and the community  
 under the same law.  
 People will believe that every mother is a hero  
 that every child is a sacred trust.  
 In an equal world people will believe  
 that everybody is somebody  
 that women and men  
 are just individuals  
 who have limitations to overcome  
 and strengths to share.  
 In an equal world people will believe in themselves.

*to create this world I.....*

### What in ourselves do we keep veiled?

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| -sins   | -faults                       |
| -shortcomings                                   | -deficiencies                 |
| -sense of failure (veiled from other women too) | -fears                        |
| -confusion                                      | -anger                        |
| -pain, from discrimination and belittling       | -love                         |
| -passions                                       | -sexual thoughts and feelings |
| -bodies   | -dreams                       |
| -hopes  | -ambitions                    |
| -selfishness or self-love                       | -souls                        |
| -competitiveness                                | -potentials                   |
| -what is unknown even to ourselves              | -spiritual innermost selves   |
| -ourselves from each other and from men         |                               |

### Unveiled I Feel...

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| -cooler                                  | -free                       |
| -unconstrained                           | -at ease                    |
| -relaxed                                 | -whole                      |
| -renewed                                 | -alive                      |
| -appreciative of air, sound, my own face | -happy                      |
| -joyful                                  | -loved                      |
| -respected                               | -strong                     |
| -vain                                    | -differentiated from others |
| -exposed                                 |                             |
| -no more or less than I was when veiled  |                             |

**What Else Could Be Happening  
to Promote the Advancement of Women in the Ottawa Bahá'í Community?**

- concrete 2nd or 3rd steps in the process; practical achievements
- practical changes in humor
- practical changes in the Feast
- practical changes in Assembly consultation
- practical changes in family dynamics
- freely being able to express (and own) our sexuality
- more courses in the community or groups working to promote equality
- equality education in children's classes
- use of feminine-language prayers
- mentoring
- seeking external professional resources for workshops on marriage and equality
- firesides
- consciousness-raising about sexual assault and abuse
- developing answers for seekers on equality
- workshops for men on equality
- helping men develop healthy masculinity and a place
- focussing on our samenesses, ie, our virtues
- parent education and training
- a women's empowerment camp
- switching gender roles (as a short term learning tool)
- creating opportunities for women to use their bodies
- networking for women; for education and support

## Post-Workshop Evaluation

*Please help evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops by filling out and returning this form.*

•What effect (if any) did the workshops have...

... on how you feel?

... on what you think?

... on what you do?

•What do you remember the most from the workshops?

•If you were running the workshops next time, what changes would you want to make?

•How important do you think it is that the Bahá'í community increase its activeness in promoting the advancement of women? (circle one)

*not very important    moderately important    very important    urgent*

•How important do you think it is that you increase your activeness in promoting the advancement of women?

*not very important    moderately important    very important    urgent*

*Comments?*

•Do you feel able to do so? If not, what would enable you to?

•Do you have plans to do so? How?

•Did the workshop series effect your answers to these questions?

**Appendix Three:**

**Summaries of  
Questionnaire and Evaluation Responses**



## Summary of Questionnaire Results

- Age?

31; 34; 28; 53; 60; 41; 35

- Marital Status?

Separated - 1; Divorced - 1; Married - 3; Single - 2

- Ethnic Origin?

Persian - 2; African-American - 1; Polish - 1; Anglo-Saxon - 3

- How long Bahá'í?

(years) 20; 20; 21; 21; 22; 3; 1.5

- Activeness as a Bahá'í?

(1=not at all; 5=very active) 2; 3; 4; 3; 4; 3; 3

- Feminist?

5 Yes; 1 Maybe; 1 No

"It depends on the definition of 'feminist'."

"A feminist to me is a person that sees themselves as being a promoter of the cause of women. That's me. I of course reserve the right to define my causes and my labels as I see fit. That's the beauty of it."

"Not a radical one, but I am active in supporting women."

"Yes, if I must be labelled for my strength - but I regret I must adopt a label to claim an identity which is purely instinctive to me. Also depending on what faction or any faction the word was being used by - I may not use it at all. I am me - some may simply limit my expression of self by categorizing me into a neat little box that can too easily be dismissed or generalized or misinterpreted."

- How well your B. comm is doing in its efforts to practice equality?

3, 3, 3, 3-4, 3.5, 2, 3, (1=a long way to go; 5=fully achieved)

"I have witnessed unwanted sexual advances. I have heard destructive jokes.

But I feel comfortable in any position of service and never limited by my gender. I feel my thoughts are accepted with the same legitimacy as men.

I have heard many comments - from men - about the superiority of women."

I know spousal abuse takes place in this community. I also know it is addressed at times."

"The percentage of women serving in visible capacities in the community. The voices of women at feasts are silent. Very little respect for 'mothers' as educators. There is a struggle for power: men have a hard time stepping down and women are not ready to line up to take the seats occupied by men. There's a long way to go!"

"Willingness of the Bahá'í community to use this principle as a basis for teaching systematically and publicly.

Failing support and sometimes murmurs of discontent when women-oriented or women-only events are run.

Failure to observe International Women's Day (I really should do something about this!)

"Freedom/courage to express oneself freely.

Number of women on institutions."

"Tasks, duties performed in traditional ways, ie., women in kitchen, caring for children.

Consultation dominated by male way of thinking."

"Equality is being worked on but there is more work that needs to be done.

I think men need to work toward this goal harder. They need to be more educated."

#### •Impact of faith on ideas about gender roles

"Since becoming a Bahá'í, I have complete faith that equality will take place and is in the process of blossoming. The faith has confirmed what I believed to be possible and true."

"I believe that my faith in Bahá'ú'lláh has always given me strength that is greater than my own to battle the hardships of being a woman. My strong belief has given me the means to trust God and have patience in the process of learning and the struggles that come with it. Without my faith I would probably be a very unhappy woman who hates men and wants to hang on to power for dear life as men have done in the past."

"Yes - how men and women can be together ie., through consultation, detachment, patience, and other virtues, bahá'í couples have demonstrated for me a few models that I would love to replicate! I still have questions about the Universal House of Justice!"

"The writings help to reinforce and to direct my understanding of equality and help to identify priorities."

"I don't think they have changed, but certainly reinforced them. Also, men in B. community are committed (by principle) to equality - don't always know how to implement the principle."

"The Bahá'í view of marriage and the roles of the father and mother in a family have both been confirmed in my life."

"No, equal rights for men and women was always something I strongly believed in. But I think the Bahai faith has encouraged me to be stubborn about what I believe. It also has helped me to give it a structure."

#### •Mens/Womens Roles

"I believe there has to be more emphasis on the opportunities rather than 'roles.' I think in today's society it is difficult to define roles for the two sexes."

"I see women as the one who accommodates - men, children, job, discussion. And the balancer, deferring to others. Keeping peace in the family, looking after her own needs last. Men are traditionally the taker, on the receiving end, sometimes deferring to women when confronted or challenged - sometimes taking initiative and letting women have equal opportunities - maybe in the real important areas (job, education, etc.)"

"The role of women and men are changing at the present time. We seem to talk about new roles but most 'examples' are still based on what we have been used to in the past."

"Men and women are human beings first, and possess all of the attributes and foibles of all members of the human race. In my culture, we have been raised to focus on differences rather than similarities, on differentiation of roles rather than the synergy of two people working in harmony. Men and women are really bound to the 'sacred script' that they choose to play out male-female relations in their lives, whether it be the societal norm or some other source, Divine in nature."

"Equality...will come to exist when we have a better knowledge of self as women and men. Then we can work on the areas that can unite the two sexes and allow them to work in harmony.....I see women as controllers in areas that do not count or are not so visible! Women are peacemakers who need to develop the right skills for peace with justice. men need to be acknowledged and educated in their role as provider and educator of their children.....I believe now...that women and men need to work on the very uncomfortable issues that separate them so they can break the silence and truly learn."

"Women's role is to claim their unique abilities and rejoice in them. Women must dare to trust men. Women must boldly educate all to appreciate women and their role. Men...must earn women's trust and be able to swallow their pride and recognize their ability to abuse power and give some power away."

## Summary of Evaluation Responses

- Did you find the workshops interesting?

5 4 4 3 6 5 5 (1=no; 5=very)

- Did the workshops change or challenge your views?

3 3 2 2 4 3 3 (1=no; 5=a lot)

- Did the information shared make you uncomfortable?

1 1 1 2 1 1 1 (1=no; 5=a lot)

"some stereotyping. Generalizing women as having low self esteem."

"Actually, I felt, maybe, I revealed more than I was expected to at times and was surprised at how I felt moved to talk and share - something I don't always do comfortably."

- Were one of the workshops your favorite?

Drama/Visualization - "I felt free to express my inner-self during the tableau exercise and was happily surprised at the concrete connection between concentration and stance and the energy created and felt within, as well as projected. It gave me a sense of connection with everyone. The visualization revealed virtues I must continue to work on and ones I have succeeded at."

Drama/Visualization - "The relaxation and expression through our bodies."

Art/Crafts- "The first one - all of them! I liked the sharing, the loving, the creating."

Art/Crafts - "Because it was unexpected and I never have time to do art despite that I enjoy it very much. It seem to be low on my priority list."

Tahirih Story - "Experiencing putting on and taking off the veil - a new experience."

Tahirih Story - "I liked having the experience of being veiled."

No favorite - "In general the workshops were done very well. Very creative activities."

- How did you like the workshop's length?

too short - 0 ; just right - 6 ; too long - 1.

" Although a continued one would only continue to bring positive growth and is recommended."

•How do you feel about the number of workshops?

too many - 0 ; just right -5 ; too few - 2

"More More More!!! Want more of everything!"

"I say this because I realize a workshop must end at some point and it ended with great closure but I would encourage another or another few..."

•Was the workshop facilitator easy to understand?

5 4 5 5 5 5 5 (1=no; 5=very)

•Did you wish there were more or less of the following, or were you happy with the amount of time spent on:

story telling: more - 1 ; just right - 6 ; less - 0.

creative exercises: more - 2 ; just right - 5 ; less - 0.

discussions: more - 4 ; just right - 3 ; less - 0.

visualizations: more - 3 ; just right - 3 ; less - 0. (one abstention)

•What is the main thing that you think you might remember from the workshops?

"Points of historical/spiritual significance.

A sense of empowerment.

The CREATIVITY, the HONESTY, the TALENT of the teachers.

The joy that women can share with each other.

How definition of words can separate us and threaten compassion."

"The porch ladies.

The art work.

The candles, reverence.

The laughter - Ha Ha - Belly Laughter."

"The people, the stories told by Sophie, the art and artistic expressions of Faye, contributions from the participants."

"The diversity of the participants added to the discussion - broadened my knowledge and understanding."

"The advancement of women and to keep working and not to give up."

"The hard work that you guys have put into this workshop."

"The experience of storytelling in the Bahá'í Faith. I had never come across such amount of incredible story telling dealing with the feminine role."

•What do you think should be changed to improve the workshops?

"I think this workshop was well-organized for its purpose."

"To have more discussions accompanied by Writings that would direct us toward the application of what we read as spiritual guidance."

"The overall goals need to be emphasized more and the link of the individual workshops to the overall goals could be made clearer."

"More time - actually, no, it was just right.

I felt that the issues of race and gender were ignored - but then we had no time - but it's a real issue for me."

"Questions should not be leading. Some rules/guidelines established at the beginning to ensure a "safe space" where people can express without judgement - perhaps some reading of the writings on consultation. Journal writing and sharing would provide increased feedback and insight."

•Do you feel like coming the the workshops was worthwhile for you? Why?

"YES! This is the most profound workshop I have been a part of in the Bahá'í community or elsewhere. It has revealed/confirmed my role as a woman in this day as a Bahá'í regarding bringing about world unity of men/women. It has provided me with new role models and new energy to act/serve."

"Yes - I have learned so much and I love myself and my Bahá'í sisters more because of it. I have always felt disconnected from Bahá'í herstory and this helped me take ownership."

"Yes, it was fun and relaxing, but informative at the same time."

"I enjoyed them all - but no one identifiable change or new insight for my personal life. Learning about early Bahá'í women does give courage and an example to follow."

"Yes I feel the coming together of all of us as strong women was joyous and exciting!"

"Yes. I enjoyed listening to other people's opinions in a friendly environment."

"Yes, the workshops helped open my eyes to feminism a bit more and I felt empowered."

•Do you think the workshops would be more effective if there were both men and women participants? Or separate workshops for men-only?

"I don't know. I liked women only."

"Yes. I think men need to share their thoughts and feelings. They also need to hear women's honest opinions and feelings in a peaceful environment."

"In an equal world the men and women would not even want to have workshops on these issues! Now, in our not so perfect world, what do you think? So the workshop for men separately would be more effective and fruitful."

"Yes [mixed workshops] and no [men-only workshops]."

"Women are not 'at ease' when men are present as men usually dominate discussions. The workshops for men-only is a very good idea as both genders need to change."

"No, two workshops running parallel and then meeting together at certain safe times. We need to experience success in gender unity!!! We need practical win-win exercises when we come together."

"Separate workshops for men-only. Women have too little areas/spaces they can claim as their own in this world. We are too often fooled into guilt for calling something our own. It would not be an act of rejection - but an opportunity (and was an opportunity) to emphasize our SELF - without being the "other" and without, possibly, feeling inhibited or questioned."

## Summary of Post-Workshop Evaluation Responses

- What (if any) effect did the workshops have on how you feel?

"I feel closer contact with the faith."

"Putting on and taking off the veil evoked many feelings."

"I feel more liberated."

"The workshops were empowering for me as a Bahá'í and as a woman. It was good to encounter these topics in a non-polar way (ie., extremes). The workshops made me feel, and still make me feel that there is hope."

"I felt very happy to be on my path for advancement of women with my own colors, energetic, enthusiastic, and less burdened by age-old pain and limitations of my past as being limited by being a girl or a woman."

"It made me feel bonded to other Bahá'í women. It made me feel relieved to experience such expressions of an understanding of women's oppression."

"I feel closer to the workshop participants - especially the organizers. I also feel closer to the Bahá'í women of the past. I like history - it always gives me courage and stimulates me to think of the great persons of the past."

- What (if any) effect did the workshops have on what you think?

"I imagine I think more as a Bahá'í should think or perhaps how I think a Bahá'í should think."

"It made me think there's much work to do and yet, if so, the best way to do it is through the Faith."

"Circumstances allows some women to overlook inequity - ie., love, children, role as peacemaker, lack of courage. Age, experience helps one to take another look."

"I feel a closeness to my Bahá'í brothers and sisters in rising to this challenge, particularly my sisters."

"The workshop made me think of more ways to try and help other women to heal, by empowering them and not belittling men. Equality to me is ore of how we can let go of our pain and heal to become comrades with men rather than disliking the way they are and making myself to be superior among other women and continuing to feel pain."

"I enlarged my knowledge of Bahá'í history. It also had an effect on the thinking process - your approach in the workshops was very organized, very systematic presentations, and perhaps now I think in a more systematic way. It had not occurred to me before but now I apply my scientific capacity for systematic thinking and organization to promoting the advancement of women."



- What (if any) effect did the workshops have on what you do?

"I take a more active role in the Bahá'í community."

"I pay particular attention to the role of women, my role as a woman and the voices of others when discussing the advancement of women. I feel compelled to move towards bringing this issue up everywhere - in children's classes, in my work (which I did.) I also use the prayers and writings."

"I have decided to do more of empowering men, those who are just and loving and work towards the advancement of humanity. When those men who are empowered find voice within women who have been hurt, they will organize "men" activities!"

"It had the effect of making me feel more free to be me - open, determined, etc."

"At the present time I am interested in increasing my knowledge of environmental issues - and it was fortunate because one of the other participants was giving talk on it. These workshops provided an opportunity to network - which is very effective and important especially for women and how women work. A recent study of the habits of successful women in business showed that they worked in webs of networks, and that this increased their efficiency and effectiveness....the workshops helped me by increasing my networking."

- What do you remember the most from the workshops?

"The sense of connection to the stories and the fellow-participants."

"The coming together of some strong, loving women in the community who are concerned for their well-being when it comes to equality. And are willing to roll up their sleeves to help in this process."

"The arts - hands on - because it was unusual. The play - that was a bit provocative. The stories - I liked the most. They were informative and educational. I enjoyed listening to them and participating in the follow-up discussions. The workshops' emphasis on how more than what was very nice especially for me who comes home exhausted - it made us feel comfortable, made it interesting. The workshops did not stuff us with knowledge and information but were teaching us through experience. I remember the journey you took us on."

"Putting on the veil. An actual experience, rather than imagining how I would feel."

"The storytelling, especially the evening we were veiled."

"I remember all the storytelling."

"The comfort, the joy of discovery in listening to the stories. The creative stuff - drama, artwork, stories. The food! Thank you for your generous hospitality! The prayers and writings were so lovely! Discussion was great too."

• If you were running the workshops next time, what changes would you want to make?

"I would eliminate the remarks about the sexual life of the Prophet of God and approach a discussion on sexuality a different way - although just as openly. I would include more meditation."

"I would move away from making women to be superior by my language, thoughts, and beliefs. Any comments that would belittle men should be eliminated from the presenter's vocabulary."

"None. I would do the same thing probably. Here's my wish list... I wish the course ran longer so we could cover more ie. women of colour issues, taking action.. That's it!"

"Only change I can think of - improved meeting place."

"No specific suggestions... The place and the date - mid-week - were maybe not the best. It's always good to have some follow-up plan, to channel the momentum from such valuable experiences and networks - through a semi-formal institute, or publishing the results... we did not want to part at the last workshop."

None - 2

• How important do you think it is that the Bahá'í community increase its activeness in promoting the advancement of women?

not very important - 0 moderately important - 1 very important - 5 urgent - 1

"It's really urgent, but so is all of the work of the Bahá'í community. We've got Divine deadlines!"

• How important do you think it is that you increase your activeness in promoting the advancement of women?

not very important - 0 moderately important - 2 very important - 4 urgent - 1

"The contacts I have established allow me to get active - this is the only way the society can change. I believe women have a very important role to play in social change. The higher women get in their workplaces and society the harder it is for them to make an impact, to be heard."

"However I don't know how much more I can do these days?! I am very active in my own life to empower myself as well as always being in the front lines of Bahá'í activities and very open when it comes to the needs and education of women."

"Deepening myself."

- Do you feel able to do so? If not, what would enable you to?

"Not as much as I'd wish to. But I can, daily, as an example, in my words... Time constraints and personal baggage currently restrict me and so time and growth will help and support systems and group participation/interest."

"I feel very able in promoting the advancement of women in my life and within the community too. As long as there are those of us within the community working away as 'women' in every activity that either is organized by us, supported and encouraged the change is slow but happening!"

"I do quite a lot through the international cartography association, the task force on women, and the gender and cartography commission, through networking and sustainable development activities. I'd like to get more involved in the Bahá'í community's activities too - when I work with Bahá'ís there is more excitement and spirit and encouraging one another - but in non-Bahá'í organizations I often get burned out or discouraged as there is too much resistance to feminism."

"I feel that I am able to promote my own advancement as a woman but I don't know about the advancement of women in general."

Yes. (3)

- Do you have plans to do so? How?

"I will need to revisit my schedule and see how and when so that I can approach the community on this issue. I will bring it up at the Community Development Consultation that I've been asked to attend and propose it to the Assembly as a topic of consultation. Also, I am working with some pre-youth boys (mostly; 2 girls too) at the Bahá'í school. It would be great to plan and deliver a unit on the advancement of women."

"My plans are already at work! Within the community I have a voice that continuously gets heard and from time to time changes occur as a result of my voice and other women like myself! The task is challenging yet rewarding! I enjoy serving on many committees where I grow, suffer, and change as well as influence change for the growth of women!"

"I am trying to add environmentalism and gender issues to my professional life as a human geographer. I have plans to work and give talks in this area."

"Yes. Use of "feminine" prayers at Feasts. I have also made a suggestion to a committee."

"Attending workshops for women, ie., this weekend - The Sacred Journey. Inviting 2 friends (1 Bahá'í and 1 other potential Bahá'í) to my home for dinner and free reflexology treatments by two other friends (1 Bahá'í).

"I am taking a diploma at Algonquin and I am working at running a household by myself."

"No plans - although I am becoming more actively involved in the community. I feel that is a step in the right direction."

- Did the workshop series affect your answers to these questions?

"Yes. I have had it reinforced in me, the idea that women's roles and visibility and acceptance must be focussed on."

"Yes - especially the need to keep closer contact with Bahá'is. It was very joyful and when we feel happy we can do more. And together we can do more. I'd be very interested in joining a group of people working on this issue. Before my involvement in the workshops I would not have thought of it, but now I am aware and am working for mapping for minorities - children, the blind, women, etc."

"The workshop was only helpful for me to recognize at what stage in life I am and how fortunate to have healed my pain as a "woman." However, many women at many different stages of healing brought love and sympathy to my heart and I got again a reminder of how far we as women have to go to first heal ourselves before we can make any changes in the lives of other women."

"Oh yeah - it certainly did. I still have more questions!"

"Yes, they helped me feel more emancipated."

"I don't know - I guess so - but I can't think specifically how. I really enjoyed them and came away feeling really invigorated and feeling more committed to my involvement in the community."

"No."

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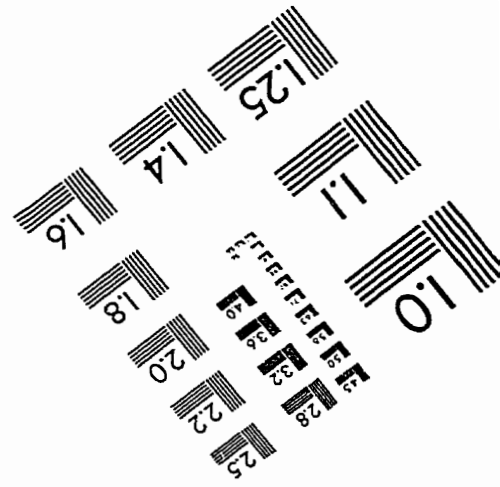
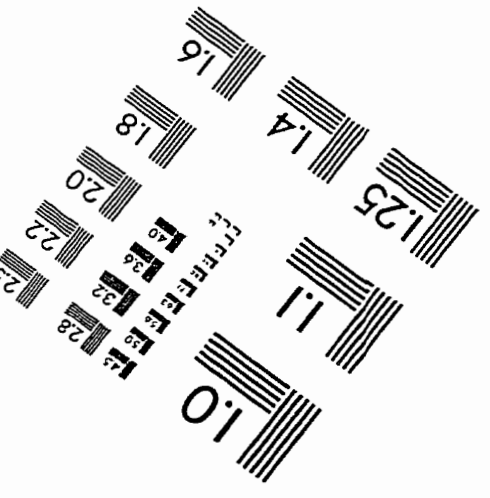
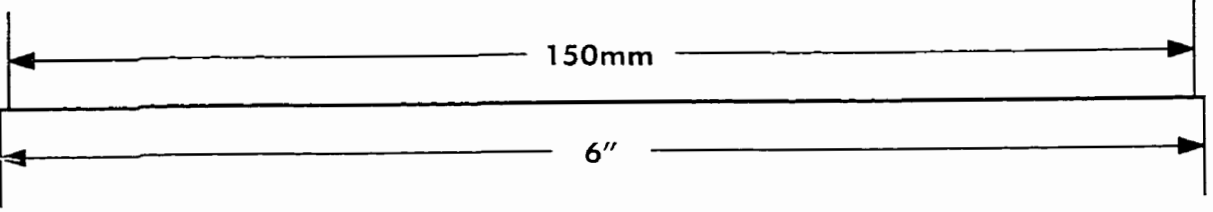
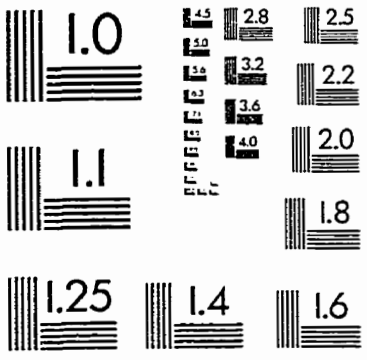
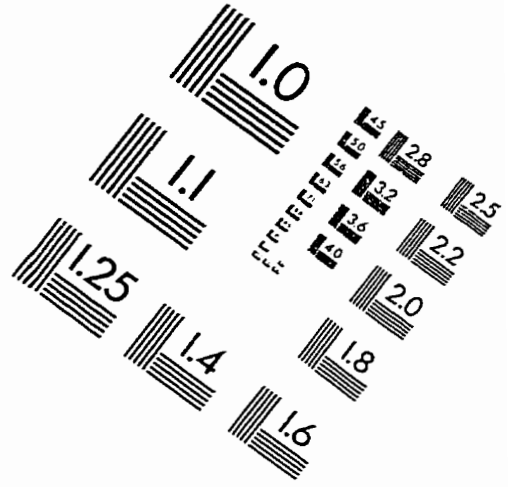
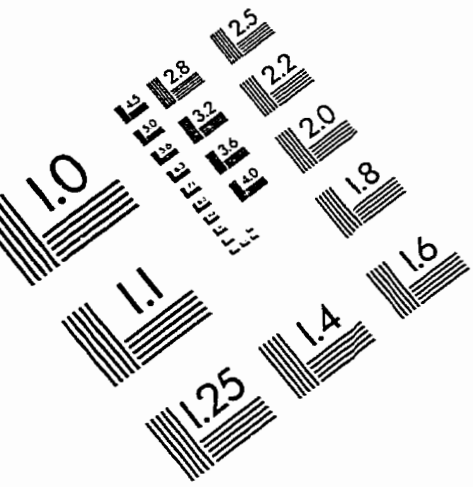
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