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Joyful, vigorous response to second ABS (ESE) scholarship academy



THE ASSOCIATION for Bahá'í Studies' second attempt at a Scholarship Academy ran during the Irish Bahá'í Summer School in Waterford, August 11–18, 2002 (the previous one was held in July 2001 at Sidcot, simultaneously with the successful Arts Academy there). On that occasion, though the attendees were dedicated, the numbers were low, (see “The Associate” Issue 36 pp. 1–2). Holding the Scholarship Academy at the Irish Bahá'í Summer School, which has a typical attendance of approximately five hundred over the week, was ingenious, allowing a much larger number to attend the Academy and, on this occasion, there were about 40. (For reasons unknown to me, this year's School was smaller than previous years and the total attendance was closer to three hundred and fifty, indicating that another Scholarship Academy at this venue would attract even greater numbers.)

They came to listen to Stephen Lambden, Todd Lawson, Moojan and Wendi Momen, Paddy O'Mara, and Sholeh Quinn, among them some of the most respected academics working in Bahá'í studies. The programme exhausted both speakers and attendees—the Academy programme was devised in such a way as to allow participants to attend both the main Summer School programme and the Academy (a fact not lost on the School Board, who took the opportunity to filch the Academy's speakers for the main programme as well). Many attended both programmes; starting at 10:00 and continuing (breaking for lunch and dinner) to 23:30; draining, but most stood the course, a testament equally to the enthusiasm of the participants and the quality of the programme.

Stephen spoke – when I use “spoke” here, of course it belies the really communal, friendly and interactive feel of the meeting – on the concept and state of Bahá'í theology; Todd on Bábí and Bahá'í scriptures, including their Islamic background; Moojan on scholarship; Wendi on the Faith's correlation with the social sciences; Paddy on recent statements from the World Centre, notably Century of Light; Sholeh on research method, in particular, historical method.

I will highlight for illustrative purposes – and, naturally, to be invidious – only one speaker, and though the others deserve high praise, Lamcomes alphabetically ahead of Law- or Moo-, O'Mar- or Qui- and it is their own misfortune not to have changed their surnames by deed poll ahead of time. A more enlightening, affectionate, versatile and patient speaker than Stephen Lambden is impossible to imagine.

The Academy had been devised with the intent of strengthening a basic level of scholarship, attempting to provide research principles, guidelines and skills. It became obvious that this was not really what the participants required and the speakers quite impressively adapted their programmes on the fly, to accommodate a different audience from the one anticipated. Perhaps an Academy programme based on research results rather than research method would have been more appropriate. Given the enthusiastic response of the participants to this academy, however, anything in this vein was sure to be welcomed. The Academy seemed to fill a space that has been vacant in that Summer School; a really intense, knowledge-based programme of study. This space has been apparent for a number of years and whether the Academy was perfect in every detail was really irrelevant; the prospect of learning of this depth on tap was enough to excite. To be fair, only a fraction of the school population that could have attended

though to estimate the extent, only a fraction of the senior population that could have attended any of the Academy programme took advantage, perhaps forty percent over the whole week.

Ireland already has had conferences under the auspices of the ABS(ESE) and has published a small conference proceedings a year (Solas – an Irish word meaning “light”) for the past two years. These annual conferences have been worth attending – for the venue, to mention nothing else (the first was in North Donegal, the second, deep in West Cork). This activity may account for the popularity of the Academy here or both facts may relate to a fundamental interest in this type of activity.

A follow-up meeting at this venue is a must.

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