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## **Association for Bahá'í Studies – English Speaking Europe**

### **Annual Conference “The Ethics of Progress”**

#### **14th–15th June, 2003**

THIS YEAR'S ASSOCIATION for Bahá'í Studies – English Speaking Europe (ABS-ESE) conference included 13 presentations on a range of different subjects including globalisation, sustainable development, interreligious dialogue, collective security, Bahá'í history, and ethics in medicine and business. The overriding theme that connected these presentations was that maintaining social and economic progress requires the integration of spiritual values into the process.

Michael Richards, a natural resources economist with long experience in developing countries, mainly for the UK government, presented the inspiring story of the development of the System of Tutorial Learning (SAT), a system of rural secondary education developed initially in Colombia, and now extended to Honduras and other Latin American countries. From 1997 to 2002, the Honduran project was supported by a £250k grant from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) managed by the Bahá'í Agency for Social and Economic Development (BASEDUK). Methodologically there are some similarities between SAT and a Bahá'í system of learning, the “Ruhi” method. SAT now covers a third of rural Colombia with about 80,000 graduates or current students, and is now being extended to various areas in Honduras following the successful pilot project supported by BASED-UK. Video footage of the work in Honduras gave a sense of the challenges and promise of such work.

Four papers touched on themes of globalisation and ethics. Moojan Momen gave an overview of the consequences of globalisation including the need for supra-national institutions to meet them. Augusto Lopez-Claros presented arguments supporting the role of globalisation as a force for good, potentially leading to the elimination of barriers among peoples. Guiseppe Robiati discussed the pre-eminent role of justice in setting the ethical agenda for global business in this century. Rob Ghanea-Hercock summarised literature on the importance of trust and trustworthiness in promoting social capital within societies, and trade between them. He noted how Bahá'u'lláh placed the virtue of trustworthiness as amongst the most important in his Writings.

Seena Fazel presented a paper that was co-written with Khazeh Fananapazir exploring one of the central ideas raised in the Universal House of Justice's April 2002 message to the “World's Religious Leaders” on how to invigorate the interfaith movement. In their paper, they suggest that an important part of the interfaith movement's future progress is to address some of the theological stumbling blocks that have kept the major world religions apart. Fazel and Fananapazir examined themes and developments in the major religions that are seen by Bahá'ís as promoting interreligious cooperation and understanding. Among them are a balanced approach to interpreting scripture, one that places importance on the multiplicity of meanings in religious texts and is sensitive to the “love” and “confessional” language of revelation. The Bahá'í approach to understanding religious history was presented, and scriptures in Christianity and Islam that parallel a nonexclusive, non-final, and progressive concept of revelation were highlighted.

Part of the ABS-ESE's approach has been to integrate the arts into Bahá'í studies. In this conference a video on the life and work of the outstanding 19th century Bahá'í

calligrapher, Mishkin Qalam, was shown (which was written by Rob Weinberg and produced by Alex Leith). A tutor of the king and other notables, Mishkin Qalam's unique style draws on a long Islamic tradition of calligraphy and uses Bahá'í motifs, symbols and texts to give physical representation to the beauty of the original writings.

Overall 60 people attended the conference, and those participating enjoyed a diverse and interesting programme. The organisers wish to thank all those who participated as well as the speakers and the helpers.

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### **ABS-ESE Seminar December 2003**

**THE BI-ANNUAL ABS-ESE Religious Studies (SIG) seminar will run from Friday December 5, 2003 (7 pm) to Sunday December 7, 2003 (5 pm).**

During these three days academic papers will be presented and discussed. Sessions on libraries, book collecting and publishing will also be held. Details and programme will be advertised later. A compact one day "Introduction to Academic Bahá'í Scholarship" on Religious Studies lines by Moojan Momen, Stephen Lambden and others will be held on Friday December 5, 2003 10 am - 5 pm immediately prior to the seminar proper.

Persons wishing to embark upon academically oriented Bahá'í Studies are welcome to attend this one-day event and the following seminar. Formal qualifications are not necessary though openness to modern academic approaches will be expected. There is no age restriction or cost involved. Consultative instruction will include informal presentations about the field, history and current state of Bábí-Bahá'í scholarship; various academic methodologies; primary and secondary source materials and access to them; the study of the various scriptural languages; research needing to be done; computing, cyberspace and Bahá'í scholarship; Bahá'í scholarship, and the Bahá'í community.

Venue: Bahá'í Centre, 30 Victoria Square, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne, England.

Over the last few decades the Religious Studies (SIG) seminars have to a considerable extent become internationalised. For details regarding these events contact:  
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