

DIVISIVE BARBARITY OR GLOBAL CIVILIZATION? THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF SCIENCE, ART, RELIGION, AND POLITICS**Editors:** M. L. Bradbury and Suheil Bushrui**Published by:** University Press of Maryland, Rockville, 1996, 236 pages

A critical assessment of each of the twenty-five contributions included in this edition of papers presented at the Fourth International Dialogue on the Transition to a Global Society is beyond the scope of this brief review. Suffice it to say that a few of those contributions are perhaps less rigorous than the others, but, under the proficient editorship of Professors Bradbury and Bushrui—the former a professor of history and the latter an eminent Bahá'í scholar at the University of Maryland at College Park—this relatively slender volume presents the reader with a whole that is greater than the sum of its textual parts—a unity in diversity of form that aptly reinforces its theme of the same nature. I focus, then, on the whole.

The Fourth Dialogue had two objectives, which are reflected in the issues mentioned in the title of the book:

The first was to find integrative answers to the challenge of building an ethical global civilization. The dialogue sought to frame the context and outline the contours of solutions to the question, "How can we escape the divisive barbarity that surrounds us and move purposefully toward a global and civilized society?" The second objective was to inspire directed energy, energy with the power to spur artistic, scientific, scholarly, spiritual, youthful, and other key leaders in society to act on the outlines of proposed solutions. (xxiii)

The text under review captures the spirit of these objectives, and while there is no attempt to assess the outcome of the Fourth Dialogue, the book itself attests to some positive results. Twenty-nine prominent people from various paths of being (insofar as they include scholars and practitioners) and knowing (insofar as they represent numerous disciplines) introduce the reader to the fruits of their engagement with the issues and themes surrounding "transition" in the multifaceted context of peace, or what a Bahá'í might call "world order" studies. The task is not an easy one, given that we are still in the embryonic stages of this integral exercise, but the work's result is a much-needed attempt to render dialogical and dialectical what have generally been atomized and dichotomous outside of the Bahá'í framework—art, science, religion, politics.

The representation of such a diversity of fields and disciplines lends important credibility to the point that the Dialogue represents in the process of positively informing and facilitating our state of transition. The work acknowledges and affirms the unity of knowledge (albeit, perhaps, unconsciously) and hence the systemic nature of building a new world order, both of which concepts Bahá'ís accept as fundamental. I think the form and some of the content of the book highlight three interrelated aspects of these

issues. First, the collection is a rather firm "pro" statement in the debate over the merits of interdisciplinary studies that has been current on numerous campuses; the references to the University of Maryland's course on the ethical dimensions of the transition to a global society (developed by the editors) and the book's final chapter of remarks from (principally that course's) student participants in the Dialogue further attest to the value of interdisciplinarity. Second, the work makes strong advances towards a model of academic and policy-oriented discourse that is more in tune with the principles of Bahá'í scholarship and one that is, as Brill suggests, "firmly rooted within the sacred, emphasizing relationality, intersubjectivity, and collaboration while rejecting the questionable benefits of an assumed 'objectivity'."¹ Finally, the edition helps unite what Chambers has observed in the development field as the "two cultures" of "experts":

. . . a negative academic culture, mainly of social scientists, engaged in unhurried analysis and criticism; and a more positive culture of practitioners, engaged in time-bounded action. Each culture takes a poor view of the other and the gap between them is often wide.²

Future Dialogues in this series might do well to foster these politically committed epistemological (and other) processes, to which the Fourth Dialogue and its predecessors have significantly contributed.

While each writer's contribution towards the "integrative answers" that the Dialogue was searching for arises out of her or his respective area of action or reflection, a consensual current underlies the book as a whole. Acknowledging the limitations of such generalizations, I venture to summarize and render explicit that consensus as follows. Three steps are fundamental to the efficient and purposeful move towards a global and civilized society given that (a) global civilization is preferable to divisive barbarity; (b) global society is definitely possible and apparently inevitable but often confused with the globalizing hegemony of any given (nonglobal) society; and (c) we are already immersed in a process of transition, but that process has not been very efficient or purposeful and, consequently, has not been recognized or supported for what it really is. For these reasons, the logical first step would be to work, at all levels, towards fostering a clear *global consciousness* of our present, tumultuous state of transition, a consciousness of the positive end that we are *moving* towards, but ultimately must be *working* towards achieving. Again, for many living and functioning in the eye of the storm it is either difficult to see the storm or else to maintain any sort of vision of life beyond it.

A universal consciousness of the transition to a global society will help to remedy these instances and will facilitate the next step generally identified in

1. Susan B. Brill, "Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 7.2 (1995): 1.

2. Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, rpt. 1993 (Harlow: Longman Scientific & Technical, 1983) 2.

the book: the identification and general acceptance of a set of *global values*. These are the foundational values that must guide all forms of agency in a global society: global citizenship, global community, and global governance.

The third step or process, which builds on a strong foundation of global values, is that of identifying the sets of *global ethics* required in the various fields and for the various constituent participants of a global society. Within the framework of these three, tiered processes lies the (here very generalized) argument of the text taken as a whole: once humanity understands and comes to terms with the nature of the present state of transition (i.e., towards a global society), it can begin practical exploration of the conditions required to render that society definite and permanent and can define the arts and sciences, and the religious and political principles and practices that must establish and perpetuate it.

I accept this line of thinking and was pleased to see it arise, expressed in various ways and to varying degrees, in the component papers of the book. While the discourse may have been outside of the Dialogue's central agenda, at times I would have also appreciated a more thorough clarification of or distinction between the fundamental concepts explored or touched upon in the papers—a clarity and distinctiveness that would lend heightened political commitment and grounded definition to the critical normative work in which the Dialogue engaged. The problematique of relativism versus universalism, for instance, requires tackling, particularly by scholar-practitioners in tune with the unity in diversity framework espoused by Bahá'ís. The state of dominant scholarship on and around this and the other concepts addressed in the book (such as morality, ethics, standards, values, and beliefs) suggests the impossibility of resolving these axiomatic questions from any starting point other than that of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

As published, the Fourth Dialogue papers explore some of the most pertinent issues arising in the international development and international relations arenas today. Interdisciplinarity has already been discussed; there is increasing and increasingly meaningful work being done towards approaching global issues in a holistic manner by bringing together the often disjointed cultures and subcultures of learners and doers. The work of the various "world commissions" (on global governance, on culture and development, etc.) attests to this. What makes the work under review particularly distinctive is its overall focus on the subdermal: the authors engage with the underlying assumptions that require change if we are to sustain the transition to a global society. In this light, it would be worth comparing the Fourth Dialogue with, for instance, the State of the World Forum spearheaded by the Gorbachev Foundation. The latter is a very similar gathering of prominent people from a diversity of backgrounds, but its focus is on narrowly symptomatic problems—nuclear disarmament, weapons control, chemical contaminants, etc. Can such worthy causes be meaningfully and sustainably won before one has dealt with the attitudes,

assumptions, and frameworks that engender war, aggression, and pollution? With the release of the Peace Statement of the Universal House of Justice over a decade ago, such questions ceased being rhetorical, and it is this point that the Fourth Dialogue papers seem to have a better grasp of than do other, similar fora. The conscious connection made, in a number of the articles, between religion and ethics—a relationship fundamental to Bahá'ís but alien to much relevant contemporary discourse—is one proof of this for me.

The Fourth Dialogue and its predecessors (only the First Dialogue's papers have been published before this present volume) have contributed significantly to the advance of the most urgent area of Bahá'í scholarship as humanity rapidly approaches the threshold of the Lesser Peace: world order studies, the foundation of which has been flawlessly laid in the writings of Shoghi Effendi. When one sees the general sociopolitical tenets of the Bahá'í Faith basically but clearly voiced in the words and work of international scholar-practitioners (only seven of the twenty-nine contributors are declared Bahá'ís), the mandate for Bahá'ís for advanced reflection, applied thought, and exemplary action is consolidated and set.

The excellent work done by the collaborative organizers of the Fourth Dialogue, without which there would be no volume of papers, must be acknowledged. The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland must be particularly noted, without the unswerving efforts of whose incumbent, the Dialogue might not have occurred. Like the Dialogue itself, Bradbury and Bushrui's edition enshrines a process that is greater than the publication of the text itself—a process in which it is encouraging to see Bahá'í-engendered institutions of learning such as the Landegg Academy and the Bahá'í Chair consciously and fundamentally engaged. I hope that such outward-looking, politically committed, Bahá'í-inspired scholarship is on the rise. Moreover and by extension, both the insights and the limitations of the present work suggest to me the tremendous value of Sacred-Text-centered, world-order-oriented scholarship and practice.

This collection of papers might be criticized by some for offering a breadth of views at the sacrifice of depth, but given the only recent, overdue emergence of the field of holistic reflection and action around world order issues, I believe the decision to publish this volume to be justified. On the one hand, the collection serves as an excellent primer for the general reader interested in world order issues and peace studies, simultaneously introducing the work of a diversity of scholars and practitioners, over twenty of whom are published elsewhere. On the other hand, I am reminded of a saying that in our case might conclude: "The book takes us to the river's edge and returns us thirsty." I think this saying presents a choice of interpretations in relation to the book but, more importantly, in relation to the work of Bahá'ís and scholars who have finished reading it. I must leave that choice with the reader.