

Dr. Peter Khan

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Dear Friends. It gives me great pleasure to be here this afternoon and to meet friends, old and new, and to be able to speak to you about the various aspects of the stage of the Faith that we are in the world at the present time.

Before I begin I want to acknowledge the presence of a number of distinguished Bahá'ís, members of Continental Boards of Counsellors, of Australasia and Asia, and I have a suspicion that somewhere in this midst is Stephen Hall who is Counsellor member of the International Teaching Centre; if he's here welcome, if he is not here, no welcome. And of course there are members of other Institutions of the Faith both national and local.

What I want to do this afternoon is to share with you my own perspective on where the Faith is going and what are its opportunities and challenges in the immediate future. In so doing, one must make the usual disclaimers that I do not speak for the Universal House of Justice, I speak only for myself, my views are far from authoritative, they simply represent my own perspective as a person serving in the Holy Land in this capacity for a number of years.

My impression is that as we approach the conclusion of the present Five Year Plan, which finishes at Ridván 2006, we will have evaluated and come to the conclusion that it has been far more successful than any other Plan of the Faith since the Ten Year Crusade, which finished in 1963. As the results come in, it has become increasingly apparent that no other plan in the last fifty years has done so much in terms of activation of the Bahá'í community in all parts of the world and this is due principally to the priority given by the plan and consequently by the believers in the execution of the core activities. The study circles and institutes and things that go along with that, the devotional meetings and the children's classes. This formula of activities has shown spectacular results. Those of you live in this particular part of South Eastern Queensland are well familiar with the activity level and the tempo of activity which has increased greatly from what I understand in this

period, over this period. What you may not be aware of is that similar things have happened everywhere else. In all parts of the globe, far and near, the House of Justice gets reports of a similar increase in vibrancy and activity, energy level and commitment of the Bahá'ís.

This, I see, is due to two things. One is the mysterious power of the Word of God. Because our core activities rest upon the realisation that there is a mysterious spiritual power associated with the Word of God – when one comes into contact with it, when one is exposed to it, meditates on it, contemplates it then that power is accessible to those participate, and this has given rise to this mysterious amplification of vitality and commitment.

The second thing I ascribe to the success of the Plan, too, is our recognition at the international level of the importance of systematic activity. Systematic activity has a dubious reputation. There are those who regard systematic activity as antithetical to the spontaneity of spiritual development. Rather, we see these things as going together. And certainly, the fact that the activities in the Bahá'í world have been systematised to the extent that they have, has had a profoundly beneficial result.

The result of all this is that the human resources of the Faith have expanded greatly in this past five years. There is just a lot more Bahá'ís around the place who are active and who are very involved in the Faith.

Janet and I keep tripping over them. August last year we spent a little time in Washington D.C. and this was a clandestine visit for a vacation which proved to be a total failure in that regard because of the Bahá'ís everywhere. We checked into the hotel called the Hyatt in Maryland – and I'm sorry it's not one of the hotels owned by Mr. Abedian but – we checked into the Hyatt in Maryland and lo and behold the man behind the desk said “Peter Khan: Are you related to the Peter Khan of Haifa?” What kind of weird question is that? How can I be related to Peter Khan of Haifa? How many Peter Khans are there in Haifa? I said “Yes” sort of rather cautiously because I wasn't sure

who was who, the gentleman was obviously from the Middle East. I was relieved when he said he was a Bahá'í and the front desk manager was also a Bahá'í.

That was quite surprising for us, and then a little later we rode on the Metro – the underground system in Washington D.C., quite well organised – but we got a little bit lost about which platform to take to get to change trains at Metro Central. And so we thought we'd ask someone. Along was coming a couple and we just asked them "Excuse me, could you tell me where we could get a train to wherever it was?" The man looked at me and said "Alláh'u'Abhá". The statistical likelihood of that is incredible. So we got directions and exchanged greetings and as Janet and I were whisked away I said to Janet "you can't get away from them."

Same thing happened in this trip. We went to a hotel in Singapore called the Sheraton, which has a lot of meaning for Janet because last time we were there she was on crutches with her fractured knee, and we thought we'd go there for nostalgia's sake and lo and behold the concierge turns out to be a Bahá'í from Johore in Malaysia and when we asked him how we could find Orchard Road he said "Oh, you are from Haifa, Alláh'u'Abhá."

So, this is not a very scientific survey but one can say from such random results and from more analytical work that in fact the human resources of the Faith have increased. There are a lot more active Bahá'ís around, and as you well realise active Bahá'ís tend to be loud, be seen and reach out to you, and that certainly is the case.

The rate of enrolments started off in the Five Year Plan relatively slowly, and for the first two or three years we had National Assemblies writing to the House of Justice with some dismay – "We are having wonderful activities, lots of things are happening but very few people are joining the Faith." And we wrote back and said "Calm down, take it easy, it will happen." Well now it is happening. We find that the rate of enrolments is increasing not spectacularly but in a reasonable way, and what is happening is that those who are

entering the Faith are entering it with a degree of knowledge which means they're much more likely to be around the place next time we look. And so that's very satisfying to us.

Whenever one has change, there are problems and that is so in this Faith. What we find with the core activities of the Plan is that there are two kinds of problem. One is arising from very sincere and devoted Bahá'ís who say "I don't want to get involved in this stuff, I don't want to go to Ruhi Book whatever it is, I don't want to go along to these things" and so on, and what we need to realise is that those Bahá'ís are perfectly entitled to their opinion. We need to recognise the legitimacy of the attitude of those Bahá'ís who, for whatever reason, choose not to participate as fully as what I'd like in the activities of the Faith, in terms of core activities. They have the right to say "Yes, I want to be a part of it" or "No, I don't want to be part of it." There are a multitude of reasons which they feel are appropriate to them. Some people have ill health, some are disabled, some are tired, some are working very, very hard and get exhausted, some people feel that they know the information, some feel the approach of the Ruhi classes is below their intellectual level – there are all kinds of reasons. Whatever those reasons are, whether you or I feel their value, we need to recognise that the individual is entitled to make up his or her mind about involvement in those core activities without the fear of being harassed or condemned or put down or humiliated by fellow believers. What we don't want is people to say, "It's terrible, nobody should do it, those who do it must be mentally retarded or anything like that". It is part of the Five Year Plan.

The other problem we have in certain parts of the world is the opposite one. We've got Bahá'ís who say "If you are not involved in the core activities there is something terribly wrong with you" and they go further and say "This is all you should be doing. Forget firesides, forget deepening classes, forget Bahá'í college classes, forget proclamation, Bahá'í studies – just do core activities". That is the other extreme.

We found this from time to time. One of the surprising things I encountered was meeting with pilgrims who come to the Holy Land, 200 at a time, every two weeks for nine days for nine months of the year and we meet with these friends in the evening in informal

sessions. I came across it when during the question period people would stand up and say “Is it alright to continue to have firesides and deepening classes?” I said, “What kind of question is that?” The Guardian said it was basic to our Bahá’í spiritual life; it is not something for us to say is good, bad or indifferent. It is an intrinsic part of Bahá’í life as certified by Shoghi Effendi. And I realised from that, in certain parts of the world there were zealots who were saying “Do nothing but core activities” and that of course is an extreme statement, it is not endorsed by the Universal House of Justice. It is not right. It produces a narrowness in the Baha’i community as well as it produces a degree of resentment and antagonism for those who are so pressured. But these are growing pains. They are not things to be worried about greatly. They are not things to be allowed to continue indefinitely but they are part and parcel of the growth of the Faith.

What we find, as the Faith continues, is that there are certain aspects of the Bahá’í Faith that are proving particularly appealing to the general public at the present time. And also there are certain aspects of Bahá’í teachings and activities which are challenging, which don’t fit in with popular perceptions or tastes or likes and I want to mention both categories.

Firstly, one of the things about the Bahá’í teachings which are proving unusually attractive at the present time, obviously we each have our own list, – this is mine. The first is that, I notice – and I notice it more in the Northern Hemisphere than the Southern Hemisphere – I notice that the Bahá’ís in those countries in the Northern Hemisphere are becoming distinguished for their optimism about the future. That there are a growing number of people who are becoming deeply pessimistic about where the world is going and what its future holds. It is not hard to become pessimistic if you look at the breakdown of urban society, the threat of terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the environmental degradation of the world, the rise of crime, the spread of pestilences and the prospect of pestilences and there is more than a hundred other things, it is very easy to get yourself worked up about it and get very discouraged about the future. And there are an increasing number of people in society, more in the north than the south, who are becoming very pessimistic. As a result, Bahá’ís in these regions are becoming

distinguished for their optimism, their confidence in the future. Our confidence is not based upon hope, it is not based upon ardent desire, it is based upon the certainty inherent in the Bahá'í Writings. Our religion provides certainty about the glorious future of humanity, far beyond hope or yearning or even ardency of hope. We are absolutely certain Bahá'u'lláh has said that humanity will go through this time of great transition and turbulence, but it will come through it, and this will prove to be a transition to world unity and the growth and development of world civilisation. It is something of which we are absolutely convinced by virtue of the power of the Bahá'í teachings, and as a result, that conviction is apparent in the body language of the Bahá'ís – the way they speak, the way they approach the development of their lives and their long term commitment to the future. Everything they do reflects this sense of optimism about the future. It means, of course, that Bahá'ís can very easily be labelled as utopian idealists, new age people, simply dreaming of a wonderful world, anticipating that if you dream hard enough it will come true. We can defend ourselves against those accusations because not only do we have the shining ideal set out in our Writings but much more than that we have the mechanism to bring it about, the vehicle for its accomplishment through the Administrative Order. So when people say to us “Your ideals are wonderful” and pat us on the head, at least metaphorically, occasionally physically, and say, “You are such a wonderful person. You have wonderful ideals” the subtext being, “It’ll never happen. Go away. It won’t ever come true”. We can respond to them by drawing their attention to the fact that we have a unique delivery system, designed to provide the means to bring these high ideals into practice. It’s a realistic mechanism which takes account of the deficiencies of human nature, the capacity of individuals to be destructive and malicious and divisive – which accommodates those negative elements of human nature as well as the positive ones. But certainly as I travel in the North, and to a lesser extent in the South, I find people talking to me about the fact that they’d been attracted to the Bahá'í Faith on what they see to be a pervasive optimism in the Bahá'í community.

The second thing I think people are very attracted to in the Bahá'í Faith is that it provides a sense of community. And this is an odd thing. If we turn back the clock forty or fifty years it would be ridiculous. People didn’t need a sense of community. They had their

family. They had their local circle of friends. They could make new friends relatively easily. It was fine. It is only in more recent years that the Bahá'í Faith has become attractive for its sense of community. People yearn to be part of a community which includes people who are trustworthy, people who can be relied on, people who will be genuine friends through thick and thin. They yearn for diversity. We take this for granted. If you look at the diversity in this room, to us it is normal. To a lot of people it is not normal. It is not normal to be able to associate with people of a different age group, of a different ethnic background, of a different educational background, and from different areas of a local region. That is unusual. People are increasingly isolated. They're lonely. They want to reach out to other human beings but they're justifiably afraid of whether or not they can trust other human beings because of the things that are going on in present day society. The difficulties that are experienced are due to some of the perversions of human nature that have been practiced by a small minority. As a result, the Bahá'í community, one of its attractions is that it provides a refuge for people in search of unity. This is becoming more attractive as the problems in society increase.

The third thing that is attractive at the moment is our sense of devotion. You find that devotional gatherings held by Bahá'ís to which their friends are invited are truly unusually attractive. They're attractive because a lot of people are looking for a location where they can get together with others and worship God and behold high ideals and spiritual values, rather than be subjected to political discourse, or hatred of other organisations and individuals, or antagonism, or other partisan attitudes. They just want to get together and engage in community worship, free of hassles and antagonisms and tensions. And our devotional meetings are proving around the world remarkably attractive for that reason. These are not occasions to pressure people to change their religion or to sneak up on them and try and infiltrate their thinking so on and so forth. It's simply a time to get together and join human being with human being in the worship of God. We're finding that in a great many parts of the world this is the principal source of attraction to people who are non Baha'is. They may, in the future, choose to become Bahá'ís but that is not the price of admission, it is simply the joining together in common worship.

Finally, in terms of attractive elements of the Faith, the nature of our religion includes certain elements that are becoming very attractive. One, of course, is the fact that it is free of ecclesiasticism. It is free from the apparatus of ecclesiastics and ministers and hierarchies and all that goes along with that. It is free from the corruption, the worldliness, and indeed the arrogance that is so often associated with religious hierarchies. It is essentially a non fanatical religion, reconciling the rational and the emotional. Obviously we find fanatics in the Bahá'í Faith. I have already mentioned that. We find extremists. We find people who are all kinds of things; People who are ambitious. People who are arrogant, people who are in the Faith for their own self aggrandisement. That's fine, that's all part of the process. Gradually those elements become purified through their involvement in the Bahá'í community or choose to depart from it. Nevertheless, the aggregate, the overwhelming majority, the general ethos of the Bahá'í community is one that is non fanatical because there are elements of the teachings that protect us against fanaticism and it is one which reconciles the rational and the emotional elements of human nature. And that is very satisfying to people because people yearn for recognition of the emotional aspect of spiritual components and they also are well aware that rationality has a very good track record over the last several centuries and nobody wants to discard it.

But of course, the Bahá'í religion, if you examine it in the spectrum of religions available to humanity, it is increasingly evident that it has the values that people would like their children to grow up with. When they look around them they say "What kind of world do I want my children to come into?" they more and more yearn for the old time values – trustworthiness, kindness, refinement, good manners and the like and they see that apparent in the Bahá'í teachings and progressively in Bahá'í practice. So there are these elements that are proving very attractive which at the moment are the engines driving the Bahá'í community forward as it grows.

Nevertheless there are certain aspects of the Bahá'í teachings which, in present day society, create challenges. There are certain things about our religion which are difficult

for the general public to accept. Now I want to mention three of those significant challenges.

The first of these three challenges that I think the Bahá'í community around the world faces as we go forward is the fact that we are aiming to present the Bahá'í Faith in a secularised society. By that I mean, in a society which adheres to material values and which discounts the spiritual component of the universe. If you look at the newspapers full of events occurring in the world, things that have happened or about to happen, you find that these are all presented in material terms. Conflicts in the world that have happened or are about to happen are analysed from a material perspective. Material forces which often have their origin in the 19th or early 20th centuries coming to fruition in this century are presented as the cause of world events. If someone were to stand up before such an audience which is imbued with that approach and say hey, it all started with a rejection of the call of Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and religious leaders in the 1870's and 1880's, they would be laughed out of the room. People would look at you as though you were some kind of "crazy". Whereas the fact is they all know that causes of events in the political sphere in the 20th Century were certain foreign policies of particular leaders of the 19th Century. This analysis occurred without any accommodation of the spiritual dimension. We lived in a secularised society. The problems of society in its state of stress at the present time are ascribed to material causes and so material measures are used to combat them. For example, the increase in crime which seems to be apparent in pretty much every part of the world which I have been in. The increase in crime is dealt with in terms of an increase in the police force, its training and its weaponry, in the greater levels of street lighting and in intensification of law enforcement including the increase in penalties for a variety of crimes. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of those measures but they are material responses to the increase in crime whereas what I would say is the increase in crime is part of the problems of our social order which have their origin ultimately in spiritual forces.

Terrorism which is becoming a source of great concern in many parts of the world is addressed though the frequency of greater and greater security checks, through surveillance monitoring, CCTV cameras, intelligence sharing between various national

intelligence agencies, travel restrictions, and the like. All of which are effective up to a certain point. All of which are reasonable in terms of dealing with the threat of terrorism. It is a terrible nuisance but it is understandable. Those of you who have been on an international flight would have more than likely been required to take off your shoes and have these x-rayed. This is a great nuisance but it is understandable given the incident which occurred over the Atlantic a few years ago. Nevertheless these are material responses to an element of the breakdown of society. The response to the spread of the possibility of warfare between states which are increasingly likely to be nuclear armed is through the intensification of weaponry and military training. The spread of epidemics such as AIDS is combated essentially by the development of medical treatment which will at least retard the spread of this disease and propagation of that treatment to a greater segment of the population. This is all part of the fact that the world looks upon these various and other problems as intrinsically material problems with material causes to which material response should be made. By contrast, our approach rests upon our view that the world is not only material but also spiritual. That there are great spiritual forces at work in the world today. The objection made to our position is that it is unscientific. "Where are these spiritual forces? I can't see them. How do you know they exist? Are you just making it up?" Now when I hear that I am reminded of the situation in the 19th Century. We know from 20th Century physics that in the 19th and 18th and 17th and all other kinds of other centuries throughout the life of humanity there were all kinds of things in the air that nobody could see. Electromagnetic waves, alpha waves, gamma rays, cosmic rays, neutrinos, and all kinds of other things which are now part of the Quantum Theory of 20th and 21st Century physics. They didn't suddenly turn up after the development of the work of Einstein and other scientists in the early 20th Century. They have been there for millennia. For untold millions of years cosmic rays have been bombarding the earth from the Oort cloud in the distant part of the universe. Neutrinos have been passing through us several times a minute ever since people have been around on this earth. Ever since the universe was in its present form, natural kinds of electromagnetic radiation coming from various elements of the universe, pulsars and various kinds of stars, radiation from black holes have been around for untold millennia. And if we were living in the 19th Century and said you know of all this stuff around us

people would have been totally incredulous. They would have said, “Nonsense. That’s unscientific! I don’t see any of the electromagnetic rays of which you speak. I don’t see alpha waves or gamma rays or neutrinos or cosmic rays or other things like that.” Yet later scientific developments showed that they do have a reality and we know it even though they are invisible. In that sense, we would defend ourselves and say that the lack of recognition of spiritual forces being part of our universe represents no more than an inadequacy of understanding. In our view, based on our acceptance of Bahá’u’lláh as a Manifestation of God, the universe includes within it a component of spiritual forces as well as the variety of material forces that we all study in physics. Beyond that we believe that the magnitude of these spiritual forces has been radically intensified by the coming of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and this is unsettling the world of humanity. It is unsettling human beings in a very subtle but definite ways, producing the age of transition we are experiencing leading to the new world civilization. It is in that sense that we believe that while material activity is appropriate in dealing with the problems of the world, we are not against it, we believe a fundamental solution to the world’s multitude of problems must require addressing the fact that their cause is, at the deepest level, through the neglect of these spiritual forces. This requires a significant change of outlook. It is going to be difficult to convince a whole lot of people to refine their model of the universe to include the concept of spiritual forces as being part. Nevertheless that is what it is about. If we were early 20th Century physicists we could shrink from embracing the model of the universe that included the various electromagnetic forces and particles, gamma rays, cosmic rays and ultimately neutrinos. We could shrink from embracing that model by the fact that it was strange and unpopular. That’s always been the way it was. I can remember studying the history of science many years ago – when magnetism first became a subject of legitimate study in around the 12th or 13th Century AD, how difficult it was for people to recognise that there was such a force as magnetism. You take two magnets, you hold them like this, there is nothing between, you could wave your arm up and down between them, nevertheless there was some force either pulling them together or pushing them apart. And that was strange because it was invisible. People could not comprehend it. Then that became part of normal thinking. And so it is with the concept of spiritual forces intrinsic to our understanding of the world, where it is and where it’s

going. It is in that sense that Bahá'ís find that part of our challenge is to persuade people around us that our efforts to spread Bahá'í values, to speak of our religion, to encourage others to participate in this quest for using spiritual forces and values, is our contribution to resolving the problems of the world. There are times when people say that Bahá'ís are off to one side working on their own thing while we're trying to stop the spread of AIDS, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the growth of crime and soccer hooliganism and all kinds of things. In fact, we need to explain to people that we have analysed the problems of society at a deeper fundamental level and we're working on their solution at that level. We need a lot more Bahá'ís of capacity and interest who will carry out studies, scholarly analyses to show that so many of the multitude of the problems of present day society ultimately are questions of human motivation, human moral values, human desires and therefore are best addressed through the Bahá'í approach, through the rectification of values and attitudes of love. This will make our position a lot more plausible than it is now to the general public.

The second of the three challenges we face that I want to mention to you this afternoon is the challenge we face through being a 'organised religion.' This is a very difficult point. Organised religion has justifiably a pretty bad name in our society. There are lots and lots of people who want nothing to do with an organised religion. When you ask them why, they can give some pretty good reasons. So often, people who are of their background feel that religion, by its intrinsic nature, is concerned with the inner nature of man, with the inner development of the human being. It's a private manner, it's a matter between the individual and God. It is not anyone else's business and organised religion makes it the business of the community. Therefore there are a lot of very good and very sincere people who choose to follow a religious life which is private, personal and not organised. People of that background quite justifiably point out the correlation between religious organisation and those things which have a corruptive influence on it; the focus on money, the focus on the building of greater and greater edifices. They don't want to be involved in those kinds of things. Such individuals regard it as grossly unspiritual to follow practices that they regard as business practices. Meetings, conventions, minutes, budgets, all the things that are the apparatus of modern business life are also found in any

halfway efficient religious organisation and this is distasteful to a lot of people. They say, “How can you associate spirituality with such mundane things as preparing minutes, getting them approved, getting them amended and the like? How can you associate it with conventions and the gathering of certain kinds of formulation of budgets and the meeting of budgets.” All of those things they would regard as taking away from the intrinsic spirituality. What we find is that we should recognise the sincerity of people who have this point of view. It doesn’t mean we agree with them, in fact we disagree with them at a very fundamental level. And we should recognise that a lot of very sincere people have been so badly burned by organised religion that they are profoundly turned off by it and when they come across the Bahá’í Faith and find that it has an Administrative Order that seems to grow in size and complexity with the passage of years, they will be reluctant to participate in it, or if they do so they will do it with a great deal of reservation. There are those who feel that if they do become Bahá’ís they will be largely uninvolved in the Administrative Order because they want to avoid getting caught up in things that could pollute their spiritual life or could lead them to get enmeshed in all the things I mentioned – conventions, minutes, gatherings, conferences, budgets and the like.

There are three things we need to say. The first is this, that the Bahá’í Administrative Order is not a discretionary part of our Faith but it’s an obligatory part. It’s not because we’d like it to be, or we have great fun seeing others suffer or anything like that. It is part of our religion because it is specified by the Founder of our religion, in black and white, in writing, that we should have an Administrative Order, a method by which this religious community is organised. We should point out in that context, that the function of our Administrative Order is not something we dreamed up after Bahá’u’lláh but it rests upon explicit, unambiguous statements in His writings in contrast to other religions. For example Islam and Christianity. The ambiguity of, “Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church”, is recognised by the variety of Christian sects and denominations. Likewise in Islam, the question of the appointment of Ali as Imam to succeed Mohammed recognised by the Shia’s is not recognised by the Sunnis – again there is a degree of ambiguity, a lack of written unambiguous statements which led and lead to the

tensions of the sectarian divisions of Islam. This is in contrast to the Bahá'í Faith where everything is written down explicitly, unambiguously. Our Administrative Order is built on the record of the statements of Bahá'u'lláh, the authority He conveyed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the interpretations provided within the context of that authority by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian.

The second thing we need to point out is that the Administrative Order is necessary to fulfil the explicit aims of the Bahá'í Faith. It's necessary because the explicit aims of the Bahá'í Faith include a fundamental change in the social order. In this religion, religion is not concerned only with private individual devotional practice. It is also concerned with social order, with the way human beings relate to each other, how we make decisions, the governance of society and the like. The very fact that the mission of Bahá'u'lláh concludes ultimately with the foundation of a world civilisation carries with it the connotation that there be social principles guiding the organisation of humanity in centuries ahead. Far beyond that, the Administrative Order is necessary to preserve the purity of the Faith, to avoid it being corrupted. You find that generally religions are corrupted not by evil people, but by good people, well-meaning people who feel they are doing the right thing, who sincerely believe that they are following what the Founder of their Faith intended, yet little by little, step by step, they add their own ideas to the authoritative texts of their religions and lo and behold, through the power of generations the thing gets corrupted. The integrity of the Faith depends upon the Administrative Order, its ability to resist compromise for the sake of progress or for the sake of short-term benefit, its unity, indeed its flexibility. If you want those things, you only get them through the Administrative Order. If you want unity, if you want flexibility, if you want purity, if you want an organisation that has integrity, this will only come through the Administrative Order and no other way. This in itself is a compelling reason for Bahá'ís to involve themselves in the Administrative Order. The final point I want to make on that challenge is that our teachings discuss the complex interaction between the individual and the society around them. We seek to create a society, a social organism which interacts constructively with the individual, fostering the spiritual development of both. In other words, the individual acts in harmony with the social order, both evolving, both

developing in a constructive manner and that of course is a very complex issue which is best explored more fully by Bahá'ís who carry out scholarly studies into this area of the relationship between the individual and the social or civil environment.

There's one more point I want to make in terms of challenges, then I will stop and hopefully take some questions. The third and final challenge we face in the spread of the Faith and its attractiveness to the general public around us lies in the relative unpopularity of certain Bahá'í laws and precepts. Our religion includes lots of things terribly attractive to people – oneness, unity, harmony, equality and the like, and individuals react to it very spontaneously, very positively. Some will say “I already believe that”, others will say, “Finally, here is an outfit that believes the kind of things that I've always thought – wonderful.” Then, as they get into it further, they find that there's all kinds of other things as part of our teachings that many people find less attractive and I think we need to recognise that and we need to deal with it. We deal with it not by changing those things, we can't anyhow as they were given by Bahá'u'lláh, but by indicating to people the plausibility and attractiveness of the Bahá'í teachings, even those teachings which go against prevailing thought. I want to make three illustrations. The first are the Bahá'í teachings on sexual conduct. You all know what they are, we don't have to recite them here. We do not believe it is appropriate for Bahá'ís to engage in sexual conduct outside marriage, we do not regard homosexual sexual practices as being appropriate for Bahá'ís, and a variety of other things. These principles are similar to those found in other religions and that is the trap. That is the problem. Because an individual will say “but the Bahá'ís are like everyone else. A whole bunch of “No”s. They can't do this, they can't do this, that and the other.” The difference is fundamental. The difference is that in so many other religions the restrictions on appropriate sexual conduct derive from concepts with which we do not agree. The concept of original sin is not part of the Bahá'í Faith. The concept of a devil waiting to get you is not part of the Bahá'í Faith. The concept of the evil nature of human beings is not part of the Bahá'í Faith. So even though we have certain principles of personal conduct which end up rather similar to what is found in other religions, they rest upon a radically different theoretical foundation. We need to think about that, we need to understand it and we need to tell others about it. Our

concepts of the basis for personal behaviour rest upon the recognition, as said in our religion, that this is based on the desire for two things: liberation and happiness.

Our religion aims at the liberation of the individual from the restrictions of his or her material nature and aims at promoting long term, enduring happiness. And we need, in explaining unpopular Bahá'í teachings, such as the restrictions on sexual conduct, we need to make it clear that they derive from the avowed purpose of our religion to liberate individuals from hang-ups, protection from the pressures of the material nature, and also to promote enduring, long term abiding happiness of the individual. Again, there are many more Bahá'ís who could go into this in far greater detail than I do with you, than my superficial remarks this afternoon, to analyse this greater detail, to establish the argument, to do it in a much more logical and reasoned way than I'm doing this afternoon – I'm doing no more than pointing to it because I think we need to show that we are a religion of liberation and happiness and that that leads a very direct route to justification for the Bahá'í principles of personal conduct including the ones I mentioned.

The same applies to the fact that our religion puts a surprising degree of emphasis on refinement of behaviour – neatness of dress, good manners, courtesy, physical cleanliness, purity of language, an approach to interpersonal relations – all these things are part of our religion. And this is very odd. People will say, “What’s cleanliness got to do with my spiritual development?” Well, it has a lot to do with one’s spiritual development; refinement of manners, of practice of interpersonal relations. All of these things are an intrinsic element of the path of spiritual development in our religion because of these same things – the desire to promote liberation and abiding happiness. And finally I want to mention within this context the high importance that we attach to the avoidance of backbiting, gossip and destructive criticism. It is not unusual for any body, whether it be a religious body or otherwise, to regard these things as no-no’s. That’s not particularly unusual. What is unusual is that our religious body regards these practices as destructive of one’s spiritual development. In other words we regard it important, spiritually, to avoid gossip and backbiting and destructive criticism, just as we regard it as important to say one’s prayers and read the Sacred Writings, to observe the laws of

fasting and the like. All of these things are part of our religious life. The reason we don't gossip and backbite and engage in destructive criticism is not only that it has a damaging effect on the community. Not only does it dampen individual initiative and aspirations. Not only does it discourage those in the community who have the capacity to be high achievers, to bring renown and prestige to the Faith through their activities. It is not only for those reasons. It is because it is destructive to our own souls spiritually and we need to explain this because these are things that are prevalent in our society, that are very, very common and which we have to show that our religion is capable of eradicating from our community and so be an example to the globe.

Well, so much for these various points that I wanted to make about where we are, that there are elements of our Faith that seem to be very attractive as well as those elements that seem to be a challenge to us in the years ahead. Overall, the situation of the Bahá'í community around the world is very, very good. There are a huge number of good things happening and the prospects for growth are essentially open-ended, the development of Bahá'í communities is quite spectacular with many different parts of the world. I think it's fair for me to say that the Members of the House of Justice are all very excited each time that we meet and we hear what is happening around the world, we do so almost in a state of exaltation about what is being accomplished by the believers around the world. But, I think we ought to recognise that there are some good things happening and that there are some challenges ahead of us. Let me now stop as I want to allow time for questions and I want you to feel free to ask any questions you wish, about any aspect of the Faith. It doesn't have to be something I talked about. It may be something you were wondering about. Anything I can help you with. Do feel free to ask.

Question time – not included in this transcript (and almost entirely inaudible).