

The writers are all members of the United States Bahá'í community and most, if not all, are highly qualified academically. The issues they address are virtually the same as those New Zealand Bahá'ís are confronting. The essays discuss the Bahá'í position in relation to the peace movement, (one article deals solely with the anti-nuclear movement, surely of high relevance to New Zealanders at the moment), race relations, poverty and wealth, human rights, the women's movement, economic and social development, and Marxism.

Some writers urge what appears to be change in the official Bahá'í position on such topics as involvement with Amnesty International and the peace movement. One writer urges "the leaders of the Bahá'í Faith to make a bold and timely statement encouraging birth control." In essence, many writers are advocating a much closer role for Bahá'ís in the crucial social issues of the day.... [The book] is an ideal catalyst for those institutions and communities who have yet to properly consult on their role in social and economic development....

Circle of Unity will be considered a landmark in the development of the Bahá'í community. Whether or not all the views are accepted as irrelevant? the stimulation to thought will give us all new intellectual vigour to meet the challenges put to us by the Universal House of Justice in 1983. From The New Zealand Bahá'í Newsletter

While still relatively small, the Bahá'í community is becoming a recognized force in several programs for the betterment of mankind. As a result, we are also beginning to find ourselves urged to support various social and political movements. A recent example that merits close examination is that contained in an article entitled "The Antinuclear Movement and the Bahá'í Community" which appears in a publication by Kalimat Press of California. The article calls on the Bahá'í community to assume the spiritual leadership of the "antinuclear movement" and to work "aggressively to transform political consciousness and accompanying public policies...."

This summons gains considerable authority merely from the fact that it has been selected for inclusion in a printed book, the only statement on nuclear issues that the book contains. For Bahá'í readers the statement's apparent authority is increased by the fact that the contents of the book are presented in bold red type on the cover as "Bahá'í Approaches" to the issues discussed. The political action theme is further reinforced by the publisher's own introduction.

Whatever is meant by "a Bahá'í Approach," the antinuclear article hardly seems to qualify. Although no one could doubt the sincerity of its concern about the horrors of nuclear war, its basic premise is sharply at variance with what Bahá'ís believe. In the face of Bahá'u'lláh's assurance, repeated in many places in His writings, that nothing whatever can nor will prevent the establishment of His World Order, the article argues that the World Order will be "still-born" unless the nuclear arms race can be halted. Political action aimed at exerting pressure on government is said to be not only

consistent with service to the Divine Plan, but essential to its ultimate success.

The spirit of the article seems even more remote from that of Bahá'í discussion. The confidence of Bahá'ís that a portion of humanity will survive whatever lies ahead is dismissed as comparable to indecent speculations in military circles about a “manageable nuclear catastrophe.” Some Bahá'ís are further accused of considering a nuclear holocaust to be a necessary stimulus to Mashriqu'l-Adhkár conversion. The Bahá'í community itself is pictured as somehow failing in its duty to the disarmament movement, and this failure is attributed to “beliefs about nuclear war that Bahá'ís have inherited from American political culture.” Apart from their unfairness, comments of this kind are unlikely to encourage a spirit of Bahá'í unity.

A social historian might comment that the predominant characteristics of American political culture are precisely those which the article and its Introduction exemplify: a persistent faith in political solutions and the use of the public information media to focus pressure on decision-making bodies. More recent American history has added a third feature, the tendency to respond to crises by imputing guilt to one's own community. There is nothing unusual about such practices in a democratic political context, but in no sense can they be considered a Bahá'í approach to problem-solving, nor consistent with one.

An attempt to mix the two approaches results in the kind of confusion which characterizes the publisher's Introduction to the book. Although avoiding specific suggestions, the Introduction argues that the challenge to political action has become the acid test of the Bahá'í community's sincerity. In an attempt to reinforce this argument the Introduction claims that the U.S. National Assembly's success in getting Congressional support in the Iran crisis had something to do with using “the struggle for power within government among parties and factions.” The truth, of course, is that all of the Bahá'í community successes with government have been the result of Assemblies being scrupulously careful to do precisely the opposite.

The two Kalimat pieces are a further reminder that the name of the Faith is ours only by courtesy. Bahá'u'lláh lends it to us for those initiatives which are motivated by a spirit of Bahá'í unity and which conform to His teachings. The sacrifices in Iran have given a powerful new thrust to the process. Throughout the world Bahá'í communities are struggling to translate these new spiritual energies into programs for human betterment, and this in turn is creating a ferment of new opinions about the best way to tackle the next stage of our mission.

When opinions are shared in the give-and-take of Bahá'í consultation, we can readily distinguish those that are useful and appropriate from those that are not. How do we deal with personal opinion which somehow skips crucial preliminary stages and appears in a commercial publication, solemnly endorsed by the publisher, and surrounded by an air of quasi-authority?

There is no simple answer. Obviously, Bahá'í community publications can do their best to provide balancing commentary. Further, as consumers, we have effective ways of signalling commercial suppliers that we are not a captive market. The review process can insist on changes in material which enjoys the use of Bahá'í channels for its distribution. Essentially, however, such practices challenge all of us to deal more maturely with the printed word. Non-Bahá'í society has become the captive of privately-owned information media which sit in judgment on private conscience and public policy alike. The Bahá'í community has embarked on an entirely different course. With the help of the consultative system Bahá'u'lláh has provided we have set out to master the difficult art of thinking for ourselves. From Bahá'í Canada

One of the criticisms sometimes levelled at Bahá'ís is their lack of a stand on current social issues. We are sometimes accused of ignoring many of these [issues] in favour of a somewhat “pie-in-the-sky” answer which will take effect sometime in the dim, distant future. It is therefore refreshing to see a book which addresses many of these issues directly.

Circle of Unity is a collection of ten essays by various authors. The subjects covered are: disarmament and the peace movement, race relations, poverty and wealth, human rights, the women's movement, economic and social development, and Marxism. A mixed bag of subjects, but each one is of great importance to us as Bahá'ís. We must, if we are to persuade others of the verity and potency of the answers the Faith contains within its teachings, demonstrate a good understanding of the problems themselves. This book is therefore vital reading to all Bahá'ís. We cannot afford to sidestep issues like these. It is therefore strongly recommended that all Bahá'ís purchase, read and ponder [this book].

The answer in Circle of Unity are not definitive, they represent only the views of their respective authors. Kalimat Press, the publishers, are actively seeking replies, even rebuttals, to the various essays. They see Circle of Unity as the beginning of a process, not the end. From The Bahá'í Journal (England)

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