

The Bahai community in the USA grows by leaps and slumps. Lately it's been slumping, and a lot of people have been thinking about the causes and solutions. This is part of the conversation.

To: XX,<TARIKH-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU>
Subject: Re: Baha'i Population
Date sent: Mon, 26 Feb 2007 12:38:00 +0100

> We are due for another cultural crisis; they come about every 30-40
> years. enrollments will surge, and we will attribute our growth
> to Ruhi.

I shudder to think how deep the crisis would have to be, for Ruhi classes to appear as an effective "well-oiled teaching machine."

I've been saying it for years and I'll say it yet again - local "houses" (meetings) of worship: which translates as Baha'i-TM and Bahai-subud, Bahai-gregorian and sufi Bahais, Buddha Bahais and Hare Hare Bahai, rap Bahai and shaker Bahai and Sunday morning dressed up in best Hear the Word and Preach the Word AY-Men Bahai. Plus firesides and world peace and media presence and opening up the internal culture (transparency, a critical civil society, intellectual debate and a diversity of visions).

When the crisis was "modernity" hitting society and especially religion (circa 1900-1920), the solution looked like religion for modernity, without clergy, unaffected by the impact of historical criticism on scripture, with an answer to religious pluralism, relatively immune to demythologising etc..

When the crisis was the credibility of the economic and political international order (circa 1930-45) the solution looked like a global order. We produced the product the people needed to believe in.

When the "crisis" (blessing) was the breakdown of social categories and identities, circa 1965-75, we threw "the dignity of the Faith" to the winds, invited people into our homes and went ourselves onto the streets, and became a peace movement. Nowadays [as you say]:

- > Overall, the country is secularizing in spite of the agenda of the
- > evangelical right. I have heard some people say the college students
- > are the first post-Christian generation in this country. That has
- > advantages for the Faith, but also disadvantages. ...And obviously
- > we won't change to fix the problem.

And this is the problem, isn't it? Not "the country is secularizing" part, but the "We won't change."

An internal culture resistant to re-inventing itself spells an inevitable (but blissfully incident-free) demise, for any organisation in today's world. We won't change, may we rest in peace, may the grass fold its blanket gently over, until names on weed-grown stones are rained away. aahmen,

and only beetles and historians are busy, with the bones

What is needed is to look again at our scriptural resources and find there what is authentic to us, and is needed out there. What's not needed is to send some smart fellows to business school and have them come up with a "building momentum" - human resources - organisation sciences hooplaa that is not authentic and flies over the heads of the "resources" (they are in fact people) whom we need, and hope to help.

What's not needed is to divert attention from the need for a radical renewal of the leadership culture by introducing - from the top - a pre-designed procrustian bed for the grass-roots who - surprise surprise - will be directed in their endeavours by the same old in faithful obedience of the supreme principle of WWC (We Won't Change).

The doors to at least modest growth, and to making a Bahai contribution to shaping the postmodern world, are open. But how do you persuade the horse that he wants to leave the stall? The leading cadre are still the people who sneered at "back to Baha'u'llah," thought that the Mashriq was something doctrinal (!), use "modern" and "postmodern" as pejoratives, who maintain an excluding and secretive internal culture of things unsaid, things that may not - subject to dire penalties - ever be said, and who-you-know: insiders and 'the rest.' This cadre will not lead anywhere.

Which brings me back to your theme of social crisis as a trigger. Social crises do make fertile fields. They also deliver a healthy slap on the rump to the sleepy horse, and that may be the most important reason why Bahai growth has coincided with social crises. Given the diversity of the social scene today, I suspect there is always some corner of society where growth is possible, where we could be helping more people to live their lives better in a secularised postmodern society. We therefore need to focus our attention on what kind of internal crisis could deliver the needed slap to the horse.

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