

## **Religious Freedom in Canada: a Bahá'í View**

Over 50 years ago, the American Bahá'í community created "World Religion Day", celebrated annually around the world to underscore the essential unity of all faiths. It's a cause that remains central and very dear to the hearts of Bahá'ís. There are those who wonder why on earth the world would need another religion. But this one says all religions are one. They're chapters of the same book.

A couple of years ago, I went to a talk by an Anglican archbishop, a wise and personable man who described the spectrum of relationships between faiths: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The first are self-explanatory and the last, simply put, accepts that there are different, equally valid paths up that spiritual mountain we're all on. The Bahá'í Faith adds a caveat: not only do the different religions come from the same Source and have the same ultimate goal, they're all closely linked. Each reiterates spiritual teachings and creates social teachings that respond to the needs of the times. Harold Rosen, author of a new book on the "Founders of Faith", calls it progressivism. I've always known it as progressive revelation, and it was reason I first fell in love with this new Faith.

Born in 1844 in Iran, the Bahá'í Faith is related to Islam in the same way that Christianity is related to Judaism. Roughly half the Bahá'ís in Victoria are Iranian. When I became a Bahá'í in the 1970's on Prince Edward Island, there were very few Persian Bahá'ís in the entire country. We'd managed to survive the generation gap quite handily (jeans meeting nylons at Bahá'í gatherings) so the cultural gap between Canadians and our new Iranian friends in the 1980's was taken pretty much in stride, aided by Persian tea and immense dishes of scented pulau.

The Canadian Bahá'í population was rapidly growing at the time, roughly doubling to about 30,000. Today in the Victoria area there are about 350, and virtually every one of the dozen communities here has a Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA), the elected local governing body. I was 21 when I first served as one of the requisite 9 members on an LSA, in Sackville, Nova Scotia. (Yes, it does exist – just outside Halifax.) It was quite the learning curve for a brand new Bahá'í. My Catholic upbringing hadn't prepared me for this do-it-yourself religion with no clergy, and I had to scramble to learn the Bahá'í principles of consultation.

I'm still learning to abide by those rules. Check your ego at the door, express yourself in a frank and loving way, detach yourself from outcomes, be guided by the highest good, strive for unity... I come from a fairly passionate and opinionated Irish family, so that level of peacefulness is still a bit of a stretch.

One of the founding principles of the Bahá'í Faith is "unity in diversity", which happens to be very much a part of the Canadian ethic. Thank goodness religious freedom in this country isn't an issue. That's the way it should be.