

ESPERANTISTS AND BAHÁ'ÍS – MULTIFACETED RELATIONS*

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Published in: Bahaismo kaj Esperanto, BEL, Hofheim 2009

Indications are not lacking to demonstrate how Bahá'ís at the time of the twentieth century's birth were in the main sure that Esperanto definitely is the auxiliary international language whose introduction was prophesied in the Bahá'í Holy Writings. Lidia Zamenhof in her letter composed in March 1938 even considered Esperanto »that language, which – I am firmly convinced – was created directly under the influence of Bahá'u'lláh, although the author of the language was not cognizant of it«. A majority of the Bahá'ís of the era, at least in Europe, were apparently either supporters of Esperanto or indeed active Esperantists. That impression is certainly obtained by close examination of the Bahá'í Esperanto gazette – La Nova Tago, published in the 1920s and 1930s.

Supporting this conviction in no small degree was the positive attitude demonstrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá especially during his historic travels in the West, 1911 – 1913, at which time he often addressed gatherings of Esperantists and expressed his high regard for the movement in addition to advocating increased promulgation of the Zamenhof language. With the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, his grandson Shoghi Effendi commenced his ministry as Guardian of the Bahá'í International Community. He too continued promotion of the use of and the learning of Esperanto and among other initiatives he saluted the annual Universal Congress of Esperanto on several occasions in most laudatory and encouraging terms.

Little by little however, the tone began to change in the Guardian's letters. He increasingly stressed that which Bahá'ís hold uppermost: (1) the idea itself of an international auxiliary language and (2) it is by no means certain that Esperanto will be the language chosen. Moreover, it was explained clearly that the Bahá'ís will not decide the selection question but rather the political leaders of humankind. »The governments of the world through their parliaments are called upon to effect this momentous enactment.« (Note 193 of the Universal House of Justice expanding on paragraph 189 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.) Vast exploration, discussion and consultation must first be initiated upon which the final decision will be securely based.

As a result Bahá'ís are engaged mainly in the general principle of introducing – whatever! – international auxiliary language whereas the Esperanto movement is specifically »a movement for the international language Esperanto«. And, one might ask oneself therefore whether Esperantism betrays Dr. Zamenhof a little and also ignores that its strict coupling to the Esperanto language might compromise its reputation with those government Departments and administrators who will at some point in time decide on the language to be adopted as a second idiom for everyone

* Provisionally translated by Paul Desailly into English from the Esperanto original.

for one must indeed suppose that those government Departments and administrators will insist on full independence to examine the entire question in regard to all possible alternatives.

In its letter to the Bahá'í Esperanto League of 6th October 1976 the Universal House of Justice warned Bahá'í Esperantists as follows:

»The House of Justice realizes that you must sometimes be faced with somewhat embarrassing situations in relation to your fellow-Esperantists since, as Bahá'ís, you are fully aware that, for all its undoubted qualities, Esperanto may well not be the international language that is ultimately chosen, and that it is the concept of an international language that the Bahá'ís are enthusiastic in supporting rather than any particular solution to the problem. The Guardian's advice that Bahá'ís must be entirely open about this matter in relation to Esperantists so as to avoid serious misunderstandings and misapprehensions in the future will no doubt be of great assistance to you in your work and enable you to forge ahead with full enthusiasm without, in any way, appearing to sail under false colors.«

Sometimes even eminent Esperantists seemed to hope to find in the Bahá'í movement an important means, perhaps even the means, to exalt Esperanto and consequently they joined the Faith. Sooner or later they were bound to be disillusioned and therefore withdrew from the community and abandoned the Faith again, if not even started to actively oppose it. That Bahá'í Esperantists did not always exhibit their position to the Esperanto community as frankly as Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice had recommended undoubtedly contributed to the situation.

An additional reason for bumpy relations can definitely be attributed to the notion held by Bahá'ís that their religion is more widespread and more comprehensive in ideology than Esperantism and ergo more important too. In its letter of 19th March 1973 to the founders of the Bahá'í Esperanto League the Universal House of Justice stated: »Your zeal on behalf of Esperanto as a functional international language will, we feel, be well rewarded by the entry into the Faith of many of your Esperantist associates who will thus take the step from universality in language to the greater universalities of one religion and one mankind.« In this last mentioned sentence is an echo of what fifty years earlier the newly declared Bahá'í, Lidia Zamenhof, had much less moderately and more provocatively contributed for Heroldo de Esperanto in June 1926: »It seems to me that Esperanto is only¹ a school in which future Bahá'ís educate themselves. The Bahá'í Movement is on the move; it is more wide-ranging.«

On pages 125 to 126 Wendy Heller's biography Lidia – The Life of Lidia Zamenhof – Daughter of Esperanto describes the episode:

»On the face of it, this was quite a startling statement. For Zamenhof's own daughter to say that something else was larger than Esperanto, that the cause to which her father had devoted his life was 'only a school' no doubt deeply shocked many Esperantists and may even have seemed treasonous. Yet the creator of Esperanto had never regarded the Esperanto movement as an end in itself, but rather as a means to educate people about unity. Zamenhof himself had believed that the idea of a neutral language could never succeed without a world religion. Lidia's words seemed to echo what Ludwik Zamenhof had told the Universal Congress of Esperanto

¹ Subsequently the editors of Heroldo de Esperanto deleted just one word – »only«.

in 1907: 'Gradually Esperantoland will become a school for the future brotherhood of mankind.'...Ludwik Zamenhof's daughter saw no contradiction or conflict of loyalties in accepting the Bahá'í Faith. Its essential teachings were not in conflict with Zamenhof's ideas, but seemed to confirm them and expand them. Here were the concepts of Zamenhof's Homaranismo – one God as the unknowable creator of all, one mankind to live in peace as one great human family, the agreement of the essential teachings of the Great Teachers of the past, accord between science and religion, a universal auxiliary language. But if the principles were the same, why accept the Bahá'í Faith over Homaranismo? ...Ludwik Zamenhof had never claimed to found a religion, but the Bahá'í teachings, Lidia came to believe, carried the power of divine inspiration. 'In the Teaching of Bahá'u'lláh', Lidia explained many years later, 'I found the universality which only the truly God-given teaching can give to searching mankind. That is why it attracted me at the beginning.'«

»The truly God-given teaching« – just here, in the Bahá'í viewpoint, can be found the crucial 'deficiency' with Zamenhof. The Bahá'í Faith is indeed a true religion, »the truly God-given teaching«. Not only does the Bahá'í Faith proclaim the same unifying ideals as Zamenhof – and even ardently pleads for the adoption of an international auxiliary language and common script – but also in essence bestrides any well intentioned and idealistic movement. The Faith puts demands on one's entire character: »With good will and determination an auxiliary language – especially one of the nature of Esperanto – can easily, and relatively quickly, be learned; whereas the Cause requires that people change not only certain ideas but their very characters and habits, and this is much harder to do and often takes a long time!«²

Perhaps not Ludwik Zamenhof but rather his youngest daughter was the one convinced that »humanity exists to know its Creator and to serve His purpose« and that to believe »is a necessary and inextinguishable urge of the species ... an impulse that will not be denied« and that »the soul's ability to attain to an understanding of its Creator's purpose is the product not merely of its own effort, but of interventions of the Divine that open the way« and that man must recognize »the central truth of revealed religion: that access to the unknowable Reality that creates and sustains existence is possible only through awakening to the illumination shed from that Realm.«³

It is not unusual that one is able to sincerely turn to the spiritual world and start to experience its soul-stirring influence only in the wake of long and possibly painful internal contests.

Moreover, the Bahá'í Faith, being a true and fully sanctioned religion – in fact the most abundant outpouring of Divine Revelation recorded in the annals of religious history to date – with its teachings that penetrate all departments of human life and with its profound spirituality, clearly in its all encompassing comprehensiveness surpasses both Esperantism and Dr Zamenhof's ideology, Homaranismo. And, thus, although parallels abound between these movements, an entirely other quality is required to join the ranks of the Bahá'ís as distinct to the Esperanto movement.

That not a few Esperantists have come to understand the independent conceptualization on the part of the Bahá'í community vis-à-vis the question of a universal auxiliary language has probably disillusioned many of them in that the

² Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi of 25th January 1943 to an individual believer

³ One Common Faith, Bahá'í World Centre 2005, §§ 40, 27 and 41.

Faith is not so smooth an ally in the battle to spread Esperanto. But the question why more Esperantists do not declare allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh is for them much less interesting than its inverse: why are so few Bahá'ís active Esperantists? The 400 strong membership of the Bahá'í Esperanto League is indeed a relatively tiny proportion of the five million Bahá'í multitude.

As clarified earlier, Bahá'ís support mainly the principle itself rather than any specific language. For that reason evidently, many more Bahá'ís than the active Esperantists among them, wholeheartedly support the Esperanto movement. Nevertheless, the overarching aim of all Bahá'ís is the promotion of the new Revelation, the Word of God sent on Earth anew.

One can thus reason that Bahá'í Esperantists face two essential tasks: to communicate the Bahá'í Faith to the Esperanto world and to demonstrate to its Bahá'í counterpart – in the same vein as Esperantist's initiatives to the public at large – the functioning of Esperanto, i.e. to prove that this planned language truly functions and has every right to be seriously considered as the successful candidate as the auxiliary tongue for the entire world.

The following summation more than adequately adumbrates the present position of the Bahá'í International Community in relation to this fundamental Bahá'í principle:

»The Universal House of Justice feels that should it select a specific language for the Bahá'ís to be used as an international auxiliary language, it would cause more difficulties than would be solved at the present time. However, the friends [Bahá'ís], remembering that it is one of the most important principles of the Faith would do well to support the idea whenever possible and to pray that the time is no longer distant when the governments of the world will adopt a single language to be taught in all the schools of the world as an auxiliary to the mother tongue of all students.«⁴

This then concisely is also the focus of the Bahá'í Esperantists who in the 1970s gave birth to the Bahá'í Esperanto League.

⁴ From the introduction to compilation prepared in January 1985 for the Universal House of Justice.