

Our duty to Bahá'í Iranians

The last person in Britain to be executed for blasphemy was Thomas Aikenhead, an 18-year-old student at Edinburgh University who was altogether too vocal in his lack of respect for the scriptures as authoritative texts on history and morals. On the day of his hanging in 1697, he wrote: "It is a principle innate and co-natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to the truth, and to seek for it as for hid treasure".

The conflict between education and religious chauvinism is thankfully not something that contemporary students in this country have to worry about. In Iran, however, there are 300,000 Bahá'í citizens excluded from university because of their religion.

Their cause has been brought to the University's attention by Bahá'í students in Durham, individuals who have approached the issue with an impressively persuasive and level-headed eloquence.

As a result, the 'Closed Door' campaign, which calls on leaders in academia to express concerns about discrimination to their Iranian peers, was endorsed last March by DSU Council. More recently Hild Bede SRC has followed suit.

There are many injustices in the world, and many in Iran besides this one. A reason to pay attention to the plight of the Bahá'í in particular is that we are indirectly involved in it. The University recruits postgraduate students from Iran: this pool of talent excludes people of the Bahá'í faith.

We are also well placed as a University to influence the opinion of Iranian students and academics, precisely because we have such well established links with the country. Indeed, this time last year *Palatinat* reported on the collaboration between the Iranian government and Durham's Centre for Iranian Studies to present the Ferdowsi lecture series. The arrangement is formalised by a Memorandum of Understanding, a document currently in force which facilitates academic exchange over a 2 year period and the transfer of £10,000 from Tehran to the University.

While we are accepting cash and welcoming Iranian colleagues, we must not forget the Bahá'í Iranians who can't take part.

Hild Bede vote to support Bahá'í Iranians

Diya Sagar

On 11th October, the Hild Bede SRC (Student Representative Council, comprising the JCR and MCR) passed a motion to "express concern regarding the denial of higher education to students of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, and its impact on the diversity of our College community".

The motion mandated the SRC President Chris Moore to write a letter of concern to the Durham MP Roberta Blackman-Woods, and indicate the problem to the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of Internationalisation through the JCR Presidents' Committee (PresComm). This motion reaffirms the unanimous vote at the DSU Council Meeting earlier this year, where the DSU voted to support the 'Closed Doors' campaign for the rights of Bahá'í students in Iran.

The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion based on the unity of humankind, and constitutes Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority. Bahá'ís are currently banned from all higher education institutions in Iran solely due to their religious beliefs. The government of Iran actively works to prevent them from obtaining an education so they can-

not contribute to their society. The Bahá'í writings state that "conflict and contention are in no ways permitted", and thus Bahá'ís refrain from political partisanship and protest. Hence, while certainly expressing serious concern for human rights abuse, the motion is not a 'protest'; it merely asks recognised academic organisations to express their worries in a civil and collegial manner.

"The problem is that members of our faith are banned from all higher education institutions in Iran."

Durham's student Bahá'í community is in favour of increased academic exchanges and scholarships between the UK and Iran. James Russell, who proposed the motion to both the DSU and Hild Bede SRC, showed his apprehensiveness of the situation: "the teachings of our faith emphasise the need to unify humanity and

the importance of education. The problem is that members of our faith are excluded from eligibility to study at Durham, because they are banned from all Higher Education institutions in Iran". As it stands, any incoming group of Iranian students to Durham would exclude members of Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority.

This discrimination is an important matter to Durham students because the University is currently recruiting students from Iran. Indeed, Mehdi Hashemi, Chair of Council of Azad University of Tehran, visited recently to discuss the possibility of Durham leading a PhD programme for academic staff from the University.

Bahá'í students banned from entering the university system in Iran are therefore also prevented from continuing on to postgraduate study at Durham. As a result, religious discrimination in Iran limits the potential diversity of Durham University and prevents qualified international students from becoming part of the university community.

Hild Bede has been designated as one of five colleges favoured for the recruitment of residential postgraduates. The college currently represents international students from 21 countries and is proud of "its long-

standing traditions as a vibrant, all-inclusive, tolerant and caring community in which the contributions of all members, regardless of their position, role or background, are appreciated as being equally important".

The SRC believes that the University Administration needs to be informed about the detrimental impact of the discrimination on its applicant pool and firmly deems that university admission to students of all or no religious traditions should be based solely on academic merit. SRC President Moore stated in an interview, "Hild Bede is committed to ensuring inclusion, diversity and freedom of education for all". He hopes that together with the support of the JCR PresComm, the Vice-Chancellor and Dean will communicate their joint concern to colleagues in Iran and the government.

International anxiety has made a difference for Bahá'í students in the past. In 2004, Bahá'í students were briefly allowed to enroll in Higher Education after the EU and other international institutions made representation to Iran. However, whilst discrimination against our fellow students of the Bahá'í Faith is ongoing, Durham's student Bahá'í community continue to campaign.