

Trial and Triumph:

The Origins of the Bahá'í Faith in Black America

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The Bahá'í Faith in America: A Brief History

We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations....That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled...Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the "Most Great Peace" shall come....These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family....Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.

- Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*¹

The Bahá'í Faith (simply referred to as “the Faith”) is a world-wide religion that fundamentally believes in the unity and accord of religion itself. Having originated in Persia in 1863, it proclaims a message that inculcates the oneness of God as well as the oneness and wholeness of the entire human race. Members of the Bahá'í Faith, *Bahá'ís*, are described as striving, living examples of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh [in English “the Glory of God”] (1817-1892)—the Faith’s prophet-founder.

Bahá'ís represent every race and virtually every nationality on earth. They come from many different religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. While Bahá'ís actively participate in the Faith’s administrative order, the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Instead, it is governed by a body of elected and appointed officials at all administrative levels—international, continental, national, regional, and local. One thing that is particularly interesting about this religion is the fact that many societies have only *recently* realized that it is indeed a major religion. In fact, I have often heard it lightly described as the world’s “eighth wonder.” Having originated just a century and a half ago (1863), *Encyclopedia Britannica* documents that the Bahá'í Faith is now the second most widespread religion in the world.²

It was not until the early 1890s that the Faith finally reached the shores of America, brought to the city of New York by way of two early Bahá'í believers—Ibrahim Kheiralla and Anton Haddad—from what is today the country of Lebanon. Anton Haddad left America shortly after their arrival; Ibrahim Kheiralla remained behind in search of a better way of life. In 1894, after only a few short years of studying the English language and without any Bahá'í scripture on-hand, Kheiralla began to spread his own understanding of the Bahá'í teachings.³ By 1898 (the year that the first pilgrimage of American believers took place), he had helped to cultivate a following of about fifteen hundred believers scattered

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Berne Convention: The Universal House of Justice, 1967), ix.

² “Adherents of All Religions by Seven Continental Areas, Mid-1993.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2003. Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service. 22 Apr, 2003 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=126063>>.

³ Robert Stockman, “United States of America,” Bahá'í Academics Resource Library, 18 April 2003, <<http://bahai-library.org/encyclopedia/usa.html>>.

throughout the cities and states of New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Wisconsin—the majority of whom came from British, German, and Scandinavian backgrounds.⁴ Upon establishing formal contact with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh and subsequent head of the Bahá’í Faith after Bahá’u’lláh’s passing—America became the home of the first founded Bahá’í community in the Western world.

In 1900, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá entrusted a small following of Bahá’í scholars from the Middle East to consolidate America’s growing Bahá’í communities. Alongside the rapid translation of Bahá’í sacred texts between 1904 and 1908, these scholars were able to largely dispel whatever lingering misinterpretations of Bahá’í teaching had emerged up to that point. In the years immediately following, the Bahá’í Faith foresaw the election of formal consultative bodies of believers in Washington, D.C., Boston, and other cities where major communities had been established—predecessors of today’s Local Spiritual Assemblies. Other developments included the establishment of a national coordinating body—now, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States—and the successful founding of *Star of the West*, the first Bahá’í periodical.⁵

Nevertheless, it was Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit in 1912 that was probably the most consolidating to early expansion. In only eight short months, Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels throughout the United States and Canada had an enormous impact on the American believers, creating ever deeper impressions upon their minds and hearts. His talks and lectures were published in hundreds of newspapers throughout the country; some were eventually compiled into books, allowing for further circulation of the Faith’s message. Before long, many believers began to travel extensively throughout the world spreading the Faith’s message abroad. Guided by the direction of Abdu’l-Bahá’s grandson, Shoghi Effendi, the international governing body of that religion, the Universal House of Justice, was established in Haifa, Israel in 1963. In the years following that establishment, the number of Bahá’ís throughout the world increased exceedingly. This was especially the case for the Bahá’í community of America, whose population grew from about thirteen thousand in 1969, to eighteen thousand in 1970, to thirty-one thousand in 1971, and, astoundingly, to sixty thousand by 1974.⁶

Today, the Bahá’í Faith has five million followers worldwide.⁷ Adhering to the principal of the oneness of humankind, its teachings emphasize the independent investigation of reality; the abandonment of all forms of prejudice and superstition; the unity and relativity of religious truth; the assurance of full equality between women and men; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; the recognition that true religion is in harmony with reason and the pursuit of scientific knowledge; the realization of universal education; and, amongst many other directives, the establishment of a global commonwealth of nations.⁸

⁴ Stockman, 18 April 2003.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Bahá’í International Community, “The Bahá’ís: Introduction to a World Community,” *The Bahá’ís* (Bahá’í International Community, 1992), 5.

⁸ For more information on the social and spiritual teachings of the Bahá’í Faith refer to The Bahá’í International Community, *The Bahá’ís* (Bahá’í International Community, 1992), 26-41.

Introduction

“To be a Bahá’í simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood.”

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*¹

In the cultural and social contexts of early twentieth-century America, the Bahá’í movement—with its emphasis on social and moral reform, on establishing a global commonwealth of nations, and on the abandonment of all forms of prejudice, amongst many other directives—was probably one of the most far-fetched undertakings that any twentieth-century American, black or white, had ever encountered. To those whose minds were faithfully imbedded in convention and whose manners and practices were too fixed upon the conservation of a *separate, but equal* society, it was nothing more than an uncontained absurdity, a social un-necessity—quite possibly, a threat to their American way of life. To a growing population of believers, however, it was an expansive haven of social solidarity and collective accord, a glorious fulfillment of religious and scriptural promise—the inevitable and utterly majestic undertaking of world peace.

The essential nature of the Bahá’í Faith was all-embracing. Its overriding emphasis on the oneness of humankind was demonstrated not only by its civic and inter-organizational activities, but also by the body of its loyal adherents—those who were said to be comprised of every religious following, of all socioeconomic standings, and of a variety of professional and educational backgrounds. To uncover its precise history, however—to understand the scope of its activities or to grasp the full extent of its impact upon the American nation—has been largely a daunting task. Although activity in today’s Bahá’í community is thoroughly detailed and documented, the Bahá’í Faith of early twentieth-century America is subject to the fading of oral histories and the desertion of unsorted letters and personal files. An understanding of its influence and early reputation, therefore, can only be gleaned from the individual histories and personal reflections of the first Americans who adhered to its teachings, persons like Dorothy Beecher Baker, a daughter of the great abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Alain Leroy Locke, one of the most influential educators of his day.

The Bahá’í Faith’s first appearance in Black America came at a time of unprecedented marginalization, when virtually every avenue to social, economic, and political success was, even since the dawning of Emancipation, systematically obstructed and detained. Black Americans, although having attained some advancement in education and politics, could not help but feel disillusioned by deep-seated divisions within their community of leaders or dismayed by the painfully slow progression of their collective socio-economic improvement. They could not escape the ever-increasing threat of racial violence or the overpowering grip of poverty and homelessness. The constitutional

¹ Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 71.

pretense that America was a free and equal nation, the guise that every American citizen unreservedly possessed the right *to liberty and the pursuit of happiness*, could only agitate their restless fury and intensify their already unbearable desperation. To this idea, one civil rights leader writes:

Never before in the modern age has a great and civilized folk threatened to adopt so cowardly a creed in the treatment of its fellow-citizens, born and bred on its soil. Stripped of verbose subterfuge and in its naked nastiness, the new American creed says: fear to let black men even try to rise lest they become the equals of the white. And this in the land that professes to follow Jesus Christ! The blasphemy of such a course is only matched by its cowardice!²

The many “blasphemies” which confronted African Americans of this period can—from a sociological perspective—be explained by the shifting of social and political institutions within the larger American society. Whereas the Emancipation Proclamation ushered in an age of advancement for black Americans (e.g., freedom, citizenship, suffrage, welfare programs, and opportunities for advanced education), conservative America, particularly the Old South, sought to offset that advancement through a series of *counter-reconstructions*—in effect, the elicitation of Black Codes, white supremacy, segregation, and racial violence. All of these circumstances, whether benevolent or malevolent, were essentially structural in nature. They represented an enormous struggle for legitimacy amid rivaling institutions and organizations and a political tug-or-war between the individuals who commanded them.³

On the whole, the many socio-structural modifications animating the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries refer to what Peter Berger describes as a “crisis of plausibility,”⁴ what William Kornhauser designates as “social atomization,”⁵ and what Michael McMullen calls the “push” of disillusionment.⁶ All are representative of a massive legitimation struggle which resulted in the marginalization of black people. According to Berger, the shifting of social-political structures is a natural cause for subsequent “shifts” within an individual’s state of consciousness. The feelings that emerge (e.g. fear, intense anxiety, and estrangement) form the basis of newly objectified activity.⁷

The ways in which this newly objectified activity unfolded were broad and varied. Some African Americans sought haven in the Black Church. Others invested their

² David Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1995), 367.

³ This idea speaks to Peter Berger’s theory of the “crisis of plausibility,” which is a structural analysis of social change and evolution. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959).

⁶ Michael McMullen, *The Babá’í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 23.

⁷ See Berger (1969).

energies into the development of civic organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the National Urban League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The division of interest which naturally arose between these groups and organizations, however, became reminiscent of the “crisis of plausibility” already taking place within the larger socio-political order.⁸ What essentially emerged was a downward spiral of secularization within the body of black leadership. Educators were challenging the intellectual capacity of preachers and ministers. Civic leaders were quarrelling over how the “Negro Problem” should best be resolved. Because of an inability to reach the black majority or to rise above the unproductive bicker of inter-organizational tensions, no one group or organization could ever be—by philosophy or political platform—particularly effective. Only organizations which, in the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, rallied on “points of agreement” between themselves and other like-minded organizations were productive and able to build coalitions.⁹

Undoubtedly, the American Bahá’í community was such a coalition-building “organization.” Within years of initiating the *Race Amity Conventions*, it was able to build enough prestige among the black collectivity to not only attract the attention of other prominent groups and individuals, but to also pull these groups and individuals into the halls of its membership and work alongside them. Because of its all-inclusive, issue-encompassing approach, the Bahá’í Faith may have very well been a unifying force amid its organizational and religious contemporaries. Careful consideration over the planning of its non-protestant and politically moderate (or avoidant) activities had enlarged its local and national capacity to join hands with diverse groups—churches, universities, civic societies and organizations—without atomizing any part of the whole.

One of the most interesting features of the early American Bahá’í community (and certainly a major reason why it was so successful in building relations with other religious and civic groups) was its ideological commitment to non-partisanship—perhaps, a seeming contradiction. The secret to understanding this *attraction by non-partisanship*, however, lies in the Faith’s social and spiritual teachings, those which predominantly emphasized the imperativeness of human accord. Simply stated, being a Bahá’í required nothing more and nothing less than loving all of humanity. It lessened one’s desire to be categorized by any particular institution or affiliated with any particular organization. It emphatically claimed that divisions and distinctions within and amongst the peoples of the world—and even apparent differences within and between religious communities—had severely limited the extent to which the *body* of human civilization could properly function and mature. Not only were these distinctions (e.g., race, limited patriotism, and religious bias) superficial and self-destructive to that body, but they were also easily subjected to change and time. Hence, the Bahá’í philosophy questioned: Because the socio-political norms of today will not be the same as those for tomorrow, why bother with them at all? Why trivialize humankind with such insufficient and impermanent standards? Why not simply remove those “norms” and hasten toward the *true* reality of man—the oneness of

⁸ See Berger (1969).

⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 66-67.

human civilization? “O well-beloved ones!” Bahá’u’lláh says, “The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.”¹⁰

In effect, such a world-embracing philosophy implies that adherents of the Bahá’í Faith were freer to conduct their affairs without being psychologically or organizationally held down by social conventions, by partisanship or affiliation, rank or file, color, sex, or nation. It did not particularly matter to them what race an individual was or part of the world he or she came from or even if that person had decided to not become a Bahá’í (through organizational affiliation). All that mattered was the dissemination of Bahá’í ideology—the common recognition of human oneness—and the stabilization and maturation of the world society. To this idea, Bahá’í scholar Shoghi Effendi writes:

[The Bahá’í Faith] implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds – creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel....It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world – a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. It represents the consummation of human evolution – an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.¹¹

In essence, being a Bahá’í designated a transcendence from all boundaries—structural, psychological, religious, social, or otherwise. It was not so much a matter of garnering religious enrollments or of converting people to its organizational membership. Rather, it

¹⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 218.

¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1938), 42.

simply signified an ideological recognition of and an active commitment to achieving that “final stage of evolution” which Shoghi Effendi had so skillfully articulated.

Fundamentally, the history of the Bahá'í Faith in America is one which describes a relative high point in the field of race relations. Amid an incessant crisis of interracial animosity and paralyzing social grief, it designated a moment of clarity, optimism, and social accord—a new way of conceptualizing the “Race Problem” on the whole. Focusing on a period between 1890 and 1940, this work addresses how Black America first encountered the Bahá'í Faith and demonstrates the Faith's social and religious appeal within the black community. Chapter One explores the socio-political and economic state of post-Civil War America. The purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the advancements and successive disappointments which affected Black America prior to its first encounter with the Bahá'í Faith. For the most part, the series of upsets and breakdowns which African Americans faced during this time aroused in them a receptivity to the positive change the Bahá'í community would begin to institute in subsequent years. In effect, the circumstances of pre-Bahá'í America created a climate favorable to the activities the American Bahá'í community would later undertake.

Chapter Two essentially outlines the events which first introduced the Bahá'í Faith to Black America. These not only include the addresses which 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to major black institutions and organizations in 1912, but also the series of interracial amity conferences which he implemented in 1921. At a time when racial tension was at an all-time high, these large-scale, conferences became a breeding ground for interracial association and understanding; their growing influence on the America mainstream, furthermore, was just as apparent as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's addresses had been no less than ten years earlier.

Finally, Chapter Three provides a statistical profile of eighty-eight African-American Bahá'ís who completed the Bahá'í Historical Record in 1935. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overall profile of these respondents, many of whom were of exceptional prestige and influence. This chapter also provides a glimpse into the philosophy of the Bahá'í teachings. Having centered themselves on the principle of oneness of humankind, the Bahá'í teachings played a major part in attracting many people to the Bahá'í Faith and were the driving force behind all Bahá'í endeavors.

Altogether, this work offers up the idea that the universalistic ideology of the Bahá'í Faith filled a socio-structural void in human society by diminishing the significance of conventional customs and practices. By directing itself toward the whole of humanity, Bahá'í ideology allowed African-Americans to address their struggles within a universal context, a context which transcended many organizational or institutional agendas and which provided black Americans with a sense of *human* dignity rather than *racial* dignity alone.

“...there is one great spiritual advantage in the tidal series of negative upsets and breakdowns in the contemporary world and that is the ever-accumulative realization of the need for a complete reconstruction of life.”

- Alain Locke, “Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá'í Principle”¹

On December 1, 1862, exactly one month before the momentous signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed to the members of Congress what he believed to be the hard and naked truth. He said that “[t]he dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present” and that, given the present deterioration of the Union, the time had now come to accept the inevitable.² As much as it was necessary to preserve and protect the socio-economic traditions and customs which had been secured up to that point, no one person or government could ever escape the unavoidable clutch of time, of change and evolution, which, with regard to slavery, was well past due. He continued by saying that although the present state of the Union was “piled high with difficulty,” the American people would now have to rise to the occasion—thinking with a new mind and acting with a new determination—so as to safeguard an already endangered American future from utter self-destruction:

As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country...In giving freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.³

One could only imagine how strong the feeling of ambiguity and uncertainty was when these words were first declared. To some, it signaled an opportunity to celebrate the forthcoming fulfillment of those noble-minded precepts envisioned in the U.S. Constitution, the progressive maturation of the American moral fiber. To others, however, it was a *threat* to the unalienable rights promised to them by that same document. Undoubtedly, the disagreement harboring between these two schools of thought was the very thing that had ruptured the entire country. Already there was an enormous and unruly divide between the Republican and the Democrat (Republicans having principally an antislavery platform) while animosity between militant radicals and

¹ Alain Locke, “Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá'í Principle,” in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume IV, 1930-1932*, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933), 372.

² Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 5 (1861-1862), ed. Roy P. Basler (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 537.

³ Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. V, 537.

unwavering conservatives continued to heighten. Lincoln considered himself to be a part of that group of persons who deemed slavery as “a moral, social, and political evil.”⁴ In the face of opposition, he seemed to be overtly vocal about his “naturally anti-slavery” sentiment, such as those expressed in his April 4, 1864 letter to native Kentuckian and editor of the *Frankfort Commonwealth* Albert G. Hodges: “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel.”⁵

Yet, despite this sentiment (and even all of the conviction with which the Emancipation Proclamation itself was invested), history shows that our sixteenth president was not *always* so resolute about abolition or so staunch an anti-slavery advocate. Of course, his speeches and addresses were, particularly in his latter days, animatedly garbed with the typical patriotic sound-bites, such as the famous “a house divided against itself cannot stand”⁶—those which *later* evolved into catch-phrases like “[slavery] is the only thing that has ever threatened the perpetuity of the Union.”⁷ But in the beginning, the abolition of slavery was certainly not among his top priorities—if a priority at all. In an 1862 letter to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, for example, Lincoln declared that his primary war objective, when stripped down to its core, did not so much concern the destruction or preservation of slavery as it did the saving of the Union.⁸ In fact, he went so far as to suggest that with such an objective in mind, the issue of slavery was only arbitrary: “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.”⁹

Now in a certain light, it is possible to give Lincoln the benefit of the doubt and say that, for all intents and purposes, he meant well. Given that benefit, perhaps his spirited words were intended to be more patriotic than anything else, assigning absolute priority to the livelihood of our liberty-breathing nation. Beneath the shade of critique, however, Lincoln’s words are not precisely so justifiable, leaving one to wonder exactly what his *true* agenda was and giving way to the seeming capriciousness of his nature. On the one hand, he was, ostensibly, a tenacious supporter of emancipation, unyielding in attitude and resolute in opinion—much to his political convenience perhaps. Yet when it was time to take action by freeing slaves in the District of Columbia, for example, he was admittedly cautious and hesitant: “I am a little uneasy about the abolishment of slavery.”¹⁰

In all probability, this caution was not so much the result of his own views toward emancipation as it was the many time-sensitive political pressures of the day. Even so, it can be said that in his attempt to satisfy an unending conflict of interests, Lincoln was more addicted to opportunity than anything else. Opportunely, he considered himself a humble servant to the American public, a willing “man of the

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. V, 537.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. VII, 281.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 461.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. III, 460.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. V, 388-389.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

people” whose support and approval governed the livelihood of his career. Like most of the political leadership, nothing was more important to him than popular esteem, and as inferred from his very first political statement, he would do just about anything to achieve it: “Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed.”¹¹

So could it assuredly be said, therefore, that Lincoln’s drafting of the Proclamation was categorically more intentional than it was *opportunistic*? Was President Lincoln always as secure about emancipation as he supposed himself to be? Frankly, it does not matter, because whatever caused him to endorse that earth-shattering proclamation—no matter how eventual the occasion of its signing or how gradual the fulfillment of its purpose—had set in motion a power that was beyond both his intention and control. Regardless of any outward or concealed agendas he may have had, Lincoln’s formalizing of the emancipation of black slaves now meant that the American Civil War was just as much about the ending of American slavery as it was about the preservation of the Union. Indubitably, the two could no longer be separated, and their *union* provided the kind of moral and political substance necessary to turn the tide of the war—not to mention the host of newly freed ex-slaves who now fought to enlist among the Union ranks.¹²

With these famous words, “I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves...are, and henceforward shall be free...” Lincoln helped to usher in an untamed spirit of hope, the assured promise of freedom, which could never again be suppressed or denied. Essentially, he spoke into existence the beginnings of that reconciliation which so many had longed for—the slave, the abolitionist, the soldier, the widow, and the orphan. At a moment when all else seemed otherwise, the promise of peace was not as unrealizable as it used to be, and for the ex-slave, it seemed to be within reach for the first time. In a 1983 study, in fact, Eric Foner notes that “the United States was the only society where the freed slaves, within a few years of emancipation, enjoyed full political rights and a real measure of political power.”¹³ With this in mind, one could only imagine how consequential and dramatically revolutionary an event such as emancipation must have been for Americans of this time! How radical it must have been for a former slave owner to realize that his own fate—political, social, or otherwise—laid vulnerably upon the hands of his own aforesaid *property*. If any at all, there are few things in today’s social order that can effortlessly match the kind of crisis-like conditions experienced during this transformative period.

From its outset, there developed a series of installments aimed at alleviating many of the societal incongruities suddenly appearing upon the canvas of a reversing socio-political order. These regulatory measures principally sought to “fashion an interracial

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. I, 8.

¹² The US National Archives & Records Administration documents that “...almost [200,000](#) black soldiers and sailors had fought for the Union and freedom.” US National Archives & Records Administration, “The Emancipation Proclamation,” *Featured Documents*, May 10, 2004, (May 10, 2004).

< http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/ >

¹³ Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 40.

democracy from the ashes of slavery” and eventually inspire brought into existence what was probably the most experimental period in American history: *the Reconstruction*.¹⁴ Among the first of these developments include the Bureau for Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen’s Bureau) of 1865, the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, and the Reconstruction Act of 1867. “[B]y furnishing supplies and medical services, establishing schools, supervising contracts between ex-slaves and their employers, and managing confiscated or abandoned lands,” these bills were able to successfully relieve much of the suffering experienced by the desperate and despondent of this time—both the ex-slave and the white refugee.¹⁵ The Freedmen’s Bureau, in particular, was able to issue more than twenty million land rations between the years 1865 and 1869, with “approximately 5 million going to whites and more than 15 million to blacks.”¹⁶

Although the intention of these regulatory programs was commendable, the issue of land rationing, in particular, was more problematic than not. Lying at the heart of this issue was an unmanageable political struggle over the scope and size of reconstructive intercession, specifically, the extent to which the federal government could rightfully interfere with the localized affairs of employers and their workers. On the one hand, Republican radicals wanted to see *total* social, political, and economical reorganization in the South—a revolutionizing of its customs and institutions. They belonged to that school of thought which denounced the “inferior” status of blacks and, hence, labored on their behalf toward the fulfillment of their civil rights. Thus, they supported the Freedmen’s Bureau and the varying agencies seeking to protect the economic interests of blacks (e.g., agents to supervise both employer-worker contracts and work relations and “freedmen’s courts” to settle arbitration disputes). Democrats, on the other hand, believed that such radicals were in violation of true republicanism and approached the subject of reconstruction from a more “hands-off,” non-interferent position. Although they agreed that the protection of blacks was necessary, they considered the full equality of blacks to be superfluous. Because of its efforts to enfranchise blacks, moreover, Democrats protested the Freedmen’s Bureau as a political machine aimed at garnering loyal support for the Republican Party.

Yet no matter how intense the war of politics had become, it was President Johnson who was to have the final say—at least when it came to the issue of land confiscation, rationing, and management. Johnson and his supporters believed that General Sherman’s attempt to “resettle the many people who had been displaced during the war” had well surpassed the limits of his political authority.¹⁷ At the very moment when ex-slaves were beginning to invest hope in the precedent of granting rations of “forty acres and a mule,” President Johnson, initiating a precedent of his own, began granting pardons and amnesties to the majority of individuals who had originally lost those lands. Justification for this came from the fact that the Constitution inhibits the government’s ability to seize land without the due process of law. By 1870, therefore,

¹⁴ Foner, 40.

¹⁵ Franklin and Moss, 255.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

virtually all the confiscated lands which the Bureau had rationed were eventually restored to their original owners.¹⁸

Obviously, land restoration meant that the tens of thousands of freedmen who had been formerly resettled were, after the army had evicted them from their newly occupied homes, once again homeless and displaced. What emerged as a result were a number of congested centers and other “[c]olonies of infirm, destitute, and vagrant blacks.”¹⁹ Of course, these colonies were instantaneously problematic for both the residents they contained and the states in which they resided. Focusing on an economic need for labor and land cultivation, the Freedmen’s Bureau sought to resolve the many disputes arising from overcrowding by providing ex-slaves with free transportation to less congested areas—namely, the rural South—where ostensibly they could become self-supporting. This plan was coupled with an additional measure aimed at rationing eighty acres of poor quality land to eligible households: the Homestead Act of 1866.²⁰

Consequentially, there evolved a system of production and bargaining between the individuals who owned these lands and those who controlled capital—one that was *potentially* beneficial to all parties involved, yet, as was shown in the practice of sharecropping and tenant farming, subject to fraud and exploitation. According to John Hope Franklin, the majority of labor contracts which were originally supervised by agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau were regularly disregarded, “employers failing to pay stipulated wages and workers failing to perform tasks outlined in their contracts.”²¹ Unsurprisingly, there were few places where sharecropping successfully prevailed without corruption; for the unfortunate Southern majority, it persisted under the cover of hatred and bitterness, irregardless of a universal need to advance the destabilized southern economy.

As an alternative to sharecropping and tenant farming, a significant number of freedmen decided to enlist in the U.S. Army and to support the many military campaigns in opposition to Native Americans in the West and Southwest. Perceptibly, these men—“Buffalo Soldiers” as they were called—were attracted to the military for a variety of reasons. Not only did military enlistment provide soldiers with an opportunity to learn how to read and write, but it also proved to be a steady economic alternative to an already overcrowded and corrupted labor market: “food, clothing, shelter, and salary, with an annual increase of one dollar per month and a reenlistment bonus at the end of five years.”²² Most importantly, the military provided some semblance of quasi equality between blacks and whites, where blacks could finally experience a degree of respect as free individuals. To some black Americans, therefore, enlistment was a twofold opportunity to improve one’s self and to elevate his status within and outside of the black community. Nonetheless, black soldiers—like their sharecropping counterparts—were also subjected to white racism and racial discrimination. Wilbert L. Jenkins asserts that in addition to the many hostile civilians they encountered, black soldiers were also

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Franklin and Moss, 256.

²⁰ Ibid., 260.

²¹ Ibid., 259.

²² Wilbert L. Jenkins, *Climbing Up to Glory* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2002), 125.

“forced to live and work in separate quarters...[and had to endure] inferior food, inferior clothing, and even inferior leadership and training.”²³

No matter how hard they tried or how they ultimately managed to earn a living, it was certain that the soldier and the farmer alike were inescapably doomed to that continued precedent of victimization and hatred predominantly reigning in the South. Even before the days of emancipation, there existed a collection of vices and laws designed to give whites full power in “keeping blacks in their place.” Formerly, these laws were grouped under the category of antebellum Slave Codes, but with the advent of emancipation, they had now mutated into something else. On the surface, they were created as *preventative measures* against possible black uprising and vengeance on whites. Yet in actuality, they were much more instigative than cautionary, giving white employers about as much control over blacks as slaveholders had previously exercised over slaves.²⁴ These laws, Black Codes, “force[d] all blacks to work whether they wanted to or not” and severely limited the extent to which blacks could rent or purchase property.²⁵ Naturally, penalties for disobeying Black Codes ranged in extremes:

Blacks who quit their jobs could be arrested and imprisoned for breach of contract. They were not allowed to testify in court except in cases involving members of their race. Numerous fines were imposed for seditious speeches, insulting gestures or acts, absence from work, violating curfew, and the possession of firearms. There was, of course, no enfranchisement of blacks and no indication that in the future they could look forward to full citizenship and participation in a democracy.²⁶

With hundreds of Black Codes now sketched into legislature books, there was no direction in which blacks could turn without experiencing some extremity of racial animosity or some form of discrimination. For the most part, it could be said that those who were fortunate enough to join the military were better off than those who, once again, returned to the farm; at least soldiers had a steady source of income and were in a better position to sidestep the brunt of those Black Codes which again forced blacks into a life of economic servitude. By 1870, the many black farmers and sharecroppers who had helped the South retrieve much of the economic gains originally forfeited during the war were now being paid wages that were “lower than those that had been paid to hired slaves.”²⁷ Once more, a money-driven white majority had made “cheap labor...the basis for a profitable agricultural system.”²⁸ No matter how much these workers had helped the South to revive the cotton kingdom and its cash-crop counterparts (e.g., indigo, rice,

²³ Jenkins, 126-127.

²⁴ Franklin and Moss, 250.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 250-251.

²⁷ Ibid., 259.

²⁸ Ibid.

and sugar), they could never escape the unyielding clutch of economic undermining. There had to be some alternative.

While the Southern economy had fixed itself on rebuilding an agricultural regime, it managed to lose sight of the revolutionary industrial changes which were taking place in the North, opportunistic changes that provided southern blacks with a perfect solution to the monotony of plantation life—or so it seemed. By the early 1880's, scores of thousands of blacks had made their way into urban centers—Chicago, Detroit, Boston, New York and others—in search of a better way of life, setting a trend that was to extend into the next century. But as some scholars attest, Reconstruction had hardly begun “before the sharp cleavage between white and black workers became apparent.”²⁹ To Northern whites, the influx of prospective black workers—be they skilled or unskilled—was just as much of a threat to *their* economic security as it had been for landless white refugees of the South. Therefore, “African-American blacksmiths, bricklayers, pilots, cabinetmakers, painters...skilled workers” and even a small number of formerly freed professionals, educators, and lawyers all met “stern opposition from [Northern whites]...wherever they sought employment”—opposition which oftentimes led to sheer violence.³⁰

The blacks who could not attain peace on the plantation, in the Army, or in urban centers sought to procure it in the courthouse, the state government, and in Congress. At the conclusion of the Civil War, the many politically charged programs focusing on the enfranchisement of blacks also had an agenda to disenfranchise Southern whites and rallied “for the express purpose of eradicating the last vestiges of the old [Southern] order.”³¹ As a result, blacks, loyal Republican whites, and southern-bound Northerners were momentarily able to enjoy the full benefits of the ballot.³² As scholar John H. Franklin attests, “[t]he constitutional conventions [which] called...[for the ratification] of the Reconstruction Act [had] all contained black members.”³³ In fact, the numbers of black delegates from Louisiana and South Carolina equaled, if not exceeded, those of whites.³⁴ In Louisiana, one-hundred and thirty three black legislators served between 1868 and 1896, 38 of whom were senators and 95 of whom were representatives.³⁵ In South Carolina, black senators and representatives filled 87 out of 127 seats in the first legislature alone. Most of all, however, twenty-two black legislators were able to serve on the national level between 1869 and 1901.

Of the fortunate collectivity of men who served during this period, some had been former slaves while others had always been free. Irregardless of their immediate history or prior circumstances, many of them were of “considerable intellectual stature” and a few exemplified an integrity so praiseworthy that, in the face of hatred, even the most concentrated animosity was lessened. A prime example of such men are Francis L. Cardozo and Beverly Nash, both of whom served in the South Carolina legislature.

²⁹ Franklin and Moss, p. 261

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 264.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ South Carolina was the only state in which black delegates comprised the majority.

³⁵ Franklin and Moss, 266.

Cardozo, an exceptional intellectual, was educated at the University of Glasgow in London and had served in two consecutive terms, first as the secretary of state (1868-1872) and then as treasurer (1872-1876). Nash, on the other hand, was one of those gentlemen whose command easily spoke for itself:

I believe, my friends and fellow-citizens, we are not prepared for this suffrage. But we can learn. Give a man tools and let him commence to use them, and in time he will learn a trade. So it is with voting. We may not understand it at the start, but in time we shall learn to do our duty....We recognize the Southern white man as the true friend of the black man....In these public affairs we must unite with our white fellow-citizens. They tell us that they have been disfranchised, yet we tell the North that we shall never let the halls of Congress be silent until we remove that disability.³⁶

Although black legislators of this period—like Nash and Cardozo—were considered to be “men of moderation,” they did manage to introduce a healthy collection of bills focusing on city government reform, the jury system, education, and women’s suffrage.³⁷ In addition, they fought to increase wages for the many black workers now migrating to the North, despite the lack of support from their colleagues. Even still, the many bills they struggled to introduce over the years were hardly ever taken into serious consideration, no matter how legitimate or vital.

The unfortunate demise of the early black politician was largely a consequence of shifting political concerns and of an emergent lust for industrial advancement, both of which were working towards heightening America’s economic potential and on securing her status as a world power. For that reason, prior appeal to Reconstruction was largely outweighed by the multitude of growing economic interests; rather than concentrating on Reconstruction-related issues like suffrage and civil rights, political leaders were now focusing on more issues like railroad subsidization and tariff legislation. Both agendas (Reconstruction and industrial advancement) were conveniently merged together to achieve an economic goal, causing everything to make “cents” in the end. And so as early as 1865, it quickly became apparent that the same political party which had originally dubbed Reconstruction *an effort to rebuild the Union by destroying the old South and by enfranchising blacks* had now, just years later, turned that same effort into something else. What politicians now wanted was economic power, “a satisfactory settlement of the Southern problem in order to hasten the exploitation of Southern resources and to capture Southern markets.”³⁸

Aside from these shifting political interests, probably the most devastating force to ever hit the black body-politic was the systematization of white supremacist ideology.

³⁶ Franklin and Moss, 265.

³⁷ Ibid., 265-267.

³⁸ Ibid., 270.

Of course, the divergence of political concerns had also succeeded in progressively “weeding out” many of the black legislators of the period; however, there can be no doubt that the rise of white-protective societies—the next generation ex-Confederates—had uprooted the American Black population entirely. Powerful organizations such as the Knights of the White Camelia and the Ku Klux Klan along with localized organizations (including the Rifle Clubs of South Carolina and the White League of Louisiana) all rallied themselves on taking back the power which had been given to those “least qualified to control [the white man’s] destiny.”³⁹ The “redemption” of their power, therefore, was not simply a matter of pride or a matter of ending radical Reconstruction; rather, it was about accomplishing what they believed to be a sacred responsibility, a rightful endeavor that was to be achieved at any cost.

Accordingly, white supremacists used every method imaginable in order to deprive blacks of their political equality: ostracism in business and societal affairs, intimidation, bribery at the polls, and arson. Whereas the most defiant of blacks were, in extreme cases, either lynched, maimed, castrated, or hanged, the frequency of “extreme cases” indicates that these activities were more of a popular diversion than retaliatory acts of “justice.” This principally occurred at the very beginning of the twentieth century, some two decades after *white supremacy* had successfully restored political power to the Democrats. Although many attempts were made to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment and to suppress and even outlaw supremacist activities (for example, the passing of several “Ku Klux Klan Acts” between 1870 and 1871 and the scattering of Union troops through the Southern region), none were particularly effective or successful. White-power organizations were simply too elusive to restrain, not to mention that they were locally respected and supported by local authorities. Hurriedly, they shifted themselves back into power, casting out the black legislator and quickly securing their position in his place. In a concerted effort, they vowed to never allow him to return to politics again and they would not rest until he was to be completely excluded from every courthouse, every business, every school, and even every sidewalk and suburb.

Yet to the great misfortune of late nineteenth-century African-Americans, the promise of peace and freedom—that great object of adoration which so many had dedicated their lives to, and labored over, and fought and even died for—had once again fallen into the hands of those working to “counter-reconstruct” any effort to attain it. With such a precious commodity in their possession, these individuals eagerly unrolled the dusty scrolls of legislature, glanced over the progressive constitutions which black legislators had previously helped to create, assumed credit for whatever advancements these new constitutions had brought forth, and anxiously rewrote *only* those clauses that had sustained the enfranchisement of their peace-petitioning authors. Sentence by sentence, these individuals—now representatives of the “New South”—arduously labored to systematically obstruct every avenue of black progress, spinning a massive web of discriminatory loopholes in an already racist socio-political order.

Nevertheless, there was still hope for black people in America, and whatever strength they had left in their bodies—whatever ambition they could somehow manage

³⁹ Ibid., 264.

to muster—was laboriously channeled toward their religious and educational salvation. For one, there can be no doubt that the Black Church was “the” cornerstone of the black community, “the first, and for decades almost the only, organization entirely under the control of Negroes, and expressive of their own self-identification.”⁴⁰ Many of the first leaders ever to stand, ever to articulate the injustices and victimizations heaped upon that group of individuals, were educated and disciplined in the tradition of the Church. Churches of the African Methodist Episcopal traditions were particularly dedicated to that purpose, having broken off from the control of white Methodist Episcopal congregations as early as 1799. Where every other societal institution had failed, the Church had reliably been breath to a body that had never before been able to breathe and reverberation for the voice that had never spoken—the quintessential heart and soul of the black community.

Even while fully recognizing the importance of the Black Church, one can only partially understand the degree to which black religious leaders were an indispensable part of the community. For many years, their status was exceedingly high and their position unquestionably respected. Typically, they had been the most learned and erudite of the entire community, naturally assuming many roles and positions—the father, the educator, the supporter, the protector, the ambassador, and the inspirer. Even before the matter of Emancipation was just a mere conception, it was not a surprise to recognize these leaders as the wearer of many hats. In the midst of turbulent Reconstruction, they sat faithfully at the center of community life. Moreover, many of the religious leaders of this time had also served as black legislators and politicians; the Reverend J. W. Hood, for example, was an outstanding assistant superintendent of education and an enactor of the North Carolinian constitution of 1868.⁴¹

Understandably, the Black Church was for a long time the most effective articulator and solver of issues afflicting the Black community. But as all things must change and must consequently demand, the need for a new kind of leadership had naturally forged its way into a growing conflict of internal issues relating to widespread disfranchisement; as one might expect, it was at that precise moment when a new kind of leader began to emerge. Empowered by increased educational opportunities and outside assistance from Northern philanthropists and denominational boards, it was the emergence of the “educated” leader that eventually came to challenge the authority of religious leaders in the Church, whose education had remained comparatively neglected.⁴² Amidst an up-and-coming league of lawyers, doctors, teachers, and civil rights leaders, the preacher, the reverend, the pastor, and the bishop suddenly found himself grappling to maintain his status as the sole educator of the black community. No longer was he able to speak with that same kind of authority inherited through precedent, and no longer was the Church the absolute center of the community. Alas, the day had come when a desire for education had completely latched itself onto the soul of black ambition, producing a respectable number of individuals (a significant portion of whom were women) who took full advantage of whatever educational opportunities

⁴⁰ Richard D. Knudten, *The Sociology of Religion: An Anthology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), 21.

⁴¹ Franklin and Moss, 267.

⁴² Knudten, 21.

presented them and who attempted to create newer solutions to a host of imbedded socioeconomic problems.

Perhaps one reason why education quickly became the “great preoccupation” of Black America was the fact that all other institutional alternatives had been systematically disfranchised over the course of Reconstruction—politics, business, government, and even religion to some degree.⁴³ The same white southerners who had sought to bring an end to all other attempts at black progress were surprisingly more tolerant of the institutions which sought to educate blacks, making education “the single greatest opportunity to escape the increasing prescriptions and indignities...heaped upon blacks.”⁴⁴ By the early 1890s in fact, “many of the schools that had been founded in the days immediately following the war were still flourishing.”⁴⁵ Moreover, the number of black students and educators had seemed to effortlessly double—even a decade after the South had been successfully “redeemed.”

Rising to the intellectual elite, two of the most distinguished of these black educators were none other than Booker Taliaferro Washington and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Unquestionably, Washington was one of the most powerful Americans of his day, having close connections with presidents, major business leaders, and powerful philanthropic organizations, in addition to establishing one of the more notable African-American institutions of higher learning.⁴⁶ Du Bois, on the other hand, was the first black man to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University and an eminent writer, historian, and civil rights activist whose renown and prestige was rapidly growing. While both gentlemen were wholeheartedly dedicated to solving America’s problem with race and to pulling the black population out of the depths of incessant impoverishment, each had his own opinion as to how that enormous goal should be accomplished, a circumstance which, according to historian Gayle Morrison, “create[d] the first major ideological split in the black community.”⁴⁷

To the far right stood Mr. Booker T. Washington with his accommodationist, pull-one’s-self-up-from-the-bootstraps approach. He proposed vocational training to be the best solution to black degradation and, hence, advocated that blacks advance through conciliatory “self-respect” and through mastery of the technical trades: agriculture, mechanics, commerce, and domestic service. To the far left, however, stood a young and almost infuriated Du Bois who believed that Washington’s program was fundamentally flawed, calling it an exaltation of “triumphant commercialism”⁴⁸ and a “gospel of Work and Money” which had the potential to completely overshadow the “higher aims of life.”⁴⁹ To Du Bois and his supporters, Washington’s preoccupation with “self-respect” was merely “silent submission to civic inferiority” in disguise.⁵⁰

⁴³ Franklin and Moss, p. 293.

⁴⁴ Franklin and Moss, p. 293.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tuskegee University of Tuskegee, Alabama; was founded in July of 1881.

⁴⁷ Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 21.

⁴⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, eds. H. L. Gates, Jr. and T. H. Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.), 35.

⁴⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 40.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

Moreover, his “failure to lend importance to suffrage, civil rights, and liberal higher education for blacks [had inherently] undermined his own goals.”⁵¹ In contrast, Du Bois believed the *only* solution to “the Negro problem” was not vocational education and technical training, but the leadership of a “Talented Tenth,” which, by precept and example, was to triumphantly pave the way for an ever-aspiring black population too anguished to settle for any means of accommodation.

Now as some scholars might argue, the weighty and fairly malicious debate which arose between these two distinguished individuals and their following was just as massively dramatic as other “reconstruction” debates which animated the last thirty years of the nineteenth century: the debate regarding slavery and emancipation, the debate over how Reconstruction was to be accomplished, the debate over which political party was more capable of piloting the Industrial Revolution, and now, the debate amongst black leaders over how the “Negro problem” was to be solved. Just as religious leaders had fallen to the ascendancy of educated leaders; and Reconstruction had fallen to the “New South;” and black politicians, agriculturalists, and soldiers had fallen to the “redemption” of ex-confederates and white-power; the army of black leaders was also “falling”—though to a diminutive extent—to the conflict of interests situated between them.

Regarding this great “conflict of interests,” it was scholar Alain Leroy Locke who, more than thirty years later, declared that “there [was] one great spiritual advantage in the tidal series of negative upsets and breakdowns [afflicting] the contemporary world.”⁵² In the midst of unremitting oppression and spiteful criticism, of unsteadied hindrance and demoralized aggression, no other advantage—spiritual or not—could be more necessary and indispensable than “the ever-accumulative realization of the need for a *complete* reconstruction of life.”⁵³ Disillusioned by the sequential failure of all other societal institutions and the persistence of a widespread separatist ideology, that “complete reconstruction of life” which Locke had so articulately described had long been the deepest wish of innumerable individuals: those who had been traumatically bound to slavery and those who had audaciously helped to fight against it; and, most importantly, those who—decades after emancipation and the transference of citizenship—were still victims to the yoke of injustice and unrelenting oppression.

No longer was it sufficient to rely upon the many unpredictable institutions on which rested an inequitable American “way of life.” Rather, the time had come for real change and real resolution, and—as was noted by Alain Locke—for a complete psychological reorientation of life. No sooner had this great *need* been recognized did the first semblances of the Bahá’í Faith sweep upon an already blood-stained American shore, quiet as the thief in the night and subtle as the coming of dawn. The Bahá’í Faith, with its pivotal emphasis on the oneness of humankind, had come to superimpose a new set of values and principles upon an incredibly outworn social order. It did not address

⁵¹ Morrison, p. 22.

⁵² Alain Locke, “Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá’í Principle,” in *The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume IV, 1930-1932*, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1933), 372.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 372.

itself merely to the fears of the American people, but rather to its hopes of the future. Neither did it “intensify a natural preoccupation with oppression” or practice an accommodationist agenda.⁵⁴ As an alternative, it sought to effect revolutionary, ideological transformation in the hearts and minds of its adherents, giving them a new set of standards and principles which were larger in scope than anything they had every experienced—a new way of experiencing the world altogether.

⁵⁴ Morrison, 57.

“Unlike the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League . . . the Bahá'í Cause was not national but international, not biracial but multiracial, not issue oriented but issue encompassing, not directed toward social change in itself but toward the spiritual transformation of both the individual and society.”

- Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World*⁵⁵

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, there had been many victories won in the cause of black suffrage and advancement—especially in the field of education, where the number of illiterate blacks had dropped from about ninety-five percent in 1865 to nearly fifty percent in 1900.⁵⁶ Indeed, the fact that blacks were even able to advance at all or to benefit themselves—as historian Eric Foner noted—to “full political rights and a real measure of political power” is far beyond amazing.⁵⁷ How bizarre it must have felt to all of a sudden stand in a courtroom *not* as a fugitive, but as an officer or a magistrate; or to teach American history in a schoolhouse or church building; or, perhaps, to sharecrop a former plantation field alongside Southern whites *not* as a slave, but as a free person. With the institution of slavery destroyed and a host of welfare programs established, blacks hurriedly took advantage of every opportunity to involve themselves in as many facets of American life as possible—and many did so rewardingly. Almost overnight, or so it seemed, there surfaced a growing force of black business owners, entrepreneurs, artists, authors, entertainers, musicians, Congressmen, legislators, soldiers, educators, athletes, and civil rights leaders.

But despite these successes, the series of developments which had aided their advancement during this chaotic period was ultimately limited and short-lived. Although the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had successively secured black freedom, citizenship, and suffrage, almost all other attempts to make blacks equal citizens under law were—as a matter of *de facto* and *de jure*—abruptly diminished by widespread sociopolitical and economic disfranchisement. Consequently, their advancement in various trades and professions was overturned by the influence of white supremacist organizations and the prevalence of Black Codes. Moreover, many of the programs and activities which once endeavored to attain peace or to forward the cause of civil rights had summarily faded away—almost just as quickly as they had first appeared. By 1896, in fact, the U.S. Supreme Court case known as *Plessy vs. Ferguson*—probably the most devastating of political outcomes in the early twentieth-century world and far-reaching in social consequences—had achieved what former Black Codes could only hope to achieve: the fabrication of a complete segregationist society. According to

⁵⁵ Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), 29.

⁵⁶ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 8th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 293.

⁵⁷ Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 40.

the seven-to-one justice majority, the goal of the Fourteenth Amendment was not intended to “abolish distinctions based upon color...” or to put an end to racial commingling and social intermixing, but rather, to enforce “absolute [*political*] equality...before the law...”⁵⁸ Hence, it was now possible for *social* inequality to exist just as long as every public and private accommodation was of “equal quality;” it would be another sixty years before the ruling would be overturned.⁵⁹

Given this widespread disfranchisement and an almost predictable breakdown of the programs and institutions which had favored their development, many African-Americans of this period assumed that the new century would be just as disappointing as the last, imbedded with a never-ending sense of hopelessness and threatened by the precedent of racially motivated attacks. In fact, there were two hundred and fourteen lynchings in the first two years alone,⁶⁰ although white supremacists organizations like the Ku Klux Klan were declining in members. While the United States government was attuning itself to imperial activity in Haiti, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands and to its own subsequent rise as a world power, Black America was trying to sidestep the upsurge of urban-related problems on the home front—inner-city overcrowding, insufficient housing, widespread unemployment, exploitation by landlords and labor unions, municipal segregation ordinances, and last but not least, race-inspired rioting and mob attacks. Stirred by the numbers of blacks now infiltrating their neighborhoods, recreational facilities, and businesses, urban whites took it upon themselves to control the rampant “delinquency” and “insolence” which had now threatened their immediate lives. Accordingly, there arose throughout the country a campaign of “wholesale terrorism”—in Statesboro, Georgia, where blacks could be burned alive for something as erroneous and trivial as walking on the sidewalk; in Philadelphia, where local white youth had developed a habit for dragging blacks off in street cars; in Springfield, Illinois, where it took more than 5,000 police officers (and 100 subsequent arrests) to suppress a local crusade to kill every interracial couple and every black business-owner in the city; and in Syracuse, Ohio, where the threat of violence was so great that blacks could not even enter the city at all.⁶¹

Perhaps that pervasive sense of hopelessness and desperation which so completely overwhelmed African-Americans of this period could best be described by the words of W. E. B. Du Bois when, in response to the September 1906 Atlanta race riot, he wrote:

Bewildered are we, and passion-tost, mad with the
madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people;
staining at the armposts of Thy Throne, we raise our
shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our
stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very
blood of our crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us

⁵⁸ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 544 (1896).

⁵⁹ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 US 483 (1954).

⁶⁰ Franklin and Moss, 291.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 345-350.

the Plan; give us the Sign! ...whisper—speak—call, great God, for Thy silence is white terror to our hearts! The way, O God, show us the way and give us the Path!⁶²

It was rising civil rights leaders like Du Bois, as some scholars attest, whose voice had come to skillfully portray in full detail the many ailments afflicting early twentieth century Black Americans and whose unyielding perspective—aroused by the need for a complete reconstruction of life—would ultimately inspire new, “unaccommodating” attempts to end their seemingly incessant problems. Desperate, angered, and insistent, Du Bois pledged himself to take an aggressive plan of action to revive the old spirit of abolitionism which had been so effective in the days of pre-emancipation; through the enactment of such a plan—later dubbed the Niagara Movement—he would be able to seize the full citizenship of African-Americans and shake up the minds and hearts of all true, liberty-loving people. At the second annual meeting of the Niagara Movement, ironically just a month before the Atlanta riot, he declared in his *Address to the Nation*: “We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America.”⁶³

Of course, Du Bois’ plan of action was far more extreme than Booker T. Washington’s conciliatory-accommodationist policy could ever be; yet the racial tension and rampant homelessness of this era could only be relieved, at least momentarily, by the advent of World War I. With approximately 750,000 American soldiers fighting overseas (20,000 of whom were African-Americans), opportunities for steady employment swiftly presented themselves to an impoverished multitude—of blacks and women alike—whose aptness and capacity had prompted a momentary shift to patriotism rather than to racial violence.⁶⁴ Even still, this did not curtail the overall fight for civil rights; rather, it made advancement and suffrage more opportune. Thus, within a period of about ten years, America saw the founding of the NAACP (1910) and the National Urban League (1911); the ascendancy of *The Chicago-Defender* (1905) and *The Crisis* (1910) as national advocacy magazines; the creation of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (1919); the establishment of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA] (circa 1917); and the favorable rulings of two Supreme Court cases—*Guinn vs. the United States* (1915), which declared unconstitutional the grandfather clauses of Maryland and Oklahoma, and *Buchanan vs. Warley* (1917), which struck down the Louisville ordinance “requiring Negroes to live in certain sections of the city.”⁶⁵

By the early 1920’s, however, the rebirth of white supremacist activities and the subsequent recommencement of race rioting had now made it clear that the great upswing of progress seen in the period before was nothing more than a mere wartime preoccupation. With riots now resuming in almost every state in the nation, the threat of

⁶² W. E. B. Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1995), 443.

⁶³ Du Bois, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 367.

⁶⁴ Franklin and Moss, 360.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 353.

lawlessness and absolute mayhem had reached an all time high, boosting the number of lynchings since 1889 to more than 3,400.⁶⁶ Having fought victoriously overseas in the name of democracy, the scores of African-American soldiers now demanding equal rights for their wartime patriotism and bravery (and also seeking employment) only intensified the efforts of racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which—in addition to blacks—now declared itself against Asians, Roman Catholics, Jews, and “all foreign-born individuals.”⁶⁷ And although civil rights organizations like the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the NAACP did achieve *some* ends in politically righting race-inspired wrongs, they were prevalently regarded as “agencies of the upper-class” and ultimately fell short of capturing the popular support of Black America.⁶⁸ In fact, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, although having “stressed the importance of civil rights for blacks and of improved race relations,” negligently failed to take a stand against the issue of segregation, which was just as palpable an issue as civil rights—and obviously related.⁶⁹

Thus, it only made sense for the greater population of Black America to shift its attention and support to black-pride organizations like the UNIA, which—in addition to a “go back to Africa” policy—offered a sense of confidence in the face of disfranchisement and self-pride amid racial indignation. However, the entirety of Black America could never choose to deprive itself of the abundant fruits of its labors or to bear the shame of forfeiting the very land on which its African ancestors—by fire, ash, limb, and rope—were consumed. So in spite of its initial popularity and appeal, Marcus Garvey’s petition for separation also had its significant shortcomings; because it “linked racial pride to an abandonment of belief in America”⁷⁰ and because it failed to secure any lines of interracial or inter-organizational cooperation, it could only serve as a mere “outlet for frustration” than a bona fide homeland solution.⁷¹ Once again, the collectivity of leadership was falling in to a conflict of interests.

But amidst the continual secularization of leadership, fanned by the unrestrained winds of racial hostility and strife, there arose from humble beginnings a series of large-scale, well-publicized interracial gatherings which—by nature of their planning and execution—uncovered a whole new world of possibility for the future of race relations in America. Unlike other activities, programs, or organizations of the day, these gatherings—collectively known as “Race Amity Conventions”—sought to create a fundamental reorientation of attitudes toward the issue of race altogether. Vigilant and prudent, convention organizers cautioned themselves of the unpredictable consequences of biased protest and political extremism and therefore elected to adopt a more “all-inclusive” program of interracial unity and amity. Of course, there were other activities and organizations which were able to achieve—though to a limited extent—some sense of *interracial-ness* or cooperation (e.g., the NAACP comprised of interracial board members and supporters). Yet few, if any at all, were able to inspire such a diversity of

⁶⁶ Franklin and Moss, 393.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁶⁹ Morrison, 133.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

representation, such immediate popularity and support, or such social and programmatic objectivity as the Race Amity Conventions. Rather than intensify an already hypersensitive preoccupation with oppression or adopt a more subjective, issue-oriented approach to “black suffrage” or “civil rights,” these gatherings sought to evoke an ever-needed sense of *common ownership* for America’s race-inspired problems and to exclude any alienable point of blame. Ever careful not to overlook the successes and failures of any particular perspective or approach, convention organizers lifted themselves up onto the grounds of commonality (rather than those of division) and concertedly focused their efforts toward providing what may possibly be the most peaceable, genuine, inclusive, and yet uncompromising venues of racial conciliation to that date—sensitive in approach, careful in presentation, diverse in philosophy, and unparalleled in result.⁷²

The full story of the Bahá’í Race Amity Conventions, however, begins many years before such gatherings had ever even taken place, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—son of prophet-founder Bahá’u’lláh and current leader of the Bahá’í Faith—began his historic visit to the United States and Canada in April of 1912. Not only was this visit an integral part of the unfolding history of the Bahá’í Faith itself, but it also struck a brilliantly uplifting chord in the ever-expanding chorus of the American moral fiber. As one reporter wrote in the latter part of 1912, “the divine fire of [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] spirituality [was] bound to illumine the dark corners of [the American imagination] and open up to us a spiritual realm which we would do well to go in and possess.”⁷³ His extensive travels throughout America—and the various addresses of *universal peace and brotherhood* which he adorned them with—quickly captured the attention, the admiration, and in many cases the reverence of a religiously and philosophically diverse American public.⁷⁴ Needless to say, this immediately became clear within hours of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arrival as scores of New York City newspapers hungrily detailed—though to varying degrees of accuracy—his first moments in America:

New York herald: “ABDUL BAHÁ HERE TO CONVERT AMERICA TO HIS PEACE DOCTRINE...will be heard at colleges, churches, and gatherings of earnest persons throughout the land...Abdul Baha’s philosophy is of a sort which the Occidental mind does not grasp in the first sentence.”⁷⁵

New York City Sun: “DISCIPLES HERE HAIL ABDUL BAHÁ...[he] was welcomed reverently by more than three hundred of his American disciples

⁷² Race Amity Conventions began in May of 1921 and subsequently thrived until dying out a little more than ten years later.

⁷³ Allan L. Ward, *239 Days: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Journey in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), ix.

⁷⁴ According to author Allan L. Ward, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá toured in the following states: New York, Washington, DC, Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Maine, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, California, and Maryland.

⁷⁵ Ward, 16.

yesterday...Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Mohammedans joined in the reception....”⁷⁶

New York City Evening World: “ABDUL BAHÁ ABBAS, HEAD OF NEWEST RELIGION, BELIEVES IN WOMAN SUFFRAGE AND DIVORCE....Abdul Baha is really a delightful prophet. he says he isn't a prophet, by the way, but 'only a servant of the servants of God.'...I ventured an interruption, 'But you see there is another remedy for strife among religions,' I said to the interpreter, 'and New York seems to have found it. Tell the prophet that we are really a lot of heathens and that we don't need to kiss and make up—we need to believe—what has [Abdu'l-Bahá] for us to believe?' The doctor interpreter eyed me and I was very glad that I wasn't in Persia....”⁷⁷

New York City Evening Sun: “AN APOSTLE OF PEACE...The keynote of Abdul Baha's philosophy is that men serve God best by serving their kind....”⁷⁸

According to historian Gayle Morrison, the greater part of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's addresses during his first days in New York and Washington, DC—which he visited later that month—generally focused on the theme of unity and peace.⁷⁹ He regularly, and in most instances rather skillfully, went to great lengths to illustrate the essentiality, achievability, and spiritual application of so seemingly elusive an issue. A worthy example of this can be lifted from one of his first public messages, given on April 14, 1912 at the Church of the Ascension, 5th Avenue and 10th Street, New York:

Since my arrival in this country I find that material civilization has progressed greatly, that commerce has attained the utmost degree of expansion; arts, agriculture and all details of material civilization have reached the highest stage of perfection, but spiritual civilization has been left behind. Material civilization is like unto the lamp, while spiritual civilization is the light in that lamp...material civilization is like unto a beautiful body, and spiritual civilization is like unto the spirit of life. If that wondrous spirit of life enters this beautiful body, the body will become a channel for the distribution and development of the perfections of humanity....Today the world of humanity is in need of international unity and conciliation. To establish

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ward, 17.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁹ Morrison, 50-51.

these great fundamental principles a propelling power is needed. It is self-evident that the unity of the human world and the Most Great Peace cannot be accomplished through material means. They cannot be established through political power, for the political interests of nations are various and the policies of peoples are divergent and conflicting. They cannot be founded through racial or patriotic power, for these are human powers, selfish and weak. The very nature of racial differences and patriotic prejudices prevents the realization of this unity and agreement....For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization.⁸⁰

The progressive nature of religious unity, the purpose of the appearance of divine manifestations [religious prophets], the agreement of science and religion, the importance of independent investigation of religious truth, the relationship between nature and the spiritual world, the equality of women and men, the abandonment of all forms of prejudice, the need for compulsory education and for a universal language—all these are just some of the topics that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá used to illuminate his majestic plan for a stabler, more unified human civilization. In natural succession with these principles, his attitude toward the issue of racial prejudice and discrimination was completely inflexible; because of its extreme juxtaposition with conventional standards and social norms, it would only be a matter of time before such a mind-set would come to illuminate all of the dark corners of the Black community.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s first opportunity to evocatively address the issue of race amity—within a specific social context, at least—had, in fact, presented itself just a few days after his arrival in Washington, DC. Perhaps there was some greater purpose behind his decision to make the nation’s capital the site at which he would take his first, formal stance on so vital and challenging an issue; assuredly, whatever came to pass in that emblematic setting—the very symbol of American livelihood—would have a lasting effect upon the nation and quite possibly the world. It was on the morning of April 23, 1912 when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his usual, luxuriant manner, unequivocally proclaimed before the entire Howard University campus that in all the realms of existence—mineral, vegetable, animal, and spiritual—color and race was of no importance before God, except to purposely necessitate, like the diverse flowers of one divine garden, the beautification of the human family:

⁸⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 11.

In the estimation of God there is no distinction of color; all are one in the color and beauty of servitude to Him. Color is not important; the heart is all-important....God does not behold differences of hue and complexion; he looks at the hearts. He whose morals and virtues are praiseworthy is preferred in the presence of God...In the realm of genesis and creation the question of color is of least importance. The mineral kingdom abounds with many-colored substances and compositions but we find no strife among them on that account. In the kingdom of the plant and vegetable, distinct and variegated hues exist but the fruit and flowers are not in conflict for that reason. Nay, rather, the very fact that there is difference and variety lends a charm to the garden. If all were of the same color the effect would be monotonous and depressing. When you enter a rose-garden the wealth of color and variety of floral forms spread before you a picture of wonder and beauty. The world of humanity is like a garden and the various races are the flowers which constitute its adornment and decoration....If we do not find color distinction drawn in a kingdom of lower intelligence and reason, how can it be justified among human beings, especially when we know that all have come from the same source and belong to the same household? In origin and intention of creation mankind is one. Distinctions of race and color have arisen afterward.⁸¹

Rather straightforwardly, he spoke of how material and social progress had thoroughly catapulted America's advancement—to such an extent, in fact, that the members of divers nations throughout the world would do just about anything to gain its citizenship. He also mentioned how eagerly European states sought to emulate America's example, whose precedent of emancipation, for one, had come to set an international standard. While American social relations and conditions were—from a domestic point of view—dreadfully devastating and ruinous, conditions outside of America were, in many cases, far more catastrophic and demoralizing. Only such an external or international perspective, he continued, could inspire the American—be he black or white—to appreciate the advantage and wealth of his lot. Therefore, he concluded, reconciliation and gratitude, not hatred and enmity, must be America's adornment, “[f]or the accomplishment of unity between the colored and whites will be an assurance of the world's peace [while] racial prejudice, national prejudice, limited patriotism and religious bias will pass away and remain no longer.”⁸²

⁸¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith* [‘Abdu’l-Bahá Section] (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 267-268.

⁸² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith* [‘Abdu’l-Bahá Section], 269-270

In today's society, the promotion and standardization of diversity or plurality is quite commonplace and routine; many of the institutions and activities which give rise to the socio-political order are often flanked with incentives to endorse it—and in many cases, enforce it. Hence, it may be difficult for the modern world to fully appreciate just how timely and extremely relevant 'Abdu'l-Bahá's messages were, particularly his Howard address. To Americans of that period, many of the ideals which 'Abdu'l-Bahá had so delicately raised were far beyond groundbreaking: they were the gleanings of a social revolution. How strange, how surprisingly *different* it must have been for individuals of that April 23rd gathering, born of the veil⁸³ and completely subjected to second-class citizenship, to sit in that Chapel auditorium of higher-learning—one of the only unobstructed pathways to black success—and listen to such exotic ideas of racial *unity* and *harmony* and of mankind's spiritual destiny. And all the while, there stood Abdul-Bahá'í before them—this small, strange-looking man from Persia, weathered by more than forty years of imprisonment for his propagation of the oneness of the human race—emblazoning the Bahá'í teachings, going on and on about how servitude to God and love for humankind were the only characteristics worth distinction.

At present, it is quite difficult to determine exactly how this provocative message was first received. Perhaps 'Abdu'l-Bahá's address aroused an immediate applause and a standing ovation; or perhaps it was followed by complete silence and deep reflection. Perhaps his words were a source of comfort and encouragement, or maybe, the subject of aggravation and criticism—for how could such a foreign perspective, given from a man who had not even been in the country for two weeks, yield any degree of insight worth attending to? Independent of these many possibilities, however, one thing was certainly clear: the image of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the feelings and thoughts he so easily evoked, had completely etched itself onto the minds and hearts of his attendees, carving out an impression—their first exposure to Bahá'í philosophy—that could never be forgotten or diminished. And just as soon as this significant juncture had ended, another one was sliding in along its own horizon. Only this time, it would involve nineteen prominent guests from “the social and political life of Washington.”⁸⁴

Immediately following his address at Howard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was making his way to the home of Mr. Ali-Kuli Khan, chargé d'affaires of the Persian Legation, and his wife Madame Florence Breed Khan, at which a luncheon and welcoming reception was to be held in his honor. Having arrived a little more than an hour before the luncheon's starting time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notified one of his attendants to contact Mr. Louis Gregory—the African-American Bahá'í and Howard University alumnus who had previously helped to organize his earlier meeting—for an interview. The interview commenced as soon as Gregory arrived and, as one observer later noted, “went on and on” until the luncheon was finally announced.⁸⁵ Just as the moment presented itself, 'Abdu'l-Bahá quickly arose to meet his distinguished guests—Yúsuf Díyá Páshá, the Turkish Ambassador, and Alexander Graham Bell among them—whom he subsequently led to the dining room area to be seated. Meanwhile, Mr. Gregory, although quite

⁸³ Refer to Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and T. H. Oliver (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1999).

⁸⁴ Morrison, 52.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

distinguished in his own right, quietly waited for an appropriate time to leave the house unobtrusively. No sooner had everyone been seated, however, did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stand up, gaze frantically around the room, and then boldly exclaimed, “Where is Mr. Gregory? Bring Mr. Gregory!”⁸⁶ Given the formality of the occasion, one guest recounts, there was nothing left for Mr. Khan to do but find him; by the time Khan rejoined the group—this time accompanying Mr. Gregory—‘Abdu’l-Bahá had already rearranged the table’s place settings, very casually placing Mr. Gregory in the seat of honor amidst Washington’s social and political elite. Then, without the slightest delay and as if nothing had even happened, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá genially proceeded to talk about the oneness of humankind, giving much attention to his earlier address made at Howard.⁸⁷

In speaking to this occasion, historian Gayle Morrison states:

I think it’s very difficult for us now to appreciate how revolutionary ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s action...in calling for Louis Gregory who was not invited to the luncheon, in rearranging the table setting and placing Louis Gregory on his right in the seat of honor...how very revolutionary that was. It wasn’t just a matter of social mixing or reordering the protocol of the event—because everyone’s place was dictated by protocol—it was breaking one of the major taboos of the period which was that the races did not eat together.⁸⁸

Now for one who is uninformed about the public prohibitions of this period, it may be fairly easy to overlook the social significance and the intended meaning of such an act; for the occasion was neither premeditated nor politically charged, neither spiteful nor pretentious. But no matter how naturally and candidly it transpired—with what one person describes as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “matchless ease”—its impact on the Washington elite was certain and its meaning transparent.⁸⁹ To ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and to supporters of the Bahá’í cause, categorization by rank and segregation by race were simply of no importance in an ever-advancing civilization. While many regarded them as necessities of custom and order, they were—in reality—nothing more than social limitations and societal constraints. And if not fully checked or properly placed in context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned, such limitations would come to throttle all future progress in America, and quite possibly of the world. Perhaps this is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “[g]ently yet unmistakably” as Morrison describes it, chose to assault the customs of that emblematic city—not to

⁸⁶ Harlan F. Ober, “Louis G. Gregory,” *The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record*, Vol. XII, 1950-1954, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 668, quoted in Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁸ Regional Bahá’í Council of the Southern States, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Initiative on Race from 1921: Race Amity Conferences* (2003), video-recording.

⁸⁹ Juliet Thompson, (diary) “Abdul Baha in America,” TS, p. 18, entry for 7 May 1912, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL, quoted in Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 54.

offend or intentionally disrespect anyone, but to emphasize the importance of race unity and to contextually shed some light on the “necessitation” of outdated standards.

Later that evening, after visiting a few more receptions and gatherings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had yet another opportunity to speak on the topic of race unity—this time before members of the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church on M Street N. W. Aside from the fact that it occurred in one of the largest and well-attended churches in the city, two things about this meeting are particularly of interest. Firstly, it was sponsored by the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, “the oldest and leading colored organization in the city” of which Mr. Gregory was president.⁹⁰ Secondly, it was said to have “as many as fifteen hundred people” in attendance—which Mr. Gregory had hoped for in its planning.⁹¹ As a cornerstone of the black community, there is no doubt that the Bethel Literary and Historical Society had some of Washington’s most eminent and notable African-Americans among its membership, those who undoubtedly had the resources and man-power to disseminate—if they were so inspired—that new “Bahá’í” message and those many progressive ideas which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had so amiably and skillfully presented. Whatever news attendees had failed to circulate was certainly disclosed by April 27th when the local black newspaper, the *Washington Bee*, printed a summary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s recent events:

Abdul Baha Abbas, the leader of the Baha movement for the world-wide religious unity, has been in the city. Through the missionary work of Mrs. Christian D. Helmick, quite a colony of colored Bahaist has been developed in Washington, and these earnest disciples gave their patron saint an especially warm reception. On Tuesday evening the venerable prophet addressed a large audience at the Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, in connection with the Bethel Literary Society. At non Tuesday, the Abdul spoke to the students of Howard University. The principal advocate of the Bahai faith in this city is Mr. Louis C. [sic] Gregory, a brilliant young lawyer and government official, whose zeal in the work was so absorbing that he made a comprehensive tour of Egypt and the Holy Land to study at first hand the history and philosophy of this remarkable cult.⁹²

Yet by the time this and other articles appeared in Washington newspapers, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was already making his rounds in Chicago, Wilmette, and Evanston, Illinois, continuing his extraordinary precedent of progressive public lecturing and revisiting again and again the issue of race unity. Of the addresses he gave in Chicago, one would be especially significant to securing the Bahá’í Faith’s relationship with Black

⁹⁰ Morrison, 32.

⁹¹ Ibid., 6.

⁹² “Abdul Baha on Religious Unity,” *Washington Bee*, 27 April 1912, p. 1, col. 5, quoted in Morrison, 51.

America and—as time would tell—to garnering major support for the many Race Amity Conventions occurring years later. On April 30, 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—having occasioned his message to the Old Testament teaching that man was made in the image of God—addressed the closing session of the Fourth Annual Convention of the NAACP by declaring:

...every man imbued with divine qualities, who reflects heavenly moralities and perfections, who is the expression of ideal and praiseworthy attributes, is, verily, in the image and likeness of God. If a man possesses wealth, can we call him an image and likeness of God? Or is human honor and notoriety the criterion of divine nearness? Can we apply the test of racial color and say that man of a certain hue – white, black, brown, yellow, red – is the true image of his Creator? We must conclude that color is not the standard and estimate of judgment and that it is of no importance, for color is accidental in nature. The spirit and intelligence of man is essential, and that is the manifestation of divine virtues, the merciful bestowals of God, the eternal life and baptism through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, be it known that color or race is of no importance. He who is the image and likeness of God, who is the manifestation of the bestowals of God, is acceptable at the threshold of God – whether his color be white, black or brown; it matters not. Man is not man simply because of bodily attributes. The standard of divine measure and judgment is his intelligence and spirit.⁹³

Impressed with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “calm, sweet universalism,” and considerate of the “thousand disappointed people [who] were unable to get even standing room [accommodation] in the hall,”⁹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois later printed this address in the June issue of *The Crisis* magazine.⁹⁵ In May of that same year, furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was honored as one of the NAACP’s “Men of the Month,” a distinction usually reserved for African-Americans.

By the time of his departure for Haifa, Israel in December 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had traveled to more than ten states throughout the country, stopping at every possible location along the way to spread his message of “unity through diversity” and of

⁹³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 69.

⁹⁴ “The Fourth Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” *The Crisis*, 4 (June 1912), 80, quoted in Morrison, 55.

⁹⁵ Along with this address appeared ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “The Brotherhood of Man” talk, given at Jane Addams’ Hull House just before his convention address. Citation: ‘Abd al-Baha’, “The Brotherhood of Man,” *The Crisis* (New York) 4 (2 June 1912): 88-89.11.10.

universal peace and brotherhood.⁹⁶ Even still, it was his Washington and Chicago addresses that had particularly impressed the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith onto “the consciousness of black America.”⁹⁷ Since its introduction to the Western world in 1898, the message of universal peace which Bahá'u'lláh had heralded back in 1863 had been largely unknown to the totality of African-Americans—even though it could have been effortlessly identified given the social backdrop of such a ruinous age. Through the efforts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, that message was no longer so obscure; and, in fact, it only took him about a week’s time (from 23-30 April) to elucidate it.

The many seeds which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had planted in 1912—and which the American Bahá'í community had subsequently nurtured—would certainly blossom in the following years, especially with regard to the Race Amity Conventions beginning in 1921. To understand the greater context surrounding these initiatives, however, it is necessary to reconnect with the spirit of the age in which they occurred—saturated with interminable interracial strife and an overwhelming sense of desperation. Among many trials and circumstances, Morrison claims, “[t]he events of the ‘Red summer’ of 1919 [had particularly] awakened in the American Bahá'ís a heightened sense of responsibility.”⁹⁸ This new sense of urgency—underscored by the desire to fulfill the explicit wishes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, now nearing the end of his earthly life—charged the Bahá'í community to “...set in motion a plan that was to bring the races together, attract the attention of the country, enlist the aid of famous and influential people and have a far-reaching effect upon the destiny of the nation itself.”⁹⁹

Furthermore, the ideological foundation on which this illustrious plan had been centered was “strikingly different in content and scope” from the offerings of other socio-political (and religious) organizations at that time.¹⁰⁰ Rather than philosophically perpetuate a nationalistic, separatist, or even racist set of values, Race Amity Conventions sought to conceptualize humanity and all of its diverse elements in the context of a *new world order*. A worthy example of such thinking emerges from Louis Gregory’s “Racial Amity” address, given at the very first amity convention in May of 1921:

The divine springtime has appeared and the great enlightened principles, which are the light and progress of the whole world of humanity, are set in motion. These relate to the great peace, the universality of truth, to the great law that humanity is one, even as God is one, to the elevation of the station of women, who must no longer be

⁹⁶ For information on the principle of “unity through diversity,” see Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938). For a record of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks and addresses, see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982).

⁹⁷ Morrison, 55.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁹⁹ Louis G. Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Vol. VII, 1936-1938*, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939), p. 655, quoted in Morrison, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Morrison, 133.

confined to a limited life but be everywhere recognized as the equal and [helpmate] of man. These pertain to the universality of education, to the oneness of language, to the solution of this economic problem which has vexed the greatest minds of the world and its noblest hearts, and to that supreme dynamic power, the Holy Spirit of God, whose outpouring upon the whole world of flesh will make this a world of light, of joy, and of triumph.¹⁰¹

With such an emphasis on *the whole world of humanity* and on—amongst many other things—*the elevation of the station of women* and *the universality of education*, it is surprising that convention organizers even chose to use the name “race amity” at all. Perhaps “World Amity Conventions” would have been a better designation; for gatherings appeared to be just as much about racial equality as they were about the equality of religions, nationalities, and genders. However, such expansion of thought and devotion to the generality of social problems were not mere coincidence. As Gayle Morrison expressed, “...the Bahá’í Cause was not national but international, not biracial but multiracial, not issue oriented but issue encompassing...”¹⁰² Rather than assemble itself upon points of differentiation and isolation, it purposely arranged itself on points of agreement and commonality.¹⁰³ Rather than accustom itself to any national or secularized agenda, it championed as its hallmark and pivot the oneness and wholeness of the entire human race.¹⁰⁴

It is for this reason that the Race Amity Conventions, organized and sponsored by the American Bahá’í community, are of great socio-historical importance. It was the first initiative on race “to focus on interracial accord...to reach beyond the confines of the liberal reform movement [and to clearly establish] to large numbers of people...the Bahá’ís principles of unity.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, the first of these gatherings, held May 19-21, 1921 at the First Congregational Church in Washington, DC, was said to have attracted as many as two thousand people in the first session alone, with more than fifteen hundred in each of its following sessions.¹⁰⁶ Subsequent conventions had comparable turnouts. The second amity convention of Springfield, Massachusetts, for example, gathered more than a thousand individuals at each of its two sessions on December 5-6, 1921.¹⁰⁷ Although the exact number of participants at the third amity convention—held in New York City on March 28-30, 1924—is currently unknown, it did secure the attendance of several civil groups and organizations, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Committee on International Cooperation of the League of Women Voters.¹⁰⁸ Occurring

¹⁰¹ Louis G. Gregory, “Racial Amity,” in Bahá’í Year Book, Volume One, 1925-1926, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1926), p. 165, quoted in Morrison, 134.

¹⁰² Morrison, 29.

¹⁰³ Refer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Refer to Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), 216.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison, 142.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

just seven months later, the fourth convention of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, held October 22-23 1924, attracted a little more than fifteen hundred to its two-part session.¹⁰⁹

Usually, such conventions featured a delicate mix of influential lecturers, educators, and guests—black and white, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, locally and nationally renowned—who appropriately occasioned their messages to the theme of unity and who “work[ed] for the creation of sentiment.”¹¹⁰ Among those who gave the prestige of their names were James Weldon Johnson, distinguished poet and statesman; Samuel Shortridge, US Senator of California; Alexander H. Martin, one of the first blacks to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa; John Hope, president of Atlanta University; Alain Leroy Locke, Howard philosopher and soon to be “father” of the Harlem Renaissance; Jane Addams, founder of the philanthropic Hull House of Chicago; W. E. B. Du Bois, civil rights leader, scholar, and NAACP founder; Walter F. White, NAACP member and secretary; James Hubert, secretary of the New York Urban League; Rabbi Abram Simon, chairman of the Synagogue Council of America; William Stanley Braithwaite, poet, literary critic, and anthologist; A. Philip Randolph, union organizer and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and Franz Boas, whose scholarly work in the field of anthropology had scientifically discredited many of the then-dominant theories of racial superiority.¹¹¹

Complementing these lectures was an array of musical performances, literary readings, and artistic presentations—which also helped to elevate the spirit of these conventions. The first amity conference, for example, featured Negro Spirituals from the Howard University Chorus and Glee Club, poetry readings from philosopher Alain Leroy Locke, and a violin solo from Joseph Douglas, a grandson of Frederick Douglass, amongst many others.¹¹² Scriptural selections from the Bible and from the Bahá'í writings also played a role in enlivening the convention's atmosphere and—as Senator Moses B. Clapp described it—in “[lifting] the whole matter up into the spiritual realm.”¹¹³ In describing the gathering's sentimental effect, Harry Randall, the white Bahá'í who served as chairman for the first session of the convention, later reported:

As the sessions progressed, the harmonies of amity and fellowship became apparent in all hearts. At the end of the second evening, one splendid colored man sitting just behind me exclaimed that this surely is the advent of the new day of racial understanding, and sighed, ‘I hardly now where I am—so happy am I.’ I turned to him as said, ‘I know where you are; you are in heaven, because you are in race-unity.’¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 148-149.

¹¹⁰ Bahai Temple Unity, Proceedings of the Annual Meeting, 1922, pp. 309-10, Bahá'í Temple Unity Records, quoted in Morrison, 140.

¹¹¹ Morrison, 146, 156, 181, 192.

¹¹² Ibid., 142

¹¹³ Bahai Temple Unity, 309-10.

¹¹⁴ Regional Bahá'í Council of the Southern States, attributed to Harry Randall, *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Initiative on Race from 1921: Race Amity Conferences* (2003), video-recording.

Apparently, this energizing spirit of “race unity” was so infectious that on one occasion, one of the presenters—a US Senator—turned to Randall just moments before his presentation and exclaimed, “I was going to make a political speech, but would it be better for me to try to follow what you have said in a harmonious way?”¹¹⁵ With a grin on his face, Randall politely nodded and replied, “I think it would be a very good plan.”¹¹⁶

Almost all accounts of the Race Amity Conventions (such as the ones given by Harry Randall) seem perpetually optimistic, laudatory, and even adorative in some cases. Yet any attempt to accurately measure that “adoration” or to completely ascertain the full effect of amity conventions has always been a daunting task. Had it not been for a few personal recollections, newspaper reviews, and program catalogues, the untapped history of these conventions—more importantly, their undeniable influence on race relations—would be utterly lost and disregarded. Nonetheless, the spirit of reconciliation which these gatherings were said to so fruitfully produce was by no means limited to its own confines; rather, this spirit was very replicable and contagious. “An interesting after effect [of conventions]” Louis Gregory once observed, “. . . was the stimulus [they] gave to orthodox people. . . [members from other religious groups and churches] who started the organization of interracial committees very soon thereafter.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, the idea that Race Amity Conventions gave rise to other organizational efforts is understandable. As time would tell, the various projects which these other organizations and religious communities were to initiate would only come to compliment the already prosperous efforts of the American Bahá’í community, creating an upsurge of collaborative projects and an expansive network of supportive devotees.

In speaking to this idea, historian Gayle Morrison asserts that the Bahá’í Faith “was not only the first religion to initiate amity activities in America, but the first to elicit interfaith support.”¹¹⁸ Its relationship with localized church groups and societies (i.e. the Society of Friends and the Mt. Pleasant Congregational Church of Washington, DC, and the Ethical Culture Society and the Community Church of New York) was particularly substantial in inspiring (on a monthly and annual basis) an ever-greater abundance of grass-root activity throughout the country—interracial discussion groups, interfaith meetings, and, of course, more race amity conventions.¹¹⁹ Still, the amiable relations it held with larger scale (civic) organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League was even more pronounced. In the early part of 1930, for example, a joint meeting was held between the National Teaching Committee (a propagative agency of the US National Spiritual Assembly), the Urban League, and the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of New York (the localized administrative body) to discuss co-sponsorship of an amity conference on November 2, 8, and 9. Later in February 1932, the National Bahá’í Interracial Committee (another agency of the National Spiritual Assembly) initiated an annual banquet to honor the Urban League and the NAACP for its achievements in the

¹¹⁵ Bahai Temple Unity, 309-10.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 140.

¹¹⁷ Gregory, “Racial Amity in America,” p. 656, quoted in Morrison, p. 142.

¹¹⁸ Morrison, 151.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 181-183.

field of race relations.¹²⁰ Both events were subsequently detailed in the *Chicago Defender*, drawing greater attention to what was now being termed “the Bahai Movement.”¹²¹

In the following years, the NAACP, the Urban League, and numerous localized organizations continued to lend their support and assistance to Bahá’í endeavors, consolidating again and again its efforts to promote interracial amity and social accord amongst the races. On the surface, it seemed as though the many interracial gatherings which the Bahá’í community initiated between the early 1920s and the mid-1930s had directed themselves toward a wide range of *socially* oriented issues—toward societal transformation on the whole. But to involve one’s self within the framework of “Bahá’í” activism also demanded a significant amount of introspection and inner transformation—an essential change of heart altogether. Undoubtedly, these conventions had emerged as a breeding ground for mutual understanding, a pluralistic crossing of American roads—black-white, rich-poor, old-young, and the like. Still, they highlighted personal transformation and moral development as an essentiality to social reform. “A rectitude of conduct,” Bahá’í leader Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1939, “an abiding sense of undeviating justice, unobscured by the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests; a chaste, pure, and holy life, unsullied and unclouded by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters; a fraternity freed from that cancerous growth of racial prejudice, which is eating into the vitals of an already debilitated society...”—this was the uncompromising standard of the Bahá’í Cause, the ultimate touchstone of every Bahá’í plan, enterprise, and endeavor.¹²² The organic relationship between the individual and the society, the spiritual interconnectedness of all parts of the whole, was one in which the Bahá’í perspective would never lose sight of, a perspective which—some would argue—infused into the dying body of humanity a new spirit of life.

¹²⁰ Morrison, 187-193.

¹²¹ “Annual Reports—1931-1932: Racial Amity Committee,” *Bahá’í News*, no. 62 (May 132), pp. 8-9; Bessye Bearden, “New York Society,” *Chicago Defender*, 5 March 1932, part 2, p.1, col. 1-2, quoted in Morrison, p. 192-193. See also Morrison, 150.

¹²² Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), 23. Shoghi Effendi is commonly known as the “Guardian” of the Bahá’í Faith, a position which was conferred upon him by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, his grandfather, in the *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (1921). The principal function of the *Guardianship* is to develop, expand, and protect the Faith’s “administrative order” (i.e., to cultivate the worldwide organization of the Bahá’í Faith and, through continued education and encouragement, to “guard” the body of Bahá’í adherents from religious schism or from misinterpretation of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings). The Bahá’í administrative order was originally envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh in his *Book of Laws (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)*; it was later expanded upon in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s will and testament. For more information on the station of the Guardianship and on the Faith’s administrative order, refer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994); Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1941); Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1938); and The Bahá’í International Community, “The Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith,” *The Bahá’í World*, 2001 (June 2, 2004). <<http://www.bahai.org/article-1-3-0-5.html>>.

“[Black people] approach the Cause looking for trouble; we are looking to find flaws—that seems natural, because all the churches stand for universal brotherhood...and yet, the colored group has knocked at so many doors to try and find the spirit of universal brotherhood.”

- Sadie Oglesby, August 4, 1927¹²³

In 1935, amidst a gradual programmatic shift to international teaching efforts and missionary work abroad, delegates of the 26th Annual Bahá'í Convention called for the enactment of a survey on the American Bahá'í community to demographically catalog—alongside any possible trends in enrollment patterns—its ethnic, racial, and religious makeup.¹²⁴ It was the first attempt at a thorough “Bahá'í census” and probably the only initiative which statistically documents the community’s primal composition. This survey, commonly referred to as the “Bahá'í Historical Record” (BHR), was in part the brainchild of at least a year’s worth of critical reflection: (1) a response to the steady decline of large scale amity activities since 1933—what Shoghi Effendi had dubbed the “silent compromise” of a vital Bahá'í principle;¹²⁵ and (2) an addendum to the national amity committee document “The Divine Call to Race Amity,” which called for the appointment of localized amity committees and—amongst many other things—the consolidation of cooperative relationships between Bahá'ís and other “concerned groups” (for example, Bahá'í membership among community organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League).¹²⁶

The Bahá'í Historical Record—consisting of about nineteen personal reference questions—was prepared for circulation in almost no time at all and had quickly made its way to the majority of country-wide Local Spiritual Assemblies, small Bahá'í groups, and isolated believers by the end of the summer of 1935.¹²⁷ Under the expressed wishes of the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA), “[n]ew Bahá'ís were...asked to fill out the forms when[ever] they enrolled” while Local Assemblies were asked to make sure that forms

¹²³ Sadie Oglesby, quoted in Gayle Morrison’s *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), 178.

¹²⁴ The purpose of a National Bahá'í Convention is to elect the National Spiritual Assembly (comprised of nine adult Bahá'ís). It is generally held each year between April 21 and May 2. National delegates consist of local electees from respective states, units, or districts throughout the country. Aside from electing the NSA, delegates consult on various issues (administrative or others) relating to the protection and propagation of the Bahá'í community. For more details on Bahá'í administration, refer to *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, edited by Wendi Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989).

¹²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1941), 131.

¹²⁶ Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), 200-203.

¹²⁷ The term “Local Spiritual Assembly” refers to the administrative body of a local community of Bahá'ís. Communities must consist of at least nine adult believers in order to elect a LSA. The term “Bahá'í group” refers to a community of believers that number less than nine.

were completed by all current members within their jurisdictions.¹²⁸ In a period of about two years, the NSA was able to collect records from a total of 1,813 individuals, a noteworthy sample which, according to Arthur Hampson's study "The Growth and Spread of the Bahá'í Faith," represented about sixty percent of the entire Bahá'í population of both the United States and Canada at that time.¹²⁹ Of these 1,813, eighty-eight had identified themselves as mixed, mulatto, light brown, Negro, African, or West Indian, forming the statistical basis of a group that may have very well been four times that size.¹³⁰ This small collection of individuals—although constituting about five percent (4.85%) of an already under-representative sample—provides a worthy statistical profile of the early Black Bahá'í community and an insightful glimpse into the essential nature of African-American converts.

The limited nature of this record—at least for the purposes of surveying black Bahá'ís—was undoubtedly etched in stone from its inception. The fact that it was initially distributed only to active Bahá'í groups and Local Spiritual Assemblies had considerably lessened the extent to which isolated believers in the South would participate. Black participation in some northern communities, moreover, was hindered by the casual dominance of conservative whites, those who—either as constituents of the Local Spiritual Assembly or as fellow community members—were yet to rid themselves of "conscious or unconscious attitudes of superiority" or of general "insensitivit[ies] toward minorities."¹³¹ Shared criticisms over the survey's race- and color-centered questions would also influence black reticence, however, alongside the lasting economic and educational effects of post-Depression.¹³²

Nevertheless, the information collected from those who had managed to overcome these limitations provides rather interesting statistics. These eighty-eight respondents—fifty-seven women and thirty-one men—came from all parts of the country. Nearly sixty percent of them (56.8%) had been born in the southern region and had subsequently migrated to the northern and central states—where 67.1% of them eventually converted.¹³³ The most recent converts had entered the Faith in 1937; long-time converts had enrolled as early as 1909.¹³⁴ Of the Historical Record's twenty-eight-

¹²⁸ In addition, communities were asked to fill out records for the deceased members of their communities.

For more details, see Morrison, 203.

¹²⁹ Morrison, 203.

¹³⁰ According to Gayle Morrison, Bahá'í Historical Record documents 1813 overall respondents, ninety-nine (99) of whom were black. For further details, refer to Morrison, 204.

¹³¹ Morrison, 204. For details on early internal divisions relating to race, see Morrison, 31-34, 73-84, and 135.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 204.

¹³³ For the purposes of this paper, the Southern Region includes the following states: Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. These states were demarcated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (1916). See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993).

¹³⁴ According to Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, the first black American to embrace the Bahá'í Faith was Robert Turner, the butler of Phoebe Hearst, the white philanthropist who helped to organize the first American pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Holy Land in 1898. Nearly a year later, Olive Jackson, a dressmaker from New York, was the first Black woman to become a Bahá'í. Information about the earliest black converts (before 1910) is largely unknown. It was not until the early 1910s that information on black converts became consistent. For more information on Harriet Gibbs Marshall, see Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, "Unsung Heroines," 51. See also note 19.

year span (for black respondents), two significant periods of growth are documented. The first of these periods occurred between 1913 and 1920, just before the inauguration of Race Amity Conventions in 1921; the second period occurred between 1927 and 1933, just as Race Amity Conventions were surfacing into the mainstream. It is rather difficult to piece together a detailed picture of some of the individuals who converted prior to 1920. Even so, information which the Bahá'í Historical Record has documented—along with supplementing bibliographies and various personal files—provides a worthy opportunity to do so.

As one might expect, Washington, D.C. was home to nearly all long-time BHR converts. Leila Y. Payne, formerly of Abbeville, South Carolina, had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the occasion of his Bethel Literary and Historical address in 1912 and became a Bahá'í shortly after. Alan A. Anderson, a convert of 1910, also met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but in the home of white socialite and prominent Bahá'í Agnes Parsons.¹³⁵ Although it is not concretely documented, Harriet Gibbs Marshall—the Canadian-born pianist who, in 1912, enrolled in the Atlantic City Bahá'í community—probably met 'Abdu'l-Bahá as well.¹³⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in America were so extensive that few converts had missed the opportunity to meet him.

While Payne, Anderson, and Marshall had all become Bahá'ís prior to 1913, the earliest of black BHR enrollees—and certainly one of the most renowned—was South Carolina-born Louis G. Gregory, the Washington influential and lawyer by profession who had helped to arrange 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University and Bethel Historical Society addresses.¹³⁷ Like the majority of early black converts, Gregory's interest in the Faith was cordially nurtured by the efforts of early white adherents, who were probably just as eager to share the Bahá'í message with blacks as the first Western evangelists were eager to share it with them.¹³⁸ After an eighteen-month period of intensive investigation—a time during which he is described as being somewhat “radical” in mindset—Gregory finally became a Bahá'í in June of 1909. By 1910, he had been so absorbed by the Bahá'í message that he sacrificed his already prosperous career as a

¹³⁵ Morrison, 204-05.

¹³⁶ For more information on Harriet Gibbs Marshall, see Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Unsung Heroines: Afro-American Women in the Early American Bahá'í Community,” *Exploring the Historical Significance of Being a Person of African Descent in the Bahá'í Faith*. Com Richard Thomas (The African American Teaching Committee, 1998), 51.

¹³⁷ Louis Gregory was undoubtedly one of the most influential Bahá'ís of his era. From the moment he became a Bahá'í in 1909, he dedicated himself entirely to the promotion of the Bahá'í cause, work which brought him to nearly every state in the nation and even to Haiti on one occasion. He was at the center of almost every “race unity” activity the American Bahá'í community had ever sponsored, serving either as an advisor, coordinator, presenter or lecturer. He was the first Black American to be elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, in addition to numerous other organizational boards and committees. The profound admiration with which the Bahá'í community endears to him not only comes from the fact that he was one of the first Black Americans to embrace it or to wholeheartedly serve it; it not only comes from his personal standing as a member of the “Talented Tenth” or the scope of his wide-reaching social and personal contacts (such as those with Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois); rather, Gregory's prestige is gleaned out of the fact that he was one of the most dedicated, influential, and self-sacrificial advocates of “race unity” the Bahá'í community—and perhaps even America—has ever known. For additional information, see Gayle Morrison's *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995).

¹³⁸ For more information on the history of the Bahá'í Faith in American, refer to Robert Stockman's *The Bahá'í Faith in America, vol. 1 and 2* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985).

Washington lawyer to undertake what he believed to be an urgent responsibility: the disseminating of the Bahá'í teachings amongst those who may have needed them the most—his own people.

Of the two periods of growth which the Historical Record has documented, the first period (1913-1920) was marked by sixteen black enrollments. Among these sixteen respondents were some of the only “entire black families in the United States to accept the Faith.”¹³⁹ In Boston, Zylpha O. Mapp and her two children, Benton and Zylpha, had all become Bahá'ís in 1916. After developing a warm friendship with Grace and Harlan Ober (the white Bahá'í couple who had taught Zylpha the Faith), Alexander Mapp—Zylpha's husband—enrolled fourteen years later.¹⁴⁰ Mabry, Sadie, and Bertha Oglesby, another well-to-do family of black Bostonians, became Bahá'ís in 1914. Seventeen years later, Mrs. Oglesby became “the first colored believer to visit [the Bahá'í Holy Land] during [Shoghi Effendi's] time.”¹⁴¹ Activist Coralie Franklin Cook and her husband Dr. George W.—two extremely prominent African-Americans of Washington, D.C.—had been involved in Bahá'í meetings as already as 1910.¹⁴² After declaring their belief in Bahá'u'lláh in 1914, both would go on to share the Bahá'í message with various members and organizations of the Washingtonian elite.

Other members of the first generation of black Bahá'ís include two of the most renowned. Alain Leroy Locke—the first African-American Rhodes Scholar and soon to be “father” of the Harlem Renaissance—became a Bahá'í in 1918. Not only did he play an active role in bringing black art and culture to the forefront of Race Amity Conventions, but he also served on several Bahá'í committees and advocacy boards, including the National Convention Committee, which was inaugurated in 1924.¹⁴³ As some scholars argue, there can be no doubt that the Bahá'í teaching of “unity in diversity” had helped to shape the core of his pluralistic and relativistic philosophies, those which he deeply instilled into the intellect of the Renaissance movement.¹⁴⁴ Aside from advancing the status and culture of the black race, few objectives were more important to Locke than sharing the Bahá'í message with his closest friends and family. In a letter to Agnes Parsons, dated June 28, 1922, he writes:

Mother's feeling[s] toward the cause, and the friends who
exemplify it, was unusually receptive and cordial for one

¹³⁹ Morrison, 208.

¹⁴⁰ Zylpha O. Mapp had five children altogether, all of whom were raised as Bahá'ís. See Morrison for details on the Mapp family.

¹⁴¹ The first African-American to visit the Bahá'í Holy Land was Robert Turner, the butler of Phoebe Hearst (1898). Twenty-nine years later, Sadie Oglesby would be the first African-American *woman* to do so (1927).

¹⁴² For more on the Cook family, see Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Unsung Heroines,” 50.

¹⁴³ For more details, see Morrison, 147, 164.

¹⁴⁴ See Alain Locke, “Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá'í Principle,” *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume IV, 1930-1932*, com National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933), 373; “The Orientation of Hope,” *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume V, 1932-1934*, com National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1936), 527-28; “Lessons in World Crisis,” *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume IX, 1940-1944*, com National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945), 745-47.

who had reached conservative years; it was her wish that I identify myself more closely with it. I have now time and energy...and I shall feel it something of a dedicated service to be able to join more activity with the friends in this movement for human brotherhood.¹⁴⁵

The other well-known Bahá'í of this period was singer-actress Dorothy Champ—who, incidentally, enrolled in the Faith just months after Locke. According to historian Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “[Champ’s] love for God and [for the Bahá'í] Cause was so strong that the fire would flash from her blazing eyes, galvanizing those who heard her speak.”¹⁴⁶ Because of her belief that the “[Bahá'í Faith] could unite the races,” Champ’s growing commitment to the Bahá'í Cause would eventually succeed over her budding career as a professional model and Broadway performer.¹⁴⁷ As a member of the New York Race Amity Committee in the mid-1920s, she played a major part in nurturing inter-organizational ties between the New York Bahá'í community and the Urban League and the NAACP.¹⁴⁸ Many years later, she moved to Wilmington, Delaware, and subsequently to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where until her death in 1979 she continued to promote the Bahá'í teachings among other African-Americans.¹⁴⁹

Unlike the first generation of black Bahá'ís, the converts of subsequent generations were more likely to have discovered the Faith by means of other African-Americans.¹⁵⁰ The advent of Race Amity Conventions may have also been a probable introduction. Nevertheless, the data shows no strong correlation between the holding of amity conventions and an increase in black enrollments in the cities that sponsored them. Between 1921 and 1926—described by Morrison as “the period of outstanding amity work”—cities which successfully held amity conventions had produced only five black enrollments altogether.¹⁵¹ The Bahá'í community of Seattle, Washington, in contrast, single-handedly produced four. Although this first phase amity activity had generated a very small number of enrollments, it undoubtedly laid the groundwork for increased enrollments in the period following.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ Alain Leroy Locke, Agnes Parsons Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States (June 28, 1922).

¹⁴⁶ Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Unsung Heroines: Afro-American Women in the Early American Bahá'í Community,” *Exploring the Historical Significance of Being a Person of African Descent in the Bahá'í Faith*. Com Richard Thomas (The African American Teaching Committee, 1998), 51.

¹⁴⁷ Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, 51.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ The first generation of African American converts first encountered the Faith via white Bahá'ís. They were more likely to have met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during his 1912 visit to the United States. Subsequent generations were more likely to have encountered the Faith via other African-American Bahá'ís, like Louis Gregory, or via public race unity initiatives.

¹⁵¹ Morrison, 208. The cities which successfully held the first amity conventions between 1921 and 1924 were Washington, D.C., Springfield, MA, New York City, and Philadelphia, PA.

¹⁵² Although African-Americans were ready to accept the *social* teachings of the Bahá'í Faith by participating in Race Amity Conventions, reservations about investigating a “strange” religion from Persia probably prevented their majority from *religiously* accepting the Faith or from initially enrolling. Even so, it was not until 1927 when larger numbers of blacks began to enroll in the Bahá'í Faith. This was probably facilitated by increasing familiarity with the Bahá'í community. After years of successfully holding Race Amity

Between 1927 and 1933, thirty-six of all eighty-eight respondents (40.9%) had become Bahá'ís, twelve of whom converted in Chicago, Illinois.¹⁵³ Of these thirty-six converts, twenty-seven were female—and almost all of them migrants from the South.¹⁵⁴ Although not entirely documented by the Historical Record, biographical sketches and obituaries indicate that the majority of these women had served the Faith in some administrative capacity. Some had been members of a Spiritual Assembly; others had held informational meetings and study groups (what was probably an equivalent to *Sunday School*). One such woman was Thelma Allison, a middle-class convert from Nashville, TN. Allison's first exposure to the Faith came by way of Louis Gregory, who at that time was touring through the South to promote the Bahá'í teachings. In the latter part of 1933, she had helped Gregory to start a black women's study group, which later formed the nucleus of Nashville's first Local Spiritual Assembly.¹⁵⁵

Other converts of this period include Elsie Austin, a lawyer who later became the first black woman to serve as the Assistant Attorney General of Ohio; Matthew Bullock, a Dartmouth College alum (1904), World War I veteran, and one of the first black lawyers admitted to the Massachusetts Bar; and Robert S. Abbott, founder of the *Chicago Defender* and member of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations. All three became Bahá'ís during the latter part of what may be considered the “formative” period of the Bahá'í Faith in America—the period of its introduction and permanent establishment.¹⁵⁶ As suggested by Elsie Austin's record, the inauguration of Cincinnati's first Race Amity Convention in 1935 had sparked her interest in the Faith. Eleven years later, she became the second black elected to the National Spiritual Assembly.¹⁵⁷ Matthew Bullock's first encounter with the Faith came on the occasion of a civic dinner his church had held for a traveling Bahá'í teacher named Ludmilla Bechtold Van Sombeek. Following that meeting, he obtained a copy of some Bahá'í literature and thereafter visited the Green Acre Bahá'í School in Eliot, Maine (which was also holding annual amity conventions at the time). Like Elsie Austin, Bullock also was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly—only twelve years after his enrollment in 1940. Robert Abbott, on the other hand, had been acquainted with the Bahá'í community from as early as 1912. Although he and his wife had been included in the 1924–25 Chicago Bahá'í membership list, it was not until 1934 that he formerly enrolled in the Faith.¹⁵⁸ As a participant in that year's

Conventions, the American Bahá'í community had gained the growing trust of an interested public. In essence, African-Americans were more ready to convert after the Bahá'í community had passed through their “period of surveillance.”

¹⁵³ Morrison, 206.

¹⁵⁴ The male-to-female conversion ratio of this period (1927 and 1933) differs drastically from those of prior periods. Between 1913–1920 and 1921–1926, the ratio was 7-to-9 (for both periods).

¹⁵⁵ The first LSA of Nashville, Morrison documents, was comprised of both black and white members. For more details, see Morrison, 243.

¹⁵⁶ The *formative* period (1898 to 1937) ended with the enactment of a seven year teaching plan (the Seven Year Plan), which, aimed to consolidate isolated believers and community and to establish more Local Spiritual Assemblies. For more information and for details on subsequent plans, see Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1941) and *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938).

¹⁵⁷ Louis Gregory was the first African American to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. His tenure lasted from 1922 to 1924, from 1927 to 1932, and from 1939 to 1946.

¹⁵⁸ Morrison, 28, 150, 200, and 207.

Bahá'í Convention (the same convention which sparked the first ideas of a Bahá'í census), he declared before the other delegates:

I hope to acquire more power, power to fight for the unity of humanity. I am identifying myself with this Cause and I go up with you or down with you. Anything for this Cause! Let it go out and remove the darkness everywhere. Save my people! Save America from herself!¹⁵⁹

The ascendancy of the Bahá'í Faith among persons of prestige—such as Robert Abbott, Elsie Austin, Matthew Bullock, Alain Locke, Dorothy Champ, and so many others—gives rise to the idea that it was at one time a very prominent feature of Black America. Its growing reputation was not only endorsed by an increase in black enrollments on the Bahá'í Historical Record, but also underscored by an increase in newspaper publicity and literary recognition. In the period that Gayle Morrison describes as “the heyday of racial amity activity” (1927 to 1933), the Bahá'í Faith was at many times the subject of attention—most frequently in *The Chicago Defender*.¹⁶⁰ The appearance of a “Bahai” case-study in the 1930's report *Black Metropolis* is also a testament to its growing popularity as an interracial movement.¹⁶¹

But to designate the Bahá'í community as only an interracial campaign—to superficially think of it solely in terms of its social livelihood—would be to overlook entirely its most essential component: the Bahá'í spiritual teachings. As a *social* community, the Bahá'í Faith labored for complete and unrestricted association—interracial, inter-gender, inter-national, and even inter-religious—between all members of society. Its essential aim was to institute, in every phase of life, the principle of the oneness of humankind. It centered itself on “fostering...harmonious [relationships] among individual peoples and nations,” and more specifically, on “the nature of those essential relationships,” so that “all the states and nations” could be brought together “as members of one human family.”¹⁶²

As a *religious* community, nevertheless, the Bahá'í Faith gave to its adherents a new moral and attitudinal belief system on which to theologize that principle of oneness. It sought to contextualize (like all religious communities) the many vicissitudes of socio-cultural life not by “the tape of the world,” as W. E. B. Du Bois had once expressed it, but by a *divine* standard—unalterable, undying, and all-

¹⁵⁹ Louis G. Gregory, “The Spirit of the Convention,” *Bahá'í News*, no. 84 (June 1934), 5, quoted in Morrison, 200.

¹⁶⁰ Morrison, 206. According to an unpublished compilation of biographical sketches prepared by the National Bahá'í Archives, it was in 1934 when Abbott began to author articles of great appreciation for the Faith. Presumably, these articles helped to circulate further the Bahá'í message and correspond to the significant increase of black enrollments between 1927 and 1933. See other examples of published articles in Morrison's index.

¹⁶¹ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper, 1962), vol. I, 139, 149-53. See also Morrison, 207.

¹⁶² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938), 42.

encompassing.¹⁶³ On the one hand, it encouraged constructiveness, proficiency, and social uprightness in all world affairs. On the other hand, it lessened attachment to worldly standards and regarded them as ephemeral and impermanent. It gave preference to the development of *spiritual* principles—what some might call human values—and partiality to the advancement of moral rectitude.¹⁶⁴ In the place of wealth and fame, it encouraged an expansion of character and intelligence. And instead of conventional power, it commended the attainment of virtue.

The Bahá'í writings themselves facilitate a better understanding of some of these ideological principles.¹⁶⁵ A passage from *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* reads:

These few brief days shall pass away, this present life shall vanish from our sight; the roses of this world shall be fresh and fair no more, the garden of this earth's triumphs and delights shall droop and fade. The spring season of life shall turn into the autumn of death, the bright joy of palace halls give way to moonless dark within the tomb...[T]o this the wise will not anchor his heart. He who hath knowledge and power will rather seek out the glory of heaven, and spiritual distinction, and the life that dieth not...for in the tavern of this swiftly-passing world the man of God [must] not lie drunken, nor...for a moment take his ease, nor stain himself with any fondness for this earthly life. Nay rather, the friends [of God]...cherish but one desire for the world and all its peoples: well-being and peace. By them, the ramparts of warfare and aggression are battered down. They have truthfulness and honest dealing and friendship for their goal, and kindness even toward a vicious foe; until at last they change this prison of treachery, the world, into a mansion of utmost trust, and turn this gaol-house of hatred and malevolence and spite, into God's Paradise. O ye loving friends! Strive ye with heart and soul to make this world the mirror-image of the Kingdom, that this nether world may teem with the blessings of the world of God, that the voices of the Company on high may be raised in acclamation, and signs and tokens of the bounties and

¹⁶³ See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and T. H. Oliver (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1999), 11.

¹⁶⁴ National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ecuador, *Lights of Guidance*, comp. Helen Hornby (New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 555.

¹⁶⁵ The “Bahá'í writings” and consist of writings, utterances, and dictations of the Faith's central figures: the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. They are a vast collection, hundreds of documents varying in length and style (e.g. books, commentaries, prayers, speeches). The majority of these writings have now been translated into more than 700 different languages and dialects.

bestowals of Bahá'u'lláh [the Glory of God] may encompass all the earth.¹⁶⁶

Hidden within this passage are the semblances of one over-arching suggestion, one elevated idea that speaks to the ephemerality of physical life and to the absoluteness of a spiritual existence. On the one hand, it admonishes any lasting attachment to the corporeal world; yet, on the other, charges its readers to devote their attention to the attainment of spiritual virtue, the maturation of human civilization and, consequentially, the realization of world peace. These ideas were especially pertinent to early African-American converts. At a time when blacks were restlessly searching for some sense of social order and spiritual restitution, these passages awakened in them a sense of purpose and meaning. They inspired them to focus their attention on their spiritual reality and, at the same time, allowed them to create an ideological link between improving the world and improving one's own moral character.

In light of man's spiritual reality, Bahá'u'lláh prescribed:

Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. If any man were to meditate on that which the Scriptures, sent down from the heaven of God's holy Will, have revealed, he would readily recognize that their purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one soul, so that the seal bearing the words "The Kingdom shall be God's" may be stamped on every heart, and the light of Divine bounty, of grace, and mercy may envelop all mankind... If the learned and worldly-wise men of this age were to allow mankind to inhale the fragrance of fellowship and love, every understanding heart would apprehend the meaning of true liberty, and discover the secret of undisturbed peace...¹⁶⁷

And at another time, Bahá'u'lláh stated:

When a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading unto the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the

¹⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, com the Research Department of The Universal House of Justice, trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), 220-221.

¹⁶⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), 259.

Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth. Even as thou dost witness in this Day how most of the people, because of such love and hate, are bereft of the immortal Face, have strayed far from the Embodiments of the Divine mysteries...¹⁶⁸

Everlasting peace, divine civilization, moral striving and spiritual preparation for an afterlife—these were some of the theo-thematic contributions which underscored the Bahá'í Faith's social philosophy. Like the generality of the world's religious teachings, the Bahá'í Writings encouraged adherents to strive for the development of morality and to not take so seriously the standards and conditions of the secular world, conditions which—in contrast to the permanence of the spiritual world—were just as fleeting as the passing of a shadow in the shimmer of light. Again, such ideas were especially relevant to the experience of African-Americans. They gave them a sense of spiritual identity when everything else had stripped them of their social identity.

Given the socio-political contexts of early twentieth-century America, it is easy to see why the Bahá'í teachings—particularly its social principles—were attracting larger and larger numbers of socially and spiritually restless individuals. Of these individuals, there were those who—having been touched by the transformative influence of the Bahá'í teachings and having traveled to the center of Bahá'í community life—embraced the Faith wholeheartedly and went on determinedly to evangelize its message. Then again, there were those who became “good believers”—as Louis Gregory expressed it—but inconsistently tittered along the outskirts and “[made] no effort to guide others.”¹⁶⁹ Finally, there were those who, having been exposed to the Bahá'í message, still chose to reject it. Of this last group, some were more cautious and reservedly untrusting; others were skeptical and overtly disbelieving. Their proximity to the Bahá'í community was such that they could benefit from whatever social or religious advancements the Bahá'í Faith had offered, and yet, criticize anything they perceived as doctrinal or organizational weaknesses.

How newly converted black Bahá'ís chose to reconcile the social consequences of joining a new religion was, as it is for all religious converts, individually determined. Even so, the many social advancements which the Bahá'í Faith attained in the field of race relations give reason to believe that—at a moment when society was so resistant to social equality—it was more well-received than not. When it came to the *personal* reconciliation of inter-religious belief systems, however—that is, how individuals chose to reconcile the religious doctrines of Christianity with those of the Bahá'í Faith—a firm commitment to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh was probably inspired by an ideological

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 264

¹⁶⁹ Louis G. Gregory, “A Heavenly Vista: The Pilgrimage of Louis Gregory.” Louis Gregory Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States.

acceptance of “progressive revelation.” In his book *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi describes progressive revelation as the “fundamental principle of religious truth:”

Let no one...mistake [its] purpose. The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.¹⁷⁰

To Bahá'í adherents, progressive revelation was the “ideological claim that all the world’s major religions are only evolutionary stages in God’s plan to educate and unify the whole planet.”¹⁷¹ It was the assertion that “religious knowledge, as recorded in the world’s holy scriptures, is revealed incrementally throughout history [to educate] humanity according to its collective ability.”¹⁷² Apparent differences amongst the world religions, therefore, result only from variations within their social ordinances, “temporary conditions and exigencies [which are as always] subject to change.”¹⁷³ The spiritual truths of world’s religions are one in the same, however; all work to establish the “essential foundation of reality...[and function as the] divine means of agreement and unification.”¹⁷⁴ Overall, the principle of progressive revelation—like the other spiritual teachings of the Bahá'í Faith—was nothing more or less than an extension of the principle of spiritual oneness, but applied to the institution of religion. Ideologically, it diminished any sense of religious compromise which new converts may have

¹⁷⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938), 57-58.

¹⁷¹ Michael McMullen, *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 7.

¹⁷² McMullen, 7.

¹⁷³ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 339.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

encountered or any particular feeling of organizational abandonment. Rather, it grouped all religions together in one divine scheme, freeing Bahá'í converts from the necessity of “reconciling” their “former” religious faith.

As a general statement, the specific reasons why individuals choose to adopt new religious belief systems can only be approximated. There is no single standard, doctrine, philosophy, or framework on which to explain such a change. Although it is difficult to ascertain why some early twentieth-century black Americans decided *not* to religiously accept the Bahá'í Faith, it is far less demanding to determine the characteristics of those who did. Based upon information from the Bahá'í Historical Record, the typical early twentieth-century black Bahá'í would have been a female between the ages of 30 and 39 [See Appendix A]. She would have had a relatively high level of educational attainment and a modest number of upper middle-class social contacts.¹⁷⁵ Born in the state of Alabama, she would have eventually moved to Illinois or to New York, where she would have employed herself as an educator or social worker [See Appendices B and C]. In her spare time, she devoted her energies to civil activism.¹⁷⁶ Although married, she would have been without children and dependents [See Appendix D]. As a “middle of the road” Christian, she was more likely to have first encountered the Bahá'í Faith via her participation in a Race Amity Convention or via travel-teachers like Louis Gregory; she was less likely to have encountered the Faith via her subscription to *The Chicago Defender*.¹⁷⁷ Finally, she was more likely to have declared her belief in Bahá'u'lláh between 1927 and 1933 [See Appendix E]. Although only a Bahá'í of less than two years (in 1935), she would have soon become very active in the administrative or organizational life of the Bahá'í Faith—most likely as a Local Spiritual Assembly member [See Appendix F].

Supplemented with biographical information, the characteristics of “typical” early twentieth-century black Bahá'ís provide insight into many aspects of their lives. Firstly, they suggest that black Bahá'ís—the first generation, at least—were predominantly well-educated, middle-class individuals who were *actively* searching for new ways to improve the overall socioeconomic condition of African-Americans. Because of their status and education, moreover, these “well-to-do” individuals were in a better position to devote their resources (e.g., monetary, social, educational, time) to Bahá'í endeavors. Presumably, their active engagement in civic activities and their relative position as “leaders” in the black community were the very reasons why they were the *first* African-Americans to encounter the Bahá'í Faith, as opposed to “grass-roots” or lower class blacks whose resources were significantly limited and whose social networks were less extensive. The Faith was practically unknown to southern and rural blacks until this first generation of well-to-do black Bahá'ís began employing their resources (e.g., publishing articles on the Faith in newspapers and magazines) and traveling to the South to spread its message.

¹⁷⁵ This information is based more upon biographical information than the information provided by the Bahá'í Historical Record. Using the BHR, it is only possible to infer educational attainment from one's listed profession. Not all respondents listed their profession.

¹⁷⁶ This information is based on biographical information and not necessarily the BHR.

¹⁷⁷ This information is also based on bibliographies. Some BHR respondents have documented that Louis Gregory was the first person to teach them the Bahá'í Faith, however.

Furthermore, attraction to Race Amity Conventions and other Bahá'í-sponsored activities indicates that the Bahá'í Faith—as a religion which ultimately stood for complete social equality—was able to fill a fundamental void which other churches and religious communities did not *specifically* address. As one early black Bahá'í expressed, “one by one various religious bodies [had] departed from their original teachings...[and had] divid[ed] on racial lines. For a colored person to enter almost any white Church...and attempt to share in its worship would be to virtually break up the meeting.”¹⁷⁸ A commitment to “the oneness of humankind,” in contrast, meant that the Bahá'í Faith was, as a religious community, capable of dissolving a social void for those African-Americans—urban or rural, middle-class or lower-class, highly educated or not—who chose to embrace its message. It also meant that women who, formerly, were unable to *fully* participate in the affairs of the Church were now, as adherents to the Bahá'í message, able to exercise full participation in all socio-religious activities within the American Bahá'í community.

Indeed, the information which the Bahá'í Historical Record provides is, on the whole, very valuable to understanding this new and unexamined dimension of black religiosity. While the BHR is a commendable source of information on early black Bahá'ís, it can only serve as a starting point. Only biographical files, letters, diaries, and personal manuscripts—items which are still waiting to be uncovered—can fill in the gaps of information this study fails to provide. At the present, it seems virtually impossible to assess how precise or how statistically acceptable the Bahá'í Historical Record is as an empirical study. Even so, it is a worthy glimpse at how the Bahá'í Faith was initially received by Black Americans. Information on black Bahá'ís from later periods (after 1940) is more much detailed.

¹⁷⁸ Coralie Franklin Cook, Leone Barnitz Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States, Evanston, Illinois (March 2, 1914).

“Weary and heart sore, discouraged with the Churches that close their doors to them, the silent pulpits that should thunder forth in trumpet tones against the iniquities in the pews, it were strange indeed if the Bahá’í Teachings wakened no response of great hope in the hearts of colored people.”

- Coralie Franklin Cook, March 2, 1914¹⁷⁹

The history of the Bahá’í Faith in Black America is a subject that has been largely overlooked and undocumented. While hundreds of volumes are dedicated to the history of the Black Church and to Black religiosity in general, only a handful are devoted to understanding Black Bahá’í religiosity or to Bahá’í history on the whole. Gayle Morrison’s work *To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* is probably the foremost of black Bahá’í studies to date. In fact, it may one day come to be described as the mother-book of black Bahá’í studies, especially when examining the formative age of the Faith in America (approx. 1890–1937). Two other published works which document black Bahá’í-ism center on Bahá’í converts from later periods in the Faith’s history. They include *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (1985) and *To Be or Not to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie* (1979). While they function as worthy starting points, all of these works are biographically centered and, unfortunately, do not address *specifically* the breadth and scope of the Bahá’í Faith within Black America in general.

Of the many studies concerning the development, the characteristics, and the socio-political goals of the Black Church, hardly any of them make reference to the Bahá’í Faith or acknowledge the fact that many long time members of the Black Church were also Bahá’í converts. If one is lucky to stumble upon some documentation of the Faith, it would be no surprise to find that description to be somewhat limited in context or even biased to some extent. However, other descriptions illustrate a complex and multifaceted religious life. An example of this can be gleaned from Gail Lumet Buckley’s work *The Hornes: An American Family*, which states:

Cora's funeral arrangements also reflected a spiritual pilgrimage: the Congregational Church of her proper Atlanta childhood, the Episcopal Church of Brooklyn's black elite, and Bahai. (Cora, who had become a Bahai disciple in the late 1920s, often took her granddaughter Lena to Bahai meetings. The Bahai movement, founded in Persia in 1863 by Prince Husayn Ali, had only recently arrived in America, along with such other Middle Eastern

¹⁷⁹ Coralie Franklin Cook, Leone Barnitz Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, United States, Evanston, Illinois (March 2, 1914).

mystics as Gurdjieff and Gibran. Bahai stressed the essential unity of all revealed religions: men should worship God by serving others—regardless of race, nationality, or religion.) Only the Catholic Church of Cora's birth and middle age refused to accept her ecumenicalism.¹⁸⁰

A passage such as this reaffirms the idea that black Americans of the early 1900s belonged to a variety of congregations and religious communities, perhaps in search of “the right religious fit,” their own eclectically comfortable niche within a tumultuously secularizing world. Given its brevity, Buckley’s description of the Bahá’í Faith seems to be a fairly accurate one. No matter how precise or inexact such rare finds are, however, the fact that the Faith’s overall history remains relatively obscure makes any documentation of it—any historical significance to Black America—much more likely to be overlooked by the average reader.

To study this undocumented history and to understand the far-reaching implications of its universalist philosophy is to ultimately challenge the Black Church as the sole religious, cultural, and socio-political stronghold of historic black America. The unearthing of Bahá’í history, moreover, shows the history of American race relations from an entirely different perspective. Some of its programs and activities may have served as replicable models on which later organizational efforts and civil rights activities have been built. For instance, the inter-denominational and congregational “coalition-building” of the Civil Rights Movement was remarkably similar to some of the activities undertaken by the American Bahá’í community in the 1920’s. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declared in 1912 that “[m]an [was] not to be pronounced man simply because of his bodily attributes...[but] judged according to his intelligence and to his spirit,”¹⁸¹ he was, in actuality, taking the public position that Martin Luther King, Jr. would take some fifty years later when he declared that man should not be judged by “the color of [his] skin, but by the content of [his] character.”¹⁸² In this way, study of the Bahá’í Faith could unveil insights about its possible influence as a predecessor to the Civil Rights movement—perhaps, the universal civil rights and human brotherhood movement.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s addresses, Race Amity Conventions, interracial discussion groups, and inter-organizational conferences and banquets are all just some of the Faith’s early American proceedings which can be documented. Even though proof of such activities exists in personal letters, files, and dairies, it is extremely difficult to piece together a complete picture of their development. Nonetheless, the Bahá’í ideology which underscored those activities operated as an instrument of relief, a mechanism which freed its recipients—Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í—from the structural and psychological restraints of socio-political custom. Secular freedom was its social philosophy. Freedom from religious compartmentalization and from moral unproductivity was its spiritual philosophy. Many individuals had been attracted to the Faith’s social philosophy, which

¹⁸⁰ Gail Lumet Buckley, *The Hornes: An American Family* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 112.

¹⁸¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 70.

¹⁸² This, of course, refers to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963.

was in high contrast to the socio-political backdrop. Nevertheless, an organizational commitment to the Black Church would prevent the larger part of those individuals from recognizing the *source* of that philosophy—the Faith’s religious and spiritual teachings.

The limited number of those who *did* become Bahá’ís and who did understand the full implications of the Faith’s universalist ideology is of little importance. Such a number simply can not speak to the impact of the Faith’s teachings on a heavily secularized society. Neither can it explain the Faith’s ability to resolve for black Americans a fundamental socio-structural void. In the midst of oppression, the Bahá’í Faith could address—just as all religions attempt to do—the basic, psychological need to preserve some sense of human dignity and security.¹⁸³ In place of socio-structural isolation and public humiliation, it could offer—to both Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í alike—a healthy serving of social solidarity and a community of diverse believers. It was a natural response to “crises of plausibility” which existed not only in the larger social order, but also within the institution of religion itself—within the Christian community. It provided order amid social chaos and offered peace of mind in place of psychological dissonance.

The whole business of a world-embracing vision, the idea that world’s ills could be cured through moral and character development, the theological basis that emboldens people to not take so seriously the secular world—these were the powerful tools which the Bahá’í Cause could employ against racial inequality, in fact, against *any* kind of secular bias. Those who wholeheartedly accepted its teachings and who actively engaged themselves in Bahá’í community life were able to link their personal struggles and avocations—their fight for black liberation—to an all-encompassing struggle: the fight for universal brotherhood. Doing so, however, did not signify compromising one’s original objectives—whether social or otherwise. It did not require the abandonment of social concern for “a preoccupation with salvation or spiritual contentment.”¹⁸⁴ Rather, it necessitated a broadening of those objectives, a conceptualizing of social concern within a universal context.

Conversely, the broadening of social concern did not lessen the Faith’s theological or spiritual vigor. Although the Faith addressed the social-structural conflict of the larger social order and, perhaps, the socio-religious conflict within a segregated Christian community, it also functioned—for those who accepted it—as a fulfillment of religious promise, the coming-true of scriptural prophecy. To this idea, one early African-American Bahá’í of this time posits:

Most naturally, the afflicted one would turn and look to the followers of Christ for protection and championship, but one by one they have given in to the mandates of the Race Problem or Prejudice that is enclosing the white race almost as much as the black; one by one, various religious bodies have departed from their original teachings....In the

¹⁸³ Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 96.

¹⁸⁴ Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), 28.

light of all these things are many more...is it not evident that the Bahai teaching, reiterating the Gospel of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man, is not only the last hope of the colored people, but must appeal strongly to all persons, regardless of race or color, who have come to say 'I am my brother's keeper' [?] If any one has come to realize his duty to the community in which he lives, to the country to which that community is a part, to the world to which that country must contribute its share in the making of world Progress and to His God, must he not embrace the Teachings of Baha'o'llah as the Greatest instrument put in the hands of man for bringing all the nations of the earth under the conscious harmony with the Will of God? Every noble principle, every lofty ideal, every rule of the conduct of the Bahai Faith can be defended by the passages of our own Bible.¹⁸⁵

Only through passages like this is it possible to understand some of the logic and significance behind being an African-American Bahá'í in the early twentieth-century. Such passages are extremely rare finds, yet assuredly speak to the idea that the Bahá'í Faith was more than just a set of moral and social principles or some kind of progressive social interchange. Even still, a full discussion of the Faith's theological vigor, in addition to its social dynamism, will assuredly be inculcated by the discovery and further documentation of additional passages and articles—those which will eventually assist in piecing together a more detailed picture of early Bahá'í religiosity.

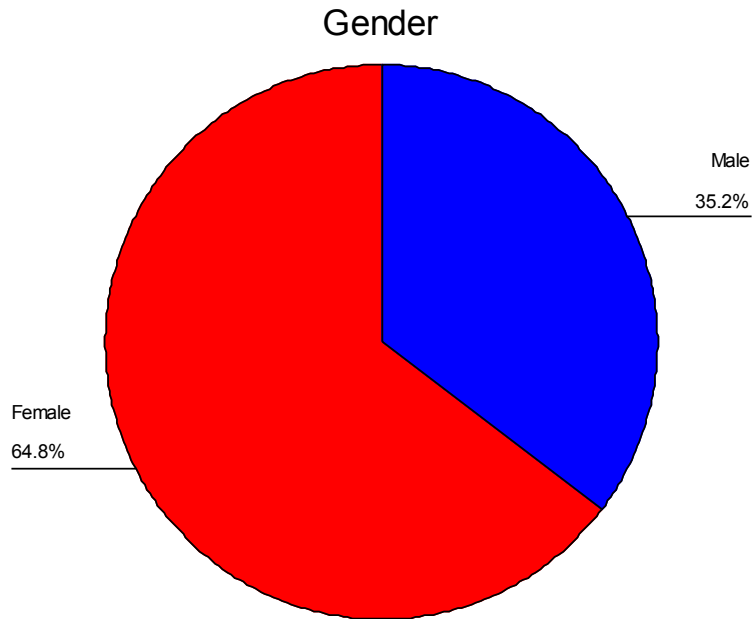
This work is only a feeble attempt at painting such a picture. It outlines the essential beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith in a community whose traditional religious association is designated almost entirely by the Black Church alone. The period which this study documents, moreover, encompasses only what may be considered the formative age of the Bahá'í Faith in America. It does not include the very expansive periods of growth that follow, periods which saw the permanent establishment of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world. Hopefully, the work which can be accomplished in this field may one day be as extensive as the projects already devoted to the history of the Black Church. Perhaps a history of the Bahá'í Faith will someday be included within and amongst those various projects. Eventually, the Faith's influence on early Black America may come to be just as identifiable as the influence of black Christian communities on the Civil Rights Movement.

The reason why American history is so presently tacit to the Faith's impact on race relations or so unspoken about its contributions to globalist ideologies remains unknown. It is very hard to understand why or when those contributions became overlooked, especially given the fact that, in the early 1930's, the Bahá'í Faith appeared to be fairly popular in early black America. One reason for this obscurity may relate to the

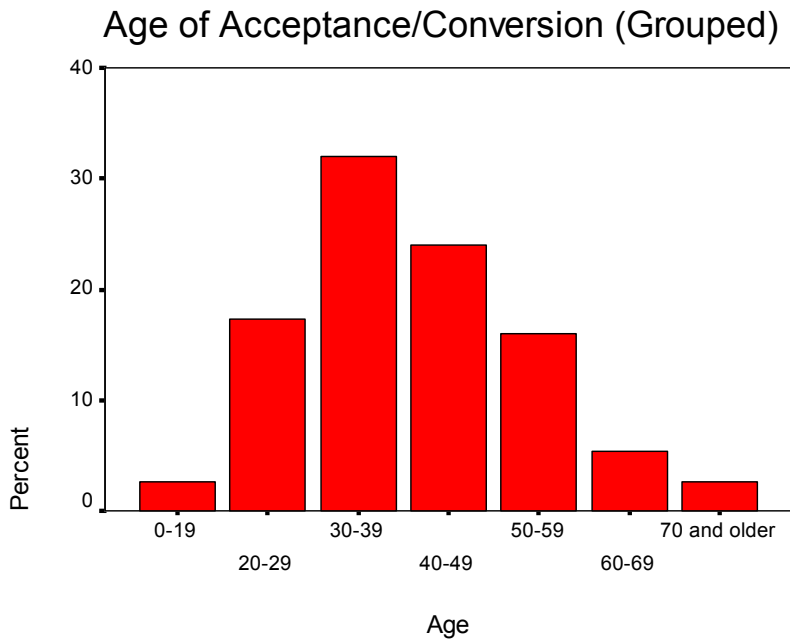
¹⁸⁵ Coralie Franklin Cook, Leone Barnitz Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, United States, Evanston, Illinois (March 2, 1914).

fact that as a religious community, the Bahá'í Faith is still in a stage of infancy. Hence, its identity as a world religious community is still solidifying. Rapid global development and industrialization, moreover, may have also played a part in its absence of recognition; the processes of globalization may have shifted historical attention away from any contributions which the Bahá'í community has made.

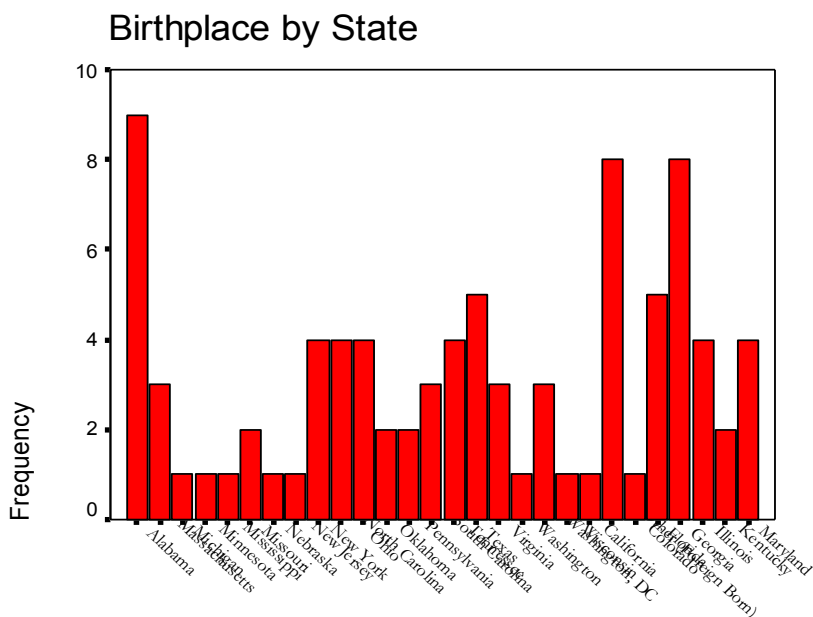
Scholarship devoted to the history of the Bahá'í Faith can be beneficial not only to the academic world, but also to the Bahá'í community itself. While study of the significance of the Bahá'í Faith in Black America is important, it is still only one, small aspect of a very wide range of events that have occurred in a short period of time. These events concern the unfoldment of Bahá'í history in many other parts of the world and speak to the Faith's collective contribution to a global society. Although the continuation of this project has the potential to make valuable contributions to the history of race relations in America, so do projects which document the activities of other specific populations, including Persian American Bahá'ís, Native American Bahá'ís, and Latin American Bahá'ís. On the whole, such projects are still waiting to be pursued.



Male-to-female ratio of 88 black respondents from the Bahá'í Historical Record (1935).

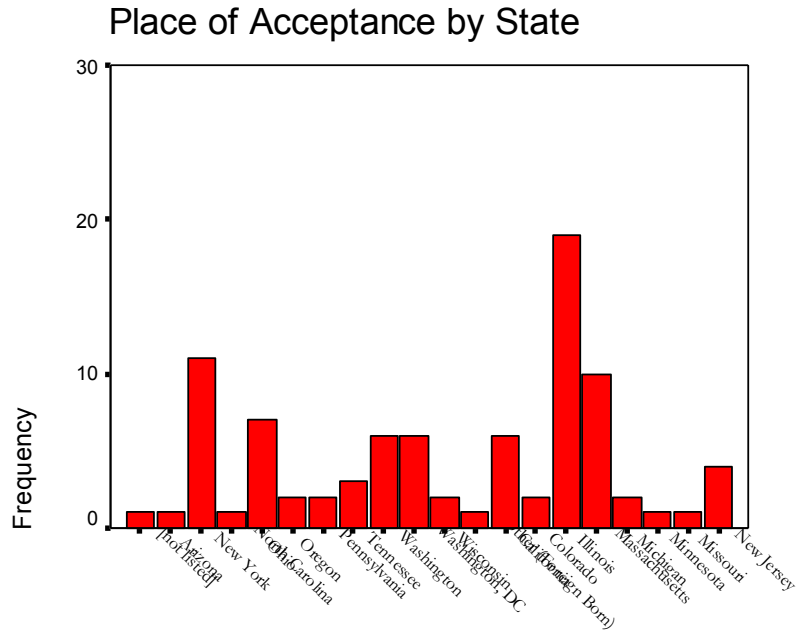


This chart describes the age at which black Bahá'í Historical Record (BHR) respondents enrolled in the Bahá'í Faith.



State	Frequency	Percent
Alabama	9	10.2
Massachusetts	3	3.4
Michigan	1	1.1
Minnesota	1	1.1
Mississippi	1	1.1
Missouri	2	2.3
Nebraska	1	1.1
New Jersey	1	1.1
New York	4	4.5
North Carolina	4	4.5
Ohio	4	4.5
Oklahoma	2	2.3
Pennsylvania	2	2.3
South Carolina	3	3.4
Tennessee	4	4.5
Texas	5	5.7
Virginia	3	3.4
Washington	1	1.1
Washington, DC	3	3.4
Wisconsin	1	1.1
California	8	9.1
Other (Foreign Born)	8	9.1
Colorado	1	1.1
Florida	5	5.7
Georgia	8	9.1
Illinois	4	4.5
Kentucky	2	2.3
Maryland	4	4.5
Total	88	100.0

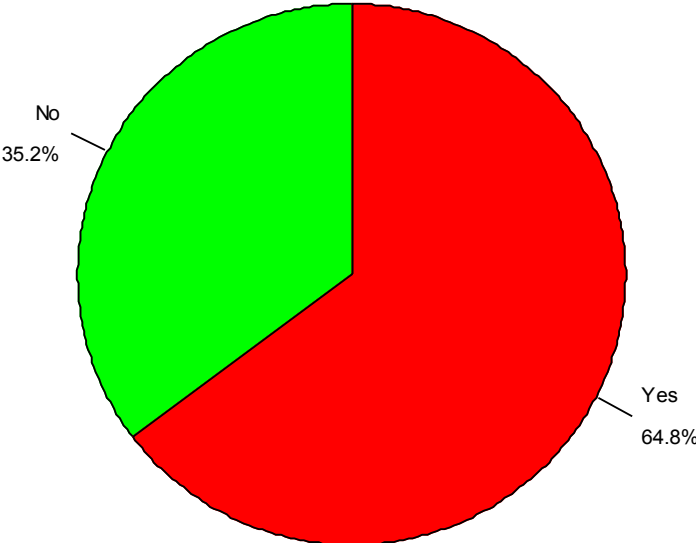
A graph and listing of the states in which BHR respondents were born.



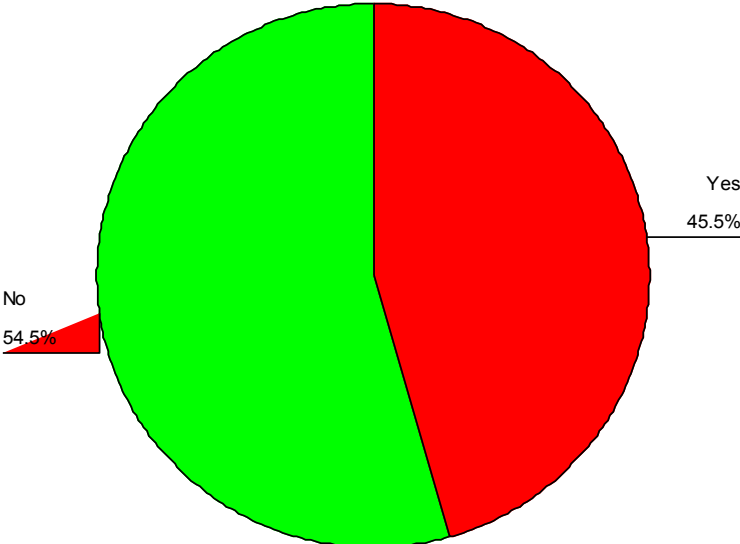
State	Frequency	Percent
[not listed]	1	1.1
Arizona	1	1.1
New York	11	12.5
North Carolina	1	1.1
Ohio	7	8.0
Oregon	2	2.3
Pennsylvania	2	2.3
Tennessee	3	3.4
Washington	6	6.8
Washington, DC	6	6.8
Wisconsin	2	2.3
Other (Foreign Born)	1	1.1
California	6	6.8
Colorado	2	2.3
Illinois	19	21.6
Massachusetts	10	11.4
Michigan	2	2.3
Minnesota	1	1.1
Missouri	1	1.1
New Jersey	4	4.5
Total	88	100.0

A graph and listing of the states in which BHR respondents enrolled in the Bahá'í Faith.

Marital Status

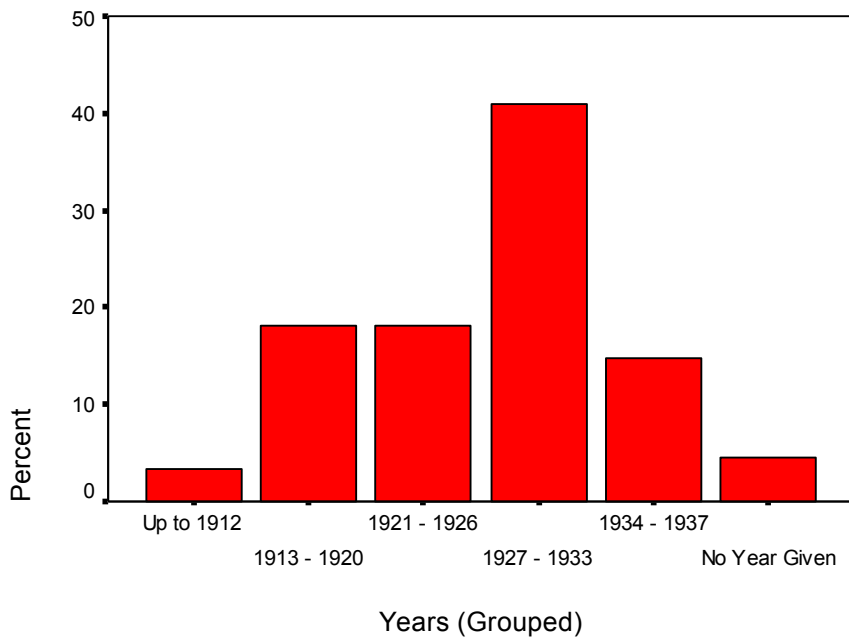


Children/Dependents



Graphs of the marital and guardianship statuses of black BHR respondents.

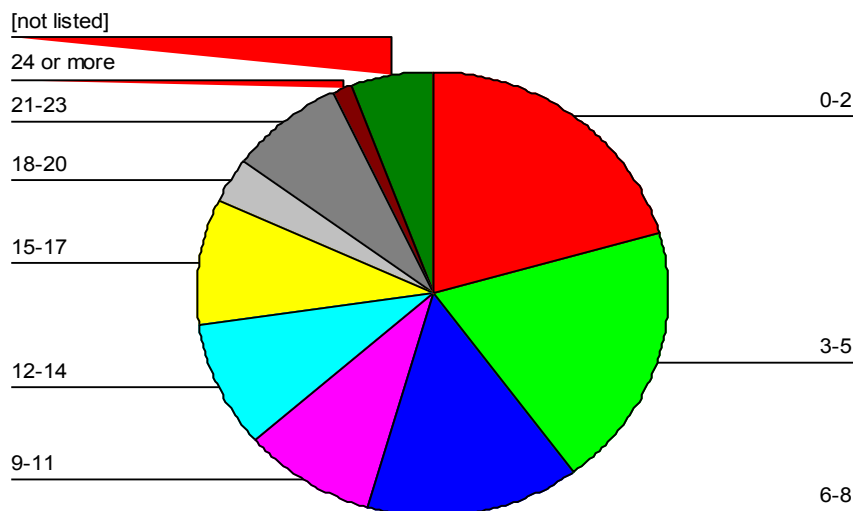
Year of Acceptance/Conversion



Year	Frequency	Percent
No Year Given	4	4.5
1909	1	1.1
1912	2	2.3
1913	1	1.1
1914	4	4.5
1915	1	1.1
1916	1	1.1
1917	1	1.1
1918	4	4.5
1919	1	1.1
1920	3	3.4
1921	4	4.5
1922	2	2.3
1923	2	2.3
1924	3	3.4
1925	4	4.5
1926	1	1.1
1928	3	3.4
1929	10	11.4
1930	2	2.3
1931	2	2.3
1932	13	14.8
1933	6	6.8
1934	3	3.4
1935	9	10.2
1937	1	1.1
Total	88	100.0

A graph of the periods and a listing of the specific years in which BHR respondents enrolled in the Bahá'í Faith.

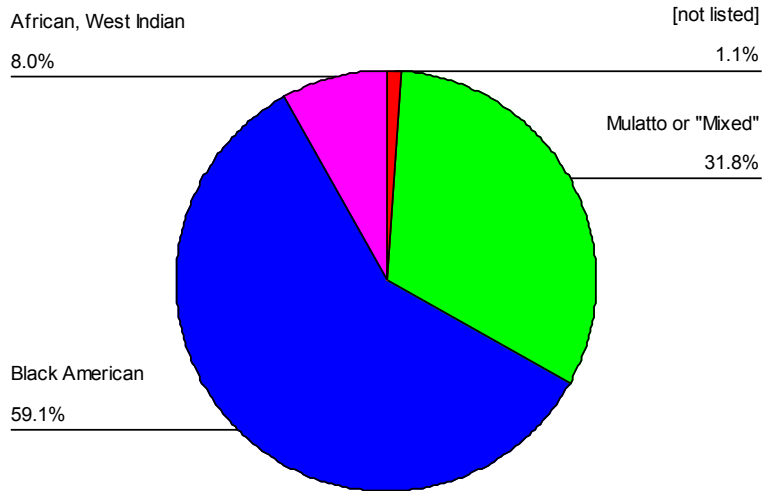
Years of Membership in 1935 (Grouped)



Year	Frequency	Percent
0	9	10.2
1	3	3.4
2	6	6.8
3	13	14.8
4	2	2.3
5	2	2.3
6	10	11.4
7	3	3.4
9	1	1.1
10	4	4.5
11	3	3.4
12	2	2.3
13	2	2.3
14	4	4.5
15	3	3.4
16	1	1.1
17	4	4.5
18	1	1.1
19	1	1.1
20	1	1.1
21	4	4.5
22	1	1.1
23	2	2.3
26	1	1.1
Sub-Total	83	94.3
Not listed	5	5.7
Total	88	100.0

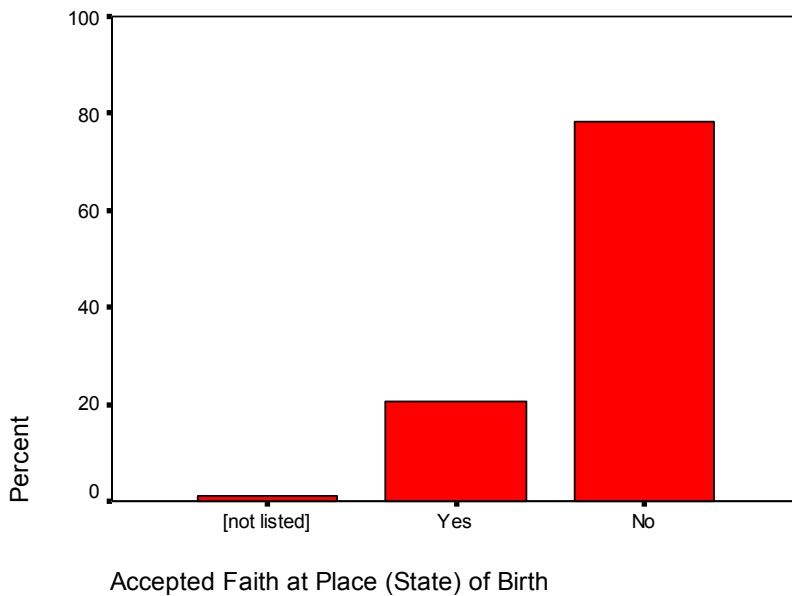
A graph and listing of the “Bahá’í age” (years of membership) of BHR respondents in 1935.

Racial-Ethnic-National Background



A chart of the ethnic background of black BHR respondents.

Accepted Faith at Place (State) of Birth



This chart describes whether or not black BHR respondents enrolled in the Babá'í Faith at the same locality of their birth.

Appendix H



Photograph taken during the fourth Race Amity Convention held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on October 22-23, 1924. Race Amity Conventions were initiated by the American Bahá'í Community in 1921 to inspire interracial understanding and concord between the races.

Appendix I



Photograph of the New York Bahá'í Community's "Inter-Racial Amity Children's Hour," April 29, 1928.



Group photograph taken at a Race Amity Convention held in New York City on November 8-9, 1930. The conference was cosponsored by the Urban League and the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New York City.

Appendices J, K, and L

Following pages:

Appendix J – Program excerpt from the first Race Amity Convention, May 19-21, 1921.

Appendix K – Electronic reprint of an advertisement for the second Race Amity Convention, December 5-6, 1921.

Appendix L – Electronic reprint of a Bahá'í Historical Record card (1935).

Note: All photos and reprints are made with permission from the Archives Department of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

*Half a century ago in America slavery was abolished.
Now there has arisen need for another great effort
in order that prejudice may be overcome.
Correction of the present wrong requires no army,
for the field of action is the hearts of our citizens.
The instrument to be used is kindness,
the ammunition—understanding.
The actors in this engagement for right
are all the inhabitants of these United States.
The great work we have to do and for which this convention is called
is the establishment of amity between the white and colored people of our land.
When we have put our own house in order, then we may be trusted
to carry the message of universal peace to all mankind.*

Excerpt from the program catalog of the first Race Amity Convention, May 19-21, 1921; reproduced in Horace Holley's "Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities in the East and West," *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record*, Vol. II, 1926-1928, comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), p. 22.

AMERICA
Will Lead the World
IN
Amity and Conciliation
Amongst all Men

AMITY CONVENTION
Based on Heavenly Teachings

For Constructive Thought on Conciliation Between
the White and Colored Races in America

December 5th and 6th, '21
AT
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL
STATE STREET

EXCELLENT MUSICAL PROGRAM
Prominent Speakers from Springfield and elsewhere
No Admission No Fee No Collection
PUBLIC INVITED
Meetings Start Promptly at 7.30 P.M.

COMMUNITY PRINT SHOP, Auburn St., Springfield, Mass.

BAHÁ'Í HISTORICAL RECORD

1. 2. Reported through Spiritual Assembly.....
Name of individual believer *City*

3. Address
Number *Street* *City* *State*

4. Birthplace Birthdate.....

5. Naturalization (if foreign born) Date

6. National origin 7. Race
(Whether of English or other stock)

8. Color 9. Sex 10. Married?,
Date

11. Children or dependents
Minor *Adult* *Adopted*

12. Religious origin (religion before becoming a Bahá'í)

13. Date of acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith

A. As isolated believer B. As member of Bahá'í group C. As member of Bahá'í Community

14. Place of acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith
[SEE OVER]

15. Date of enrollment in present Bahá'í Community (No. 2)

A. By transfer from previous community By. Enrollment as Bahá'í for first time

C. Subsequent transfers (leave blank),

16. General information you would like to have preserved in this historical record
 (about Bahá'í services, connection with the Cause in early days, special talents,
 etc.)

(Additional notes may be attached to this card)

17. Additional information (do not fill in)

18. Photograph
(If possible, please attach photograph to this record. Write name and date the picture was taken on back of photograph.)

19. Signature

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