

## AFRICAN AMERICAN BAHÁ'IS, RACE RELATIONS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BAHÁ'I COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES

### ABSTRACT

Bahá `u' llah's teachings emphasizing the oneness of the human family have always had a special appeal to African Americans with their long experiences with white racial discrimination at the hand of both the State and the Church. From their first exposure to the Bahá'i Faith during the 1890s, African Americans were attracted by the spirit of universality reflected in the writings of Bahá `u' llah.

During the 1890s, when the Bahá's Faith was first introduced to a small group of white Americans, a much smaller group of African Americans also were being swept up in this new universal Faith that promised to unite the world's peoples into one human family. Robert Turner, the African American butler of Phoebe Hearst, one of the early American Bahá'is and the mother of William Randolph Hearst, the famous publisher, was the first African American to become a Bahá'i. Turner's first exposure to the Bahá'i Faith occurred while he was listening to one of the first white American Bahá'is, Lua M. Getsinger, teaching the Bahá's Faith to his employer. Turner was so affected by these teachings that he pursued opportunities to hear more and joined the Bahá'i Faith around late 1898.

Turner was confirmed in his new faith in 1898 when he accompanied Mrs Hearst and her party as her butler on a trip to Palestine to visit `Abdu'l-Bahá, the spiritual head of the Bahá'i Faith. `Abdu'l-Bahá embraced Turner and gave a talk to the whites with obvious references to the African American butler: "We can all serve in the Cause of God. Peter was a fisherman, yet he accomplished most wonderful things; but the heart must be turned always toward God, no matter what the work is: this is the important thing; and then the power of God will work in us..." `Abdu'l-Bahá assured Turner that "... if he remained firm and steadfast until the end, he would be the door through which a whole race would enter the Kingdom." Turner remained a Bahá'i to the end of his life, and thus became the door through which thousands of African Americans entered the American Bahá'i community.

For several decades, a small but steady stream of African Americans passed through the "door" into the Bahá'i community opened by Turner, particularly African American women. Among the most impressive of these women was Mrs. Susie C. Steward, who became a Bahá'i in 1911 and was one of the first African American Bahá'is involved in raising funds for the building of the Bahá'i House of worship in Wilmette, Illinois.

The one African American Bahá'i who best exemplified the role of African Americans and race relations in the development of the Bahá'i community was a lawyer named Louise Gregory. As his biographer, Gayle Morrison, described him: "At the heart of the most challenging issues for the American Bahá'i community- the problems of obliterating racial prejudice—stands Louis G. Gregory. A highly regarded teacher, writer, and lecturer throughout the first half of the century, and the first black to serve on the national administrative body of the United States and Canada, Louise Gregory is a

major historical figure. Few blacks of his era were elected or appointed repeatedly to positions of national leadership in organizations with a white majority. None worked more tirelessly for the removal of racial prejudice.”

Gregory became a Baha’i in 1909 and soon after wrote ‘Abdu’l-Baha. He received a reply in which ‘Abdu’l -Baha presented him with one of the most difficult racial challenges even given to anyone in the Baha’i community in the United States. “ I hope that thou mayest become...the means whereby the whites and colored peoples shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the reality of humanity, that is the universal unity which is the oneness of the Kingdom of the human race, the basic harmony and the appearance of the bounty of the almighty.”

Louise Gregory accepted this challenge and, as a result, greatly contributed to the interracial development of the Baha’i community. As one of the first African American Baha’is in Washington D.C., Gregory had to endure the insults of a partially racially segregated Baha’i community.” As concerned as he was about the segregated practices of some white Baha’i, he did not allow them to dampen his spirit. He was encouraged by those white Baha’is who supported racially integrated meetings. .

If there was ever any doubt in the minds of Baha’is about the Baha’i teachings on racial unity and equality they were abruptly removed during ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s visit to the United States in 1912. In order to impress upon the Baha’i community in the United States the importance of interracial marriage as a reflection of the Baha’i belief in the oneness of the human race, ‘Abdu’l-Baha encouraged Louis Gregory and Louisa Mathew, an English Baha’i, to marry. This marriage was the first interracial marriage among the Baha’is in the United States.

‘Abdu’l-Baha’s uncompromising position on racial equality within the American Baha’i community, his demonstration of love and respect for African-Americans and his frank talks on the racial problems in the United States warmed their hearts and encouraged them in their new faith. Wherever he spoke, if there were blacks and whites in the audience, he praised them. When he spoke at Howard University, in Washington, in April, 1912, one of his companions reported: “...here, as elsewhere, when both white and colored people were present, ‘Abdu’l-Baha seemed happiest.” As he looked over the racially mixed audience at Howard, he remarked: today I am most happy, for I see here a gathering of the servants of God. I see white and black sitting together.”

After returning to Palestine, ‘Abdu’l-Baha arranged to set in motion conferences for the promotion of interracial unity. He gave the responsibility for arranging the first race amity conference to Mrs. Agnes Parsons, a wealthy white Baha’i in Washington D.C. The first race amity conference was held in 1921 and included prominent Black and White Americans. ‘Abdu’l-Baha sent a special message to this conference: “Say to this convention that never since the beginning of time has one more important been held. This convention stands for the oneness of humanity; it will become the cause of enlightenment of America. It will, if wisely managed and continued, check the deadly struggle between these races that otherwise will inevitably break out.”

For decades these Baha’i Race Amity and Race Unity conferences continued with a few short interruptions. They attracted African-Americans leaders and scholars, reinforced the faith of African-American Baha’is in the Baha’i teachings on interracial unity, and contributed to the development of interracial interaction within the American Baha’i community. These conferences were so important to African-American Baha’is

that when they were temporarily discontinued in 1925 and 1926, many probably lost interest in the Baha'i Faith. For example, Sadie Oglesby, an African-American Baha'i from Boston remarked at the 1927 Baha'i National Convention, that the Baha'i community was no longer attracting new African-American believers and was losing those who had once been interested in the Baha'i Faith. Racial prejudices among some white Baha'is towards African-American Baha'is added to the problem and impeded the development of the Baha'is community. In a December 1938 letter to the American Baha'i community, Shoghi Effendi wrote: "As to racial prejudice...it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Baha'i community at the present stage of its evolution."

Shoghi Effendi recognized the anguish African American Baha'is were experiencing. In a letter written on his behalf to Oglesby in February, 1942, he said that he was "well aware that the conditions within the ranks of the believers in respect to race is [sic] far from being as it should be. However, he feels very strongly that it presents a challenge to both white and colored believers." He gave the following advice to African American Baha'is: "...it is incumbent upon the [N]egro believers to rise above this great test which the attitudes of some of their white brethren may present. They must prove their innate equality not by words but by deeds. They must, Shoghi Effendi stressed, "accept the Cause of Baha'u'llah for the sake of the Cause, love it, and cling to it, teach it, and fight for it as their own Cause, forgetful of the shortcomings of others. Any other attitude is unworthy of their Faith."

Several generations of African-American Baha'is took this advice to heart and began playing key roles in the development of the Baha'i community. They participated in spreading the Baha'i message both at home and abroad; they were appointed to and elected to all areas of decision-making; and they helped pave the way for the emergence of the present Baha'i community, the most racially and culturally diverse religious community in the United States. To the American Baha'is great credit, these developments reflected a radical transformation of racial attitudes among a then predominantly white Baha'i community that for decades continuously elected African-Americans to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, its highest governing body.