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RELIGION

Baha'i doctrine attracts non-whites

By James S. Tinney

In many ways, Baha'is (pronounced bah-hi) seem to be ahead of the times. They preach a radical equality between men and women that has earned them persecution in Third World countries unwilling to give women full rights. And they not only proclaim racial equality and the end of prejudice as a lofty goal, they work to make it so.

Glenford Mitchell Magdalen Carney

While many Christians just talk about it, Baha'is do it. Consequently, this world faith which began in the 19th century in what is now Iran, has great appeal for those Black Americans who seek a truly international approach to religion that is perhaps the most racially integrated of any faith on American soil.

The Baha'i faith boasts that more than 30 percent of its members in the U.S. are Afro-American. Only one or two other denominations can make similar claims — among them, most notably, the Seventh Day Adventists. But the Baha'is additionally can claim that the remaining 70 percent is not mostly-white either. It is, instead, mostly composed of people of color and of Third World origin.

Take the chief governing body of the 100,000 adherents here in the U.S. This top-level administration, known as the National Spiritual Assembly, has nine members, all of whom jointly share equal rank. Their nationalities? They include an American Indian, an Asian-American, an Iranian — or Persian, as Baha'is are still wont to say — three white Americans and three Blacks.

Until last year, the entire work in this country was directed by another Black Baha'i member, Glenford Mitchell, who has since been elevated by popular vote to become a spiritual "servant" on the worldwide governance unit known as the International House of Justice. Mitchell, a Jamaican-born American citizen who taught at Howard University prior to serving 14 years of the National Spiritual Assembly, however, is not the first Black person at the Baha'is international headquarters in Haifa, Israel, where its founder Baha'u'llah was tortured and died a prisoner of the Turks in 1892.

He was preceded by Amoz Gibson, a Washington, D.C.-born educator who spent most of his adult life on American Indian reservations, an unusual sight for many to behold — a Black man devoted to full time improvement of the status of First Americans. But that is as typical of Baha'i followers as anything. They have a vision larger than concrete spaces and they regard the entire world as their home, not just a parish. They live out their lives as members of an international order that envisions the coming of one world government.

Baha'is may not number very many heads, as far as counting goes, but they are not newcomers to the religious scene. Take Dr. Wilma Brady, for example. A member of the faith who lives in Atlanta, Brady prides herself on the fact that she belongs to a four-generation family of Baha'is.

Not only were her mother and father converts to the faith (they joined in the '30s), but her son and grandchildren are also. Brady is one of the three Black members of the National Spiritual Assembly; her son, Dr. Robert Henderson of Atlanta, is another. In fact, this marks the first time that a mother-son combination has ever served together on that panel.

"In the beginning, it was a struggle to live up to the faith," she says. "But after a brief period of rebellion as a youth, I came back to the Baha'i faith at the age of 15. I couldn't stay away. I missed the freedom and liberty that comes from knowing who you are as a Black person. The Baha'i faith teaches you that — but never defines Blackness simply in reaction to some other racial or ethnic group."

For Brady, who has reared seven children, all of whom are also now practicing this religion, the Baha'i faith is especially important for Black children defining their own sense of identity, and for all Black people who seek to love themselves at the same time they love everyone else. "Little Black children in Baha'i families know who they are, and they realize that Black is a wonderful thing to be, but never in opposition to any other color."

Unlike some Eastern religions which seem to negate individuality and all race consciousness (and the Baha'i religion is unique in that it attempts to combine the best elements of all the major Eastern and Western religions), the Baha'i faith does not expect Black followers to lose a sense of heritage and racial pride in some kind of colorless integration.

"We believe in unity with diversity. We do not believe in uniformity," explains Brady. "If I have non-Black Baha'is in my home, I don't serve them a Caesar salad. I serve smothered chicken and collard greens. The richness of all the human family is valued."

Similarly, Brady believes that Baha'is are best equipped to deal with white people in truly mutual, self-respecting fashion. She says: "I didn't have to learn how to deal with white people, because growing up in a Baha'i home, I had been around white people, and people from every country, all of my life."

This national Baha'i figure sums up her sense of racial pride by saying, "I teach my little babies spirituals. I love the blues. I love being who I am. And it's all all right."

People join this religion for many reasons. And all kinds and sorts of people join. Even among Black Baha'is, there is no one kind of background that seems more attracted to the faith.

Barbara Eaton Bond, a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly in Washington, D.C., was a single parent, divorced, with four little children, when she decided to become a follower. For her, it was the writings of Baha'u'llah that attracted her, especially the two chief books by the founder: the Book of Laws and the Book of Certitude. "I stayed up half the night reading those books, even though I had to get up early the next morning to go to work."

Someone might get the impression that most Blacks who join represent a well-heeled middle-class with the built-in advantages of a good education. Not so, say Baha'is. On the other hand, there is something about the religion's emphasis on universal compulsory education — meaning everybody at all times must be a

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searcher for truth and a learner of God's progressive revelation — that brings people to a higher level of educational achievement that they might not have otherwise been motivated to attain.

Of course, this is attractive to both the formally education and the self-educated. No wonder, then, that famous Black Baha'i members include Robert Abbott, the founder of the Chicago Defender newspaper; Alain Locke, the first Black Rhodes scholar; Robert Hayden, the acclaimed poet; and Matthrew Bullock, a Harvard-trained lawyer and the first Black coach at any white college. Dizzy Gillespie is also a Baha'i.

Robert Henderson **Alberta Deas**

But many just-as-important but unknown farmers and sharecroppers and poor people, both rural and urban, have also joined. The success of this religion in the state of South Carolina, for instance, is due to the large following among Black rural dwellers. Probably there are more Black Baha'is in South Carolina, followed by Georgia, than anywhere in the nation.

Much of the credit for the Carolina growth belongs to Alberta Deas, who went away to get an education and then returned to "dig out" and "build up" the Baha'i faith in her home area. Deas now heads the Louis Gregory Institute in Hemingway, S.C., an adult-education school that is named after a Black man and operated primarily by Blacks, although persons of all races attend. The Baha'i school was started in 1972.

"My grandfather was an AME minister," Deas states, "and my father was a deacon in the church for 58 years. Now he too is a Baha'i." Not only him, but 35 other members of Deas' family.

Operating with a largely volunteer staff, and doing the legwork herself, traveling every day from one small Carolina town to another, Deas has almost singlehandedly carved out the territory for her religion. Her conversion to this religion came after years of searching and trying first the Baptist, then the Presbyterian, and eventually the Episcopalian denominations. "I've been a searcher all of my life," she stresses. But now she believes she has found what she was looking for.

Some compare her dedication and zeal to none other than the man for whom her school is named. Louis Gregory was the first Black American to convert to the faith in 1922. A Fisk graduate, he earned a Howard law degree and then went to work for the Treasury Department before finally traveling to Egypt to meet the son of the founder of the Baha'i faith. He was also one of the nine original members of the very first National Spiritual Assembly.

Today, Black members of the Baha'i religion are very much in the news in South Carolina. Both whites and even some Blacks steeped in traditionalism cannot understand why the governor of the state has appointed a Black Baha'i named Alonzo Nesmith to the board of trustees of the Citadel College — an elite, private military school. At 26, he is also the youngest board member ever. But Baha'is attract the attention and admiration of nearly everyone who comes in contact with them.

Everyone may not agree with their estimation of Jesus Christ —they say he was one of a line of prophets, and not the son of God in a unique sense of incarnation. But no one can gainsay their modeling of a new world order that puts even the United Nations to shame.

This is probably the only church — perhaps the only group of any kind — that prohibits campaigning for office, and relies exclusively on a popular vote without nominations. It is also the only one, as far as is known, that dictates that whenever there is a tie between two candidates, the election always goes to the non-white person if there is one.

It's a good rule. And it works for the Baha'is. It's the kind of policy that attracted people like Dr. Magdalene Carney, who had spent the '60s coordinating desegregation struggles in Canton, Mississippi. A few days ago, Carney went to Israel where she is now an "international counselor" (or world representative) for the religion. For her, the Baha'i insistence that all its members eliminate prejudice of all kinds, both in their own lives and in society, forms a line of continuity with her former civil rights activities.

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