

**Abstract:** The American Baha'i community has been focused on activism for racial unity and civil rights for some 100 years. This paper attempts to locate the moment when this teaching became active and important in Baha'i history.

## **‘Abdu’l-Baha’s Response to Racism in the United States, 1912**

*draft*

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2025

The Baha'i Faith has its roots in Islam, originating in Iran as an offshoot of Shi'ism in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It has now developed into a world religion which is completely independent of its Islamic origins. Of course, the religion has changed and developed from the start. Beginning in 1844, Baha'i history began with the claim of a Shirazi merchant, Sayyid ‘Ali Muhammad (1819-1850), known as The Bab, to have fulfilled Shi'i prophecies concerning the return of the Imam Mehdi, the promised Qa'im. At that time, Babis (and later Baha'is) have been labeled as heretics by the orthodox Muslim clergy and expelled from the Islamic community. Eventually, the Bab himself was executed in 1850, by order of fatwas of Shi'i clerics, in the city of Tabriz. Babis were persecuted and thousands were massacred.

The Babi religion was revived and reinterpreted by Mirza Husayn-‘Ali Nuri (1817-1892), a Persian nobleman who became known as Baha'u'llah. From exile in Ottoman territories from 1863 until his death in 1892, he reshaped the Babi teachings into the Baha'i Faith. He appointed his son, Abbas Effendi, known as

‘Abdu’l-Baha (Servant of Baha), as his successor and the interpreter of his teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Baha expanded and elucidated the teachings of his father until his death in 1921. He visited Europe and America between 1911 and 1913, where he spread the Baha’i teachings to the West and adapted them to a European and American audience. Finally, he appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1898-1957), to be the Guardian of the Baha’i Faith and its head for life. After that, the Baha’i community has been governed by elected councils of believers.

Baha’is now claim some five million adherents worldwide, with about 180,000 members in the United States. There are about one million Baha’is in Africa, two million Baha’is in India, and somewhere less than 300,000 in Iran, the land of its birth. The rest are scattered across the world.

The teaching of the Baha’i Faith owe a great deal to their Islamic roots. The fundamental beliefs in one God, who is unknowable; one humanity; and one religion revealed by God are almost identical. Baha’is also accept the Qur’an as a holy book inspired by God, and believe in the idea of a succession of Prophets sent by God to guide humanity, all of whom received divine revelation. Baha’i scripture and theology rely heavily on Sufi mysticism and Sufi poetic forms. Of course, there are also profound differences, since Baha’is believe that a new revelation has occurred and two Prophets were sent by God after Muhammad, namely The Bab and Baha’u’llah. The Baha’i Prophets annulled the Shari’a *tout court*, and Baha’u’llah refused to create a new one, saying that his mission was not to establish a Shari’a, but to guide humanity towards its highest goals. Baha’u’llah also taught the divine origins of all religions, and the legitimacy and holiness of all sacred scriptures—Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.

In fact, the central Baha’i teaching of the unity of humankind was initially articulated by Baha’u’llah in terms of the unity of all religions. Baha’u’llah wrote:

O well-beloved ones! 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.<sup>1</sup>

Referring to Shi'i laws and beliefs that non-believers are unclean (*najes*), Baha'u'llah wrote:

'Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.' Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, Baha'u'llah abolished the idea of ritual "uncleanliness" (*bajes*) entirely from his religion. In the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, his Most Holy Book, he states;

God hath, . . . as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of "uncleanness." whereby divers things and peoples have been held to be impure. He, of a certainty, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous. Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification . . .<sup>3</sup>

'Abdu'l-Baha continued to promulgate these teachings during his journeys to Europe and America. But it was not until his visit to the United States in 1912, and specifically to Washington, D.C., that in this context, these teachings were to take on the specific character of the urgency of eliminating racial prejudice between blacks and whites. Before that, Baha'u'llah's call for universal fellowship had remained just that, a universal call. In the context of Muslim societies, where

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<sup>1</sup> Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, K75, p. 47.

the Baha'i Faith had begun, this was primarily understood as a call to unity among nations and the followers of all religions.

In 1911, for example, before 'Abdu'l-Baha's trip to America, and while he was staying in Britain, one of the foremost scholars of the Baha'i community, Mirza Abu'l-Fadl wrote a short treatise in answer to the attack on the Baha'i religion published in Britain by a fundamentalist Christian minister. Abu'l-Fadl's treatise was highly praised by 'Abdu'l-Baha, who ordered that it should be translated and published by Baha'is, and it was in 1912. In it, Abu'l-Fadl lists nine basic teachings of the Baha'i Faith:

- 1, the end of divisions based on religious traditions;
2. prohibition of disagreements caused by individual interpretation of the holy scriptures;
3. acceptance of all views and doctrines concerning the station of the Manifestation of God;
4. abolition of slavery;
5. the obligation to engage in some trade or profession;
6. universal compulsory education for both sexes;
7. the absolute prohibition of cursing and execration;
8. outlawing carrying firearms, except in times of necessity; and
9. the establishment of the House of Justice and the institution of democratic, constitutional government.

Then, Abu'l-Fadl adds a tenth principle: the broad distribution of wealth throughout society.

There is no reference to racism or to racial prejudice in this list. The first three of the principles, plus #7, about cursing, refer to the end of religious disputes and divisions.

‘Abdu’l-Baha’s first public address to a Western audience was given at a church in London, City Temple, on September 10, 1911, where he proclaimed the Baha’i message. After announcing, in symbolic language, the coming of a new Revelation from God. ‘Abdu’l-Baha said:

The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion. War shall cease between nations, and by the will of God the Most Great Peace shall come; the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers. . . . therefore the East and the West will understand each other and reverence each other, and embrace like long-parted lovers who have found each other. There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one. Let us worship Him, and give praise for all His great Prophets and Messengers who have manifested His brightness and glory.<sup>4</sup>

This general, and universal call was well received in London. But during ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s tour of the United States, it would become more focused—not on the reconciliation of Eastern and Western civilizations—but on healing the divisions between black and white and the elimination of racial prejudices. This anti-racist project would occupy center stage in the American Baha’i community for the next 100 years.

‘Abdu’l-Baha, of course, had been aware of the problem of racial prejudice in the United States before his American journey. American racial attitudes were commonly known. A prominent black Baha’i, Louis Gregory, had visited ‘Abdu’l-Baha in 1911, well before the journey to America, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had questioned him closely about the racial situation in America.<sup>5</sup> He had instructed the Baha’is that all of their meetings should be racially integrated and that they should promote

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<sup>4</sup> *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Londdon*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison, *To Move the World*, p.

interracial marriage as a solution to the race problem.<sup>6</sup> But it was only upon his arrival in America, and specifically during his visit to Washington, D.C., that he became aware of the full extent of American racism. Juliet Thompson, a prominent New York Baha'i, remarked on 'Abdu'l-Baha's impressions of his D.C. trip after his return to her city:

He had been horrified in Washington by the prejudice against the Negroes. "What does it matter," He asked, "if the skin of a man is black, white, yellow, pink, or green? In this respect, the animals show more intelligence than man. Black sheep and white sheep, white doves and blue do not quarrel because of difference of color."<sup>7</sup>

African American Baha'is had been an integral part of the small Washington, D.C., Baha'i circle for some time. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit, a black newspaper noted that: "[The Baha'i] white devotees, even in this prejudice-ridden community, refuse to draw the color line. The informal meetings, held in the fashionable mansions of the cultured society in Sheridan Circle, Dupont Circle, Connecticut and Massachusetts Avenues, have been open to Negroes on terms of absolute equality."<sup>8</sup>

In Washington, D.C., the black Baha'is managed to arrange for 'Abdu'l-Baha to speak to a number of Negro audiences, including, an African American literary society in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, students and faculty at Howard University, the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and various Baha'i gatherings. It was here that 'Abdu'l-

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<sup>6</sup> *Baha'I World Faith*, p. 359.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Diary*, 284.

<sup>8</sup> *The Washington Bee* April 27, 1912. That was not absolutely true. The white Baha'is in Washington remained divided on the question of racial integration. Some meetings remained all white. (See Morrison, *To Move the World*, pp.

Baha's preaching against racism became explicit. For example, he began his address at Howard University with these words:

Today I am most happy, for I see here a gathering of the servants of God. I see white and black sitting together. There are no whites and blacks before God. All colors are one, and that is the color of servitude to God. Scent and color are not important. The heart is important. If the heart is pure, white or black or any color makes no difference. God does not look at colors; He looks at the hearts. He whose heart is pure is better. He whose character is better is more pleasing. He who turns more to the Abha Kingdom is more advanced.<sup>9</sup>

Later, in a talk given in Montreal, 'Abdu'l-Baha continued with this theme, insisting that the idea of race was a misplaced social construct:

. . . racial assumption and distinction are nothing but superstition. . . . All these in the presence of God are equal; they are of one race and creation; God did not make these divisions. These distinctions have had their origin in man himself. Therefore, as they are against the plan and purpose of reality, they are false and imaginary. We are of one physical race, even as we are of one physical plan of material body -- each endowed with two eyes, two ears, one head, two feet.<sup>10</sup>

During his travels in America, 'Abdu'l-Baha gave hundreds and addresses and public talks. While he continued to preach his father's universal message, he repeatedly focused his attention on the racial problem in America. He even urged Louis Gregory, a black Baha'i, and Louisa Matthews, a white English Baha'i, to marry each other during his American tour, which they did at 'Abdu'l-Baha's insistence. Of course, this was an almost unthinkable rupture of social convention in America in

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<sup>9</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

1912. After ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s journey, however, the American Baha’is almost became notorious for their advocacy of interracial marriage. From 1912 on, activism for racial justice became a regular part of Baha’i activities in the United States.

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