

# **The Bahá'í Faith and African American History**

## **Creating Racial and Religious Diversity**

Edited by Loni Bramson

Introduction by Loni Bramson

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# Introduction

Loni Bramson

When the American Academy of Religion launched a new Bahá'í Studies Unit in 2016, the unit's steering committee decided that the obvious subject choice for an inaugural panel discussion at the Academy's subsequent annual meeting in San Antonio was "The Most Challenging Issue: Race and Religion in the Bahá'í Community."<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the doctrines, practices, and theology of the Bahá'í Faith is the principle of the oneness of humanity. The religion's essential aim, enunciated by its founder, Bahá'u'lláh, in the second half of the nineteenth century, is the establishment of a just and peaceful global civilization characterized by universal human rights and freedom from prejudices of all kinds. Within the Bahá'í doctrine of the oneness of humanity, racism is considered to be a baneful evil.<sup>2</sup> Virtually since the moment of its arrival in North America around 1900, a major theme in the development of the Bahá'í Faith in the United States has been the confrontation of a new world religion explicitly grounded in human equality and solidarity with the ideologies, structures, and practices of white supremacy. Therefore, this was a logical topic for the first panel discussion, and in the context of the United States' continuing racial conflict, an all too timely one with which to start.

Unfortunately, not all those who were interested in participating were able to make it to San Antonio. In addition, two excellent papers that were delivered at the panel were, for logistical reasons, not ready for publication. This volume, then, includes versions of three papers from the panel plus a number of others that are thematically related but were assembled afterwards. The authors hope that this book will help both to crystallize the place of the Bahá'í Faith in the broader scholarship on race and religion in modern America and to spur further research on the many intersections between Bahá'í and African American history.

## THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH: ORIGINS AND SCOPE

Although a comprehensive overview of the Bahá'í Faith is outside the purview of this volume, some background information needs to be provided at the onset for readers who are new to its study. Bahá'í history starts with Sayyid 'Alí Muhammad Shirázi (1819–1850), who took the title of the Báb.<sup>3</sup> He declared himself a messenger or manifestation of God<sup>4</sup> in Iran in 1844, a controversial claim that soon resulted in a massive effort on the part of the government and religious leaders in Iran to exterminate his religion. The Báb's teachings were revolutionary in Persia because he abrogated Islamic law and prophesied another manifestation of God would soon follow. The Báb was executed and his followers viciously persecuted.

Among the Báb's followers was Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí Núrí (1817–1892), who came to be called Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>5</sup> He was born into a family of nobility and wealth in Iran. Although born in luxury, Bahá'u'lláh chose to become a follower of the Báb despite the risks involved. Iranian religious and government leaders considered the Bábí religion a threat to their power, and when there was an attempt on the life of the Shah, Bahá'u'lláh became a victim of the pogrom that followed and that engulfed the real and perceived opponents of the Shah. Bahá'u'lláh was thrown into a notorious prison and weighed down in chains for months. When he was freed, it was on condition of agreeing to an exile to Baghdad; Bahá'u'lláh and his family were sent there on foot. This exile was the first of several that finally ended in the prison-city of Akko (in present-day Israel). Bahá'u'lláh is buried in the compound of the house where he died, now a place of pilgrimage for Bahá'ís.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were born and raised in a violent world in which slavery and other forms of forced labor, the oppression of women, and despotism were commonplace. Yet, their writings hold out a startling vision of spiritual and social transformation in which justice, equity, and kindness become the ruling principles in human affairs. While the Báb did not explicitly forbid slavery during his short ministry, when Bahá'u'lláh wrote his book of laws (around 1873), he firmly declared that slavery was wrong.<sup>6</sup> Further in his book of laws, he likens humanity to a human body, "Be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body."<sup>7</sup> In a letter he sent to Napoleon III, Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body."<sup>8</sup> One of his most well-known statements is "Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean."<sup>9</sup>

The third central figure in the Bahá'í Faith is 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, whom he appointed as his successor and head of the Bahá'í community in his Will and Testament (*Kitáb-i-'Ahd*).<sup>10</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá has a particularly important place in this volume because it was during

the period of his leadership that the religion arrived in the United States and developed its initial stance toward American racism. His earliest years were spent in privilege, but once his father became a follower of the Bábí religion, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life quickly turned to one of hardship. When describing his childhood, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recalls being chased and bullied because of his Bábí connections, and later he shared Bahá’u’lláh’s imprisonment and exile. This suffering helped mold him into a man of compassion and loving-kindness. As an adult, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became his father’s most important assistant. Bahá’ís consider him to be the perfect exemplar of Bahá’í teachings and doctrines, and of how to live a Bahá’í life.<sup>11</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not hold a prophetic station. Rather, he was the “center” of the covenant established by Bahá’u’lláh with his followers. In this capacity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had the authority to interpret the religion’s scriptures, protect the unity of the community, and provide for its growth and establishment around the world. A major goal for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the initial development of democratically elected lay councils, as the Bahá’í Faith has no clergy. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also worked to deepen the Bahá’ís’ understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on the oneness of humanity and its profound implications, primarily through voluminous correspondence to followers explaining the Bahá’í teachings, interacting with pilgrims who visited him in Akko and Haifa, and sending erudite Persian Bahá’ís where needed to clarify key concepts. In this way, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá helped the Bahá’ís better understand Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on race relations.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s most memorable elaborations of the Bahá’í approach to race relations came during an eight-month visit to the United States, part of a three-year extended journey to Egypt, Europe, and North America, which he undertook after being released from prison in Akko following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. It was during his time in the United States that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was able to elaborate in detail the Bahá’í approach to race relations. His visit in the United States came at an important moment in African American history, what the Howard University historian Rayford Logan later famously termed the “Nadir of the Negro.” Across the South, where the vast majority of African Americans lived, Reconstruction was a dead letter, and the Jim Crow system severely restricted blacks’ social, political, economic, and educational opportunities. When they fled the South, first as a trickle and then a flood with the outbreak of World War I, discrimination and mob violence frequently greeted them. In academia and in popular culture, on the street and in the halls of Congress, white supremacy was the order of the day. The NAACP had been founded in 1909, and the National Urban League, in 1910, shortly before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit. The year after his visit, ironically, the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, President Woodrow Wilson officially segregated federal workplaces. In 1915, the Ku Klux

Klan was reborn in response to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. The contrast could not have been sharper.

While in the United States, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not just talk about race amity. He made a point of demonstrating what he thought it should look like in public and private interactions and in the press. This included holding integrated meetings in such rigidly segregated cities as Chicago and Washington, DC. 'Abdu'l-Bahá directly contradicted the reigning ideology of white racial superiority; openly promoted interracial marriage; and demonstrated such uncommon courtesy and love toward individual African Americans that they and their white counterparts were astonished.

Considerably more research is needed on how 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit may have affected the course of American race relations. Memoirs of the people who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá are still being explored to fully understand how he helped the American Bahá'ís better understand the importance of interracial harmony. Two important ones were written by women mentioned in this book, Agnes Parsons and Juliet Thompson.<sup>12</sup> An important collection of his talks while in North America, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, clearly shows his consistent thematic emphasis on the oneness of humanity.<sup>13</sup> Even a cursory review of press coverage and of his interactions with prominent African Americans indicates that the visit is a significant and under-studied event in early twentieth-century race relations.<sup>14</sup>

Deep academic analysis is still not available related to how 'Abdu'l-Bahá affected the course of race relations through his letters and visiting pilgrims. His approach was to promote personal, social, and spiritual transformation through the teachings of his father. Buck's chapter, "The Bahá'í 'Pupil of the Eye' Metaphor," discusses this, as does Mike McMullen's, "Race Unity Efforts among American Bahá'ís: Institutionalized Tools and Empirical Evidence." Gwen Etter-Lewis's chapter, "The Most Challenging Issue Revisited: Black Women's Perspectives on Race and Gender in the Bahá'í Faith," also analyzes this.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings and the record of his public talks are replete with references to the oneness of humanity, including the imperative need to abandon all prejudices and to establish justice. For example, he wrote, "In every Dispensation . . . the light of Divine Guidance has been focused on one central theme. . . . In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God, and the distinguishing feature of His Law, is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind."<sup>15</sup> To accomplish this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá continually advised the whites and blacks in the United States to associate together, remove mistrust and apprehension, and cooperate for the common good: "Endeavor that the black and the white may gather in one meeting place, and with the utmost love, fraternally associate with each other,

so that quarrels and strife may vanish from among the white and the black.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá counseled, “If it be possible, gather together these two races—black and white—into one Assembly, and create such a love in the hearts that they shall not only unite, but blend into one reality. Know thou of a certainty that as a result differences and disputes between black and white will be totally abolished.”<sup>17</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s successor as head of the Bahá’í Faith was Shoghi Effendi Rabbaní (1897–1957), his eldest grandson. In his Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed Shoghi Effendi, as he is known, Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith.<sup>18</sup> Shoghi Effendi was a wide-ranging traveler during his lifetime: in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. His writings demonstrate political astuteness and a passion for uniting the races. Based on the terms in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, he further developed the handful of nascent Bahá’í administrative bodies into a worldwide system of elected local and national councils (termed spiritual assemblies).

Once the basic administrative system was in place, Shoghi Effendi introduced a series of multi-year plans to expand the geographic scope and to diversify the ethnic and racial makeup of the Bahá’í community. He spearheaded the Bahá’í Faith’s expansion into all parts of North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Loni Bramson’s chapter, “‘The Most Vital and Challenging Issue’: The Bahá’í Faith’s Efforts to Improve Race Relations, 1922–1936,” advances analysis on how Shoghi Effendi guided Bahá’ís and Bahá’í institutions in the United States to improve race relations within the Bahá’í community, further diversify its membership, and attempt to influence public discourse on race. After World War II, Shoghi Effendi detailed plans to take the Bahá’í Faith further into Europe and Africa. He established a massive Ten Year Crusade (1953–1963) to spread the religion to the remaining countries of the world. From the beginning of the Bahá’í Faith until 1921, Bahá’ís resided in thirty-five countries and territories. By 1957, that number had increased to more than 200. Shoghi Effendi kept track of the numbers of different races and ethnic groups from around the world included in the Bahá’í community, and any others that had been contacted. He joyfully shared the news with the Bahá’ís when there was an increase in the number of racial and ethnic groups represented within Bahá’í membership.<sup>19</sup> He used *The Bahá’í World*, a series of volumes detailing the progress of the Bahá’í Faith, telegrams, and letters to describe to the Bahá’ís his pride in their achievements and explain why such diversity and global diffusion was important. For Shoghi Effendi, each increase in the Bahá’í community’s diversity was a further step in a world-historical process in which all peoples would contribute to the building of a new global civilization.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE: SHOGHI EFFENDI AND *THE ADVENT OF DIVINE JUSTICE*

In 1931, Shoghi Effendi wrote to all Bahá'ís in a letter eventually called “The Goal of a New World Order”:

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men. . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society.<sup>20</sup>

While the importance of promoting interracial fellowship figured prominently in Shoghi Effendi's guidance to the North American Bahá'ís from early on in his tenure as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, his seminal treatment of the subject came in 1938 with a book-length letter published as *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Due to its enduring importance in shaping the American Bahá'í community's stance toward race, it is frequently cited by the authors of this volume. For ease of reference, a summary is provided here. The pertinent section of the book begins with:

As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution.<sup>21</sup>

Shoghi Effendi calls the Bahá'ís to action and clearly indicates that he is not satisfied with how they have been working for race unity up to that point:

The ceaseless exertions which this issue of paramount importance calls for, the sacrifices it must impose, the care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates, invest this problem, which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily resolved, with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated.<sup>22</sup>

Shoghi Effendi states that both blacks and whites must actively participate in the effort to achieve racial harmony. Both races are responsible to ensure its implementation. Referring to the first Seven Year Plan for the religion's diffusion throughout the Western Hemisphere, he indicates that no success is possible without progress in this field of endeavor:

White and Negro, high and low, young and old, whether newly converted to the Faith or not, all who stand identified with it must participate in, and lend their

assistance, each according to his or her capacity, experience, and opportunities, to the common task of fulfilling the instructions, realizing the hopes, and following the example, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whether colored or noncolored, neither race has the right, or can conscientiously claim, to be regarded as absolved from such an obligation, as having realized such hopes, or having faithfully followed such an example. A long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls, still remains untraveled, both by the white and the Negro exponents of the redeeming Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. On the distance they cover, and the manner in which they travel that road, must depend, to an extent which few among them can imagine, the operation of those intangible influences which are indispensable to the spiritual triumph of the American believers and the material success of their newly launched enterprise.<sup>23</sup>

Shoghi Effendi continues by reminding the Bahá'ís of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who through his very being demonstrated how one should think, act, and behave in order to implement interracial harmony. The Bahá'í standard is high and grounded in love for everyone. However, this love is to be demonstrated through personal actions:

Let them call to mind, fearlessly and determinedly, the example and conduct of 'Abdu'l-Bahá while in their midst. Let them remember His courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship, His contempt for and impatience of criticism, tempered by His tact and wisdom. Let them revive and perpetuate the memory of those unforgettable and historic episodes and occasions on which He so strikingly demonstrated His keen sense of justice, His spontaneous sympathy for the downtrodden, His ever-abiding sense of the oneness of the human race, His overflowing love for its members, and His displeasure with those who dared to flout His wishes, to deride His methods, to challenge His principles, or to nullify His acts.<sup>24</sup>

Shoghi Effendi then, in some of the strongest language in the Bahá'í writings, clearly states that to be a Bahá'í means to actively work to eliminate prejudice, discrimination, all forms of injustice, and to resist all social and public pressures:

To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority, is a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. The consciousness of any division or cleavage in its ranks is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals. Once its members have fully recognized the claim of its Author, and, by identifying themselves with its Administrative Order, accepted unreservedly the principles and laws embodied in its teachings, every differentiation of class, creed, or color must automatically be obliterated, and never be allowed, under any pretext, and however great the pressure of events or of public opinion, to reassert itself.<sup>25</sup>

The only discrimination allowed, Shoghi Effendi continues, is what can be called the Bahá'í version of affirmative action. Still today, when there are elections for Bahá'í spiritual assemblies, guidelines based on the following section of the extract from *The Advent of Divine Justice* are used to encourage the broadest possible representation on Bahá'í elected and appointed bodies in order to encourage minorities, enable them to contribute fully to the community's governance, and serve as an example of solidarity and unity to the world. What is also interesting in this passage is the call for the Bahá'ís to pay attention so that those individuals from a minority who are already qualified are elected and appointed to various positions. Diversity at all levels is in the best interest of society:

If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise. Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community. In the light of this principle, and bearing in mind the extreme desirability of having the minority elements participate and share responsibility in the conduct of Bahá'í activity, it should be the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible. The adoption of such a course, and faithful adherence to it, would not only be a source of inspiration and encouragement to those elements that are numerically small and inadequately represented, but would demonstrate to the world at large the universality and representative character of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and the freedom of His followers from the taint of those prejudices which have already wrought such havoc in the domestic affairs, as well as the foreign relationships, of the nations.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the specific composition of the Bahá'í community's administrative bodies, Shoghi Effendi counsels the Bahá'ís to demonstrate freedom from prejudice in every aspect of their lives, both individually and collectively,

among themselves and in their interactions with society at large. In the context of widespread racial segregation in housing, schools, and public service facilities of all kinds, he says that they should actively cultivate interracial fellowship and cooperation, whatever their backgrounds or personal inclinations, and in all parts of the country.

Freedom from racial prejudice, in any of its forms, should, at such a time as this when an increasingly large section of the human race is falling a victim to its devastating ferocity, be adopted as the watchword of the entire body of the American believers, in whichever state they reside, in whatever circles they move, whatever their age, traditions, tastes, and habits. It should be consistently demonstrated in every phase of their activity and life, whether in the Bahá'í community or outside it, in public or in private, formally as well as informally, individually as well as in their official capacity as organized groups, committees and Assemblies. It should be deliberately cultivated through the various and everyday opportunities, no matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds, their Bahá'í meetings, conferences, conventions, summer schools and Assemblies. It should, above all else, become the keynote of the policy of that august body which, in its capacity as the national representative, and the director and coordinator of the affairs of the community, must set the example, and facilitate the application of such a vital principle to the lives and activities of those whose interests it safeguards and represents.<sup>27</sup>

Shoghi Effendi did not underestimate the difficulties inherent in attempting the eradication of prejudice from all aspects of one's life, the effort to break free from the ideologies and structures of white supremacy, and the creation of an alternative social space along completely different lines from what existed in society. He makes it clear that Bahá'ís have no choice, and repeats 'Abdu'l-Bahá's warning that the fate of the nation rests in no small part on their efforts. Racism is evil:

A tremendous effort is required by both races if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. Casting away once and for all the fallacious doctrine of racial superiority, with all its attendant evils, confusion, and miseries, and welcoming and encouraging the intermixture of races, and tearing down the barriers that now divide them, they should each endeavor, day and night, to fulfill their particular responsibilities in the common task which so urgently faces them. Let them, while each is attempting to contribute its share to the solution of this perplexing problem, call to mind the warnings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and visualize, while there is yet time, the dire consequences that must follow if this challenging and unhappy situation that faces the entire American nation is not definitely remedied.<sup>28</sup>

Shoghi Effendi ends this section in *The Advent of Divine Justice* on racism and how to eliminate it with specific instructions for whites and blacks, based on their respective positions in an unjust social order. He explains that ultimately it is their joint responsibilities to build an interracial religious fellowship such as the country has never before seen:

Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds. Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part, show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds. Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved. Let neither think that they can wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith. Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country. Let them rather believe, and be firmly convinced, that on their mutual understanding, their amity, and sustained cooperation, must depend, more than on any other force or organization operating outside the circle of their Faith, the deflection of that dangerous course so greatly feared by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the materialization of the hopes He cherished for their joint contribution to the fulfillment of that country’s glorious destiny.<sup>29</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS

When Shoghi Effendi died in 1957, the Bahá’í community had nearly completed the effort necessary to establish the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council that Bahá’u’lláh had ordained and upon which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had elaborated as the supreme authority in the Bahá’í Faith. Since 1963, this worldwide administrative body of the Bahá’í Faith is elected by the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies around the world, without nominations or campaigning, and is headquartered in Haifa,

Israel. Virtually since its establishment, the Universal House of Justice has continued Shoghi Effendi's pattern of global propagation plans. Beginning with a Nine Year Plan (1964–1973), these plans resulted in dramatic growth of the worldwide Bahá'í population, especially in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific region.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the Universal House of Justice also continued Shoghi Effendi's emphasis on establishing interracial harmony. In 1985, for example, it wrote a widely distributed open letter to the peoples of the world entitled *The Promise of World Peace*. In it the House of Justice identifies racism as an impediment to global peace and justice:

Racism, one of the most baneful and persistent evils, is a major barrier to peace. Its practice perpetrates too outrageous a violation of the dignity of human beings to be countenanced under any pretext. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if this problem is to be overcome.<sup>31</sup>

In the mid-1990s, following decades of experimentation in diverse parts of the world where the Bahá'í Faith had experienced large-scale growth, the Universal House of Justice formalized a system of grassroots community education called the “training institute.” Its goal is to empower growing contingents of people to become protagonists of the spiritual, social, and intellectual development of their communities. Through the study of a series of books that foster learning through action, individuals develop the skills, knowledge, and spiritual insights to engage in personal and social transformation, hold devotional meetings, and organize children's classes focused on moral and spiritual development. Another realm of service is mentoring middle schoolers through junior youth groups that raise, through study and acts of service, the participants' understanding of community service, their leadership skills, their ability in verbal and written expression, and their capacity to be agents of change. A process of study, consultation, action, and reflection helps individuals and communities advance systematically, to learn step by step within the reality of their own circumstances, to overcome obstacles that arise, and to increase their unity of vision.<sup>32</sup> The Universal House of Justice explains that when these training and community-building activities are highly advanced, they “will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.”<sup>33</sup> June Manning Thomas's chapter, “Race, Place, and Clusters: Current Vision and Possible Strategies,” using Detroit as an example, examines how this new Bahá'í framework for action can confront patterns of race and class segregation and discrimination in United States' cities.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The chapters in this book span much of the Bahá'í history described above. The first chapter by Christopher Buck, "The Bahá'í 'Pupil of the Eye' Metaphor: Promoting Ideal Race Relations in Jim Crow America," focuses on the Bahá'í metaphor used by Bahá'u'lláh that black people are like the pupil of the eye; as the pupil channels the light of the sun, people of African descent channel the light of the spirit. Buck describes the people who received letters from 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which he employed this metaphor and analyzes its spiritual significance. This provides initial insight into how African Americans were accepted in the emerging American Bahá'í community at the turn of the twentieth century.

The second chapter, Loni Bramson's "'The Most Vital and Challenging Issue': The Bahá'í Faith's Efforts to Improve Race Relations, 1922–1936," helps to provide the context for Alain Locke's philosophy by exploring Bahá'í race relations work during the period when Locke was formulating his theories. She examines the efforts of the early American Bahá'ís to understand the Bahá'í Faith's teachings on the elimination of prejudices, and their sometimes audacious and radical efforts to implement them. While the chapter does not directly examine Locke, a prominent African American philosopher known as the "dean" of the Harlem Renaissance, it does explore the Bahá'í efforts to improve race relations in which he was involved. This provides important context for understanding Locke's philosophy. Locke was actively involved in the Bahá'í "race amity" efforts, and to not include this as a direct influence in the analysis of his philosophy is curious.

In the third chapter of the book, "Alain Locke on Race, Religion, and the Bahá'í Faith," Christopher Buck examines Locke and his work more directly. The bulk of the scholarship on Locke ignores the fact that he was an active member of the Bahá'í Faith. Buck examines Locke's views on race and religion, and on the Bahá'í Faith in this context. He concludes that one cannot understand Locke's position on democracy without understanding his Bahá'í conviction.

The fourth chapter, "The Most Challenging Issue Revisited: African American Bahá'í Women and the Advancement of Race and Gender Equality, 1899–1943," by Gwen Etter-Lewis, specifically focuses on Bahá'í African American women. She examines intersectionality in the context of religion, race, and gender. Etter-Lewis discusses how these Bahá'í women's religious belief helped them navigate racism and sexism. Her chapter helps bring forth activism that has not yet been recognized. Along with the first chapter by Buck and the one by Mike McMullen, Etter-Lewis's chapter provides direct analysis of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to fostering interracial unity and justice.

The fifth chapter, Louis Venters's "Hand in Hand: Race, Identity, and Community Development among South Carolina's Bahá'ís, 1973–1979," adapted from a forthcoming monograph, examines the challenges and opportunities that presented themselves when thousands of people, mostly rural African Americans, embraced the new religion in South Carolina during the 1970s. Venters posits that the growth in South Carolina, part of the general shift in Bahá'í population toward the global South beginning in the 1960s, increasingly brought African Americans to the forefront of Bahá'í education, administration, and culture in the state. At the same time, it precipitated important changes in the structure and priorities of the Bahá'í community at the national level, representing a significant advance in implementing Shoghi Effendi's guidance in *The Advent of Divine Justice*.<sup>34</sup>

The sixth chapter, "Race Unity Efforts among American Bahá'ís: Institutionalized Tools and Empirical Evidence" by Mike McMullen, provides persuasive evidence that the many decades of Bahá'í involvement in improving race relations has borne fruit, at least within their own local communities. That data upon which the chapter draws comes from McMullen's role as the Bahá'í lead sociologist for the Faith Communities Today project, the goal of which is to study the reality of religious life in a wide variety of congregations in multiple religious faith traditions. McMullen also notes the continuing influence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the United States on contemporary Bahá'í efforts to combat white supremacy and eliminate prejudice from their personal and collective lives.

June Manning Thomas's chapter, "Race, Place, and Clusters: Current Vision and Possible Strategies," previously published in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, examines how the Bahá'ís have divided the planet into "clusters," a system of small, manageable units for growth and transformation, and how the training institute works within a cluster to overcome racism. The courses of the training institute each help develop capacity in individuals to take charge of their own development and, collaboratively, that of their environment.<sup>35</sup> She reviews current understanding of the importance of place-based community building for Bahá'ís and their friends, in neighborhoods and villages, and then describes one potential barrier for a religion devoted to racial unity: the racially segmented geography of many metropolitan areas. As Thomas points out, the Universal House of Justice sees the training institute as a sturdy solution to many problems including racial unity, and this chapter explains how this might be possible, even in a context of hyper-segregated metropolitan areas. Purposeful "homefront pioneering," for example, such as having whites move into black neighborhoods, can help initiate the training institute process. The study circles of the training institute and the process by which the courses are offered are "only the first step in what the Universal House of Justice sees as a serious process of community development starting

with spiritual empowerment and moral education, extending to social action at a small scale, and ultimately expanding to include progressively complex community-building projects.”<sup>36</sup> The article of Thomas is among the first research to examine the implications of the path on which the Universal House of Justice has set the Bahá’í community in regards to race relations. With McMullen’s and Thomas’s chapters, this volume engages the latest, ongoing phase of the American Bahá’ís’ more than one century-long effort at interracial community building.

The chapters in this book are important for launching new research into the history of African Americans and the Bahá’í Faith. Of course, important work has already been done, but it is the tip of the iceberg of what still needs to be accomplished. For example, archives, both national and local, for the Bahá’í Faith, the National Urban League and the NAACP have barely been touched. The chapters presented in this publication raise more questions than they answer. One of the more obvious gaps is research into the connections between Bahá’ís and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This is not because such connections were few. Rather, it is simply that academic research on this is still to be done. The authors of this book hope that their efforts inspire others to continue their research and improve upon it.

## NOTES

1. Not everyone who attended the panel discussion was a member of the Bahá’í Faith, but due to circumstances, all the authors in this book are.

2. See, Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, [http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19851001\\_001/19851001\\_001.pdf](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19851001_001/19851001_001.pdf).

3. The Báb means the Gate. For more on the Báb and the Bábí religion, see Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Baha’í Religions: From Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

4. For Bahá’ís, manifestations of God are more than a human being as they release into the world divine forces to renew society and provide guidance to humanity from God. Some manifestations in Bahá’í texts are Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh.

5. Bahá’u’lláh means the Glory of God. For a biography of Bahá’u’lláh, see Moojan Momen, *Bahá’u’lláh: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007) and Hasan Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1991).

6. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992), 45.

7. *Ibid.*, 40.

8. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002), 81. This letter to Napoleon III is part of a series of letters that Bahá'u'lláh wrote to political and religious leaders. These are available in the abovementioned book.

9. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh: Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), 27.

10. For more on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, see Hasan Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh* (London: George Ronald, 1971). See Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, 219–223.

11. Shoghi Effendi, "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh," in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 134.

12. The two best known memoirs are Richard Hollinger, ed., *'Abdu'l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parsons' Diary* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1996) and Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983).

13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982).

14. For a recent treatment of the influence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, see Negar Motahedeh, ed., *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), 119.

16. *The Power of Unity: Beyond Prejudice and Racism*, compiled by Bonnie J. Taylor and National Race Unity Committee (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986), 69.

17. *The Power of Unity*, 68.

18. For a biography of Shoghi Effendi, see Rúhíyyih Rabbaní, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969). See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, <http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/will-testament-abdul-baha>.

19. These are listed in, Hands of the Cause Residing in the Holy Land, comp., *The Bahá'í Faith, 1844–1963: Information Statistical and Comparative, Including the Achievements of the Ten Year International Bahá'í Teaching and Consolidation Plan, 1953–1963* (N.p.: n.p., n.d.), 9–11, 15–20.

20. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 42–43.

21. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 33–34.

22. *Ibid.*, 34.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

25. *Ibid.*, 35.

26. *Ibid.*, 35–36.

27. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

28. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

29. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

30. The letters of the Universal House of Justice about the Nine Year Plan are available online, for example the letter entitled "Teaching the Masses." Universal

House of Justice, letter “Teaching the Masses,” July 13, 1964, [http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19640713\\_001/19640713\\_001.pdf](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19640713_001/19640713_001.pdf).

31. Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1985), 10. For an account of the administrative transition from Shoghi Effendi to the Universal House of Justice, see Universal House of Justice, *The Ministry of the Custodians, 1957–1963: An Account of the Stewardship of the Hands of the Cause*, rev. ed. (Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1997). Hands of the Cause of God were advisory leaders appointed by Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi.

32. Universal House of Justice messages between 1996 and 2006 reflect its evolving guidance as the training institute process developed and grew in complexity around the world. Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice and Supplementary Material, 1996–2006* (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 2006).

33. Universal House of Justice, letter dated March 26, 2016, [http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20160326\\_002/20160326\\_002.pdf](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20160326_002/20160326_002.pdf).

34. The first part of the study is Louis Venters, *No Jim Crow Church: The Origins of South Carolina’s Bahá’í Community* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2015).

35. The list of books used by the training institute are available here: <http://palabrapublications.com/publication-category/section/training-institute-materials>. For the junior youth groups, the list of books is available here: <http://palabrapublications.com/publication-category/section/publications-junior-youth-activities>.

36. June Manning Thomas, 403 (in this book).

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