

Public Discourse on Race

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech



Christopher Buck
February 10–12, 2012
Louhelen Bahá'í School
Davison, Michigan



'Abdu'l-Baha with children and Lua Getsinger (r.) at home of Howard MacNutt, Brooklyn, NY (June 17, 1912).

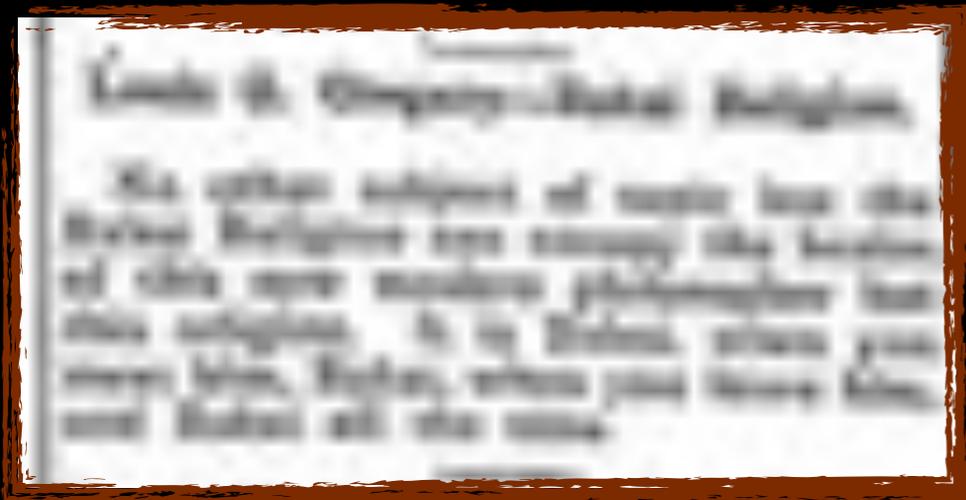
Overview of This Weekend's Sessions

- 1. Session One: 'Abdu'l-Bahá & The Black Intelligentsia.**
- 2. Session Two: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech: Personal Accounts.**
- 3. Session Three: Press Coverage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech.**
- 4. Session Four: Translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech, with reference to the Persian Original.**
- 5. Session Five: Competing Civil War "Myths": 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Views of the Civil War & the Emancipation Proclamation.**
- 6. Session Six: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Message to African Americans & Message to the "Whites."**
- 7. Session Seven: Guidance on Bahá'í Public Discourse**
- 8. Session Eight: Adapting 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Discourse on Race: Guidance from the Universal House of Justice**

Based on the forthcoming book chapter:

- **Christopher Buck, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s 1912 Howard University Speech: A Civil War Myth for Interracial Emancipation.” In: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America: A Persian Reformer Comes to the West. Edited by Negar Mottahedeh. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).**
(Invited/accepted for publication).

Louis Gregory arranged for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University speech.



— The Washington Bee (Dec.
2, 1911) Vol. XXXII, Issue 26;
Page 4.

Louis Gregory & Louisa Mathew,
first interracial Bahá'í couple,
New York, September 27, 1912
(wedding photo).





Session One

'Abdu'l-Bahá & The Black Intelligentsia

Friday, February 10, 2012

8:00–9:30 p.m.

Session One: Learning Objectives

- 1. Were African American intellectuals and leaders cognizant of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America?**
- 2. Take the great W.E.B. Du Bois as a prime example. Was he impressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words and deeds?**
- 3. In which speaking venues would 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message most effectively reach African Americans?**
- 4. In which publications would 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message most effectively reach African Americans?**

'Abdu'l-Bahá's NAACP Speech

The BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

An address delivered at the Chicago Conference by ABDUL BAHÁ of Persia



OD has stated in the Bible, the Old Testament: "We have created man in our own image and likeness." This statement indicates the fact that man in some particular is of the image and likeness of God. This man who has been called the image and likeness of God: Let us find out just where and how he is the image and likeness of the Lord, and what is the standard or criterion whereby he can be measured.

If a man should possess wealth, can we call him an image and likeness of God? Or is human honor the criterion whereby he can be called the image of God? Or can we apply a color test as a criterion, and say such and such a one is colored with a certain hue and he therefore is the image of God? Can we say, for example, a man who is green in hue is an image of God? Or can we make another distinction, saying that one who is white is any more an image of God? Is simply the white color a criterion whereby man is to be judged? And shall we make a sweeping statement like that? Or is it reasonable for us to choose the dark color? Supposing we say a colored man is after all the image and likeness, just because of his color, or the red-skinned man, shall he be the image and likeness of God? Or shall we declare the yellow race to be a creation and therefore an image and likeness of God? Hence we come to the conclusion that colors are of no importance.

Colors are accidental in nature. That which is essential is the humanitarian aspect. And that is the manifestation of Divine Virtues and that is the Merciful Bestowals. That is the Eternal Life. That is the Baptism through the Holy Spirit. Therefore let it be known that color is of no importance. Man, who is the image and likeness of God, who is the Manifestation of the Bestowals of God, he is acceptable at the threshold of God whatever be his color. Let him be blue in color, or white, or green, or brown, that matters not! Man is not to be pronounced man simply because of bodily attributes. Man is to be

judged according to his intelligence and to his spirit. Because he is to be judged according to spirit and intelligence, therefore, let that be the only criterion. That is the image of God.

As regards you here in this country, there is a point of importance, namely, patriotism. That is common to both. And from the standpoint of language, you share that, both of you speak one tongue. And you have in common the same civilization. And now, with these numerous points of partnership or contact and the one point of difference, which is of the least importance, that of color, are you going to allow this least of differences, namely, that of color, to separate you?

From the standpoint of the body, you have that in common. All the five senses and tangible properties of man you share. As regards intelligence, you are both endowed therewith. Patriotism is common to both. From the standpoint of language there is a point of contact. Your civilization is one and the same. From the standpoint of religion you are one and the same. One point of distinction, and that is color. Is it meet, is it becoming, with all the points of contact, for this least point of distinction or difference should there be any separation or difference? Indeed, not! God is not pleased, nor is any intelligent man pleased, nor is any reasonable man willing to have any difference because of that.

His Holiness, Baha'ollah, has proclaimed to the world the Oneness of the world of humanity. He has caused the various nations and divergent sects and creeds to unite, and he has declared that the difference in color in the human kingdom is similar to the differences of the flowers, the variegated flowers in a garden. If you enter a garden you will see yellow flowers, white flowers, dark, variegated flowers, the red flower, for example, in the utmost of delicacy and beauty, radiant, and each one through difference lends a charm to the other. This difference in the human kingdom is similar to that. And now were you to be ushered into a garden where all the flowers were to be of the same hue or color, how monotonous!

The Crisis (June 1912)

The Crisis
May 1912

THE CRISIS



A RECORD OF THE DARKER RACES

Volume Four

MAY 1912

Number One



Church Number



Colored Baptist Institutional Church, Jacksonville, Florida

ONE DOLLAR A YEAR

TEN CENTS A COPY



'Abdu'l-Bahá Man of the Month



ABDUL BAHÁ, THE PERSIAN TEACHER OF BROTHERHOOD

The Persian
Teacher of
Brotherhood

ECHOES OF THE N. A. A. C.'S
FOURTH ANNUAL CON-
FERENCE.

By Mildred Miller.

No greater meeting has ever been held in the later history of this country. From the brilliant opening at Sinai temple Sunday evening through to the closing Tuesday night in Handel hall, every session was marked with an intense earnestness of purpose, and the addresses were of an unusually high order and teeming with information and human interest.

It may come slowly, but such meetings cannot but bring about finally "the uplift of colored people of this country by securing to them the full enjoyment of their rights as citizens, justice in all courts and equal opportunity everywhere."

Every young colored boy and girl in Chicago should have seen and heard Mr. William Pickens, of Talladega, Ala.; Mr. H. T. Kealing, of Quindamon, Kan., and Mr. W. E. B. DuBois, author, scholar and editor of "The Crisis."

The reception at Hull House was a very delightful and interesting affair. That wonderful teacher of peace and the brotherhood of man, Abdul Baha, of Persia, made his first appearance at the Hull House.

In both of his addresses at Hull House and Handel hall, Abdul Baha very eloquently showed the folly of discrimination on the account of the only point of difference between men, that of the color of the skin.

A garden of flowers, all of one color, would be monotonous and by no means beautiful.

The local committee deserves much credit, of course, for the arrangements for the comfort, etc., of the guests and attendants upon the N. A. A. C. conference, but yet when

one looked at the ushers for the evenings at Handel hall one could not but think of Abdul Baha's garden with the one color and variety of flower.

If we are hoping for a time when we shall not be measured by the color of our skin, had we not better begin by "cutting out" these nice little discriminations among ourselves?

The young ladies who acted as ushers were lovely and this word is no criticism upon them at all; but the scheme of having young girls for ushers might have been carried just a little farther, and instead of married and maiden ladies such high school girls as Misses Esther Webster, Helen Perry and Bertha Mosely might have been added with credit to the list.

"No greater meeting has been held in the later history of this country."

"That wonderful teacher of peace and brotherhood of man, Abdul Baha, of Persia, made his first appearance at the Hull House."

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s NAACP Speeches

No greater meeting has been held in the later history of this country ... That wonderful teacher of peace and brotherhood of man, Abdul Baha, of Persia, made his first appearance at the Hull House. In both of his addresses at Hull House and Handel hall, Abdul Baha very eloquently showed the folly of discrimination on account of the only point of difference between men, that of the color of the skin. A garden of flowers, all of one color, would be monotonous and by no means beautiful. The Hull House speech has been reported, as has the Handel Hall.

— Mildred Miller, “Echoes of the N. A. A. C.’s [sic] Fourth Annual Conference.” The Chicago Defender Vol. 7, No. 18 (Big Weekend Edition, May 4, 1912), 2.



W.E.B. Du Bois on 'Abdu'l-Bahá

“I remember Abdul Baha of Persia. He visited me personally in New York in 1912.”

— W.E.B. Du Bois, “Forum of Fact and Opinion: The Fall of the Baha’i.” Pittsburgh Courier (30 Oct. 1937), p. 11 (“The Pittsburgh Courier’s ‘Feature Page’”).

“Two men sit high before the world today—Eugene Debs and Abdul Baha. One is free of chains which should never have bound him—the other [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] of Life which he tried to free of race and national prejudice.”

— W.E.B. Du Bois, “Opinion of W.E.B. Du Bois.” The Crisis 23.4 (February 1922): 151.



Session One: Discussion Questions

1. How effective was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "message" of interracial harmony?
2. How radical was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "message" of interracial harmony? (Clue: Remember, this was the "Jim Crow" era—America's apartheid!)
3. How effectively did 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "message" of interracial harmony impress African American "race men"?
4. Why did this message not fail to impress? Was it a message of "interracial emancipation"? In other words, is racism tantamount to emotional and social bondage?



Session Two

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech:

Personal Accounts

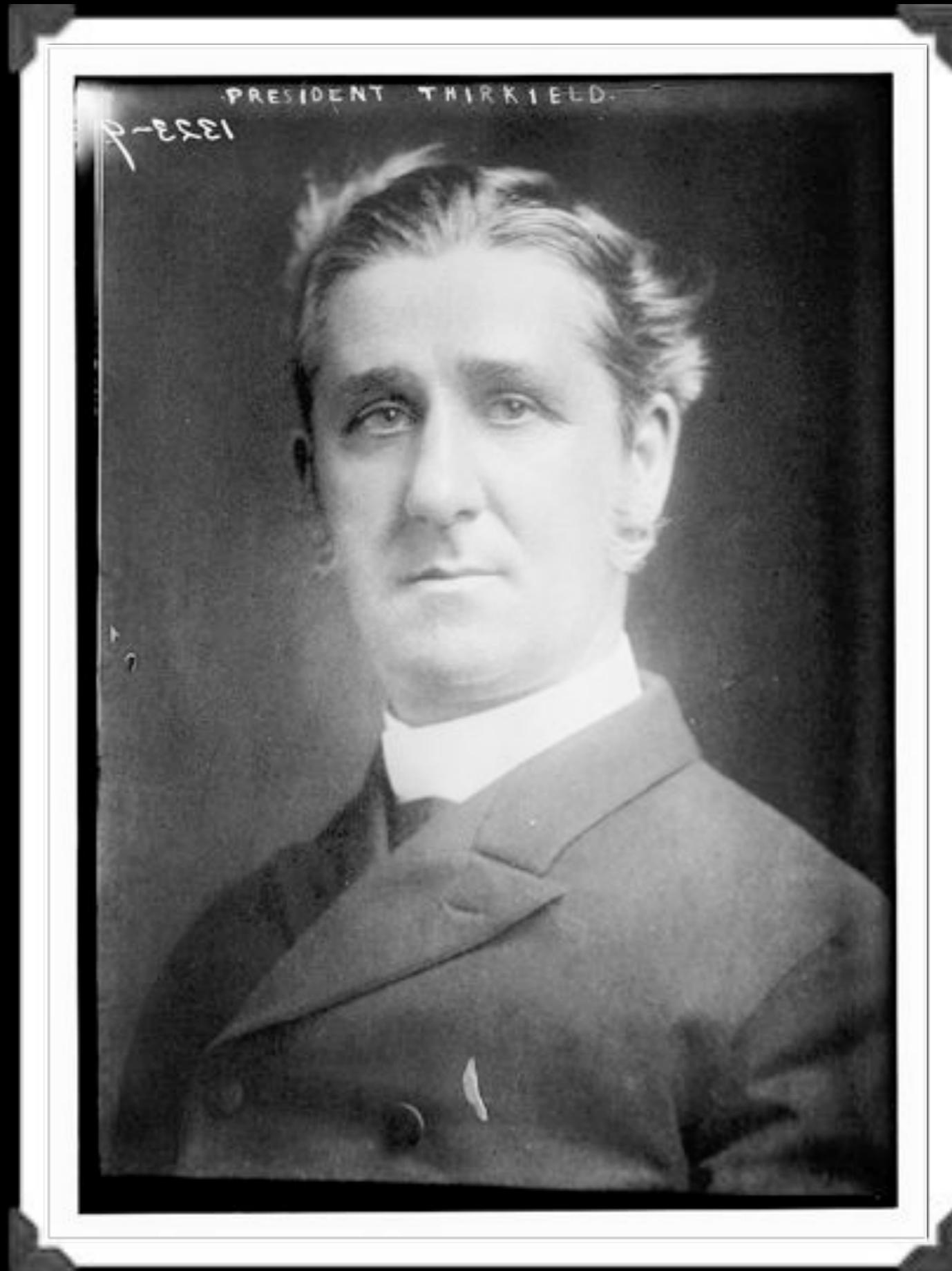
Saturday, February 11, 2012

9:15–10:45 a.m.

Session Two: Learning Objectives

- 1. What do we know of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Howard University speech from eyewitnesses and personal reminiscences?**
- 2. Can we reconstruct the “reception” to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Rankin Chapel speech?**
- 3. Are there related events, sooner before and after, that help us better appreciate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s effect on His audiences and those whom He personally met?**
- 4. Did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá personally exemplify His public discourse with social action immediately following His Rankin Chapel speech?**

**Wilbur P. Thirkield,
President, Howard
University,
introduced 'Abdu'l-
Bahá on April 23,
1912.**



Maḥmúd's Diary

Today the Master went to Howard University, an educational institution for blacks. The hosts (mostly black with a few whites) had made special arrangements so that when the Master arrived He was welcomed by music from a band while the audience applauded with excitement and exuberance. It is difficult to describe the scene adequately. The president of the university was very cordial and introduced 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Prophet of Peace and the harbinger of unity and salvation. Then the Master rose from His seat and spoke on the subject of the harmony between blacks and whites and the unity of humankind. The audience repeatedly applauded Him during the talk, delighted at His words. At the conclusion, the president of the university thanked 'Abdu'l-Bahá on behalf of all those gathered. As He left the auditorium, group after group formed two lines, one on each side, all showing their highest respect by bowing and waving their hats and handkerchiefs in farewell to the beloved Master.

— Mírzá Maḥmúd Zarqání, Maḥmúd's Diary: The Diary of Mírzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey to America. Translated by Mohi Sobhani (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 55–56. Translated from the original Persian text by Mírzá Maḥmúd Zarqání, Badá-yi al-Áthár, vol. 1. Langenhain: Bahá'í Verlag, 1982. Reprint of the Bombay 1914 edition.

Joseph H. Hannen's Account

On Tuesday, April 23rd, at noon, Abdul-Baha addressed the student-body of more than 1,000, the faculty and a large number of distinguished guests, at Howard University. This was a most notable occasion, and here, as everywhere when both white and colored people were present, Abdul-Baha seemed happiest. The address was received with breathless attention by the vast audience, and was followed by a positive ovation and a recall. That evening the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, the leading colored organization in Washington, was addressed, and again the audience taxed the capacity of the edifice in which the meeting was held.

— Joseph H. Hannen, “Abdul-Baha in Washington, D. C.”
Star of the West 3.3 (April 28, 1912): 6–24 [7].



Agnes Parsons on the Speech

[Tuesday,] April 23rd

On Tuesday, after seeing several people in the morning Abdul Baha and Dr. Fareed went for a short drive: stopped at Mr. and Mrs. Hannen's and afterward they went to Howard University where Abdul Baha made an address before a large audience of professors and students. He dwelt largely upon the need of love and unity between the white and black races and spoke of the gratitude which the colored people should feel for the whites, because, through them came not only freedom for their race, but it was the beginning of freedom for all slaves. He also told through education the differences between the two races would be lessened.

— Agnes Parsons, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parsons' Diary, April 11, 1912–November 11, 1912, Supplemented with Episodes from Mahmúd's Diary. Edited and annotated by Richard Hollinger (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1996), 29.



When “white and colored” present, “Abdul-Baha seemed happiest”

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LEADER OF BAHAI MOVEMENT COMING TO CAPITAL SOON

Abdul Baha Abbas Will Ex- pound His Philosophy Here.

Abdul Baha Abbas, the leader of the Bahai movement, is expected to arrive in Washington, D. C., in a few days. He will be here for a short time, but his visit is of great importance to the Bahai community in this country. He will be speaking at the National Press Club, and his address will be a most interesting one. He will explain the philosophy of the Bahai faith, which is a religion of peace and unity. He will also discuss the role of the Bahai community in the world. His visit is being widely publicized, and many people are looking forward to hearing him speak.

Oriental Due Here



Abdul Baha Abbas, leader of the Bahai movement, is expected to arrive in Washington, D. C., in a few days.

Justice Hall's Crime

Justice Hall, who was recently convicted of a crime, is expected to be released from prison in a few days. He is a well-known figure in the legal community, and his case has attracted a great deal of public attention. His release is being widely discussed in the press.

THE FIRST GRAY HAIR DON'T LOOK OLD

Washington Times
Friday, April 5, 1912

Gayle Morrison's Commentary on the Luncheon

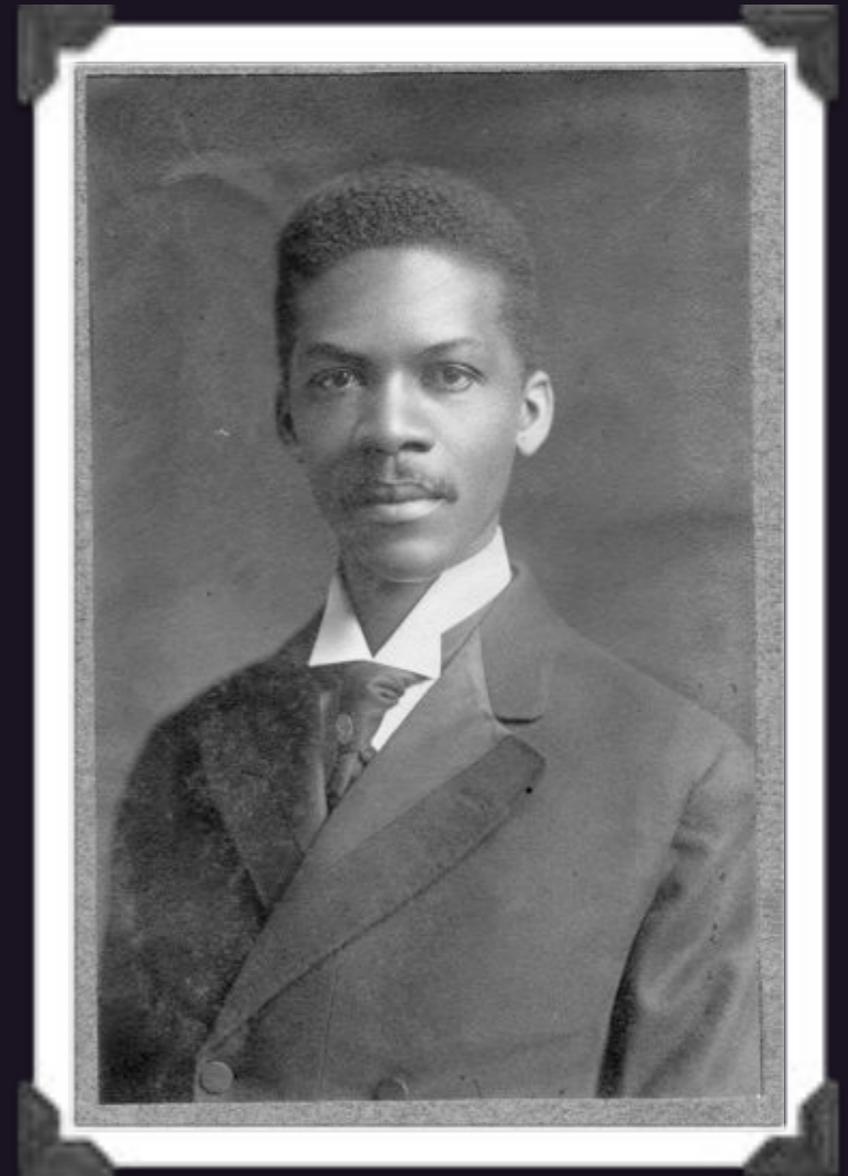
Early on that afternoon of 23 April 'Abdu'l-Bahá had sought to demonstrate His teachings on race by challenging the practice of social segregation. After His speech at Howard University, He had been invited by Ali-Kuli Khan, chargé d'affaires of the Persian Legation, and Madame Florence Breed Khan, both of whom were Bahá'ís, to attend a luncheon and a reception in His honor. About nineteen guests were present at the luncheon. Some were "very prominent in the social and political life of Washington," Mr. Gregory recalled, and others were Bahá'í friends of the Khans, individuals such as Agnes Parsons, a Washington socialite, and Juliet Thompson, a painter from New York, who were comfortable in such circles. ...

— Gayle Morrison, To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982/1999), 52–53.

The luncheon following Abdu'l-Bahá's speech

During the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the United States in 1912 a luncheon in His honor was given in Washington by Mírzá Ali-Kuli Khan and Madame Khan, who were both Bahá'ís. Khan was at that time chargé d'affaires of the Persian Legation in the capital city. Many noted people were invited, some of whom were members of the official and social life of Washington, as well as a few Bahá'ís.

Just an hour before the luncheon 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent word to Louis Gregory that he might come to Him for the promised conference. Louis arrived at the appointed time, and the conference went on and on. 'Abdu'l-Bahá seemed to want to prolong it. When luncheon was announced, 'Abdu'l-Bahá led into the dining room, except Louis.



“Where is Mr. Gregory? Bring Mr. Gregory!”

All were seated when suddenly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stood up, looked around, and then said to Mírzá Khan, “Where is Mr. Gregory? Bring Mr. Gregory!” There was nothing for Mírzá Khan to do but find Mr. Gregory, who fortunately had not yet left the house, but was quietly waiting for a chance to do so. Finally Mr. Gregory came into the room with Mírzá Khan. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who was really the Host (as He was wherever He was), had by this time rearranged the place setting and made room for Mr. Gregory, giving him the seat of honor at His right. He stated He was very pleased to have Mr. Gregory there, and then, in the most natural way as if nothing unusual had happened, proceeded to give a talk on the oneness of mankind.

— Agnes Parsons, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parsons’ Diary, 31 and 33, n. 45, citing Harlan F. Ober, “Louis G. Gregory,” in The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record, Volume XII, 1950–1954. Comp. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956), 666–669 [668].

Juliet Thompson's & Louis Gregory's Accounts

Juliet Thompson's account of the luncheon testifies to the ease with which 'Abdu'l-Bahá defied convention, as if it did not in fact exist. She wrote simply that "a colored man, Lewis [sic] Gregory, was present and the Master gave a wonderful talk on race prejudice." Mr. Gregory himself, although he undoubtedly told the full story of the luncheon to many friends, stated in his formal reminiscences only that "'Abdul Baha' made everyone feel perfectly at ease by his genial humor, wisdom and outpouring of love. ... He mentioned his address at Howard University which was made at noon that same day and indicated guidance and progress in race relations."

— Gayle Morrison, To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982/1999), 53.

Gayle Morrison's Commentary

Gently yet unmistakably, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had assaulted the customs of a city that had been scandalized only a decade earlier by President Roosevelt's dinner invitation to Booker T. Washington. Moreover, as a friend who helped Madame Khan with the luncheon recalled, the place setting that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had rearranged so casually had been made according to the strict demands of Washington protocol. Thus, with one stroke 'Abdu'l-Bahá had swept aside both segregation by race and categorization by social rank.

— Gayle Morrison, To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982/1999), 53–54.

Session Two: Discussion Questions

1. Did 'Abdu'l-Bahá "make history"?
2. If your answer was that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America was a significant milestone in Bahá'í history, did it have any impact on American history?
3. If not, do you anticipate a "revisionist history" at some later date, that will record at least the social significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message of "race amity"?
4. See: "Cornel West praises work of Baha'is in establishing Racial Unity": <http://www.bahai.us/2012/02/01/cornel-west-praises-work-of-baha%E2%80%99is-in-establishing-racial-unity>



Session Three

**Press Coverage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech
Saturday, February 11, 2012
11:00 a.m.—12:15 p.m.**

Session Three: Learning Objectives

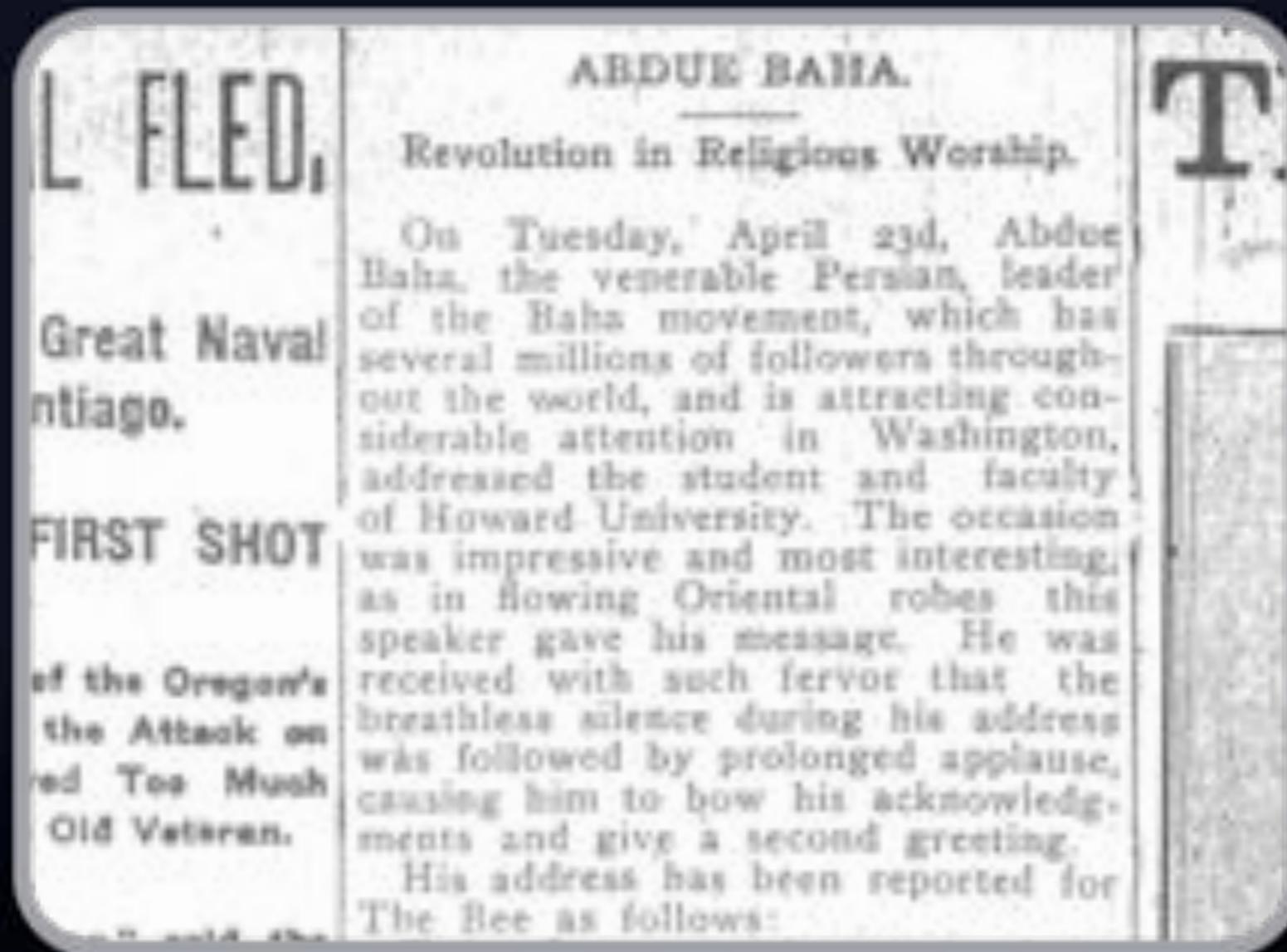
- 1. Did the press cover 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University speech?**
- 2. Was the press impressed?**
- 3. Was 'Abdu'l-Bahá ever interviewed about His Rankin Chapel speech?**
- 4. What was the likely impact on most white readers?**
- 5. What was the likely impact on most African American readers?**

The Chicago Defender on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to DC

His visit to Washington has been a triumphal march. He has met with and conquered Southern prejudices. He made addresses at Metropolitan A. M. E. church, at Howard University and at many of the white churches and halls and was listened to by many thousands of people of both races, who applauded his propaganda of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

— “To Break The Color Line: Abdul Baha, the Great Persian Philosopher and Teacher, Aims to Unite the Peoples of All Races and Creeds in One Great Bond of Brotherhood.” The Chicago Defender Vol. 7, No. 18 (Big Weekend Edition, May 4, 1912), 3.

“Breathless silence ... prolonged applause.”



- “On Tuesday, April 23d [sic], Abdue (sic) Baha, the venerable Persian, leader of the Baha (sic) movement, ... addressed the student and faculty of Howard University. The occasion was impressive ... as in flowing oriental robes this speaker gave his message.”
- “He was received with such fervor that the breathless silence during his address was followed by prolonged applause, causing him to bow acknowledgments and give a second greeting.”

Source: *The Washington Bee*, Vol. 32, Iss. 51 (May 25, 1912): 3.

“Abdue [sic] Baha: Revolution in Religious Worship”

On Tuesday, April 23d [sic], Abdue [sic] Baha, the venerable Persian, leader of the Baha [sic] movement, which has several millions of followers throughout the world, and is attracting considerable attention in Washington, addressed the student and faculty of Howard University. The occasion was impressive and most interesting, as in flowing oriental robes this speaker gave his message. He was received with such fervor that the breathless silence during his address was followed by prolonged applause, causing him to bow acknowledgments and give a second greeting. His address has been reported for The Bee as follows.

— “Abdue Baha: Revolution in Religious Worship.” The Washington Bee Vol. 32, Iss. 51 (May 25, 1912), 3. The Library of Congress archive, “The Washington Bee. (Washington, D.C.) 1884–1922,” does not feature this issue online.

“Abdul Baha on Religious Unity”

Abdul Baha Abbas, the leader of the Baha [sic] movement for the world-wide religious unity, has been in the city. Through the missionary work of Mrs. Christian D. Helmick (Mrs. A. C. Barney that was), quite a colony of colored Bahaists 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 Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, in connection with the Bethel Literary Society. At noon Tuesday, the Abdul [sic] 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.

“Abdul Baha on Religious Unity”

The Behai [sic] belief is that universal peace can only come through the harmony of all religions, and that all religions are basically one. Its consistent espousal of the “fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man” is causing the new faith to find considerable favor among many of our leading people. Its white devotees, even in this prejudice-ridden community, refuse to draw the color line. The informal meetings, held frequently 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. The liberality of the Behaist faith is evidenced in the fact that one can be of any known religious denomination, and yet maintain good standing as a disciple of Behai.

— “Abdul Baha on Religious Unity.” The Washington Bee Vol. 32, Iss. 47 (April 27, 1912), 1.

Interview of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Abdul Baha Abbas, Persian prophet and teacher, courteously replied to questions of the representative of THE INDEPENDENT by means of an interpreter. In spite of the lofty position ascribed to him by his followers, is interested in ordinary human affairs is keen. He was dressed in flowing robes and turban, which accorded well with his square cut gray beard. His blue eyes are frank, lively and humorous, his figure of medium hight [sic] and slight, but erect and graceful in spite of his sixty-eight years.

Interview of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

I AM very pleased with America and its people. I find religion, high ideals, broad sympathy with humanity, benevolence and kindness widespread here, and my hope is that America will lead the movement for universal peace. . . .

Such leadership would be in accord with their own history and the principles on which the government is founded. Never in all the annals of the world do we find such an instance of national self-sacrifice as was displayed here during the Civil War. Americans who had never seen a weapon used in anger left their homes and peaceful pursuits, took up arms, bore utmost hardships, braved utmost dangers, gave up all they held dear, and finally their lives, in order that slaves might be free.

Interview of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

In Washington recently I addressed the students at Howard University—about fifteen hundred of them—and I told them that they must be very good to the white race of America. I told them that they must never forget to be grateful and thankful. I said to them: “If you want to know really what great service the white race here has rendered to you, go to Africa and study the condition of your own race there.” But the same time I said that the white people here must be very kind to those whom they have freed.

Interview of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The white people must treat those whom they have freed with justice and firmness, but also with perfect love. America's example of freeing the slaves has been a power for freedom everywhere. Because America freed her slaves, even at the cost of one of the bloodiest wars of modern times, other nations have felt themselves bound to free slaves. America's leadership in humanitarian and ultra-state matters is generally acknowledged.

— Abdul Baha Abbas, "America and World Peace." The Independent 73, No. 3328 (New York, September 5, 1912): 606–609.

Session Three: Discussion Questions

- 1. Was 'Abdu'l-Bahá “newsworthy”?**
- 2. If so, why?**
- 3. Was the press coverage adequate?**
- 4. What was positive about the coverage?**
- 5. What was negative about the coverage?**
- 6. Did this reflect American society at that time?**



Session Four

**Translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Howard University Speech,
with reference to the Persian Original**

Saturday, February 11, 2012

2:00—3:30 p.m.

Session Four: Learning Objectives

- 1. How should a speech be read?**
- 2. Does “social context” illuminate the text?**
- 3. What is “rhetorical analysis”?**
- 4. Should the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá be “analyzed”?**
- 5. What was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s message?**
- 6. Was there a separate message for African Americans (“Blacks”)?**
- 7. Was there a separate message for Euro-Americans (“Whites”)?**

English Translation & Persian Original

English Translation:

'Abdu'l-Bahá, "23 April 1912 Talk at Howard University Washington, D.C.," 45–46.

Persian original:

Majmu'ih-i- Khatabat-i Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. 2, 39–43.

Online:

Begin: <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/KA2/ka2-44.html#pg39>.

“There are no whites and blacks before God.”

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 Abhá Kingdom is more advanced.

In the realm of existence colors are of no importance.

“You are like the whites; there are no great distinctions left.”

But I wish to say one thing in order that the blacks (*siyāhān*) may become grateful to the whites (*mamnūn-i sifidān shavand*) and the whites become loving (*mihrabān*) toward the blacks. If you go to Africa and see the blacks of Africa (*siyāh-hā-yi ifrīqā*), you will realize how much progress (*taraqqī*) you have made. Praise be to God! You are like the whites; there are no great distinctions left. (*al-ḥamd lillāh shumā miṣl-i sifidānīd imtiyāz chandānī dar miyān nīst.*) But the blacks of Africa are treated as servants (*khadamah*).

“How they fought and sacrificed until they freed the blacks!”

The first proclamation of emancipation for the blacks was made by the whites of America. How they fought and sacrificed until they freed the blacks! (*avval i'lān-i ḥurriyyatī kih barāyi siyāh-hā shud az sifidān-i āmrīk būd chih muḥārabih va jān-fishānī kardand tā siyāh-hā-rā najāt dādand.*) Then it spread to other places. The blacks of Africa were in complete bondage, but your emancipation led to their freedom also (*valī najāt-i shumā sabab shud kih ānhā nīz najāt yāftand*)—that is, the European states emulated the Americans, and the emancipation proclamation became universal. (*duval-i urūpā iqtidā bih āmrīkā'ī-hā kardand ān būd kih i'lān-i ḥurriyyat 'umūmī shud.*)

“... so that you may progress in all human grades.”

It was for your sake (*bijahat-i shumā*) that the whites of America made such an effort. Were it not for this effort, universal emancipation (*ḥurriyyat-i ‘umūmī*) would not have been proclaimed (*i’lān nimīshud*). Therefore, you must be very grateful to the whites of America, and the whites must become very loving toward you so that you may progress in all human grades. Strive jointly to make extraordinary progress and mix together completely.

“Had you not been freed, other blacks would not have been freed.”

In short, you must be very thankful to the whites who were the cause of your freedom (*sabab-i āzādī-i shumā*) in America. Had you not been freed, other blacks would not have been freed either. (*agar shumā āzād nimīshudīd sāyir-i siyāh-hā ham najāt nimīyāftand.*) Now—praise be to God!—everyone is free and lives in tranquillity. I pray that you attain to such a degree of good character and behavior (*ḥusn-i akhlāq va aṭvār*) that the names of black and white shall vanish. All shall be called human (*jamī’-rā ‘unvān-i insān bāshad*), just as the name for a flight of doves is dove. They are not called black and white (*siyāh va sifīd guftih nimīshavad*). Likewise with other birds.

“... endeavor to promote your advancement and enhance your honor”

I hope that you attain to such a high degree—and this is impossible except through love. You must try to create love between yourselves; and this love does not come about unless you are grateful to the whites, and the whites are loving toward you, and endeavor to promote your advancement and enhance your honor (*dar taraqqī-i shumā bikūshand va dar ‘izzat-i shumā sa’y namāyand*). This will be the cause of love (*sabab-i maḥabbat*). Differences between black and white will be completely obliterated; indeed, ethnic and national differences will all disappear. (*bikullī ikhtilāf bayn-i siyāh va sifīd zā’il mīgardad balkih ikhtilāf-i jins va ikhtilāf-i vaṭān hamih az miyān mīravad.*)

“be with one another in utmost harmony and love”

I am very happy to see you and thank God that this meeting is composed of people of both races and that both are gathered in perfect love and harmony. I hope this becomes the example of universal harmony and love (*nimūnih-yi ulfat va maḥabbat-i kullī*) until no title remains except that of humanity. Such a title demonstrates the perfection of the human world and is the cause of eternal glory and human happiness. I pray that you be with one another in utmost harmony and love (*nahāyat-i ulfat va maḥabbat*) and strive to enable each other to live in comfort.

Session Four: Discussion Questions

- 1. What was the likely goal of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s speech?**
- 2. What was “usual” about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s speech?**
- 3. What was “unusual” about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s speech?**
- 4. What was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s message to the audience as a whole?**
- 5. Was there a separate message for African Americans (“Blacks”)?**
- 6. Was there a separate message for Euro-Americans (“Whites”)?**



Session Five

**Competing Civil War “Myths”:
‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Views of the Civil War
Saturday, February 11, 2012
3:45–5:15 p.m.**

Session Five: Learning Objectives

- 1. How do 'Abdu'l-Bahá's views on the Civil War compare to the received views of American historians?**
- 2. Can these differing perspectives be considered "competing myths"?**
- 3. Is there a contemporary historian whose views on the Civil War may, more or less, serve to validate those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá?**

Why did 'Abdu'l-Bahá Speak on Civil War/Emancipation Proclamation

'Abdu'l-Bahá's choice of topic was timely, as it was the 50th anniversary of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

On September 28, 1912, Baltimore's The Afro-American Ledger reported on the "golden jubilee of the lifting of the shackles of slavery from the race" observed on September 27, during which the "principal sessions were held in the Metropolitan A. M. E. Church," where President Taft addressed the audience:

"It is a pleasure to be here," said the President, "at the celebration of the greatest act in the life of Lincoln, who life was filled with great acts. The extinction of slavery meant the extinction of a living lie, because the Declaration of Independence said that all men were free and equal." Mr. Taft went on to say that while Mr. Lincoln abhorred slavery, that he realized that it was recognized by the United States Constitution.

— "President Taft Praises Emancipator: Says 'That It Is Right That Lincoln Should be Held Up in History as the Man Chiefly Responsible for the Freedom of the Negro'." The Chicago Defender (September 28, 1912), 2.

Except from Buck's Manuscript

In his 2010 article, “America’s Changeable Civil War,” published in The Wilson Quarterly, Christopher Clausen notes that “a lively debate over what caused the Civil War continues.” “States’ rights” as the cause of the Civil War is the classic Southern justification. Clausen then asks: “That abstract phrase ‘states’ rights’ as used before the Civil War immediately prompts the question, states’ rights to what?” Clausen quotes the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian, James M. McPherson, for the answer: “‘The right to own slaves, ... the right to take this property into the territories; freedom from the coercive powers of a centralized government’.” Indeed, there is “no logical connection between local autonomy and racial oppression.”

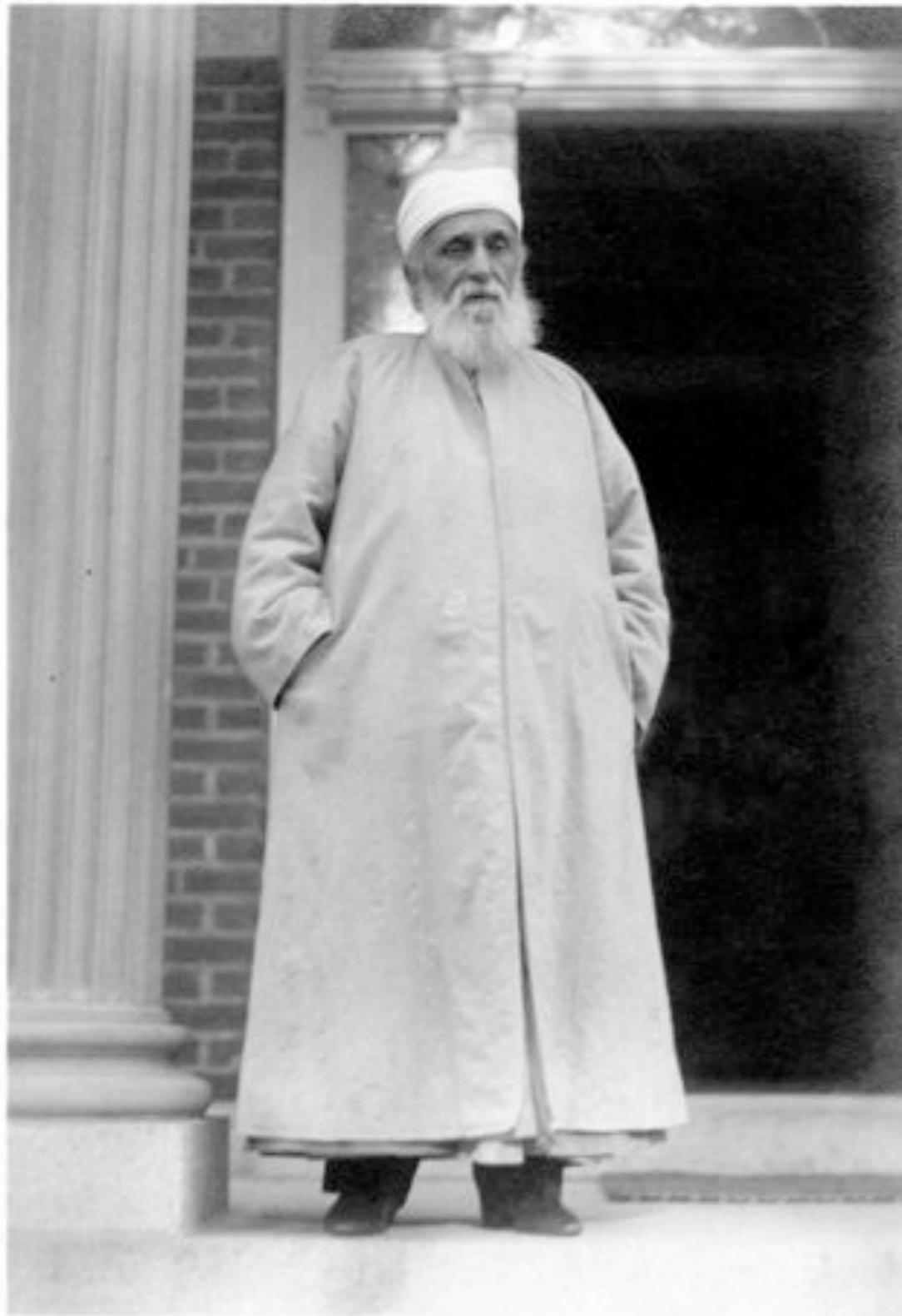


Session Six

**'Abdu'l-Bahá's Message to African Americans
& Message to the "Whites."**

7:30–9:00 p.m.

'Abdu'l-Bahá
April 22, 1912
The Day Before
the Speech



**In front of the house at
1818 "R" Street, N.W.,
specially built by Agnes
Parsons for 'Abdu'l-
Bahá.**

Slavery as a Bridge to Civilization?

It would be tempting to read ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement on Africa as an argument that slavery served as a proverbial bridge to civilization. In 1904, Booker T. Washington, wrote of slavery as a bridge to Christianity as the “one great consolation” that came of slavery in America:

Slavery, with all its disadvantages, gave the Negro race, by way of recompense, one great consolation, namely, the Christian religion and the hope and belief in a future life. The slave, to whom on this side of the grave the door of hope seemed closed, learned from Christianity to lift his face from earth to heaven, and that made his burden lighter. In the end, the hope and aspiration of the race in slavery fixed themselves on the vision of the resurrection, with its “long white robes and golden slippers.”

— Booker T. Washington, “The Religious Life of the Negro.” North American Review 181 (July 1905): 20–23 [21].

The Rhetoric of “Progress”

In Ramleh, Egypt, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá revealed a “Tablet” (letter/epistle) on September 12, 1913, to an individual in China, and wrote, in part:

For example: what is the difference between the African negro and the American negro? The former has not yet adorned himself with the ideals of culture while the latter has become intelligent, sagacious and civilized. During my journey throughout America, at the time when I was in Washington and elsewhere, I delivered detailed addresses in the universities, churches, conventions and meetings of the negroes, and found their audiences composed of most intelligent persons who could grasp the subjects under discussion as well as any other audiences of civilized and intelligent Westerners. Thus a great chasm exists between these two communities of negroes; one in the lowest depth of ignorance; another rising toward the pinnacle of civilization and freedom. Then it is plain that education is the distinguishing mark.

— ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Abbás. Abdul Baha in Egypt. Trans. Mīrzā Aḥmad Sohrāb (New York: J. H. Sears & Co., 1929), 304–305.

'Abdu'l-Bahá
April 24, 1912
The Day After
the Speech



**'Abdu'l-Bahá seated
with Marzieh Khan,
Hamideh Khan and
Rahim Khan in the
Washington D.C. home
of 'Ali Kuli Khan and
Florence Breed Khan.**

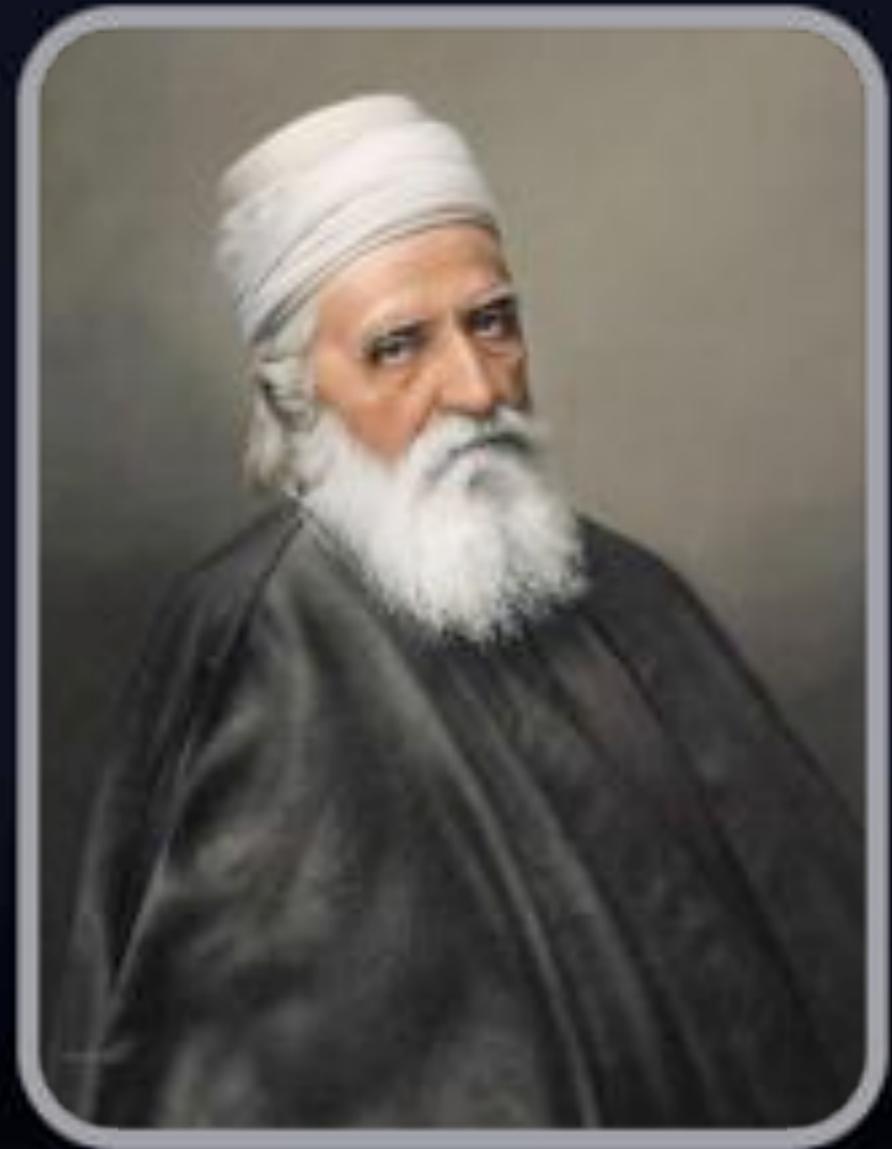
Blacks & Whites

“Rubies & Pearls”

1912

- A meeting such as this seems like a beautiful cluster of precious jewels—pearls, rubies, diamonds, sapphires. It is a source of joy and delight.
- In the clustered jewels of the races may the blacks be as sapphires and rubies and the whites as diamonds and pearls.
- How glorious the spectacle of real unity among mankind!
- This is the sign of the Most Great Peace; this is the star of the oneness of the human world.

— 24 April 1912, Talk at Home of Andrew J. Dyer,
1937 Thirteenth Street, NW, Washington, D.C.



'Abdu'l-Bahá's Message to the Whites

You must try to create love between yourselves; and this love does not come about unless you are grateful to the whites, **and the whites are loving toward you, and endeavor to promote your advancement and enhance your honor** (*dar taraqqī-i shumā bikūshand va dar 'izzat-i shumā sa'y namāyand*). This will be the cause of love (*sabab-i maḥabbat*). Differences between black and white will be completely obliterated; indeed, ethnic and national differences will all disappear. (*bikullī ikhtilāf bayn-i siyāh va sifīd zā'il mīgardad balkih ikhtilāf-i jins va ikhtilāf-i vaṭan hamih az miyān mīravad.*)



Session Seven

Guidance on Bahá'í Public Discourse
Sunday, February 12, 2012
10:45 a.m.—12:15 p.m.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s speech qualify as “public discourse on race”?**
- 2. Is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Howard University speech the “perfect exemplar” of Bahá’í public discourse on race?**
- 3. Would this speech “work” today?**
- 4. If not, how can ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discourse be adapted to today’s audiences?**
- 5. If so, which audiences would be most receptive to such a message?**

What is “Public Discourse” in the Bahá’í Context?

Three broad areas of action currently underway in the Baha'i world include (1) the institute process; (2) social action; and (3) social discourse: "All Bahá'ís should engage in efforts to expand and consolidate the Faith. They also participate, to some extent, in social action and the discourses of society." [1] Social discourse encompasses "a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few." [2] In its Ridván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice calls for "participation in the prevalent discourses of society," along with engaging in "social action," as a contribution that Bahá'í individuals and communities can make "to the material and spiritual progress of society." [3]

[1] Letter dated 4 January 2009 from the Universal House of Justice to the NSA of Australia. See <http://messagesbahaiworldcentre.blogspot.com/2009/12/4-january-2009-universal-house-of.html>.

[2] Id.

[3] Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010 message, par. 27. See <http://messagesbahaiworldcentre.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2010-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&updated-max=2011-01-01T00%3A00%3A00-08%3A00&max-results=8>.

Guidance on Bahá'í Public Discourse

5. Efforts to participate in the discourses of society constitute a third area of action in which the friends are engaged. Such participation can occur at all levels of society, from the local to the international, through various types of interactions—from informal discussions on Internet forums and attendance at seminars, to the dissemination of statements and contact with government officials. What is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few—so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society. Of course, care should be exercised that the friends involved in this area of activity avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience . . .

— The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 4 January 2009, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

From the “Public Discourse” Desk

Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá’í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

— The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010.

What are some examples of Bahá'í “Public Discourse”?

Model statements from the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity.

Available online at:

<http://www.globalprosperity.org/library>

- 1. Reflections on Governance**
- 2. Advancing Toward the Equality of Women and Men**
- 3. Science, Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations**
- 4. Science, Religion, and Development: Promoting a Discourse in India, Brazil, and Uganda**
- 5. May Knowledge Grow in our Hearts: Applying Spiritual Principles to Development Practice**



Session Eight

**Adapting 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Discourse on Race:
Guidance from the Universal House of Justice**

Sunday, February 12, 2012

10:45 a.m.—12:15 p.m.

The Need to Adapt ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Discourse on Race

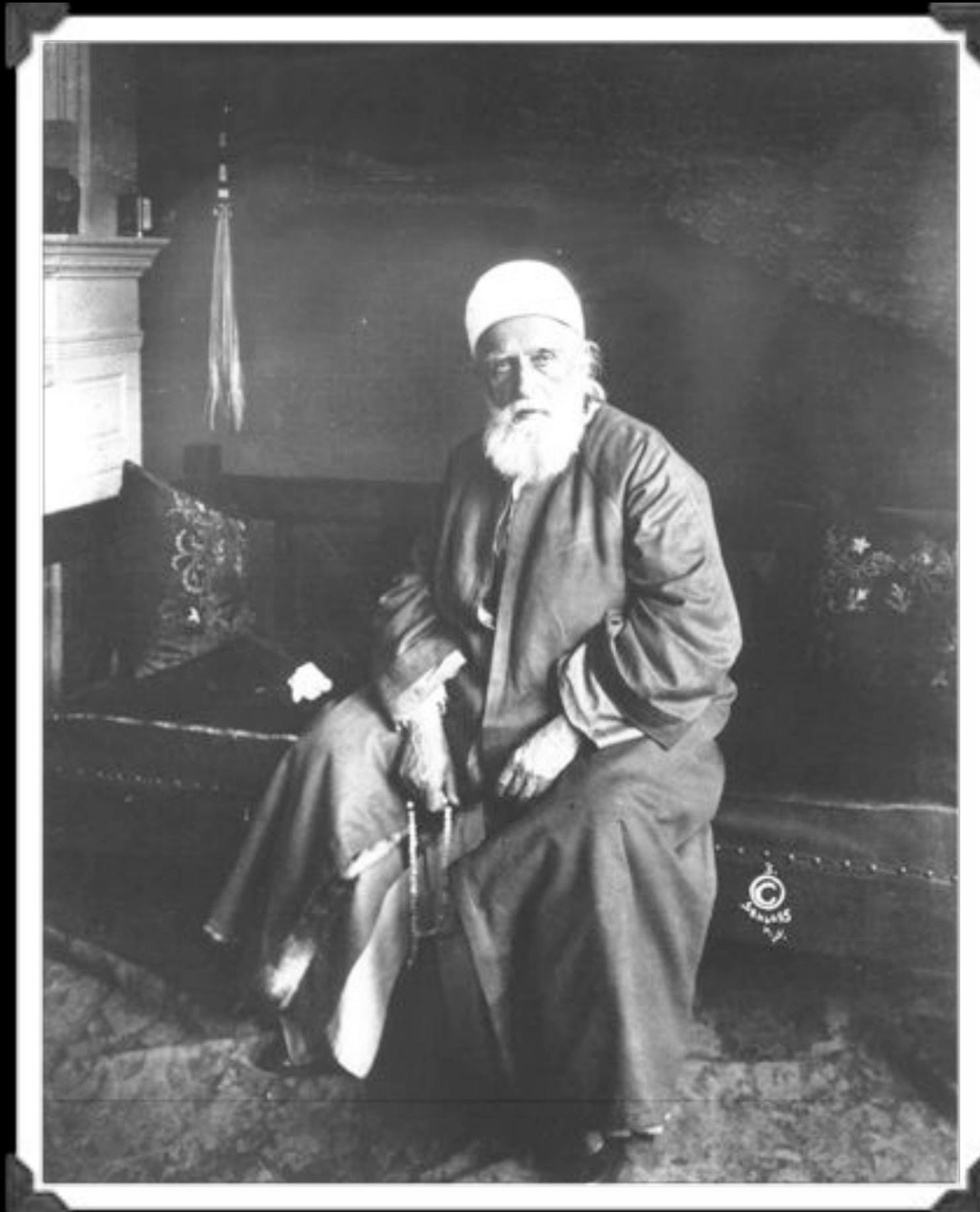
The American nation is much more diverse than in 1938, and the friends cannot be concerned only with relations between black and white, essential as they are. The expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus more intractable. So too, the American Baha’i community has evolved significantly and is no longer at the same stage of its development; it faces a wider range of challenges but also possesses greater capabilities. The House of Justice stated that the principles Shoghi Effendi brought to the attention of the American believers more than seventy years ago are relevant today, and they will continue to be relevant to future generations. It is obvious, however, that the “long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls” upon which the friends must tread, will take them through an ever-changing landscape that requires that they adapt their approaches to varying circumstances.

— Letter dated 10 April 2011.

Session Eight: Discussion Questions

- 1. After adapting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Howard University speech to a contemporary Bahá’í discourse on race, what should the primary “message” be?**
- 2. What kinds of “social action” will this “message” implicate? (In other words, how do we “practice what we preach”?)**
- 3. What does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mean in encouraging “whites” to “endeavor to promote your [African Americas’] advancement and enhance your honor”?**
- 4. How does this mission “translate” into social action?**
- 5. Can public discourse also be considered a form of social action?**

**'Abdu'l-Bahá
New York
1912**



**Photo: 'Abdu'l-Bahá,
New York, 1912. From
the Collection of
Albert C. Killius.
Courtesy of the
Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of
Springfield, Illinois.
Published as
frontispiece in
Christopher Buck,
Paradise and
Paradigm: Key
Symbols in Persian
Christianity and the
Bahá'í Faith (Albany:
State University of
New York Press,
1999).**