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The Interracial “Baha’i Movement” and the Black Intelligentsia: The Case of W. E. B. Du Bois

This article surveys W. E. B. Du Bois’s encounters with the Baha’i religion, from 1910 to 1953. Sections one and two focus on Du Bois and ‘Abdu’l-Baha (1844–1921), while section three treats Du Bois’s indirect connection to the New York Baha’i community through Nina Du Bois’s documented affiliation with that group. Section four chronicles the 1937 Nashville incident involving reportedly segregated Baha’i meetings, and section five looks at Du Bois’s later Baha’i contacts, completing the trajectory. Originally attracted to Baha’i teachings on interracial unity — with Du Bois prominently featuring ‘Abdu’l-Baha with full-page photograph in Du Bois’s “Men of the Month” column — Du Bois later waxed indignant, openly criticizing the Baha’i movement in a *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial. Drawing on press reports, Baha’i records, and archival correspondence between members of the Baha’i community and Du Bois, primary sources establish that Du Bois’s righteous indignation was based on misinformation.

Introduction

When you talk about race and the legacy of white supremacy, there’s no doubt that when the history is written, the true history is written, the history of this country, the Baha’i Faith will be one of the leaven in the American loaf that allowed the democratic loaf to expand because of the anti-racist witness of those of Baha’i faith. [Cornel West, Professor of African American Studies and Religion, Princeton University, 1 February 2012.]¹

In the first half of the twentieth century, the “Baha’i movement” impressed a significant number of the black intelligentsia — including W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963; Fig. 1) — who were drawn to the Baha’i principle and praxis of “race amity” (i.e., ideal race relations).² The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., said of Du Bois: “We’re going to let our children know that the only

1. “Cornel West Praises Work of Baha’is in Establishing Racial Unity,” National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United State, accessed 17 March 2012, <http://www.bahai.us/2012/02/01/cornel-west-praises-work-of-baha-is-in-establishing-racial-unity>.

2. G. Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1982/1999), 150.

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philosophers that lived were not Plato and Aristotle, but W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came through the universe.”³ A little-known aspect of Du Bois’s life was his interest in the Baha’i religion, beginning in 1912 when ‘Abdu’l-Baha (1844–1921) — eldest son and successor to the prophet-founder of the Baha’i Faith, Baha’u’llah (1817–1892) — came to America. These two intellectual giants — the black “Plato and Aristotle” — while having convergent interests, had divergent responses: Locke joined the Baha’i religion in 1918, while Du Bois, in 1937, publicly criticized a Baha’i policy (rarely, if ever, implemented) of temporarily allowing, in the Jim Crow South, separate meetings of whites and blacks interested in the Baha’i principles of “race amity,” with the ultimate goal of permanently and fully uniting these two groups within the Baha’i community, in keeping with the explicit Baha’i goals of fostering interracial harmony, including the encouragement of interracial marriage.

W. E. B. Du Bois’s Interest in the Interracial “Baha’i Movement”



Figure 1 W. E. B. Du Bois (Boston, 1907). MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts.

3. Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., speech at Poor People’s Campaign Rally in Clarksdale, Mississippi, 19 March 1968, quoted in J. H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 152, n. 20.

In 1910, Louis G. Gregory (1874–1951), an African American lawyer from Washington, DC, sent W. E. B. Du Bois a book on the Baha'i religion.⁴ In 1911, Du Bois may have seen the Baha'i presentation at the First Universal Races Congress (London, July 1911), where Du Bois was a delegate, speaking on "The Negro Race in the United States of America,"⁵ as was the "Bahai Assembly, Washington,"⁶ with a presentation, "The Bahai Movement," that included a tablet by 'Abdu'l-Baha.⁷ "I remember Abdul Baha of Persia," Du Bois recalled. "He visited me personally in New York in 1912."⁸

In the June 1912 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois wrote of "the calm sweet universalism of Abdul Baha" when the latter spoke at the commencement of the Fourth Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Chicago: "As opening and climax to this remarkable gathering came a speech of Abdul Baha and a farewell from Julius Rosenwald. Small wonder that a thousand disappointed people were unable to get even standing room in the hall."⁹ Thereafter Du Bois continued to have significant Baha'i contacts: "Mr. DuBois himself knew much about the Baha'i Faith and was acquainted with its American leaders; in fact, his wife was a member of the Baha'i community for some time."¹⁰ In a letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Miriam Haney, 25 February 1914, Du Bois noted his profound regard for 'Abdu'l-Baha:

I thank you very much for your kind words of February nineteenth. I am afraid I do not believe much in Divine Revelations, as they are usually called. I have great respect for Abdul-Baha and I should be very glad to see something of you and Mr. Haney when I come to Washington.¹¹

In 1931, Du Bois wrote to Coralie Franklin Cook (1861–1942) — Howard University professor, a founder of the National Association of Colored Women, committed suffragist, and erstwhile member of the Washington, DC Baha'i community¹² — whose photograph Du Bois featured on page 24 of the November 1917 issue of *The Crisis*. On 27 February 1932, Du Bois spoke at the "Interracial Day" banquet that the Baha'is hosted in honor of the NAACP and

4. W. E. B. Du Bois to Mr Louis G. Gregory, 19 March 1910, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b002-i315, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Massachusetts Amherst, MA.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro Race in the United States of America," in *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems, Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress, Held at the University of London, July 26–29, 1911*, edited by G. Spiller (London: P.S. King and Son, 1911), 348–76.

6. "World Congress on Races Assembles," *New York Times*, 24 July 1911.

7. Baha'i Assembly, Washington, "The Bahai Movement" [third session] in Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems*, 154–57, including "Letter from Abdu'l Baha to the First Universal Races Congress," 155–57.

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion: The Fall of the Baha'i," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 October 1937, 11 ("the *Pittsburgh Courier's* 'Feature Page'").

9. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Fourth Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," *The Crisis* 4, no. 2 (June 1912): 80.

10. Morrison, *To Move the World*, xv.

11. W. E. B. Du Bois to Miriam Haney, 25 February 1914, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b007-i255, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

12. W. E. B. Du Bois to Mrs E. R. Mathews, 13 February 1931, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b059-i201, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

the National Urban League.¹³ In 1932, Loulie Mathews was noted as the “donor of the DuBois literary prize”¹⁴ of 1,000 dollars.¹⁵ In 1935, fellow black communist sympathizer, George Streater, remarked on how Du Bois’s views on violence resonated with Baha’i ideals: “In writing about violence, you write like an apostle of Abdul Bahia [sic].”¹⁶ In 1936, Du Bois published a feature article in the July 1936 issue of *The Crisis*, “The World Issue of Race” by Horace Holley.¹⁷ Other Baha’i contacts may be referenced.¹⁸ A search of the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers reveals some forty-seven results when “Bahai” is searched, and twenty-eight results when “Baha’i” is queried.

Relations remained cordial, and Du Bois’s interest in the Baha’i movement continued, until an unfortunate misunderstanding developed regarding Baha’i gatherings “at the meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the U.S. and Canada, held in Nashville, Tennessee January 10–12, 1937.”¹⁹

Du Bois Features ‘Abdu’l-Baha among the “Men of the Month”

‘Abdu’l-Baha came to America in 1912 (see image on frontispiece; p. 463). He spent 239 days in the United States and Canada, from his arrival on 11 April 1912 to his departure on 5 December 1912. Du Bois was deeply impressed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha.

After spending his first days in New York, on his tenth day in America — Saturday 20 April — ‘Abdu’l-Baha arrived in Washington, DC and stayed until Sunday 28 April. Toward the end of his visit, the *Washington Bee*, one of the city newspapers, published a story that read, in part:

Its [the Baha’i Faith’s] 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.²⁰

On Tuesday morning, 23 April, ‘Abdu’l-Baha spoke in Rankin Chapel at Howard University. Well over 1,000 faculty, administrators, students, and guests crowded the relatively small space of this modest chapel to hear him speak. This is how he opened his talk:

13. Programme for Baha’i Dinner, 27 February 1932, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b063-i031, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. See also “Bahai To Sponsor Interracial Dinner In New York City,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 March 1932, 2.

14. “Two Groups Observe Interracial Day Here with Banquet and Harlem Tour; Baha’i Committee Fetes N. A. A. C. P. and New York Urban League — Columbia Professor Leads Party Downtown,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 2 March 1932, 11.

15. Horace Holley to Mountford Mills, 3 November 1937, National Spiritual Assembly Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly. National Baha’i Archives, Baha’i National Center, Evanston, IL. Courtesy of Lewis V. Walker, Archivist.

16. George Streater to Du Bois, 29 April 1935 in H. Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois. Volume II: Selections, 1934–1944* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 95.

17. H. Holley, “The World Issue of Race,” *The Crisis* 43, no. 2 (July 1936): 204.

18. See the “W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, 1803–1999,” University of Massachusetts Amherst, accessed 14 July 2012, http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/ead/mums312_full.pdf.

19. Du Bois to Lawrence A. Hautz (“Memo to Mr. Hautz”), 8 January 1952, 1, MS 312, reel 68: frame 365, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

20. “Abdul Baha on Religious Unity,” *The Washington Bee* 32, no. 47 (27 April 1912), 1.

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.²¹

Here, ‘Abdu’l-Baha stressed character over characteristics. He expressed his genuine delight that the meeting itself was interracial — an attitude expressed in poetic eloquence the very next night. ‘Abdu’l-Baha remarked:

Before I arrived, I felt too tired to speak at this meeting. But at the sight of such genuine love and attraction between the white and the black friends (*ulfat va injizab ah.ibba-yi siyah va sifid*), I was so moved that I spoke with great love and likened (*tashbih namudam*) this union of different colored races (*ittihad-i alvan-i mukhtalifah*) to a string of gleaming pearls and rubies (*la’ali va yaqut*).²²

‘Abdu’l-Baha concluded his address prophetically: “When the racial elements of the American nation unite in actual fellowship and accord, the lights of the oneness of humanity will shine . . . This is the sign of the ‘Most Great Peace’.”²³ ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s most influential rhetorical strategy in promoting racial uplift and ideal race relations was his likening of people of African descent to the “pupil of the eye.” Significantly, ‘Abdu’l-Baha ascribed this metaphor to his father, Baha’u’llah: “Baha’u’llah once compared the colored people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the spirit shineth forth.”²⁴

As editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois ran a series called “Men of the Month.” This column regularly featured African American men (and women) of interest. In a remarkable departure from this practice, Du Bois devoted the first part of the May 1912 column to ‘Abdu’l-Baha.²⁵ Guy Mount has drawn attention to the extraordinary attention that Du Bois lavished on ‘Abdu’l-Baha in the May 1912 issue of *The Crisis*.²⁶

On 4 May 1912, *The Chicago Defender* reported that the Baha’i leader, ‘Abdu’l-Baha, addressed the NAACP delegates twice.²⁷ In the June 1912 issue,

21. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, “23 April 1912. Talk at Howard University. Washington, D.C. Translated by Amin Banani,” in ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1982), 44.

22. M. Sobhani, trans., *Mahmud’s Diary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 57 (under the diary page for Wednesday 24 April 1912). Persian text in M. Zarqani, *Bada-yi al-Athar*, vol. 1 (Langenhain, Germany: Baha’i Verlag, 1982), 48–49.

23. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 57.

24. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939; repr. Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1990), 37.

25. W. E. B. Du Bois [presumed author], “Men of the Month,” *The Crisis* 4, no. 1 (May 1912): 14–16.

26. See G. Mount, “Locke, Shock, and Abbott: Baha’i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement,” 13–14, Field Report from Lecture Halls website, <http://www.keylectures.com/lectures/guy-emerson-mount-bahai-theology-and-the-acceleration-of-the-african-american-civil-rights-movement>, accessed 14 July 2012.

27. M. Miller, “Echoes of the N. A. A. C.’s [sic] Fourth Annual Conference.” *The Chicago Defender*, 4 May 1912, 2.

Du Bois published one of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s speeches presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the NAACP.²⁸

After ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s death on 28 November 1921, Du Bois wrote: “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-Baha] of Life which he tried to free of race and national prejudice.”²⁹ Here, Du Bois’s profound respect for ‘Abdu’l-Baha is still in evidence.

Conversion of Nina Du Bois?: Evidence For and Against



Figure 2 Nina Gomer Du Bois (c. 1910). MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts.

28. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, “The Brotherhood of Man. An Address at the Chicago Conference by Abdul Baha of Persia.” *The Crisis* 4, no. 2 (June 1912): 88.

29. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Opinion of W. E. B. Du Bois,” *The Crisis* 23, no. 4 (February 1922): 151.

Historians of early American Baha'i history — notably Robert Stockman and Gayle Morrison — have consistently stated that Du Bois's first wife, Nina Gomer Du Bois (1871–1950; Fig. 2), was a Baha'i.³⁰ Nina Du Bois's name appears on the New York Baha'i membership lists for 1937 to 1940. The 1937 list reads: "DUBOIS, Miss Nina[,] 210 West 150 St[.], New York, N.Y."; 1938: "DuBois, Miss Nina[,] 210 West 150 St[.], New York, N.Y."; 1939: "DuBois, Nina[,] 210 W. 150 [sic] St., N.Y.C."; but the 1940 list (on a separate sheet entitled "registered and on file but inactive") reads: "DuBois, Nina[,] Will not affiliate."³¹ This latter fact is confirmed by Louis Gregory who, in his letter dated 29 March 1943 to Du Bois, refers to a letter that Du Bois evidently had written "to Mrs. Geo. R. True [Peggy True] of Grosse Pointe, Mich., stating why Mrs. Du Bois did not unite with the Baha'i Faith."³² There is little doubt that Nina Du Bois's withdrawal from the New York Baha'i community, if indeed she was formally accounted a member, was primarily due to W. E. B. Du Bois's critical stance in 1937.

Du Bois himself, however, indicates that his first wife never actually affiliated with the Baha'i community, although she seriously considered doing so, as he explains in several letters, such as this one:

I am acquainted with the Bahai Movement. I met personally Abdul Baha'i [sic] when he was in America and he was a guest speaker to the organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People . . . I had great respect for him and for his movement. Indeed later my wife . . . after having attended the Bahai meetings in New York for sometime determined to join the movement . . . At the meeting of the organization in Tennessee, white leaders . . . held a meeting of the organization to which Negroes were not invited . . . As a result . . . Mrs. Du Bois refused to join. I think they [these "facts"] will explain why my interest in the Bahai movement is not as great as it was.³³

Evidently, it was Nina Du Bois herself who brought the Nashville incident, and its supporting policy, to her husband's attention:

Enclosed is an article from the Baha'i News, Teaching in the Southern States. Mrs. Trotman called my attention to it and is very much upset about it. She says of course we cannot go to Green Acre. A group is going to do something about it. This stand came out of the meeting in Nashville last March but is just being given out to the world. Mrs. Trotman knew something of it but did not think the Guardian would approve. She wants you to write a letter but not until you have all the facts relative to the case.³⁴

30. See, for example, R. H. Stockman, "Baha'i Faith," in *African American Religious Cultures*, vol. 1, edited by A. B. Pinn (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 101; Morrison, *To Move the World*, 27–28.

31. New York City membership lists, 1937–1940, National Baha'i Archives.

32. Louis G. Gregory to Du Bois, 29 March 1943, p. 1, reel 55: frame 347, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. (Emphasis in original.)

33. W. E. B. Du Bois to Peggy True, 29 September 1942, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b099-i114, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

34. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 22 March 1937, *Baha'i News*, no. 108 (June 1937), 1–2. Republished in B. J. Taylor, *The Pupil of the Eye: African Americans in the World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Riviera Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 1998), 163–64. See "Baha'i News: Teaching in the Southern States, 22 March 1937," MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i043, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. This is a typescript enclosure in letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, 17 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i042, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

Two dates appear to be conflated here: the letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published June 1937, and the Nashville meetings that ignited the controversy, held on 10–12 January 1937. The March 1937 Nashville event, in which evidence suggests that Alain Locke may have been present (and would predictably have been invited to speak) appears to have attracted no criticism.³⁵

What were the “facts” surrounding the 1937 Nashville controversy, and what about the policy announced in the June 1937 *Baha’i News*?

The Nashville Incident

In his *Pittsburgh Courier* column, “Forum of Fact and Opinion: The Fall of the Baha’i,” published on 30 October 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois expressed righteous indignation over an allegedly segregated Baha’i meeting held in the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville on 11 January 1937, and to an interim policy by Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Baha’i Faith from 1921 to 1957, allowing, under certain circumstances, teaching to take place among whites and blacks separately until it was possible to ascertain each individual’s complete acceptance of the Baha’i ideal of interracial harmony:

I remember Abdul Baha of Persia. He visited me personally in New York in 1912. He spoke to colored folk at Chicago that summer and since: “His Holiness, Baha’o’llah, has proclaimed to the world the Oneness of the world of humanity . . . The various colors of human kind lend a harmony and beauty to the whole . . . Therefore all must associate with one another, even as flowers consort harmoniously together in a given garden.” It seemed even then too fine a vision to be true of any ethic with an American following; and it was . . . Only the Baha’i were left, and last year at their meeting in Nashville they succumbed. For the first time they held a public meeting in the Hermitage Hotel to which no Negroes, not even members, were invited; and they voted for color segregation at future meetings. Not only this but they put the question to the present Guardian, Shoghi Effendi. How the matter was presented to him is the secret of certain American leaders. But he answered: “Your Assembly’s suggestion that Baha’i public meetings should henceforth be conducted separately for whites and colored and that study classes resulting from such meetings should likewise be conducted separately until individuals of both races are truly confirmed believers, is splendid, as it will undoubtedly help in removing the misunderstandings and obstacles that have thus far stood in the way of the expansion of the Faith in Southern States.”³⁶

Du Bois’s column was brought to the attention of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada by Alice N. Parker, Pittsburgh, in a letter dated 1 November 1937. She had contacted one of the *Pittsburgh Courier* editors: “I have also talked to one of the editors — Mr. Prentiss — explaining the difference between meetings for Bahais and Bahai ‘public’ meetings for non-Bahais and he asked me to get an answer to DuBois

35. Postcard from Louis G. Gregory to Minta B. Trotman, 22 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i031, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

36. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Fall of the Baha’i,” 11. For the original typescript, see “The Fall of the Baha’i, c. October 1937,” MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i038, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. This typescript was sent ten days in advance of publication to Minta B. Trotman. See W. E. B. Du Bois to Minta B. Trotman, 20 October 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i037, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

and said he would take pleasure in publishing it.”³⁷ Horace Holley, National Spiritual Assembly secretary, published a detailed rebuttal that appeared in a subsequent issue of the *Pittsburgh Courier*.³⁸

The information on which Du Bois had relied was, according to Horace Holley’s eyewitness account (see his 9 July 1937 letter quoted later in the present article), contrary to fact. Six meetings were held in January 1937; three were public, and three private. The first was at Fisk University on Sunday 10 January 1937 (public); the second was a reception at the Fisk University president’s home on Sunday 10 January 1937 (private); the third was a Baha’i devotional/administrative meeting at the home of Mrs Johnson (private); the fourth was at the Hermitage Hotel on Monday 11 January 1937 (public); the fifth was at the Hermitage Hotel on Tuesday 12 January 1937 (public); and the sixth was a home meeting with some twenty persons, the only meeting confined to white persons (private).³⁹ These meetings, public and private, were deemed a success.⁴⁰

So far as the present writer can tell, it was the first Hermitage Hotel meeting on Monday 11 January 1937 to which Trotman objected most strenuously. In her letter to Shoghi Effendi of 21 January 1937, shortly after the incident, Trotman reported that there were “three meetings held” in Nashville: “A Monday evening meeting, a Tuesday evening meeting and a Sunday afternoon meeting.” “Separate invitations were sent” in advance of each meeting. What raised Trotman’s ire most was the Monday meeting: “The Monday evening invitation was sent to white people only and great care was exercised that not one fell in to [sic] the hands of any body [sic] of the colored group.” If true (arguendo), this would have been pursuant to Shoghi Effendi’s policy of holding a racially separate meeting if circumstances prevented an integrated meeting in the Jim Crow South.

Although Tuesday’s event was admittedly integrated (notwithstanding the hotel’s whites-only policy), Trotman was still critical: “The Tuesday eve. [sic] meeting, a few colored people were invited between fifteen and twenty” so that (in the words of someone she quoted) there would not be “‘too many colored people there’.”⁴¹ While her allegations regarding the Monday meeting were disputed by Holley and arguably by Marion Little, who helped organize these events (see her 15 November 1937 letter, *infra*), Trotman’s characterization of the Tuesday meeting appears to be corroborated so far as the Baha’is succeeded, on the very next night, in persuading the Hermitage Hotel to make an

37. Alice N. Parker to Horace Holley, 1 November 1937, “National Spiritual Assembly” Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha’i Archives.

38. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 261, citing Horace Holley’s letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 November 1937, but without quoting its contents.

39. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada to Minta B. Trotman, 9 July 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i033, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. See also reel 48: frames 229 ff. (not quoted by Morrison). Enclosed with this cover letter is letter from Mountford Mills to Minta B. Trotman, 20 July 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i032, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

40. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 259, citing “Public Meetings in Nashville,” *Baha’i News*, no. 105 (February 1937), 2.

41. See Minta B. Trotman to Shoghi Effendi, 21 January 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i025, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

exception to its whites-only policy: an extraordinary achievement in itself and consistent with the artful and adroit Baha'i subterfuge of Jim Crowism, in breaking the racial barrier, but not the racial law.

The primary problem that the Baha'i organizers faced was that the Hermitage Hotel was racially exclusive. Although intended primarily for whites at that particular time and notwithstanding the hotel's policy, the public Baha'i meetings, in fact, were attended by several blacks, "whose welcome had been assured by the hotel management before the room was reserved," writes Morrison. "This was an unexampled concession to the Baha'is."⁴² But the hotel management's permission was granted on condition that not "too many" blacks would be present. According to Albert James, a young African American (introduced to the Baha'i teachings by Louis Gregory) member of the Nashville Baha'is at that time, such approval "was at least a foot in the door" in gradually overcoming segregation.⁴³

Given the volatile racialized nature of the Jim Crow South at that time, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada endorsed the pragmatic wisdom of holding, as prudence dictated, racially separate meetings and study classes in the South, in order to make the Baha'i teachings accessible to both races. The National Spiritual Assembly sought Shoghi Effendi's approval, which he gave in a letter dated 22 March 1937, as a practical strategy for reaching "the two races in the South without the slightest discrimination."⁴⁴ There was to be no racial segregation among declared Baha'is, of course; the segregated meetings were purely a temporary measure — a policy strictly limited to those who were not yet "truly confirmed believers,"⁴⁵ with full integration as the ultimate goal, pursuant to the core Baha'i principle of the oneness of humankind.⁴⁶

Horace Holley, writing on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada, provides an eyewitness account in his letter dated 9 July 1937 to Mrs Minta B. Trotman of Brooklyn, a Baha'i who was so upset by what she had heard about the allegedly segregated meetings that she also wrote to Shoghi Effendi.⁴⁷ Holley writes, in part:

The Assembly feels that the questions raised in New York are truly regrettable. In order to eliminate any misunderstanding as to what took place at Nashville in January, the Assembly would like to give you the following facts. A public meeting was held at Fisk University and advertised in the local press as a public Baha'i meeting conducted by the National Spiritual Assembly. After the meeting, the members attended a reception at the home of [Fisk University] President and Mrs. Jones. We then attended a Feast [a Baha'i devotional and administrative meeting] at the home of Mrs. Johnson and remained during the evening in consultation with the local Baha'is and those who had come from other cities. The meetings held at Hermitage Hotel on Monday and Tuesday evenings were entirely public, and

42. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 259.

43. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 259.

44. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 259.

45. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 260.

46. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 260.

47. See Minta B. Trotman to Shoghi Effendi, 16 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i027, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

advertised in the press in exactly the same way as the meeting at Fisk. Considerable publicity was obtained, and the Message [sic] was given over the Radio [sic]. One of the evenings we accepted an invitation to meet a group of some twenty persons in a private home, where the Message [sic] was clearly explained, and this meeting was the only one confined to white persons.⁴⁸

Holley's letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* (which, evidently, was co-authored by Mountford Mills)⁴⁹ was sent through Alice Parker. In his reply to Parker, Holley suspected that it was a Baha'i who gave Du Bois this misinformation: "There is, however, one very troubling aspect of the matter, and that is, how did Dr. DuBois arrive at his conclusion without instigation from some believer? The friends in Nashville have been perfectly satisfied, because the teaching work was carried on in consultation with the local assembly (mostly colored)."⁵⁰ There is some evidence that "DuBois has in all probability been approached by some disaffected Baha'i."⁵¹ This may have been Ludmila Bechtold in New York.⁵² Du Bois himself wrote: "Meantime there arose within the Baha'i Movement a tendency to blame Mrs. Bechtold for originally revealing the Jim Crow policy at Nashville, coupled with an effort to deny that anything untoward took place."⁵³ To her credit, perhaps, Bechtold wrote to Du Bois, expressing her disappointment over his *Pittsburgh Courier* column. She was an eyewitness, having "attended because I have friends in Nashville, at Fisk University and also because of the Baha'i aspect."⁵⁴ Bechtold, however, does not offer any specifics as to the meetings themselves. Indeed, it appears, based on a survey of the relevant archival documents in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, that the most vocal critic was Minta B. Trotman of Brooklyn.⁵⁵

On behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly, Horace Holley published a rebuttal that appeared in a subsequent issue of the *Courier* but which, because of its length, was run only in the newspaper's Southern states edition.⁵⁶ The typescript version of Horace Holley's letter, dated 3 November 1937, to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reads, in part:

Our attention has been called to the recent issue of the *Courier* in which, under the heading Forum, Fact and Opinion, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois has expressed his opinions

48. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada to Minta B. Trotman, 9 July 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i033, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. See also reel 48: frames 229 ff. (not quoted by Morrison). Enclosed with this cover letter is letter from Mountford Mills to Minta B. Trotman, 20 July 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i032, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

49. Horace Holley to Alice N. Parker, 4 November 1937, "National Spiritual Assembly" Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha'i Archives.

50. Horace Holley to Alice N. Parker, 3 November 1937, "National Spiritual Assembly" Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha'i Archives.

51. Horace Holley to Mountford Mills, 3 November 1937, "National Spiritual Assembly" Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha'i Archives.

52. See Ludmila Bechtold, reel 48: frame 737, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

53. Du Bois to Lawrence A. Hautz ("Memo to Mr. Hautz"), 8 January 1952, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b137-i035, 1, reel 68: 365, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

54. Ludmila Bechtold to W. E. B. Du Bois, 20 February 1938, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i503, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

55. At least twenty-seven letters — to, from, and referencing Minta B. Trotman — are archived in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

56. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 261.

concerning the Baha'i attitude toward the race problem in the United States. Every American Baha'i will heartily welcome such an opportunity to record the true facts in this important question . . . Coming now to the one detail upon which your contributor has based his cursory view that the Baha'is are untrue to their fundamental principles, — the method adopted for carrying the teachings to the Southern States, — it need only be pointed out that your contributor's assumption of fact is wholly inaccurate, and his interpretation of method or policy is, from the point of view of the Baha'is, irrelevant. We who were actually present at the meetings he refers to can state without qualification that they were all freely attended by members of his own race. It was ascertained in advance that the meetingplace [sic] on the occasions of these public lectures would be open to admission without discrimination, and the hotel management entirely fulfilled its agreement on this point. As for the policy: This simply means that, in a social environment officially endorsing certain forms of prejudice, Baha'i teachers will make their first contacts with each race separately, and as individuals are brought to the point of accepting the principle of the oneness of mankind they will be received into the Baha'i community where no prejudice or discrimination is permitted to exist. The ultimate purpose of all Baha'i teaching, the establishment of a spiritual community free from any form of prejudice, has not been undermined but considerably furthered by this method or approach representing an honest and impartial analysis of what the Baha'is admit is the most difficult problem in America. It should be pointed out, moreover, that the first in that particular series of meetings, advertised as prominently as the other meetings, was held in a Negro University [i.e. Fisk University]. The Baha'i teachers made efforts to bring the faith and its universal principles to the attention of the entire population, and not to one section of it alone.⁵⁷

Morrison mentions a letter by Marion Little, who knew Du Bois and who had helped organize the Nashville meetings. In her letter to him dated 15 November 1937, Little provides a firsthand, eyewitness account of the Nashville meetings.⁵⁸ A few excerpts will give the reader a fair impression of Marion Little's statement of the facts:

It was with great surprise and profound sadness that I read your article in the Pittsburgh Courier of October 30.

I have grieved that you were willing to report an event which obviously you had not sufficient interest to investigate, for if you had you would have found it to be untrue.⁵⁹

I was sent to Nashville last December to make arrangements for the first public meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is to be held in a Southern city. This work was done with consultation and cooperation of the members of the Baha'i Faith in that city, and for your information the majority of these members are of your race. On Jan. 12, 1937, a public meeting was held in the Ball Room [sic] of the Hermitage Hotel and both races were present. Later in March another meeting was held at the Hermitage Hotel and both races were present. And I might state that this was the first time in a conservative hotel in a Southern city that both races were

57. Horace Holley (on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada), letter dated 3 November 1937 to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, National Spiritual Assembly Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha'i Archives.

58. Mrs Raymond D. [Marion] Little to W. E. B. Du Bois, 15 November 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i443, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. See also reel 47: frame 748.

59. Marion Little to Du Bois, 15 November 1937, p. 1, MS 312, reel 47: 748, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

represented. And [th]is is proof that the spirit which motivates the Baha'i Faith has the power to overcome prejudice of all kinds.⁶⁰

With the possible exception of the Monday 11 January 1937 event, which Trotman claimed was reserved for whites only, this eyewitness account is significant in setting the facts straight (and for pointing out the fact that "the majority of these members are of your race"); but this does not seem to have swayed Du Bois in the least. He appears to have been more critical of the policy by Shoghi Effendi that he cited. In his reply of 1 December 1937, Du Bois explains:

I did not comment on the new Baha'i race attitude with pleasure but rather with sorrow. I have your letter and I have talked with Mr. Gregory. You and Mr. Gregory disagree on one point. Mr. Gregory admits that there was a meeting of the Baha'i at the hotel in Nashville but says that colored people were not invited because it was a private meeting. I knew, of course, that there were some meetings to which colored people were invited [sic, read: "were not invited"] but I should not have taken exception even if there had been a private meeting. I can conceive many reasons why this should take place but I cannot conceive any reason why openly, publicly and suddenly this should be erected into a fixed policy of the Baha'i movement with the highest sanction. Nothing that either of you have said alters to my mind the essential fact that in the year 1937 of all years it was necessary for the spiritual head of the Baha'i movement to put down in black and white a sanction for race separation based on color . . . Of course I am convinced that a change has taken place and the change is this: Mr. Holley and others and your leaders are convinced that they cannot make headway with certain people in the South unless they draw the color line and they have, therefore, induced Shoghi Effendi openly to draw this line. I think as I have said before that this is nothing less than a shame for this otherwise promising movement.⁶¹

In his letter dated 17 December 1937, Du Bois added: "If this is not a new departure for the Baha'i, why was it necessary to state it in the year 1937 of all critical years?"⁶² Du Bois points out the discrepancy between Marion Little's and Louis Gregory's reports of the Hermitage Hotel meetings. Little said that both races were invited, while Gregory said that blacks were not. This only added to the confusion as to what really happened, but that is practically beside the point. Du Bois takes issue with what he describes as a public change in policy by no less than Shoghi Effendi that, in the South, the Baha'is should "draw the color line." This mischaracterizes the policy completely. The colour line had already been drawn in the South.

Baha'is were trying their best to erase the colour line through a pragmatic principle of gradualism. The policy of holding completely integrated meetings among confirmed Baha'is remained unchanged. The only alteration of this policy was, as a temporary measure, to hold racially separate public meetings in a Jim Crow society where the races were already separate. By meeting

60. Marion Little to Du Bois, 15 November 1937, p. 2, MS 312, reel 47: 748, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (repeated on frame 749).

61. W. E. B. Du Bois to Mrs. Raymond D. [Marion] Little, 1 December 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i444, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

62. W. E. B. Du Bois to Loulie Albee Mathews, 17 December 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b083-i026, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers; see also the variant letter, identifier: mums312-b083-i025.

separately, the intent was to pragmatically work within the context of the colour line, but with the ultimate aim of obliterating it. It was a grand subterfuge of the "separate but equal" status quo, in order to gradually transform it from within. This temporary measure was by no means a reversal of Baha'i policy; rather, it was a practical tactic aimed at erasing the colour line over time. Although he quoted Shoghi Effendi accurately,⁶³ Du Bois cited Shoghi Effendi incompletely, as Morrison is quick to point out: "Dr. DuBois went on to quote — with virtually complete accuracy — Shoghi Effendi's approval of the policy but not his reminder that the goal must be 'ultimate fusion of the two races' once the individuals became Baha'is."⁶⁴ This omission is telling.

Louis Gregory, in his letter dated 29 March 1943 to Du Bois, explained the wisdom behind holding racially separate introductory meetings and study groups:

At the time of the Nashville incident, on the basis of information which reached me, like your own, from a place remote from the scene, I was also of the opinion that the National body had fallen into error. But after visiting Nashville, hearing from the colored Baha'is there and considering the Teachings and Instructions for a third of a century, I know well that no error was committed. This I once tried to tell you⁶⁵ . . . Both 'Abdu'l Baha in his administration and Shoghi Effendi more recently, have permitted the friends in various Southern cities to start the races in separate study classes when deemed wise and necessary. This is on the principle of not expecting a person to have a college education when he enters college. But when a person accepts the Faith he must abandon all prejudices. Certainly he must know what it all means before making so radical a change⁶⁶ . . . It is passing strange that you do not see and value the noble ideals and marvelous achievements of the Faith which has encircled the Earth in the first century of its life and has done and is doing the humanly impossible thing in merging into oneness people of all colors, faiths, ranks and degrees. Heaven beckons, but hell also yawns! With regard and best wishes, Louis G. Gregory.⁶⁷

Du Bois definitively states his position on the Nashville controversy in a letter dated 8 January 1952.⁶⁸ Du Bois explains that he received "letters which passed between Mrs. Minta B. Trotman of Brooklyn, and Shoghi Effendi, Mr. Horace Holley, Mrs. M. P. Smyth, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Lulie [sic, read: 'Louli'] Mathews and myself," provided by "the surviving daughter, from whom I have received this correspondence," (i.e., the wife of "Probyn Thompson, in Brooklyn.")⁶⁹

63. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 22 March 1937, *Baha'i News*, no. 108 (June 1937), 1–2. Republished in Taylor, *The Pupil of the Eye*, 163–64. See "Baha'i News: Teaching in the Southern States, 22 March 1937," MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i043, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. This is a typescript enclosure in letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, 17 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i042, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

64. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 260–61.

65. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 262.

66. Louis G. Gregory to Du Bois, 29 March 1943, 2–3, reel 55: 348, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, quoted in Morrison, *To Move the World*, 262.

67. Louis G. Gregory to Du Bois, 29 March 1943, 6–7, reel 55: 350, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, not quoted by Morrison.

68. Du Bois to Lawrence A. Hautz ("Memo to Mr. Hautz"), 8 January 1952, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b137-i035, 1, reel 68: 365, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

69. Du Bois to Lawrence A. Hautz ("Memo to Mr. Hautz"), 8 January 1952, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b137-i035, 1, reel 68: 365, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

The following “Memo to Mr. Hautz” suggests that Minta B. Trotman, born in Nashville and who was an African American Baha’i, was herself disaffected by what she was told regarding the Nashville incident, and was evidently critical of Shoghi Effendi’s interim Baha’i policy in force at that time:

Mrs. Trotman is now dead. I knew her from 1888 until her death. She was born in Nashville of well-to-do parents . . . She was educated at Fisk University . . . [T]he surviving daughter, from whom I’ve received this correspondence, was a teacher in the New York Public Schools . . . Mrs. Trotman lived for many years in Brooklyn and had considerable real estate holdings. She was a close friend and associate with my first wife, Mrs. Nina G. Du Bois; with Mrs. Helen Curtis, widow of the U.S. Minister to Liberia; Mrs. Bibb, and several other colored women of standing. Through her they were attracted to the Baha’i Movement, and planned to join. Mrs. Trotman did join, but I think none of the others. They were repelled by the occurrences at the meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the U.S. and Canada, held in Nashville, Tenn. January 10–12, 1937 . . . I finally thought it was time for me to take a hand in the controversy, and in my column which I was then writing for the Pittsburgh Courier[,] I wrote a statement on “The Fall of the Baha’i” . . . I do not know whether anything further took place with regard to this matter. I do know that Mrs. Du Bois and Mrs. Curtis refused to join the Movement and that I, personally, lost interest.⁷⁰

Note that the letters, which would have contained specific factual information regarding the events in question, were not seen by Du Bois (“I do not have copies of these letters”). In a letter dated 12 May 1938 to Minta B. Trotman, Loulie A. Mathews wrote that she herself personally investigated the incident, and found that Trotman was completely misinformed:

I went to Nashville as I told you I should. There you will find no one to uphold your view. They are all frightfully down on Mrs. Bechtold, whom they feel made all the trouble and not any one [sic] else. They are in perfect harmony and have just elected a board of five Colored and four White people to serve during the coming year, so you see I cannot find one item to corroborate this sad, most sad story. It is sadder still to think that after years of warm friendship with you, with Dr. Du Bois, his wife, with Mrs. Bibb that someone, a stranger should come into my life and sweep away dear, precious friends.⁷¹

That Du Bois got the facts wrong does not end the inquiry. There’s still the question of the interim policy of Shoghi Effendi. That policy, which Du Bois accurately quoted in his column, was pursuant to a previous policy in 1936, which was as follows:

The holding of public meetings in that city should be avoided only in case it would lead to grave and very serious results. Slight local criticisms and unpopularity should not act as deterrent. The issue should be met squarely and courageously, and an effort should be made to attract at first the most cultured element among the colored, and through them establish contact with the white and the [colored]. Such individuals and groups, whether white or colored, who are relatively free from racial prejudice, should be approached, separately if necessary, and an endeavor should be made to bring them together eventually, not only on formal occasions and for specific

70. Du Bois to Lawrence A. Hautz (“Memo to Mr. Hautz”), 8 January 1952, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b137-i035, 1, reel 68: 365, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

71. Loulie A. Mathews to Minta B. Trotman, 12 May 1938, reel 49: 748, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (enclosure, Minta B. Trotman to Loulie A. Mathews, 16 May 1938).

purposes, but in intimate social gatherings, in private homes as well as in formally recognized Baha’i centers.⁷²

Note that this strategy was “attract at first the most cultured element among the colored” and then, through their influence, reach the wider population of both races. It should also be understood that the meetings at Fisk University and the Hermitage Hotel were, according to Horace Holley, publicly advertised, open to all, and were racially integrated.

Had he been in possession of the correct facts, Du Bois still could have taken umbrage over the one meeting that was “confined to white persons” simply because it was in a private home, as Horace Holley explained: “One of the evenings we accepted an invitation to meet a group of some twenty persons in a private home, where the Message [sic] was clearly explained, and this meeting was the only one confined to white persons.”⁷³

Ironically, in 1927 Du Bois had even conceded that the idea of a separate Negro state was “feasible.”⁷⁴ In the January 1934 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois published his fateful editorial, “Segregation,” advocating “nondiscriminatory segregation”⁷⁵ as a pragmatic solution to social and economic problems among African Americans, in which he envisioned the development of black culture within white America, including voluntary residential segregation. This directly contradicted the NAACP core ideology of integration, igniting a fiery debate between Du Bois and Walter White that ended in Du Bois’s resignation as editor of *The Crisis* and from the NAACP itself in May 1934.⁷⁶

By contrast, Shoghi Effendi’s interim policy was to pragmatically avoid sparking harmful controversy in a social climate that greatly frowned on anything that would disturb the Jim Crow status quo. His approach was gradualist and quietist — indeed, an adroit disguised acceptance of the Jim Crow status quo — yet without compromise to the bedrock Baha’i principle of “race amity.”

Conclusion

The first page of the invitation to (and programme of) the 10 January 1937 public meeting at Fisk University reads: “You are cordially invited to attend a public meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada on the need of a new world order[,] Sunday January Tenth

72. Shoghi Effendi (through his secretary), “Letters from the Guardian,” *Baha’i News*, no. 103 (October 1936), 1, quoted in Morrison, *To Move the World*, 258–59.

73. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada to Minta B. Trotman, 9 July 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i033, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. Enclosed with a letter from Mountfort Mills to Minta B. Trotman, 20 July 1937, reel 48: frames 229 ff., W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (not quoted by Morrison).

74. G. Horne, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Greenwood, 2010), 117; W. E. B. Du Bois to James J. Jones, 2 September 1927, in Aptheker, *Correspondence Volume I*, 359–60.

75. See Du Bois, “Segregation,” *The Crisis* 41, no. 1 (January 1934): 20, reprinted in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections from The Crisis*, vol. 2, edited by H. Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Krauss Thomson Ltd, 1983), 727.

76. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Dr. Du Bois Resigns: The Full Text of His Letter and the Resolution of the N.A.A.C.P. Board Accepting His Resignation,” *The Crisis* 41, no. 8 (August 1934), 245–46. See also R. Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia, MS, and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 227–38.

3:30 P. M.[.] Fisk University Nashville.[.] No admission charge or collections taken.[.]⁷⁷ Two lectures were presented: “The Implications of a World Faith” and “Order for a Troubled World,” although no speakers are identified. Suffice it to say that, with the venue being a historically black university, this public meeting was integrated. This is confirmed by Minta B. Trotman herself, who wrote: “I think I state a fact when I say that only the meeting at Fisk University was free to all.”⁷⁸ As previously mentioned, Trotman acknowledged that, at the “Tuesday eve. [sic] meeting,” indeed “a few colored people were invited between fifteen and twenty.” Trotman did not appreciate the significance of the fact that the Baha’is succeeded in persuading the Hermitage Hotel to make an exception to its whites-only policy on Tuesday January 12 1937 (and possibly on the night before as well).

This leaves only the Monday January 11 1937 meeting in question, excluding the meeting of “some twenty persons in a private home” which, according to Horace Holley, “was the only one confined to white persons.” Trotman evidently did not know about this private meeting; but even if she had, she was concerned only with racially separate public Baha’i meetings, not with private: “To talk to small groups of people in private homes and try to interest them in the fundamental principles of the Baha’i Faith is an entirely different matter to having a large meeting at a hotel and sending invitations to one group and withholding them from another.”⁷⁹ Contrary to Trotman’s hearsay evidence, Holley, an eyewitness participant, is quite definite in stating, as previously recounted, that the “meetings held at Hermitage Hotel on Monday and Tuesday evenings were entirely public” and were “advertised in the press in exactly the same way as the meeting at Fisk” resulting in publicity in print and by radio. If the advertisements for the Hermitage Hotel meetings were ever to be found, such evidence would corroborate Holley’s eyewitness account over Trotman’s hearsay allegations. The only possible way to reconcile Trotman’s and Holley’s accounts is if Trotman mistook the meeting of “some twenty persons” in a private home one evening with the allegedly whites-only meeting at the Hermitage Hotel on 11 January.

The present writer did not succeed in locating an invitation to the public meetings held at the Hermitage Hotel on 11 and 12 January 1937. Notwithstanding, there is good evidence that, at no time, was there ever a public Baha’i event advertised with the least hint of segregation, as Louis Gregory noted on 13 December 1937: “I spoke to one of the members of the N.S.A. before leaving New York and he assured me that there was not contemplated any plan for advertized [sic] meetings which all races could not attend.” Gregory, who

77. “National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada, Invitation to a Public Meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada on the Need of a New World Order, c. January, 1937,” MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i043, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. Enclosed in W. E. B. Du Bois to Minta B. Trotman, 20 October 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i037, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

78. Minta B. Trotman to Mountford Mills, 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i041, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

79. Minta B. Trotman to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada, 16 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i029, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

had spent a week at Atlanta University, further wrote: "Dr. Du Bois gave me a very friendly and cordial welcome upon my arrival." When Gregory broached certain issues not explicitly described (but which almost certainly referred to the January 1937 Nashville incident), however, Du Bois was "rather annoyed than pleased."⁸⁰ Based on this and other supporting evidence, Du Bois did not swerve from his adamant criticism of Baha'i policy. Ironically, there is absolutely no evidence the present writer could find that any public Baha'i meeting was segregated. There is no way to say to what extent the policy was implemented, with discretion, in private meetings.

As such it is the present writer's conclusion that Shoghi Effendi's temporary policy, at which Du Bois took such public umbrage, was never implemented; this was a fleeting "paper policy" — at least insofar as public Baha'i events were concerned — that was effectively abandoned. In any case, Shoghi Effendi's responses to Minta Trotman's letters are not presently known to the author.⁸¹ The author is further of the opinion that Trotman's allegations regarding the Hermitage Hotel meetings were entirely without foundation: because Minta was a close friend, it was Nina Du Bois who brought these allegations to W. E. B. Du Bois's attention, and passed on Trotman's request that he publish "a letter but not until you have all the facts relative to the case."⁸² This request was ultimately realized in the "Fall of the Baha'i" column that appeared in the 30 October 1937 issue of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, but, unfortunately, was not based on all of the facts.

In a letter dated 15 November 1948, Du Bois disavowed belief in any world religion, including the "Baha'i faith":

I do not believe in the existence and rulership of the one God of the Jews. I do not believe in the miraculous birth and the miracles of the Christ of the Christians; I do not believe in many of the tenets of Mohammedanism and Buddhism; and frankly I do not believe that the Guardian of the Baha'i faith has any supernatural knowledge.⁸³

Yet, in 1953, Du Bois planned to attend an international Baha'i conference in India: "We wish in October, 1953, to attend the Intercontinental Conference of the Bahai Faith to be held in New Delhi, India."⁸⁴ But Du Bois was denied a passport, preventing his attending.

Clearly the Nashville controversy alienated W. E. B. Du Bois and his first wife, Nina Du Bois, from the "Baha'i Movement." Yet it is equally patent that

80. Louis G. Gregory to Minta B. Trotman, 13 December 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i039, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

81. See, for example, H. Rabbani to Minta B. Trotman, 5 February 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i026, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (includes a handwritten note by Shoghi Effendi); H. Rabbani to Minta B. Trotman, 16 August 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i036, also includes a handwritten note by Shoghi Effendi.

82. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 22 March 1937, *Baha'i News*, no. 108 (June 1937), 1–2. Republished in Taylor, *The Pupil of the Eye*, 163–64. See "Baha'i News: Teaching in the Southern States, 22 March 1937," MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i043, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. This is a typescript enclosure in letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, 17 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b082-i042, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

83. Du Bois to B. Moreno, 15 November 1948, reel 62: 381, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

84. Du Bois to Ruth R. Shipley, 23 March 1953, in H. Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume III, Selections, 1944–1963* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 345.

W. E. B. and Nina Du Bois's initial interest in the Baha'i religion illustrates how the Baha'i teachings effectively reached the black intelligentsia, even if the movement for interracial harmony during the Jim Crow era "seemed even then too fine a vision to be true of any ethic with an American following."⁸⁵ What Du Bois failed to appreciate was that the rationale behind the Baha'i policy was pragmatically aimed at subverting Jim Crowism in such wise that, as prudence dictated, the interim policy allowed "Baha'i teachers" to "make their first contacts with each race separately, and as individuals are brought to the point of accepting the principle of the oneness of mankind they will be received into the Baha'i community where no prejudice or discrimination is permitted to exist."⁸⁶



Figure 3 Board of Directors of the Encyclopedia of the Negro (1936), with W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts.

What was the immediate aftermath of the Nashville incident within the Nashville Baha'i community itself? In June 1937, Louis Gregory wrote that

85. Du Bois, "The Fall of the Baha'i," 11. Ironically, one of Du Bois's great-grandsons, Arthur Edward McFarlane II, is a committed Baha'i. See C. O'Connor, "In the shadow of W.E.B. Du Bois," *The Denver Post*, 13 January 2009, accessed 15 July 2012, http://www.denverpost.com/carman/ci_11438954.

86. Horace Holley (on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada), letter dated 3 November 1937 to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, National Spiritual Assembly Secretary Correspondence: Pittsburgh, PA Local Spiritual Assembly, National Baha'i Archives.

Alain Locke (Fig. 3), a highly respected member of the Baha’i community, had visited the Nashville Baha’is:

A letter from one of the Nashville C. [City] [Baha’i] friends, received yesterday, assures that that [sic] community is in the greatest state of love, confidence & harmony, have been blessed with inspiring visits from distinguished Baha’is, among them Prof. Locke of Howard University and that during the recent special activities two “mixed” meetings were held at the Hermitage Hotel[.] This good news, I am sure will be the cause of joy to you as it is to me.⁸⁷

While it is quite possible that Locke was present at one or both of the 11 to 12 January 1937 Hermitage Hotel meetings, it seems more likely that Locke had attended the March 1937 meeting in the very same venue. Absent further facts, it is impossible to say; but this much can be said: Gregory’s postcard simply could not be accounted for if there had been a segregation policy or problem within the Nashville Baha’i community.

As splendid exceptions to the Jim Crow nightmare, the Baha’i interracial initiatives, with their precocious social ethic, prefigured Dr Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I have a dream” vision of America and his “world house” global vision. Sadly, these ennobling efforts did not have a lasting impact, except insofar as their memory became inspirational for future cycles of Baha’i interracial endeavours. Yet another inhibiting factor was the centrality and dominance of the independent black churches that served as beacon and bastion for their respective communities. A further factor was the relative foreignness of a “transplanted” religion, one that had not yet been fully understood nor assimilated into the host culture.

A sister publication sheds light on the relationship of two other giants of the black intelligentsia — Robert S. Abbott and Alain Leroy Locke — to the Baha’i Faith, both of whom embraced the new religion and became its most notable African American adherents.⁸⁸ While somewhat reticent over his Baha’i affiliation in his immediate professional circles, and in his “on stage” performances as a public intellectual, Locke publicly championed what are quintessentially both core Baha’i and universal values: “On the one hand there is the possibility,” Locke wrote to the *New York Times* in 1931, “of a fine collaboration spiritually between these two groups [black and white] with their complementary traits and qualities. They have great spiritual need, the one of the other, if they will so see it.”⁸⁹ Locke stated quite the same in *The Negro in America* (1933):

If they will but see it, because of their complementary qualities, the two racial groups have great spiritual need, one of the other. It would truly be significant in the history

87. Postcard from Louis G. Gregory to Minta B. Trotman, 22 June 1937, MS 312, identifier: mums312-b084-i031, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

88. C. Buck, “The Baha’i ‘Race Amity’ Movement and the Black Intelligentsia in Jim Crow America: Alain Locke and Robert S. Abbott,” *Baha’i Studies Review* 17 (2012): 3–46.

89. Alain Locke quoted in “Says Art Raises Status of Negroes: Dr. Alain Locke Declares Nation is Re-evaluating Race for Its Contributions,” *New York Times*, 8 September 1931, 17. Locke, who was in Germany at the time, sent to the *New York Times* the text of his paper entitled “The Negro in Art,” which had been read in absentia on 7 September 1931, at the Conference of International Student Service, held at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. The *New York Times* excerpted the paper in its article.

of human culture, if two races so diverse should so happily collaborate, and the one return for the gift of a great civilization the reciprocal gift of the spiritual cross-fertilization of a great and distinctive national culture.⁹⁰

Among contemporary black intellectuals, Cornel West, Class of 1943 University Professor in the Center for African American Studies — who in stature and influence may be compared with W. E. B. Du Bois — has recently expressed his admiration of the Baha’i race amity efforts:

When you talk about race and the legacy of white supremacy, there’s no doubt that when the history is written, the true history is written, the history of this country, the Baha’i Faith will be one of the leaven in the American loaf that allowed the democratic loaf to expand because of the anti-racist witness of those of Baha’i faith. So that there is a real sense in which a Christian like myself is profoundly humbled before Baha’i brothers and sisters and the Dizzy Gillespie’s and the Alain Locke’s and so forth.⁹¹

History will tell whether Cornel West’s prediction will come true; that is, if a revisionist history, at long last, chronicles the fact that the Baha’i “race amity” efforts audaciously sought to overcome Jim Crowism by openly preaching, and putting into practice, interracial harmony, thereby attracting the interest of the black intelligentsia.

90. A. Locke, *The Negro in America* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1933), 50.

91. In the same video, Cornel West also states: “I have come to have a profound admiration for brothers and sisters of the Baha’i Faith. I’ve actually met Dizzy Gillespie and he, of course, one of the great artists of the 20th century, was of Baha’i Faith, and talked over and over again about what it meant to him. Alain Locke, of course, probably one of the greatest philosophic minds of the middle part of the 20th century, was also of Baha’i Faith, the first Black Rhodes scholar and chairman of the philosophy department at Howard University, for over 42 years. What I’ve always been taken by is the very genuine universalism of the Baha’i Faith, one of the first religious groups to really hit racism and white supremacy head on, decades ago. By decades, I mean many decades ago and remain consistent about it.” 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-is-in-establishing-racial-unity>.