

Messengers of God in North America Revisited:¹ An Exegesis of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Amír Khán²

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Abstract

The following paper is cast in the form of a conversation between two Bahá'í scholars, Dr. Donald Francis Addison and Dr. Christopher Buck, in an emic/etic

¹ Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Pauline Tuttle (d. 2007), of partly East Coast Mi'kmaq as well as of African, Irish, and British ancestry and, by marriage, of "the People of the Salmon" — that is, of Stó:ló, Ditidaht, and Cowichan heritage. She was Adjunct Professor of Ethnomusicology, University of Victoria School of Music, author of *The Hoop of Many Hoops: The Integration of Lakota Ancestral Knowledge and Bahá'í Teachings in the Performative Practices of Kevin Locke* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2002) and other works, having dedicated her life and career to Native cultures and Bahá'í enlightenment. See also Pauline Tuttle, "Beyond Feather and Beads: Interlocking Narratives in the Music and Dance of Tokeya Inajin (Kevin Locke)." *Selling the Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures*. Edited by Diana Royer and Meyer Carter Jones (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 2001). Formerly, Dr. Tuttle was also an instructor at Malaspina University-College (in Nanaimo, British Columbia), Maxwell International Bahá'í School (at Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia), and the University of Washington (Seattle). She also, among other things, helped to establish and coordinate the Tawacin Waste Win Indigenous Studies Special Interest Group of the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

Dedicated also to the memory of the late Dr. David S. Ruhe (1914–2005), former member of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith. Elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in 1959, Dr. Ruhe served as its secretary from 1963 until 1968, when he was elected to the Universal House of Justice. His service on the democratically-elected Universal House of Justice extended for five terms of five years each until 1993. Medical doctor, accomplished film-maker, painter, and author, Dr. Ruhe produced scores of medical films, winning the Golden Reel Award (1957), the first Golden Raster award (1967), the Venice Film Festival award, and the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain award for his productions, eventually leading to his appointment as Director of the Medical Film Institute for the Association of American Medical Colleges. Prior to his passing in 2005, Dr. Ruhe was planning to produce a film documentary on Native Americans and the Bahá'í Faith. He personally believed that the Iroquois culture-hero, Deganawidah, was "an astonishing Prophet of Peace" (idem, "A New Evolution: Religious Bonding for World Unity," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 6.4 (1994-1995): 45–57 [45]), and that the time was ripe for the Bahá'í Faith to formally establish the "category" of Native Messengers of God "at the least" and to recognize "Deganawida as indigenous Prophet at the most" — and that such would be "a great service" to the Bahá'í Faith's outreach to indigenous peoples. (See Appendix Three, *infra*.)

² The question of whether Bahá'í doctrine can accept, in principle, the existence of "Messengers of God to First Nations" — on a par with those "Manifestations of God" that the Bahá'í Faith already recognizes — was first addressed by Buck in 1996. In this 2007 joint venture by Buck and Addison, this question is "revisited." This time, the centerpiece of the discussion is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablet to Amír Khán* which, in part, declares: "Undoubtedly in those regions [America] the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now." By way of disclaimer, the authors admit that this text is susceptible of multiple interpretations, both for and against the existence of Native Messengers.

As a "spectrum hypothesis," both maximalist and minimalist readings confirm and uphold the divine inspiration of indigenous spiritual traditions. *Maximalist reading*: Great Manifestations of God appeared among the Native Americans and raised directly the Call of God, Their teachings being to some extent forgotten, but Their influence not lost, and restored through Bahá'u'lláh. *Minimalist reading*: The Call of God, proclaimed in the East by the Manifestations of God, was raised among Native Americans through their seers, sages, and holy men, who were inspired by God to impart the light of His teachings unto their people. Both readings sacralise and legitimize Native tradition, and furnish bridges for the cultural appropriation of the Bahá'í Faith into Native spiritual idioms. Both readings delegitimize and undermine colonialist approaches to Native spirituality that place before Native converts an "either/or" choice between their Native traditions and the Bahá'í Faith. In the following paper, Buck and Addison present a *maximalist* reading as an alternative to the *minimalist* reading that seems to prevail in current Bahá'í thinking. The reader is free to agree or disagree with this *maximalist* reading of the *Tablet to Amír Khán*.

Let the reader bear in mind that Buck and Addison are proposing a formal recognition of the "principle" of "Messengers of God to First Nations" and not necessarily the "principals" by name (that is, any purported Native Messengers of God such as Deganawidah and White Buffalo Calf Woman) except insofar as to accord Them recognition and respect, as one important and highly symbolic dimension of the Bahá'í-Native encounter.

(insider/outsider) collaboration that offers a complement of Native/non-Native perspectives. Their work takes the form of an experimental alternative to traditional models of academic discourse — one called “conversive relationality,”³ broadly defined as follows: “A conversive model of communication and scholarship...firmly rooted within the sacred, emphasizing relationality, intersubjectivity, and collaboration...[to] reinform and transform academic...writing and scholarship.”⁴

The exchange between Dr. Addison⁵ and Dr. Buck⁶ addresses the critical need to fully transform intercultural interactions between Native American/Native Canadian and mainstream Bahá’í communities, and that this process can be renewed through a formal recognition, on the part of the Bahá’ís, of the value and authenticity of Native American spirituality. One way that this can be achieved symbolically is through acknowledging that, in principle, the indigenous peoples of the Americas have their own claim to wisdom traditions, and that these traditions derive from “Messengers of God to First Nations.” This principle is anchored, Buck and Addison argue, in the *Tablet to Amír Khán Áhan*. And while Bahá’ís cannot officially add names of individuals who might otherwise qualify as “Manifestations of God,” they can certainly “recognize” the fact that sacred Indian tradition has. This new rapprochement, if successfully undertaken, will signalize

³ See Susan B. Brill de Ramírez, “Conversive Relationality in Bahá’í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self.” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 1995, 7(2), 1–28.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ An elder in the Choctaw community, Dr. Donald Addison has a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology. He currently teaches Native American Music and African Music courses for both undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Oregon on a part-time basis, having proposed and designed these courses for adoption in the curriculum. He is also instructor of Ethnic Studies and Anthropology at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, and teaches at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, as well. Dr. Addison is currently earning his second Ph.D. in the Department of Linguistics at the [University of Oregon](#). For the “[Wisdom of the Elders Radio Programs](#)” Series Three (funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, the Oregon Arts Commission, and Spirit Mountain Community Fund, Grand Ronde, Oregon), Dr. Addison hosts “Speaking Native” in the eight, one-hour public radio programs on Native languages of the Lewis and Clark Trail. The “Tribal Rhythms” segments — which introduce Native music through interviews with Native American musicians who share the history and background of the traditional music and dance of featured tribes — is likewise scripted by Dr. Addison. As a team member in the “Wisdom of the Elders Curriculum Project,” Dr. Addison is helping to develop multimedia American Indian curriculum materials for schools in collaboration with the State of Oregon Department of Education’s Indian Education office and other agencies. (See also Donald Addison, “Native Americans and the Bahá’í Faith,” *The Community College Moment*, 2002, 2(1), 68–76.

⁶ Dr. Christopher Buck is an attorney-at-law and independent scholar. Author of *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (2005), *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Bahá’í Faith* (1999), *Symbol and Secret: Qur’an Commentary in Bahá’u’lláh’s Kitáb-i Iqán* (1995/2004), and editor of *Generation Y Speaks Out: A Policy Guide* (2002), Dr. Buck has recently been admitted to Bar of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He now works as an attorney-at-law for the law firm of Pribanic & Pribanic (White Oak, PA). At Michigan State University (2000–2004), Quincy University (1999–2000), Millikin University (1997–1999), and Carleton University (1994–1996), Dr. Buck taught American studies, African American studies, Islamic studies, and religious studies. “Religious Myths of America” (2003–2004) and “African American Spirituality and the Conscience of America” (Spring 1999) are among the courses he designed and taught during his ten years as a professor. Dr. Buck has published several contributions to American Indian studies: Christopher Buck, “Bureau of Indian Affairs.” *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. Edited by Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008); “[Never Again: Kevin Gover’s Apology for the Bureau of Indian Affairs](#).” *Wicazo Sa Review* 2006, 21(1), 97–126; “Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets,” *Reason & Revelation: New Directions in Bahá’í Thought*. Edited by Seena Fazel and John Danesh (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2002), 172–201; and “[Native Messengers of God in Canada?: A Test Case for Bahá’í Universalism](#),” *Bahá’í Studies Review*, 1996, 6, 97–133. Presented at the 18th Annual Conference. Association for Bahá’í Studies (Aug. 1994, Cambridge MA), and given “Award for Excellence in Bahá’í Studies” by the late Dr. David S. Ruhe, on behalf of the ABS, at that same conference. For another Bahá’í perspective on Deganawidah, see Aram Gomez, “Tree of Peace and the Coming of Bahá’u’lláh,” presented at the Irfan Colloquia, Session #2 (English), Bahá’í National Center: Wilmette, IL (March 25–27, 1994). [Abstract online](#).

the intercultural parity and equality that is needed before the indigenous peoples of the Americas can find inspiration and empowerment in what has been characterized as the sole “specific racial prophecy in all of the Bahá’í scriptures,”⁷ which is this: “Attach great importance to the indigenous population of America. For ... there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world.”⁸

[BUCK] *Halito. Chahta iskitini anumpuli li. Chim achukma?* (“Hello. I [now] speak a little Chahta [Choctaw]. Are you well?”). Don, I just downloaded a 2005 Master’s thesis on Aboriginal-Bahá’í relations in British Columbia. I was quite surprised by the author’s findings, and was wondering if you could help me understand? In her thesis, “*As ye have faith so shall your powers and blessings be*”: *The Aboriginal–Bahá’í Encounter in British Columbia*, Chelsea Dawn Horton — who is now a Ph.D. candidate at the University of British Columbia — has chronicled the notable growth of the Bahá’í religion in western Canada.⁹ In an online interview, Horton attributes the initial successes of the Bahá’í outreach to indigenous communities to the Bahá’í tradition of “legitimizing, honouring and validating native spiritual prophecies and practices.”¹⁰ Notwithstanding the promising overtures and high hopes, however, Horton concludes: “Relatively few of the over nine hundred Aboriginal people who enrolled in the Bahá’í Faith [in British Columbia] between 1948 and 1992 ultimately became active adherents...”¹¹ And further: “Despite such empowering impact, however, patterns of non-Aboriginal cultural dominance encountered within the Bahá’í community simultaneously suggest the pervasiveness of the colonial legacy and the potency of contemporary social context; good intentions proved insufficient to fully transform intercultural interactions.”¹² In your experience, has Horton identified a real problem here? *Ak akostinincho.* (“I don’t understand.”)

[ADDISON] Yes, this is a very real problem — one that has not been sufficiently recognized in the Bahá’í community. This is a perfect, although sobering, example of some of the contributions that scholarship can bring in terms of cross-cultural awareness. But first, let’s review the history of the “Aboriginal-Bahá’í encounter,” as Horton terms it. What reasons explain the growth of the Bahá’í Faith among Native Americans? Why do indigenous Bahá’ís find such ready acceptance of their peoples and traditional cultures among Bahá’ís of other cultures and ethnic groups? Why has the Bahá’í Faith steadily grown among Native peoples from its earliest Native converts

⁷ Andrew Pemberton-Piggot, *The Bahá’í Faith in Alberta, 1942–1992: The Ethic of Dispersion* (Master’s thesis: University of Alberta, 1992), 34. Cited by Chelsea Dawn Horton, “Beyond Red Power: The Alternative Activism of Dorothy Maquabeak Francis,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 2004, 14(3/4), 35–71 [43].

⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, IL: U.S. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1993), 33.

⁹ Chelsea Dawn Horton, “*As ye have faith so shall your powers and blessings be*”: *The Aboriginal–Bahá’í Encounter in British Columbia* (Master’s thesis: Simon Fraser University, 2005).

¹⁰ Dept. of History, Simon Fraser University, “Making Connections.” *Primary Source* 4 (June 2006): 11.

¹¹ Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá’í Encounter in British Columbia*, iii (Abstract).

¹² *ibid.*

dating back only approximately seven to eight decades? And what characterizes the informal and formal recognition of Native American traditional prophets — which has such enormous symbolic significance for many Native peoples — by adherents and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith?

Like Ms. Horton, I have conducted my own research on these matters for a number of years. Research at the community level for this study stems from individual interviews I have carried out with both Native and non-Native peoples — both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í — over approximately 40 years in both the U.S. and Canada. Such a study poses interesting questions for students of the social sciences and the history of religion. Ever increasing numbers of Native peoples are also watching the mounting instances of Native community involvement in the Bahá'í Faith. Unlike the spread of Christianity within Indian country, the Bahá'í Faith has never been associated with a fortification of colonial occupation, Euro-American assimilation, or forced conversions of Native Americans.¹³

[BUCK] Yes, that's quite true. In fact, one notable Bahá'í figure has, in fact, apologized for the devastation that colonialism has visited upon Native peoples. In a joint letter addressed to the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Canada and the United States, Rúhíyyih Khánúm (wife of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921–1957) expressed some of her concerns following her trip throughout Canada and the United States in the spring of 1960:

Bahá'u'lláh warned us against the evils of civilization when carried to extremes, the Master and particularly the Guardian, elaborated on this theme until at the end of his life. Shoghi Effendi fairly thundered against our civilization — particularly the American variety of it...

I remember when we had the first Japanese pilgrim here, Shoghi Effendi said to him that the majority of the human race was not white and that the majority of Bahá'ís would not be white in the future. As up until very recently the Bahá'ís of the world were almost exclusively white it is only natural that their virtues and their faults should have colored the Faith and its community life. It is illogical to suppose that what we have now is either mature or right; it is a phase in the development of the Cause; when peoples of different races are incorporated in the world-wide community (and in local communities) who can doubt that it will possess far greater power and perfection and be something quite different from what we have now?...

¹³ While my purpose is not to criticize religions or missionaries of any denomination, clarification must be made here. In my many years of college teaching, I am often amazed at how little of the accurate record of the Christian conversions of Indians is either known, understood, or even acknowledged. For example: "Beginning in 1644, Puritans took over Indian communities...which meant that Indians were forced to dress and follow Puritan proprieties and profess Christianity, or else be flogged." Alice B. Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1981 [3d edn., 2006]), 234.

Bahá'u'lláh said the black people are like the pupil of the eye and sight is in the pupil: When Bahá'u'lláh likens the Negro race to the faculty of sight in the human body — the act of perception with all it implies — it is a pretty terrific statement. He never said this of anyone else...

I am convinced that if we start mass conversion of the Indians and Negroes, mass conversions of the whites will follow...

*I could see the American Indians straighten their shoulders when I asked their forgiveness for the injustices my race had done them and when I praised their great past.*¹⁴

These words of Rúhiyyih Khánum are quite powerful and give pause for thought! From these statements, we can see that the colonial legacy has not only wreaked havoc in “Indian Country” but has greatly conditioned the colonizers as well, with the lingering effects visible in the subtle, perhaps unconscious attitudes of many, if not most of the Bahá'ís within the dominant culture of North America. Yet the fact that Rúhiyyih Khánum was moved to express a formal apology to American Indians for what her race had done to them is extraordinary. This represents a clearly decolonizing attitude and goes far in explaining how and why Bahá'ís have, despite their cultural conditioning and other limitations, succeeded in crossing racial divides to widen the embrace of the Bahá'í community to include significant numbers of African Americans and Native Americans alike.

[ADDISON] Yes, I'm glad that you cited this extraordinary letter that Rúhiyyih Khánum was moved to write. Looking back historically, we can see that the early successes experienced by Bahá'ís in their outreach to Native Americans did not go unnoticed by non-Bahá'í observers. Some of the earliest helpful references to Native Americans and the Bahá'í Faith date back to the 1960s. Anthropologist Alice B. Kehoe encountered the Bahá'í Faith among aboriginal peoples and documented this in a pamphlet published in March, 1963, by the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History in Regina.¹⁵ In *Saskatchewan Indian Religious Beliefs*, she describes the influence of traditional Native religions, Christian beliefs, and other movements such as the Native American Church.¹⁶ Not to be confused with some type of eclectic movement, the Bahá'í Faith, she notes, is considered by its members to be a universal faith, not tied to any one particular culture, religious background, language, or even country of origin. She adds that it “does not deny the validity of native Indian beliefs, [and the Bahá'í

¹⁴ Hand of the Cause of God 'Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhiyyih Khánum, [joint letter 1961 dated to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada](#) (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Alice B. Kehoe, *Saskatchewan Indian Religious Beliefs*. Popular Series No. 7 (Regina: Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, 1976).

¹⁶ The Native American Church is also known as the Peyote religion, a cultural hybrid, representing a synthesis of traditional Indian beliefs and ritual with Christian dogma and symbolism.

Faith]...appeals to many Indians who are seeking a religion that is neither exclusively Indian nor dominated by white values and customs."¹⁷

Similarly, in the 39th Annual Report of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, 1964, William Wuttunee, Chief of the National Indian Council in Calgary, Alberta, writes of the success of the Bahá'ís. He states, in part, that they "are moving along quite quickly. They only started a few years ago and yet one-third of their people [one-third of the whole Bahá'í population of Canada] are Indians. I think they are converting practically whole Indian Reserves¹⁸ which hitherto had been Catholic or some other denomination. Why is it that they are making such headway? Because their attitude is different. Their attitude is this: Your religion [Native spirituality] is correct, the way you worship the great Spirit [Creator or God] is right. You should worship Him that way. But in addition we [the Bahá'ís] have something new to offer you. We have a new Prophet for this era. They are increasing the faith of the Indians, not detracting or replacing [it]. They accept Indians whole-heartedly...and Indians take an equal part [in Bahá'í activities and administrative institutions]."¹⁹ Not only Native writers but some non-Native anthropologists (and other non-Bahá'í sources) have documented the all-embracing manner in which Bahá'ís view indigenous peoples and cultures. Such accommodation is not, as some observers may be tempted to infer, tantamount to syncretism. It is better analyzed as a practical application of a Bahá'í universalism, that all religious truth — insofar as it is truth — proceeds from one source.

[BUCK] This is all very interesting. Please understand that I'm not trying to be dismissive of these fine beginnings. Yet the consolidation of Native Canadian Bahá'ís was lacking, and currently it seems that much of that initial work has been undone. As Chelsea Horton observes:

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the Bahá'í community of Canada set about realizing a specific racial prophecy concerning the Aboriginal inhabitants of North America revealed in 1916 by then-leader of the Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Sensing, by mid-century, that the Canadian Bahá'í community was sufficiently established to undertake concerted teaching efforts, the international and national Bahá'í administrations launched calls for a variety of teaching programs within Aboriginal communities that resulted in over fifty-four hundred declarations in Canada, over nine hundred of them in British Columbia, between the years 1948 and 1992.²⁰ Many, perhaps most, of these Aboriginal enrollments did not translate into

¹⁷.Quoted in Patricia Verge, *Angus: From The Heart* (Cochrane, Alberta: Springtide Publishing, 1999), 106–107.

¹⁸ An Indian Reserve in Canada is similar to an Indian Reservation in the U.S.

¹⁹.Quoted in Verge, *Angus: From The Heart*, 106.

²⁰. Statistics supplied by Lindsay Slavin (Department of Archives, Bahá'í National Centre), e-mail to the author, 15 Sept. 2004.

active participation in the Bahá'í Faith. Lacking in resources and maintenance procedures, the British Columbian Bahá'í community proved hard-pressed to consolidate new Aboriginal membership, resulting in large-scale drop-off. The significance, however, of the Aboriginal-Bahá'í encounter in the province lies beyond statistics.²¹

Can you give me an honest appraisal of the problems that the Aboriginal-Bahá'í encounter now faces? If, as Horton observes, the “significance...of the Aboriginal-Bahá'í encounter in the province lies beyond statistics,” what challenges confront the dominant Bahá'í community now?

[ADDISON] Horton's observation regarding “the pervasiveness of the colonial legacy” is absolutely most significant here. The history of the West is tainted with the notion that Indian culture (“uncivilized peoples”) must be taught how to be white. Most white Canadians and Americans have no clue with respect to how constantly they reinforce their own cultural assumptions, right or wrong, and pile them upon Indians, never willing or even interested in hearing our own Native view. I agree that the Bahá'ís in Canada and the U.S. have made some good headway in the honoring and validating native spiritual prophecies and principles. However, much more transformation along the lines of intercultural interactions within the Bahá'í international community needs to take place. In particular, I am referring specifically to most (but not all) of our non-Native Bahá'ís who find it impossible to break through the inner barriers of their own Euro-American culture.

Yes, “consolidation” follow-up was lacking in those Native communities, but I think the most paralyzing issue is cultural. When some Native believers were filling a Peace Pipe for Rúhíyyih Khánúm's visit, for example, at one conference where she spoke, lots of non-Native believers acted very disrespectful and treated the Peace Pipe ceremony as satanic. Rúhíyyih Khánúm treated it with the highest degree of love and respect and many believers were very rude to the Native peoples out of cultural ignorance. When all or most of the members of the U.S. and Canadian Bahá'í community are white, without any Indians, and they plan Ruhi study circles, or for a dinner for a fireside, or a public meeting for United Nations Day, all of the programming is white by culture. So what you have is that many white Bahá'ís think that their community life is Bahá'í when, in fact, it is more Euro-American in culture. For example, it is very traditional for most all Native peoples at the beginning of any gathering, whether for praying, singing, eating, etc., to quietly and unobtrusively to go and personally shake the hand and greet any elders in the room. Most Euro-Americans aren't often comfortable doing this because, they assume, “I don't know them, so I don't want to embarrass myself.” This lack of respect for elders — or call it simply a lack of awareness to show such respect —

²¹ Horton, *The Aboriginal-Bahá'í Encounter in British Columbia*, 2.

can extend to other seemingly commonplace situations, where Euro-American cultural assumptions unconsciously dictate behavior.

Accepting Bahá'u'lláh as the Healer — what Bahá'ís call the “Manifestation of God” for this day and age, Who can bring all of humanity together — is the first step. But unfortunately, most Euro-American believers just stop there. They begin a very deceptive process, not out of racism so much, but out of sheer unwillingness to step outside the boundaries of their own cultural assumptions. The reason why most believers in the West view their perception of Bahá'í culture as “universal” in principle — when it really isn't in practice — is because Westerners take it for granted.

[BUCK] Now let me see if I understand you correctly. Your anecdotal account seems to underscore the central problematic in the Bahá'í-Aboriginal encounter, as Horton alternatively frames it: “Patterns of paternalism and non-Aboriginal cultural dominance persisted within the Bahá'í community regardless of intense commitment to the overarching principle of unity in diversity. This suggests both the pervasiveness of the colonial legacy and the potency of contemporary social context. Like religious change, the transformation of intercultural interactions represents a process as opposed to event alone. Throughout the specific time period under consideration, however, good intentions, it seems, proved insufficient to fully achieve this goal.”²² Is Horton's observation a fair characterization? Let me hasten to add that I don't expect you to go into great detail, as you can paint the current scene in bold strokes, without compromising the Bahá'í ethic against backbiting, as Horton herself observes: “The process of oral history also demands sensitivity to the significance of silence as well as verbal articulation. Given Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition against ‘backbiting,’ which Bahá'ís take very seriously, a number of the consultants that I interviewed proved reticent to discuss potentially controversial issues or engage in critique of past people and events.”²³ So I will respect any reticence that you might have in being too specific in what you are about to say.

[ADDISON] Thank you for commenting on that ethic. Before I address this question, let me first say something about my training and experience, in order to establish the “ethos” (credentials/credibility) needed to inspire confidence in the reader that what I am about to say is borne of sufficient background and knowledge in these rather delicate matters. As you know, my Ph.D. is in ethnomusicology, and I'm currently in the process of acquiring a second Ph.D. in linguistics. The University here (i.e. the University of Oregon) rarely ever allows older students (I'm 64) to return to graduate school to get a second Ph.D. But their diversity policy is very

²² Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá'í Encounter in British Columbia*, 12.

²³ Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá'í Encounter in British Columbia*, 17.

strongly enforced here. Also the demand for Indians to work in linguistics (because of so many of our languages dying out as we speak) is so great, that they “invited” me to work toward a second Ph.D. in linguistics. However, the second Ph.D. will simply formalize and validate what I’ve been doing for some time now. I’ve taught Native American languages at the college level for many years, and in our local Native American student programs for the public schools as well. I script some of the “Wisdom of the Elders” programs and curricula projects which are produced for public radio broadcasts all across the country. So I think you’ll agree that what I am about to say comes from extensive experience as well as academic training in terms of framing these problematics and proposing possible solutions.

[BUCK] It’s clear that you’re a fellow academic. But there’s something you have that I don’t. Would you elaborate on that?

[ADDISON] For a minute there, you were making me feel like an anthropologist, looking from the outside in! This is what we academics call the “etic” approach. But I’m a mixed blood Choctaw. As a “real Indian,” as they say, I offer an “emic” perspective, looking at the inside out. In that sense, I guess you could say that I combine the training of an academic with the worldview of an authentic Native American perspective.

At my age, I’m considered an Elder and I speak four of our Native languages and teach them at the University level. As an Elder, I am authorized to bear the Eagle Staffs in ceremonial processions and offer the Native Prayers for most all the powwows in this area. I always use Bahá’í Prayers in Native languages publicly in these powwows and most all Indians in our area know that I’m a Bahá’í, and we’ve had some rather exciting Native seekers arise and declare themselves also Bahá’í. Elders who are strictly Christian or strictly traditional, likewise, pray publicly when called upon, in their own tradition. There’s no hard-and-fast rule applying to everyone. Any elder, asked to share a prayer at any of our Native community activities, can do so in any language, and from any religious tradition they choose. I can’t tell you the number of other elders and younger Indians who come up to me and say how good it is for them to hear American Indian languages in the prayers — because today, most Indians simply don’t speak their traditional Native language.

[BUCK] Don, your credentials are certainly impressive, and your experience as a member of the Choctaw Nation imbues you with authenticity. Now, let’s revisit the problem that Chelsea Horton has raised. Recall her conclusions regarding the Bahá’í-Native encounter in British Columbia, when she wrote: “Despite such empowering impact, however, patterns of non-Aboriginal cultural dominance encountered within the Bahá’í community simultaneously suggest the pervasiveness of the colonial legacy and the potency of contemporary social context; good intentions

proved insufficient to fully transform intercultural interactions.”²⁴ If this is true, then what went wrong? And, more importantly, what can be done about it?

[ADDISON] Whatever problems Horton has identified are really part of a larger set of issues. Patterns of oppression, based upon incorrect Euro-American perceptions of Indians, still exist. Due to the chronic lack of accurate information about our Native cultures, fantasies about Indians and our peoples, as well as our religions — attitudes largely inherited from the colonial past — are still very much with us. They plague the academy. They abound in the media. They are alive and well in society at large, and in the concepts that the general population of the U.S. still maintains about Indians. Many non-Indians, in fact, haven’t got a clue how hurtful it is when Euro-Americans make assumptions about our peoples and our beliefs. And these pompous and grossly inaccurate assumptions continue to abound because so few folks are courageous enough to speak up when a wrong has been committed.

[BUCK] How do these attitudes manifest themselves in Bahá’í-Native interactions? Can you give an example of a situation in which well-meaning Bahá’ís might say or do the wrong thing, without realizing it?

[ADDISON] Yes, that’s quite easy to do. Here’s a typical scenario that I’ve witnessed and experienced all too well. Remember I had spoken about our elders, whom we hold in the highest respect. At Native gatherings, the elders eat first. They go through the line to get their plates before all the rest of the peoples. Euro-Americans rarely ever do this. And Bahá’ís are usually following the Euro-American cultural prescriptions in community activities, oblivious to Indian mores and culture. So Indians just sit in amazement, hoping some day, “They will appreciate the elders, as we do.” Indians believe the elders have earned that right to be fed first, or go through the serving line first — that they have “paid their dues,” so to speak. I can’t tell you how painful it is to have to tell you that with few exceptions, when focusing Bahá’í teaching efforts among indigenous peoples, most white Bahá’ís are usually unwilling to even consider allowing elders to eat first.

When meeting Indians for the first time, most whites ask far too many questions. Even worse, when a white person thinks or assumes that they might have some Indian blood, to “make friends” with this Indian, that’s the first thing out of their mouth: “You know, I’m part Indian also!” “I have a great great great great great grandmother who was a Cherokee princess in our family ancestry.” Well, that’s actually the worst thing to do! Usually that kind of a statement, without any previous contact with those Indians, is considered phony and “sucking up.” I don’t go up to anyone and ask them “how much French blood do you have”? So why does someone want me to

²⁴ Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá’í Encounter in British Columbia*, iii (Abstract).

know that they have 1/64th Cherokee blood, and from a princess no less. Why aren't there ever any "princes" out there? Only "princesses"? For a very good reason! Women ancestors pose no threat, but male ancestors represented "the enemy" at one time! And why Cherokee? This is a common joke among Indians: if there truly were as many Cherokee princesses as some folks claim, the population of the Cherokee tribe would equal four times the whole USA!

I believe at the top of this list of cultural misunderstandings among white Bahá'ís is the notion that Native Americans of the whole Western Hemisphere (our Native elders tell us) had genuine divinely ordained Messengers of God. Rarely, if ever, have I seen these Native figures compared to Prophets of other nations and peoples around the globe *on an equal footing*. I agree with scholars Robert Ruby and John Brown when they underscore this lack of recognition based on a want of phenomenological parity:

Unlike the prophets of other religions, Smohalla and Skolaskin needed no credentials from church boards or other governing bodies to prove that their authority came directly from above. Both believed in a "covenant" not unlike that of Judeo-Christianity, to which they owed a debt. This covenant required that, since the Creator nourished his children, they in turn were obligated to use and gratefully protect the bounties so generously bestowed on them. Any threats to the relationship between them and the Creator, be they human or natural, required supplications and appeasements beyond those required of traditional worshipers. It seems ironic that, despite the similarity of the native prophets to those of *Judeo-Christian tradition*, *they were never accepted nor acknowledged as having merit by adherents of those faiths.*²⁵

My epistemological basis stands in direct contradiction to the lack of recognition that Ruby and Brown have noted above. As a believer in the Prophethood of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, I firmly believe in the efficacy and whole-hearted validity of these Native Messengers of God. Bahá'ís believe that all the Manifestations of God, or Prophets of God — these great Spiritual Seers or Teachers, by whatever name one chooses to call them — have appeared to all the peoples on earth at one time or another, and that these Messengers have received guidance from an unseen, otherworldly, divine source. These include Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, as well as the Founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh — *and to this list, I submit that we should include, among others, White Buffalo Calf Woman and*

²⁵ Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *Dreamer Prophets of the Columbia Plateau: Smohalla and Skolaskin*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989; Red River Books edition), 2002), 14–15 (emphasis added).

Deganawidah. I take the view here that these Prophets deserve acknowledgement of their contributions in their own cultural contexts, and should be acknowledged as such by the “outside world.” Western theologians and historians will advance in their understanding of our Native Prophets once they decide to remove the cultural and religious barriers to understanding that they themselves have constructed in their own minds. Furthermore, without trying to force these Native Messengers or spiritual guides into a mold imposed from any outside perspective, we should not deny the possibility that not only might Native Prophets internally share similar as well as contrasting characteristics with one another, but that their inclusion within a global context is only just and proper.

While Bahá’u’lláh does make statements to the effect that we, as have all peoples, had them, there are still obstacles to this acknowledgement. At a secondary level, many whites have certain superior cultural assumptions that Indians find very difficult to deal with, so some just stop trying. Some believers can’t even discuss the issue without critically taking to task the person that acknowledges that Bahá’ís officially accept the validity of Native Prophets. It’s far too difficult for them to break out of that cultural mold. I think this problem is cultural, not theological.

[BUCK] Are there any theological problems as well?

[ADDISON] Surprising as this may seem to many, if not most Bahá’ís, I would have to say, yes. Again, just as in the intercultural problems that I’ve just described, assumptions lie at the root. One such assumption is that if a Prophet of God isn’t named in some authoritative text, this must be a false Prophet. I don’t think that that is a Bahá’í belief. Rather, I attribute this to the dominant cultural assumptions that a certain view of history is the correct one, that their perception of the Bahá’í Teachings is the only valid one, and that if Native peoples have a different take on things, non-Native believers seem to just brush these aside. “They need a Ruhi study circle!” “Send him to a deepening class!” Third, most all white peoples accept as absolutely binding, the assumption that that Bering Straits theory must be correct because scientists came up with it.²⁶ For instance, Bahá’í scholar, Dr. Susan Maneck, in her review of your abridged article, “Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets,”²⁷ essentially reads the Bering Straits theory into a statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which we will discuss further in this article:

In terms of Bahá’í scholarship the most significant contribution of this article is bringing to the forefront a Tablet written by ‘Abdu’l-

²⁶ For a scholarly refutation of the Bering Straits theory from a Native American perspective, see Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Reissue edn.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997), 67–91.

²⁷ Christopher Buck, “Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets.” *Reason & Revelation: New Directions in Bahá’í Thought*. Edited by Seena Fazel and John Danesh. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2002. Pp. 172–201.

Bahá which explicitly addresses the issue of revelation in regards to the Native Americans. This Tablet, addressed to one Amir Khan of Teheran [sic], *acknowledges that at one time there was communication between Asia and America via the Bering Straits, the implication apparently being that they might have received revelation through this means.*²⁸

With all due respect to my colleague, this reading of a Bahá'í text reveals more about the cultural assumptions behind the reading rather than the "original intent" of the text itself, since 'Abdu'l-Bahá is simply acknowledging that the Bering Straits theory enjoyed wide currency, although, to be fair, Dr. Maneck can rely on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement in the same Tablet: "There are other signs which indicate communication."

Another thing is that Bahá'ís say, "We love all the Prophets of God," and then when we begin a discussion of specifics about Deganawidah, or White Buffalo Calf Woman, or others, I can see the believers pulling back. I can "hear" their "inner voices" saying, "Is this in the Writings?" Then I can see them pulling back, and disengaging. Physically their rejection can be read on their faces. And then I feel badly. I feel people buddy-up to us with friendship, but they really don't mean that Indians have "real" Prophets or Manifestations of God.

Some non-Native believers, I truly believe, try sincerely to overcome those invisible walls between our peoples, but a huge amount of work is yet to be done, and so far, with a few rare exceptions, it hasn't even begun.

[BUCK] Fair enough. But is the Bahá'í Faith taking root in Native American and Native Canadian cultures and contributing to the social amelioration and empowerment of those communities? It seems to me that what Chelsea Horton is saying is that the very question of forging what we might call "decolonizing" relationships is, in fact, a core issue. While we must not lose sight of power dynamics both internal and external to the Faith, Horton has found that the Bahá'í community has nevertheless proved a significant site of (oftentimes empowering) intercultural interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that warrants analysis in terms of its decolonizing achievements and potential. Horton writes:

This very question of forging what we might call "decolonizing" relationships is, in fact, a core issue that I hope to explore in much greater depth through my doctoral research. While we must not lose sight of power dynamics both internal and external to the Faith, the Bahá'í community has nevertheless proved a significant site of (oftentimes empowering) intercultural interaction between

²⁸ Susan Maneck, Review of "[Bahá'í Universalism and Native Prophets.](#)"

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that, to my mind, warrants analysis in terms of its decolonizing achievements and potential.²⁹

Notwithstanding the potential to achieve ideal intercultural relations, the Bahá'í-Native encounter has experienced some very real challenges. As a researcher directly observing (and also experiencing) these interactions in the course of her field work, Ms. Horton stresses the crucial role that non-Native Bahá'ís can play in bringing about true intercultural parity and reciprocity:

In terms of insights or lessons from my thesis research, perhaps the most painful and disheartening finding of my MA work was that concerning the difficulty Indigenous people continue to face in their interactions with so-called “dominant” society, where even in a context such as a Bahá'í gathering characterized by an open and inclusive atmosphere, the very act of engaging with (even the most well intentioned) non-Indigenous people can serve to invoke sentiments and memories of inferiority, marginalization, and oppression on the part of Indigenous participants. In terms of “relational dynamics” necessary to help balance such unequal power relations, as well as the more overt instances of discrimination and marginalization sometimes encountered in the Bahá'í community, in the context of my research in British Columbia, it was those non-Indigenous Bahá'ís who had committed themselves to Indigenous teaching over the long term, who had lived with Indigenous people and built personal, engaged, sustained relationships with them, who appear to have most effectively contributed to the neutralization of these pervasive power dynamics.³⁰

Yet, in light of the central problematic that Horton has identified (i.e. “patterns of non-Aboriginal cultural dominance encountered within the Bahá'í community simultaneously suggest the pervasiveness of the colonial legacy and the potency of contemporary social context; good intentions proved insufficient to fully transform intercultural interactions”), what needs to be done to fully transform Bahá'í-Aboriginal intercultural interactions? Might such a transformation begin with establishing intercultural religious parity between the dominant Bahá'í culture and the indigenous Bahá'í conclaves scattered throughout the First Nations of North America? Could that process begin, both doctrinally and symbolically, with an affirmation of the highest expressions of Native spirituality — that is, in a formal recognition that North America (and, by extension, all of the Americas) were not bereft of their own Prophets (to use an Abrahamic term)?

²⁹ Chelsea Horton (Ph.D. candidate, University of British Columbia), e-mail, dated 27 April 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck and Dr. Donald Addison, cited with permission.

³⁰ *ibid.*

[ADDISON] Yes, this is precisely where the application of an Abrahamic term — prophets — as applied to Native Messengers of God would carry manifest symbolic value. Better still would be to apply Bahá'í terminology — Manifestations of God — to the great Native Wisdom Bearers. At least this should be possible to do in principle, don't you think?

[BUCK] Let's explore a solution that begins with a symbolic transformation of the dominant Bahá'í culture's relationship to the Native American and other aboriginal Bahá'í communities. There may be a reading and linguistic argument whereby one could reach this result, such that "Messengers of God to First Nations" may now be presented as a valid Bahá'í principle, anchored in a clear, authoritative text. You'll recall that I had originally proposed the following conceptual scheme in "Native Messengers" article back in 1996:

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION
Messengers of God to First Nations*

Abraham
Krishna
Moses
Zoroaster
Buddha
Jesus
Muhammad
The Báb
Bahá'u'lláh

* Sacred tradition names such Messengers as Deganawidah, Quetzalcoátl and Viracocha (Iroquois, Toltec, Inca traditions in North, Central, and South America).

Let me introduce the teachings of Deganawidah, since he is the first traditional Native Messenger of God mentioned in the note above. His station is clearly that of a Messenger of God:

It is just this, that the Holder of the Heavens, Dehaenhyawa?gih, chose her as the medium through whom shall be born the one he has sent to work here on earth. "Moreover, when he shall be born you two shall name him Deganawidah. And the reason he shall have such a name is that he will travel about on the earth; for he is the principal person both in the skyworld and here on earth. For understand, he brings with him Power, *ga?shasdenhsa?*, and also the Great Law, *gayanebsa?go:nah*, that everything shall become peaceful, *sken:non?*, on earth as well as in the sky-world."³¹

In Bahá'í theophanology, there is the Messenger and then there is the Message. This roughly corresponds to what systematic theologians term the "Person" and the "Work" of Jesus Christ. In more familiar Christian terms, Christ is both the "Savior" who brings "salvation." Bahá'ís have universalized that concept (not derivatively, but simply analogously), such that every Messenger of God is effectively a Savior-figure and every

³¹ William Nelson Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman University of Oklahoma Press, 1998: Series: Civilization of the American Indian, Vol. 223), 85.

corresponding Message effects the process of salvation. In every age and era of history in which a Messenger of God appears, the peoples of that part of the world have a responsibility to investigate the truth of that Messenger's claims. This involves two "twin" duties: (1) recognition of the Messenger of God; and then (2) application of the Messenger's Message (that is, faithful adherence to the laws and ethical teachings revealed by that Messenger of God). Now as for Deganawidah's divine Message, the reader can judge for himself or herself how closely it resonates with the essential teachings of Bahá'u'llah and also Jesus. This is the essence of Deganawidah's Message:

I carry the Mind of the Master of Life ... and my Message will bring an end to the wars between east and west.

The Word that I bring is that all peoples shall love one another and live together in peace. This message has three parts: Righteousness and Health and Power — *Gáiwoh*, *Skénon*, *Gashadsénshaa*. And each part has two branches.

Righteousness means justice practiced between men and between nations; it means also a desire to see justice prevail.

Health means soundness of mind and body; it also means peace, for that is what comes when minds are sane and bodies are cared for.

Power means authority, the authority of law and custom, backed by such force as is necessary to make justice prevail; it means also religion, for justice enforced is the will of the Holder of the Heavens and has his sanction.³²

³² Cited by Paul A.W. Wallace, *White Roots of Peace* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1994), pp. 39–40, "a publication endorsed by prominent chiefs of the Haudenosaunee." See Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa, Ontario: Canada Communication Group — Publishing, Oct. 1996), Vol. 1, Part 1, Section 4, Sub-section 2, "*Iroquoians and the Iroquois*," pp. 14 and 58, n. 26. The following are the major versions of the Deganawidah Epic:

1885 Version: Seth Newhouse, *Cosmogony of De-ka-na-wi-da's Government of the Iroquois Confederacy: The Original Literal Historical Narratives of the Iroquois Confederacy*. Manuscript. Public Archives of Canada, folder MG 19 F. 26, Ottawa. American Philosophical Society Library, catalogued as: Seth Newhouse, *Mohawk Cosmogony of De-ka-na-wi-da's Government*, 1885, 1 vol. (302 pp.). Photocopy. Described by William N. Fenton, "Seth Newhouse's Traditional History and Constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy," *American Philosophical Society Proceedings*, 1949, 93, 141.

1897 Version: Seth Newhouse, *Constitution of the Confederacy by Dekanawidah* (1897). Trans. by J. N. B. Hewitt (1937). Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Archives, No. 3490.

1898 Version: John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt, *Constitution of the Confederacy by Dekanawidah, collected and translated from Mohawk by Chief Seth Newhouse 1898* (Manuscript 1343, Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives, "copied 1936.")

1899 Version: Chief John Arthur Gibson (1899), "*The Deganawidah Legend: A Tradition of the Founding of the League of the Five Iroquois Tribes*." English translation of text given by John Arthur Gibson to J. N. B. Hewitt. Ed. by Abram Charles, John Buck, Sr., and Joshua Buck (1900–1914). Trans. by William N. Fenton and Simeon Gibson (1941). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Bureau of American Ethnology, Nos. 1517b and 1517c. Copy in American Philosophical Society Library.

1912 Version: John Arthur Gibson, *Concerning the League: The Iroquois League Tradition as Dictated in Onondaga by John Arthur Gibson. Newly Elicited, Edited and Translated by Hanni Woodbury in Collaboration with Reg Henry and Harry Webster on the Basis of A.A. Goldenweiser's Manuscript* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics, 1992). Vecsey says that this may well be the "definitive version": "A major, perhaps definitive, version of the story was narrated by John Gibson to Alexander Goldenweiser in 1912." Christopher Vecsey, "The Story and Structure of the Iroquois Confederacy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54.1 (Spring 1986): 79–106 [80, n. 3]. The original Gibson-Goldenweiser Manuscript in Onondaga is preserved in the Canadian Ethnology Service Archives at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec as Ms. 1252.5. A facsimile of page 4 of this manuscript appears as Fig. 2, opposite p. xi, in *Concerning the League*.

[ADDISON] There may be a connection between the passage you've just cited and Deganawidah's name. First, let me say something about how deeply this name is revered by most Native American who are familiar with the Deganawidah tradition. The Iroquois consider Deganawidah's name so sacred as to be ineffable — that is, out of reverence and profound respect, the name “Deganawidah” should not be pronounced. Instead, Deganawidah is customarily referred to as “the Peacemaker.”

The sacred name “Deganawidah” means “two river currents flowing together.”³³ This is significant because these “two rivers” could be a metaphor for both Deganawidah and His spokesman, Hiawatha (as His major mouthpiece or speaker, since Deganawidah stuttered). Or it is tantalizing to see this metaphor of “two rivers” in light of the prophecy you've quoted above: that the “two rivers” might refer to the “east and west” in your sentence, “I carry the Mind of the Master of Life ... and my Message will bring an end to the wars between east and west.”

[BUCK] Interesting! I hadn't thought of that.

[ADDISON] Now before you develop the notion that Deganawidah is a great Prophet (which is a common, perhaps universal belief among Native Americans who are not predisposed by Christian doctrinal conservatism to believe otherwise), can you say something that might begin to articulate a Bahá'í perspective on Native Messengers of God generally?

[BUCK] Well, while there may be some distance between the ideal and the actual with regard to Native American spirituality by the Bahá'í community at large, the official Bahá'í position is quite clear, so far as it goes. Generally, we can say that the Bahá'í attitude towards Native American religions is — or should be — been characterized by the Universal House of Justice as follows:

The Bahá'í attitude to earlier religions, therefore, is not that they are false or “heathen”, but that, at root, they are all true and that these fundamental truths still persist within them. Bahá'ís encourage Indians in South America, for example, to see and reverence the profound spiritual truths which are to be found in both their pre-Christian religions and in the Catholicism which, in later centuries, has to varying degrees supplanted or overlaid their archaic faiths.

1916 Version: Arthur C. Parker, *The Constitution of the Five Nations or the Iroquois Book of the Great Law*. New York State Museum Bulletin, No. 184 (Albany: NY: April 1, 1916). Reprinted in William N. Fenton, ed., *Parker on the Iroquois*, Book III: *The Constitution of the Five Nations* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 30–60.

³³ See Alice B. Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account*. 3d edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 227. Or “Two water currents flowing together.” A. Parker, “The Traditional Narrative of the Origin of the Confederation of the Five Nations Commonly Known as the Iroquois,” in *Parker on the Iroquois*, ed. W. Fenton (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1968) 3: 64, n. 2.

Through the Bahá'í teachings, the inner conflict which many still feel between their ancient religions and Christianity is resolved and, at the same time, they are enabled to understand their spiritual unity with the peoples of other continents, such as Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims with whom they will undoubtedly come into contact with increasing frequency.

An example of the Bahá'í attitude is to be found in the operation of such radio stations as Radio Bahá'í Ecuador, which has a policy of encouraging Indian arts and music and fostering in the Indians pride in their heritage.³⁴

Therefore, Native Bahá'ís should neither feel — nor be made to feel — “the inner conflict which many still feel between their ancient religions and Christianity.” Moreover, since the source of all spiritual truth ultimately harks back, in Bahá'í belief, to a Manifestation of God, therefore the source of all Native wisdom and spirituality perforce must derive from a Native Messenger (or from more than one Native Messengers of God), as Shoghi Effendi clearly implies, in a text cited by the Bahá'í World Centre:

While the peoples in certain parts of the world hold religious beliefs that are classified as animist, the Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate any clear statements in the Writings about animist spirits. You might be interested in the general guidance contained in the following extract from a letter dated 7 July 1942, written on behalf of the Guardian in response to a question about the status of a number of different religious groups and movements:

“Truth is found everywhere. It would be indeed difficult to find a creed or a doctrine of any sort in this world that did not possess some facet of truth; this is what Bahá'u'lláh believed and taught. But everything has a source or focal centre; the focal centres of truth are not broken up or distributed at random, but, like the sun, are concentrated in one mighty source whom we call a Prophet or Manifestation of God. What we find in each other, and in various creeds, are rays from this source — but the source is the all-important thing, and to recognize and turn to it gives one an infinitely greater degree of strength and enlightenment than to try to find its rays, one here and one there, scattered about among our fellow men.”³⁵

Consider the work of Patricia Locke. Recognized as one of the most influential American Indians of the 20th century, Locke dedicated her life to preserving the languages, cultures and spiritual traditions of American

³⁴ The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 March 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly (unpublished). Cited by Universal House of Justice, letter dated 25 March 1997 to an individual Bahá'í. Posted by Brent Poirier on the Tarjuman list, 9 June 2007.

³⁵ The Universal House of Justice, unpublished letter dated 25 March 1997 to an individual Bahá'í. Posted by Brent Poirier on the Tarjuman list, 9 June 2007.

Indians and other indigenous peoples. This was her abiding passion. Moreover, she helped organize seventeen tribally-run colleges, and influenced changes in federal laws affecting Native Americans. In 1991, Locke was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. She was also the first Native American woman elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (1993–2001). As a crowning tribute to her life and work, in 2003 Patricia Locke was admitted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.³⁶ Reflect how this historic document, the *Declaration of Vision*, which Locke was instrumental in facilitating, and which was initially adopted by a near-unanimous vote by the delegates at the 1993 Parliament of World's Religions, yet ultimately nullified by Dr. David Ramage, Jr., Chairman of the Council Parliament, who overruled the vote. The 1993 American Indian *Declaration of Vision* states, in part:

One hundred years ago, during the 1893 Parliament of World Religions, the profoundly religious Original Peoples of the Western Hemisphere were not invited. We are still here and still struggling to be heard for the sake of our Mother Earth and our children. Our spiritual and physical survival continues to be threatened all over the hemisphere, we feel compelled to ask you to join us in restoring the balances of humanity and Mother Earth in these ways:

- A. Acknowledgement of the myriad of messengers of the Creator, the Great Mystery, to the peoples of the Western Hemisphere.
- B. Support in promoting, preserving and maintaining our Indigenous languages and cultures.³⁷

Obviously the Bahá'í delegates (Patricia Locke and Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, who is now Chair of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States), had voted in support of this resolution. It seems to me that, if Patricia Locke and Jacqueline Left Hand Bull had advocated that the peoples of the world should ensure “that the myriad of Messengers of God to the peoples of the Western Hemisphere be acknowledged,” then surely the Bahá'í Faith should as well — at least in principle, especially on the clear authority of the Tablet to Amír Khán.

Now, Don, let me ask you: Would this be a welcome way of presenting the Bahá'í Faith to Native Americans and Native Canadians, as well as to the indigenous peoples of South America and Central America? I believe that Chelsea Horton has already predicted that it would, when she writes: “In regards to the question of ‘Messengers of God to First Nations’...[i]f by this you mean the recognition, acknowledgement, and validation of Indigenous prophets on the part of the Bahá'í community (whether officially or at the

³⁶ See “Patricia A. Locke (1928–2001),” *Women of the Hall*. National Women's Hall of Fame, <http://www.greatwomen.org>

³⁷ Valerie Taliman, “Parliament's chair nullifies “Vision” as delegates leave” News From Indian Country, September, 1993.

level of praxis), my research in British Columbia has certainly indicated this to have had an empowering effect for Indigenous Bahá'ís.”³⁸ Do you agree?

[ADDISON] Yes! Wholeheartedly yes! Lots of Indians view such recognition of “Deganawidah, Quetzalcoátl and Viracocha” and are deeply thrilled, deep down inside. Like a breath of fresh air! Even some will say to themselves, “Well, this group of names comes from other tribes and indigenous Nations, not my own particular tribe or prophet or spiritual leader (whatever you want to call them). But this list of Native Messengers does contain at least some founders of indigenous religions, and therein is “the miracle” — finally a religion that includes our own! At long last, there’s a religion that came along (the Bahá’í Faith) in which some of its followers and some of its literature includes Native Prophets! Or at least the notion that Native Prophets have existed that must have been inspired by the Divine Creator of us all! Native peoples love this! (Except, of course, those converted Indians who are stuck in the very literalist, evangelical Christian, very closed-minded doctrines, foreign to Native experience and culture. And unfortunately we do have some Indians that have bought that notion, “hook, line and sinker.”) I love it! Yakoke! (Choctaw for “Thank you.”)

As you know, I’m Choctaw. We had a very very ancient prophet whose name was lost. He’s part of our earliest creation/migration story (we don’t call it a “myth” for obvious reasons) and “prophet” is the word used in our Choctaw stories in English. I can even cite publications where “prophet” is the term used. Even though this chart doesn’t include our Choctaw prophet, Choctaw peoples will look at this list and be thrilled! The reason being is this: that previous religious literature and (especially Christian) missionaries actually teach the reverse — that our Native prophets were Satan personified, or were the “anti-Christ” or that they were duping the people. I heard a Christian minister with a straight face once say, “All Native prophets were sent by the devil.” And he was serious! It makes most Native peoples sick when folks say this, but we’re used to it from Christians. But when Bahá’ís include even some Native Prophets, somewhere, anywhere in their presentation of the Faith (whatever form that takes) it is like a huge “Ah-ha!” “Finally!” Then Indians sense that “when these Bahá’ís are saying that they are free of religious prejudices, they really mean it! They ‘walk their talk.’” I have seen other Native people accept the Bahá’í Faith deep down in their hearts (that internal inmost spirit inside each of us) and accept Bahá’u’lláh (Whom they’d never previously heard of) initially because a Bahá’í states that Bahá’u’lláh makes statements along the lines that there is no people on earth to whom God has not sent some prophet or messenger!

[BUCK] I have found what appears to be an ethnographic record of the name of your Prophet, which was Chah-Tah: “The name of their principal

³⁸ Chelsea Horton, e-mail, dated 27 April 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck and Dr. Donald Addison, cited with permission.

chief or prophet was Chah-tah, and he was a man of great age and wisdom.”³⁹

[ADDISON] I loved your information on “Chah-Tah” being the “name” of the ancient Choctaw Prophet. Somewhere, sometime back, somewhere along the way, it seems to me that I vaguely recall that others have talked about that notion and this idea has been around for a while. I have a tendency to really accept it as valid and accurate, even without “empirical” proof, because it has been very common in ancient times for a Prophet’s name to become the name of a people’s tribe, band, clan or even family, and in this case, we have abundant “hints” that our tribe’s authentic name “Chahta,” came into existence by virtue of “Chahta” being the name of that early Messenger or Prophet of God. He was honored and his memory given great prestige that the tribe was named for him. It was Europeans who changed the spelling, and hence the name, from Chahta to Choctaw. But we still say “Chahta” as our tribal name. So thanks much for finding this. You certainly are constantly amazing me with the wonderful materials you come up with.

[BUCK] Thanks, Don. Let me you ask a question regarding a sensitive issue. I have chosen “First Nations” here, although it is a Native Canadian term. Some have objected to my use of “First Nations” here, arguing that’s it’s a purely Canadian term. Does “First Nations” enjoy some currency today among Native Americans today? If so, is it an acceptable phrase in terms of its accuracy and dignity, or is it used alternatively or even begrudgingly? Is this term appropriate?

[ADDISON] I think “First Nations” is a beautiful term, an honorary term. Its certainly not an “abbreviated” term that divides peoples one from another. Personally, I think it’s more inclusive. I find its use among Bahá’is as highly respectful and shows that Bahá’is are attempting to redress the wrongs of colonial times. Because behind those two beautiful words — “First Nations” — are families, and grandmothers, prayer makers, and loving relationships, one tribe with another, and all the love that my mother put into the red and green grass dance outfit she sewed for me by hand when I was a kid, etc. What is not a “First Nation,” by contrast, is clearly meant the Europeans who came to the Western Hemisphere looking for gold, conquest, converts, lands, etc.

Sometimes the use of “First Nations” is a statement of survival. We’re here still, in spite of 600 years of efforts to eradicate all of us indigenous peoples. I would deeply encourage a more fuller reading of “First Nations” — not to exclude others who have different prophets, or “no” prophets at all — but to

³⁹ As reported by Peter Pitchlynn, “[Chief of the Choctaws](#),” *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 25, Issue 150 (April 1870).

include all peoples who faced the onslaught of Europeans who had guns, and Natives who only had spiritual beliefs to sustain them.

I'm interested in what you have to say about this Bahá'í text — one that you've effectively rediscovered and brought back to influential life. Do you mean the Tablet to Amír Khán, which you briefly discussed in your lengthy "Native Messengers" article back in 1996?

[BUCK] Yes. I should give credit, however, to my dear wife, Nahzy Abadi Buck, who first brought this Tablet to my attention. But there have been some problems associated with this text.

[ADDISON] How so?

[BUCK] There were discussions about the Tablet to Amír Khán on two scholarly Bahá'í lists — Tarikh and Tarjuman. Unfortunately, these debates generated more heat than light, and I was opposed by several individuals on each list — yet others — that is, those few individuals who have been willing to explore this issue further, to assist in the necessary research, and who have contributed their understanding of the text — have made it all worthwhile. This debate, I should add, has already attracted scholarly attention. On the positive side, Chelsea Dawn Horton⁴⁰ notes:

Although there is debate, from an official Bahá'í perspective, as to whether Aboriginal prophets occupy an equal station with such figures as Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed or are, rather, "lesser Prophets," more significant here are the interpretations of Aboriginal Bahá'ís themselves.⁴¹ In the words of Linda Loft Pappenberger, progressive revelation is not, for many Aboriginal people, "a taking away of anything that they didn't believe before"; "in fact," she continues, "it's even enhanced."⁴² Many Aboriginal Bahá'ís from across North America have interpreted the Bahá'í Faith as the fulfilment of prophecies from their respective Aboriginal cultures.⁴³

40 Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá'í Encounter in British Columbia*, 2.

41 Horton's footnote: On the debate over the station of Aboriginal prophets see Pauline Tuttle, *The Hoop of Many Hoops*, 188. While Tuttle elects not to take a stance on the issue, citing the need for further research and consultation, Christopher Buck, for his part, does so in his article "Native Messengers of God in Canada?"

42 Horton's footnote: Interview.

43 Horton's note: For references to discussion of the Bahá'í Faith as the fulfillment of Aboriginal prophecy in British Columbia see *Canadian Bahá'í News*, no. 273 (Sept./Oct. 1973), 6; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, no. 305 (July 1977), 9; "Indian fire warms," [Victoria newspaper], 1977. For discussion from outside the province, see [U.S.] *Bahá'í News*, no. 148 (May 1962), 11 [Blackfoot]; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, no. 205 (Feb 1967), 1, 7 [Navajo]; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, 2, no. 3 (July/Aug. 1979), 12 [Tejas]; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, 9, no. 8 (Oct 1987), 3 [Navajo]; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, 10, no. 4 (June 1988), 3; *Canadian Bahá'í News*, 10, no. 5 (July 1988), 4; Joseph O. Weixelman, "The Traditional Navajo Religion and the Bahá'í Faith," *World Order*, 1985, 20(1), Fall, 31–51; Carolyn Patterson Sawin, *Native Conversion, Native Identity: An Oral History of the Bahá'í Faith among First Nations People in Southern Central Yukon Territory, Canada* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Washington, 2000), 9–11, 130–138; Tuttle, "Beyond Feathers and Beads," 108, 124–125, 127, 129–130 [Lakota]; Tuttle, "The Hoop of Many Hoops," 78, 318, 325 [Lakota]; William Willoya and Vinson Brown, *Warriors of the Rainbow: Strange and Prophetic Dreams of the Indian Peoples* (Happy Camp, CA: Naturegraph, 1962); Annie Kahn, *Olin*

Lakota Bahá'ís Kevin Locke and Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, for example, consider Bahá'u'lláh the fulfillment “of White Buffalo Calf Woman’s promise to return...”.⁴⁴

However, this position has had its detractors. I have my own stories to tell, having directly experienced criticism with the lively (and deadening!) “debate” of which Chelsea Horton speaks.

[ADDISON] Yes, I’ve read some of the recent postings that have confronted your postings — as well as to the proposition that drew such opposition. I would say that, while your views did generate some support, they were often resisted by others. What, if any, was your most successful argument against this opposition?

[BUCK] Good question. That would be when I posted this argument on 16 May 2007:

Suppose that Bahá'u'lláh had appeared in North America — not in Iran — and that Europe and the rest of the world only had oral religious traditions. Then let us suppose that Bahá'u'lláh, under this hypothetical, had named Manifestations of God who were known to have appeared in the Americas. And then the Faith, instead of spreading from East to West, had spread from West to East.

Imagine how strange it would feel to Europeans if their sacred traditions — based on the oral traditions of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad — were not truly and equally recognized by the Bahá'ís under this reverse hypothetical. And imagine if someone like me or you started to say: “Well, perhaps God did send Messengers to Europe.” But we lack a “clear Text” either way. And let’s suppose further that the Jews, Christians, and Muslims — all without a written tradition under this hypothetical — had to perdure the Native-centrism of the Bahá'ís from North America.

The indigenous Europeans would have every reason to feel alienated, since somehow their spiritual traditions were not really being recognized, nor their cultures, etc. And then someone like you or me rises up to proclaim that, yes, perhaps we can aver that God must have sent “Messengers of God to Europe.” And then that person draws all kinds of criticism for doing so! And, far worse, the indigenous European believers were leaving the Faith. Under such hypothetical circumstances, what other choice would you or I have, as scholars, as concerned Bahá'ís, and empathetic to their situation?

Karch, and Blu Mundy, *Four Remarkable Indian Prophecies of the Navajos, Toltecs, Mayas and Indians of Idaho* (Happy Camp, CA: Naturegraph, 1963). *Buck's/Addison's note*: See also Joseph O. Weixelman, “The Traditional Navajo Religion and the Bahá'í Faith,” *World Order* (Fall 1985): 31–51.

⁴⁴ Horton, *The Aboriginal–Bahá'í Encounter in British Columbia*, 72–73.

[ADDISON] Wow! Now that's quite a scenario — what you call a “hypothetical” — that almost anyone in the West can relate to. What about the text itself? First, what were the “circumstances of revelation,” as Islamicists would say? Who was the recipient? Who was Amír Khán? And how did his questions regarding the issue of Manifestations of God in North America arise in the first place? What do you think precipitated this sudden and unexpected interest in Native Americans?

[BUCK] On this issue, I think you'll agree when I say that the Tablet to Amír Khán exists in “splendid isolation” (as scholars sometimes refer to a unique text) and is thus a singular and therefore absolutely critical text. As for Amír Khán himself, I'd say that it wasn't so much an interest in indigenous cultures *per se*, but rather a curiosity about the possibility of extra-Semitic and extra-Aryan Messengers of God. Or, more simply, we can say that Amír Khán was concerned over what scholars like John Hinnells have termed, “the salvation of others.” As for the identity of Amír Khán himself, Dr. Iraj Ayman knew him personally. Here is what Dr. Ayman says about him:

Amír Khán of Tehran refers to a Bahá'í known as Amír Khán Áhan. He owned a shop at the beginning of Naser Khosrow Street in Tehran. It had a sign of “Magházeh Áhan.” So he was known in Tehran as Amír Khán-i-Magházeh Áhan. He was importing and selling various hardware items. Amír Khán was famous for his many inventions. He had traveled to Europe and especially to Russia where he had sold some of his inventions. He is the recipient of a famous Tablet of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in response to his submission asking His guidance on what line [of endeavor — *s.anáyi*’ (sing. *s.an’at* — variously translated as “crafts/arts/industries”)]⁴⁵ he should pursue, due to his many different interests. The Master advises him to concentrate on one line, otherwise his talent and energies will be wasted. Amír Khán was the recipient of several Tablets and he had met ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land. Amír Khán was a close friend of my father. Accompanying my father, I did meet him many times. He was full of fascinating ideas and constantly making new devices and solving technical problems.⁴⁶

I then replied:

Not only have you identified who the mysterious “Amír Khán” was (i.e., Amír Khán-i-Magházih Áhan), you have accurately described the most famous Tablet that the Master had revealed for him. On the basis of Omid Ghaemmaghami's provisional translation of Parts One

45 Dr. Iraj Ayman, e-mail, dated 10 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarikh list.

46 This explanatory information was provided by Mr. Omid Ghaemmaghami, e-mail, dated 12 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarjuman list.

and Three (based on the Research Department's Memorandum, which I quoted earlier), I was able to match your description of that famous Tablet with this particular Tablet in *'Amr va Khalq ...* Then Omid observed that the presence of an ellipsis indicates that some of the text of this Tablet is missing. Of course, I immediately wondered where the original Tablet in its entirety might be found. You, Dr. Ayman, have now solved this mystery! This is a thrilling moment of discovery for me, after first having encountered a small excerpt from this Tablet many years ago. Naturally you'll expect my next question: Can you provide a facsimile of this complete Tablet so that we can all study it closely?⁴⁷

Dr. Ayman responded in two separate messages, which I combine as follows:

This is the Tablet that I had mentioned in my previous message. This is addressed to Amír Khán that I briefly introduced in that message. If you check this Tablet in the collection of Tablets transcribed and photo-printed by Mírzá 'Alí-Akbar Mílání Rúghin (*Muhjibb al-Sultán*) in blue color, the complete name of Amír Khán Áhan is written on the top of this Tablet.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, I do not have access to the collection of the Tablets transcribed and published by 'Alí-Akbar Mílání. I remember very well that the complete text of that Tablet was published in the series of Tablets that he was photographically publishing in blue color. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian have endorsed the authenticity of the Tablets published by 'Alí-Akbar Mílání. Someone who has access to that collection could leaf through it and find it.⁴⁹

Here, "photographically publishing in blue color" refers to mimeographing or jellygraphing as a form of reproduction, since the publication of Bahá'í books in Iran was outlawed (and still is).

[ADDISON] Do you have a provisional translation of the Tablet to Amír Khán?

[BUCK] Yes. Here's what we have so far:

47 Dr. Christopher Buck, e-mail, dated 12 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Iraj Ayman, posted on the Tarjuman list.

48 Dr. Iraj Ayman, e-mail, dated 12 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarjuman list.

49 Dr. Iraj Ayman, e-mail, dated 12 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarjuman list.

He is God!

O servant of God! You had complained about [your] inability to attain perfection in more than one craft (*dar s.anáyi' muta'ddidih*). A multiple number of crafts cause [one's] perceptions to become scattered. Endeavor in one of these crafts and strive and exert yourself to attain perfection therein. This is better than having a number of crafts (all) remain in a state of imperfection⁵⁰ ...

In ancient times the people of America (*ahl-i Amrík*) were, through their northern regions, close to Asia, that is, separated from Asia by a strait. For this reason, it hath been said that crossing had occurred. There are other signs which indicate communication.

As to places whose people were not informed of the appearance of Prophets, such people are excused. In the Qur'án it hath been revealed: "We will not chastise them if they had not been sent a Messenger" (Q. 17:15, *mā kunnā mu'adhdhīna h.attā nab'atha rasūl(an)*).⁵¹

Undoubtedly in those regions the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now.

Undoubtedly, in those regions, the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now (*al-battih dar án s.afahát níz dar azmanih-yi-qadímih vaqtí nidá-yi-iláhí buland gashtih va-lákin hál farámush shudih ast*).⁵²

I will supplicate God to confirm you in attaining perfection in one of the crafts.⁵³ And upon thee be greetings and praise.⁵⁴

[ADDISON] This is a remarkable text! But the first thing that Bahá'í scholars will do is to question its authenticity. Is this text authentic? And is this text an actual "Tablet" or merely a "reported utterance"? I understand

⁵⁰ Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami. Persian text: *'Amr va Khalq*, vol. 3, p. 307.

⁵¹ Transliteration provided by Dr. Necati Alkan (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), e-mail, dated 31 May 2007, posted on the Tarjuman list.

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to Amír Khán Áhan of Tehran*, in Fádíl Mázandarání, *'Amr va Khalq* (Germany: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 46-47

⁵³ Provisional translation by Omid Ghaemmaghami. Persian text: *'Amr va Khalq*, vol. 3, p. 308.

⁵⁴ Provisional translation by Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir. Based on facsimile of the original Tablet to Amír Khán, provided as an attachment of the Research Department memorandum dated 16 May 1996 (and re-sent by the Universal House of Justice as an attachment in its letter of 8 June 2007 to Dr. Christopher Buck. Although the identity of the recipient of this Tablet is not mentioned in the 16 May 1996 memorandum, Amír Khán of Tehran was identified as the recipient in the Research Department memorandum dated 25 August 1994: "In an email message dated 1 August 1994, Mr. Christopher Buck requests the source of a quotation attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá by Fádíl Mázandarání in *Amr va Khalq* (vol. 2, pp. 45-46). This quotation is found in a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's, revealed for a certain Amír Khán in Tíhrán. The section referred to by Mr. Buck is the central portion. Fádíl Mázandarání has also published the beginning and final passages of this Tablet in *Amr va Khalq* (vol. 3, pp. 307-308)."

that this Tablet was introduced as a “*khit.áb*” (discourse or speech), and that this terminology has cast some doubts over the authenticity of this text.

[BUCK] The Tablet to Amír Khán Áhan is most definitely a Tablet, for the following five reasons:

1. *Research Department Memorandum*: I just opened up several old boxes and found a stack of letters from the Universal House of Justice, I am happy to tell you that I have at last located the Research Department’s Memorandum in reply to my question regarding the source of Tablet to Amír Khán of Tīhrán:

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice
 Date: 25 August 1994
 From: Research Department
 Source of Citation

In an email message dated 1 August 1994, Mr. Christopher Buck requests the source of a quotation attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá by Fádil Mázandarání in *Amr va Khalq* (vol. 2, pp. 45–46). This quotation is found in a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s, revealed for a certain Amír Khán in Tīhrán. The section referred to by Mr. Buck is the central portion. Fádil Mázandarání has also published the beginning and final passages of this Tablet in *Amr va Khalq* (vol. 3, pp. 307–308).

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This Tablet takes on heightened significance as a textual basis for putting forth the proposition that “Messengers of God to First Nations” is a valid Bahá’í principle, the formalization and application of which would go far in bringing about a symbolic transformation of interracial and intercultural relations — first among mainstream American Bahá’is and Bahá’is of Native American ancestry and identity. Wouldn’t you agree?

[ADDISON] I wish the non-Indian believers here in the West were more tolerant of our Native voices and American Indian Prophets. As a Native American, I’m deeply saddened that some Bahá’is of non-Indian backgrounds find it so difficult to cut through their own European cultural barriers that cloud their open acknowledgment of Native American Prophets as Manifestations of God.

Would it be a serious breach of Bahá’í belief or a mistaken misrepresentation of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh if an enrolled Bahá’í in good standing were to write and publish in print “Bahá’is acknowledge the validity of the Prophethood of Deganawidah”? It seems to me that this

would not detract in any way from the authenticity of Bahá'u'lláh or His Writings, nor does it in any way detract from the validity of all the other Central Figures and the Administrative Structure of this Divinely ordained Faith. This statement, I hasten to add, doesn't in any possible way represent a challenge to the Covenant — God forbid! My statement is fully in accordance with “there being ‘no people to whom a Messenger has not been sent’ and the general doctrinal position that ultimately all religion comes from God,” as you yourself just stated. Why impose a disconnect between the latter and the former?

The Sacred Writings of the Báb, the forerunner, and Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, of even Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successor, His eldest Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, do not specifically mention any Native American Prophet by name. However, their Writings all clearly imply their existence. Many distinguished Bahá'í writers, scholars, and administrative servants of the Faith, have increasingly been referring to Native Prophets in public talks, in publishes articles, and other media presentations.

[BUCK] Quite true. First, note that both Qur'anic and Bahá'í texts that basically state that no people, at some point in its history, has been bereft of divine guidance. Thus, “Unto every nation hath an Apostle been sent” (Q. 10:47; cf. Q. 16:36). In the *Commentary on the Surah of the Sun*, Bahá'u'lláh states that Messengers of God have been sent to every people: “As thou canst see, every nation on earth hath been enlightened by one of these brightly shining Suns. Whoso denieth Them remaineth deprived.”⁵⁵

[ADDISON] That's certainly a universalism. For skeptics, however, isn't that a little too general, too abstract, too diffuse? I think that, while practically all Bahá'ís would support this analysis, relatively few of them would be prepared to extend full recognition and parity with the highest spirituality that indigenous cultures have to offer. This is a precious legacy that, if ignored and otherwise devalued, can never combust with mainstream Bahá'í spirituality to ignite the worldwide influence that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has envisioned (and predicted) that the indigenous Bahá'ís of North America might contribute. I recall that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had commented on the fact that America had a great civilization in the past.

[BUCK] Yes, Don, in fact it was you who recently brought this to my attention in a recent posting of yours. It was either Friday, July 5, 1912, or July 9, 1912, when Bahá'í artist, Juliet Thompson, took the leader of the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to visit the American Museum of Natural History. Of particular interest was an exhibit of art and artifacts from early America. Whether pre-Columbian or later is not clear at this time. This

⁵⁵ Adapted from translation by J. Cole of Bahá'u'lláh's *Commentary on the Surah of the Sun* (Ames, Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2000) at 10–11

exhibit was probably on the Blackfoot Indians, since anthropologist Clark Wissler (1870–1947) was curator of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City for nearly 40 years, and had published several monographs on the Blackfoot Indians.⁵⁶ On seeing this exhibit, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made a comment in passing—recorded in its original Persian in *Mahmud’s Diary*—from which a possible religious significance might be inferred. The authoritative account relates this event as follows:

Today, at the invitation of Juliet Thompson, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went to a museum near His house. On the first floor there were statues, figures of animals and a collection of relics of early American civilization. On observing these objects, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “From these things it appears that America had a great civilization in ancient times.”⁵⁷

The Persian original reads: “*Az in áthár ma’lum ast kih Amríká dar ayyám qadím dará-yi tamaddún búdíh.*”⁵⁸ Translated literally, this means: “From these relics, it appears America had a civilization in the days of old.”⁵⁹ On the surface, this is a statement of the obvious. Whether it has a deeper meaning — that the rise of a great civilization is necessarily the result of a great religion — is impossible to say.

[ADDISON] I agree. Evidence of a high civilization does not directly imply a Manifestation of God. That’s the problem as I see it. In the vast corpus of Bahá’í Writings, it appears that only one single text been found that might conclusively establish that North America had not only high civilizations but independent Manifestations of God. It that your conclusion?

[BUCK] As far as specific pronouncements on that issue are concerned, I would have to say, yes.

⁵⁶ N. C. Nelson, “Clark Wissler, 1870–1947.” *American Antiquity*, 1948, 13(3), 244–247.

⁵⁷ Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmud’s Diary: The Diary of Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání*. Translated by Mohi Sobhani (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 158–159. For an alternative account of this excursion, see Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, with a preface by Marzieh Gail (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983), 329–332. However, Juliet Thompson’s date differs from that of Mahmúd, in that she gives Monday, July 9, 1912 (see p. 329). Not only does this date conflict with that given in *Mahmud’s Diary*, but the comment by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as well:

“I have heard a tradition,” I said, “that in the very distant past this country and Asia were connected.”

“Assuredly,” answered the Master, “before a great catastrophe there was such a connection between Asia and America.”

It should be noted that Mahmúd’s account is considered authoritative as it is “regarded as a reliable account of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels in the West and an authentic record of His utterances, whether in the form of formal talks, table talks or random oral statements. Mirzá Mahmúd was a careful and faithful chronicler and engaged in assembling and publishing his work with the permission of the beloved Master.” (*The Universal House of Justice*.) Thus this contradiction should be resolved in favor of Mahmúd’s report, and Juliet Thompson’s contradictory narrative regarded with some suspicion here, where she also states that the exhibit was one of Mexican antiquities (not of Blackfoot culture).

⁵⁸ Persian text. Mirza Mahmúdi-i-Zarqani, *Badáyi’u’l-Atha’r*.

⁵⁹ Provisional translation provided by Dr. Ahang Rabbani, e-mail, dated April 20, 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarikh list.

[ADDISON] Seeing that this text, the Tablet to Amír Khán Áhan, exists in “splendid isolation,” as you say, why don’t we take a closer look at it? It’s this part of the Tablet that interests us:

In ancient times the people of America (*ahl-i Amrík*) were, through their northern regions, close to Asia, that is, separated from Asia by a strait. For this reason, it hath been said that crossing had occurred.

There are other signs which indicate communication. As to places whose people were not informed of the appearance of Prophets, such people are excused. In the Qur’án it hath been revealed: “We will not chastise them if they had not been sent a Messenger” (Q. 17:15, *má kunná mu’ádhhibína hattá nab’atha rasúlá^{ah}*).⁶⁰

Undoubtedly, in those regions, the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now (*al-battih dar án s.afahát níz dar azmanih-yi-qadímih vaqtí nidá-yi-iláhi buland gashtih va-lákin hál farámúsh shudih ast*).⁶¹

Now I like this statement from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá very much: “Undoubtedly in those regions the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now.” My own people, the Choctaw, had an ancient Prophet whose name no one remembers (unless, as you pointed out, the name of our Prophet was “Chah-tah”). So I think ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quite accurate here as well. Only a very few Native American Prophets’ names have endured. We have some, identified all the way from the lowliest village elder, healer, traditional singer of prayers, all the way up to “great seers,” “great visionaries,” “spiritual leaders,” to lesser Prophets and Major Manifestations of God — just as in most other societies on earth (although the terms change obviously). With the exception of famous people like Wodziwob, Ganiodaiyo (Handsome Lake), White Buffalo Calf Woman, Deganawidah, we have others who admittedly are problematic. Yet some of our sacred traditions remain. Thus they are “remembered” — not forgotten. They are preserved as living traditions. Does this language of “forgotten” effectively bar Bahá’í recognition of these living traditions?

[BUCK] Again, let’s examine the clause, “...but it hath been forgotten now” (*va-lákin hál farámúsh shudih ast*), closely. Here follow representative texts in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá comments on how living religious traditions — all of the named exemplars of which are considered “historic” insofar as they are “founded” religions — are functionally “forgotten” even though they are present in the world today.

Buddha’s and Confucius’ Teachings Have Been Forgotten:

⁶⁰ Transliteration provided by Mr. Omid Ghaemmaghami (slightly modified by the present writer), e-mail, dated 16 April 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck, posted on the Tarikh list.

⁶¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet to Amir Khán Áhan of Tehran*, 46–47

Buddha also established a new religion, and Confucius renewed morals and ancient virtues, but their institutions have been entirely destroyed. The beliefs and rites of the Buddhists and Confucianists have not continued in accordance with their fundamental Teachings. The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of His doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose and increased until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images.⁶²

The meaning is that the Buddhists and Confucianists now worship images and statues. They are entirely heedless of the Oneness of God and believe in imaginary gods like the ancient Greeks. But in the beginning it was not so; there were different principles and other ordinances.⁶³

Moses' Teachings Have Been Forgotten:

When in San Francisco, I was invited to speak in a Jewish synagogue. I said, "For about two thousand years, between you and the Christians, there have been friction and opposition, owing to the misunderstandings which today have blinded the eyes. You conceive that His Holiness the Christ was the enemy of Moses, the destroyer of the laws of the Pentateuch, the abrogator of the commandments of the Bible. When we investigate the reality we observe that Christ appeared at a time when according to your own historians, the laws of the Torah were forgotten; the foundation of religion and faith was shaken."⁶⁴

Christ's Teachings Have Been Forgotten:

Again, consider how much the principles of the religion of Christ have been forgotten, and how many heresies have appeared. For example, Christ forbade revenge and transgression; furthermore, He commanded benevolence and mercy in return for injury and evil. Now reflect: among the Christian nations themselves how many sanguinary wars have taken place, and how much oppression, cruelty, rapacity and bloodthirstiness have occurred! Many of these wars were carried on by command of the Popes. It is then clear and

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 165.

⁶³ *ibid*, 166.

⁶⁴ Originally reprinted from *Abdul Baha [sic] on Divine Philosophy*. Comp. Isabel F. Chamberlain. Boston: Tudor Press, 1916, chapter V: "Abdul Baha Answers Many Questions asked by Theologians of Paris". The original text has been reprinted in Persian in *Khitábát* (Talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá). Rev. ed. Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1984, pp. 737–747. See revised translation Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir, "'Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity'", *Bahá'í Studies Review*, 1993, 3(1).

evident that in the passage of time religions become entirely changed and altered. Therefore, they are renewed.⁶⁵

The foundation of the religion of God is one. The same basis which was laid by Christ, and later on was forgotten, has been renewed by His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh.

God has founded religion so that it might be the bond of amity and mutual association between the peoples. His Holiness the Christ did not sacrifice his life so that the people might believe the doctrine that he is the word of God; nay, rather he gave his life so that he might bestow the consciousness of eternal life to the world of humanity. That is why he said, "Jesus, the son of man, is come to give life to the world".

This reality has been forgotten by the people, and the doctrine of the father, son and holy spirit has been substituted. The original foundation has been lost sight of. Christ said, "if one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Is there any relation between this commandment and bloody events taking place today?⁶⁶

Muhammad's Teachings Have Been Forgotten:

Those "kindreds, people and nations" signify those who are gathered under the shadow of the Qur'án, not permitting the Cause and Law of God to be, in outward appearance, entirely destroyed and annihilated — for there are prayer and fasting among them — but the fundamental principles of the Religion of God, which are morals and conduct, with the knowledge of divine mysteries, have disappeared; the light of the virtues of the world of humanity, which is the result of the love and knowledge of God, is extinguished; and the darkness of tyranny, oppression, satanic passions and desires has become victorious. The body of the Law of God, like a corpse, has been exposed to public view for twelve hundred and sixty days, each day being counted as a year, and this period is the cycle of Muhammad.

The people forfeited all that these two persons had established, which was the foundation of the Law of God, and destroyed the virtues of the world of humanity, which are the divine gifts and the spirit of this religion, to such a degree that truthfulness, justice, love, union, purity, sanctity, detachment and all the divine qualities departed from among them. In the religion only prayers and fasting persisted; this condition

⁶⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 166.

⁶⁶ Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir, '[Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity](#)' Compare: "The Teachings of Christ were forgotten. The Christly bounties ceased. Divine moralities disappeared. Day ended in night." 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (ed. Howard MaxNutt, Willmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1992), 55.

lasted for twelve hundred and sixty years, which is the duration of the cycle of the Furqán. It was as if these two persons were dead, and their bodies were remaining without spirit.⁶⁷

Generally, The Past Manifestations' Teachings Have Been Forgotten:

O ye respected souls! From the continual imitation of ancient and worn-out ways, the world had grown dark as darksome night. The fundamentals of the divine Teachings had passed from memory; their pith and heart had been totally forgotten, and the people were holding on to husks. The nations had, like tattered garments long outworn, fallen into a pitiful condition.⁶⁸

My thesis is simply this: "Forgotten" is relative, not absolute. "Forgotten" does not mean that all memory of the Manifestation of God and His/Her Teachings has been effaced from historical memory, without a trace. Rather, "forgotten" primarily means that the Teachings have been displaced, having lost their primacy in actual practice.

[ADDISON] The notion of "forgotten" is a huge issue in Indian country as well. First, most Native peoples will say that we all accept the fact that some of our cultures have been "forgotten," no doubt about it, but the white Euro-American suppression of our peoples, languages, religions, and cultures has not wiped everything away. So lots of Indians are super-sensitive about saying, for example, that our music or that our language is "dead." Rather, since many of our languages that used to be spoken fluently in the 19th century are no longer around, we simply say that these languages "are asleep."

During the most severe repression of our religions in the U.S. and Canada, the languages, dances, stories and the songs were forced underground, or our people said, "put to sleep." Now they can be revived out in the open, those songs and languages that remain, when elders can be found still alive who are willing to remember them and bring them back to the community. Unfortunately, a few of our living elders in various parts of the country have been so deeply hurt by Christian missionaries telling them "your religions and your languages are evil," so much so, that some of these elders actually started believing that. They then refuse to share any of their traditional cultures (today) that they might remember because they don't want "to go to hell when they die." Many parents wouldn't teach their Native language to their kids so they wouldn't suffer what the parents went through with classmates laughing at Indian children who speak in their native tongue. During the Boarding School Era, if you pretended to "forget" your Native religion, it meant you would be beaten by the missionaries much less often!

⁶⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 52–53.

⁶⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), 252.

That was a means of sheer survival. Some say during those difficult times that “we weren’t dumb, just numb!” To “appear” to “forget,” one has to “go numb,” to “pretend” to “fit in,” so the missionaries wouldn’t beat the kids as much.

“Forgetting” of the past is a much more difficult set of problems. Many of the ancient Native spiritual traditions and “Teachings” have been lost, no doubt about it, from both the ravages of time, cultural migrations and change, and especially from official governmental attempts to cripple our Native religions through the boarding schools, enacting of anti-Indian legislation, English-only programs, forced Christian Church conversions, etc., and when those failed, some of our religions and their ceremonies and their practitioners were persecuted at gun point. The Ghost Dance worshippers, massacred in 1890 at Wounded Knee, and other similar events explains why most of our peoples say “certain ceremonies have been forgotten.” However, many Teachings still remain — such as reverence for the Creator, the importance of prayer, the relationship between sacred lands and sacred traditions, those “ancestors” who are “still associated with the land,” our need to care for this land, the Native prophecies that are still remembered and recorded, our valuable elders and the cultural wisdom they pass on, and above all, the fact that much — but not all — of our sacred beliefs and Teachings, do survive as they are passed on to our young people. These include beliefs from ancient Prophets, some of Whose Names have not even survived into the 21st century, but most all Indians regard their “memories” as sacred, even if we know little more than that about most of them. Native Bahá’ís often, but not necessarily always, enjoy recapturing our Native languages, and learning about our Native belief systems — you see these do not really conflict with the Bahá’í Message.

While many elders talk as if much of the spiritual knowledge of the past still remains, a more accurate appraisal is that “it does, and it doesn’t.” So for Indian religious traditions with which I have spent a life time studying and in which I have participated for many years, “forgotten” — many will agree — is a relative term. I and many other Native Bahá’ís feel that Bahá’u’lláh has “revived” many Native ways and recast some “concepts” that were “lost” and now have been “returned” — from perhaps a different part of the globe, but with the same spiritual energy, creative vigor, and transformative power. I have witnessed first hand how the Bahá’í Faith has already begun to create the rich and loving climate for a “return to Native cultures” while concurrently “stepping into the new world community” brought by Bahá’u’lláh, and seeing these two as complementary, and not competitive in any way.

The “Call of God” mentioned in this Tablet is a most significant metaphor to most Indians who really know their own cultural, spiritual, and Native belief systems. I find this absolutely fascinating.

[BUCK] I'm glad you drew our attention to this metaphor, the explication of which may prove decisive — either way. Here is how I would analyze this figurative expression. Rhetorically as well as logically, the “Call of God” presupposes a “Caller” — one who is doing the calling. In Islamic eschatology, this is a Summoner to the Day of Judgement. Prefigured in the Qur'án (Q. 50:42; cf. Q. 3:193), this future Figure is actually called “the Caller” or “the Crier” (*al-Munádí*), and is a subject of the Last Day. The Caller is thus an actor in the divine drama of the end of prophetic history, which Bahá'í doctrine equates with the beginning of history of prophecy come true (the “Cycle of Fulfillment”). The Caller is eschatologically realized in the persons of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. In the *Tablet of the Son*, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh has identified the Báb as the eschatological “Caller” of the Qur'an.⁶⁹ Similarly, in the *Lawh-i Aqdas*: “Say, did ye not hearken to the Voice of the Crier, calling aloud in the wilderness of the Bayán, bearing unto you the glad-tidings of the coming of your Lord, the All-Merciful?”⁷⁰ Although the phrase *al-nidá al-iláhí* does not appear in the Qur'án, it would be difficult for anyone familiar with the Qur'án to read the phrase and not think of *al-Munádí*, according to Dr. Moojan Momen.⁷¹

[ADDISON] That's all well and good. But as you well know, Bahá'ís are not Muslims. The Qur'an, at best, would enjoy a secondary authority at best. What about evidence from the Bahá'í primary sources themselves?

[BUCK] While we would have to verify each text in the Persian or Arabic original, a representative survey of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's various usages of the “Call of God” are all unified by one single referent: the Manifestation of God (primarily, but not exclusively, Bahá'u'lláh) and His message. We can arrive at this determination by examining such exemplars as these:

Message of The Manifestations(s) of God:

O ye concourse of the Kingdom of Abhá! Two calls to success and prosperity are being raised from the heights of the happiness of mankind... The one is the call of civilization, of the progress of the material world... The other is the soul-stirring call of God, Whose spiritual Teachings are safeguards of the everlasting glory, the eternal happiness and illumination of the world of humanity... The propagator and executive power of this call is just government... This second call is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of

⁶⁹ “The Caller has cried out (lit., “the Caller has raised the Call,” wa qad nádá al-munádín) in the sacred plain (*fí barríyyat al-quds*) with the name of 'Alí-Muhammad (*bi 'ismi 'Alí qabli Nabil*).” Translated by Juan Cole, “[Tablet of the Son \(Jesus\): Letter of the Middle Edirne Period circa 1866](#),” *Translations of Shaykhí, Bábí and Bahá'í Texts*, 2001, 5(2) with transliteration (slightly emended) supplied by Sen McGlinn, e-mail message dated 24 April 2007, and “sacred wilderness” changed to “sacred plain,” as suggested by Omid Ghaemmaghami, e-mail message dated 25 April 2007.

⁷⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, “[Lawh-i-Aqdas](#),” *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 12

⁷¹ Dr. Moojan Momen, e-mail, dated 23 April 2007, to Dr. Christopher Buck.

the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God.⁷²

Message of The Prophets, Christ & Bahá'u'lláh:

O honoured lady! For a single purpose were the Prophets, each and all, sent down to earth; for this was Christ made manifest, for this did Bahá'u'lláh raise up the call of the Lord.⁷³

Message of The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh:

By the term “that true and radiant morn” mentioned in the Hidden Words is meant the Dawn of divine Revelation when the Exalted One [The Báb] manifested Himself in the plenitude of His glory, while the Blessed Tree referreth to the Ancient Beauty [Bahá'u'lláh]... However when the Call of God was raised in the realm of the heart and spirit, mankind remained heedless and inattentive, and therefore was dumbfounded.⁷⁴

Message of Bahá'u'lláh, Promulgated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Note ye that when, singly and alone, with none to second me, I upraised the call of God around the world, the peoples thereof rose up to oppose, to dispute, to deny.⁷⁵

Message of Bahá'u'lláh, Promulgated by Bahá'í Teachers and Hands of the Cause of God:

O thou beloved maid-servant of God (Miss Haruko Mori). Praise be unto God, that through the guidance of Miss Alexander thou couldst hear the Call of God. Then strive as far as thou art able to spread the Divine Teachings, so that thou mayest become distinguished with this great Bestowal among the women of the world.⁷⁶

Message of Bahá'u'lláh, Promulgated by Ideal Bahá'ís:

Rest ye assured that if a soul ariseth in the utmost perseverance and raiseth the Call of the Kingdom and resolutely promulgateth the Covenant, be he an insignificant ant he shall be enabled to drive

⁷² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 283–284.

⁷³ *ibid*, 31.

⁷⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet to an individual (on Hidden Words, Persian No. 19), translated from the Persian.

⁷⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 230

⁷⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, Tablet dated August 10, 1920. Translated by Azizullah Bahadur, “Tablets to Japan,” *Japan Will Turn Ablaze!* (Tokyo: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992).

away the formidable elephant from the arena, and if he be a feeble moth he shall cut to pieces the plumage of the rapacious vulture.⁷⁷

Message of Bahá'u'lláh, Promulgated by Ideal Bahá'í Husbands:

Know thou, verily, the husband is one who hath sincerely turned unto God, is awakened by the call of the Beauty of El-Bahá and chanteth the verses of Oneness in the great assemblies⁷⁸

Message of Bahá'u'lláh, Promulgated to Indigenous Peoples:

God willing, the call of the Kingdom may reach the ears of the Eskimos, the inhabitants of the Islands of Franklin in the north of Canada, as well as Greenland.⁷⁹

Hearing The Message of Bahá'u'lláh:

Happy are ye for this favor, the likeness of which was not seen by the eye of existence, not its similitude heard by the ears of the creatures; because it is the greatest favor on the part of the Lord of the Kingdoms in the world of existence; that is, the greatest guidance, the attainment unto the day of the Lord and listening unto the call of God.⁸⁰

Believing the Message of Bahá'u'lláh:

Hájí Muhammad-Ridá came from Shíráz. He was a man spiritually minded, lowly, contrite, the embodiment of serenity and faith. When the call of God was lifted up, that needy soul hurried into the shelter of heavenly grace. As soon as he heard the summons, "Am I not your Lord?" he cried out: "Yea, verily!" and became as a lamp to the people's feet.⁸¹

Also among the emigrants and near neighbors was Áqá 'Alí Najaf-Ábádí. When this spiritual young man first listened to the call of God he set his lips to the holy cup and beheld the glory of the Speaker on the Mount. And when, by grace of the light, he had attained positive knowledge, he journeyed to the Most Great Prison, where he witnessed the substance of knowledge itself, and arrived at the high station of indubitable truth.⁸²

⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 209.

⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*, Vol. 3, (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1916), 605.

⁷⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, IL: U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), 29.

⁸⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*, Vol. 3, 662

⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful* (U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), 117.

⁸² *Memorials* 61.

I have perused thy excellent letter which shows that thou art turning thy face unto the living, eternal One and grasping the hem of His Grandeur and thy attraction unto the Call of thy Supreme Lord. Well done! Well done! O maid-servant of God, for thou hast believed in the Glorious Beauty (of El-Abhá) and art confirmed in the manifestation of the Kingdom of God, during this time.⁸³

On the basis of this evidence, the expression “Call of God” (Persian: *nidá-yi iláhhí*) in Bahá’í texts is a transparent reference to Prophets of God in general, and, in historical-contemporary references to Bahá’í history, to Bahá’u’lláh in particular (as well as the Báb). The expression, the “Call of God,” is thus a stock allusion to revelation, as in Bahá’u’lláh’s poetic description of the Báb’s revelation: “The divine call (*nidá-yi iláhhí*) of the Celestial Herald from beyond the Veil of Glory.”⁸⁴

Of all of the *possible* meanings of the phrase, the “Call of God,” the *probable* meaning is that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is speaking of a Manifestation of God and His message. Relying on these exemplars, which both fairly and primarily represent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s relevant discourse, I conclude that the probable meaning — indeed, the almost certain meaning — of the “Call of God” in the Tablet to Amír Khán of Tehran is a Manifestation of God — such that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can be understood as confirming the existence of a Manifestation or Manifestations of God to North America.

[ADDISON] What about the place from which the Call of God originates?

[BUCK] Let’s examine this statement closely: “Undoubtedly in those regions the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now.” The words, “Undoubtedly in those regions” (*al-battih dar án s.afahát*) indicates ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s preferred explanation, in favoring the third possibility that Amír Khán must have raised: namely, that one or more Manifestations of God appeared in North America. As stated, the “Call of God” appears to be ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s euphemism for a Manifestation of God and His Message.

Since the whole discussion was about North America in the first place, “in those regions” has to mean North America. Furthermore, it cannot mean Asia, since Manifestations of God had already appeared in Asia. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, there is no question but that this must be so, which is why he uses the adverb, “undoubtedly” (*al-battih*). As to place, the words “in those regions” (*dar án s.afahát*) must refer to North America — and not to

⁸³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu’l-Baha Abbas*, Vol 1, (Chicago: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1916), 97.

⁸⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, tr. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1931/1970) 239; Persian text, Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: Book of Certitude* (Germany: Bahá’í Verlag, 1980) 186, line 3.

circumpolar Asia — for syntactical as well as semantic reasons, as the previous sentence refers to “places whose people were not informed of the appearance of Prophets.”

“In ancient times the people of America were, through their northern regions, close to Asia, that is, separated from Asia by a strait. For this reason, it hath been said that crossing had occurred. There are other signs which indicate communication.” Here, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes the possibility of “communication” between the circumpolar regions of present-day Russia and Alaska, presumably across the land-bridge of the the Bering Straits. It is important to note that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not commit Himself to this theory. In saying that “it hath been said that crossing had occurred,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá simply acknowledges a prevailing theory, advanced by some of the leading geologists and anthropologists of the day. While the reader gets the sense — or even the distinct impression — that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cites this scientific authority with tacit approval,⁸⁵ still He entertains the opposite possibility in His response to what appears to have been Amír Khán’s second concern or question.

The land-bridge theory has its attractions for religious reasons, in that it makes it possible for the “Call of God” — the saving Message of a Manifestation of God — to have reached the ancient inhabitants of North America as the missionary by-product of the migration of peoples from East Asia to North America. For this hypothesis to hold, not only would there have to be persuasive evidence of material culture (and some argue that there is), there would also have to be compelling evidence of similar spiritual practices that resist the alternative explanation of having simply reflected parallel developments. In neither case is there a sufficiently strong monotheistic tradition (despite the presence of “High Gods”) that one might expect from a Bahá’í concept of a Manifestation of God.

[ADDISON] Despite the fact that this theory has its attractions for religiously-minded people that measure prophetic authenticity by the yardstick that you’ve trenchantly termed “Semiticentrism” — which term perhaps we could refine as Arya-Semiticentrism (as the Bahá’í Writings acknowledge the non-Semitic, Aryan, Manifestations of God as well) — the Bering Straits theory has its detractors. Indeed, it has the opposite effect on Native Americans. Most Native Americans see that Bering Straights theory of our Native origins as the white man’s conception. You see, that’s not how we view our origins. Each tribal community may have one or more origin

85 Anecdotal evidence for this exists in the following reported utterance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recorded by Louis Gregory (who was later designated as a Hand of the Cause of God): “But in very ancient times Asia led all the continents in civilization. At this time there was a connection between Asia and America which was lost and entirely forgotten. As to the belief of the American Indians in the Great Spirit, this is explained by the fact that worship is inherent in the nature of man, who must have something above himself upon which he may depend. Even men who are unconscious of this and deny it, depend upon it notwithstanding.” Louis G. Gregory, ‘[A Heavenly Vista: The Pilgrimage of Louis G. Gregory](#)’ (Ferndale, MI: Alpha Services, 1997 [reprint of original edition: Washington. D.C.: Pendleton, 1911(?)]), 13.

story, often called “myths” which is (again) a very insensitive and hurtful term. Why are our Native origin stories “myths”, but the Euro-American or Euro-Canadian “explanation” considered “scientific irrefutable proof”? (In the same light, why are our Native arts called “crafts” or “handicrafts” and “hobbies” and European examples “high art”? and “Fine arts”?)

As a Choctaw, I enjoy our own approaches to science and scientific pursuits. We have them, you know, but about the only folks in the Western Hemisphere that knows nothing about our Native sciences are the Euro-American scientists and scholars. I find academics particularly fond of claiming that our Indian origins are “their” (the white’s) domain of study, and that our own views of our own Native origins, are (by definition) “unscientific,” “unproven,” “legends” and “tales” and unreliable undocumented “myths.”

Our elders say that three “theories” of our origins include the following: (1) first and foremost is that our people emerged out of Mother Earth at a beautiful ancient Choctaw site near Philadelphia, Mississippi, known as “Nanah Waiya” (“Leaning Mountain”). It is a stark soil mound physically, but it is a “beautiful place” for us, spiritually! Inwardly! Ancestrally! It is an earthen mound that is now protected by the state of Mississippi as a state park. We say it is being “protected” from archaeologists that want to dig up anything they can find, if it might contain Indian burials.

In our language, we have a beautiful origin statement: “*Hopaki fibna kask, hattak at atoba ammona kat Nanah Waiyah.*” “The place where man (*hattak*) [meaning all peoples, men and women] came into being a long time ago was Nanah Waiyah.” You see, right there is a good example. In English, “man” is the generic term for “people” — yet it is a decidedly male-dominated cultural matrix out of which English emerged. Not so with most of our Native languages.

A second origin belief (not “myth,” mind you) is that our ancient ancestors came down from ancient American earthen mound civilizations such as Cahokia and migrated into the Southeast. Many of our tribe truly believe that we are descended from Cahokia, but scientists can’t prove or disprove it. And they certainly won’t even countenance our explanation, either. Cahokia flourished from about 400 to 1450 CE and much of it still exists, many earthen mounds in an ancient metropolis whose ruins are located not far from St. Louis, MO and Collinsville, IL. A third possible explanation from our elders states that — instead of migrating from Siberia through the Bering Straights, down through Alaska, Canada to Mississippi — our own ancestors came north from the Maya regions, boating up through the Gulf of Mexico, up into what is now Mississippi untold thousands of years ago.

[BUCK] Yes, I see the problem here. These Bering Strait discussions proceed from one major assumption: That the “aboriginal” peoples of North

America were not “original” in that their physical and cultural origins are derivative. That assumption must be looked squarely in the eye for what it really is. And its limitations must be acknowledged as well.

In any event, the indigenous religions of North America have their own history, development, and character — entirely distinct from any Bering Straits hypothesis. In other words, if we bracket the question of origins, it’s quite clear that the subsequent history and development of Native American traditions is an entirely separate matter altogether.

Now let us consider the possibility that “families of religions” had existed independently on continents that, until relatively recently, had little or no contact — and even less possibility of religious influence or syncretism — as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has stated in the Tablet of the “Seven Candles of Unity”: “Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well-nigh impossible. Consequently intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable.”⁸⁶ On the basis of Bahá’í texts taken together, we have firm acknowledgement of at least three “families” of religions and Manifestations — and, now, possibly four:

1. Pre-Semitic: Melchizedek, Adam, Noah).
2. Semitic/Abrahamic: Moses, Jesus, Muhammad.
3. Aryan: Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha.
4. Native American/Native Canadian: White Buffalo Calf Woman, Deganawidah (tentatively).

While I won’t say that this list is complete or more representative than previous Bahá’í lists — which consist of Semitic and Aryan Prophets combined — this one widens the circle and further universalizes Bahá’í universalism, I dare say.

[ADDISON] I have long been puzzled by so many Bahá’ís who say they are open-minded, but don’t really want to commit themselves to saying Indians had real Manifestations of Gods or at least “Major” Prophets of God! What about a known and named Native Messenger of God, like Deganawidah. Haven’t you presented him as a “test case” for Bahá’í recognition?

[BUCK] Yes, I certainly have. But first, let me say a few words about the process of evaluating the qualifications or judging the authenticity of anyone claiming to be a Messenger of God. Discussing the “prophetic credentials” of a claimant is a proper religious and scholarly inquiry. Let me explain. Such an inquiry serves to establish or disqualify the prophetic

⁸⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1982), 31.

warrants of a claimant according to specified criteria from within a Bahá'í, Christian, Islamic or other perspective. While scholarship cannot stand in the shoes of belief or faith, scholars can certainly discuss what has been called the “phenomenology of revelation” and study how such characteristics are exemplified by any given religious figure. Thus, whether from a scholarly or a religious perspective, we can examine the “prophetic credentials” of a culture-hero such as Deganawidah.

According to Iroquois oral tradition, Deganawidah established the “Great Law of Peace”⁸⁷ — arguably the first New World democracy, which one scholar has dated at August 31, 1142.⁸⁸ This could well be one of the criteria of Deganawidah’s authenticity from a Bahá'í perspective, since “every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms.”⁸⁹ History and the problems of dating aside, may I ask how you personally respond to these words of Deganawidah?

I carry the Mind of the Master of Life, and my message will bring an end to the wars between east and west. The word that I bring is that all peoples shall love one another and live together in peace. This message has three parts: Righteousness and Health and Power - Gaiihwiyo, Skenno, Gashedenza. And each part has two branches. Righteousness means justice practised between men and between nations; it means also a desire to see justice prevail.

Health means soundness of mind and body; it also means peace, for that is what comes when minds are sane and bodies cared for.

Power means authority, the authority of law and custom, backed by such force as is necessary to make justice prevail; it also means religion, for justice enforced is the will of the Holder of the Heavens and has His sanction.

It will take the form of the Longhouse, in which there are many fires, one for each family, yet all live as one household under one Chief Mother. Hereabouts are Five Nations, each with its own Council Fire, yet they shall live together as one household in peace. They shall be the Kanonsiónni, the Longhouse. They shall have one

⁸⁷ See John Arthur Gibson, *Concerning the League: The Iroquois League Tradition as Dictated in Onondaga by John Arthur Gibson. Newly Elicited, Edited and Translated by Hanni Woodbury in Collaboration with Reg Henry and Harry Webster on the Basis of A.A. Goldenweiser's Manuscript.* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics, 1992); and Jacob Thomas, *The White Roots of Peace: Reading of the Great Law of Peace* (Brantford, Ontario: Iroquoian Institute, 1992).

⁸⁸ The “Six Nations” of the Iroquois is a living confederacy of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora tribes. Today, the Iroquois number more than 60,000 in population across 14 reservations and several urban centers in New York, Ontario, Quebec, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma.

⁸⁹ From a letter dated 23 December 1942, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual Bahá'í. Cited by Chris Jones, “[Individual Bahá'í Perspective on Spiritual Aspects of Cultural Diversity and Sustainable Development: Towards a Second Enlightenment](#)” (2005).

mind and live under one law. Thinking shall replace killing, and there shall be one Commonwealth.⁹⁰

I am Dekanawidah and with the Five Nations' Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace....

I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords....

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength....

We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger⁹¹ threatening he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy.

Thereupon Tekanawita [Deganawidah] stood up in the center of the gathering place, and then he said: First I will answer what it means to say, "Now it is arriving, the Good Message." This, indeed, is what it means: When it stops, the slaughter of your own people who live here on earth, then everywhere peace will come about, by day and also by night, and it will come about that as one travels around, everyone will be related...

Now again [?], secondly I say, "Now it is arriving, the Power," and this means that the different nations, all of the nations, will become just a single one, and the Great Law will come into being, so that all now will be related to each other, and there will

⁹⁰ Deganawidah, quoted in P. Wallace, *The White Roots of Peace* 13–14. According to a note archived in the Hewitt Papers, the Great Law is comprised of three dual concepts:

The League of the Iroquois was founded on six basic principles ... But these six principles ... were expressed by (only) three terms, each of which denoted two of these underlying principles. These three terms are: *Ne? Skannon?*, *ne?*, *ga: i?hwiyo*, and *ga?shasdenhsen?*. The first as applied to the body politic denotes peace, tranquility, rest; but as applied to the human or living body of flesh and blood, it denotes health or soundness, normal functional condition. War, strife, contention is the antithesis of the first meaning; and disease, illness, obsession or possession by another personality, especially ... through ... sorcery [is the antithesis] of the second meaning. Here we have the maximum extension and intention in the connotation of a term.

The second term is *ga: i?hwi yo*, which is not so easy of translation into English. Its first denotation is gospel, wholesome doctrine, what is good to be heard, ethical teaching, values, ethics — righteousness. As its second meaning, it denotes justice, right, as formulated in the customs, manners, religion, and ritualistic summations of the past experience of the people. The first is the teaching of a good doctrine; the second is the establishment of the good doctrine in institutional forms.

The third is *ga?shasdensa?*, whose first denotation is force, as expressed in the war power of the people; and its second meaning is the power, force or authority of the *orenda* or magic potency of the institutions of the people. It was at this point only that religion ... exerted its influence on the organic units of the social structure.

The institutions arising from these six fundamental principles or conceptions were together called *Kaenensha?go: na*, or the Great Commonwealth of Law.

John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt, qtd. in William Nelson Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 86. See also Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly* 113–115.

⁹¹ Deganawidah, qtd. in Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois*, Book III: *The Constitution of the Five Nations*, 33.

come to be just a single family, and in the future, in days to come, this family will continue on.

Now in turn, the other, my third saying, “Now it is arriving, the Peace,” this means that everyone will become related, men and also women, and also the young people and the children, and when all are relatives, every nation, then there will be peace... Then there will be truthfulness, and they will uphold hope and charity, so that it is peace that will unite all of the people, indeed, it will be as though they have but one mind, and they are a single person with only one body and one head and one life, which means that there will be unity ... When they are functioning, the Good Message and also the Power and the Peace, these will be the principal things everybody will live by; these will be the great values among the people.⁹²

[ADDISON] To me, these words are magnificent. They ring as true to me as the words of Bahá’u’lláh Himself. And I know that at least a few other Bahá’ís feel the same way. What does your experience in these matters reveal?

[BUCK] Quite true! Why else would Dr. David S. Ruhe publicly proclaim?

To the warring tribes 700–800 years ago there came an astonishing Prophet of Peace — Deganawidah united five, later six, mutually hostile tribal groups in a federal union based on democracy, the first in the Western Hemisphere. He cemented this union with a “Great Law of Peace,” a constitution which propounded one expansive human family... And thus, in God’s Plan, with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as perceptive mediators, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were vital steps (after the War of Independence [1775–1783]) toward realising in America the Iroquois concept of the primacy of individual rights as superior to property and power. And of course the Iroquois foreshadowed, in their Longhouse of sky and earth, the planetary Message of the Bahá’í Faith for today.⁹³

[BUCK] If this new approach might be tried out as an experiment — that is, the recognition, acknowledgement, and validation of Indigenous prophets on the part of the Bahá’í community (whether officially or at the level of praxis) — what social benefits might accrue? What do you foresee?

[ADDISON] Alex Poorman, a Cree Bahá’í of the Poorman Reserve, said, in reference to the first National Bahá’í Convention Indians that he had attended in Canada, “[W]hen the diversity of the human race comes together, there’s a tremendous power released. And this was the first time that this had happened in Canada, where we have two different cultures, the

⁹² Deganawidah, quoted in John Arthur Gibson, *Concerning the League*, 36–41.

⁹³ David S. Ruhe, “A New Evolution: Religious Bonding for World Unity,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 6.4 (1994-1995): 45–57 [45].

Native people, and the people that had come from Europe. Two cultures and we came together in the Bahá'í Faith.”⁹⁴ A review of research into the growth of the Bahá'í Faith around the world, published in 2000, concludes: “As community after community steadily awakens to the possibility of unity in diversity, the pain caused by centuries of racial and ethnic violence is being openly acknowledged and addressed, and the first glimmerings of healing can be discerned.”⁹⁵ This healing process, which is ongoing and ever widening, is also a major contributing factor that will ensure that Native American peoples and cultures, with the flute performances and powwow dancing of culture-bearers such as Kevin Locke, will survive.

[BUCK] Yes. Kevin Locke makes this very point when he said in an interview:

As he [Kevin Locke] explored the history and tenets of the Faith, which teaches that there is only one God and that all of the world's religions, *including many indigenous ones*, are expressions of the same ancient and eternal faith, he decided that many of the prophecies of the White Buffalo Calf Woman had been fulfilled.

“The central prayer of the Lakota is to be sheltered under the ‘Tree of Life,’ and the teachings about the great ‘Hoop of Life’ are that the many hoops of creation, or, peoples of the world are interconnected and destined to come together,” he said, pointing out that one of the titles of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is the “Tree of Life.”

“I realized that the teachings of the Woman [White Buffalo Calf Woman] were part of a great process of divine revelation that all peoples have taken part of, and that it has reached its culmination in the Bahá'í Faith,” he said. “I also realized that what the Bahá'í Faith teaches does not detract from or in anyway negate my own traditional religion. Many people ask me, ‘How does the Bahá'í Faith tie in with your Indian spiritual traditions?’ Because there is an assumption that people get from their experience with Christianity, at least as practiced here, that you have to renounce your former practices when you join a new religion.

“But the Bahá'í writings say that all peoples have received a portion of the divine bounty, and that this bounty is all from the same source,” he said. “In other words, the truly valid and beautiful spiritual traditions are from one source and they all have prophetic traditions that point to the same point of unity and to the same glorious future for humanity, which is the unfoldment of an all-

⁹⁴ Quoted in Patricia Verge, *Angus: From The Heart*, 75.

⁹⁵ The Bahá'í World Centre, *The Bahá'í World 1998–1999: An International Record* (Haifa, Israel: World Centre Publications, 2000), 89.

embracing world civilization. So there is no need to deny or negate or invalidate each other's spiritual heritage."⁹⁶

Note here that this official Baha'i publication (*One Country* is the "Newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community") goes on record to state that the Bahá'í "Faith...teaches that there is only one God and that all of the world's religions, *including many indigenous ones*, are expressions of the same ancient and eternal faith." Not many Bahá'ís are actually aware of this representation — this crucial nuance — of the Bahá'í doctrine of "Progressive Revelation."

[ADDISON] Please elaborate on this line of reasoning.

[BUCK] The Bahá'í teachings embody what has been termed a "theory of civilization." In fine, the Bahá'í perspective, as I understand it, inextricably links social evolution with spiritual evolution. In other words, civilization cannot progress without Progressive Revelation. Social evolution would have no generative force were it not for the regenerative forces released by these charismatic spiritual geniuses — Native Messengers of God, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, to name a few — who punctuate history to create the moral and social foundations for the advancement of civilization.

Kevin Locke also speaks of the prophecies of White Buffalo Calf Woman as having been fulfilled by the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. How, then, are Native prophecies possible without Native Prophets?

[ADDISON] Point well-taken!

[BUCK] For each and every Lakota Bahá'í I've read about or met, White Buffalo Calf Woman is clearly a Messenger of God. Would you agree?

[ADDISON] Yes, absolutely.

[BUCK] The presence of Lakota Bahá'ís is part of the diversity that so greatly enriches the Bahá'í world community. Yet there exists some real confusion on the part of many Bahá'ís, who are either at a loss as to how to integrate the rich religious diversity that Native Americans bring to the Bahá'í experience of unity in diversity. Some Bahá'ís are locked into an "Arya-Semiticentric" — to coin your improvement of my neologism, "Semiticentrism," Don — worldview, such that no authentic Prophets can have ever existed (unless "unnamed" and therefore unproblematic) outside of the Semitic (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and Aryan (i.e., Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism) families of religions. How do we clear up this

⁹⁶ "[Hoop dancing and world citizenship: meet Kevin Locke](#)" *One Country* 8.2 (July–Sept. 1996). (Emphasis added.)

confusion, Don? What insights do you have to offer, from a Native perspective?

[ADDISON] Well, for one thing, don't the Native American religions represent another distinct "family of religions," just like the Semitic and Aryan religions, as you have rightly pointed out? I think you had previously made that point in your 1996 "Native Messengers" paper. But let me talk about the "extended family" of Native peoples worldwide.

More broadly, the consciousness of interrelatedness of all indigenous peoples would quickly clear up this confusion. This interrelatedness of Native peoples has inspired some films done by our late Bahá'í brother, and my Choctaw brother, Phil Lucas, who just passed away in Issaquah, Washington. Watch those films. He, for example, links up the Seri of Tiburon Island (Mexico), with the Kwakiutl of Canada's Northwest Territories, with the Maori of New Zealand, with the Aborigines of Australia. He called them, "Storytellers of the Pacific Rim," and this film documentary was broadcast on "Identity"⁹⁷ — which I use in all the cultural anthropology classes I teach.

I believe what Bahá'u'lláh says about the Prophets of God must include Native Prophets. This should pose no threat to Bahá'ís who carry more traditional views. I can tell you that I was physically present when I heard Jacqueline Left Hand Bull (now Chair of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States) refer, almost as a side note, that, to her, Bahá'u'lláh represents the "Promised Return of the White Buffalo Calf Woman." She made no further issue of it at all! In fact, I personally witnessed Jacqueline say that she believes Bahá'u'lláh is the Return of White Buffalo Calf Woman at two Bahá'í events: once when she spoke at an Association for Bahá'í Studies conference, and a second time at a Native Bahá'í gathering at the Brighton Creek Conference Center grounds near Yelm, Washington.⁹⁸ I should highlight the fact that her comments at both events were very natural, that she didn't go into any further detail about this statement, that she didn't appear to sense that anyone in either audience would object. It was a very matter-of-fact statement. Since she saw no need to explain or defend it, she didn't offer any further discussion or "proof." She just made a simple statement of faith and personal conviction — as if all in the hall would understand — and that was that! I've never heard other Lakotas (whether Bahá'í or not) try to "fill in the blanks" and get others to acknowledge that White Buffalo Calf Woman was a real prophet! It's almost irrelevant.

⁹⁷ See *Storytellers of the Pacific: Identity* (1996).

⁹⁸ See also a published statement to this effect: "[The Return of the 'White Buffalo Calf Woman': Prophecy of the Lakota](#)," interview of Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull by U.S. National Spiritual Assembly member, Patricia Locke (Lakota) in 1989.

Bahá'ís in every community trace their descent to any number of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, the lack of any one dominant cultural community or perspective in the Bahá'í Faith clearly illustrates its all-embracing nature, and Native Americans quickly notice this characteristic of Bahá'í communities. At the international level, Amoz Gibson,⁹⁹ who descended from Native American, African American, and Scottish Irish ancestry, was elected, at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1963, to the first Universal House of Justice, which has established its Seat on Mount Carmel in Israel.¹⁰⁰ Native peoples were elated and deeply moved when this happened, because Gibson's election to that august institution became a clear and powerful demonstration that Bahá'ís were putting the Bahá'í teachings into practice.

More importantly, most American Indian Bahá'ís are more invested in the discussions of how we can help our Euro-American Bahá'í brothers and sisters better appreciate the gifts that we (Natives and Euro-Americans) can contribute together to the accomplishment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's great prophecy.

[BUCK] Let's talk about the importance of cultural diversity as a shared communally shared value. Article 1 of UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* states: "Cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature." Would you agree when I say?: "Cultural diversity is as necessary for the Bahá'í community as it is for humanity at large."

[ADDISON] How could I not? Listen to this interview with Jacqueline Left Hand Bull:

Patricia Locke: How many Indians do you estimate are Bahá'ís in the Americas?

Left Hand Bull: There are probably over 200,000 Indian Bahá'ís in the Americas. Most — the vast majority — are in South America, where there are very large populations of Indians, many who don't even speak Spanish. But Central America also has quite a few thousand, especially among the Mayan Indians.

Patricia Locke: Why do you think so many indigenous people have become Bahá'í?

Left Hand Bull: I think indigenous people are initially attracted to the Bahá'í Faith for two or three reasons. For some, it is the fact that the teachings of the Faith emphasize the importance of preserving Native cultures. We know that we, and all Indians, have been under tremendous pressure to assimilate into non-Indian ways, so it is a

⁹⁹ Quoted in Verge, *Angus: From The Heart*, 101.

¹⁰⁰ The Universal House of Justice is the nine-member, internationally elected administrative institution that is the governing body of the Bahá'ís throughout the globe.

confirmation for many to learn that a Messenger of God brought this particular teaching over a hundred years ago.¹⁰¹

I really appreciate this statement: “For some, it is the fact that the teachings of the Faith emphasize the importance of preserving Native cultures.” It should become a more pronounced — and practiced — Bahá’í principle. Not everything in our indigenous cultures should be preserved. But, here, unity should stress cultural preservation (survival), not assimilation (extinction), even though a “world culture” will likely emerge, coefficient with the kind of world unity that Bahá’ís have been advocating all along.

[BUCK] In keeping with what you have said, there has been an official or semi-official Bahá’í endorsement of precisely this perspective. In fact, the Canadian Bahá’í pamphlet, *The Right to An Identity*, is one of the most remarkable Bahá’í documents I’ve seen. It states, in part:

Our hope is that Canada will be the first nation on earth to give practical force to the most fundamental right of all: the right of every citizen to be what God has made him.

Some of the steps which can contribute to such a breakthrough are:

- Recruitment of native Canadians as teachers and teaching assistants.
- Kindergarten and some primary instruction in the native language of the children.
- Development of courses of study covering the entire religious heritage of mankind.
- Involvement of Indian youth in Canada’s overseas aid programs.
- Inclusion of the right to a cultural identity in any civil rights entrenched in the Constitution.¹⁰²

Note here the proposal for a new constitutional right to be added to the Canadian Constitution! Also note the recommending of the “[d]evelopment of courses of study covering the entire religious heritage of mankind” — which presumably adumbrates Native Canadian and Native American religions. Does it stand to reason that whatever the Bahá’í community proposes for adoption as a fundamental right — whether under constitutional law or under international law — the Bahá’í community ought to accept for itself? What do you think, Don?

[ADDISON] I am currently using copies of *The Right to an Identity* with all my summer semester students at the University of Oregon! I made copies

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, “[The Return of the ‘White Buffalo Calf Woman’: Prophecy of the Lakota](#)” (South Dakota, 1989) See also: Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt, “Bahá’í,” in *A Parliament of Souls: In Search of Global Spirituality*. Interviews with 28 Spiritual Leaders from Around the World, ed. M. Tobias, J. Morrison, B. Gray (San Francisco: KQED Books, 1995), 22.

¹⁰² *The Right to An Identity* (Toronto: The Canadian Bahá’í Community National Office, n.d.), 9. Color copy of this pamphlet provided courtesy of Chelsea Dawn Horton.

for every single student! They loved it! As for striking a symmetry between between our own practices and those which we propose that governments, such as Canada, ought to adopt, it seems perfectly obvious to me that we are obligated to practice what we preach. So, we ought to recognize “the right to a cultural identity” as a Bahá’í principle and we ought to develop “courses of study covering the entire religious heritage of mankind” — curricula that recognize and include Native Canadian and Native American religions. Imagine — when a Bahá’í community like Canada takes a visible position of advocacy for Native rights and recognition of Native religions — how else can we escape a charge of ideological duplicity unless we ourselves model such noble principles as these! Isn’t that what you and I are partly endeavoring to accomplish in this collaboration of ours?

[BUCK] Dr. Addison, friend and colleague, yes, I wholeheartedly agree. I guess that’s why this conversation has been important. We should probably bring this discussion to a close. I can tell you that I am certainly not alone among Bahá’í scholars in reading ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Amír Khán as providing independently sufficient warrant for “Messengers of God to First Nations” as a valid Baha’í principle. For instance, let me introduce my friend and colleague, Dr. Necati Alkan, who is currently a visiting scholar in Bahá’í studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 2004, Dr. Alkan successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1844–1928*, at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. In 1998, he completed his Master’s thesis, *Die Bahá’í-Religion und ihre Beziehung zu den islamischen Reformbewegungen am Ausgang des Osmanischen Reiches, 1860–1922*.¹⁰³

Dr. Alkan, what is your reading of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Amír Khán? In your professional and personal opinion, and based on your knowledge of the Bahá’í source languages of Persian, Arabic, and Turkish — together with your investigation of ancillary, authoritative Bahá’í statements that bear on the question that we now have before us — is this a clear Text?

[ALKAN] As to the text in the Tablet to Amír Khán, for me it sounds clear that Prophets must have appeared in America in ancient times. Otherwise why would ‘Abdu’l-Bahá say “the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times”? Who else, if not a Prophet/Messenger, raised the “Call of God”? I do not see a problem when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the “must have been raised” and, on the basis of this clear statement, effectively admits Native American Messengers of God into the line of “our” Prophets. You discuss this all in your article clearly.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Dr. Alkan’s [curriculum vita](#) may be accessed online and a list of his [publications](#) is also available.

¹⁰⁴Dr. Necati Alkan, e-mail, dated 27 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck. Slightly edited and cited with permission. The statement, “You discuss this all in your article clearly,” refers to the article, Christopher Buck, “*Native Messengers of God in Canada?: A Test Case for Bahá’í Universalism.*” idem, “*Bahá’í Universalism and Native Prophets.*”

My reading is based both on the Persian reading and English translation. Only a Prophet/Messenger can “*nida-yi ilahi buland gashtih*” — raise the Call of God! And I checked Shoghi Effendi’s translation of the word “*al-battih*”: he translates it as “without doubt”, “no doubt”, “of a certainty”, “unfailingly”, “surely”, “most certainly”, etc.¹⁰⁵ I really do not know what the problem is with stating that there were Prophets sent to the First Nations. I would base my arguments on the following reasons:

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement in the Tablet to Amír Khán is unambiguous. Who else than Prophets or Messengers can raise the Call of God?
2. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, only 28 prophets (*anbiyá’*) are mentioned in the Qur’an by name. There are many others who are unnamed.
3. The Qur’an says: “And there never was a people, without a Warner having lived among them (in the past).” (Q. 35:24); and “... to every people a guide” (Q. 13:7).
4. Shoghi Effendi states that the nine religions that Bahá’ís regularly speak of is sufficient yet not exhaustive. Consider this statement: “The number nine, which in itself is the number of perfection, is considered by the Bahá’ís as sacred, because it is symbolic of the perfection of the Bahá’í Revelation which constitutes the ninth in the line of existing religions, the latest and fullest Revelation which mankind has ever known. The eighth is the religion of the Báb and the remaining seven are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islám, and the religion of the Sabaeans. These religions are not the only true religions that have appeared in the world but are the only ones still existing. There have always been Divine Prophets and Messengers, to many of whom the Qur’án refers. But the only ones existing are those mentioned above.”¹⁰⁶

This statement must not be read dogmatically and exclusively, for Shoghi Effendi hastens to add: “The Guardian feels that with intellectuals and students of religion the question of exactly which are the nine existing religions is controversial, and it would be better to avoid it. He does not want the friends to be rigid in these matters, but use their judgment and tact, sometimes one statement is exactly the right thing for one type of mind and the wrong thing for another.”¹⁰⁷

5. Therefore, in my opinion, Bahá’í doctrine can recognize — at least in principle — the existence of other Prophets, such Native American Messengers of God. In response to a believer who

¹⁰⁵ Dr. Necati Alkan, e-mail, dated 28 May 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian* (New Delhi: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1973), 51–52.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 52.

raised this issue, Shoghi Effendi explained: “Regarding your question: the only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic Prophets is because their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is mentioned and Zoroaster in our scriptures — both non-Jewish or non-Semitic Prophets. We are taught that there have always been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names.”¹⁰⁸ This same reasoning can certainly be applied to the question of whether Bahá’í doctrine can accept the existence of “Messengers of God to First Nations,” as you say.¹⁰⁹

These ancillary texts provide strong support for the argument based on the Tablet to Amír Khán. To be honest, in light of this clear Text that has now surfaced and come to light, I fail to see why some Bahá’í scholars still object to the idea of Native American Prophets.¹¹⁰

In conclusion, it is my professional and personal opinion that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet to Amír Khán provides a sufficiently clear text to warrant “Messengers of God to First Nations” as a valid Bahá’í principle. I will be happy if you would extract my comments from my e-mails and add it to the conversation between you and Dr. Addison.¹¹¹

[ADDISON] Yakoke! Dr. Alkan, for providing this independent attestation!

[BUCK] Dr. Addison, let me recapitulate what I understand to be our collaborative and conversive thesis and reasoning here. In the Tablet to Amír Khán, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is speaking about two distinct, yet interrelated subjects: the question of migration and then the question of revelation. Although we do not have the exact questions posed by Amir Khan, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reply should be accounted as an answer to the question of crossing and communication, including the issue of whether there was any religious influence as a result of this migration. I agree with you, Don, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is simply acknowledging the currency of this theory without endorsing it. First, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá acknowledges that a migration across the Bering Straits has been postulated by scholars. I would concede that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cites this theory with tacit approval, but only to the extent that migration may well have occurred. Forgive the pun, but the Bering Straits have little or no “bearing” on Native American religions.

[ADDISON] In fact, the Bering Straits theory is reductive, not productive. I might add that other Native scholars say much the same thing. Lakota

¹⁰⁸ From a letter, dated 10 October 1950, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File*, comp. H. Hornby, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), 503.

¹⁰⁹ Dr. Necati Alkan, e-mail, dated 29 May 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck. Slightly edited and cited with permission.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Dr. Necati Alkan, e-mail, dated 3 June 2007, in reply to Dr. Christopher Buck. Slightly edited and cited with permission.

author and scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., has written extensively on this in *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*.¹¹² So has Devon Mihesuah, associate professor of American Indian history, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, and member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, who states that the stereotype that “Indians arrived in this hemisphere via the Siberian land bridge” is simply not what Indians, on the whole, believe. The reality, she says, is that “Indians believe that they were created in this hemisphere.”¹¹³

[BUCK] Yes, the Bering Straits theory treats Native American spirituality as a genetic question. In focusing almost exclusively on origins, it practically excludes the question of development, doesn't it? In any event, simple logic rules out genetic arguments that would suggest that Native American religions are derivative as a consequence of the Bering Straits migrations. Consider:

Despite truth-claims of Mormon doctrine to the contrary, scholars have found no trace of Western religious influence — whether that of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, or Islam — on the American continent before the European conquest and colonization of the Americas. Nor, for that matter, are there any pre-Columbian relics or doctrinal vestiges of the so-called Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, to be found in the Americas.

The verb “forgotten” (*farámush shudih ast*) in the Tablet to Amír Khán, therefore, is not related to those religions, for the simple reason that the utter lack of evidence clearly shows that these religions did not enter the Americas — whether in antiquity or in the medieval period — prior to the European conquest and colonization.

[ADDISON] This is an argument from silence, with which I agree.

[BUCK] Yes, the silence is resounding, isn't it? In addition to this *argumentum ex nihilo*, we also have Qur'anic arguments and terminological arguments as well.

Now let's revisit the Qur'anic text that 'Abdu'l-Bahá adduced. In citing the verse of the Qur'án, “We will not chastise them if they had not been sent a Messenger” (Q. 17:15), 'Abdu'l-Bahá invokes traditional Islamic reasoning to register a key point: By implication, this verse implies that North America has been the scene of the advent of Native Messengers of God

¹¹² Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Reissue edn.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997), at 67–91, and *passim* at xi, 6, 31, 33, 47, 55, 93, 94, 95, 161, 196–197, and 211. Deloria underscores the absolute lack of Indian oral tradition about such a migration at pp. 81–83, and suggests alternative theories at pp. 33–34 and 59–60, not to mention the general lack of evidence for the Bering Straits theory at pp. 58–62, 70–73, and 91, with topographical factors in opposition to such a migration at pp. 72–76.

¹¹³ Devon A. Mihesuah, *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities* (Regina, Saskatchewan: Clarity Press, 1998), 46.

since other Qur'anic passages, in relation to this verse, clearly testify that God has sent a Messenger to *every* nation (*ummah*) (Q. 10:47; cf. 35:24). Thus a whole-to-part deduction obtains here. This doctrinal evidence from the Qur'án necessitates the advent of the Native Manifestations of God specifically for the “people of America” (*ahl-i Amrík*), as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly indicates in the Tablet to Amír Khán.

Bahá'u'lláh points to Qur'anic universalisms as well, as Dr. Alkan has already noted. We can extend this reasoning geographically and historically, even though this is a religious argument rather than an archaeological or historical one. In His *Commentary on the Surah of the Sun*, after explaining that by *al-shams* (“sun”) is meant the Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh affirms the truth of Q. 10:47 and parallels: “Then, in another station, it referreth to the Prophets and Pure Ones of God, for They are the Suns of His names and attributes amidst His creation. Were it not for Them, no one would have been illumined by the mystical knowledge of God. As thou canst see, every nation on earth hath been enlightened by one of these brightly shining Suns. Whoso denieth Them remaineth deprived.”¹¹⁴ In this statement, Bahá'u'lláh declares that Messengers of God have appeared to every one of the peoples of earth, although in sundry times and places. Obviously this includes, *inter alia*, Native Americans and Native Canadians, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly affirms in the Tablet to Amír Khán.

[ADDISON] This traditional Islamic argument, as made by both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, makes eminent sense as well. Note that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá applies this reasoning specifically to North America.

[BUCK] In addition to arguments from silence and Islamic reasoning, we can point to a terminological argument as well. We've already demonstrated that the “Call of God” (*nidá-yi iláhí*) is a Bábí and Bahá'í euphemism for Manifestations of God, or, derivatively, in reference to belief in or promulgation of Their teachings. By the phrase of the “Call of God” is definitely meant the advent of “Manifestations of God” — or, derivatively, recognition and promulgation of Their Teachings — as I've demonstrated in the various Bahá'í texts that we've previously adduced. The Bahá'í meanings attached to this term are all unified by reference to divine Manifestations or the divine Teachings that emanate from Them.

Thus, in this Tablet, the phrase, “the Call of God” is not referring to the Call of God raised by the promulgators of previous religions, because their adherents never reached the Americas in pre-Columbian times in the first place. If such were the case, then we would expect to find a few vestiges, at least, of such cultural influences, even admixed with superstitions. Yet this expectation has never been met.

¹¹⁴ Adapted from translation by J. Cole of Bahá'u'lláh's [Commentary on the Surah of the Sun](#) (Ames, Iowa: Omphaloskepsis, 2000) at 10–11

[ADDISON] Yes, the fact is that we have precious few artifacts that suggest such religious influence should indicate that Native American religious possess their own distinctive character.

[BUCK] Yes, in our argument from silence, we've already noted that there is no trace of such putative religious influence from Siberia on North America, except perhaps for shamanism. This can just as easily be explained as a *parallel development*. In any case, no prior influences are sufficient to account for the teachings of Deganawidah, which are remarkable in that they are as original as they are fully consonant with Bahá'í teachings. Would you agree?

[ADDISON] Deganawidah's religious teachings are quite advanced — a far cry from the inauthentic, to be sure.

[BUCK] Quite so. Now let's review our geographical argument: Reflect on this emphatic statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Undoubtedly in those regions the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now."¹¹⁵ The words, "Undoubtedly in those regions" (*al-battih dar án s.afahát*) indicates either North America in particular or the Americas in general (and so, both). This phrase obviously cannot mean Asia, since Manifestations of God had already appeared in Asia.

[ADDISON] 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reference to North America is explicit textually and patent contextually.

[BUCK] I'd say that you are living proof of that point, Don! Now let's review another argument from silence: diminished influence. The verb "forgotten" (*farámush shudih ast*) scarcely means obliterated. Rather, in most cases, "forgotten" means diminished influence, not total disappearance. That having been said, I must concede a sad fact of history: It is true that some Native religions have become extinct whenever language and culture were eradicated, which is a tragic outcome of much of the history of Indian Country. Nevertheless, I believe that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá primarily means here is that the teachings and influence of these Native Manifestations of God has waxed and waned. They longer possess the currency and influence that They once enjoyed.

[ADDISON] Yes, I've already spoken of how some of our Choctaw traditions have largely disappeared, although the cultural values and wisdom that these have imparted are woven into the fabric of who we are as a people.

¹¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, [Tablet to Amir Khán Áhan of Tehran](#). This text appears at the top of the page at 2-47

[BUCK] Now let's recap our exegesis with a rhetorical argument: 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the adverb, "undoubtedly" (*al-battih*) with such rhetorical force that we cannot doubt His word that the "Call of God" was raised in America. If our interpretation that the "Call of God" essentially means "Manifestation of God," then 'Abdu'l-Bahá's rhetorical use of "undoubtedly" raises the the appearance of Native Manifestations of God to a level of doctrinal certainty!

[ADDISON] Yes. We cannot take this statement lightly. It is definitive. I cannot escape this conclusion in my reading of this Tablet.

[BUCK] And so, in light of our informally logical, Islamic, terminological, and rhetorical arguments, here is the interpretive challenge: Is the Tablet to Amír Khán this a "clear Text" or not? Although whatever 'Abdu'l-Bahá is stating is stated forcefully, I concede that no consensus has yet emerged as to whether 'Abdu'l-Bahá is referring to Native Manifestations of God or otherwise. Eleven years ago, in 1996, this Text was admittedly not "clear" enough for the Universal House of House to make an official pronouncement (either way) at that time.

[ADDISON] Times can change. What about now, in 2007?

[BUCK] Perhaps in the near future, God-willing, the the Universal House of House might revisit this question in light of a fuller analysis by the Research Department of the Tablet to Amír Khán — possibly in reference to the detailed textual and contextual analysis that you and I have offered here.

[ADDISON] So the question is still open? Certainly this issue is still alive.

[BUCK] Well, we can at least proceed from the fact that the House says, in its letter cited after the English translation, that while there is nothing in the Writings that definitively establishes "Messengers of God to First Nations," there is nothing in the Writings to deny it.

[ADDISON] I'd say that what we are proposing is relatively new and controversial — yet of far-reaching and profound importance for Native teaching. This question again stands before us as a Bahá'í community, and deserves our serious reconsideration, rather than brusque dismissal, which is what I've seen in recent discussions of this question online, where you were more or less pilloried in cyberspace.

[BUCK] That comes with the territory of presenting anything that's novel and new. Still, in covering new doctrinal territory, and in pushing the frontiers of Bahá'í universalism, you and I have stood our ground.

[ADDISON] Are you as certain of your reading of the Tablet of Amír Khán in 2007 as you were in 1996 when your "Native Messengers" paper was

first published, or as you were in 1994 when you first publicly presented it at the Association for Bahá'í Studies conference at Harvard?

[BUCK] Yes. And Dr. David S. Ruhe, who was there and came to my defense during the vigorous discussion that followed, inspired in me even greater confidence.

After serious study of this text for well over a decade, I have scholarly and spiritual certitude that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of the term, the "Call of God," is a clear reference to Manifestations of God, since every single text where this expression occurs warrants — if not compels — the conclusion that the "Call of God" (*nidá-yi-iláhí*) is clearly a Bábí and Bahá'í euphemism for Manifestations of God, or, derivatively, for a belief in or promulgation of Their teachings, as I've previously stated.

In fine, the Tablet to Amír Khán is, in my estimation, a sufficiently clear text that enunciates what amounts to a newly-discovered Bahá'í teaching that Native Manifestations of God have definitely appeared in the Americas. On its surface, the Tablet to Amír Khán appears to be a piece of correspondence of relatively minor importance, yet which, in actuality, is a unique text. For out of the entire corpus of Bábí and Bahá'í sacred Texts, this is the only definitive and authoritative Bahá'í statement on the issue of Native Manifestations of God raised up in the Americas.

[ADDISON] And how does this all tie in with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "sole racial prophecy" (as Chelsea Horton has characterized it) of the destiny of American Indians to enlighten the world?

[BUCK] As you well know, another singular text is the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "Attach great importance to the indigenous population of America. For these souls may be likened unto the ancient inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, who, prior to the Mission of Muhammad, were like unto savages. When the light of Muhammad shone forth in their midst, however, they became so radiant as to illumine the world. Likewise, these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world."¹¹⁶ Underscoring the fact that this statement is without parallel in other Bahá'í texts, the Research Department concludes: "The Master's likening of the indigenous Americans to the pre-Islamic Arabs, which is described in His *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, is not noticed in His other works."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Revealed on April 8, 1916, in the garden outside the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, and addressed to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, Illinois: U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993) 33.

¹¹⁷ See Appendix One, *infra*.

Since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compared the American Indians to the ancient Arabs, then the appearance of Native Manifestations of God — such as Chah-Tah,¹¹⁸ — the Prophet of your people, the Choctaw Nation — White Buffalo Calf Woman, and Deganawidah — would complete the analogy, as counterparts to Hud, Sálìh, and Muhammad.

[ADDISON] You’re not suggesting that Deganawidah is the New World Muhammad?

[BUCK] No, except that Deganawidah may be a figure of comparable influence in the New World.

[ADDISON] Granted. But where does this line of reasoning lead?

[BUCK] Bear in mind that we are basically arguing for recognition of a Bahá’í *principle* of First Nations Manifestations, not necessarily a concomitant recognition of the *principals* (names of these Manifestations), even though we can certainly acknowledge and honor their mention, such as that of Deganawidah, just as the late Dr. David S. Ruhe stated, which I quote once more: “To the warring tribes 700–800 years ago there came an astonishing Prophet of Peace — Deganawidah united five, later six, mutually hostile tribal groups in a federal union based on democracy, the first in the Western Hemisphere. He cemented this union with a ‘Great Law of Peace,’ a constitution which propounded one expansive human family... And of course the Iroquois foreshadowed, in their Longhouse of sky and earth, the planetary message of the Bahá’í Faith for today.”

[ADDISON] I concur, my good friend, wholeheartedly. And Dr. Ruhe’s words are worth repeating. But his words never rose to the level of recognized Bahá’í doctrine, unfortunately.

[BUCK] You make a good point here. Whether the Bahá’í Faith can formally recognize Native Messengers of God is as open a question as it is a vexed question. In her dissertation, Pauline Tuttle (to whom this paper is also dedicated, along with Dr. David S. Ruhe), wrote:

It is important to note a from a [sic] Bahá’í perspective there is some question as to whether White Buffalo Calf Woman was a ‘Prophet’ of the same station as Bahá’u’lláh or a ‘lesser Prophet,’ whose reachings [sic] were inspired by the spiritual impulses of the Manifestation of Her day as defined by Shoghi Effendi (1923–57: 156). The Universal House of Justice has consulted at length about extensive research which Patricia Locke, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, and Kevin Locke have conducted on the station of indigenous

¹¹⁸ “The name of their principal chief or prophet was Chah-tah, and he was a man of great age and wisdom.” As reported by Peter Pitchlynn, “[Chief of the Choctaws](#),” *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 25, Issue 150 (April 1870)

Prophets and to date it has been determined that further research is required before a decision can be rendered in relation to this particular question, a factor which Christopher Buck does not seem to be cognizant of in his discussion of this topic (Buck 1996).

Patricia Locke suggests that in light of the guidance from the Universal House of Justice, the term Holy Souls is preferable to that of Messengers when speaking of indigenous Prophets (Interview in *Wakpala* July 1999, Tuttle Collection 99.47-MD). Although I use the terms Messenger and Holy Souls interchangeably I do so with the understanding that the words themselves do not hold particular meaning beyond that construed by the reader and elucidated in the body of the text. What is important for purposes of this dissertation is what is found in the Sacred Texts on this issue and how the individual Lakota Bahá'ís I have worked with interpret both the station and teachings of White Buffalo Calf Woman. Rather than arguing the point one way or another, as Buck chose to do, I fully concur with the conclusion that further research is required before a *de facto* stance can be taken regarding this issue."¹¹⁹

[ADDISON] Is Chelsea Horton correct here?

[BUCK] She's entitled to her view, of course. But let me speak in my own behalf. Just for the record, in my "Native Messengers" paper I did cite a letter from the Universal House of Justice (in reply to my research questions) that a pronouncement was impossible to make in the absence of a "clear Text." So, with all due respect (sincerely so), I think Pauline missed the point with respect to my "Native Messengers" paper. It represents some of the "further research" that the House rightly said needed to be undertaken. And, now, our exegesis of the Tablet to Amír Khán presents both still further research and a "clear Text." Whether our elucidation of this Text will be sufficiently clear remains to be seen.

[ADDISON] I get the sense that what we are doing here is potentially historic?

[BUCK] Whether or not this a historic moment remains to be seen. This is what we have done: We have argued that the principle of "Messengers of God to First Nations" is based on a sufficiently "clear Text." We can say this partly on the basis of the close textual analysis proffered by Dr. Necati Alkan, among others with whom you and I have previously consulted.

So is with measured confidence that we can say that the Tablet to Amír Khán promulgates a clear teaching that Native Manifestations of God

¹¹⁹ Pauline Tuttle, *The Hoop of Many Hoops*, 188, note 177.

appeared in the Americas. In so saying, we prescind from making any authoritative pronouncement, as we clearly have no authority to do so.

[ADDISON] Yes, we need to make this disclaimer abundantly clear. What we claim argumentatively, we disclaim as having any authority. Adoption or formal recognition of our findings would have far-reaching implications for presenting the Bahá'í Faith anew to Native Americans and Native Canadians — and potentially to all of the indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere. In so saying, we are not stating this definitively, as only the Universal House of Justice — in its role in elucidating the Bahá'í Writings — could ever authoritatively validate such a pronouncement on behalf of the Bahá'í community at large.

[BUCK] Yes, in law, we call cases that have no precedential authority merely “persuasive” precedent (also persuasive authority).

[ADDISON] Not binding, right?

[BUCK] Right. Yet the implications of our argument are quite clear, wouldn't you say?

[ADDISON] Yes, indeed. Let me say, on a formal note, that the application of our thesis has obvious implications for the Bahá'í teaching work — with Native American and Native Canadian communities of interest in mind — as our finding permits an open declaration that Bahá'ís can now proclaim that Native Manifestations of God are not simply a valid inference from Qur'anic universalisms, but that Bahá'ís, on the authority of the Tablet to Amír Khán, can and should — without an ontological commitment to specific names and personages *per se* — affirm and honor the central role that these Wisdom Bearers and Lawgivers have had in the finest traditions of Native spirituality. And, on a personal note, I have to say that I, along with many other native American Bahá'ís, have waited for Bahá'í validation of what we always knew to be true.

[BUCK] Yes, and the implications of all this for the future course of the Bahá'í-Native encounter are nothing short of profound! But, in so doing, aren't you and I — or I myself at least — vulnerable to the criticism that we are somehow co-opting Native American spirituality — that, indeed, Bahá'ís who wish to recognize, integrate, or even assimilate elements of Native sacred tradition are engaging in something that is not only spiritually inauthentic, eclectic, and syncretistic, but is tantamount to spiritual imperialism?

[ADDISON] By way of a disclaimer, I think it vital to add that Bahá'ís are *not* engaged in the ugly business of co-opting Native American spirituality. I want to make this point very clearly — mainly for the sake of American Indian readers who know nothing about the Bahá'í Faith. Let me assure our

Native American readers that Bahá'ís are definitely not stealing American Indian beliefs, rituals, doctrines, ribbon shirts, drumming practices, and transforming them into some hybrid or amalgam of Bahá'í and Native religious experience as some other religious movements have done in the past, like the Ghost Dance, or the Peyote Religion, or the Shaker Church — all of which are syncretic movements of both Christian and Native provenance.

Most importantly, as Bahá'ís, we are not a community of Indians and non-Indians who pretend to speak for Native Americans regarding their own sacred traditions. I can tell you that an ongoing controversy has raged among scholars in the academic Study of Religion over this very issue for some time now, precisely because Euro-American or other non-Indian scholars have assumed that they have a scholarly prerogative or “right” to study any American Indian religion that they want and to conclude what they will as a result of their investigations. Worse still, some non-Native scholars act as if they themselves are *the* quintessential experts on indigenous religions — not Native Americans ourselves! In fine, this “academic freedom” has, in the transgressive extremity of its overreaching, led to a certain cultural imperialism borne of overweening academic hubris. Scholar Lee Irwin has edited a thought-provoking collection of essays on this scholarly debate, entitled, *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*.¹²⁰

I should hasten to add this critical disclaimer. Under no circumstances are Bahá'ís ever doing these things or fawing and foisting such grandiose claims on others. As Bahá'ís, we are not embroiled in or otherwise tainted by this controversy in any way, and I think it is absolutely vital that we clarify this for the non-Bahá'í Native American reader — whether a practicing member of a Native American religion or not. American Indian scholars sometimes speak of these practitioners as “white shamans” (also spelled as one word, *whiteshamans*). Steven Leuthold, assistant professor in Syracuse University’s School of Art and Design states in his monograph, *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity*, explains that “whiteshamans” basically manufacture “invented traditions” out of their own appropriation of Native spirituality, and the result of such transmuting of sacred traditions is a hodge-podge and a monstrosity

I want to add I believe the term “whiteshamanism” is admittedly a racist term and that Bahá'ís don’t use that term. Bahá'ís will want to understand why the practices that led to the birth of this term are so offensive to Native Americans. By the same token, Native Americans need to understand that Bahá'ís do not in any way condone what these “whiteshamans” are doing. The problem with these offensive “whiteshamans” is that they typically

¹²⁰ Lee Irwin, *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader* (Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

refuse to give up their appropriation of Native practices or their pretense of being (magically) “authentic” Native spokesmen or so-called “spiritual guides.” Bahá’ís, under no circumstance, would ever condone the offensive behavior of these “whiteshamans.” Nor would we condone the misuse of any other religious ceremony, nor would we want Native peoples to ever think that Bahá’ís (Indian or not) take on Native Americans beliefs, ceremonies, ritual art or artifacts, in order to incorporate these into Bahá’í beliefs and community life. Bahá’ís have done nothing to merit being called “whiteshamans,” in fact. That would be quite unfair and grossly inaccurate.

Conversely, a word of caution is important here. A Native American Bahá’í, on the other side of the coin, is not “co-opting” Native beliefs if she or he sings, for example, an authentic Native American spiritual song at a Bahá’í event. I, and many other Native Americans, share Native prayers and spiritual songs at Native and Bahá’í gatherings. This does not compromise the great respect that we have for the prayers or beliefs of any other religious tradition on the planet. Bahá’ís maintain respect for all other religions. Therefore a clear distinction must be made here, so that (non-Bahá’í) Indians don’t confuse membership and active participation of genuine American Indians in Bahá’í community activities as cultural imperialism or misappropriation of Native spirituality.

No tribal tradition forbids the respectful sharing of Native prayers or songs or drumming, if genuine elders and respected authentic Native spokesmen do not object to it. As an elder, I’ve often been asked to share Native prayers at Bahá’í events and I’ve found these prayers always honored and respectfully received, and never “stolen” by Bahá’ís. I have, however, been very careful about imprudently sharing Native spiritual beliefs when they wouldn’t be honorably received. My point here is that Bahá’ís do not practice what Native Americans find so objectionable in the behavior of so-called “whiteshamans.”

[BUCK] Very important points you’ve made, Don. However, not every non-Native who recognizes and appreciates the importance of Deganawidah is a “whiteshaman.” Take the U.S. Congress, for instance, which holds that the Iroquois Confederacy, founded by Deganawidah, helped to shape American democracy. The Iroquois influence thesis holds that the U.S. Constitution was largely modeled on the Iroquois Confederacy. This thesis sparked a vigorous scholarly debate.¹²¹ While its historical merits and

¹²¹ See Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: Native American Studies Centre, UCLA, 1991); J. Barreiro (ed.), *Indian Roots of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Northeast Indian Quarterly, 1988); “Iroquois Great Law of Peace and the United States Constitution: How the Founding Fathers ignored the Clan Mothers,” *Native American Law Review* 16 (1991): 497–531; cf. P. A. Levy, “Exemplars of Taking Liberties: The Iroquois Influence Thesis and the Problem of Evidence,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 588–604; S. B. Payne, “The Iroquois League, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 605–620; D. A. Grinde, Jr., “Sauce for the Goose: Demand and Definitions for Proof regarding the Iroquois and Democracy,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 621–636; W. A. Starna and G. R. Hamell, “History

demerits continue to be weighed in the balance of historical scrutiny — which any historical thesis must withstand — the fact remains that Deganawidah is now part and parcel of the legacy of America.

That it enjoyed some popular support as well is reflected in a Congressional resolution, passed in 1988. On September 16, 1987, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) introduced S.Con.Res. 76. On July 11, 1988, similar legislation was introduced by Representative Morris Udall (D-Arizona) in the House of Representatives as H.Con.Res. 331. On October 4, 1988 the House passed H.Con.Res. 331¹²² — *A concurrent resolution to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution* — by a vote of 408–8. By voice vote, the Senate agreed to H.Con.Res. 331 on October 21, 1988.¹²³

In 2007, U.S. Representative Joe Baca and U.S. Senator, Daniel Inouye, respectively introduced H.R. 3585 and S. 1852: *Native American Heritage Day Act of 2007*, “A bill to designate the Friday after Thanksgiving of each year as ‘Native American Heritage Day’ in honor of the achievements and contributions of Native Americans to the United States.” This proposed legislation, in its current draft, acknowledges the contribution of the Iroquois League of Nations: “Congress finds that ... the Founding Fathers based the provisions of the Constitution on the unique system of democracy of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, which divided powers among the branches of government and provided for a system of checks and balances.”¹²⁴

[ADDISON] If the U.S. Congress has recognized the legacy of Deganawidah, why can't we as Bahá'ís?

[BUCK] I quite agree. Let's see what our readers have to say! I believe that the *Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies* invites reader responses.

Dr. Addison, I can say that my contact with your culture has enriched me. And our collaboration would not have been possible were it not for our contact having transpired through an inspired vision of intercultural unity, founded on the bedrock of mutually recognized cultural integrity (that is, sovereignty, as regards First Nations).

[ADDISON] Yakoke! It's been wonderful collaborating with you, too. Let me explain the framework within which I see our work, which is the work

and the Burden of Proof: The Case of Iroquois Influence on the U.S. Constitution.” *New York History* 77 (1996): 427–452.

¹²² See <<http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/hconres331.pdf>>.

¹²³ See <http://www.senate.gov/reference/common/faq/Iroquois_Constitution.shtml> and <<http://140.147.249.9/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d100:55:./temp/~bdcHxQ:@@L&summ2=m&>>.

¹²⁴ Text available online at <<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-3585>>.

of all those who share the same interests and vision: A mandate for building bridges with Native peoples was given by Shoghi Effendi, who wrote: “Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the upbuilding of Bahá’í national communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisite for any successful teaching enterprise, which is *to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds*, the ideologies, and the temperament of the divers races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract.”¹²⁵ Here, we have done just that, in adapting “the presentation of the fundamental principles” of the Bahá’í Faith to the “cultural and religious backgrounds” of Native Americans and Native Canadians in particular, and to indigenous peoples in general. We have also done our best to completely avoid “a purely mercenary approach to religion.”¹²⁶

But not only have we attempted, in good faith, to do that fine and necessary work. We have also tried to educate ourselves and our peers — for our own enlightenment — to see that the wisdom of Native peoples (which must have derived, at least in part, from Native Messengers of God in the distant past) is very much on a collective par with the established world religions. The problem of identifying Native Messengers is not that cut-and-dried by any means.

Fundamentally, Native religions, unlike Bahá’í Faith and in Abrahamic and Aryan religions generally, are not “written” traditions. Our religions are oral traditions and because of this, the passing on of a Native Prophet’s “words” are typically found in oral tribal histories, in ceremonial “texts,” “songs,” and, symbolically, in tribal rituals and the like. And these are held extremely sacred, with tremendous respect and even protocol associated with them. Yet at least we have established — or endeavored to establish — recognition of “Messengers of God to First Nations” as an authentic Bahá’í principle grounded in the Tablet to Amír Khán and in other sacred Bahá’í texts.

As you say, my good friend and colleague, the Bahá’í teachings adumbrate the *principle* of “Messengers of God to First Nations” — without making an ontological commitment to which *principals* are within the class of Native Messengers. Let us hope that the powerful resonances between Native wisdom and Bahá’í wisdom transcends the issue of “names” and that their harmonics ring true in the inner ears of the person who sees both traditions as part and parcel of one universal Message.

We are wisely counseled by Shoghi Effendi with respect to the Bahá’í-Native encounter — about which Chelsea Dawn Horton has written with

¹²⁵ From a letter dated 5 June 1947 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of the West (emphasis added), in [“Teaching Among Aboriginal and Indigenous People.”](#)

¹²⁶ From a letter dated 29 April 1948 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, *ibid.*

such great sensitivity and insight — “We should meet them as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient descent, and who feel that they will be interested, as we are, in a living religion and not in the dead forms of present-day churches.”¹²⁷ As I understand it, this admonition applies not only to the Bahá’í-Native encounter individually, but collectively as well. This is where some kind of highly symbolic — and real — recognition of Native Messengers of God becomes the litmus test of our own universality and authenticity. Maybe we need to begin to look at other peoples’ religions as being just as good as our own — and perhaps this will bring some much needed understanding and appreciation for spiritual traditions from a wide variety of the world’s diverse religions. I can think of no better line, in stark contrast to Western exclusivity that is so toxic, that describes this more clearly than a passage from a prayer of Baha’u’llah: “I yield Thee such thanks as can ... fulfill the needs of the peoples of all religions.”¹²⁸

And let’s not forget the importance of the Bahá’í-Native encounter, which should assume more importance than it now has: “He attaches the greatest importance to teaching the original inhabitants of the Americas the Faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself has stated how great are their potentialities, and it is their right, and the duty of the non-Indian Bahá’ís, to see that they receive the Message of God for this day.”¹²⁹ This is described as a “right” that Native peoples possess — to preserve their respective cultural and spiritual identities within the global framework of an emergent world civilization that the Bahá’í world community is now establishing.

Consider this profound parallel: “The Master has likened the Indians in your countries to the early Arabian Nomads at the time of the appearance of Muhammad. Within a short period of time they became the outstanding examples of education, of culture and of civilization for the entire world. The Master feels that similar wonders will occur today if the Indians are properly taught and if the power of the Spirit properly enters into their living.”¹³⁰ By God! How utterly amazing is this vision! Has the Bahá’í community forgotten? Has it largely, although not completely, neglected the sole “specific racial prophecy in all of the Bahá’í scriptures,”¹³¹ which is this: “Attach great importance to the indigenous population of America. For

¹²⁷ From a letter dated 21 September 1951 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Comité Nacional de Enseñanza Bahá’í para los Indígenas, in *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Baha’u’llah, *Prayers and Meditations*. Translated by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1938; reprinted 1998), 331.

¹²⁹ From a letter dated 29 July 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia, in “*Teaching Among Aboriginal and Indigenous People.*”

¹³⁰ From a letter dated 22 August 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Central America and Mexico, in “*Teaching Among Aboriginal and Indigenous People.*”

¹³¹ Andrew Pemberton-Piggot, *The Bahá’í Faith in Alberta, 1942–1992: The Ethic of Dispersion* (Master’s thesis: University of Alberta, 1992), 34. Cited by Chelsea Dawn Horton, “Beyond Red Power: The Alternative Activism of Dorothy Maquabeak Francis,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 14.3/4 (Sept.–Dec. 2004): 35–71 [43].

... there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world,”¹³² as you have already mentioned.

I'd like to close with excerpts from a column I published in the *Eugene Weekly* in 2004:

I've noticed an increasing interest in Native American cultures, languages, and especially spirituality today, which has translated into full classes wherever I am teaching courses on these subjects.

I, myself, am Choctaw Indian. I am grateful to be Native American, but it wasn't always something one wanted to state publicly in the past. A fresh new spirit abounds today, and many American Indians are tracing their roots, learning about their cultures, and getting acquainted with their indigenous languages. A recent local powwow is a good illustration of this return to one's Native cultural roots. As I looked around the crowded hall, I saw rows of Native youth eager to participate. When the drumming and singing began, the dancing commenced and our spirits soared into the sky.

Many Native American spiritual leaders over the centuries foretold this phenomenon we are privileged to see today. White Buffalo Calf Woman, a Lakota, spoke of a great spiritual renewal. Other American Indian prophets expressed a dream that Indian and non-Indian would someday come together in unity. Deganawidah, Peacemaker of the Iroquois Confederacy, long ago promised he would “return,” and other great messengers left similar prophecies that a great teacher would come, as the Navajos believe, from the East.

Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, did come from the East and Native Americans are increasingly joining his faith, because they believe Bahá'u'lláh has fulfilled these prophecies. The Hopi, for example, foresaw a time when the Indian and the Euro-American would join together in unity. Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed this, saying, “Ye are the flowers of one garden and the leaves of one tree.”

Unity in diversity characterizes Native communities today. We Indians enjoy comparing notes on how languages, music, and customs differ in some cases, and appear similar in others. Bahá'í teachings encourage unity in diversity — the coming together of all peoples. However, Bahá'u'lláh never said Native Americans must give up their cultures or languages. Kevin Locke, Lakota musician, dancer and educator says that “the Bahá'í Faith actually enhances” his Native beliefs and culture.

The resurging interest in Native spirituality is not without controversy, and Native American Bahá'ís are quick to point out their

¹³² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, 33.

beliefs are not being compromised or misused by the Bahá'ís. On the contrary, in 1916 Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, gave a most splendid prophecy about a glorious future for Native Americans.

I believe I am lucky to be Bahá'í — it gives me answers to today's problems, it requires religion and science agree and if they don't, science without spirituality can become materialism and religion without science can become superstition. American Indians have always had “science” — our's just developed differently than European sciences. Natives see science as spiritual.

The Bahá'í prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for believers to use do not preclude using prayers of other religions, including those of indigenous religions in American Indian languages. Bahá'ís believe in the same God as Native Americans, Christians, Jews, Muslims and the other world religions. We have beautiful prayers for unity, marriage, the morning time and the evening hour, for assistance, and for children. And when life on life's terms gets difficult, I look up a powerful prayer Bahá'u'lláh revealed to be read in times of tests and difficulties: “Armed with the power of Thy Name, nothing can ever hurt me, and with Thy love in my heart, all the world's afflictions can in no wise alarm me.”

Many folks ask about the sad things that happened to Indians over the last 600 years. Those things really did happen, so let us learn from those experiences and teach our children to look at all peoples as members of the same family, enjoying the beauty of all our cultures and languages. The Bahá'í Faith gives me this hope.

What the Bahá'ís express about unity can also be summed up in probably the most famous American Indian expression one can find around the country today: “*Mitakuye Oyasin.*” Though it is Lakota, this phrase is used by Indians from many different backgrounds; it means “all my relations” or “all my relatives.” In other words, we are all related in one family. So we must put hatred and prejudice behind us because one must not hurt one's own relatives. *Mitakuye Oyasin!*¹³³

My dear friend and colleague (“Dr. Buck, I presume?”), you and I — as an emic/etic team — have engaged in “conversive relationality” whereby both of us have been transformed. We hope that our readers, too, may experience some of this reciprocal enlightenment that can result from a truly relational and potentially transformative dialogue among equals. Furthermore, the implications for further research are patently obvious: If generalizable, our hypothesis and argument invite research on the issue of Indigenous Manifestations of God among Oceanic, Australasian, African, and other indigenous peoples.

¹³³. Don Addison, “[Mitakuye Oyasin! We are All Related](#)” *Eugene Weekly* (2004).