

## **Social Activism Among Some Early Twentieth-Century Baha'is<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Résumé**

Le présent article discute de l'engagement socialiste de trois des premiers Baha'is du Canada : Paul Kingston Dealy, Honoré Jaxon et Rose Henderson. En effet, vu le véritable intérêt pour la justice économique et sociale existant depuis le tout départ dans la foi baha'ie, un certain nombre des premiers Baha'is ont adhéré au socialisme. Le présent article s'efforce d'expliquer cet engagement, alors que la foi baha'ie interdit tout militantisme politique.

En fait, vu le petit nombre d'écrits baha'is fondamentaux avant le début des années 1920, plusieurs Baha'is de la première heure ont adapté leur conception de la doctrine baha'ie à leur point de vue personnel, et sont devenus des militants politiques — se démarquant ainsi radicalement de la doctrine baha'ie, qui interdit un tel engagement. Qui plus est, dans les premiers temps, le caractère flou de l'appartenance à la communauté baha'ie ne permettait pas aux membres d'appliquer avec rigueur des critères d'adhésion. À compter de 1920, existe toutefois une situation différente : un caractère officiel de l'appartenance à la communauté baha'ie, associé à une prohibition systématique de toute participation à la politique. Ceci étant, les Baha'is de la première heure se sont officiellement retirés soit de la communauté baha'ie soit du militantisme politique. Fondée en 1844, la religion bahai'e compte de nos jours environ 33 000 adeptes au Canada.

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the socialist involvement of three of Canada's earliest Bahá'ís, namely Paul Kingston Dealy, Honoré Jaxon, and Rose Henderson. Given that the Bahá'í Faith had an authentic interest in economic and social justice from its earliest days, a number of these early Bahá'ís were involved in socialism. This paper seeks to explain such an engagement despite the Bahá'í proscription of involvement in partisan politics.

Because of the paucity of Bahá'í core writings until the early 1920s, a number of early Bahá'ís fit what they perceived to be Bahá'í teachings to their personal views, which led a number of them to engage in political activism. These views stand in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í teachings forbidding such involvement. Moreover, the porous membership boundaries in the early days of the Bahá'í community did not allow members to be consistent about criteria of Bahá'í membership. However, by the 1920s, membership in the Bahá'í community had become formalized and the prohibition against engaging in political affairs became a sine qua non for such membership. As a result, these early Bahá'ís either formally relinquished their membership or withdrew from active participation. At the current time, the Bahá'í Community of Canada numbers approximately 33,000 adherents. It is a religion that was founded in 1844.

## Introduction

This paper explores the background and experiences of some of Canada's earliest Bahá'ís who were engaged in socialist movements. On the surface, the connection with such movements seems uncharacteristic for Bahá'ís, because the Bahá'í community is avowedly apolitical. Nevertheless, the stories of these early Bahá'ís invite closer study because the Bahá'í teachings are concerned with a number of issues that seem to echo some socialist understandings of social and economic justice.

The Bahá'ís in Canada form part of the global Bahá'í community which originated in mid-nineteenth century Persia (now called Iran) when Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) proclaimed himself to be a Messenger of God, fulfilling the millennial visions of previously revealed religions such as Christianity and Islam. While the Bahá'í tenets from its founding days address matters related to both personal conduct and social issues, they are also mystical in nature and embody a program or a system calling for the structural reorganization of human society. This system envisions a planetary society with a common script and language, universal education, no racial discrimination, equality between women and men, harmony between science and religion, a world tribunal, and a democratically-elected parliamentary form of world government. On a personal level, the Bahá'í teachings insist on a moral code of conduct.<sup>2</sup>

A number of Canadians who attended sessions at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Illinois in 1893 became Bahá'ís. As a result of the efforts of Bahá'ís, newly-arrived from Egypt, more Canadians enrolled in the new religion in 1897. Although others in London, Ontario, Montreal, Quebec and elsewhere joined in successive years, the idea of a Bahá'í community did not become viable until the mid-1910s or early 1920s. Until that time, rather than forming a cohesive community, Canadian followers of this new religion remained simply an aggregate of individual members.

## Centrality of the Concept of Social Justice to the Bahá'í World View

Because the core message underlying and supporting the Bahá'í social and personal teachings revolves around the unity of humankind, the concept of justice plays a pre-eminent role in the envisioned transformation of local, national, and global society. In fact, according to Bahá'í teachings, justice is also the hallmark of personal and social relationships. Richard Thomas (1993), a Bahá'í scholar, has written extensively about the correlation between racial unity and social progress as corollaries of justice. Badi Shams (1989) highlights the Bahá'í principles of justice in the economic realm. Another scholar, John Huddleston (1989) surveys society's search for social and economic justice in light of the Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'í International Community which represents the Bahá'ís

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<sup>2</sup> I refer readers to the following introductory works on the Bahá'í Faith and its community and teachings: Peter Smith, *The Babi-Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (1987) and William S. Hatcher and Douglas Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (1998).

at the United Nations, offered this statement about the importance of justice in its document, *Turning Point for all Nations*:

*... a concern for justice is the indispensable compass in collective decision-making, because it is the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved. Far from encouraging the punitive spirit that has often masqueraded under its name in past ages, justice is the practical expression of awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. To the extent that justice becomes a guiding concern for human interaction, a consultative climate is encouraged that permits options to be examined dispassionately and appropriate courses of action selected. In such a climate the perennial tendencies toward manipulation and partisanship are far less likely to deflect the decision-making process (Bahá'í International Community, 1995: 12-13).*

The deep Bahá'í interest in justice originates in some of the elemental writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. For example, the second admonition in one of his key works, *The Hidden Words*, contains this phrase, “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice.” (Bahá'u'lláh, [1858] 1970: 1). In the collection of his writings, *Tablets of Baha'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that the light of humankind is justice, but cautions humanity to “[q]uench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny,” while affirming that its purpose is the “appearance of unity” among earth’s inhabitants (1978: 66-67). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Baha'u'lláh who travelled in North America, remarked in answering a question about socialism that “so far great injustice has befallen the common people” and that “laws must be made because it is impossible to be satisfied with the present system” (1922 : 231).

That the Bahá'í conception of justice remains a central concern of the Bahá'í community is confirmed by a recent letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom to Ms. Audrey Miller, Co-Chair of the Jubilee Debt Campaign:

*The issue of social justice is central to the Bahá'í teachings, teachings which revolve around two major themes: unity and justice. The learning of the Bahá'í community worldwide is that the kind transformation of society that will result in sustainable social justice (including the removal of the gross extremes of wealth and poverty that currently exist) depends on the growth of a new spiritual understanding that all human beings are part of one family (2004).*

Nevertheless, such a long-range view may leave the reader under the impression that Bahá'ís are quietists or passivists in the fight for economic and social justice. It is fairer to say that the Bahá'í program is a ‘political’ program but carried forward in non-partisan political ways. One could argue that the Bahá'í approach addresses fundamental

educational and attitudinal challenges to be met for the majority of society to accept, voluntarily and willingly; a rebalancing of economic extremes. Thus, the ballot box and partisan political debate, however important and valuable it may be for others in society to pursue, is not where Bahá'ís chose to put their energy. Unity and voluntary, willing affirmation of economic justice, from the Bahá'í perspective is a requirement as society attempts to manufacture or regulate or legalize a redistribution of wealth. The problem with partisan politics (although Bahá'ís certainly uphold legislation such as a progressive tax system, which is indeed found in the Bahá'í writings) is that it would enforce a change in behavior without a real change in attitude and values at the most important level of all. It lacks, then, the motivational ground that can truly support a sustainable and evolving economy and society where there is greater economic justice. Experiments to carry out economic and social reform towards greater levels of justice often generate unpredictable consequences which are more costly to society, in the long run, than the cure produced.

Bahá'ís believe they are fighting a longer struggle against injustice in which they must, as their priority (while cheering on those who chose partisan political battles of various kinds), put their focus into that level of motivation and commitment to justice where religion is the most effective operative force. As one Bahá'í put it:

*My Bahá'í convictions are almost as much due to the more refined and more persuasive program of social action which the Bahá'í Faith uses (consultation, unity before all else, voluntarism, not regulation and enforced legislative action, etc.) as it was more spiritual, historical and philosophical persuasion that one meets when encountering the Bahá'í Faith (Filson, 2005).*

These various teachings about social and economic justice, lead one naturally to ask: what is the Bahá'í approach to socialism?

### **Bahá'í Approach to Socialism**

The forerunner of the Bahá'í Faith, the Báb, 1819-1850, heralded a view of society that, amongst other things, emphasized its communal character. However, when the Báb thought of socialism, it was not in the European sense (ie. the defeat of capital by labour). Rather, he added a concept of socialism to his doctrines “which formulated the equality of all, sweeping away social classes and distinctions, and ordaining a community of property ...” (Balyuzi, 1973: 220). Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, an early and prominent Bahá'í scholar, summarized the Bahá'í position on various issues related to socialism as follows:

*... these three firm and irrefutable ordinances, namely, first: the question of heritage by which monopoly of wealth will be removed and the question of socialism solved; second: the question of universal peace and international agreements regarding disarmament and conserving expenditure now devoted to*

*implements of war; [and] third: the question of all being commanded to acquire a profession, art or trade ... such as farmers, laborers, et al. (Abu'l-Fadl, 1998: 37)*

The Bahá'í interest in, and perspective on socialism, is most vividly expressed through the talks delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1888) during his journey throughout the Western hemisphere, which included a visit to London in 1912. During his travels through Europe and North America (including Canada) he had ample opportunity to meet with socialists and proponents of similar causes, advocating the removal of the extremes of poverty and wealth. Despite his empathy with many socialist tenets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1969) dissuaded believers from joining socialist parties.

Given the importance accorded to all forms of justice by the Bahá'í teachings, one would not be surprised if the Bahá'í community engaged in partisan politics to achieve the lofty goal of justice in the personal, social, political, and economic spheres. Instead, one finds the Bahá'í community explicitly non-partisan in its approach to the affairs of the world. The position taken by the local, national, and international Bahá'í community is that of non-interference in political affairs (Universal House of Justice, 1970).<sup>3</sup>

The prohibition against Bahá'ís' joining politically-motivated causes is not the only reason why Bahá'ís do not join socialist movements. The current Bahá'í stance takes issue with socialism because of its emphasis on materialism and the lack of recognition given to the spiritual dimensions of human and societal life:

*The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise (The Universal House of Justice, 1985).*

Nevertheless, social activism is an important and relevant part of Bahá'í life. The Bahá'ís see no contradiction between advocating justice of all kinds, while remaining aloof from partisan politics. In essence, the main problem one encounters with the study of social activism in the Bahá'í Community is that the general conception of social activism is defined by one particular practice. While the inherent Bahá'í message nurtures social activism, it does so in an apolitical fashion. How does one critique society without engaging in protest? Karlberg (2004: ix) does not believe, from his Bahá'í perspective, that “social change is best pursued through oppositional strategies.”

Indeed, it is easy to misinterpret Bahá'í social activism in critical discourse. As Karlberg points out (2004: ix-x), “[m]any critical scholars take for granted the marriage of cultural critique and oppositional politics,” and any attempt to recast the relationship between these

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<sup>3</sup> However, Bahá'ís do vote in general elections—and are encouraged to do so (Hornby, 1988).

two concepts is greeted with scepticism. For contemporary Bahá'ís, however, the creation of their distinctive administrative structure, allows for the establishment of social justice. This structure embodies democratically-elected councils at the local, national, and international level, without nominations, platforms, constituencies, or secret ballot. Local and national governing bodies are elected annually by adult Baha'is residing in local civil jurisdictions and national entities, respectively. The international governing council (the Universal House of Justice) is elected every five years by all national governing bodies. Each body contains nine members. While the Bahá'í writings insist that the decision-making process at all levels should involve the full frank and full expression of thoughts (and even encourages the clash of conflicting ideas as the source of arriving at 'truth'), it is these governing councils as institutions that carry authority, not the individuals that happen to be their members. These are some of the elements that blend individual initiative and institutional governance.

In the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Canada, one notes a striking presence of people with multiple memberships in a number of social movements, including socialism. The next section offers a synopsis of these Bahá'í activists, followed by a discussion of how such multiple memberships were possible.<sup>4</sup>

### **Early Canadian Bahá'ís**

#### *i) Paul Kingston Dealy*

Among the close circle of those early Bahá'ís was Paul Kingston Dealy (d. 1935), who declared his new-found faith in March 1897 when the Chicago Bahá'í community numbered about thirty people. Originally from Saint John, New Brunswick, Dealy moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the 1870s. There, at the age of 31, he apprenticed as a railroad engineer and was eventually credited with inventing a system that ejected ashes from locomotive engines. After marrying Adelaide Stewart in 1881, his first son was born in a boxcar that also served as a home for the Dealy couple (Stockman, 1985).

Dealy proved to be one of the most active Bahá'í teachers (Stockman, 1985: 96). He cut a lively figure. Not only musically gifted, he was, according to his grandson, "fiercely dedicated to whatever was his current interest" (Dealy. 1984). These interests were indeed far-ranging: steam engines, building railroad lines, religion, politics, writing, farming, and "looking out for his family" (Stockman, 1985: 88). He lived the remainder of his life as a "struggling" farmer (Stockman, 1985: 88) in a Single-Tax colony. The colony attracted socialists who were interested in its collectivist endeavours which included such things as a telephone system, a water-supply system, and a school. When "P.K.D." died in 1935, he was the "oldest living Master Mechanic" of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Stockman, 1985: 87). Dealy's attachment to the Bahá'í Faith was in line with his conceptions about a society and economy that centred around the community rather than the individual.

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<sup>4</sup> Parts of the following sections have been published in van den Hoonaard (1996). I wish to acknowledge the generous permission granted by Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the use of extracts of some of these previously published passages.

ii) *Honoré Jaxon*

Another dreamer attracted to the Bahá'í cause was Honoré Jaxon (1861-1952). Born as William Henry Jackson, he established his historical reputation as Secretary of the Settlers' Union of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, when he played a key part in securing white support for the early phase of Louis Riel's 1885 movement (Flanagan, 1976). As Riel's secretary, he "championed the rights of the poor settlers, as well as those of the Indians and Métis" (Smith 1981a: 10).

William Jackson's own background is a far cry from his later involvement with Louis Riel, a Catholic Métis, who stood up for the rights of the most dispossessed of Canadian society.<sup>5</sup> William was raised in a village in Ontario. It fell upon his mother to educate her children and she did so in a spirit of independence, nurturing a love for literature and history along the way. At the age of eight, William read his first history of Greece and Rome. He was an individual who was always hungry for "food for the mind" (Smith, 1981a: 12) and thus, he entered University College at the University of Toronto, where he not only did well in the first three years, but continued his "passion for freedom," that is, his passion for the classics (Smith, 1981a: 12). His home education also included learning about politics. Jackson acquired a tremendous admiration for William Lyon Mackenzie, the organizer of the Upper Canadian Rebellion against the ruling oligarchy. Thus, Jackson's conception of politics included a "strong aversion to the ruling Canadian political and economic elite" (Smith, 1981a: 12). By the time Jackson was twenty-three years old, he was following Louis Riel's movement with a great deal of interest and sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

A series of events brought Jackson into contact with Louis Riel who was summoned by the Métis to help them press for promised lands and entitlements. Jackson realized that the misfortunes of the northern farmers, mostly white, could be best allayed through an alliance with Louis Riel and the other Métis. Jackson spearheaded the movement for representative government in the Prince Albert Region, circa 1880-1885.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Riel and his cause were so effectively vilified in English Canada that it took until 1992 before any government in Canada could reinstate the "rebel" as a bona fide founder of one of Canada's provinces, Manitoba. The biographical section on Honoré Jaxon is extensively taken from Smith (1981a; 1981b). I am deeply indebted to Dr. Donald B. Smith for his historical accounts of Jaxon. See also Cherwinski (1965).

<sup>6</sup> His studies were interrupted by disasters in the family-run businesses, and by 1883, the whole family had moved to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (William had moved there in 1881). The family ventures in Saskatchewan had proven to be dismal failures due to the enforcement of harsh land regulations, early frosts, and the abandonment of the northern farmers by the government. Becoming familiar with the plight of these farmers, William advocated change through publications, and political organization. Upon the formation of the Settlers' Union in 1884, William was immediately elected as its secretary (Smith, 1981a: 15).

<sup>7</sup> I thank one of the Socialist Studies reviewers for his/her observation that Jaxon was engaged in the movement for representative government.

Riel trusted Jackson. This special relationship, however, was not destined to last long. Riel became ever more insistent in his claim that the Indians and the Métis were the perpetual landlords of the Northwest while Jackson believed in a joint custody of the land with the white settlers. In an effort to come closer to the Métis cause, Jackson became a Catholic in 1885 and changed his name to Honoré Jaxon, to honour his Catholic conversion. Soon Riel declared himself as a prophet; as the voice of aboriginals throughout the world (Smith, 1981a). Demonstrating his attachment to the new “prophet,” Jaxon walked for three miles over the snow, “wearing on his feet moccasins alone, without socks,” to meet Riel (Smith 1981a: 18). Canadian troops captured Jaxon and in 1885, the authorities mounted a trial against Jaxon for treason-felony, but acquitted him by reason of insanity.<sup>8</sup> Escaping the Selkirk, Manitoba, asylum in which he was confined, Jaxon fled to the United States (Smith, 1981a; Flanagan, 1976).

The fervour of this “bookish,” and “short, slight man” (Smith, 1981a: 10, 16) grew stronger in the United States. His long “straight raven-black hair” (Smith, 1981b: 90) lent credibility to his claim that he was Métis and enabled him to speak on behalf of aboriginals. He dedicated his new life to anarchism, opposing authority and protecting freedom of expression. He made his living by building sidewalks and curb walls on contract, as well as tutoring Greek, science, and Hebrew.

From the early 1890s, Jaxon espoused many causes, small and large, which involved exposing a ring that thrived at the expense of taxpayers, trying to end corruption at City Hall, supporting various political candidates, and joining an American colonization company. But his radical politics interfered with his making a living. In 1897, when he turned 33, this “socialist organizer” (Flanagan, 1976: 175-176) grew weary of his activities, married for the first time in his life, and discovered the Bahá'í Faith. He had followed Bahá'í classes in Chicago for several weeks when he enrolled in June (Stockman, 1985: 92).

As an intellectual and as a “man of keen wit ... consumed with a love of his people” (The Pittsburgh Post quoted in Smith, 1981b: 91), Jaxon began once again to pursue his many interests, including the design of a tunnelling machine and a device that would decrease the effects of earthquakes on buildings. He also tried to convince the city of Chicago to build a speaker's corner, while remaining active in the Chicago Federation of Labor.<sup>9</sup>

It seems quite certain that Jaxon did not discriminate among his various causes, including

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<sup>8</sup> Four days earlier Louis Riel himself was put on trial, accused by the Canadian government of instigating the 1885 “rebellion” (Smith, 1981a: 10).

<sup>9</sup> Jaxon was quick to defend those on trial, and, in one case was involved in a vigorous letter-writing campaign to President Theodore Roosevelt. The President replied to just one letter, that of Honoré Jaxon (Smith, 1981b: 92).

the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>10</sup> Jaxon was familiar with the works of Marx and Prince Kropotkin, and easily blended their ideas into his own personal synthesis (Smith, 1981b: 93).<sup>11</sup> When he undertook a trip to his native Saskatchewan accompanied by his wife, Aimée Montfort, in 1906-1907, and spoke to the annual convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in Winnipeg, he may well have had both socialism and the Bahá'í Faith in mind.

It is fair to say that Jaxon's loyalty to the Bahá'í Faith did not likely measure up to his political loyalties, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá discouraged, and even prohibited, political involvement and discussions by Bahá'ís (cited in Universal House of Justice, 1976). Nevertheless, he was unstinting in his energy for the Bahá'í cause and was responsible for negotiating the title for the site of the future, first Bahá'í house of worship in the West, situated in a northern Chicago suburb (Jaxon, 1910). In 1912, he wrote engaging pieces about the dedication of the site for the Bahá'í House of Worship (Jaxon, 1912a) and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Chicago (Jaxon, 1912b). At the end of World War I in 1918, Jaxon appeared in New York City where he spent the remainder of his life until his death in 1952, at the age of 90.

The story of Jaxon's death is a most heart-wrenching one. Some half-dozen American newspapers told the story of a janitor and furnace-man who had been evicted from his own apartment building on 34th Street, sitting with a huge mound of paper and cartons. The furnace-man was Jaxon, and the tons of cartons contained a precious collection on aboriginal history. Too sick to do his janitorial and furnace duties, Jaxon fell behind in his rent, and was evicted onto the sidewalk. Broken-hearted, Jaxon sat on the sidewalk guarding his papers and seeing snow fall on them. It took three men a full six hours to remove all of Jaxon's belongings, books, papers, and manuscripts. Most of the collection was taken to a local garbage dump, and Jaxon died a few weeks later, in January 1952.

Among the first coterie of Bahá'ís were not only Atlantic Canadians and the defender of the Métis, Jaxon, but also his spouse, Aimée Montfort, a young school teacher. A "stylish and well-educated" woman, Montfort was a descendant of Simon de Montfort (Charlebois, 1975: 130). An early Bahá'í described Aimée as a "very plain lady, but she had charm" (Loeding, 1985). Four months after her husband, Jaxon,<sup>12</sup> she became a devoted believer on 5 October 1897. Elected president of the Women's Assembly of Teaching (CHSR,

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<sup>10</sup> Jaxon translated *An Investigation of Bahaism* (1900) by Gabriel Sassi who was Commissioner appointed by the Supreme Council of the Martinist Order to investigate Babism. I thank Dr. Donald B. Smith for drawing my attention to this tract.

<sup>11</sup> He attended the Regina Branch of Labour Party, urged the founding of Producers' Social and Economic Discussion Circles (to alleviate the inferior economic status of farmers and workers), attended an agricultural convention, ran as an independent Liberal (and suffered defeat), spoke to striking mine workers in British Columbia, and was elected to a committee of the Calgary Socialist Party (Smith, 1981b: 94-95).

<sup>12</sup> Smith (1981b: 100) claims Aimee married Honoré in 1900, but the appearance of her married name and as a Bahá'í in 1897 suggests that she married him several years earlier.

Minutes, 10 February 1906), she did much teaching of the Bahá'í Faith in small groups and before large audiences.<sup>13</sup> Both she and her husband offered liberal hospitality at Bahá'í functions in the community.<sup>14</sup>

The Jaxons returned briefly to Canada, 1907-1909, to visit Montfort's niece, Cicely Plaxton in Saskatchewan (Smith, 1992). Montfort left Jaxon after the 1914-1918 war, possibly with his encouragement, for like many anarchists, he saw 'marriage' (as far as the woman's interests were concerned) as "a man-made scheme for the annexing of female slaves" (Smith, 1981b: 95).

### iii) *Rose Henderson*

Another woman adherent in the early days in Canada was Rose Henderson, née Wills, who was born in Ireland (Anonymous, 1937) in 1868 or 1869 and came to Canada in 1893 when she was about 24 years old.<sup>15</sup> Many of Henderson's interests spanned her whole life, while a number of others seem more concentrated in particular periods. Henderson had long-term interests in promoting health. She succeeded in getting Parliament to amend the 1912 Drug Act to prevent the sale of medications except by doctor's prescription (Roberts and Tunnell, 1936) and was in touch with a British Bahá'í, who was a member of the executive committee of the State Medical Service Association, a body set up to promote the concept of a national medical service (Momen, 1975). The Association provided evidence to the government committee that produced the Dawson Report, a report that is acclaimed by medical historians as one of the most important and far-sighted documents of the modern age and as one of the foundations of the British National Health Service.

Her career had many overlapping interests: mothers and children, peace and the status of women, juveniles, labour, politics and public office, and education. She was also a prolific writer and poet.<sup>16</sup> One hundred years ago, early in her career, she published a little book of stories and poetry about poor children, *Kids What I Knows* (Henderson, 1902). Her foreword states that "Man through his love of power and greed for gold has created poverty (the worst of all crimes) and through the unequal distribution of wealth he has compelled unequal opportunity." In an interview with the *Montreal Daily Star* (Anonymous, 1912: 12), Henderson was already alerting her readers to the fact that the country's legislators had dealt only with the production and protection of wealth and with the adult – "mostly with the male adult." According to her, society had imposed immense

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<sup>13</sup> The 1898 financial ledger of the Chicago House of Spirituality contains a reference to Mrs. and Miss Montfort, contributing to the Bahá'í fund. (CHSR, May-December 1898). A later ledger for May-December 1899 has an entry for 'Miss Blanche Montfort.'

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Mrs. True to House of Spirituality (CHSR, 10 March 1906).

<sup>15</sup> Portions of this section on Henderson are based on van den Hoonaard (1996; 2004). I also wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Peter Campbell (Queen's University) and Dr. Linda Kealey (University of New Brunswick).

<sup>16</sup> Peter Campbell (2001) has collected approximately 150-200 of Henderson's writings.

responsibilities on mothers without enabling them to fulfil these obligations. “[G]ood advice, gifts, and doles,” miscalled charity, were not enough to help mothers in their important tasks (Anonymous, 1912: 12).

More important, she argued against the separation of children from mothers when society used poverty as an excuse, saying institutional care could not replace the nurturing love received at home. Finally, she reminded her readers in the above interview that in 1912 a Member of Parliament had suggested that some \$10 million of the \$39 million surplus be spent on the navy; ‘Would we not better spend a little money in defence of mothers and children?’ She also appeared before a parliamentary committee advocating the establishment of an old-age and mothers’ pension, at the invitation of Prime Minister William L. Mackenzie King. Widely-travelled, she moulded public opinion in favour of these pensions. By 1927, six provinces in Canada were operating mothers’ pensions (Anonymous, 1927).

As a maternal feminist, she not only spoke of the economic causes of war, but also of women’s “maternal aversion to violence and war” (Sangster, 1989: 121-122). Henderson “was a unique blend of socialist and feminist ideas” (Sangster, 1989: 121-122) which were brought to bear on the establishment of peace, and published in 1920, *Women and War* (Sangster, 1989). According to Sangster (1989: 121-122), Henderson believed that because of “women’s mothering experiences they better understood the value and sanctity of human life.” Thus peace was seen as both a socialist and a women’s issue. She was also the sole Canadian delegate to the *Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* at The Hague Conference in 1922 (Socknat, 1987: 109).<sup>17</sup>

After two years of voluntary service helping children who appeared in the police courts, she had gathered enough facts to assist the federal government in establishing juvenile courts; this service was followed by eight years as assistant to the judge of the juvenile court in Montreal (Roberts and Turnell, 1936) possibly from 1924 to 1931 (Anonymous, 1937: 4). She was also an early advocate of the *Big Sister* and *Big Brother* movement and was an opponent to cadet training in schools (Roberts and Turnell, 1936).

As was the case with a number of other early Baha’is, Henderson championed socialist causes and the Labour movement. She was portrayed as a working-class hero in the Labour press during the years 1919-1920,<sup>18</sup> as evidenced by the extensive press notices that appeared about her. A proponent of the rights of the working class, she saw middle-class rule as a “tragedy” (Caplan, 1973: 25). *The Toronto Star* (cited in Roberts and Turnell, 1936: 497; and Anonymous, 1927) stated that she was “the best known speaker in the

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<sup>17</sup> Jameson Bond, a Baha’i since World War II, mentions that his ‘mother knew Rose Henderson in Toronto in the “[1930s] when she was [also] active in the League of Nations Association of Canada.’ (Letter to W. C. van den Hoonard, 27 April, 1997)

<sup>18</sup> Peter Campbell, email to W. C. van den Hoonard, 18 October 2001.

Labour movement.” *The Windsor Tribune* described her as a speaker of ‘rare ability, marshalling her facts clearly and delivering them with a force that carries conviction’ (cited in Roberts and Turnell, 1936: 497; and Anonymous, 1927). In an interview with the *Montreal Daily Star* (11 September 1912: 12), Henderson made the following statement: “We have established bureaux for the investigation of agriculture, forestry, mines, astronomy, bees, hogs and insects, but the human race, the most wonderful and sacred of all God’s creatures has been the last thing to receive attention.” Desiring first-hand information, Henderson worked in “factories and sweat-shops, laundries, restaurants and private homes” and lived in the homes of miners in Canada and Great Britain (Anonymous, 1927). Henderson maintained contact with William Mackenzie King, Canada’s prime minister. In July 1926, for example, she wrote to him, urging him to take on reforms “in the interests of justice, fair play and Constitutionalism” (Mackenzie King Papers, 1926: 112399).

According to some accounts, from 1926 to autumn 1930 she travelled to Germany and the Soviet Union to study political and social conditions. Henderson’s granddaughter, Anne, recounted that Henderson wanted to travel to Russia ‘to see what happened’ after the Revolution of 1917.<sup>19</sup> In Britain, Henderson studied sociology and economics for two years at London University under Professor Laski (1893-1950) and others.<sup>20</sup>

Laski was a celebrated scholar and socialist at the London School of Economics from 1920 to 1934, and author of thirty-one books. A ‘public intellectual’, he was active in the Labour Party and the Socialist League (Kramnick and Sheerman, 1993: 4-7). Like Henderson, Laski undertook a visit to the Soviet Union (in 1934). As it turns out, it was at the height of Henderson’s involvement with the Labour movement, at the cusp of her becoming involved in partisan politics, that her support of the Bahá’í Faith waned.

In the early 1930s, she became a member of the executive of the Ontario Labour Party (Socknat, 1987: 132), and in 1934 she was successful in defending her Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) candidacy to the Ontario legislature for Toronto-Dovercourt in the general elections (Roberts and Turnell, 1936: 497). In 1935, she was the Parkdale, Ontario, candidate for parliament, the same year that she was present at the Congress of the Canadian League against War and Fascism (CLWF) (Light and Pierson, 1990: 348). In 1936, she became a “leading figure” in the Toronto CCF Women’s Joint Committee, while at the same time serving on the executive of the Ontario Labour Party at a time when there was a “brief flowering of feminist support for the radical left” (Socknat, 1987: 132-134, 325). In 1934, she was an active member of the Toronto Board

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<sup>19</sup> Rose’s granddaughter, Anne, became right-wing and moved to Hollywood to become an actor. Anne’s niece, Deirdre, always knew her as a set-designer (Bonnycastle, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, memorandum to the House of Justice, 16 November 1999 (enclosed in a letter from the Department of the Secretariat of the House of Justice to W. C. van den Hoonaard, 16 November 1999).

of Education (Ward 5) (Anonymous, 1937). In 1936, Henderson organized a peace-poster contest in Toronto's technical schools, in which Arthur Lismer exhibited.<sup>21</sup>

*iv) Others who followed the Faith*

While a number of new adherents to the Bahá'í Faith (such as the ones described above) had direct roots in their attraction to socialism, another set of social activists were drawn to social reform through Methodism. I allude to this affiliation only briefly. Methodism was the home religion of Honoré Jaxon and other adherents. The Methodist spiritual theme would continue to exercise a dominating influence on other early Bahá'ís in Canada. In the late 19th-century, these liberal pragmatists became enamoured with the 'social gospel,' a Protestant movement that stressed Christian social action with some of its tenets expressing the same concern for social and economic disparities as the socialists. It was a reaction against exaggerated forms of North American individualism and unrestrained capitalism, holding the view that increased state intervention in economic and social life was essential in establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth. The leaders of the movement advocated gradual social reform and based their proposals on a belief in the general goodness of the individual and in his or her susceptibility to the forces of moral persuasion. At the height of the movement in the late 1910s, it espoused prohibition, women's suffrage, civil service reform, bureaus of social research, expansion of cooperatives, and the decline of party-based government. It was a response to the growing social malaise (Boudreau, 1997).

## Discussion

The participation of several early Bahá'ís in socialism leaves us with a number of questions. First, why or how were these Bahá'ís involved in socialism? Second, what explains the political character of their activities when the Bahá'í stance on non-participation in partisan politics is so unambiguous?<sup>22</sup> What is striking to the contemporary observer is that their pursuit took on a semi-political character – an element that is entirely foreign to the Bahá'í conception of how adherents are to interact with the world at large.

To interested socialists (and Methodists), the spiritual and social platform of the Bahá'í Faith was a natural extension of their principles and ideology of immediate economic and social reform. The Bahá'í Faith was only thirty-four years old when the first Canadian Bahá'ís enrolled in the new religion in 1897 (the first public proclamation occurred in

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) was a member of the "Group of Seven," Canada's most notable artists.

<sup>22</sup> In numerous letters and documents, the Bahá'í position about not becoming involved in partisan politics is unequivocal. From the Bahá'í perspective, no political machinery provides "the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigor of organized peoples and nations" (Universal House of Justice, 1996: 126). Because the Bahá'í Community is a world-wide organization seeking to establish universal peace, a Bahá'í cannot work for one political party to overcome another. Such work is seen as a negation of the very spirit of the Bahá'í Faith. In other words, "[m]embership in any political party ... necessarily entails repudiation of some or all of the principles of peace and unity proclaimed by Baha'u'llah" (Universal House of Justice, 1976: 48).

1863 in Baghdad, Iraq. Although deeply based in religious faith, the beginnings of the movement disturbed the social landscape of Iran with its advocacy of socialist-like principles and aims. The resulting upheavals evoked interest and attention among Westerners, especially scholars, authors, and playwrights who were deeply moved by the wholesale, violent opposition by secular and religious leaders in Iran to the new religion. From that perspective alone, the new religion attracted followers who were already deeply concerned with social and economic justice and democracy.

The religion's boundaries were quite porous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was no, or very little scrutiny of membership requirements and its organizational life was at best embryonic, even though the founder of the religion had sketched out a detailed view of a future society. Thus, membership was fluid. However, as criteria of membership became more transparent, including the prohibition of engaging in partisan politics, those who joined the new religion with mixed motivation, gradually withdrew, passively or deliberately. Indeed, all three of the individuals presented in this article, Paul Kingston Dealy, Honoré Jaxon, and Henderson, became disaffected. By 1927, the North American governing body of the Bahá'ís (the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada) had decided on formal membership criteria, along with by-laws that would govern the work and operation of the religion. Four years earlier, in 1923, work had already begun to formalize the nature, structure, and election of local Bahá'í governing councils (local Spiritual Assemblies) which is still followed today.

In addition to porous membership boundaries, the early Bahá'ís in the western hemisphere did not have access to many of the Bahá'í sacred writings (originally written in Persian and Arabic), containing the relevant Bahá'í teachings governing personal affairs and social relationships. The early Bahá'ís' understanding of their new religion stemmed primarily from those believers who had first-hand knowledge of the Head of the Bahá'í Faith in the Holy Land. Visitors to Palestine which already served as the centre of the new religion brought back "pilgrim's notes" (Piff, 2000: 39-41). These pilgrim's notes contained their personal accounts and advice they received in the Holy Land and were copiously retyped, copied, and shared with others. The fact that these letters were intended for personal guidance and that other readers were quite unaware of the context of the advice contained in them, contributed to a patchwork of ideas about the new religion's teachings. Such an emphasis on individualistic interpretations would prove to have a negative influence on some members of a new religious faith. From the Bahá'í perspective, it paved the way for the understandable rather distinctive and unique views held by individuals who then found it difficult to accept the higher spiritual authority vested in the Bahá'í writings and Head of the Bahá'í Faith.

Finally, the actual publication of Bahá'í teachings in the western hemisphere took the form of individual Bahá'ís' publishing their personal views and understandings. Although there was some early translation and publication of some of the sacred texts, they were very few in number.<sup>23</sup> These early translations of Bahá'í texts were generally quite inadequate; thus, it was understandable that some of the early believers grafted their own ideas onto this unsatisfactory foundation.

### **Conclusion**

The authentic Bahá'í interest in economic and social justice led some early Bahá'ís in Canada to see joining the Bahá'í religion as a natural extension or adjunct to their socialist impulses. Even though Bahá'í teachings insist on non-involvement in partisan political affairs, the association of these early Bahá'ís with socialism was probably due to the lack of available published Bahá'í writings, which allowed these individuals to develop their distinctive personal opinions about the nature and purpose of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'í membership boundaries, moreover, were also porous. It was only when the criteria for membership became firmer in the 1920s that non-involvement in political causes became more evident as a Bahá'í responsibility. As those criteria became more evident, a number of early Bahá'ís either actively withdrew from membership or quietly faded into oblivion, at least from the Bahá'í perspective.

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<sup>23</sup> Today, the corpus of what constitutes Bahá'í Writings include 5,000 items (whether as books or letters) revealed by Baha'u'llah, some 15,000 letters by his son and successor 'Abdu'l-Baha, 36,000 letters by Shoghi Effendi, Guardian and interpreter of the Bahá'í Faith, and innumerable items provided by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í worldwide community.

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