

Matters of Opinion

Reviews

BOOK REVIEW BY DERIK SMITH

ALAIN LOCKE: FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY

BY CHRISTOPHER BUCK
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Alain Leroy Locke was a principal operator at the switchboard of American culture in the early twentieth century. By most accounts he was a master of arrangement, a slight-bodied man with an exceptional mind who carried out much of his work behind the scenes of history. Although he was among the most meticulously educated African Americans of his era, Locke is most often associated with his role as a supporter of the arts—as a literary aesthete and intellectual patron who promoted the work of black writers and artists of the 1920s. Remembered as a facilitator rather than a leading performer, Locke has been overshadowed by those—such as poet Langston Hughes—whom he guided

toward fame. As the reputations of those around him have become increasingly important to the narrative of American culture, Locke's legacy as philosopher, social activist, and private citizen has been somewhat obscured. He is best known for compiling and editing *The New Negro* (1925), a groundbreaking anthology of African American letters, but his considerable work as a philosopher and social theorist is rarely acknowledged.

Scholarship similarly has ignored the details of Locke's personal life. For these reasons, Christopher Buck's recent book, *Alain Lock: Faith and Philosophy*, is a welcome addition to the literature on early twentieth-century American and African American culture. But, perhaps more important, Buck's study is a significant contribution to scholarship on

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the history of the Bahá’í Faith in the United States. While *Faith and Philosophy* represents one of the most detailed explorations of Locke’s life and work, it is primarily an investigation of Locke’s relationship to the Bahá’í Faith that the philosopher adopted as a young man. Buck’s painstakingly researched text portrays Locke as an intellectual reflexively drawn to Bahá’í principles of egalitarianism and social justice. But it also reveals an African American of notoriety and prominence who was challenged by his relationship to an emerging American Bahá’í community. The story of Locke’s achievements and struggles as a Bahá’í and a black man, who significantly shaped national discourses on culture, race, and religion, are instructive to those who seek a nuanced and catholic understanding of the modern United States.

In the early twentieth century *The Crisis* magazine was one of the nation’s most widely read black periodicals. Founded by W. E. B. Du Bois as the literary organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the magazine delivered to its audience a varied fare of news reportage, opinion, poetry, and fiction that documented the trials and triumphs of a national African American community coming of age in the new century. In its “Men of the Month” section for May 1912, *The Crisis* featured a full-page image of an aged man whose olive-hued features hovered in the white frame of a modest turban and long beard. The

photograph’s caption read: “Abdul Baha, the Persian teacher of Brotherhood.”¹ Not quite a month earlier, this teacher had arrived by steamer in New York City. The article accompanying the photo explained that “His coming is of particular interest to those of us who believe in the brotherhood of man, for that is the doctrine Bahais emphasize above all other things.”² During an eight-month stay in the United States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would deliver this Bahá’í message of brotherhood in dozens of formal gatherings and exemplify it, perhaps most tellingly, through His interaction with the African American community. He spoke at the historically black Howard University and at African American churches. Two weeks after His arrival in the country He addressed the fourth annual conference of the NAACP.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá alighted in the heart of the African American intelligentsia at a pregnant moment. The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of movement, rupture, and reformation in black America. The Great Migration of Southern blacks into urban centers of the North produced an invigorated American culture that was alive with creativity and exploration, even as it was marked by racial tension and violence. In a rich marketplace of urgent ideas, charismatic leaders like Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey—to name only the most prominent—vied for the hearts and minds of black Americans. They constructed and preached sociopolitical ideologies that attempted to address what Du Bois called “the problem of the color line.”³

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appeared from what were then remote Eastern lands with an unsolicited call for the abolition of all prejudice and discrimination, the

1. “Men of the Month,” *The Crisis* 4.1 (May 1912): 14.

2. “Men of the Month,” *Crisis* May 1912: 15.

3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY, USA: Penguin, 1995) 78.

black intellectual class noted His entrance in the racially charged American scene with a degree of wonderment. The “Men of the Month” section in *The Crisis* is evidence of that. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s attention to the color line was also a distinctive model for instructing the young American Bahá’í community. His explicit attention to the issue of race eventually led the early American Bahá’í community to form relationships with black activist organizations including the NAACP and the National Urban League. As its commitment to ideals of racial solidarity became evident, the young Bahá’í community drew greater attention in the black community.

Among those educated African Americans who were drawn to the Bahá’í Faith during the early decades of the twentieth century was Alain Locke. Buck’s study *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* is the first book-length effort to uncover systematically Locke’s affiliation with the Bahá’í Faith and take stock of his public career in light of his private religiousness. According to the author, his exploration of Locke’s faith complements extant writing on the philosopher, which has ignored the religious aspect of Locke’s life, and thus rounds out the biographical sketch produced in earlier scholarship.

Buck also justifies his work with the assertion that “Alain Locke is certainly

the most important Western Bahá’í to date in terms of his impact on American history and thought.” This categorical claim is somewhat fraught for several reasons, not the least of which is Locke’s complicated relationship to the Bahá’í Faith. The greater part of Buck’s admirably researched book is devoted to documenting the evolution of Locke’s status as a Bahá’í from the time of his enrollment in the Faith in 1918 through periods of religious estrangement until his death in 1954. This difficult task supports Buck’s primary endeavor to demonstrate the “synergy between Locke’s profession as a philosopher and his confession as a Bahá’í.” However, it is the supportive argument seeking to uncover the quality and degree of Locke’s involvement in the Bahá’í Faith that motivates Buck’s extensive exploration of often-virgin archival materials in the Alain Locke Papers at Howard University and elsewhere.

Throughout the study the archival materials are close at hand. Its early chapters trace a dutiful chronological path through Locke’s life as they emerge from the record, the surprisingly sparse body of Locke’s published writings, and a selection of contextual sources. In revealing the resonance between the social teachings of the Bahá’í Faith and Locke’s pragmatic relativist philosophy, Buck’s reader intermittently glimpses the volatile American scene of the Jim Crow era.⁴ Although Locke played a prominent role on this charged national stage, Buck mainly confines the scope of his study to the limited sphere of the U.S. Bahá’í community in which Locke was a noteworthy, but enigmatic, figure.

The scattered traces of Locke’s activities as a Bahá’í make difficult the construction of an authoritative “spiritual

4. “Jim Crow” refers to discriminatory laws meant to uphold certain forms of racial segregation in the southern part of the United States. The term is also applied to the time period (from the 1870s to the 1960s) during which these laws were enforced. In their practical implementation, Jim Crow laws ensured that black Americans in the South were deprived of many basic social opportunities afforded to whites.

biography.” For example, in spite of extensive research, Buck is unable to isolate definitively the context in which Locke was introduced to the young religion. One subheading is given the suggestive heading “*Locke’s First Encounter with the Bahá’í Faith? (1915)*.” The punctuation mark recasting the declarative title as a question hovers above much of Locke’s personal experience of faith. He almost never identified himself as a Bahá’í in public forums, and he wrote very little about his intellectual or spiritual feeling toward the religion. This reserve forces Buck to speculate about aspects of Locke’s Bahá’í life—such as his investigation and declaration in the Faith—based on little more than sterile and ambiguous administrative records.

However, the archives yield a trove of correspondence that enlivens the narrative. Piecing together a mosaic of personal letters, Buck situates Locke in a small constellation of early U.S. Bahá’ís whose communications reveal a valiant and at times dogged effort to transcend the insidious power of the color line. In these letters Locke appears as an often-ailing, over-scheduled public figure who would lend his voice to the Bahá’í cause on occasion but not as often or as forthrightly as many of his coreligionists would have hoped.

Some of the most poignant, telling correspondence documented by Buck comes from the pen of black lawyer Louis Gregory, a tireless worker in the Bahá’í

Faith. Gregory’s letters to Locke suggest that he held a respectful affection for a fellow-Bahá’í and African American of unparalleled potential. The two worked together on several occasions and were partners during a 1925 journey through Southern states in which both spoke in service of their Faith. However, late in life Gregory expressed to Locke a sentiment—both a hope and a lament—that may have been shared by many American Bahá’ís: “Although your Bahá’í spirit has been admirably shown by so many traits and activities, yet I have the deepest longing that you will see the wisdom of wholly identifying yourself with the Faith, thereby increasing both your joys and usefulness, perhaps twenty-fold.”⁵ In its qualified praise and implied admonition, Gregory’s entreaty suggests questions that run throughout Buck’s study: What was Locke’s attraction to the Faith? What was it that prevented him from embracing it—from giving himself fully and publicly to its cause? While the latter is a sticky question that can lead to guesswork about the most private spaces of the believer’s psyche, the answer to the first question is evident in any perusal of Locke’s philosophical writings. In his final chapters Buck provides an insightful analysis of Locke’s pragmatic cultural relativism that plainly reveals the resonance between the philosopher’s thinking and the social principles of the Bahá’í Faith.

As an advocate for racial equality in the early, roiling decades of twentieth-century America, Locke’s concern was for a social praxis suited to multicultural society, “for promoting respect for difference, for safeguarding respect for the individual . . . and for the promotion of commonality over and above such differences.”⁶ His philosophy dem-

5. Louis G. Gregory, letter to Dr. Alaine [sic] Locke, Apr. 6, 1949, quoted in Buck, *Faith and Philosophy* 199.

6. Quoted in Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia, PA, USA: Temple UP, 1989) 61.

onstrates a deep distrust of all forms of absolutism as it works toward the development of a relativism suited to pluralist societies.

As Locke understood it, absolutism in personal worldview grows into group-related absolutisms, the unassailible nature of which inevitably leads to social conflict. He saw these conflicts and their resultant oppressions as functions of claims to absolute interpretive authority in the realm of values, and he advocated relativism as a method of peacefully mediating these conflicts. Thus he argued that “there should be only relative and functional rightness, with no throne or absolute sovereignty in dispute.”⁷ His belief was that social conflict could be overcome without requiring individuals or groups to jettison values, traditions, and loyalties; indeed, he felt that such a program would be undesirable. Instead, it was necessary to allow cultural values to coexist without hierarchy:

Through this we may arrive at some clearer recognition of the basic unity or correspondence of our values with those of other men, however dissimilar they may appear on the surface or however differently they may be systematized and sanctioned. . . . We can then take on our particular value systems with temperate and enlightened attachment, and can be sectarian without provincialism and loyal without intolerance.⁸

Locke desired a pragmatic openness that would lead toward the awareness of

“common-denominator values” that finally affirm the fundamental unity of humanity. A belief in the possibility, indeed, the necessity of “unity in diversity” is, without doubt, the force that propelled Locke toward the Bahá’í Faith. This principle, which ambitiously moves through cultural toleration and toward identification with the Other, was in Locke’s mind a practical means by which African Americans could advance socially. If whites would begin to recognize their commonality with African Americans rather than concentrating on their differences, parity, and eventually unity, between the races might be achieved.

The same message was emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His sojourn in America just a few years before Locke began to articulate his philosophical commitment to cultural pluralism and relativism. Though it is difficult to identify the degree to which Bahá’í teachings may have influenced Locke’s thinking, the resonance is unmistakable. In a talk at Chicago’s Hull House given on the same day that He addressed the 1912 NAACP annual conference, the “Persian teacher of Brotherhood” framed His discussion of the principle of “unity in diversity” within the context of American race relations:

In the human kingdom itself there are points of contact, properties common to all mankind; likewise, there are points of distinction which separate race from race, individual from individual. If the points of contact, which are the common properties of humanity, overcome the peculiar points of distinction, unity is assured. . . . One of the important questions which affect the unity and the solidarity of mankind is the fellowship

7. Quoted in Harris, *Philosophy of Alain Locke* 56.

8. Quoted in Harris, *Philosophy of Alain Locke* 59–60.

and equality of the white and colored races. Between these two races certain points of agreement and points of distinction exist which warrant just and mutual consideration. . . . [N]umerous points of partnership and agreement exist between the two races; whereas the one point of distinction is that of color. . . . God is not pleased with—neither should any reasonable or intelligent man be willing to recognize—inequality in the races because of this distinction.⁹

The full-page prominence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s inclusion in *The Crisis* suggests the excited reception of this theologically cast sentiment of racial equality among the African American intelligentsia of the era. Its underlying thesis of unqualified egalitarianism mirrored the opinions of most black thinkers. Yet Locke’s philosophical ideas seem to do more than simply echo the spirit of the message; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s pluralist framework in which difference is admitted but is surmounted by commonality resonates powerfully with Locke’s secular philosophy.

It must be emphasized that Locke’s thinking emerged from a school of philosophical pragmatism that placed great value on the *practicality* of philosophical ideas. For pragmatists, philosophy must not remain confined to the world of the mind. It should manifest

itself tangibly in human society. That a black philosopher of the early twentieth century rooted himself in pragmatism is not surprising; neither is it surprising that Locke was intrigued by the social principles and practice of the Bahá’í Faith. Locke must have looked upon the Faith as an actually existing attempt to realize the program of pluralism and relativism that he had come to intellectually. Although Buck does not explore fully this possible attraction, Locke may have viewed the Bahá’í Faith as a viable, *practical* vehicle for the dissemination of secular ideas to which he was devoted in abstract philosophy.

Indeed, Locke’s willingness to participate in and identify with the Bahá’í community was mostly a function of that community’s ability to manifest its principles of unqualified egalitarianism in American society. For the most part, the Bahá’í activities that Locke supported were concentrated upon the cause of racial justice and reconciliation. In Buck’s narrative, Locke’s multiple years of service on Bahá’í committees focused on the development of “race amity” emerge as the philosopher’s central path of service to the Faith. His eventual estrangement from the Bahá’í community appears to have been the direct result of his perception that the Bahá’ís were not moving satisfactorily toward those ideals of racial equality expressed in the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and central to Locke’s secular philosophy. In a 1941 letter expressing his wish to withdraw formally from the Washington D.C. Bahá’í community—if not the Faith itself—Locke cites the “seeming impossibility of any real crusading attack on the practices of racial prejudice in spite of the good will and fair principles of the local believers.”¹⁰

9. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982, 1995 printing) 67–68.

10. Alain Locke, letter to Mrs. Miriam Haney, Mar. 30, 1941, quoted in Buck, *Faith and Philosophy* 177.

Because it so attentively focuses on the philosopher's relation to the Bahá'í Faith, Buck's study does not explore the range and intensity of Locke's work as a national figure in the struggle for racial equality during the inter-war years. It was in his role as an advocate for African American cultural production who acted as midwife to the Harlem Renaissance—recognized as the first major efflorescence of black art in the United States—that won Locke a prominent place in American cultural history. As the so-called "Dean" of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke promoted art as an instrument in the effort to win blacks greater inclusion within American democracy. It is possible that he also viewed the Bahá'í Faith in similar, instrumental terms. That Locke's frustration with the Bahá'í "attack" on racial prejudice may have led him to distance himself from the Faith suggests that the philosopher understood himself as a champion of racial justice before all else. So far as the Bahá'í community did not live up to its social principles, Locke was willing to walk away from it. While a believer like Louis Gregory held the advancement of the Bahá'í Faith as his life's goal, Locke seems to have viewed his religion as one among several forces that could be marshaled in opposition to the prejudice that he felt to be a fundamental problem in America.

Any future study of Locke must necessarily make its way through Christopher Buck's *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*. The scholar forcefully proves his thesis that, in Locke's thinking, philosophy and religious belief operated as synergistic terms. He has shown that

the Bahá'í Faith was integral to Locke's life and ideology. However, Buck's text is never able to allay fully its discernable anxiety about the quality and the degree of Locke's faith. In his meticulous survey of the archival record, Buck appears to be in search of an ever-retreating Rosetta Stone that might reveal the precise texture of Locke's religious belief or of some document showing that Locke unabashedly proclaimed himself a Bahá'í before a national audience—as Gregory hoped he would. But, because such definitive materials are not uncovered, Locke's relationship to the Bahá'í Faith can be described empirically only as a *clear intellectual affinity*.

At times, Buck's cataloguing of Locke's religious life seems like a frustrated response to this looming conclusion. His exhaustive compilation of Locke's Bahá'í activities may be interpreted as an accumulation of circumstantial evidence implicitly attempting to convince the reader that Locke's relationship to the Faith was not "secular"—or merely intellectual. Yet, after reading Buck's work, it is difficult to imagine Locke the philosopher rapt in prayer. Of course, this is not a shortcoming of the book. Rather it is an indication that, while he may have wanted to portray a more pious figure, Buck maintains the vow he made in his introduction to *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* "to constrain any grandiose claims on Locke as a Bahá'í." Finally, it might be said that the cerebral character that emerges from Buck's text conceals the spirit of his faith with the same guarded circumspection as did the historical Alain Locke.