

**Locke, Shock, and Abbott:  
Baha’i Theology and the Acceleration  
of the African American Civil Rights Movement**

By: Guy Emerson Mount

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“[T]he intelligent, loyal Baha’i should stress not the source,  
but the importance of the idea,  
and rejoice not in the originality and uniqueness of the principle  
but rather in its prevalence and practicality.”<sup>1</sup>

—Alain Locke

In April of 1912 Abdu’l Baha Abbas, “the leader of the Bahai [sic] movement for world-wide religious unity”, was in the midst of a momentous crusade to inspire the hearts and minds of African Americans with a message of hope, love, and redemption.<sup>2</sup> In a nation accustomed to itinerant preachers and religious revivals, Abdu’l Baha found a ready audience in nearly every segment of American society. For African Americans specifically, however, the fundamental tenants of his faith, which called for an end to all forms of prejudice, a redistribution of wealth, and a peaceful approach to conflict resolution, must have sounded like a heavenly symphony.<sup>3</sup> Between April 23<sup>rd</sup> and April

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Locke, “Unity through Diversity: A Baha’i Principle” in *The Baha’i World: A Biennial International Record Volume V, 1932-1934*, ed. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and Canada, (New York: Baha’i Publishing Committee, 1936), 372-373.

<sup>2</sup> *The Freeman*. Indianapolis, Indiana. April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent overview of the beliefs and history of the Baha’i faith see Peter Smith, *The Baha’i Religion: A Short Introduction to its History and Teachings* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), Moojan Momen,

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

30<sup>th</sup> Abdu'l Baha spoke at the Fourth Annual NAACP Convention, the A.M.E Church's Bethel Literary Society, and Howard University, all to great accolade.<sup>4</sup> These remarkable talks, as well as the African American responses to them, raise a number of important questions regarding the nature of African American religion during the Gilded Age and the difficulty of establishing historical causality from the dispersed ideological and theological movements of the Baha'i Faith in America.

In his public addresses, Abdu'l Baha spoke with former slaves and the descendants of former slaves. Many in his audiences had lived through the horrors of the Civil War<sup>5</sup>, the great jubilee of Emancipation, and the broken promises of Reconstruction<sup>6</sup>. Most had experienced firsthand the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and endured the violent

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*A Short Introduction to the Baha'i Faith* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), and J.E. Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era: An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Several firsthand accounts survive of Abdu'l Baha's journey to America including Mohi Sobhani, ed., *Mahmud's Diary: The Diary of Mirza Mahmud-i-Zarqani* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), Marzieh Gail, ed., *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983), and Richard Hollinger, ed., *Abdu'l Baha in America: The Diary of Agnes Parsons* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) for a general overview of the Civil War and James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted During the War for the Union*, (New York: Vintage, 2003) for the specific experiences of African Americans during Civil War. Also see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001) for perhaps the clearest explanation of the lasting meaning of the Civil War in American life, especially as it relates to race.

<sup>6</sup> See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) for the Reconstruction period broadly and Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005) for the intersection of race and religion during this same period.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

reassertion of Southern 'home rule', where African American security literally functioned as a bargaining chip to settle the disputed election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden in 1877. Nearly all had fought against the lynchings, disenfranchisement, and open acts of injustice that had accelerated through the 1880's and 1890's, as white Southerners worked to reasserted their power and undo the meager gains of Reconstruction. Booker T. Washington's reconciliatory leadership, exemplified by his infamous Atlanta Compromise of 1895, helped mollify the situation somewhat, but it also permitted segregation to take hold and thereby frustrate the aspirations of many African Americans yearning for a life beyond poverty, manual labor, and second class citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

When Abdu'l Baha arrived in America, he encountered an exhausted African American community. It was a community deeply divided by class, generation, skin tone, religious denomination, political ideology, and gendered expectations. Black women were questioning whether or not the fight for liberation and equality would include them as well.<sup>8</sup> Black nationalists such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner had

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<sup>7</sup> Washington's station as a 'conservative' black leader is currently being reconsidered by new generation of scholarship including W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003). A great deal of evidence exists that through T. Thomas Fortune and other radical black leaders, Washington was secretly funding legal challenges to segregation, disenfranchisement, and higher education discrimination even as he told white Americans that he was against such strategies. See Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> See Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997) for the diverse efforts of black

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

been arguing for years that a mass migration back to Africa was the only viable solution for Americans of African descent.<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois was working systematically to displace Booker T. Washington and offer a more progressive and intellectual public response to American racism.<sup>10</sup> White skinned and multiracial African Americans found themselves in an increasingly uncertain position as the shifting racial boundaries of post-Emancipation blackness were rapidly twisting and warping to remake blackness in light of the new realities of Jim Crow segregation.<sup>11</sup> In short, the black community was in turbulent state of transition in 1912.

### One Day in April

On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, at high noon in the nation's capital, Abdu'l Baha spoke to the students and faculty of Howard University. Later that afternoon, he went to a luncheon and two receptions in his honor where he mingled with the city's elite white residents and established relationships with Alexander Graham Bell and the minister of Turkey.

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women to secure their freedom both as African Americans and as women after Emancipation and through World War I.

<sup>9</sup> See James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journey to Africa, 1787-2005* (The Penguin Press: New York, 2006) for the long history of African American migrations 'back to Africa'.

<sup>10</sup>For more on the debates between Du Bois and Washington see Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See Guy Emerson Mount, "Building Multiracial Fortunes: Black Identity, Masculinity, and Authenticity through the Body of T. Thomas Fortune" (Master's Thesis, San Diego State University, 2011 forthcoming) for more on this topic.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

In the evening he once again addressed a predominantly black audience at the Bethel Literary Society at the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>12</sup>

The visual and cultural mosaic of that day must have been stunning to say the least, yet Abdu'l Baha was clearly uncomfortable with the segregation he witnessed. At the luncheon, held at the Persian Embassy, he rearranged the table settings and insisted that Louis Gregory, one of the city's most prominent African American Baha'is, would be seated next to him as his guest of honor and thereby integrate an otherwise segregated meeting. Gregory had quietly slipped away from the luncheon to avoid the embarrassment of being openly Jim Crowed, however Abdu'l Baha apparently went to great lengths to insure that he was found and that the luncheon did not start without him.<sup>13</sup> This gesture must have certainly made some of the white diners uncomfortable, as it was perhaps the first and only time that many of them had broken bread with a black man. Yet this same act of resistance established that Abdu'l Baha practiced what he preached and that he would defy the tradition of segregation that had taken hold in the nation's capital. For Gregory, this no doubt confirmed his belief in the spiritual principles of the Baha'i Faith and their potential to fight social injustice. However, to

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<sup>12</sup> See Allan L. Ward, *239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979), 37-46, and Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), 49-62, for more on this day.

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, *Move the World*, 52-53.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

what extent Gregory shared his experiences or how widely they circulated among black Washingtonians remains uncertain.

What is known is that Abdu'l Baha's message resonated profoundly with African American observers if for no other reason than his willingness to acknowledge and value diversity, even when there might have been very little to witness. This was clearly evident at Howard University where he analogously referred to the largely black audience as the "multicolored flowers" of one garden.<sup>14</sup> Although he said that "I see white and black sitting together" what he more than likely saw were dark skinned, light skinned, and white skinned African Americans sitting together, all of whom made up part of black Washington's educated class.<sup>15</sup> Although a good number of Howard's administrators and teachers, including its president, were white, almost all of its students at the time had some measure of African ancestry and identified themselves as such. In effect, many of the white bodies that Abdu'l Baha observed were actually multiracial African Americans.

This nuance may not have been immediately evident to Abdu'l Baha, but his words would never the less have spoken inadvertently to many of the crowd's underlying

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<sup>14</sup> Abdu'l Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 45. For more on the makeup of Washington's black elites see Jacqueline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville : University Press of Virginia, 1999) and Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color : The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1990). Included in both books is a discussion of the complex realities of intra-racial divisions within the black community at the time.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

intra-racial anxieties. While promising that eventually “differences between black and white will be completely obliterated”<sup>16</sup> he asserted that in many ways this process had already taken place to a large degree by asserting, from his Eastern vantage point and transnational perspective, that “you are like the whites; there are no great distinctions left”.<sup>17</sup> This statement combined with one in which he encouraged blacks and whites to “mix together completely”<sup>18</sup> would have rung true to many of the more radical black and multiracial leaders present, who at the time were fighting for what was then called ‘social equality’ (or complete political, cultural, and sexual integration). At the same time, these sentiments would have been scoffed at by the emerging black nationalists and purveyors of a pan-African consciousness, who would in subsequent decades have their positions more fully articulated by Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many others.

On another level, however, Abdu'l Baha would have played well to these same ‘back to Africa’ supporters who were worried about the idea of ‘absorption’, even as he would have connected with some of the more mainline black religious leaders who were listening that day. In his talk Abdu'l Baha put forward a patently Afro-Centric theology relating to divine providence which was very similar to the one prevalent among many

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 46. Abdu'l Baha would extend his challenge to the sexual politics surrounding interracial ‘mixing’ to its ultimate conclusion when he meticulously engineered and encouraged the marriage of Louis Gregory to Louisa Mathew, an Englishwoman who was eight years his senior. Morrison, *To Move the World*, 63-72.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

African American Christians at the time. This theology attempted to explain exactly how a righteous God would have allowed something like slavery to have ever occurred in the first place. What emerged was a gospel of pre-destination, that also rung forcefully from so many African American pulpits in 1912. This gospel held that Africans were enslaved and brought to America as part of a larger divine plan to eventually bring progress and monotheism back to the African 'fatherland' through African American missionaries and a mass re-colonization. Sounding like so many other preachers of this period, Abdu'l Baha said "[t]he blacks of Africa were in complete bondage, but your emancipation led to their freedom."<sup>19</sup> As many returning black missionaries were arguing at the time, he also observed that "if you go to Africa and see the blacks of Africa, you will realize how much progress you have made."<sup>20</sup> He may have gone too far in concluding that, as a result, African Americans "should be very grateful to the whites of America"<sup>21</sup> because they unknowingly expediting African American progress, but this too was a common appeal made by black preachers at the time and represented a compelling argument in favor of burying the hatchet while encouraging either black migration to Africa or brotherly love and fellowship across racial divides while still in America.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, if everyone could be painted as an instrument of divine providence, then hatred and bitterness were sins against the divine plan.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>22</sup> See Campbell, *Middle Passages*.



## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

In his final talk of the day in front of the Bethel Literary Society, Abdu'l Baha continued to connect with African American interests and strike a balance between the horrors of the past, the opportunities of the present, and the work of the future. He compared his experiences as a prisoner under the Ottoman Empire to the generations that African Americans spent in bondage by saying: "You do not know. I, who for forty years have been a prisoner, do know. I do know the value and blessing of liberty. For you have been and are now living in freedom, and you have no fear of anybody. Is there a greater blessing than this? Freedom! Liberty! Security!"<sup>23</sup> Certainly African Americans did 'know' a great deal about involuntary confinement and would have disagreed with Abdu'l Baha when he claimed that they were living in a state of liberty, security or freedom which they could enjoy without fear. Yet the point was well taken and enthusiastically applauded as if to usher in the promise of this idea that had eluded African Americans since 1619. It was an acknowledgement of the progress made and recognition of the opportunities currently open to African Americans that were firmly closed a generation earlier. Although few would have agreed with Abdu'l Baha's characterization of the American government as one which "rules with impartial equity and equality toward all" the hope that America might one day keep its promise and fulfill this ideal was worth supporting. African Americans surly interpreted Abdu'l Baha's premature observations as an optimistic sign that change was on the horizon and

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<sup>23</sup> Abdu'l Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 52.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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that perhaps it could be willed into being by this strange man from Persia who seemed to care about them so deeply and see their situation in a fresh light.<sup>24</sup>

This evening talk is much more problematic for contemporary scholars than the one given earlier at Howard because it demonstrates the wide gap between our current scholarly ears and African American popular theology and politics of the 1910's. African Americans in 1912 were a people in flux, and as such, were open to a wide variety of strategies and perspectives provided that they were grounded in a spirit of love and genuine fellowship. Abdu'l Baha, by all accounts held these qualities in abundance.

### **The Problem of Causality**

All told, how should scholars read Abdu'l Baha's visit to Washington D.C.? Did he come and go like so many other traveling evangelicals before him or did he cause a lasting shift in African American political thought and religious ideology? Several events indicate that his impact was significant yet much more work needs to be done in order to fully trace the social and theological concepts that he and his small band of American Baha'is championed so fervently. Others might argue that this effort should be abandoned altogether. Principle among them was the great African American Baha'i philosopher and founder of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, Alain Locke. Locke cautioned that the Baha'i community "should stress not the source, but the importance of the idea, and rejoice not in the originality and uniqueness of the principle but rather

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 49.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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in its prevalence and practicality.”<sup>25</sup> While this may be true, an examination of the African American reactions to Abdu'l Baha's visit can still yield a great deal of valuable insight regarding black lives in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The *Washington Bee*, an African American newspaper run by the staunch social critic William Calvin Chase, ran a favorable article in response to Abdu'l Baha's visit that has been widely cited by scholars.<sup>26</sup> Going unnoticed, however, is a fascinating work of plagiarism/creative editing which was done to this article by George L. Knox, editor of the Indianapolis based *Freeman*. Knox copied large sections of the article while 'correcting' several spelling errors that he found in the *Washington Bee* including changing "Baha movement" to "Bahai movement", "Behai belief" to "Bahai belief", and "the Abdul" to "Abbas Effendi".<sup>27</sup> Clearly Knox was captivated at the prospects of Baha'i theology and had done a bit of independent research on his own before doing some remarkable cheerleading. The most notable additions to the article found Knox proclaiming proudly that one-third of all Persians were Baha'is, an exaggeration meant to lend legitimacy and excitement to the emerging faith.<sup>28</sup> Knox, like Chase, made it a

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<sup>25</sup> Locke, "Unity through Diversity", 372-373.

<sup>26</sup> *Washington Bee*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912.

<sup>27</sup> Compare *Washington Bee*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912 to *Freeman*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912. To my knowledge this is the first time that the *Freeman* article has been cited.

<sup>28</sup> Knox likely would have gotten this figure from one of the many Western scholars hoping to exaggerate the size of the Baha'i faith as part of an anti-Muslim campaign. Although Knox was certainly not aware that such a figure was overblown or for what purpose his use of it to forward anti-racist struggles in America is ironic give the disparaging origins of these figures. See Moojan Momen, ed. *The*

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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point to claim that “quite a colony of colored Bahaists has been developed in Washington” but he felt compelled to add that it was “finding considerable favor among our people”. Given the willingness of white Baha'is to open their homes to African Americas, Knox also added that there are many “Negroes willingly [sic] to give the faith a hearing.” The fact that African Americans “have mingled on terms of absolute equality” with their white co-religionists was a major draw.<sup>29</sup> In what was perhaps the most telling discrepancy of all Knox became one of the few African Americans who characterized the Baha'i Faith as a separate independent religion rather than a ‘movement’. He explicitly excluded Chase’s line that “one can be of any known religious denomination and yet maintain good standing as a disciple of Bahai [sic].”<sup>30</sup> In the end both men were actively looking to sell the new faith to their respective readers and bring new ideas into the discussion of African American civil rights, but each had competing perspectives on what the Baha'i Faith could and should be. To what extent their editorial policies, perceptions of religion, or senses of sectarianism shifted as a result of their encounter with the teachings of Abdu'l Baha would require much more research and may ultimately remain difficult to quantify. Ideas of universality, the oneness of humanity, and other aspects of Baha'i theology were already current among many

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*Babi and Baha'i Religions: 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), for more on this subject.

<sup>29</sup> *Washington Bee*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912. *Freeman*, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1912

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Where Abdu'l Baha and the African American community in general stood on this issue of movement versus religion is addressed more fully below.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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different circles that intersected with black intellectual life in the 1910's making untangling such thoughts in search of causality a daunting task.

Another key document which prior scholars have ignored involves the incomparable black leader W.E.B. Du Bois. In the month after the Fourth Annual NAACP conference, but a month before the formal write up of the event cited by most scholars, Du Bois devoted almost the entire body of his "Men of the Month" column to Abdu'l Baha.<sup>31</sup> Adorned with a full page picture followed by a full page write up, the article is less remarkable for what it says and more fascinating for what it is. In a column reserved exclusively for African American accomplishments (which often included black women) Abdu'l Baha's inclusion seemed to be an obvious anomaly. The space devoted to him relative to the other men of that month as well as those recognized throughout that year is also striking. No other figure that Du Bois honored that year warranted a full page article much less a full page photo. For most months, each biographical sketch was given roughly equal space with a lucky few earning a small inset photo. Abdu'l Baha however dominated that month's section and literally pushed the other honorees into a tiny space at the bottom of the page. This new find is perhaps the most extensive article on the Baha'i Faith attributed to Du Bois and given the space he

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<sup>31</sup> *The Crisis*, May, 1912. To my knowledge this is the first time that this article on Abdu'l Baha has been cited.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

devoted to it in his paper, his meeting with Abdu'l Baha must have had a significant impact on him.<sup>32</sup>

The article itself is a dry but largely accurate historical account of the life of Abdu'l Baha and the emergence of the Baha'i Faith. Du Bois did take several editorial liberties, however, that are important to examine. For Du Bois, and so many others, the Baha'i Faith was understood first and foremost as a "movement" which "does not ask a Christian to cease professing Christianity." This proved to be a powerful idea with wide implications. The fact that the Baha'i faith "pays little attention to dogma" was especially attractive to Du Bois who throughout his life searched for a viable alternative to 'the black church' which could move African Americans in a more spiritually progressive political direction.<sup>33</sup> Du Bois was adamant about the fact that the Baha'i Faith was not a "new religion" but could rather be part of the wider and older African American syncretic tradition that incorporated diverse religious perspectives into a

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<sup>32</sup> As editor it is possible that Du Bois may have had someone else within the NAACP actually write the article, however, the quality of prose, knowledge of Christian history, and overall style indicates that Du Bois himself was the most likely author. In these early years of the NAACP Du Bois had significantly less help than he would have in later years and given the fact that *The Crisis* was less than two years old at the time all fingers point to Du Bois as the writer. At the very least his decision as editor to devote the space that he did to this subject speaks volumes as to the impact that his encounter with Abdu'l Baha had on the forty six year old Du Bois.

<sup>33</sup> Until recently scholars have been perplexed regarding how to situate the spiritual life of Du Bois, with most regarding him as an atheist. However, Edward Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) has largely debunked this theory by demonstrating that quite to the contrary, Du Bois's major project was the spiritual transformation of African American lives and the reform of 'the black church' to reflect a more modern, rational, and politically engaged position.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

concise world view that reconciled the troubled realities of being black in America. Du Bois clearly saw in the Baha'i Faith a theology that matched his distain for sectarian divisions and his belief that spiritual principles should directly lead to social action. Du Bois may have also found in the Baha'i Faith an African American version of what Robert Bellah later referred to as a 'civil religion'<sup>34</sup> even as the Baha'i Faith proper would remain with him for many years to come.

On an organizational level the Baha'i Faith would subsequently interact significantly with the NAACP. Baha'i "race amity" conventions, one of the first conscious projects designed to promote interracial coalitions frequently included the NAACP and its members.<sup>35</sup> What effect this relationship had on the NAACP's move from an all black organization rooted in the Niagara Movement, to its cooperation with white activists later on in its history remains to be examined. It is clear that a number of prominent Baha'is were active in the leadership ranks of the NAACP and that the Baha'i race amity committees made joining and collaborating with the NAACP part of their platform.<sup>36</sup> In 1932 the Baha'is held a banquet honoring the NAACP where Du Bois

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<sup>34</sup> Bella's concept essential accounts for unspoken 'meta-religious' movements that take on a religious fever and structure but are adopted by people of all denominations and expressed in the public sphere. For more on Bellah's concept see Robert N. Bellah and Phillip H. Hammond *Varieties of Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, seems to follow this line of thought in that an overarching religious framework that will provide a foundation for black unity is what Du Bois finds himself perpetually grasping for.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the relationship between the NAACP and the Baha'i Faith see Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angles, Kalimat Press, 2005), 69-90.

<sup>36</sup> Morrison, *To Move the World*, 202.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

spoke to the crowd and Walter White, the then head of the organization, said after the meeting that “the Baha’i movement” was “one of the great forces of human understanding”.<sup>37</sup>

On a personal level Du Bois would remain connected to the Baha’i Faith for the remainder of his life. Du Bois would lecture at Baha’i schools and may have been the first person to introduce his lifelong friend Alain Locke to the teachings of Abdu’l Baha and the Baha’i Faith.<sup>38</sup> Locke would go on to become one of the most vocal African American Baha’is and explicitly incorporated a great many of its teachings into his work as an activist/philosopher. When he died in 1945 Du Bois would speak at his funeral.<sup>39</sup> In addition to Locke, Du Bois also corresponded with Louis Gregory and *Chicago Defender* editor Robert Abbott, both of whom were open members of the Baha’i faith.<sup>40</sup>

In 1936 however, Du Bois’s connection with the Baha’i Faith deepened significantly when his wife Nina officially converted and became more active in the local Baha’i community. One year later Du Bois was publicly attempting to shape Baha’i policy regarding integrated meetings in Nashville as some of the local public events appeared to ‘draw the color line’ despite the fact that the official policy and general

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<sup>37</sup> Buck, *Alain Locke*, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Buck, *Alain Locke*, 60. Buck credits Morrison as having first contemplated this possibility.

<sup>39</sup> Buck, *Alain Locke*, 210.

<sup>40</sup> For Abbot and Du Bois see Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955). For more on the Gregory and Du Bois connection see Morrison *To Move the World*.



## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

---

practice of the faith dictated that all Baha'i events were to be integrated and that black and white members would meet together on an equal footing. For Du Bois to get involved in such a local matter shows that he must have cared deeply about the direction of his wife's new faith, perhaps more so than many of its confirmed believers.<sup>41</sup> A few years earlier in 1935, Du Bois himself was 'accused' of being a Baha'i by fellow black communist George Streater, largely because of Du Bois's stance against violence.<sup>42</sup> As late as 1953, and after Nina's death, Du Bois was denied a passport by the United States government as he was petitioning to attend a World Peace Council meeting in Budapest and the Inter-Continental Conference of the Baha'i Faith in New Delhi.<sup>43</sup> Apparently during the McCarthy Era such activities were deemed revolutionary communist threats by the federal government, and hence, they were right up Du Bois's alley.

Beyond the more obvious and well documented work done on Alain Locke and Robert Abbott, a study of this connection between W.E.B. Du Bois and Baha'i theology is long overdue and may open the door to some of the most important impacts that Abdu'l Baha may have had on the direction of African American history. Yet to precisely trace Baha'i theology through the infinitely complex thoughts that circulated Du Bois's mind, and other African Americans generally, may prove to be an impossible task. However,

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<sup>41</sup> This controversy over integrated meetings is much more complicated and is covered in depth by Morrison, *To Move the World*, 258-261.

<sup>42</sup> George Streater to Du Bois, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1935 in *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois Volume II Selections, 1934-1944*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 95.

<sup>43</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois to Ruth R. Shipley, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1953 in *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois Volume III Selections, 1944-1963*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 345.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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as R. Laurence Moore, Christopher Buck, and other scholars of American religious history have demonstrated, it is not unheard of for small, upstart, religious outsiders to circumvent conventional religious lines and shift the collective direction American religion while remaking its parameters in their own image.<sup>44</sup>

### **'The' Black Church, The 'Black' Church, and The Black 'Church'**

In the end, what effect, if any, did Abdu'l Baha's trip have on popular theology, everyday African American belief, and the ongoing struggle for Civil Rights? Did his ideas trickle down to the masses and cause any real change or did they remain confined to black intellectuals like Du Bois, Locke, and Abbott? Many of the stumbling blocks in approaching these questions are rooting in the idea of exactly what the so-called 'black church' actually is. For those outside the black community this term often becomes a way to ghettoize African American religion and frame African Americans as a singular mono-chromatic group with no internal diversity. For insiders, this often repeated term is horribly misleading as it implies a single black church (rather than black churches), an exclusively Christian perspective (as it's not 'the black mosque'), and the idea that authentic black religion can only be found in black dominated (and presumably Christian) congregations. A more appropriate way to conceptualize black religious experience(s) is to think in terms of a 'black theology' which can be understood as the

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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dynamic, decentered, syncretic, and even contradictory process that individual African Americans engage in so as to mark the spiritual coordinates of their lives and create order out of the world around them.

Scholarship on black theology has been pulling the field in this direction for years and has opened up a number of other questions regarding the centrality of religion generally within the larger arc of African American history. Exactly how important was religion to African Americans during slavery, Jim Crow, or the Civil Rights movement and how relevant is it today? The myth of the singular, stable Christian black church as the center of black life in America from time immemorial has already begun to crumble in light of new evidence and new interpretations. Its legacy, however, remains burned in the minds of both blacks and whites alike. Princeton Professor Eddie Glaude, in bemoaning this fact, even went so far earlier this year to claim that “The Black Church is Dead”.<sup>45</sup> He and many others have criticized black religious practices and theology in both the past and in the present as being a conservative force that reinforced oppression, rather than a progressive force that advanced the struggle for liberation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Huffington Post*, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Barbara Diane Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008) which argues that black scholars who came of age in the 1950's and 60's are largely responsible for projecting backwards the image of a strong, progressive, activist black church as the center of African American life. Also Jonathan L. Walton *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) has been critical of the patriarchy, homophobia, and conservative political platform of many contemporary black mega churches.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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In light of this new paradigm of 'the black church', which in many ways was ushered in by Du Bois,<sup>47</sup> the Baha'i faith was in a rather unique position in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to Du Bois's critique of the Nashville meetings Du Bois believed that "[o]nly the Baha'i were left" among the available black religious options because they refused to compromise their radical position against segregation and remained committed to fundamental social change.<sup>48</sup> If the Baha'i faith were understood by scholars today as a 'movement' as opposed to a 'religion', just as it was by African American observers at the time, than its influence may be easier to trace. Rather than focus on the number of African American Baha'is, which was always tiny, a study of the organizational patterns, general principles, and strategic tactics of the Baha'is can help locate more precisely to what extent Baha'i theology influenced everyday people and shaped change in mainline African American congregations. This approach is not novel and has been applied to the religious elements of Garveyism, Rastafai, and the Nation of Islam which are numerically small but disproportionately significant in shaping African American theology.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois*.

<sup>48</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1937.

<sup>49</sup> The idea that black ideology remains decentered while incorporating often competing ideas was explored in Melissa Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2004). For early the impact of Islam on black religion see Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For Rastafai see Noel Leo Erskine *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007). For the Nation of Islam see C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1994).

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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In the end, Abdu'l Baha's efforts among African Americans might best be viewed on his own terms. He said upon his arrival that "[i]t is my purpose to set forth in America the fundamental principles of the revelation and teachings of Baha'u'llah. It will then become the duty of the Bahais of this country to give these principles unfoldment and application in the minds, hearts and lives of the people".<sup>50</sup> In other words, Abdu'l Baha saw himself as a prophetic voice of change that was not trying to raise money or win converts but spark a movement. That movement was to be carried forward by American Baha'is, both black and white. Rather than fall into a limiting paradigm such as the one entrapping 'the black church', Abdu'l Baha took a wider, more inclusive, and even post-modern stance towards 'membership' stating that "[y]ou can be a Bahá'í-Christian, a Bahá'í-Freemason, a Bahá'í-Jew, a Bahá'í-Muhammadan" while the community should "not distress or deny anyone by saying 'He is not a Bahá'í!' He will be known by his deeds."<sup>51</sup> In terms of what constituted a Baha'i he was equally as broad saying: "He is a true Bahá'í who strives by day and by night to progress along the path of human endeavor, whose cherished desire is to live and act so as to enrich and illumine the world; whose source of inspiration is the essence of Divine Perfection, whose aim in life is to conduct himself so as to be the cause of infinite progress. Only when he attains

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<sup>50</sup> Abdu'l Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Discourses by Abdul Baha during His Visit to the United States in 1912*, ed. Howard MacNutt (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1943), i.

<sup>51</sup> Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London* (London: UK Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), 98.

## Locke, Shock, and Abbott:

Baha'i Theology and the Acceleration of the African American Civil Rights Movement

Guy Emerson Mount

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unto such perfect gifts can it be said of him that he is a Bahá'í."<sup>52</sup> Gendered pronouns aside, nearly every African American in 1912 would have said "Amen" to that.

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<sup>52</sup> Abdu'l Baha in *Lights of Guidance*, ed. Helen Hornby (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1994), 70.