

## ***Mary Magdalene ‘The Lioness of God’ in the Baha’i Faith***

**Lil Osborn  
Independent Scholar**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of Mary Magdalene in the Baha’i tradition. ‘Abdu’l Baha son of the founder of the Baha’i Faith spoke of Mary Magdalene on numerous occasions, referring to her as the ‘Lioness of God’ and extolling her as an exemplar to his followers, ‘My hope is that each one of you may become as Mary Magdalene – for this woman was superior to all the men of her time and her reality is ever shining from the horizon of Christ.’ Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a female archetype in the context of the doctrine of ‘return’ which describes how in each revelatory cycle the phenomenon of recurring archetypal events and *dramatis personae* occur. Mary Magdalene is thus linked to the Persian Poet Tahirih, the immortal heroine of the Babi-Baha’i dispensation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá portrays Mary Magdalene as a courageous woman, venturing out into a hostile and dangerous environment, firmly determined to fulfil her mission and propagate the Cause of God. By doing so, she provided a role-model for the fearful followers of Jesus who had gone into hiding. The parallels to Tahirih, in terms of courage, determination and leadership qualities, cannot be overlooked.

### ***Mary Magdalene ‘The Lioness of God’ in the Baha’i Faith***

#### **Introduction**

The Baha’i Faith began in Persia in 1863 when the Prophet-Founder, Baha’u’llah (Mírzá Husayn `Alí Núrí) publically declared himself to be ‘He whom God shall make manifest’, a messianic figure whose coming, according to Bahá’ís, was announced in the scriptures of all of the world’s great religions. Whilst the Baha’i faith is an independent religion, both Bahá’u’lláh and his forerunner the Báb operated in the context of Shi’a Islam, consequently the earliest Bahá’ís in the Middle East had a similar cultural connection to Persian Islam as the earliest Christians had to Judaism. It is unsurprising then that there are many significant overlaps between the symbols, rituals and practises of Bahá’ís and Shi’a Muslims.

#### **Doctrine of Return**

In discussing the role Mary Magdalene in the Baha’i tradition it is necessary to consider a the Doctrine of Return (*Raj’a*) which is common to Shi’a Islam and the Baha’i Faith, and a point of major divergence between the two – the equality of men and women. The Doctrine of Return (*Raj’a*) as understood by Muslims is outlined by Moojan Momen thus:

The Hidden Imam, the Imam Mahdi, is in occultation awaiting the time that God has decreed for his return. This return is envisaged as occurring shortly before the final Day of Judgement. The Hidden Imam will then return as the Mahdi, with a company of his chosen ones and there will also return his enemies led by the one-eyed Dajjal and the Sufyani. The Imam Mahdi will lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in one final apocalyptic battle in which the enemies of the Imam will be defeated.

The Imam Mahdi will rule for a number of years and after Him will come the return of Christ, the Imam Husayn and also the other Imams, prophets and saints. Strictly speaking, the term *raj'a* only applies to the return to life of figures who have died such as the Imam Husayn. It is more correct to refer to the *zuhur* (appearance) or *qiyam* (arising) of the Twelfth Imam who did not die and is in occultation. Return is envisaged by Shi'is as involving only the Imams, their supporters and their enemies. (Momen, 1985, p. 166)

### Immortal Heroines

Whilst Baha'is reject much of Islamic eschatology, including the Day of Judgement, the Doctrine of Return is retained and applied to the characters appearing in the lives of 'Manifestations of God' as Baha'is describe the prophet-founders of religions. In the course of each prophetic revelation a woman is designated as an "immortal heroine" – in his history of the first century of the Babi-Baha'i dispensation (1844-1944 CE) entitled *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1975) refers to a succession of prominent female religious worthies as "immortal heroines", referring to Bahiyah Khanum, The Greatest Holy Leaf he wrote:

The Greatest Holy Leaf, the 'well-beloved' sister of 'Abdu'l Baha, the 'Leaf that hath sprung' from the Pre-existent Root,' the 'fragrance' of Baha'u'llah's 'shining robe,' elevated by Him to a 'station such as none other woman hath surpassed,' and comparable in rank to those immortal heroines such as Sarah, Asiyah, the Virgin Mary, Fatimih and Tahirih, each of whom has outshone every member of her sex in previous dispensations. (Rabbani, 1944, p. 347)

The importance of the immortal heroines was discussed in a paper of the same name by Fariba Hedayati, she points out the first four of these heroines were all rooted in the writings and statements of 'Abdu'l Baha which in turn were inspired by Islamic archetypes, she lists them as follows:

1. Sarah (d. 2100 BCE?) – Abrahamic religion [Sabeanism]
2. Asiyah (d. 1400 BCE?) – Israelite religion [Judaism]
3. Maryam = Mary (d. 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE) – Christianity
4. Fatimah (d. 633 CE) – Islam (7<sup>th</sup> Century CE – 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE)
5. Tahirah (d. 1852 CE) – the Babi religion (mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE)
6. Bahiyah, daughter of Baha'u'llah entitled 'The Greatest Holy Leaf' (d. 1932) (Hedayati, 1995)

Hedayati outlines the significance of the first four in the Islamic context and cites a number of hadith and traditions familiar to Iranian Muslims which extol the virtues of Sarah the wife of Ibrahim/Abraham, Asiyah contemporary of Musa/Moses, Maryam/Mary the mother of Isa/Jesus and Fatimih, daughter of Mohammed, wife of Ali and mother of Imam Husayn. Fatimih is important in the Babi and Baha'i tradition she is referred to extensively in the Bab's *Risalafi al-nubuwwa al-khassah*. Hedayati also points out that coincidentally the name Fatimih was given by their parents to both Tahirih and Bahiyah<sup>1</sup> (Hedayati, 1995).

---

<sup>1</sup> Our Lady of Fatima is also a title given to Mary the Mother of Jesus after her reported appearance to three children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917

Mary Magdalene does not appear on this primary list of Immortal Heroines, however, according to Juliet Thompson, ‘Abdu’l Baha replied to a question:

“There was one name” the Master (‘Abdu’l Baha) answered, “that always brought joy to the face of Baha’u’llah. His expression would change at the mention of it. The name was Mary of Magdala.” (Thompson)

I have not been able to locate any written references to Mary Magdalene by either the Bab or Baha’u’llah, however, that may be because most of their ministries were within the context of Islamic societies, as Mary Magdalene does not appear in the Quran she would not conform to the pattern of Islamic archetypes, discussed above. The importance of Mary Magdalene as an Immortal Heroine was emphasised by Baha’u’llah’s son ‘Abdu’l Baha in his teaching of Western converts who were familiar with the symbols and traditions of Christianity. The concept of the Doctrine of Return and the role of the Immortal Heroines is however fundamental to understanding the role of Mary Magdalene in the Baha’i tradition.

### Gender Equality in the Baha’i Faith

A third element is relevant to understanding the role of Mary Magdalene in the Baha’i tradition that is the Baha’i belief in gender equality. This goes beyond mere political and social equality but is founded upon correspondences in the spiritual realm. The most important of these is the relationship between Baha’u’llah and the Holy Maiden, a female representation of the Holy Spirit (Abdo-Osborn, 1994) who appears to Baha’u’llah during His incarceration in the Black Pit in Tehran during 1852-3, in his Súriy-i-Haykal (Tablet of the Temple) Bahá’u’lláh describes his vision as follows:

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden - the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord - suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good-pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt Earth and Heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honoured servants. Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in Heaven and all who are on Earth saying: "By God! This is the best beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not. This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could ye but understand.

The Holy Maiden appears in several tablets of Bahá’u’lláh’s: *Tablet of the Maiden* (Lawh-i-Húri), *Tablet of the Deathless Youth* (Lawh-i-Ghulámu’l-khuld), *Tablet of the Holy Mariner* (Lawh-i-Malláhu’l-quds) and *The Tablet of the Vision* (Lawh-i- Ru’yá). Her role and relationship to the Divine Feminine has been discussed at length by Terry Culhane in his excellent work *I Beheld a Maiden*. (Culhane, 2001) It is only necessary to point out here that the Baha’i commitment to sex equality is rooted in the most sacred aspect of the relationship between God and the Manifestation of God – Baha’u’llah.

All the laws revealed by Baha’u’llah in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* are equally binding on men and women, from the outset women have played an important role in all aspects of the Baha’i Faith, even in deeply conservative Muslim countries such as Persia. In a address given at

## Mary Magdalene – the Lioness of God

---

Franklin Square House, Boston, USA on August 26, 1912, Abdu'l Baha outlined His understanding of the suppression of women being based on the limitation of educational opportunities and affirm the equality of the sexes in the sight of God:

Briefly, history furnishes evidence that during the past centuries there have been great women as well as great men; but in general, owing to lack of educational advantages, women have been restricted and deprived of opportunity to become fully qualified and representative of humankind. When given the opportunity for acquiring education, they have shown equal capacity with men. ...The truth is that God has endowed all humankind with intelligence and perception and has confirmed all as His servants and children; therefore, in the plan and estimate of God there is no distinction between male or female. The soul that manifests pure deeds and spiritual graces is most precious in His sight and nearer to Him in its attainments. (The Promulgation of Universal Peace)

In a meeting in London he went even further:

Taken in general, women today have a stronger sense of religion than men. The woman's intuition is more correct; she is more receptive and her intelligence is quicker. The day is coming when woman will claim her superiority to man. (Hammond, 1912)

This would have been radical heady stuff in the drawing rooms of Edwardian London but it was outrageous by Middle Eastern standards that 'Abdu'l Baha was making such statements must have shocked and pleased his audience in equal measure.

### **The Baha'i Faith in the West**

The Baha'i Teachings were taken to the West by two Arab Christian converts, Ibrahim George Kheiralla (18?? – 1919) and Anton Haddad, Kheiralla was remarkably successful in building a group of enthusiastic believers around him. Kheiralla's version of the Baha'i Teaching was idiosyncratic and unorthodox but it proved popular. Kheiralla's understanding of the Bahá'í teachings seem to have included the belief that Bahá'u'lláh was God incarnate together with numerous popular Middle Eastern religious ideas about dreams, magic and talismans. He was especially keen on the Bahá'í teaching of the hundredth and greatest name of God, which he believed had potent magical powers. Early in 1893, Kheiralla joined another Christian adherent of Bahaism, called Anton Haddad in America. The two men were involved in a number of imaginative but doomed business ventures before Kheiralla bought a doctorate and set himself up as a healer in 1894. His healing practice seems to have been fairly successful. Utilizing traditional Middle Eastern magical and spiritual healing techniques, he charged two dollars a visit. His healing business introduced him to the alternative medicine and cultic milieu of Chicago. In 1895 began to teach his version of Bahaism, and not only were his teachings unorthodox, so were his methods. He invited 'Truth Seekers' (his term) to a series of thirteen graduated lectures in which he promised to reveal secret wisdom to those who stayed the course. According to Berger 'Seekers' who disagreed with their teacher were 'excused'; thus Kheiralla "eliminated all but the most credulous." (Berger, 1954, p. 87) He taught that the millennium would begin in 1917, following a great war. He also taught the doctrine of reincarnation, although it is unclear if this was a misunderstanding of the Shiah doctrine of *rāja'a* or an acceptance of ideas current in the American popular religion of the day. Wherever it came from, central to his teaching was that Bahá'u'lláh was God, and his son was a reincarnation of Jesus. Kheiralla's thesis continued that the Bahá'í teachings

were proved by the Bible. His emphasis was almost exclusively Christian in orientation, and, whilst other faiths were acknowledged, their importance was minimized. Kheiralla was very successful. He was soon unable to cope with the number of 'Truth Seekers' requiring his classes and was required to hand over some of the work to students he had trained up to teach 'The Pith' as he referred to his secret doctrine. By 1900 there were about 1,500 Bahá'ís in America (Stockman, 1985, p. 163).

The Baha'i community in the British Isles never numbered more than about a hundred souls from its beginning in 1899 until about 1930, however, like their American co religionists the community was dominated by women (Abdo-Osborn, Religion & Relevance, 2004). This was not unique in religious and spiritual at the time, the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn and Christian Science, to name just a few had a high proportion of female members and leaders. The nature of society in the early twentieth century meant that middle class women were literate, mobile, restricted in employment and had servants to undertake their domestic responsibilities, in other words – they had time to involve themselves in all manner of social, political and religious causes. Many of the women drawn into the Baha'i groups in the West had been and continued to be, involved in the suffrage movement.

### **'Abdu'l Baha's Journeys to the West**

The visits made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the West in 1911 and again in 1912 – 1913, were eagerly anticipated by the Bahá'ís. They used all their influence and contacts to ensure that the opportunities afforded by the physical presence of their Master realised their full potential. These visits present a unique snapshot of their concerns and activities or to put it another way – what was relevant to them. The British and American Bahá'ís organised the itinerary, arranged the meetings and ultimately set the agenda for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was required to answer their questions, meet the people they thought important and address the issues that concerned them. Consequently he was required to expound Bahá'í teachings in new contexts and to expand on areas which had hitherto not been explored.

It is not surprising that given the involvement of a number of his followers in the suffrage movement and their interest in equality he would meet with leaders of the suffrage movement and address meetings on the subject. His meeting with a feminist in London was described thus:

'Abdu'l-Bahá's interest in women's work and progress is well known, and among the notable leaders who came to see him, may be mentioned Mrs. Annie Besant, President of the Theosophical Society, the organizers of various suffrage bodies, civic and philanthropic workers, the principals of several woman's colleges and lady doctors.

A spirited conversation due to the visit of an ardent suffragist will be long remembered by those who had the privilege of being present. The room was full of men and women, many Persians being seated in their familiar respectful attitude on the floor.

After contrasting the general position of the Eastern and the Western women, and then describing how in many respects the Eastern woman has the advantage of her Western sister, 'Abdu'l-Bahá turned and said to the visitor: "Give me your reasons for believing that woman today should have the vote?"

Answer: "I believe that humanity is a divine humanity and that it must rise higher and higher; but it cannot soar with only one wing." 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed his pleasure at this answer, and smiling, replied: "But what will you do if one wing is

stronger than the other?” Answer: “Then we must strengthen the weaker wing; otherwise the flight will always be hampered.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá smiled and asked: “What will you say if I prove to you that the woman is the stronger wing?”

The answer came in the same bright vein: “You will earn my eternal gratitude!” at which all the company made merry.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then continued more seriously: “The woman is indeed of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work. Look at the vegetable and the animal worlds. The palm which carries the fruit is the tree most prized by the date grower. The Arab knows that for a long journey the mare has the longest wind. For her greater strength and fierceness, the lioness is more feared by the hunter than the lion.

“The mere size of the brain has been proved to be no measure of superiority. The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis. If necessary she can become a warrior.” (Hammond, 1912, pp. 104 - 105)

Given a new context of Western, Christian followers and enquirers it is unsurprising his message developed new examples and explored new themes, the equality of men and women had always been central to the Baha’i message but now it had a real urgency amongst those whose primary interest was the emancipation of women. The doctrines of return and the role of the Immortal Heroines was now expounded in a new context.

### **Tahirih**

As discussed above the earliest Devine Heroines of the Baha’i Faith were traditional Islamic archetypes, however the Devine Heroine of the Babi dispensation was very different and of interest to the Western Baha’is and she is intimately linked to the character of Mary Magdalene in Baha’i thought. Táhirih (1817-1852) as she is called by Bahá’ís or, alternatively, Fátimih, Umm Salmá, Qurratu’l-‘Ayn or Zarrín-Táj, who was a prominent follower of the Báb. She was the daughter of Hájí Mullá Sálíh and related to other leading members of the religious establishment. She was a highly intelligent and original scholar, whose participation in religious argument was unique for a woman of her time. She is described as the Immortal Heroine of the Babi Dispensation. She was mentioned at some length in the work of the Cambridge orientalist E. G. Browne, whose accounts of the Bab and His followers informed many populist writers on the subject. Browne used her involvement in the Bábí movement to indicate the Báb’s progressive stance on women’s rights. Later Bahá’í writers would also use her to enhance relevance for Western women involved in the struggle for suffrage.

Two incidents in the life of Tahirih were of particular interest and recounted in numerous articles and illustrated by often fanciful pictures. The first took place in in the hamlet of Badasht at a conference, organized in part and financed by Bahá’u’lláh. The discussion at the conference centred on the relationship to Islam of the teachings of the Bab. During the proceedings as an act of symbolism, Tahirih took off her traditional veil in front of an assemblage of men on one occasion and brandished a sword on another. The unveiling caused shock and consternation amongst the men present. Prior to this, many had regarded her as the epitome of purity and the spiritual return of Fatimih, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. Many screamed in horror at the sight, and one man was so

horrified that he cut his own throat and, with blood pouring from his neck, fled the scene. Táhirih then arose and began a speech on the break from Islam. Many Westerners saw the veiling of Muslim women as the outward symbol of their oppression and opposed it vehemently, the unveiling of Táhirih and the fact that Baha'i women do not veil unless required to do so by the law of the country they are in, was a proof of the Baha'i teachings on gender equality.

The other incident was her execution. Táhirih was later imprisoned and sentenced to death, on hearing she was to be executed she dressed in her bridal attire and strangled, some sources say with a white silk handkerchief, which she had chosen herself, others with a veil she had chosen in anticipation of her martyrdom, her body was then thrown down a well. Words attributed to her at the time of her death are, "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women." (Rabbani, 1944, p. 75) As the emancipation of women had not been a central theme of her work these words may be apocryphal, she is described as "the first woman suffrage martyr" (Rabbani, 1944, p. 75) which is also rather unlikely as there was no suffrage movement of any kind in Persia at the time. In September 1911 the Women's Freedom League newspaper *The Vote* ran a three part article by Despard entitled "A Woman Apostle in Persia"<sup>2</sup> but this account of Táhirih, significantly, does not describe her as a suffragette, its author, however, chaired a meeting of the Women's Freedom League addressed by Abdu'l Baha.

Táhirih is of interest because although she is chronologically later than Mary Magdalene her story is a framework into which Mary Magdalene is fitted into the Baha'i hermeneutic.

### Mary Magdalene

Abdu'l Baha made more references to Mary Magdalene than any other woman in history, indeed she is his most oft-quoted disciple of Christ. The amount of Baha'i scripture and devotional references to her - one even reputedly by Baha'u'llah - is utterly astounding. She must be one - if not the most - revered woman in the Baha'i hermeneutic, she is the Immortal Heroine for the post Christian West; she is contextualised by being listed with other Biblical women:

"The one whose heart is purest, whose deeds are most perfect, is acceptable to God, male or female. Often in history women have been the pride of humanity -- for example, Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was the glory of mankind. Mary Magdalene, Asiyih, daughter of Pharaoh, Sarah, wife of Abraham, and innumerable others have glorified the human race by their excellences. In this day there are women among the Baha'is who far outshine men." (Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 174-175)

She is repeatedly compared with Táhirih, both women were prepared to defend their religion and outperform male believers:

During the Christian dispensation the apostles became agitated after the Crucifixion of Jesus; even Peter denied Him thrice, but Mary Magdalene became the cause of their becoming firm and steadfast. In the Religion of Baha'u'llah, Kurat-el-Ayn [Táhirih] and many other Persian women demonstrated their knowledge and wisdom to such an extent that even the men were astonished, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Despard, *A Woman Apostle in Persia*, *The Vote* (London) (30 Sept., 7 Oct., and 14 Oct. 1911).

## Mary Magdalene – the Lioness of God

---

listened to their advices and lectures. (Interview between 'Abdu'l-Baha and a San Francisco Newspaper Reporter, October 3, 1912)

The point which Abdu'l Baha reiterates over and over again is that Mary Magdalene was a simple village woman; she has no special training, nor is she important in any of the ways society usually measures status, it is her relationship to God which makes her outstanding:

"He who has the consciousness of reality has eternal life -- that lamp which can never be extinguished. The humble peasant girl, Mary Magdalene, -- to what splendor she attained! A wise man sees no satisfaction in the material world; he is not content to be one of the creatures. In the world of divine effulgence he finds eternal life and becomes aflame with the fire of the love of God, the great source of life of the immortal kingdom and his head is adorned with a crown of eternal jewels." (Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy, pp. 57-58)

That Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Jesus created an opportunity to explain the Baha'i understanding that the Resurrection was symbolic rather than literal:

'O maid-servant of God! Verily, Mary, the Magdalene, was a villager, but she kept firm in the Cause of Christ and confirmed the apostles at the time she declared to them (thus): "Verily, Christ is alive and eternal and death did not overtake Him; and verily, the foundation of His religion is not shaken by His crucifixion at the hand of the oppressors!" By this her face is eternally shining from the horizon of guidance.' (Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha Vol.2, p. 268)

This apparent grasp of the specifically Baha'i understanding of the Resurrection was elaborated upon by George Townshend:

'Quicker than any of the Twelve, she perceived the reality of His kingship, and recognised that if His body was dead, His spirit was indestructible and was alive breathing in mortal power. She cheered the disciples. She communicated to them her vision, quickened their faith and renewed their courage. Purified by their suffering, animated by her spiritual power, they now perceived for the first time the incorporeal nature of the dominion and glory of their Lord and of His kingdom. Not till the first Easter was the great confession of an earlier day completed; and if the glory of that confession belongs to Peter the glory of making it in the fullness of its spiritual sense belongs to the Magdalene.' (George Townshend, The Heart of the Gospel, pp. 133-134)

And yet again her role as the Apostle to the Apostles is stressed and her role as an exemplar is reinforced:

'Let us make a comparison with the days of Christ. He had eleven disciples only, for the twelfth was the cause of his crucifixion. The leader of the apostles was Peter and on the night of the crucifixion his faith was shaken and he thrice denied Christ, though afterwards he became firm.

'All were shaken but Mary Magdalen. She was a veritable lioness. She gathered the others together and said, "Why do ye mourn? Did not the Christ foretell his crucifixion? Arise, and be assured. They have killed but the body; the reality can



never die, for it is supreme, eternal, the word of God, the son of God. Why, therefore, are ye agitated?" Thus this heroine became the cause of re-establishing the faith of the apostles.

'My hope is that each one of you may become as Mary Magdalene -- for this woman was superior to all the men of her time and her reality is ever shining from the horizon of Christ.' (Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy, p. 50)

Over and over again, Abdu'l Baha invokes the story of Mary Magdalene and like Tahirih she is not defined by her relationship to any man but rather she is an example of female courage and tenacity, she is an exemplar that other women are encouraged to emulate. In the case of one Baha'i woman, Juliet Thompson the example of the Magdalene was rather more literal than for most.

### **Juliet Thompson**

Juliet Thompson (1873–1956) was an American Baha'i whose published diary is one of the main sources of information about 'Abdu'l Baha's visit to America, she also painted a life size portrait of him, which sadly no longer exists. She was born in Washington USA and it was there that in 1898 she learned about the Baha'i Faith, from Laura Barney, she describes the incident in her diary:

I had been almost fatally ill and was slowly recovering in Washington when I said one day to my brother, "Coming so close to death makes you think. And I have been thinking lately that it is time for another Messenger of God." The very next day Laura burst in on me, taking me by complete surprise, for I had not heard of her return from Paris. "Yesterday, Juliet," she said, "I was in Bar Harbour. Tomorrow I sail from New York for Palestine. But I couldn't sail without first seeing you to tell you why I am making this pilgrimage. Juliet, the Christ-Spirit is again on earth, and-as before-He is in Palestine." (The Dairy of Juliet Thompson p. 159)

Shortly afterwards she travelled to Paris at the invitation of Laura Barney's mother. Later in 1901 in Paris she met the English Baha'i, Thomas Breakwell, who gave her Arthur de Gobineau's description in French of the Execution of the Báb which confirmed her in the Baha'i Faith. She remained in Paris where she was took classes on the religion from Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl its most erudite scholar. She was also introduced to Mason Remy, a prominent American Baha'i during her time in Paris. She made her first pilgrimage to meet 'Abdu'l Baha in July, 1909 when she began her diary. During His first visit to the West in the autumn of 1911 she met him at Thonon-les-Bains, in France. During Abdu'l Baha's second trip when He reached New York, he sat for a life-sized portrait for a period of several days starting on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1912. Thompson was an important artist and moved in bohemian circles in Paris and New York, she was a neighbour of Kalil Gilbran who she introduced to 'Abdu'l Baha.

Thompson was deeply in love with Percy Stickney Grant (1860-1927) an Anglican clergyman who was minister at the Church of the Ascension in New York from 1893 to 1924. Grant was a radical cleric, who became known for his support of Socialism and for his "forum" for the expression of views on labour and living conditions. Advocates of all political and social doctrines were permitted to speak freely in his church and that included 'Abdu'l Baha. Despite Thompson's ardent prayers Grant refused to embrace the Baha'i Cause. Such was the tension that the situation was causing Thompson 'Abdu'l Baha himself intervened and gently

suggested she might consider marrying Mason Remy, but even the intervention of 'The Master' could not persuade Thompson to sever links with Grant. Grant was never seriously attracted to the Baha'i Teachings and even his meeting with 'Abdu'l Baha did not cause him to embrace either the Cause or Thompson. He was in fact smitten with another woman:

She was a Cuban -- descended beauty of great wealth, whose luxurious car would be seen outside Grant's rectory by day and night. She had a dead-white face with bright, red-painted lips, and was a given to wearing evening gowns which did not hide the fact one breast had been completely removed, while the other remained without flaw. No intellectual, she was what Marjorie called "eruditized" by her association with famous artists and scholars.

As to the woman, she lived on, constantly under the surgeon's knife, constantly giving sumptuous dinner parties at which all she herself could eat was a little rice from a silver bowl -- meanwhile assuring the guests that this was simply the best way of maintaining her (slim and lovely) shape. (Marzieh Gail, preface to *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*)

The woman in question was Rita Lydig (born Rita Hernandez de Alba de Acosta, (1875-1929) In 1921 Lydig and Grant announced their engagement, the wedding plans were broken off in 1924 when Bishop William Manning, the head of Grant's diocese, refused to authorise the marriage, citing Lydig being a divorcée with two living former husbands. Rev. Grant died shortly afterwards, leaving his personal fortune to the woman he had hoped to marry.

Juliet Thompson wrote a semi autobiographical book entitled *I Mary Magdalene*, in which the character of Mary is based on herself, Jesus on 'Abdu'l Baha and the Roman soldier with whom Mary is romantically involved on Grant. The story of the woman taken in adultery is retold about a famous courtesan, who might bear resemblance to Lydig. In Thompson's book Mary Magdalene goes to Rome and confronts the emperor about the conduct of Pontius Pilate and the treatment of the followers of Jesus, before settling down to a happy ending with her Roman officer. According to Marzieh Gail, who knew Thompson well and wrote the preface to the publication of her diary, 'Juliet said that she used, in her story of Mary Magdalene (whom, as Abdu'l-Baha remarked in the diary, she even physically resembled) many things she learned from the Master himself. This book has inclined many a heart toward our Faith, and Stanwood Cobb considered it "one of the most graphic and lofty delineations of Christ ever made in literature."' (Marzieh Gail, Preface to *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*). The relationship between Abdu'l Baha's and Thompson, in particular the shared interest in Mary Magdalene, is unique; there is no other instance of him relating a believer to a historical figure in this way :

"Once He [Abdu'l-Baha] called Mamma and me into His room and among other things He said was this: "There are correspondences, Mrs. Thompson, between heaven and earth and Juliet's correspondence in heaven is Mary of Magdala." (The Diary of Juliet Thompson)

The basis of Thompson's work can be attributed to Abdu'l Baha, who outlined the same story on at least one occasion in London:

"That night [December 22, 1912] after dinner, in the drawing-room of 97 Cadogan Gardens, He talked about Christ and His advent, about Christians of early days and particularly Mary Magdalene. Mary, He said, made her way to Rome, sought out the Emperor and interceded for the Jews whom Pontius Pilate was persecuting for having misled him to condemn Jesus to death. Christians, Mary told the Emperor, did not desire revenge. She begged him to send orders to Pilate to cease persecuting the Jews, and the Emperor complied with her wishes." (H.M. Balyuzi, *Abdu'l-Baha - The Centre of the Covenant*, p. 348)

The story that Mary Magdalene went to Rome is a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, the interview with the Emperor is not, it has entered Baha'i belief through these stories recorded by followers of Abdu'l Baha. Mary is reinforced as a spokesperson, heroic and indomitable, fearless to face the most powerful man in the world and argue her cause successfully.

### **Conclusion**

Mary Magdalene was a massively important symbol of the equality of men and women for the Baha'i community, in the early years of the twentieth century. She was the example of what a woman could achieve by total commitment to the teachings of a prophet, despite a humble background, little education and a patriarchal society. It is no surprise that in the woman dominated Baha'i communities of the West, where women's thought and action had been honed by the suffrage movement, Mary Magdalene and Tahirih would be perceived as heroines and exemplars. The notion of the simple peasant girl going to Rome and debating with an emperor was exhilarating and inspiring for the Baha'is. Baha'u'llah himself had addressed a number of letters (tablets) to kings and consequently the idea of targeting prominent persons to explain their beliefs to was integral to the strategy of spreading the Baha'i Teachings. Perhaps the most successful exponent of this strategy was Baha'i pioneer, Martha Root, would later convince the Queen of Rumania of the validity of the Baha'i Faith. In the context of the Baha'i hermeneutic neither Mary Magdalene nor Tahirih were defined by their relationships to men, they were defined by their belief in God and the relevant "Manifestation of God". For the Baha'is Mary Magdalene is the woman who stands fast while the men around her fall apart, there is no tradition of bloodlines, secret marriages or hints of a esoteric priestess role, she is simply an ordinary woman who becomes extraordinary through her relationship with the divine. The Baha'i women hearing of her from Abdu'l Baha would surely have found her an inspirational heroine and an example for every woman who would rise up and play a role in her faith community.

### Bibliography

- Abdo (now Osborn), L. (1994). Female Representations of the Holy Spirit in Bahá'í and Christian writings and their implications for gender roles. *Baha'i Studies Review* , 27 - 37.
- Abdo (now Osborn), L. (2004). *Religion & Relevance*. London: Unpublished PhD thesis SOAS.
- Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy
- Abdu'l-Baha. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette: Bahai Publishing Trust.
- Abdu'l-Baha. *Tablet Vol. 2*
- Balyuzi, H. M. Abdu'l-Baha - The Centre of the Covenant
- Berger, P. (1954). *From Sect to Church*. New York: PhD New School of Social Research.
- Culhane, T. (2001). *I Beheld a Maiden ... The Baha'i Faith and the Life of the Spirit*. Los Angeles: Kalimat.
- Hammond, E. (1912). *'Abdu'l Baha in London*. East Sheen: The Unity Press.
- Hedayati, F. (1995). Immortal Heroines. *ABS Gender Studies Conference*. Newcastle upon Tyne: <http://www.breacais.demon.co.uk/abs/associate/a18.htm>.
- Momen, M. (1985). *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Rabbani, S. E. (1944). *God Passes By*. Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Stockman, R. (1985). *The Baha'i Faith in America Vol 1*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Thompson, J. *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*. Los Angeles: Kalimat.
- Thompson, J. *I, Mary Magdalene*
- Townshend, G. *The Heart of the Gospel*