

Discovering Imageless Truths

The Baha'i Pilgrimage of Juliet Thompson, Artist

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Though Juliet Thompson (1873-1957) lived in what one reporter of her time called one of the most “materialistic and sordid corners of the world,” New York City, she had spiritual dreams, religious visions and providential awakenings. She had one of them when she was a young woman, probably in her late twenties, while recovering from diphtheria, an illness that almost killed her. “One evening, while I was lying in bed,” she remembered, “I heard the doctor say to mother from the next room, ‘Juliet is dying.’ When I went to sleep that night I did not expect to wake up again.” But as she slept her fortunes changed, for sometime in the night an unexpected visitor appeared in a dream, offering a healing benediction. “I had a dream and in it I saw a most wonderful-looking man. He said to me with complete assurance, ‘You will get well.’” She had no idea who this person was, but she did recover, and after her illness she told her brother that something about this experience had made her more thoughtful about spiritual things. She wondered—Were the miracles and wonders spoken of the Bible true, and were they still happening today? Was the spirit of Christ still in the world, healing and guiding us? Somehow, it was hard to believe.¹

The next day brought another providential sign. A friend named Laura Barney arrived unannounced at Juliet’s door, looking as “though she had found the secret of happiness” and blurting out something to the effect that the Holy Spirit had come back into the world. There was a new divine messenger and his followers were living in British Palestine, the Holy Land. “I am sailing from New York tomorrow for the Holy Land, and I could not go till I had told you the

¹ Fabius, “The God Intoxicated People,” *The Daily Independent-Times* (Streator, IL) Sat., 10/31, 1914; no pages on my copy (might get them). Biographical information on Thompson is from O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Baha'is of the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977), 76-77 and a typescript autobiographical statement written by Juliet Thompson (hereafter “Autobiography”) that was in the Juliet Thompson Papers, Baha'i National Center, Wilmette, IL (Box 2).

marvellous thing I know now,” Barney exclaimed. “The Great Messenger of God promised in all the Sacred Scriptures, foretold by all the Prophets as the One who would bring peace to the earth, has come. His name is Baha’u’llah. He died, a prisoner, in the Holy Land.” His son and successor, Abdul-Baha, was still in Akka, an old fortress city in Palestine, and Barney was sailing to meet him. This was a moment of real excitement for Thompson, but though she listened to her friend attentively, she seems not to have pursued the matter further. And she certainly did not connect Barney’s Holy Land prisoner with that wonderful looking man in her feverish dream. Before she could make that connection, there were other providential steps and signs in her life, and a visit, her own, to the Holy Land to see for herself that the Holy Spirit did indeed produce signs and wonders in the modern world.²

Juliet Thompson was a woman of great spiritual sensitivity, someone who felt deeply the religious dilemmas of her age and searched with determination for a solution. Like many others living at the turn of the twentieth century, she felt challenged and disoriented by dramatic changes that made religious belief difficult. Life in new American cities seemed to foster nervousness, materialism and an unsettling spiritual coldness. Like others, Juliet wondered if there was a place for spirit, or spiritual longing, in the cold, angular, urban spaces of modern America. And the new, American city was not the only reason it was hard to believe. Christian practices and traditions, those religious forms that for so many years clothed the spirit and made it real, now suddenly seemed out-of-date, superstitious or irrational. Scientists and intellectuals often labeled them as such, calling into question the veracity of the Bible, the reasonableness of belief and the usefulness of any kind of worship. For religiously sensitive souls such as Juliet Thompson, and for millions of other Americans who, while uncertain about Christianity were incapable of doubting the existence of God, trying to sustain a sensitivity to spiritual realities represented a real dilemma. Was it possible to believe in prophets, the miracles of the New Testament and the Holy Spirit in the modern world? Was some kind of religious renewal possible? In this essay I turn to the diaries and letters of one religious seeker, Juliet Thompson, in order to understand these problems and contribute something to our understanding of the history of the problem of seeing spiritual signs and realities—and the ways unsettled spiritual seekers at the turn of the twentieth century overcame this difficulty.

² O. Z. Whitehead, *Some Early Baha’is of the West*, 76-77 and Juliet Thompson, “Autobiography,” Juliet Thompson Papers.

Drifting

Thompson was born in 1873 in Virginia and raised in Washington D.C. by a Protestant mother and an lapsed Irish Catholic father. (Her father, Ambrose Thompson, a wealthy land developer and shipping magnate, was by an unfortunate turn of events in the hands of nuns when he died, who hastily administered Catholic final rites. His Protestant wife, Celeste, discomfited by the ritual, sat next to her dying husband wringing her hands. “Never mind Celeste,” he reassured her, “it doesn’t amount to a damn.”) The social and business circles that Ambrose inhabited were not appealing to his daughter, who even as a young person was free-thinking, unconventional and occasionally brusque. “She did not hesitate to speak well of the Germans during World War I,” one friend recalled, pointing out one or two examples; “or to exhibit the Kaiser's picture on her living room table.” This was about the equivalent, she estimated, “of setting up a statue of Herod in a cathedral.” Juliet spoke her mind. Later in life, when she was an accomplished portrait painter, she spoke freely even to the president and first lady of the United States. While painting Mrs. Calvin Coolidge’s portrait, president Coolidge “came in to watch,” Juliet remembered, “chewing on an apple, and I told Mrs. Coolidge that I could not put up with that.”³ Juliet painted likenesses not only of the Coolidges, but also of president Wilson, his cabinet members and others, though she also did landscapes and abstract art. Like other artists of her time, especially abstract artists, she thought of art as a way of exploring deeper realities of nature and human nature. She wanted to see the spiritual essences undergirding all things. It was a preoccupation born of nascent religious questions and anxieties.

By her 20s, Juliet was somewhere in-between her Protestant mother and lapsed-Catholic father—in other words, Episcopalianism. At this time, at approximately the time when her friend and fellow artist Laura Barney informed her about a new Holy Land prophet, she moved to New York and joined New York city’s Ascension Church, a well-heeled Episcopal church led by the free-thinking rector Percy Grant. Grant shared many passions with Juliet—liberal Christianity, poetry, art—and the two were close friends for many years. Juliet loved the Bible and the Church, but her piety was not confined to what was going on at Ascension. She spoke of art as a spiritual practice. She was interested in other religious trends—theosophy, New Thought, eastern religions (ct). She had a magnanimous personal style and organized salons her

³ Marzieh Gail, forward to *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983), xi-xiii, xviii.

studio in Greenwich Village attended by a large, incongruous group of seekers, artists, actors, writers and spiritual inquirers. (These gatherings were so large in fact that the actor and brother-in-law of Enrico Caruso, Romeyne Benjamin, worried that the crowd upstairs would crash through the ceiling.) Her brownstone on West 10th was once owned by P.T. Barnum's midget General Tom Thumb—or so Juliet liked to tell people. “It was just that kind of place” a friend remembered, inhabited by eccentric strangers, avant-garde artists and extraordinary events. One night a roommate “left his bed briefly in the night and returned to find a sailor in it, complete with live parrot.” Juliet was part of a widening circle of religious liberals, ecumenical in religious outlook, cosmopolitan in intellectual and artistic interests.⁴

[fig. 1. Caption: “You are not beautiful, you are not handsome. You are lovely.” OR “There is a magic in Juliet's eyes”]

Thompson suffered from spiritual strains and anxieties common to Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century. There were several discourses of anxiety and spiritual coldness at the time. One was a discourse about the rise of the city and its problems. America was rapidly urbanizing, and new, urban ways of living challenged older ways of thinking and being in the world. In this period, doctors, teachers, psychologists and clergy could not stop warning the public about pollution, bad air, industrial work, loud noises, overcrowding—all of these things weakened our bodies and minds. The New York neurologist George Beard, alarmed by the rise of nervous disorders, popularized the idea that the harsh, jarring sounds of machines, cramped living and working conditions, electronic communications, new ideas and technologies, and the “friction and unrest” of American capitalism drained our nervous powers. Again and again, he saw the results in his clinical practice: unremitting anxieties, unaccountable fears, mysterious neuralgias, depression. Others, including a platoon of new professionals called “psychologists,” worried that Americans were agitated, tense, and breathless. (The great psychologist William James thought Americans were the most fidgety people on earth). Clergymen, for their part, thought that city living was destroying spiritual and moral sensibilities. In any case, for those Americans who felt a loss of nervous or spiritual force, the question was how to regain that power and confidence, how to overcome the anomie and alienation of living

⁴ Marzieh Gail, forward to *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, ix-x.

in the American city. Thompson also worried about these issues, joining many others who pondered the problem and its solution. Like many, she wondered if more primitive, mystical cultures or religions in the East might be an antidote to western obsessions with consumption, industry and efficiency.⁵

There are hints and suggestions in Thompson's art that she wrestled with precisely these modern dilemmas, though much of her work and virtually all of her views on art have been lost. "Shop Window" (Fig. 2) for example takes as its subject a divided self projected into the angular spaces of a storefront window. Here she sees her split reflection in a featureless, divided mannequin illuminated by electricity—a modern wonder if there ever were one—uncovering all the dark spaces of the self, from the front (the lightbulb) and the rear (the illuminated triangular panel). Nothing escapes modernity's glare. But instead of solving the puzzles of anomie and anxiety, instead of providing a solution, the light that modernity sheds on her illuminates only the problem: a fragmented self. There are the heart's pulsing desires, and the head's ticking calculations. Are we human beings or machines? And what is the fate of deep, personal needs, desires and aspirations—aspirations even for transcendence—in an environment that imprisons us in mechanical laws, right angles, and geometric shapes? Is this our fate in an urban landscape—a life that is cold, fragmented and mechanical?

[Fig. 2 here.]⁶

Of course, people have ways of steadying themselves when they are agitated, uncertain or nervous; but the tragedy of Juliet's era was that the religious consolations that could anchor or calm them also were being buffeted and in some cases entirely swept away. And so there was a second discourse of spiritual coldness developing in this period, a discourse of critical questions,

⁵ There is a vast literature on the spiritual anxieties and strains of late nineteenth-century American life. A few representative works include Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Paul Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971); James Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Paul Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

⁶ Juliet Thompson, "Shop Window," from the Frick Art Reference Library, New York, New York.

not easily dismissed, concerning Christianity and whether belief in it could be sustained in the modern world. There were scientific studies of the Bible that called into question miracles and Biblical understandings of nature; there were textual studies that called into question the Bible's consistency, morality and divine authorship; and there were even studies that called into question the very existence of Biblical prophets and saviors, including Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, Christian claims to uniqueness and superiority were undermined by increased travel and inter-religious contact. Narratives about all of these critical discourses and more generally about what many have called a "critical period" of doubt in American culture have been told before.⁷ The doubts were not so pervasive that they seeped into every believer's supplications, but there was a portion of the American populace that felt acutely the strains produced by these criticisms, and for some it was enough to set them entirely free of old moorings, out on journeys of spiritual seeking across wide oceans and cultural gaps that had previously been impassable. The religious liberal Octavius Frothingham may have said it best. "Ours is an age of restatements and reconstructions, of conversions and 'new departments' in many directions. There is an uneasy feeling in regard to the foundation of belief. The old foundations have been sorely shaken."⁸ It was a time of real uncertainty about Christianity in particular.

Something of the intensity of this critical situation is apparent in this era's urgent efforts to make more vivid images and historical narratives of Jesus—all ways of shoring up a religious figure fading under the critical gaze of modernity. An intense search for the historical Jesus was on, a quest pursued not only by scholarly readers of Strauss and Renan. Run of the mill Americans also worried about how to imagine the personality and disposition of the person they prayed to. The result was a new visual culture of Jesus. All of a sudden, illustrated lives of Jesus, picture cards of Jesus or the Holy Land, frameable images and gift books were made and sold. Book length treatments of Christ were increasingly dominated by imagery; some of it was fine art from Europe, older renderings of Jesus, but much of it was done by contemporary Christians who had journeyed to the Holy Land and reimagined these places and figures for doubting Christians living in the modern West. Lives of Christ were adorned with ethnographic, archeological and even botanical illustrations of "details and customs of biblical life," one historian has pointed out, in order to "bolster the historical claims made for the life of Christ."

⁷ See note 4 above.

⁸ Quoted in Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 69.

(The impulse was pursued with determination by the prominent preacher Thomas De Witt Talmage in his *From Manger to Throne* (1890), which included over 400 engravings of details of life in the Holy Land, nearly 200 well known paintings of Jesus and a color panorama of the “crucifixion that folded out to ten feet in length.” Talmage of course, was unsatisfied with all the images of Jesus, as other writers were in their attempts to capture the Messiah in ink. Which images could show him in his true humanity—and in his divinity?)⁹

Juliet Thompson also was interested in using art not only to understand Christ but to think more generally about how spiritual essences were “fixed” or incarnated in material forms. She remembered that as a ten-year old girl she prayed that “someday she could paint Christ,” finally rendering his image in a more satisfactory way. She said she wanted to correct those mistaken images of him that portrayed him as “sweet and ineffectual.” He deserved to be painted more like a “King of Men.” She almost certainly argued about this with her pastor and close friend Percy Grant, also an artist, and also concerned with finding more satisfactory images of Jesus. The two disagreed on Jesus’s true nature. She thought he should be depicted in a kingly manner; Grant thought he actually was meek, innocent and maternal. He had not been raised in a strenuous, industrial society, Grant reasoned; why would he have been strong and sovereign? Today we read about these arguments and wonder why they were so crucial then, and so pervasive in American culture. I think the answer to this is that there were deeply personal motivations behind these arguments, as there were behind all of the efforts to reimagine Jesus in more vivid, life-like, narratives. It was a devotional concern: Believers were concerned that they did not have a reliable understanding or image to ponder when reflecting and praying. Did Jesus exist? Who was he? How did he embody (incarnate) the spirit?¹⁰

As Juliet Thompson pondered these questions about soul and matter, spiritual essence and outer form, another providential sign appeared. This one came in 1900 in Paris, where she was studying art, and where she came upon a picture of a holy man originally from Persia now living in Palestine, a new religious figure who brought a message of peace, religious universalism and ecumenism. Like many Americans she knew that the East was a place of wisdom and mysticism. She looked closely at the man’s face. Was this, finally, what the spirit looked like in human form? It was an older face with engraved lines and shadows, wrapped in a

⁹ David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture and the Age of American Mass Production* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 293, 296-298.

¹⁰ Whitehead, *Some Early Baha’is*, 79; Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*, 300.

white beard and long cloak. When she looked closer she saw something else, something she recognized about the face. At that moment she made an incredible discovery, for this was the same man who had visited her in her feverish dream years ago, the one who told her she would survive diphtheria. She turned and asked his name. It was Abbas Effendi, Abdu'l-Baha.¹¹

Lit Up

Soon, on a trip to the Holy Land in 1909, she got to meet him. A friend and roommate who later redacted Juliet's diaries recalled that Juliet's journey to meet Abdul-Baha in British Palestine was a "breathless, ecstatic, tear-drenched pilgrimage," and the accounts that Juliet left behind certainly bear this out. "We were in the Holy Land. We were in a bygone age. We drove along a wide white beach, so close to the sea that its little waves curled over our carriage wheels. To our right, a long line of palm trees. Before us, its domes and flat roofs dazzling white beneath the deep blue sky: 'Akká, [Palestine] the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. Camels approached us on the sand, driven by white-cloaked Bedouins, their veils bound by circlets; or sheep, led by shepherds in tunics and carrying crooks, striped head-cloths framing their faces." She ascended the broken steps of a great stone house, passing a crowd of Persian expatriates with smiling "faces miraculously pure," Juliet, sobbing, bowing her head, compressing into an hour the emotions of conversion—contrition, remorse, uncertainty, elation—finally face to face with Abdu'l-Baha, who greeted her with a smile and an unexpected welcome in English. Juliet's companion Alice knelt down and spoke in brief sentences to Abdul Baha and the translator. But Juliet stood still. Abdul-Baha addressed her, and she did not respond. Alice answered for her. After a period of silence, Juliet said that her heart spoke, and he said he heard her, and she said forgive me my failures, and he said she could be sure of God's forgiveness, and she said that being there was like being at home, and he said yes; and that was it. Then those indubitable outer signs of inner transformation, tears, streaked down her face, and Juliet knelt until Abdul-Baha picked her up and asked her to sit next to him.¹²

¹¹ Whitehead, *Some Early Baha'is*, 75-6. Might also mention the dream she has at this time: Abdul-Baha revealing a new light to her, and veiling her, a dream recapped in Akka when he veils her; see *Diary*, online, 74-5.

¹² Gail, foreword to the *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, xv; Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983), 15, 16-21. Thompson's accounts of this event are different in mostly unimportant details in her letters and in Thompson, "Autobiography."

[Fig. 3: Images of carriages on the Akka beach]

She saw him with the eyes of a religious seeker and an artist, examining light and shadows as they fell on his face, sorting elements of his personality into what she thought of as their essences and their outer forms, studying him for signs of the Holy Spirit or other miraculous energies. Of her first encounter with him she wrote that his face had an ineffable quality to it, that it was, she said, full of capitalized Power. He had a human body, she said, “charged with a Power I have seen in no *human* being, restless with the Force that so animated it.”¹³ A body restless with spiritual energies. After returning to New York she tried to explain the experience in a letter to her friend and fellow Baha’i Agnes Parsons, scratching out sentences with underlines and exclamation points. How could a pen speak of supernatural things? Abdul-Baha revealed the spirit, she said, with “such a tenderness...such a closeness” that many spiritual things that were once far away, hazy, seemed clear. He unraveled the mystery of Christ and solved the problem of his remoteness. “As I knelt at His feet...how I understood the woman who broke her most precious treasure at the feet of the Christ, poured out all her precious ointment at His feet. I understood many things I had read of that Holy One Jesus the Christ.” The experience was a wonder “undreamt of by any artist—a strength, a tenderness, a light impossible to conceive...a touch from another Kingdom.” “Only be sure that he is true,” Juliet exclaimed, “be sure that it is true.”¹⁴ There are several fascinating things about this letter, none more so than the fact that meeting Abdul-Baha helped her understand who *Christ was and what Biblical stories meant*. Juliet saw signs of the Holy Spirit in Abdul-Baha’s face, she saw divinity in Abdul-Baha’s manner, his bearing and his words. She said repeatedly that he helped her see what the Holy Spirit looked like when it came into matter. She said she finally understood how spirit got into material form—she finally “saw divinity incarnate,” she said. She said all of these even though she knew (because Abdul-Baha made it clear) that he was neither God, nor Christ nor the return of Christ (Baha’is believe his father, Baha’u’llah, was a prophet, not Abdul-Baha.)¹⁵

Juliet was not the only one powerfully effected by Abdul-Baha; she was not the only one

¹³ Thompson, *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, 93-4.

¹⁴ Juliet Thompson to Agnes Parsons, October 18, 1909, Agnes Parsons Papers, Baha’i National Archives, Wilmette IL.

¹⁵ “At last we saw divinity incarnate,” she said once when seeing Abdul-Baha during his 1912 American visit. She used similar phrases at other times. See Thompson, *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, 236.

who saw in his faith the antidote to western materialism and unbelief; she was not the only one who felt powerful emotions or energies in his presence. She wept when encountering him, but compared to the ecstatic experiences of other inquirers her reaction was tame and sober. Others fell to the floor or shouted spontaneously. Some said they were healed. One woman reported feeling an “electric shock that went from my head to my feet.” Another pilgrim, a skeptic from Cleveland, Ohio, spoke of magnetic forces and energies pulsing in Abdul-Baha’s room. It was not unusual, either, for Abdul-Baha’s to appear in visions or dreams. A distant relation to the great evangelist Lyman Beecher, the Baha’i convert Ellen Beecher, reported seeing a “Benign Face” next to her during her meditations, a presence that took her in his embrace. “I had attained to the Meeting—and Glory be to GOD! my soul was clothed with the ‘Wedding Garment’ such as mortal could never create or conceive of.” Again and again she heard “The Holy Spirit dominates my limbs.”¹⁶

Being dominated by the Holy Spirit was precisely the point of all of this spiritual seeking and journeying—it was precisely the point of going to the Holy Land, seeking an alternative, vital experience of religious truth. Seekers were looking for this emotional *extra*. The emotional charge that many found here was exactly what was missing in overcivilized American cities and buttoned-up religious communities. “In our day,” one psychologist diagnosed the American situation, “the hot life of the feelings is remote and decadent. Culture represses, and intellect saps its root. The very word passion is becoming obsolete.”¹⁷ Modern cities unnaturally repressed our emotional life, modern living expanded our intellect but not our feeling-life. And the intellectual life, in its bloated form, had not always accommodated religious beliefs, either, as we have seen.

Juliet, then, was taking part in a wider cultural phenomenon—Americans seeking in foreign cultures for alternatives to the artificial, urban, anxious lifestyles they endured at home.

¹⁶ Juliet had her own ecstatic moments to be sure. For instance, when she encountered a picture of the prophet founder of the Baha’i Faith, Baha’u’llah, she reported being overwhelmed by the experience. “The instant I saw that photograph I fell with my face to the ground, trembling and sobbing. It was as though the Picture were alive and Something had rushed from it and struck me a blow between the eyes. I cannot explain it. The power and the majesty were terrific.” “Yet—dare I say it?” she continued, “I love the Face of Abdul-Baha more.” Thompson, *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, 88. Other accounts referred to here are from Allan Ward, *239 Days: Abdul-Baha’s Journey in America* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1979), 206; Archie Bell, *The Spell of the Holy Land* (Boston: The Page Co., 1915), 306; Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 217-8.

¹⁷ G. Stanley Hall, quoted in Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 95. See also Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 142.

Many Americans, for example, would have agreed with Thompson that the simplicity and meditative quietness of the East was a cure for the incessant noises and unrest of city living. But there was another reason to journey to the Holy Land. Holy Land experience allowed Americans a way to fix in their minds the devotional images that had faded under the critical gaze of modernity and science. They could see again markers and evidences of divine inspiration in the physical landscape, in middle eastern artifacts, and, in the case of Abdul-Baha, in modern holy men and women. “Every step I advanced on the soil of Palestine offered some new and startling evidence of the truth of the sacred story,” wrote William Prime, first professor of art history at Princeton and author of *Tent Life in the Holy Land*. “The Bible was a new book, faith in which seemed now to have passed into actual sight, and every page of its record shone out with new, and a thousand-fold increased lustre.” This was precisely Thompson’s experience: The Holy Spirit touched her again. Thompson and many other travelers felt a strange feeling of at-home-ness in the Holy Land. The Methodist Episcopal bishop Henry Warren said Palestine was “the first country where I have felt at home,” even though, he continued, “I have been in no country that is so unlike my own.”¹⁸ The reasons Thompson and Warren felt this way are clear enough: They *had* lived their whole lives imaginatively in the biblical world. Thompson, for one, knew the Bible well and could quote it from memory.

[fig. 4. Tent Life in the Holy Land]

Fixing the Spirit

When Juliet Thompson visited Akka, Abdul-Baha seemed to know what to say to an artist-seeker yearning for a vivid image of deeper, spiritual realities. He spoke to one of Juliet’s concerns in particular: How to sustain a clear, vivid image of the divine in mind during worship. First of all, no image of God, he cautioned Juliet and others in Akka in 1909, accurately represented God. “Whatever form is produced in the mind is imagination, that is, one’s own conception,” he said. There was no connection between it, he continued, and God’s reality—no connection. This was not such an unfamiliar theme for Baha’is or Muslims or other believers

¹⁸ Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 41, 43.

over the centuries: God was wholly transcendent, unknowable, literally unimaginable. But the interesting part of Abdul-Baha's message here was that even though he insisted God was unknowable he also recognized that believers needed a way to hold him close in memory, to see him. So while Abdul-Baha pointed out that all images are products of the mind he also said that "at the time of prayer one must hold in one's mind some object," some image or picture, and "[the believer] must turn his face and direct his mind to this picture." This apparently was the role of things like photography and art, and Abdul-Baha even directed Juliet's attention to a portrait done of Baha'u'llah that was then on display in Akka. "Juliet will appreciate this," he said (ct). On a number of occasions he told Juliet that (good) art pointed our attention to the divine, helped us hold on to it, even if it could never contain or exhaust the divine reality.¹⁹

Even before journeying to Akka in 1909, Juliet was sensitive to this problem and to the ways that art might capture the spirit and bring it close. In a handwritten reflection dated February 13, 1907, Thompson mused that artists made invisible things visible, transforming deep, immaterial truths into material forms. True art, then, had a religious function—it *was* religion, she said—because it helped human beings unfold spiritual essences in the world, giving them suitable forms, and thus helping human souls realize inner longings for the "Beautiful and the Sublime" (an artist's definition of God if there ever was one). Achieving this kind of artistic religiousness involved concentration and spiritual receptivity, for true artists lost themselves in their work, letting their hands work by "the dictates of the heaven-kissed genius which dwells in the center of his being." Juliet's statement here was essentially a statement of artistic method, something she repeated now and again, including one time for a reporter interested in an exhibit of her frescos in Washington D.C. "I do not know when I put the paper before me what form or colors the picture I am about to do will take," she said. "I lightly pencil the paper in a smudge and there, before my eyes, as a picture grows in a crystal, my picture develops and I paint it."²⁰ True art comes from an transcendent place. This exhibit included a number of allegorical pastels and paintings with religious themes—depictions of death, resurrection, angels, the Madonna and Jesus's disciples. In other exhibits she used abstract elements to explore ways of depicting other elusive spiritual things, what she called "deep, imageless Truths."

¹⁹ Juliet's conversation with Abdul-Baha is from Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, 90-91.

²⁰ Juliet Thompson, "As Essay on Art," Juliet Thompson Papers; No author, "Inspiration School," *Washington Post*, April 25, 1934.

[Fig. 5. Juliet's "Essay"]

It is likely that Juliet was influenced by a number of nineteenth-century artists pondering ways of capturing the spiritual in art. Her close friends, the artist Alice Pike Barney and her daughter Laura Barney, were both influenced by the French Symbolists, who reacted against earlier emphases on objectivity and realism and turned towards subjectivity, mysticism, imagination and dreams. Juliet also found these congenial themes. Another movement beginning in the late nineteenth century, abstract art, drew on similar themes and developed an ambitious agenda for art as a spiritual discipline. Some well known abstract artists, including Wassily Kandinsky and Pieter Mondrian, strove to capture spiritual states in iconoclastic art that, by smashing conventional forms, tried to break through the materialism that these artists believed imprisoned the human spirit. Probably the most influential book by a twentieth-century artist, Kandinsky's manifesto On the Spiritual in Art (1911), announced that avant-garde artists, restless and uneasy with older orders and systems, were pushing ahead towards a "spiritual revolution" that would illuminate the "dark picture" of the "soulless life of the present." He touched on themes familiar to Thompson and other Americans—materialism, urban ennui. The soulless present had been made so by an ubiquitous materialism that made it impossible to recognize, feel or express the deep, transcendent parts of the self. And old, incompetent religions were not helping. "The abandoned churchyard quakes and forgotten graves open and from them rise forgotten ghosts"—this was Kandinsky's way of sweeping Christianity into its own grave. Kandinsky believed in new prophecies and new revelations—but he believed they would be fashioned not by some modern Moses but by avant-garde artists who knew best how to capture spirit in forms that spoke to modern sensibilities.²¹

Kandinsky developed his unconventional religious vision by drawing on an influential spiritual movement that other artists borrowed from as well, Theosophy. Founded by the Helena Blavatsky et al., Theosophy was a new religion that insisted that spiritual states could be perceived in moments of trance, clairvoyancy or "superconsciousness." He wanted his work to express "spiritual impressions," "internal harmonies," and "soul vibrations," believing that resulting metaphysical pictures would point a way toward new visions of metaphysical things. For Kandinsky and others, the modern artist was in the vanguard of those whose new discoveries

²¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (reprint New York: Kessinger Pub, 2004), 20-22.

would usher in a new spiritual renaissance.²² This is not a bad way to think of Juliet’s art, either—as a form of spiritual seeking, as an impulse to find and uncover new spiritual realities. Both Kandinsky and Juliet also were interested in the problem of capturing spiritual entities in material forms—in pastels, oils and canvases—and using these forms to see or understand spiritual things better. When Abdul-Baha spoke to Juliet about holding an image in mind when she meditated he spoke to a similar concern, namely how to come closer to spiritual realities in life.

But Abdul-Baha’s notions did not solve Juliet’s seeking problems once and for all; Abdul-Baha himself recognized that this spiritual problem was difficult and ongoing, and there is no question that while Juliet’s Holy Land experiences infused her with vivid, new images and close-up realizations of spiritual things, these experiences quickly faded in memory. “There was more: much more” about being in Palestine, she worried to her diary. The closeness of it all was fading. “How could my memory serve me so cruelly?” she complained late in 1909.²³

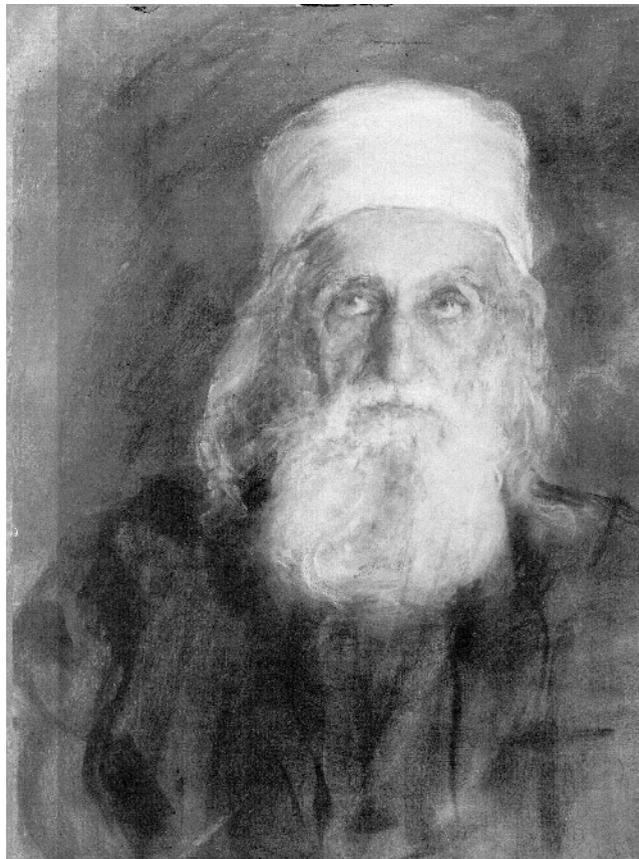
So she did everything she could to remember—she wrote letters about the trip, she sketched it, she painted it, she later fictionalized it in a story about Holy Land prophets and holy men. She wrote about her trip in a regular column entitled “Pen Pictures of Abdul-Baha” in the American Baha’i news magazine, *The Star of the West*. Then, in 1912, came what was probably the crucial moment for Juliet, a chance for her to sit with Abdul-Baha and paint his likeness. In 1912 Abdul-Baha traveled to Europe and America and he agreed to let Thompson paint his portrait. Juliet knew the difficulty of this task and its significance: It was a chance to fix the Holy Spirit in material form.

She knew it would require a miracle. On the day of the event, Abdul-Baha made the task more difficult by requesting that she “paint the soul,” a request that made her more nervous, not less. Juliet objected about the difficulty of painting unseen things, for who could paint the *soul*—let alone the soul of a holy man? “Who can paint the soul of Abdu’l-Baha?” (She talks about this in newspaper clippings; might include this). The best she could do was assemble two girlfriends, May and Lua, to pray by her side as she did her work, “perceiving and encouraging while I painted with a breathless and blind speed, lifted up on a wave of inspiration, only

²² For information in this and the previous paragraph I am indebted to Pam Meechem and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 67-70; Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 34-43; and Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

²³ Thompson, *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, 144.

feeling!” At some point, Juliet remembered, she let go, “relying on the promise and on the prayers of May and Lua; and then a great wave of inspiration came, lifting me to unimagined heights of confidence, endowing me with clear, sure perception, above all, filling, thrilling me with feeling, so profound and immense that my hand, strangely certain, as direct as though guided by a more powerful one, trembled so it could scarcely execute. In five half-hours the portrait was done.” “A portrait this size,” Juliet noted, “normally takes forty hours at least.”²⁴ Here was another confirming sign, for an artist anyway, of the closeness of spiritual things, an artistic miracle: rendering something spiritual in material form.



[Fig. 6. Juliet’s Portrait]

People certain that they have made deep spiritual discoveries generally do not keep such things to themselves, and Juliet, who already was friendly and direct in her personal style, was not going to keep Abdul-Baha to herself. She told other friends and artists that there was

²⁴ Juliet Thompson, “Pen Pictures of Abdul-Baha in America,” *Star of the West* 12:8 (Aug 1, 1921), 145-147. (Re-check pages numbers on this)

something in this great man that revealed the closeness of the spirit, its true nature, something about it. One friend she spoke to, a neighbor in Greenwich Village, and a writer and artist also keenly concerned with issues related to capturing spirit in artistic forms, was the great Lebanese Christian poet and writer Kahlil Gibran, the man would write *The Prophet* and many other religious books beloved by religious liberals in the twentieth century. Warming him up, Thompson first passed Gibran some of the Arabic writings of Baha'u'llah, whose message of unity and religious ecumenism he admired, calling these writings later in life the most “stupendous literature that ever was written.” It was a new kind of Arabic, he said, with “new and wonderful words.”²⁵ Thompson asked Gibran if he wanted to try his hand at seeing and rendering Abdul-Baha's face for himself, and he agreed. During his sitting in Juliet's New York studio (ct) with Abdul-Baha, Gibran had the same, remarkable experience that Thompson did. “For the first time,” Gibran wrote, “I saw form noble enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit.” Here, finally, was an adequate form for that inner essence and spirit in all religions. After his sketch was done, many crowded around and shook his hand, saying he had “seen the soul of [Abdul-Baha].” Abdul-Baha then turned and spoke to Gibran in Arabic, and, quoting Muhammad, produced a phrase that must have pleased both of them: “Prophets and poets see with the light of God.” Indeed—prophets and artists see with God's eyes! Gibran thought that in Abdul-Baha's smile he saw “the mystery of Syria and Arabia and Persia,” and much later he recalled to Juliet that when he sketched Abdul-Baha he had “seen the Unseen, and been filled.” (in Bushrui, 126) [show the sketch] He also told her that his meetings with Abdul-Baha profoundly influenced his biography of Jesus, *Jesus, the Son of Man* (Bushrui catalogues how his Jesus looked/sounded like AA). Like Juliet, Gibran now had a new way of visualizing, a new way of imagining, how spirit got into matter—and how God's spirit got animated Jesus's body in particular.²⁶ Abdul-Baha had showed it to him.

²⁵ This is Juliet's recollection of Gibran's words. See JT to Horace Holley, March 17, 1945

²⁶ Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet* (Oxford: One World, 1999), 126.



[Fig. 7 Gibran's sketch of Abdul-Baha]

Gibran could not see his way to embracing the Baha'i Faith, though Juliet nudged and coaxed him. He faced the same dilemma that she and many other cosmopolitan religious seekers did, searching for the unseen essence underneath all religious forms, hoping to bring that spirit into life again, somehow. Gibran was content to continue to do this as an artist, revealing religious truth in inspirational verse and images, insisting he needed no prophetic mediator, no religious holy man or form other than those literary and artistic ones he created. He would, like Emerson, have an unmediated relationship with the divine. He produced all of his art, then, from a place somewhere between liberal iconoclasm and a recurring preoccupation to produce new religious images and forms that modern people could see and understand. His poetry, his art, his life of Jesus—they all were the imaginative products of a spiritual art that, like Kandinsky's, probed and discovered spiritual dimensions and tried to embody them.

I am Mary Magdalene

Thompson had a different way of resolving competing desires for destroying old religious forms and desperately needing some kind of form to clothe religious realities: She converted to the Baha'i Faith. Here was a faith that captured the old, eternal religious essence and embodied it in new forms. She appears to have known two things quite well: one, that she needed some kind of mediator, form or institution to have a religious life; and two, that the forms that even the most radical iconoclast created would be shaped decisively by the traditions that they were trying to obliterate. The spiritual biographies of liberal seekers in this period usually bear this out: The new religious forms, beliefs and practices they embrace are deeply influenced by their childhood religions and dilemmas of faith. So in a profound way, there was no way out. Though Juliet Thompson knew the difference between Baha'i and Christian, between Baha'u'llah and Christ, she conflated them in her imaginative art and work.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the life of Christ that she wrote near the end of her life. Reimagining Christ's life was an obsession among unsettled believers in this era when, as I've noted, Christ's reality was fading into a demythologized past. But the novel Juliet wrote was different, for as reviewers in many papers noted (including the New York Times, which called it "vivid with emotional rapture") her book drew on new images and stories, images not from a fading biblical past but from fresh teachings given by a great teacher in the Holy Land. It had been there, in the Holy Land, other reviewers confirmed, where "she interviewed peasant and prophet," including the great saint Abdu'l-Baha, a place where she saw truly the customs and devotional lives of biblical characters. Thompson's novel *I, Mary Magdalene* was a retelling of the Christ story, a novel marketed to Christians and read by them, a novel with an obviously Christian theme. And yet there was something different about it as well, for while the novel retells the Christ story through Mary Magdalene's eyes it does so with a crucial difference: it does so by reimagining Christ as Abdul-Baha and Juliet as Mary Magdalene. Juliet draws from her own passions and interests as she creates Mary; and she draws on Abdul-Baha's personality and his teachings as she reimagined Christ. In the illustrations Juliet drew for the book, Mary has Juliet's face and Christ has Abdul-Baha's.²⁷

²⁷ New York Times, (find citation). John Francis Kelly, "Review of Irish and Catholic Books and Authors," *The Advocate* (NY) (July 13, 1940) (no page)

[Figs. 8 and 9. Sketches from the book and its promotional materials]

The book's front matter makes it explicit that the Baha'i revelation both renewed and clarified the older Christian story. The introduction, written by the popular writer and Nietzsche scholar (ct) Emily S. Hamblen, points to key Persian influences on world religions and on Christianity in particular. The forward, on the other hand, makes the importance of the Baha'i Faith more explicit. This forward, which was written by a Baha'i friend of Juliet's who accompanied her to the Holy Land, called Juliet's book a "vivid and subtle word painting" that used words and images drawn from Holy Land meetings with Baha'i leaders. "As pilgrims we journeyed together to the Holy Land," this writer remembered, "first to Carmel, that Mountain of the Lord, to meet Shoghi Effendi; to the shrines of the Bab and of Abdul-Baha; to Akka, the scene of the long imprisonment of Baha Ullah [sic] and his son; and to Baha'u'llah's shrine and tomb at Bahji." By seeing new Holy Land teachers and saints, Juliet was able to understand how older holy souls in the Christian era believed and acted. Juliet was a particularly sensitive observer; the landscape fired her imagination, drew her into itself, transformed her from a seeker to a disciple. "So sensitive was the artist-author to the vibrations that emanate from the spots which have been frequented by the Holy Messengers and Martyrs, that she was irresistibly drawn to an obscure path that led to a small dome-shaped dwelling, and I recall poignantly her joy when she learned from a peasant that it was the traditional site of the home of Mary of Magdala." Juliet believed she had a connection to the place and its old stories: She was a new Mary.²⁸

Was there a better way to overcome a sense of spiritual coldness and alienation, a sense that the old, spiritual religious were no longer real? Juliet had become a part of them. Her life played them out again in new ways. Her life was miraculous and enchanted. She was a modern Mary Magdalen, an early witness of a new resurrection in an unbelieving, cold world. Like Mary, she would go and tell others that Christ had risen again—this time with a new name.

Conclusion

There are a couple of important things to say in conclusion about Thompson's middle eastern pilgrimage and her religious experiences. First of all, her conversion clearly was shaped by what I see as a key dilemma of her era: how to find Jesus again, how to bring him back into a

²⁸ Marguerite P. Smyth, forward to Juliet Thompson, *I, Mary Magdalen* (New York: Delphic Studies, 1940), ix-x.

closer relationship to the world, how to find him and know who he is—how to be certain. The broader framing of this problem, a more appropriate framing for post-Christians and other liberals and metaphysical believers, might be stated more as this—how to understand the relationship between spirit and form, how to fix the spirit in a material medium. Holy Land pilgrimages solved these problems for many American believers, Christian and otherwise, by helping them reimagine the Holy Spirit and its closeness and vitality. Thompson was acutely concerned about ways of accomplishing this. What were the procedures for solving spiritual coldness? How could one overcome a sense of uncertainty, loss, nervousness? Abdul-Baha helped Juliet with this problem by encouraging her to hold in mind some image or object while praying. Abdul-Baha himself gave Juliet a renewed set of images of holy things that she then tried again and again to fix in material media, and thus hold closer. Thompson's portraits and her novel, *I Mary Magdalen*, were produced to accomplish these goals, to help her and others hold in their minds something vital and alive about the spirit, a living religious form.

At the end of her life, Juliet had a final vision of Abdu'l-Baha, and this time instead of healing her illness and giving her back her life, he stood by as she suffered and waited for her to die. By this time, the pastel portrait she had done of Abdul-Baha at the 1912 sitting had faded—pastels are unfortunately an impermanent medium—but Abdul-Baha's image and reality had stayed with her, and she must have turned to this image again and again in her mind as she lay dying. A friend sat with her. It was December of 1956. "Do you want to come with me, and be with 'Abdu'l-Bahá?" Juliet asked. "No," her friend replied, "I am not ready yet." And then, as she sat next to her friend, Juliet died.²⁹

²⁹ Marzieh Gail, forward to *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983), xvi.