

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to North America, 1912: A Preliminary Analysis

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'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbás visited North America from April 11 to December 5, 1912. His eight-month sojourn took Him to some 44 localities in 15 states and the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, Canada. Because His North American trip followed on an earlier European visit (Aug. 22-Dec. 2, 1911), when 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in New York He had a developed routine. He established Himself in a hotel or, ideally, a rented house, so that He had the space to provide hospitality and the freedom to welcome people of all races. He held what today we would call a press conference shortly after arrival, then began a daily schedule that involved correspondence in the morning, private meetings with individuals and small groups, sometimes a public talk in the salon before lunch because the press of visitors became too great for individual meetings, an afternoon walk in a park (sometimes accompanied by a crowd) or an appointment, then an evening meeting, often in the house of a Bahá'í. The latter on occasion might start with dinner and continue into the late evening or early morning.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived on April 11, He already had three invitations to major events: the Persian-American Educational Society annual conference in Washington, D.C., April 18-20; the Bahai Temple Unity annual convention a week later in Chicago; and the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference in the Catskill Mountains of central New York, May 14-16. Therefore, after nine days in New York City, during which He spoke at the Church of the Ascension,

Columbia University, New York University, and at the Bowery Mission, 'Abdu'l-Bahá went to Washington for a week (without visiting the Philadelphia and Baltimore Bahá'í communities), then Chicago for a week. At that point he had visited the three largest Bahá'í communities in the United States, located in the country's three most influential cities. He headed back to Washington, visiting the Cleveland and Pittsburgh Bahá'ís on the way, fulfilled further commitments in the American capital, then returned to New York City briefly and headed to Lake Mohonk. His first month was a whirlwind of activity.

For the next two months—from May 17 to July 23—'Abdu'l-Bahá used New York City as His headquarters. He rented a house, gave talks there during the afternoon and usually in the houses of Bahá'ís in the evening, and spoke to various churches and societies. From New York He made excursions to greater Boston (May 22-25), Philadelphia (June 8-10), and Montclair, New Jersey (June 21-29). Particularly notable were His talks at Clark University, the annual Unitarian Association conference, the annual meeting of the Free Religious Association, and Russell Conwell's moderately evangelical Baptist Temple in Philadelphia.

Escaping the heat and humidity of New York City, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made a two-day visit to Boston, then spent twenty-three days in Dublin, a major summer resort area for the wealthy in southern New Hampshire (July 25-Aug. 16). 'Abdu'l-Bahá initially planned to depart America in September.¹ The earnest pleading of the California Bahá'ís, however, caused Him to change plans and head west. Leaving Dublin, in the next two months He visited Green Acre Bahá'í School (Aug. 16-23), greater Boston again (Aug. 23-30), Montreal (Aug. 31-Sept. 9), Buffalo (Sept. 10-12), Chicago (Sept. 13-17, including a day visit to Kenosha, Wisconsin), Minneapolis-Saint Paul (Sept. 17-21), Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska (Sept.

22-23), Denver (Sept. 23-26), Glenwood Springs (Sept. 27-28), Salt Lake City (Sept. 29-Oct. 1), and the San Francisco area (Oct. 2-18).

In all those places, except Nebraska, Glenwood Springs, and Salt Lake City, there were local Bahá’í communities to plan meetings and secure speaking invitations at churches and synagogues. The stop in Nebraska was prompted because William Jennings Bryan, the former Presidential candidate and future Secretary of State, had visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Akka and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wished to return the gesture; Mr. Bryan was traveling, but Mrs. Bryan entertained Him. The 22-hour Glenwood Springs visit was necessitated by exhaustion. The three-day stop in Salt Lake City is surprising; He did meet a Bahá’í travelling from Montana in the city, but had no Bahá’í community to visit. He expressed interest in the agriculture fair and perhaps was drawn by the spiritual character of the city, but He may also have decided not to arrive in California until after the funeral of Thornton Chase, so as not to be a distraction from the services for the first American Bahá’í.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá originally had no intention to travel outside the Bay area. The Bahá’ís in Portland and Seattle had hoped He would visit their cities and had even publicized speaking invitations, but had to satisfy themselves with a train trip to Oakland to visit Him. He made an exception to visit the grave of Thornton Chase, in Los Angeles (Oct. 18-21).

After four days more in the Bay area, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started back east, visiting Sacramento (Oct. 25-26), Denver (Oct. 29), Chicago (Oct. 31-Nov. 4), Cincinnati (Nov. 5), Washington (Nov. 6-11), Baltimore (Nov. 11), and Philadelphia (for a few minutes on Nov. 11; thirty Bahá’ís got on the train for one stop to visit with Him). His last three and a half weeks in the United States were spent in New York City

(Nov. 12-Dec. 5). He took few public speaking engagements, but spoke daily in several Bahá'í homes and in His rented house.

A preliminary review of talks mentioned in *Mahmúd's Diary, Star of the West*, and other sources suggest that He gave approximately 375 talks during His trip (of which 139 were published in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*), an average of 1.5 per day. There were some days when He gave as many as four. Extrapolation from known attendance figures and some statistical assumptions allow one to arrive at a rough figure of 93,000 people who attended His talks.² His audience included high and low alike. In Washington, D.C., where the Bahá'ís had excellent contacts with government officials, and at the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference, which was a fairly small and exclusive gathering of influential men, He spoke with many of the influential figures in American society. Particularly noteworthy are the talks He gave in thirty-one liberal and moderate white Protestant churches, fourteen Theosophical and other metaphysical gatherings, five universities, three synagogues, one African American church, Hull House, at the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference, and at the fourth annual NAACP conference.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks can be divided roughly into two types: those to the public and those primarily to Bahá'í audiences. The former usually started with a reference to a common experience—a comment by the previous speaker, a scriptural text that had been just read, an event from the daily newspaper, or the weather. From there, a link was often made to a related event in the life of Christ, then to a comparison to the life of Bahá'u'lláh and finally to the theme 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought to develop, which He illustrated by stories or anecdotes. Sometimes He grounded theological points on rational proofs based on Neoplatonic principles, referring to the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, or to essences of things.

A message to the West gradually developed throughout His journey that emphasized up to eleven principles of the Bahá’í Faith: investigation of reality, the oneness of humanity, the oneness of religion and science, the abandonment of prejudices, the adjustment of economic standards, equality of men and women, universal education, religion must be a cause of love and unity, establishment of an equal standard of human rights, a universal language, and the power of the Holy Spirit. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá first used this approach to presenting the Faith to public audiences at meetings in Paris in November 1911.

Some of the eleven are emphasized in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, like universal education; others mentioned, like a universal language; yet others only implied in the texts available in the West at that time, like equality of the sexes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also chose not to mention some principles stressed by Bahá’u’lláh, such as the importance of promoting agriculture.³ The list of principles represented a crystallization of teachings that could already be found in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings and policies (such as encouraging the Iranian Bahá’ís to open schools for girls and to bring about the advancement of women). The talks, which were soon published in Persian, provided the Bahá’ís, east and west, with a new summary of some basic Bahá’í teachings, one particularly relevant to a modern, westernized audience.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not talk about principles right away in the United States. He first mentioned three principles in a talk at the Parsons residence in Washington, D.C., on April 25, expanded to seven principles to the Chicago press on April 30 and at the Hotel Schenley in Pittsburg on May 7, then spoke of eight principles in His chief address at Lake Mohonk on May 15. The order of the points was not fixed and the number varied from talk to talk (He gave ten principles at the Baptist Temple, Philadelphia, on June 9 and eleven at St. James Methodist Church in Montreal on September 5). Many

of these principles in turn become the sole theme of talks to other groups, such as Esperantists or women's clubs. His frequent support for women's suffrage often was featured in the headlines of newspaper articles about Him. In current Bahá'í terms, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks were active engagement in public discourse.

Other groups received specialized talks on other themes: Theosophists often heard about the oneness of God and progressive revelation; the poor often heard about the divine rewards awaiting the involuntarily impoverished poor who had the right attitude toward their lot. His synagogue talks were controversial. He offered proofs of the divine origin of the missions of Abraham and Moses, which were then used to prove that Jesus and Muhammad received authority from the same source. 'Abdu'l-Bahá then called on the Jews to recognize the prophethood of Jesus and Muhammad. But it would seem that He was not calling on them to renounce Judaism; rather, He was taking a position similar to that held by liberal Protestants, Jews, and Hindus, that religionists should acknowledge and respect each other's founders as a basis of dialogue and peace: "Whenever these people mention each other's leaders with due reverence then all sufferings and contentions shall cease, and instead of hatred there will be love and instead of enmity and disunity there will be harmony and affection. This is my purpose."⁴

A frequent and very important theme in many of His talks was the need to establish world peace. He proposed no easy solutions for this achievement, emphasizing the need for true and abiding love between all humans, striving to free oneself from prejudices (particularly national and racial), and a deep understanding of the implications of the oneness of humanity. His emphasis on profound personal spiritual transformation seems to have been missed by some of His audience, who sought superficial political and diplomatic solutions and sometimes understood His talks to consist of platitudes. He often began His discourse on the need for peace by stressing the

horrible bloodshed and destruction being wrought by the Italians in their unprovoked and unjustified campaign to wrest modern Libya from the Ottomans. When that war helped to spawn the first Balkan War—where Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, emboldened by Ottoman weakness in Libya, sought to enlarge their domains at the expense of the Turks—He condemned the bloodshed there, warned it would continue, and praised efforts to end the war. At least six times in His North American travels—in New York City, Milford, PA, Montreal, Buffalo, Omaha, and Sacramento—He warned that Europe was a powder keg and a much greater and more destructive war there was coming. The Balkan War set the conditions for World War One.

Talks to Bahá’ís, on the other hand—especially the last talk to them in each locality—usually emphasized two things: first, the Covenant and obedience to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant, and second, teaching the Faith.⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned against association with Covenant-breakers, gave examples of communities that were avoiding them effectively, and noted that communities with enduring connections to them tended to be stagnant. He warned specific Bahá’ís about their connections with Covenant-breakers and even temporarily expelled Howard MacNutt from the community for his failure to understand and obey. He met with the governing bodies of the Chicago and New York Bahá’ís and had the former reorganized and reelected. He often mentioned the Universal House of Justice that would be formed in the future, thus alluding to aspects of His Will and Testament—already drafted but still not public—and presaging the development of the Bahá’í Administrative Order.⁶

Such talks, clearly, were designed to build a distinct, separate Bahá’í community, not to encourage those interested in Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to remain in their churches and leaven them from within. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid the cornerstone of the Bahá’í House of Worship when He visited the Chicago area, an act of great historic significance that was also designed to build a distinct and separate

religious community. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not emphasize distinctive aspects of Bahá'í practice. There are no references to talks where He discussed fasting or Bahá'í obligatory prayer, even though some Bahá'ís were already following these practices. He was in North America for eight of the nine Bahá'í holy days, but generally did not commemorate them. He did not tell the Bahá'ís that they should stop consuming alcohol, though a few had already done so. Rather, He deferred implementation of these aspects of Bahá'í practice to a future time.

Where teaching the Faith was concerned, He stressed that a Bahá'í must love humanity, seek to serve others, and develop such a burning passion for people and service that others would be attracted to the Cause. The Bahá'í communities themselves had to strengthen their love and unity to the point where they became magnets for others. Bahá'ís also should go out to other places to proclaim the teachings. He had already encouraged regional and international Bahá'í teaching trips for at least eight years and at least six North American Bahá'ís had already traveled across Asia to speak about the Faith.⁷ The foundation for the Tablets of the Divine Plan had already been laid before His North American visit, and His talks to the Bahá'ís about teaching did much to prepare them for the ambitious goals He was to give them four short years later.

Nearly 200 newspaper articles about His visit are currently available in the archives in Wilmette. Coverage was almost uniformly positive, in spite of the critical comments of Christian missionaries and a few verbal challenges by Covenant-breakers. The positive treatment surprised the Bahá'ís, who feared 'Abdu'l-Bahá "would simply be placed on a level with many traveling 'Swamis.'" As Thornton Chase, the first American Bahá'í, noted, "there is evidently a certain strength, sincerity, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, and nobility manifesting from him, as an aura of spiritual power, that even our flippant and calloused news men are restrained by it."⁸ This comment also

highlights another characteristic of 'Abdu'l-Bahá an aspect feebly captured by the overused term charisma—which was commented on in a variety of ways by those who met Him.

Another notable feature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was His emphasis on race unity. There are no reports indicating that the Hindu or Buddhist teachers who had come to America had made efforts to meet African Americans or attend their events. When in Washington 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at Howard University and to the Bethel Literary Society at Metropolitan A. M. E Church. He charged Agnes Parson, a wealthy white socialite, with the mission of promulgating race unity. In Chicago He attended a session of the 4th annual convention of the NAACP. He arranged to speak at a special gathering of the African American servants of the wealthy whites vacationing in Dublin, N.H. In San Francisco He visited an ill African American Bahá'í in his house. In New York He arranged for a special banquet for African American Bahá'ís turned away from the official farewell banquet at the Great Northern Hotel. That evening, white Bahá'ís served their black co-religionists.

Equality of the races was a frequent theme He underlined when speaking about the oneness of humankind. His insistence that Louis Gregory, an African American Bahá'í attorney, be seated at His right hand at a formal luncheon hosted by the Persian legation and attended by prominent Washingtonians made a major statement about inclusion and violated almost every spoken and unspoken rule about racial separation in that segregated city. His encouragement of Louis Gregory and Louise Mathews—a British Bahá'í who accompanied Him to America—to consider marriage, led to their union on September 27, 1912, the first interracial marriage in the American Bahá'í community.⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá carried out an exhausting and demanding schedule, day after day, for many months in spite of the fact that He was 68

years old and suffering from the ill effects of forty years of imprisonment and privation. His health in August of 1910 was so bad that He rested in Egypt an entire year, even though His initial plan was to follow a one-month sojourn in Port Said with an immediate trip to Europe (GPB).¹⁰ His four-month sojourn in Europe, beginning in August, 1911, required a second Egyptian rest of three months. After arriving in the U.S., at times He spoke several times in a single day in spite of fever. The heat and humidity of summer impaired His health, which was a reason He went to Dublin, New Hampshire, for three weeks, and one reason He initially planned to leave North America for Europe in September. While traveling by train He often eschewed comfort and slept upright on a passenger seat, though on the transcontinental trip from San Francisco to Chicago He did agree to Pullman accommodation every other night.

One approach to assessing the impact of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America and its Bahá'ís is to compare His visit to that of other "Oriental" religious leaders. He was not the first Asian religious teacher to come to the United States; that honor is held by Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (1840-1905), a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, an important early Hindu nationalist movement. Mozoomdar visited over sixty Unitarian churches and a few Congregationalist churches in New England, New York, Washington, D.C., greater Chicago, and San Francisco, between August 28 and November 24, 1883. Because Mozoomdar emphasized Hindu monotheism and expressed great love and respect for Christ, he was often called a Unitarian, though he personally rejected the label. On his second American trip in 1893, Mozoomdar spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, then went to Indianapolis, Buffalo, Boston, New York City, and Washington, reportedly delivering over two hundred talks in three months. He returned to the United States for five weeks in May and June 1900 to visit Unitarian churches and organizations in Massachusetts and to travel to New York City and Washington, D.C.¹¹

Contemporaneously, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) spoke at the Parliament and went on a three-month tour of the United States, to which he returned in 1896-97 and at least once subsequently. Dharmapala's talks stimulated considerable interest in Buddhism and one American became a Buddhist, though no specific Buddhist group resulted.

Better known is Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) of the Rama Krishna Mission, who spoke repeatedly at the Parliament and then crisscrossed the United States for two and a half years, lecturing on Hinduism, critiquing "Christian civilization," and criticizing missionaries for attempting to Christianize India. Vivekananda's aggressive speaking style, his eloquent English accented with a slight brogue, and his impressive education in western philosophy made him a formidable and controversial speaker, which may explain why his travels in the United States are remembered by scholars of religion better than anyone else's. Vivekananda spoke to opera house audiences, women's clubs, and Unitarian churches; he was rarely invited to speak in a mainline Protestant place of worship. Those doors, however, were open to 'Abdu'l-Bahá fifteen years later.

Unlike the other teachers, Vivekananda created a community of American converts, the Vedanta Society, though the group had only a hundred or so members when Vivekananda left America, had less than two hundred members in 1912, and in the early twenty-first century has grown to 2,500 adherents.¹² His group has never approached the American Bahá'í community in size. The early followers were nearly all wealthy, educated, European Americans.

All three South Asian religious leaders included fund raising for their various projects among their pleas. Vivekananda had to pay for his own traveling expenses; he sold tickets to many of his lectures. In contrast 'Abdu'l-Bahá received a steady stream of financial support from the Persian Bahá'í community and accepted no such support at

all from Americans before or during His western tour. When American Bahá'ís tried to donate money to Him, he refused it and urged them to give it to charity.

Mozoomdar, Dharmapala, Vivekanada, and other eastern teachers such as D. T. Suzuki (the principal founder of Zen Buddhism in the United States, whose wife, interestingly enough, was an American Bahá'í)¹³ had a measurable impact on American culture because they were the harbingers of ancient and vast religious-cultural traditions; they were the tip of an iceberg, the rest of which was increasingly accessible because of colonialism, growing commercial ties with Asia, military involvement in the region, tourism, and extensive wealth that could be lavished on the endowing of university chairs and the subvention of extensive translation efforts. In contrast, in 1912—and even today—the Bahá'í Faith is a small religious community, a minority in every land where it is found, with a relatively undeveloped secondary literature and cultural expressions. As a result, no cultural, commercial, and political forces were available to continue the momentum started by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit.

The other Asian teachers attended a pivotal event in American religious history: the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in September, 1893. They helped to make the Parliament a pivotal event because their presence on the stage as equals to the Christians implied an equality between Christianity and other religions, an idea either flatly rejected or beyond the imagination of most American Christians of the time. By puncturing stereotypes of "heathen" religions—sometimes in dramatic and controversial ways—they inaugurated a revolution in thinking that moved Christianity from "the truth" to "a religion" like the others.

They also helped move a myriad of liberal Protestants toward an appreciation of and sympathy toward other religions, thereby building on the insights and enthusiasms of the earlier generations of

Transcendentalists. Thus, for example, the twenty year old Ernest Hocking—decades later a prominent Harvard philosopher and an important lay Protestant thinker—attended a talk by Vivekananda at the World’s Parliament of Religions and came away with the realization that secular thinkers like Herbert Spencer did not have the last word about the biological and psychological origins of religion; rather, that transcendent religious experience was real, whether experienced by a Hindu like Vivekananda or a Methodist like himself.¹⁴ Hocking went on to pen a preface to the Bhagavad-Gita and to chair a major liberal Protestant commission that reexamined the nature and purpose of international Protestant missionary work in the 1930s.

The nearest equivalent to Ernest Hocking, in the Bahá’í context, was Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841-1915), a prominent Oxford scholar of the Old Testament and an advocate of higher biblical criticism, who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when He visited Britain in 1913, became a Bahá’í in 1914, and wrote a book, *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions*, which was published that year. There is also the example of Albert Léon Guérard (1880-1959), a professor of French at Stanford University, who attended ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk there in October 1912. Guérard, a French Protestant who became an Episcopalian, was intrigued and maintained a lifelong interest in Bahá’í ideas about race unity, world peace, a world government, and an international language. But the extent to which they influenced his humanist thinking—he published 28 books—or his active support of internationalist causes such as the United Nations remains to be explored.¹⁵ He himself never indicated to Bahá’ís that Bahá’í ideas had shaped his thinking significantly.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited America in 1912, thought systems such as the Social Gospel, Progressivism, and liberal Protestantism offered tentative solutions to the dilemmas raised by Darwinism, higher biblical criticism, and comparative religion; solutions that were not to collapse until the end of World War One. Consequently, while

'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks and information about the Bahá'í principles no doubt encouraged and strengthened some thinkers, such as Guérard and Cheyne, in their commitment to world peace or racial reconciliation, His impact outside the Bahá'í community was necessarily limited. This is especially true because, two years after His travels in America, World War One erupted and forced most intellectuals to reconsider their fundamental assumptions. Furthermore, the Bahá'í principles of social reform can only be partially implemented in a secular context; much of their efficacy depends on a strong and numerically significant Bahá'í community, organized within the Bahá'í administrative system.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit greatly strengthened and deepened the American Bahá'í community, which existed partially because the earlier Asian teachers had pushed open the door to conversion to non-Christian religions. When He arrived eighteen years after the founding of the American Bahá'í community, there were between 1,500 and 3,000 American Bahá'ís—depending on whether one counts only the more active followers or includes the more loosely attracted sympathizers—located in dozens of cities. This number may seem small, but the 1916 United States religious census counted 86,000 Unitarians, 59,000 Universalists, 29,000 Spiritualists, 5,400 Theosophists, 2,900 Bahá'ís, and 190 Vedantists.¹⁶ In terms of attracting Americans of European background, the Bahá'í Faith had done much better than Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. Unlike those attracted to other Asian religions, the Bahá'ís tended to be more economically diverse: there were significant numbers of middle and working class Bahá'ís and even several score African American members. As a result, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived, there already were local Bahá'í communities in place with the ability to organize numerous public and private meetings—sometimes months in advance—publicize them through the newspapers, and attract inquirers from among the rank and file of the local population.

The Bahá’ís in 1912 were not well organized and sometimes uncertain whether they were a separate religious community or a leaven destined to spread Bahá’í teachings within the existing churches. This may be one reason why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit did not produce a great increase in dedicated followers. But it did bring in dozens of committed Bahá’ís (notably Robert Abbott, Victoria Bedekian, Howard Colby Ives, Ruth Moffett, Harry Randall, and Albert Vail) who heard of the Faith during His visit. It transformed some persons, such as Howard MacNutt and Agnes Parsons, who had to change some of their fundamental attitudes as a result of His visit. It strengthened the faith and devotion of some younger Bahá’ís, such as Grace Roberts Ober, George Latimer, and Fred Mortensen. It solidified the Bahá’í identity of many children of Bahá’ís, who often considered 1912 to be the year they accepted Bahá’u’lláh. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, *“I have planted the Seeds in America. You must nurture them and care for them. If you do this, they will yield an abundant harvest.”*¹⁷ The direct impact of His visit on the strength of the American Bahá’í community was notable for decades.

Ironically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit also sharpened the division within the American Bahá’í community between those who emphasized close adherence to the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh and the interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and those who saw the Bahá’í Faith as a renewal of existing metaphysical and mystical teachings. The latter tended to relativize the Faith’s distinctive teachings and metaphorically interpret or ignore the teachings they found distasteful or backward. They seized on comments ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made in public talks and to non-Bahá’ís that implied the Bahá’ís should not organize or form a distinct community. Because they were often epistemological individualists, they tended to oppose efforts to organize the Bahá’í community by those who sought to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance closely. The tension resulted in several incidents of Covenant-breaking before the decade was over and was not ultimately resolved until

Shoghi Effendi began to implement the terms of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament and build Bahá'í institutions in the 1920s.¹⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá was very pleased by the way Americans received Him: "In America . . . people are more spiritual, they seek the knowledge of God, they hail the truth no matter from what quarter it comes."¹⁹ Diary entries by His secretary, Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, record His sometimes gleeful comments about how audiences responded to His talks; His tablets often overflowed with pleasure; and He frequently had His Persian secretaries send bundles of newspaper clippings to Haifa or Iran so that others could share in His happiness. The Persian pages of *The Star of the West* spread positive reports of His trip throughout the Persian-speaking Bahá'í world. The confidence and increased self esteem that such reports gave to the Bahá'ís of Iran was of great significance.

The Hindu and Buddhist teachers to North America brought about something similar in their home countries, although the homeland responses to them can be divided into two types: internal to their movement and external in their culture. Their travels often solidified their own importance in their groups and strengthened the group's importance in their national cultures. Indian and Sri Lankan newspapers followed their talks at the World's Parliament and their subsequent lecture tours. As a result, Vivekananda went from a relatively unknown and untested leader of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission to the celebrated leader of one of India's most important Hindu modernizing groups, conjoining devotion to the Vedas, ecstatic bhakti worship, and the creation of modern schools and hospitals. Mozoomdar and Vivekananda became recognized as fathers of Indian nationalism. Dharmapala became seen as the great leader in Sri Lankan Buddhism, as one of the most internationally important Buddhists of his day, and as a key figure in the revival of Sri Lankan culture and nationalism.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to North America remained largely unknown to Iranian non-Bahá’ís, but one can predict that its cultural importance can only grow as more hear about it, read His talks, and come to reiterate His teachings about the oneness of humanity, world peace, equality of men and women, and universal human rights. Perhaps a secularized narrative about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will develop, just as one has begun to form about the Bábí heroine Táhírih.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s trip to the western world, according to Shoghi Effendi, was the “culmination” of His ministry and its “greatest exploit.”²⁰ The effect He had on the development of the American Bahá’í community was considerable, but much of the impact will be felt in the future, as the Bahá’í community continues to grow and applies His teachings to the urgent problems facing humanity.

NOTES

- 1 *Star of the West*, vol. 3, no. 8, page 22.
- 2 This number is arrived at by assuming 100 attendees in home meetings, 200 at hotel meetings, and 500 in churches. Published attendance figures often exceed these figures, so the total may be low.
- 3 Bahá'u'lláh lists the importance of developing agriculture as His fifth principle in the *Lawh-i-Dunyá* (Tablet of the World), but notes that “although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others” (Bahá'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 90). He provides various lists of Bahá'í teachings or principles in His tablets of *Ishráqát*, *Tarázát*, *Tajallíyyát*, *Bishárát*, but none of the lists correspond closely to the lists 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave in His talks in North America or Europe.
- 4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Mahmúd's Diary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 381.
- 5 *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 455, 457-58; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary*, 128, 135, 137, 166-67, 339-41, 346-47, 390.
- 6 Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd's Diary*, 127-28, 132, 167, 268, 277, 371, 392.
- 7 The travels of Sydney Sprague, Harlan Ober, Hooper Harris, Laura Barney, Charles Mason Remey, and Howard Struven have been summarized or mentioned in Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2: *Early Expansion, 1900-1912* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1995).
- 8 Thornton Chase, “Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His Station,” comp. Robert H. Stockman, *World Order*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Fall, 1993), 20.
- 9 Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 67.
- 10 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 280.
- 11 Sunrit Mullick, *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar* (New Delhi: Northern Book Center, 2010) provides separate chapters on all three of his visits to the U.S.

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- 12 Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 108.
- 13 *Star of the West*, vol. 2, no. 17, p. 13.
- 14 William Ernest Hocking, “Recollections of Swami Vivekananda,” quoted in Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries: His Prophetic Mission, Part One*, 4th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), 117–18.
- 15 “MEMORIAL RESOLUTION: ALBERT LEON GUÉRARD (1880–1959)” at <http://histsoc.stanford.edu/pdfmem/GuerardAL.pdf>; “Telephone Conversation with Firuz Kazemzadeh, September 15, 2010, 32 minutes,” author’s personal papers; “Telephone Conversation with Dr. Amin Banani, Tuesday, September 13, 2010; 21 minutes,” author’s personal papers.
- 16 <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00190404p1ch2.pdf>. The membership data was self reported to the Census Department.
- 17 Words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá “to a little group of Americans in Paris” in 1913, *Star of the West*, vol. 4, p. 256.
- 18 Peter Smith details these issues in his essay “The American Bahá’í Community, 1893-1912: A Preliminary Survey,” in Moojan Momen, *Studies in Bábí and Bahá’í History*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982), 225-53.
- 19 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 9, p. 6.
- 20 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 295. (GPB)