

## `Abdu'l-Bahá's Elucidation of the Concept of the Oneness of Humanity During His Western Travels

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### The concept of the oneness of humanity in the Bahá'í writings

The Bahá'í teachings centre on two interrelated and often interchangeable concepts: the oneness of humanity and the unity of humankind.

For the purposes of this paper, I take the 'oneness of humanity' to be an expression of a fundamental truth about the nature of humanity, while 'unity of humankind' is an aspiration of the way human beings need to act so that civilization will advance sustainably into the future.

The central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is the oneness of humankind.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind – the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve ... implies an organic change in the structure of present day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. [WOB 42-43]

The principle of the oneness of humanity is embedded in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>1</sup> As a concept, it was not unknown: it is also found in Islam.<sup>2</sup> In the West, however, the idea was not well developed at the beginning of the 20th century, even among the Bahá'ís. It was `Abdu'l-Bahá in his role as the interpreter of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh who explained to the Bahá'ís and others what this concept meant and how they should

apply it in their lives. His talks, public and private, during his travels to the West in 1911-13 frequently expanded on this primary Bahá'í teaching.

What 'Abdu'l-Bahá did was to establish new definitions of 'all', 'we' and 'us.' There are many identifiers of the 'other': strange faces, strange clothes and hats, strange practices and customs, strange ideas and religion. In effect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá defined 'all', 'we' and 'us' in a more inclusive way and overturned western ideas of 'foreign', 'stranger', 'strangeness', 'other', 'enemy'.

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the West

'Abdu'l-Bahá was freed from 40 years of captivity in 1908 by the Young Turk Revolution. In 1911 he left the Middle East for the first time and travelled to Europe, visiting France and Britain. His purpose was to bring the teachings of his father, Bahá'u'lláh, to the West. 'Abdu'l-Bahá made a longer and more extensive visit to the West in 1912-13, spending eight months in the United States, including a few days in Montreal, Canada, as well as short visits to England, Scotland, Stuttgart, Vienna and Budapest, with a stay of 22 weeks in Paris.

The themes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks in the West were peace, the oneness of humanity, one God, the equality of women and men, the importance of education for everyone but especially for women and children, the unity of religions, the need to rid oneself of prejudices of all kinds, economic issues, political topics such as good governance and the like. These themes are interrelated and 'Abdu'l-Bahá linked them in several of his talks. These topics became known as the 'principles' of the Bahá'í Faith (although there are many Bahá'í teachings not incorporated into the list). That 'Abdu'l-Bahá focused on the social issues of the day rather than on the more ethereal and mystical teachings which can be found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and which he did address from time to time can be attributed to the injunction of the Bahá'u'lláh "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements" [GWB 213].

Each of the countries visited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá experienced what today we would today call racism. It was part of the institutions of government and business and was widespread among individuals in their relationships with others. No country provided full rights to all the people living in it; some denied people the full rights of citizenship, others access to services, still others the right to marry persons of their choice, etc. It was common for people to demean members of different ethnic, religious or class groups, to make fun of them or to treat them as though they were invisible.

'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in the West at a time of great social change. The scientific and technological advances of the 19th century were being played out at every level of society. Social developments included the rise of middle classes; mass transportation, including relatively inexpensive passage to North America from Europe; the growth of the labour movement; better health owing to better medicines, drains, plumbing and nutrition resulting in a steady increase in population; greater access to education; calls for the extension of the franchise to women; and the transfer of Darwinian concepts such as 'survival of the fittest' to a social context and the rise of social Darwinism. The movement of people in the 19th and early 20th century – as refugees from pogroms or from poverty, as slaves or bonded servants, through colonization – increased the diversity of many European countries and particularly the United States. What did not change so rapidly was the attitude of people towards those who were 'different' in some way – 'foreign', dark-skinned, with a different religion, disabled, poor, of a lower 'class', uneducated, 'woman'.

## **Major challenges to the principle of the oneness of humanity**

The major challenges to the principle of the oneness of humanity that 'Abdu'l-Bahá encountered were anti-Semitism, which was particularly rife in Europe and in the 19th century had led to pogroms against the Jews; xenophobia, a suspicion of foreigners of any description, again, particularly in Europe; and

racism, particularly by whites towards blacks and Native Americans in North America, a racism which was based on colour and assumed that members of a particular race all had the same characteristics, such as laziness. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was acutely aware of the dangerous racial climate in the United States and warned that steps should be taken to change it.

... the stress and strain imposed on the fabric of American society through the fundamental and persistent neglect, by the governed and governors alike, of the supreme, the inescapable and urgent duty – so repeatedly and graphically represented and stressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His arraignment of the basic weaknesses in the social fabric of the nation – of remedying, while there is yet time, through a revolutionary change in the concept and attitude of the average white American toward his Negro fellow citizen, a situation which, if allowed to drift, will, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cause the streets of American cities to run with blood ... [CF 126]

In addition, nationalism and nationalist movements were poised to change the map of Europe while colonialism changed the map of the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularly noted the tense situation in Europe, which he said was largely due to prejudice:

Just now Europe is a battlefield of ammunition ready for a spark, and one spark will set aflame the whole world. [PUP 122]

The causes of dispute among different nations are always due to one of the following classes of prejudice: racial, lingual, theological, personal, and prejudices of custom and tradition. [ABL 59]

By focusing in his public lectures and private discussions on the central principle of the oneness of humankind, 'Abdu'l-Bahá directly challenged the entrenched social views – and, perhaps more importantly – the racist behaviours of many people. Further, he was a living example of how one could demonstrate that they upheld the principle.

## The situation in Europe at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1911-13

Anti-Semitism was rife across Europe at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels. France, for example, had only recently emerged from the Dreyfus affair which had exposed the anti-Semitism and ethnic nationalism prevalent there. Vienna was a centre of religious prejudice and racism. Approximately two and a half million Jews, mostly from central Europe, immigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1924, contributing to a revival of anti-Semitism there.<sup>3</sup> Anti-Semitism in Germany rose steadily through the early years of the 20th century, culminating in the atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s.

At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visits to Britain the country was preoccupied with the issue of Home Rule for Ireland – an island divided by religious prejudice into sectarian camps. In 1912 unionists pledged to resist Home Rule, by force if necessary. This issue, the partition of Ireland and the subsequent 'troubles' that arose from it, are in the popular media couched as having a religious basis but others have suggested that they may also be seen as having a basis in race. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promotion of the concept of the oneness of humanity countered both perceptions, seeing both divisions as subsets of the basic set 'humanity'.

At the same time, the women's suffrage movement was very active in the UK, with suffragettes turning more militant in their efforts to win the vote. While disapproving of the use of violence to achieve the suffragettes' ends, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a strong advocate of the advancement of women and of their enfranchisement. Again, in the Bahá'í teachings, women are half of the 'humanity' that is one.

There are many indicators of the racism that was embedded in British society at the time and that racism was promoted, perhaps unwittingly – that is, without malice, since non-whites were not considered 'one of us'. For example, a popular children's book, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls* by Florence Kate Upton, had been published in London in 1895. It told the story of two dolls in a toy shop who encountered Golliwogg, 'a horrid sight, the blackest gnome', wearing 'bright

red trousers, a red bow tie on a high collared white shirt, and a blue swallow-tailed coat', a 'caricature of American black faced minstrels',<sup>4</sup> easily mocked. So popular was the Gollywogg character that he became the central character in 14 further books and was made into a similarly popular rag doll. At best, use of this character was insensitive to the feelings of the non-white population of Britain, where the character originated (although it also became popular in other parts of Europe and in the US and Australia). It may be that the racial epithet 'wog', used by the British to denote foreigners, particularly from the Middle or Far East, came from this character (although this may also be an acronym for Western Oriental Gentleman, or similar).<sup>5</sup> It was this attitude of the white society that people of a different race or nationality did not merit being treated with dignity that 'Abdu'l-Bahá challenged by giving a different definition of what a human being is – not merely a physical being with physical characteristics, which were more or less the same – but divinely created, a noble being with the same potential regardless of superficial physical characteristics.

Canada too had racist policies. For example a law denied rights to the Chinese, even if they were citizens.<sup>6</sup> Jews and Native Americans were also targets of racism in Canada.

Racism and xenophobia were deeply embedded in Austria. Austrians' traditional dislike for specific groups such as Turks, Serbs and especially Jews climaxed during the Second World War. But it was in the United States, with its recent history of the slavery of, primarily, black people, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá promoted most vigorously the oneness of humanity and was able to demonstrate this teaching in the most dramatic ways.

## Prevailing ideas of race in the West

Popular ideas about race and how a person's colour or other characteristics related to race were based on religious, legal, scientific and traditional determinants.<sup>7</sup> Among the most pernicious were the biblical justification for slavery, particularly of foreigners;<sup>8</sup> the concept that developed during the height of 18th and 19th century slave trade that black people were cursed with the 'curse of Ham'<sup>9</sup> for their sins and

deserved the punishment of slavery; and the idea, ostensibly based on scientific principles and promoted by 19th-century physicians, that people of 'mixed blood' – 'mulattoes' – were more susceptible to disease than those of 'pure' blood and lived shorter lives; and that their descendants, if the mixing of blood continued into the next generations, would become progressively less fertile.<sup>10</sup>

An influential proponent of what developed into 20th century European racism was Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau, whose "Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races" (1853-1855) argued against mixing races (identified as black, white, and yellow) and questioned whether the black and yellow races belonged to the same human family as the white race. He believed the white race, which he called the 'Aryan' and identified with Germanic people, was superior to the other races and that it was the white race that was responsible for the progress and advance of civilization, so long as it remained free of contamination by intermarrying with other races. Although Gobineau was interested only in how social life operates, his work was the inspiration for those who developed political platforms from it, such as Hitler.

In the United States, popular notions of race based on physical characteristics such as skin colour and facial features were bolstered by a legal decision of Judge Henry St George Tucker in *Hudgins v. Wright* (State of Virginia, 1806).<sup>11</sup> The case concerned a Virginia slave, Hannah Hudgins, who sought freedom on the grounds that her mother was a Native American, not black, and that Hannah herself was Native American, not black. The Virginia Supreme Court upheld a decision in a lower court on the grounds that as she *looked* 'Indian', she *was* Indian and therefore was entitled to be considered a non-slave. Judge Tucker's decision reads, in part:

Nature has stamp't upon the African and his descendants two characteristic marks, besides the difference of complexion, which often remain visible long after the characteristic distinction of colour either disappears or becomes doubtful; a flat nose and woolly head of hair. The latter of these disappears the last of all; and so strong an ingredient in the African constitution is this

latter character, that it predominates uniformly where the party is in equal degree descended from parents of different complexions, whether white or Indians ... Upon these distinctions as connected with our laws, the burden of proof depends.<sup>12</sup>

Tucker deemed that because Hannah had long straight hair — clearly the characteristic of a Native American — and not the woolly hair of black Africans, she must be a Native American, not a black African, and therefore entitled to her freedom. This judgement embedded a concept of racial stereotyping within a legal framework.

### **Situation of the American Bahá'í community at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1912**

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited North America in 1912 there were very few Bahá'ís at all on the continent<sup>13</sup> and very few indeed were of African-American heritage. Stockman says that by July 1908, 15 blacks had accepted the Faith in Washington DC, owing to efforts of Pauline Hannen<sup>14</sup> — there were about 70 Bahá'ís altogether in the city at the time<sup>15</sup> — about 21.4 per cent of the Bahá'í community, compared to the proportion in the city of 28 per cent.<sup>16</sup>

Among the blacks in Washington DC at this time was Louis Gregory, a 'prominent black lawyer', who became a Bahá'í in 1909 through the efforts of Carrie York, the Hannens, and Lua Getsinger. He was president of the Bethel Literary and Historical Society, the city's oldest black organization, and was able to bring the Faith to the attention of black intellectuals. He promoted integration between black and white Bahá'ís, writing to the Washington DC Bahá'ís deploring the segregation of the Bahá'í community. As a result, in March 1910 the Washington Bahá'ís began to hold racially integrated meetings in what was a wholly segregated city in America's South. In 1911 Gregory was elected to Washington's 'Working Committee', thus becoming the first black to serve on a Bahá'í consultative body; in 1912 he was elected to the Executive Board of Bahai Temple Unity.<sup>17</sup>

The oneness of humankind was a very difficult concept for Bahá'ís at the turn of the 20th century to put into practice in their personal lives. In the United States, fraternization between black and white races was not only frowned upon, it was criminalized. The American Civil War of 1861-5 may have freed black slaves but it did not change segregation laws. 38 of its 50 states had at some time 'anti-miscegenation'<sup>18</sup> laws<sup>19</sup> – laws banning interracial relationships and/or marriage which were first introduced by several of the American colonies in the late 17th century and the last of which were repealed only in 1967.<sup>20</sup>

Even in many 'northern' states that had fought to free slaves, blacks could not stay in the same hotels as whites, eat in the same restaurants, or frequent the same clubs. Public transport was available to both but seats were reserved for white people and black people had to stand, or sit at the back. Tall buildings had separate lifts for blacks and whites and interracial marriage was illegal in a number of 'northern' states. Even though blacks had been able to attend university since 1837,<sup>21</sup> graduates were not afforded the same jobs as whites and even if they achieved professional status, they were excluded from society.

The Bible was used in the US to defend anti-miscegenation laws well into the 20th century, using a racist interpretation of stories such as that of Phinehas<sup>22</sup> and the 'Curse of Ham'.<sup>23</sup>

Even before he arrived in America 'Abdu'l-Bahá was aware of the damage race prejudice was causing to the country:

One of the great reasons of separation is colour. Look how this prejudice has power in America, for instance. See how they hate one another! Animals do not quarrel because of their colour! Surely man who is so much higher in creation, should not be lower than the animals. Think over this. What ignorance exists! White doves do not quarrel with blue doves because of their colour, but white men fight with dark-coloured men. This racial prejudice is the worst of all. [ABL 55]

## 'Abdu'l-Bahá's application of the teaching of the oneness of humanity in the West

It was into this society that 'Abdu'l-Bahá came, bearing the message of the oneness of humanity. A number of people — black and white — agreed with the sentiment, as an intellectual reality and a statement about human nature, but did not see that it had anything to tell them about the way they lived their lives. They might have been quite willing to accept that people of different races should be free and should vote in elections, should attend school as children and university as adults but would not have considered them eligible to be friends or want them as neighbours, nor would they have wished to have them over to dinner or to marry their daughters. 'Abdu'l-Bahá challenged this complacency by deliberately bringing people of different races and nationalities together and personally revelling in the display of diversity, rather than hiding it away. Thus, for example, he was very touched by the attendance of different races at the meeting in Washington DC at which he described the people as different gems. Balyuzi reports that after this meeting, 'He was wonderfully exhilarated' as he travelled to his next engagement.

His voice could be heard, loud and clear, exclaiming: 'O Bahá'u'lláh! What hast Thou done! O Bahá'u'lláh! May my life be sacrificed for Thee! O Bahá'u'lláh I May my soul be offered up for Thy sake! How full were Thy days with trials and tribulation! How severe the ordeals Thou didst endure! How solid the foundations Thou hast finally laid, and how glorious the banner Thou didst hoist.'<sup>24</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledged that there are differences in humanity, differences of gender, colour, race, nationality, class, thought, opinion, religion, language; and he encountered many forms of social differentiation and discrimination on his travels and was himself the target on some occasions. All these differences he considered to be superficial and of negligible importance.<sup>25</sup> If they had any importance or significance, it was to add to the beauty and diversity of the human race. Giving inappropriate importance to any of these differences

undermines, he suggested, the full expression of the oneness of humanity.

However, in his talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not focus on the particularities of these divisions but rather on the message of the oneness itself as an antidote for all divisions and coolness between people of different ethnicities and backgrounds.

He outlined some practical steps people could take to develop the oneness of humankind as a lived reality. For example, he said all people needed to remove all forms of prejudice from their lives:

We must banish prejudice. Religious, patriotic, racial prejudices must disappear, for they are the destroyers of human society. We must become the cause of the unity of the human race. [ADP 25]

A new religious principle is that prejudice and fanaticism whether sectarian, denominational, patriotic or political are destructive to the foundation of human solidarity; therefore man should release himself from such bonds in order that the oneness of the world of humanity may become manifest. [BWF 247]

If you meet those of different race and colour from yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness. Think of them as different coloured roses growing in the beautiful garden of humanity, and rejoice to be among them.

Likewise, when you meet those whose opinions differ from your own, do not turn away your face from them. All are seeking truth, and there are many roads leading thereto. Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one.

Do not allow difference of opinion, or diversity of thought to separate you from your fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute, hatred and strife in your hearts.<sup>26</sup>

In his very first public talk ever – on 10 September 1911, City Temple, London – 'Abdu'l-Bahá discussed this basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh:

This is a new cycle of human power ... It is the hour of unity of the sons of men and of the drawing together of all races and all classes ... The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion. War shall cease between nations, and by the will of God the Most Great Peace shall come; the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers. [ABL 19-20]

It was an invitation to the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in May 1912 that ostensibly brought 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the United States:

From the beginning, 'Abdu'l-Bahá took keen interest in efforts to bring into existence a new international order. It is significant, for example, that His early public references in North America to the purpose of His visit there placed particular emphasis on the invitation of the organizing committee of the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference for Him to address this international gathering.<sup>27</sup>

As it was the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in May 1912 that brought 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the United States, it is significant to note that his talk on 15 May at the conference was entitled “The Oneness of the Reality of Humankind.” In his opening remarks he drew attention to the situation 60 years previously, with the revolutions across Europe in 1848 and the wars in Persia, describing the enmity between the different religions and nationalities. It was at this time, he said, that Bahá'u'lláh appeared, proclaiming the ‘oneness of the world of humanity and the greatest peace’. Those who accepted Bahá'u'lláh’s teachings ‘were united and attained the greatest amity and unity’ such that the ‘Kurd, the Arab, the Persian and the Turk freed themselves from the prejudice of race and were people agreed’. ‘Among those people

the utmost of love and oneness of peace now obtain, for the great teachings of Bahá'u'lláh make for the oneness of the world and for humanity, universal peace and arbitration,' he stated.<sup>28</sup>

## **'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to anti-Semitism and xenophobia**

'Abdu'l-Bahá specifically challenged prevailing ideas of anti-Semitism, xenophobia and racism. For example, with regard to anti-Semitism, he told members of the Temple Emmanuel in San Francisco:

... the foundation of the religion of God laid by Moses was the cause of their eternal honour and national prestige, the animating impulse of their advancement and racial supremacy and the source of that excellence which will always command the respect and reverence of those who understand their [particular] destiny and outcome.... [PUP 364]

He explained to New Yorkers that in 1870 Bahá'u'lláh had written to the Shah of Persia advising him to 'be kind to all his subjects', 'dispense justice', 'make no distinction between the religions' and 'charging him to deal equally with Jew, Christian, Muslim and Zoroastrian' and 'to remove the oppression prevailing in his country'.

At that time [1870] the Jews were greatly oppressed in Persia. Bahá'u'lláh especially recommended justice for them, saying that all people are the servants of God, and in the eye of the government they should be equally estimated. 'If justice is not dealt out, if these oppressions are not removed and if thou dost not obey God, the foundations of thy government will be razed, and thou shalt become evanescent, become as nothing.' [PUP 223]

'Abdu'l-Bahá understood why people were xenophobic but asked them to overcome this by changing their behaviour towards foreigners:

Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries. Do not look at them as though you suspected them of being evil-doers, thieves and boors. You think it necessary to be very careful, not to expose yourselves to the risk of making acquaintance with such, possibly, undesirable people.

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers, whether come they from Turkey, Japan, Persia, Russia, China or any other country in the world.

Help to make them feel at home; find out where they are staying, ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier.

In this way, even if, sometimes, what you at first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them – this kindness will help them to become better. [PT 15]

## **`Abdu'l-Bahá's challenge to racism**

But it was racism, particularly colour prejudice in North America, that `Abdu'l-Bahá focused on primarily in his western travels. Using a variety of images and metaphors, he explained the beauty in the diversity of humankind. He overturned age-old concepts of racial superiority and inferiority, challenged even the very concept of 'race'. Further, more than merely voicing the principle of the oneness of humanity, he demonstrated it in his own actions, often causing consternation or outrage among both Bahá'ís and the wider population.

The idea that 'races' are natural distinctions in humanity, that there is a biological basis for distinguishing one group of people from another determined by physical characteristics such as colour, hair type, skin texture, the shape of the nose or eyes is questioned today by scientists, forensic anthropologists and others.<sup>29</sup> The notion of 'race' as it is popular conceived is a social construct yet human differentiation based these physical features is still accepted today as a way to distinguish and

categorize groups of people, often to suppress them or to exert power over them. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in the West this concept was very much embedded in the popular mind as well as in social and political institutions and legal frameworks.

In a talk at Howard University, an historically black university in Washington DC, 'Abdu'l-Bahá dismissed the idea that there were 'races' of people, focusing rather on the idea that there is only one race, the human race:

There are no whites and blacks before God. All colours are one, and that is the colour of servitude to God. Scent and colour are not important. The heart is important. If the heart is pure, white or black or any colour makes no difference. God does not look at colours; He looks at the hearts. He whose heart is pure is better. He whose character is better is more pleasing ... white and black are the descendants of the same Adam; they belong to one household ... All humanity is descended from them. Therefore, in origin they are one.  
[PUP 45]

At the same time, he used the language of 'different races' familiar to his hearers to explain the principle of the oneness of humanity, drawing on what he saw as the superficial physical differences among people to demonstrate his point.

## **How 'Abdu'l-Bahá made his points**

To discuss the issue of the oneness of humanity with western audiences, 'Abdu'l-Bahá focused on the physical characteristics of human beings, selecting the one – colour – that was immediately obvious to everyone and the one used by most people to determine race, particularly for purposes of social and other forms of discrimination. He also discussed differences of religion, nationality and gender.

## Use of metaphors

In many of his western talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá used metaphors from nature to describe the physical colour differences of people. Always used to show the beauty of the diversity of colours, the metaphors most frequently employed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá were flowers in a garden, leaves and fruits of a tree, waves of an ocean, jewels and the human body.

The metaphor of flowers may be an extension of the metaphor for the oneness of humanity found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, trees: 'Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.' [GWB 218]. The use of garden imagery for western audiences was inspired. For Christians and Jews, the garden evokes the Garden of Eden and its inhabitants, Adam and Eve, and serves as a reminder that all people have a common ancestry. Further, many of the cities to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled were famed for their public gardens and parks – Paris, Washington DC, London – gardens and flowers were particularly loved by the English; and they were thus familiar to his audiences. Thus when 'Abdu'l-Bahá described how a garden is enhanced by having flowers of different colours and shapes, he was describing something people could understand and appreciate and they immediately grasp his point:

... difference of race and colour is like the variegated beauty of flowers in a garden ... If all the flowers in a garden were of the same colour, the effect would be monotonous and wearying to the eye ... the various races of humankind lend a composite harmony and beauty of colour to the whole. Let all associate, therefore, in this great human garden even as flowers grow and blend together side by side without discord or disagreement between them. [PUP 67-69]

'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently reiterated Bahá'u'lláh's own metaphor likening humanity to a tree with different leaves, branches and fruit:

Bahá'u'lláh has addressed the world of humanity, saying, 'Verily, ye are the fruits of one tree and the

leaves of one branch.' This signifies that the entire world of humanity is one tree. The various nations and peoples are the branches of that tree. Individual members of mankind are represented by the twigs and blossoms. Why should these parts of the same tree manifest strife and discord toward each other? [PUP 372]

and sometimes expanded it create not only a visual image but an evocation of a pleasant springtime:

All men are the leaves and fruit of one same tree, they are all branches of the tree of Adam, they all have the same origin. The same rain has fallen upon them all, the same warm sun makes them grow, they are all refreshed by the same breeze. [PT 129]

Another metaphor drawn from nature used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was that of the ocean and its waves. Bahá'u'lláh had used this metaphor to describe the immensity of his revelation,<sup>30</sup> the bounty and mercy of God,<sup>31</sup> the vastness of God's knowledge<sup>32</sup> and many other characteristics of God and His revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá added to this catalogue by comparing the oneness of humanity to the ocean. As he had recently spent many days at sea, perhaps contemplating the ocean and its waves, this may well have been in his mind when he drew on this imagery to explain the principle to a western audience:

Your souls are as waves on the sea of the spirit; although each individual is a distinct wave, the ocean is one, all are united in God.

Every heart should radiate unity, so that the Light of the one Divine Source of all may shine forth bright and luminous. We must not consider the separate waves alone, but the entire sea. We should rise from the individual to the whole. The spirit is as one great ocean and the waves thereof are the souls of men. [PT 83]

We must use these powers in establishing the oneness of the world of humanity, appreciate these virtues by accomplishing the unity of whites and blacks, devote

this divine intelligence to the perfecting of amity and accord among all branches of the human family so that under the protection and providence of God the East and West may hold each other's hands and become as lovers. Then will mankind be as one nation, one race and kind – as waves of one ocean. Although these waves may differ in form and shape, they are waves of the same sea. [PUP 51]

The jewel metaphor employed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was also effective for western audiences. Jewels are beautiful, expensive, rare, desirable and highly prized and using them to describe human beings of different colour cast people in a new light:

A meeting such as this seems like a beautiful cluster of precious jewels – pearls, rubies, diamonds and sapphires ... In the clustered jewels of the races, may the coloured people be as sapphires and rubies, and the whites as diamonds and pearls. The composite beauty of humanity will be witnessed in their unity and blending.<sup>33</sup>

For whites to hear blacks beings described as rubies and sapphires was highly unusual – as no doubt it was for the blacks themselves.

Howard Colby Ives records an incident involving a number of street children who had been invited to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá.<sup>34</sup> One was a black 13 year old boy who did not enter the room for fear he was not invited. 'Abdu'l-Bahá welcomed him in, saying that here was a black rose. Later, when offering the children chocolates, he picked out a very dark one and laid it against the boy's cheek. The other boys looked at their friend in a new light and he himself thought of himself differently.

To Ives, who witnessed the encounter, 'the scene brought visions of a new world in which every soul would be recognized and treated as a child of God.'

Another metaphor used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to demonstrate the sort of unity possible among humans was the human body. Again, this may be an extension of the image of unity provided by Bahá'u'lláh: 'Be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members

of one body' [GWB 139]. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the differentiated organs and limbs of the body working together provides his audience with perhaps the most easily understood of all his metaphors, as everyone has a body and understands how its different parts contribute to its functioning:

This diversity [of races, etc.], this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. [SWAB 290]

### **Joining of East and West**

It was not only the bringing together of black and white that 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed. In Europe, as well as in North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the oneness of the peoples of the East and the West.

The most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind, the bond conjoining East and West, the tie of love which blends human hearts. [PUP 31]

As the East and the West are illumined by one sun, so all races, nations, and creeds shall be seen as the servants of the One God. The whole earth is one home, and all peoples, did they but know it, are bathed in the oneness of God's mercy. God created all. He gives sustenance to all. He guides and trains all under the shadow of his bounty. [ABL 38]

'Abdu'l-Bahá not only reiterated the basic oneness of all people from both the East and the West but also encouraged both to come together in unity, that is, to manifest their essential oneness and to act as one people:

I have come here with this mission: that through your endeavours, through your heavenly morals, through your devoted efforts a perfect bond of unity and love may be established between the East and the West so

that the bestowals of God may descend upon all and that all may be seen to be the parts of the same tree – the great tree of the human family. [PUP 16]

## **Deeds, not words**

'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorted people to do more than pay lip-service to the principle to the oneness of humanity:

Love ye all religions and all races with a love that is true and sincere and show that love through deeds and not through the tongue; for the latter hath no importance, as the majority of men are, in speech, well-wishers, while action is the best. [SWAB 69]

Thus although it is the primarily the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks given on his journeys across Europe and North America that were recorded, it was often the actions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself that made greatest and most lasting impression on people. The Bahá'í Faith does not rely upon the recorded actions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a reliable guide to the truth of the revelation, nevertheless, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was appointed by Bahá'u'lláh as the Perfect Exemplar of his teachings, observing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's deeds was an important way for Bahá'ís, and others, to understand how Bahá'u'lláh's teachings could be implemented in their own lives. Hence there are several accounts by eye-witnesses of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's demonstration of the oneness of humankind.

## **Actions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá**

### **Demonstrating the oneness of race: Louis Gregory at luncheon**

Perhaps the primary example pointed to by Bahá'ís of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's actions demonstrating the oneness of humanity, the equality of all and the due regard that people should hold for one another was the luncheon held in the rigidly segregated Washington DC at the home of the Chargé d'Affaires for the Persian Legation, Ali Kuli Khan, a Bahá'í, on 23 April 1912 at

which 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the guest of honour.<sup>35</sup> A number of dignitaries were invited to the luncheon, which took place after 'Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken at Howard University on the 'harmony between blacks and whites and the unity of humankind',<sup>36</sup> and diplomatic seating protocol was observed. Local Bahá'í Louis Gregory, a black lawyer whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá had met previously, was not invited to the luncheon but 'Abdu'l-Bahá had asked him to attend at the home of Ali Kuli Khan prior to it for a consultation. When the guests were called for luncheon, 'Abdu'l-Bahá went into the dining room but Mr Gregory stayed behind. When everyone was seated, 'Abdu'l-Bahá called for Mr Gregory. While the host was seeking him, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rearranged the seating, placing Mr Gregory in the seat of honour at his right,<sup>37</sup> demonstrating 'Abdu'l-Bahá's disregard for the convention that segregated blacks and white at such occasions and providing a simple example of how unity of races could be embedded in one's personal life.

### **Demonstrating the oneness of rich and poor**

It was not just a recognition of the oneness of races that interested 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was also concerned that people understand that the oneness of the human race extended to the poor and indigent as well. A most telling example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to the poor living in a big city was his attendance at the Bowery Mission on Manhattan's Lower East Side on 19 April 1912. He had only been in the United States for a week, having arrived on the 11th.

The Bowery Mission was established in 1879 by the Rev. and Mrs. A. G. Ruliffson as a very decidedly Christian mission with the objective of assisting recent immigrants to New York City who had not yet found adequate means to earn a living. Over time it provided help, both material and spiritual, to the homeless and impoverished in New York. It is the third oldest gospel mission in the United States. New York was a centre of immigration at this time and many of the people who lived there were immigrants from Europe seeking a better life in the United States — economic migrants, as they are known today — and by definition were poor, as well as being on the bottom rung of society. At the time the Bowery Mission catered for men only,

although there had been a well-established programme since 1894 of taking poor city children into the countryside for their health and relaxation. Juliet Thompson states that many of the men were alcoholics and came to the mission to get out of the cold. The Bowery itself was a place of great deprivation and poverty, known for its 'down and outs' well into the 1950s — and was often called 'skid row'.

It was the practice of the Mission to invite outside speakers to preach to the men who came there and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was probably seen as simply another such. Juliet Thompson arranged the visit.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk was short and simple, apparently less than 800 words. He addressed the men as 'my relatives, my companions', saying 'I am your comrade'. He did not chide them or call them to great things, ask to change their lives or to transform themselves. He did not ask them to give up their alcohol, to renounce their sins or change their ways. Rather he told them that Jesus himself was poor, that he said 'Blessed are the poor', not 'Blessed are the rich' and that he said he, too, was poor and that the Kingdom of God is for the poor. He told them they should be thankful to God that 'although this world you were indigent yet in the Kingdom of God you were precious'. Some today might consider this to be patronizing, telling the poor that their poverty is a good thing, and wonder why 'Abdu'l-Bahá would take this line. It is important, however, to recall that the ethic of the time was very much that the poor *deserved* to be poor because they lived ignoble lives. In the popular view, just as in some of the tabloid press of today, the poor were poor because they were lazy and stupid and had too many children and drank too much — not because the social environment failed to educate them, provided no safety net when they were out of work, that there was little public housing, that private rents were extortionate and accommodation for the poor was crowded, unsafe, unhygienic and precarious — tenement slums, in other words. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reversed this picture for the men of the Bowery, telling them that

The *rich* are mostly negligent, inattentive, steeped in worldliness, depending upon their means, whereas the

poor are dependent upon God, and their reliance is upon Him, not upon themselves. Therefore, the poor are nearer the threshold of God and His throne. [PUP 33]

'Abdu'l-Bahá did not talk about the Bahá'í principle of bridging the gap between extreme wealth and extreme poverty. He did not talk about the history of the Bahá'í Faith or even about Bahá'u'lláh, except to mention that Bahá'u'lláh himself had been poor and that he had 'admonished all that we must be the servants of the poor, helpers of the poor, remember the sorrows of the poor, associate with them; for thereby we may inherit the Kingdom of heaven' and that 'God has not said that there are mansions prepared for us if we pass our time associating with the rich, but he has said there are many mansions prepared for the servants of the poor, for the poor are very dear to God.' [PUP 33]

He ended his brief talk by praising the men at the Bowery Mission:

So, my comrades, you are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Your lives are similar to His life; your attitude is like unto His; you resemble Him more than the rich do. Therefore, we will thank God that we have been so blessed with real riches.

Then he offered himself to them:

And in conclusion, I ask you to accept 'Abdu'l-Bahá as your servant. [PUP 34]

'Abdu'l-Bahá could have left it there and just gone away. But he did not. He did not let the 400 to 500 destitute men who heard him pass back into the city night to sleep in doorways, to scavenge for food. Rather, having told them poverty is not an ignoble state, he then proceeded to give them money, a silver coin or two each — as many as five or six for the most destitute.<sup>38</sup> He did not ask them to buy food with it or to save it or use it for noble purposes. He just gave it. How it was spent was not a concern of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He gave, without admonition or advice. Some accepted ungraciously, some with

grace;<sup>39</sup> again 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not concerned with their response — he merely gave.

And he shook each hand. He actually touched the people he spoke to. This small act is very significant. Many would not have dared touch a person of the streets for fear of catching a disease or worse. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá habitually shook the hands of the people who came to hear him. The shaking of hands with the priest as one leaves the church after a service is characteristic of the Christian faith and may well have been expected by those at the Bowery Mission. The shaking of hands can be a symbol of equality and in this instance no doubt was meant as such by 'Abdu'l-Bahá — another example of the oneness of humanity.

### **Demonstrating the oneness of women and men**

I have discussed elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá's articulation of the Bahá'í teaching of the equality of women and men.<sup>40</sup> Briefly, he spoke frequently about this principle while in the West, prompted in part by the issue of women's suffrage, which was politically and socially controversial and saw women taking direct, often militant, action to force governments to legislate for it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in favour of women's suffrage but advised that they use non-violent means to achieve it. He also exhorted men to recognize the equality of women and to provide them with the educational, economic, political and job opportunities that would enable them to progress.<sup>41</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá included 'women' in the term 'humanity' and made few distinctions between them and men, casting any such differences as 'negligible'.<sup>42</sup>

But 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not merely speak about the teaching of the equality of women and men, he showed how it could be implemented within the Bahá'í community and, by extension, within the community at large. For example, he gave significant responsibilities to women for the initiation and management of important developments within the religion.

Some ten years before 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West, Chicago Bahá'ís, inspired by the laying of the corner stone of House of Worship in Ishqabad in 1902, asked him whether it

would be possible to establish a Temple in Chicago. He wrote two Tablets to the Chicago House of Spirituality giving his approval. On 7 June 1903 he sent a third Tablet to Corinne True, president of the Chicago Women's Assembly of Teaching:

I entreat God to assist the confirmed believers in accomplishing this great service and with entire zeal to rear this mighty structure which shall be renowned throughout the world ...

Whosoever arises for the service of this building shall be assisted with a great power from His Supreme Kingdom and upon him spiritual and heavenly blessings shall descend, which shall fill his heart with wonderful consolation and enlighten his eyes by beholding the glorious and eternal God! [TAB 96-97]

True took this to be an assignment from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, writing to a friend, 'He wrote me instructions about the Temple to my utter astonishment that placed a great responsibility on my shoulders.'<sup>43</sup> Her response was to take the letter to the Women's Assembly of Teaching, which raised some money for the Temple. However, not much progress was made until just before True was to go on pilgrimage in 1907. She launched a petition calling for the start of construction on the Temple, writing to Bahá'ís all over the country. Almost 800 signatures were collected, the petition sheets glued together by True's husband into a large scroll and the scroll taken to 'Akka and presented to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá received the scroll, he gave True detailed instructions on the location and design of the Temple and, much to her surprise and the discomfiture of the men on the House of Spirituality, assigned her a major role in the task of building the Temple. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá involved women in the most significant project of the American Bahá'í community of the early 20th century.

Similarly, in 1920 'Abdu'l-Bahá assigned Agnes Parsons the task of organizing 'a Convention for unity of the coloured and white races'.<sup>44</sup> Parsons was a wealthy white socialite in Washington DC who had become a Bahá'í around 1908 and financially supported many of the prestigious Bahá'í activities.

Washington DC was the hub for Bahá'í teaching among the African Americans but there is no evidence to suggest that she was involved with this. Louis Gregory was assigned to assist her with this controversial activity.

Parsons reached out to her circle of socially prominent women to be patrons of the event and 19 agreed. She was able to secure high-ranking speakers, including Senator Samuel Shortridge of California, Congressman Martin B. Madden of Illinois and Congressman Theodore Burton of Ohio. Assisted by Gregory and a committee chosen by her, Parsons organized in Washington DC from 19 to 21 May 1921 what was to become the first in a long series of Race Amity (later Race Unity) conferences to be held throughout the US.

These are among the many examples of 'Abdu'l-Bahá entrusting women with important tasks outside their apparent areas of competence and experience and thus enabling both women and men to see practical illustrations of his advice to men, that they give women opportunities to achieve their potential<sup>45</sup> and that 'When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!'<sup>46</sup>

### **The elephant in the room**

'Abdu'l-Bahá gave many practical demonstrations of how people might begin to appreciate and act upon the principle of the oneness of humanity. Among the most telling of these was his arrangement of the marriage of Louis Gregory to Louise (Louisa) Mathews, a white Englishwoman. The 'elephant in the room' at the time, that is, the one obvious issue that everyone wished to ignore, was the question of intermarriage. In the United States it was, as discussed above, actually illegal in 25 of the 48 US states of the time and so this issue might not have been so pressing as integration of meetings and activities. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to a correspondent who was happy that progress had been made in that there were now Bahá'í meetings for each race:

You have written that there were several meetings of joy and happiness, one for white and another for

coloured people. Praise be to God! ... If it be possible, gather together these two races, black and white, into one Assembly, and put such love into their hearts that they shall not only unite but even intermarry. Be sure that the result of this will abolish differences and disputes between black and white. Moreover, by the Will of God, may it be so. This is a great service to humanity. [BWF 358]

Thus even after all 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lectures about racial harmony and the oneness of humanity and his expressions of how pleased he was at interracial meetings, nevertheless the idea of integration between blacks and white was so controversial and so outside social mores of the time that very few Bahá'ís were able to effect any change in their behaviour.

Gregory and Mathews had met while on pilgrimage in March 1911 and had been attracted to one other as friends. During their pilgrimage 'Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken about the importance of race unity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the two to develop their friendship and to consider marriage. In the course of the next year 'Abdu'l-Bahá continued to hint that he would be pleased if they would marry and eventually they decided to do so. They were married on 27 September 1912 in New York in a quiet Church of England ceremony, the exchange of Bahá'í wedding vows being said after the main ceremony. They were the first interracial Bahá'í couple.

## The Effectiveness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Efforts

'Abdu'l-Bahá spent a considerable in Europe, the United States and Canada. He spoke to thousands of people, both in public and in private. He was the subject of hundreds of newspaper accounts. He was lauded and praised by clergy, lay people, rich and poor. Yet the number of people who became Bahá'ís was very small and the number of people who understood his message and were prepared to act very limited.<sup>47</sup>

However, there are several indicators of the effectiveness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's efforts to embed a consciousness of the oneness of humanity among both Bahá'ís and the wider society. First, he

gave them actions they could take, however small, such as holding meeting where all races were welcome, including women on Local Spiritual Assemblies<sup>48</sup> and giving service to the poor.

He changed the discourse among Bahá'ís on the meaning of the oneness and unity of humanity and refined 'we' ('We must banish prejudice ... We must become the cause of the unity of the human race' [ADP 25]), making oneness not just an intellectual position but a change of one's personal being so that one's behaviour towards others reflected the reality of oneness. Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly articulated the Bahá'í position and eventually changed the behaviour of Bahá'ís. This did not happen immediately. In Washington DC, for example, the relationship between blacks and whites deteriorated after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, despite the presence of the Gregorys.<sup>49</sup> In time, however, the concept of the oneness of humanity became not only an oft-quoted principle of Bahá'í discourse but a feature of Bahá'í community life, activism and advocacy, inspiring successive generations of Bahá'ís to embed this principle into their personal lives such that today it is the defining characteristic of Bahá'ís and their communities worldwide.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, 'The Great Being saith: O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch' [GWB 218]. And: 'The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens' (ibid. p. 249); and 'He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body' (ibid. p. 213).

<sup>2</sup> See [http://islamicweb.com/begin/introducing\\_islam.htm](http://islamicweb.com/begin/introducing_islam.htm).

<sup>3</sup> 'A Century of Immigration, 1820-1924'. From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America. <http://loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-century.html>

<sup>4</sup> Dr David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology, Ferris State University, November 2000. <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/>

<sup>5</sup> D. Wilton 24 February 2007. Wog. Wordorigins.org. Retrieved from <http://www.wordorigins.org/index.php/more/579>

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11. See <http://www.duhaime.org/LawMuseum/CanadianLegalHistory/LawArticle-584/1914-Chinaman-Racism-In-Law.aspx>. Anti-‘Hindu’ (Indian) articles appeared in the press, pointing out the colour of the skin of the immigrants, as described in the March-April 1912 edition of *The Aryan*, a newspaper ‘Devoted to the Spread of the Eastern View of Truth; The Interests of the Hindus in the British Dominions; and the Causes of Present Unrest in India, published in Victoria, BC.’
7. For a detailed history of racism and slavery, see M. L. Perry, *The Last War: Racism, Spirituality and the Future of Civilization*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2005.
8. See, for example, Leviticus 25:44-6 (Revised Standard Version):
- As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever; you may make slaves of them, but over your brethren the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another, with harshness.
- and 1 Tim. 6:1-2:
- Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.
9. Genesis. 9:18-26.
10. See <http://un.org/wcm/content/site/chronicle/home/archive/issues2007/thesolidarityofpeoples/theideologyofracism> and Amanda Thompson, *Scientific Racism: The Justification of Slavery and Segregated Education in America*, online at <http://pat.tamu.edu/journal/vol-1/thompson.pdf>
11. For a partial transcript of the case see <http://academic.udayton.edu/legaled/Race/Cases/Hudgins%20v%20Wrights.htm>
12. See [http://academic.udayton.edu/legaled/Race/Cases/Hudgins v Wrights.htm](http://academic.udayton.edu/legaled/Race/Cases/Hudgins%20v%20Wrights.htm)
13. Stockman says that by the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit in 1912, there were between 1200 and 1600 ‘active members’ and perhaps as many as 2000 Bahá’ís, which included the conversion of blacks and Japanese. Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá’í Faith in America, Early Expansion, 1900-1912*, vol. 2. Oxford: George Ronald, 1995, pp. 382-3.
14. *ibid.* p. 226.

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- <sup>15</sup>. Robert H. Stockman, 'The American Baha'i Community in the Nineties'," in Dr Timothy Miller, ed., *America's Alternative Religions*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.
- <sup>16</sup>. Two blacks accepted the Faith in Kheiralla's time (Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 2, p. 224; in Alabama Paul and Addie Dealy brought 'perhaps a dozen' blacks in to the Faith but the community of Fairhope ultimately died out Ibid.). According to Stockmen, the three Jamaicans who became Bahá'ís in Pittsburgh in 1909 may have been black (ibid. p. 341).
- <sup>17</sup>. ibid. pp. 343-4.
- <sup>18</sup>. 'Miscegenation' was coined in the US in 1863, in the middle of the American civil war, from the Latin *miscere*, 'to mix', and *genus*, 'kind'. Its quasi-scientific etymology was intended to give credence to alleged differences between races, as if all people were not *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a popular view at the time.
- <sup>19</sup>. Perry, *Last War*, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>20</sup>. See *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which declared Virginia's 'Racial Integrity Act of 1924' — and thus all anti-miscegenation laws — unconstitutional. It was not until 2001 that the last of the them was in fact overturned, when Alabama finally complied.
- <sup>21</sup>. What are known as 'historically black colleges and universities' — institutions of higher education reserved for blacks — were established primarily after the American civil war. The first, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, was established in 1837.
- <sup>22</sup>. See Numbers 25:1-9. Phinehas was a high priest of Israel who executed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman while they were together in the man's tent, ending a plague said to have been sent by God to punish the Israelites for sexually intermingling with the Midianites.
- <sup>23</sup>. See Genesis 9:20-7. The Curse of Ham (Curse of Canaan) refers to Ham's father Noah placing a curse on Ham's son, Canaan. Ham saw his father naked in his tent and told his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, who then covered Noah with a cloak. When Noah awoke he pronounced the curse on Ham's son, Canaan, who was condemned to be a 'servant of servants'. to his brothers. While originally a justification of the subjection of the Canaanites to the Israelites it was later understood as an explanation for black skin and slavery.
- <sup>24</sup>. H. M. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, p. 182.
- <sup>25</sup>. Only four years after its founding, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, now the United States's oldest, largest and most widely recognized grassroots-based civil rights organization, was visited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Below is an excerpt from his talk at Fourth Annual Conference of NAACP at the Handel Hall, Chicago, Illinois:

Can we apply the test of racial colour and say that man of a certain hue – white, black, brown, yellow, red – is the true image of his Creator? We must conclude that colour is not the standard and estimate of judgement and that it is of no importance, for colour is accidental in nature. The spirit and intelligence of man is essential, and that is the manifestation of divine virtues, the merciful bestowals of God, the eternal life and baptism through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, be it known that colour or race is of no importance. He who is the image and likeness of God, who is the manifestation of the bestowals of God, is acceptable at the threshold of God – whether his colour be white, black or brown; it matters not. Man is not man simply because of bodily attributes. The standard of divine measure and judgement is his intelligence and spirit. (PUP 68)

- <sup>26</sup>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaking on 28 October 1911 in Paris. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1967, p. 53.
- <sup>27</sup>. Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2001, para. 10.2.
- <sup>28</sup>. Report of the 8th Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on Int'l Arbitration, 15-17 May 1912, pp. 42-4: <http://centenary.bahai.us/talk/oneness-reality-humankind>
- <sup>29</sup>. See, for example, the debate 'Does Race Exist?' at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/evolution/does-race-exist.html>; and Michael J. Bamshad and Steve E. Olson, 'Does Race Exist?' *Scientific American*, December 2003.
- <sup>30</sup>. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 187-8; and *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, p. 247.
- <sup>31</sup>. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, p. 85; and *Gleanings*, p. 61.
- <sup>32</sup>. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries: Javáhiru'l-Asrár*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002, p. 16; and *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 150.
- <sup>33</sup>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 182.
- <sup>34</sup>. See Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1973, pp. 64-7.
- <sup>35</sup>. I have written of this in my earlier paper for the Irfan Colloquium and therefore allude to it here only briefly. See "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity during His Western Travels'.
- <sup>36</sup>. Mahmúd-i-Zarqání. *Mahmúd's Diary*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1998, p. 55.
- <sup>37</sup>. *The Bahá'í World*. vols. 1-12, 1925-54. rpt. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. *Bahá'í World*, vol. 12. p. 668.
- <sup>38</sup>. *Diary of Juliet Thompson*, *The*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983, p. 260.
- <sup>39</sup>. *ibid.*

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- <sup>40</sup>. See Wendi Momen, 'The Two Wings of Humanity: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Articulation of the Equality of Women and Men During His Western Travels'.
- <sup>41</sup>. See, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 182; and *Promulgation*, pp. 134, 284.
- <sup>42</sup>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 8 January 1981.
- <sup>43</sup>. Mrs Charles Lincoln Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois. Quote in Nathan Rutstein, *Corinne True: Faithful Handmaid of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1987, p. 42.
- <sup>44</sup>. See Gregory, 'Inter-Racial Amity', *Bahá'í World*, vol. 2, pp. 281-5.
- <sup>45</sup>. 'As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 133.
- <sup>46</sup>. *ibid.* p. 163.
- <sup>47</sup>. Commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light*, para. 3.16.
- <sup>48</sup>. The first time women were eligible to be elected to a Local Spiritual Assembly was in 1912 after 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to the Chicago House of Spirituality explaining that a new election should be held to include women. The new body included both men and women members. See Anthony A. Lee, Peggy Caton, Richard Hollinger, Marjan Nirou, Nader Saiedi, Shahin Carrigan, Jackson Armstrong-Ingram and Juan R. I. Cole, 'The Service of Women on the Institutions of the Bahá'í Faith', presented at the New Zealand Bahá'í Studies Association Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1988.
- <sup>49</sup>. See Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, pp. 73-81, 82.