

CHAPTER 5

The Baha'i Faith and Globalization 1900-1912

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Any effort to study the early twentieth century Baha'i approach to the process now known as globalization is inevitably hampered by the fact that the Baha'is were not using the term. The Baha'i Faith was, however, evolving its own strategies that could be called globalistic, both in terms of the geographical spread of its community and the beliefs and attitudes of its members. `Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), the religion's living head, was coordinating the effort based on the principles laid down in the writings of his father, Baha'u'llah (whose works constituted the core of Baha'i scripture). Baha'is (in this paper, the American Baha'is in particular) found a variety of resources related to globalization in their native cultures; some supported the Baha'i Faith's global principles and priorities, while others undermined the Faith's ultimate, global goals.

Globalization in Early Twentieth Century American Christian Perspective

The culture of the early twentieth century American Baha'is witnessed a sort of globalization driven by the technology and social organization of their own branch of the human race, which tied the globe together with telegraph wires, steel rails, shipping lines, and advanced weaponry on its own terms. This globalization was perceived by many Westerners, such as Americans and British, as proving the religious superiority of Christianity, the cultural superiority of the west, and possibly even the racial superiority of the European peoples. In this context, Christian missionaries – active globalizers in their own right – usually labored both to Christianize and “civilize” – that is, to Westernize – the so-called benighted heathen that constituted the majority of the inhabitants of the globe. One can find an excellent example of this attitude toward the rest of humanity in the paper that first introduced the Baha'i Faith publicly to a large Western audience. Henry Jessup's “The Religious Mission of the English Speaking Nations” had as its purpose to describe the “four elements which make up the power for good in the English speaking race and fit it to be the Divine instrument for blessing the world”, in other words, to spread Christianity around the globe. This triumphalist

document ends with an example of how the Christ-spirit is working in the heathen world, presumably to leaven it and prepare it for Christ: it quotes Edward G. Browne, the British Orientalist and scholar of the Babi and Baha'i Faiths, about "the Babi saint, named Behâ Allah" (Jessup 1893: 1125-26).

This attitude of Western superiority, pervasive in the late nineteenth century, had important consequences for the spread of Christianity. Browne himself offered the following observation about the matter:

I have often heard wonder expressed by Christian missionaries at the extraordinary success of Bahai missionaries, as contrasted with the almost complete failure of their own. 'How is it', they say, 'that the Christian Doctrine, the highest and noblest which the world has ever known, though supported by all the resources of Western civilization, can only count its converts in Mohammedan lands by twos and threes, while Bahaim can reckon them by thousands?' The answer to my mind is as plain as the sun at mid-day. Western Christianity, save in the rarest cases, is more Western than Christian, more racial than religious; and, by dallying with doctrines plainly incompatible with the obvious meaning of its Founder's words, such as theories of 'racial supremacy', 'imperial destiny', 'survival of the fittest', and the like, grows steadily more, rather than less, material. Did Christ belong to a 'dominant race', or even to a European 'white' race? ... The dark skinned races to whom the Christian missionaries go are not fools... they clearly see the inconsistency of those who, while professing to believe that the God they worship incarnated Himself in the form of an Asiatic man – for this is what it comes to – do nevertheless habitually and almost instinctively express, both in speech and action, contempt for the 'natives' of Asia. (Browne 1926, cited in Sprague 1907: 15)

To what extent did the American Baha'is, by the first decade of the twentieth century, possess a different perspective? It cannot be said that they completely lacked the common prejudices of Westerners - *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Volume One* documents that Ibrahim Kheiralla, the founding teacher of the American Baha'i community, taught a belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and in the inferiority of Catholicism, Mormonism, and Islam (Stockman 1985: 67-69).

But it appears that various factors mitigated some of the common Western attitudes and myths of superiority. The American Baha'is' prophet was most definitely an Asiatic man, as was his son and the head of the Faith. They had been taught their new religion by Asian missionaries. Their religion was not part of triumphalist Western culture and society; its origin and heartland lay elsewhere. At least some Americans became Baha'is because of their suspicion about the claims of the superiority of Christianity and perhaps partly of claims of superiority of their own culture. Inevitably, the fact that about 95% of their religion's followers - including a few of the most prominent members in the United States - were Iranians also served as an antidote to Eurocentrism.

It should be noted that Baha'is were not the only Americans who rejected the superiority of Christianity. It was a theme in the writings of Emerson and other Transcendentalists as far back as the 1830s, and can be seen in the European Enlightenment much earlier. Americans manifested it in their interest in Swedenborgianism (a mystical and doctrinally heretical Christian teaching) in the early nineteenth century and in Spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1870 and 1920, some thousands became converts to Theosophy, Vedanta Hinduism, and forms of Buddhism. Such conversion often, though not always, accompanied a rejection of Christianity. Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a co-founder of Theosophy, expressed a virulent intolerance for Christianity, and Henry Steel Olcott, her spiritual partner, actively wrote against Christian missionary efforts in his adopted homeland of India (Prothero 1996: 64, 157). Influential on many Americans who rejected Christianity were voices such as Swami Vivekananda, who traveled across the United States in the 1890s and often engaged in debates with Christian missionaries about the need to reform so-called "Christian" civilization, rather than "save" India. But notably different was the positive tone about Christianity in the writings of most Baha'is, versus the criticisms and invective often heard from Blavatsky, Olcott, Vivekananda, and others (against each other, as well as against Christianity). (*ibid.*: 122, 164-67).

In spite of their biases against Christianity, Westerners who adopted Theosophy and Buddhism often retained a strong belief in the cultural superiority of the West. Stephen Prothero's biography of Olcott has as one of its principal themes Olcott's persistent attempt to remake Hinduism and Buddhism in "modern" and "liberal" terms. Such efforts appear to be less common or more muted among the Baha'is.

Globalistic Baha'i Teachings

There are many important Baha'i teachings that relate centrally to the concept of globalization. The oneness of humanity, enunciated in Baha'u'llah's early work *The Hidden Words*: "Know ye not why we created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other" (Baha'u'llah 1992: 29) was itself enough to convince Pauline Hannen, a prominent early twentieth-century Washington D.C. Baha'i, that she had to overcome her prejudices against black people and work for interracial reconciliation. Later writings by Baha'u'llah and `Abdu'l-Baha helped open many Baha'is up to fellowship with peoples of other religions and backgrounds. Iranian Baha'is of Muslim background were breaking down ethnic barriers and interacting with Iran's Jews and Zoroastrians as early as the 1880s. As a result, converts from those groups soon entered the Iranian Baha'i community, and after a

generation or two of hyphenated status (such as “Jewish-Baha'is”; in other words, as partial members of both groups) they became integrated into the majority Iranian Baha'i community. There are also stories about the interaction of Persian and American Baha'is that are illustrative of the desire to mix and integrate. One Persian Baha'i said to Sydney Sprague, an American who became a Baha'i in Paris about 1903, “I once thought I was polluted if I was obliged to shake hands with a Christian—now I am glad to shake hands with all the world”. (Sprague 1986: 28)” Presumably the reference to pollution is a comment on the nineteenth century Muslim view that non-Muslims were ritually unclean and thus should not be touched.

There are many anecdotes that can be offered about how converts to the Baha'i Faith overcame cultural restrictions on intercourse with other groups. Sydney Sprague's two books *A Year with the Bahais of India and Burma* and *The Story of the Bahai Movement: A Universal Religion* are filled with examples of Baha'is of Zoroastrian background assisting Baha'is of Muslim background in Bombay, Baha'is of Buddhist background working with Baha'is of Muslim background in Mandalay, of Zoroastrian and Muslim Baha'is nursing a Baha'i of Christian background (Sprague himself) in Lahore.

The Baha'i concept of the oneness of religion (and progressive revelation) is another important factor relating to globalization. This teaching in itself would not be the basis of good relations with people of other backgrounds, however, if it were not coupled with a Baha'i tendency to accentuate the positive. One could, after all, recognize divine commonalities and still stress the differences between religions. Sydney Sprague offered an astute observation of the result of this desire to stress the positive:

The Bahai propagandist in India has not the difficulty that besets the Christian missionary, that of pulling down; his duty only is to build on to what is already there, for the Bahai teaches that the essence and truths of all religions are one; he sees Hindu, Buddhist, and Mohammedan with the same eye, and he reveres the prophets of each; instead of showing where they were wrong, he shows where they were right. . . he shows their adherents that a further revelation has come through the teaching of Baha Ullah. . . . The Bahai does not disdain the prophecies which have come down to us from all religions, but points out that they have all referred to the coming of a great teacher who should establish peace and harmony on the earth (Sprague 1907: 13-14).

Sprague's reference to prophecy is noteworthy. The fulfillment of prophecy was a very important emphasis in the early Baha'i communities worldwide. Because prophecy consists of metaphors and symbols that almost by definition are ambiguous and subject to many interpretations, it provided Baha'is with an important vehicle for emphasizing commonality among the religions. Edward G. Browne's *A Year Amongst the Persians* shows that in 1887-88 Baha'is attempted to convert Browne to the Baha'i Faith - or at least to dialogue with him -

through the claim that Baha'u'llah fulfilled biblical prophecy. The fulfillment of biblical prophecy was central to conversion of Americans to the Baha'i Faith in the nineteenth century and remains important to this day. In a sense, one could say that a central Baha'i teaching in the year 1900 was that Baha'u'llah was the return of "fill in the blank", with the blank being the traditional prophetic figure of each culture and religion. Prophetic interpretation often became a bridge between cultures; Iranian Baha'i communities wrote letters to American Baha'i communities about the fulfillment of biblical texts.

The importance of prophecy appears to have diminished about 1910 when 'Abdu'l-Baha began to stress the social teachings of Baha'u'llah. They provided a set of teachings that not only appealed across religions traditions, but to the non-religious as well. Many of these teachings - such as a universal auxiliary language, reduction of armaments and collective security, and a world government - are clearly globalistic. They provided Burmese, Iranian, and American Baha'is with much more powerful theological and globalistic bonds than swapping accounts of fulfilled prophecies and stories about the life of 'Abdu'l-Baha. In the early 1920s Shoghi Effendi, recognizing this, made it a policy to take the first reasonably comprehensive introduction to the Baha'i Faith (and especially its social teachings) - Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* - and commission translations of it into as many languages as possible, thereby giving the Baha'is of the world a common textbook on their Faith.

'Abdu'l-Baha's Approach to Fostering Globalistic Efforts

Much can be said about 'Abdu'l-Baha's efforts to foster globalism. As soon as the Western Baha'is had acquired a basic understanding of their Faith, he immediately sent out inter-ethnic teams of travelling teachers to demonstrate together Baha'i unity. Sydney Sprague was the first; during his second day on pilgrimage in Akka, Palestine, in late 1904, 'Abdu'l-Baha summoned him and said "I wish you to leave for India to-night". Sprague was accordingly on a 2 a.m. ferry boat from Akka to Haifa to catch a British steamer to India. He accompanied fifteen Baha'is of Muslim and Zoroastrian background, and since none knew English, he used the voyage to learn Persian. By living with the local Baha'is rather than staying at fancy hotels and clubs catering to foreigners, the Western Baha'is broke down cultural barriers and unspoken taboos about social mixing of the ethnic groups.

'Abdu'l-Baha's instructions to Harlan Ober, who accompanied Hooper Harris and two Persians on a trip to India in 1906, give a further glimpse into his approach. To both men he said, "Serve the people, speak in the meetings, love them in reality and not through politeness,

embrace them as I have embraced you. Even if you should never speak, great good will be accomplished". In short, 'Abdu'l-Baha wanted the men to behave very differently than the Christian missionaries described by Browne. 'Abdu'l-Baha added that few conversions could be expected from the trip, but that its impact would be great nevertheless (**Harris 1907: n.p.**).

'Abdu'l-Baha's instructions about the Hindu approach to certain theological subjects is also illuminating because of his use of simile, rather than attempting to criticize Hindu doctrine. He said:

I will now speak to you about India. In India people believe God is like the sea and man is like a drop in the sea, or that God is like the warp and man is like the woof of this coat. But Baha'is believe that God is like the sun and man is like a mirror facing the sun ('Abdu'l Baha quoted in Kidder 1953-63: 869).¹

'Abdu'l-Baha was also quick to emphasize the importance of examples of Baha'i sacrifice for each other. One of the most poignant involves Sydney Sprague. In Lahore, Sprague caught typhoid fever and nearly died. All over India, the Baha'is prayed for his recovery. Two Baha'is nursed him devotedly until they were exhausted. A third, a Zoroastrian Baha'i named Kai Khosroe, travelled up from Bombay to help them, but four days after his arrival he caught the cholera and died within twenty hours. His death was seen as a sacrifice for Sprague's life:

"He was a humble shopkeeper," they said, "and had no ability to teach, but you are able to go about and teach great multitudes; he could only give his life to serve the Cause of God, and he was glad to do it." Noble Kai Khosroe, you will always be remembered as the first Oriental friend to give his life for a Western Bahai brother (Sprague 1986: 52).

Those are Sprague's words. But 'Abdu'l-Baha echoed them in a tablet to Sprague:

Thou didst laud and extol... the self-sacrificial Kay-Khusraw. Thy comments are indeed just. Bethink thee, how vast is the distance that separates thy country from the land of Kay-Khusraw! And yet how profound the influence of the Bahá'í spirit, that it hath moved this Easterner to lay down his life for thee, who art a Westerner! How real the love, and how true the sense of affinity with humankind! Happy indeed are those who have come to know the true potency of this love! ('Abdu'l-Baha 1916: 656).²

¹ Quoted in Elizabeth Kidder et al. "Harlan Ober", in *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. 13, 1953-63, 869. It should be noted that since these words are not known to have come from a written statement by 'Abdu'l-Baha, they should not be considered part of the Baha'i sacred writings.

² 'Abdu'l-Baha to Sydney Sprague, translated by the Research Department of the Baha'i World Centre in 1987. The original translation was made by Ameen Fareed in June 1906 and published in *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society, 1916), III, 656 (translation data found in Thornton Chase Papers).

Activism

Activism is the tendency to view religion more from the point of view of organizations and efforts to do good deeds than from the point of view of prayer, contemplation, and the mystic life. Both activist and quietist tendencies have always existed in religions. Philip Schaff, a Swiss theologian and historian who emigrated to America in the mid nineteenth century, captured the tendency of American religion toward activism when he said that “American Christianity . . . is more Petrine than Johannean; more like busy Martha than like pensive Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus”. (Schaff 1961: 95). Activism tends to be this-worldly, whereas the contemplative side of religion is more other-worldly.

In the American context, activism was manifested in the democratic nature of congregational organization, in the numerous committees and voluntary organizations associated with local churches, and in the hundreds of national social organizations to foster Sabbath observance, temperance, sale of Bibles, organization of Sunday schools, and other social and religious improvements. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Americans were seen by European observers as obsessed with this side of religion. But the activist side of religion has steadily expanded in importance and is now an important aspect of globalization, which stresses religious competition in the marketplace of ideas and in the doing of good deeds, and more generally such traits as self-expression and creation of a civil society.

The American Theosophist Henry Steel Olcott was central to introducing activist ideas to Sri Lankan Buddhism in the late nineteenth century, and the British influence on India was one reason for the rise of the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and other Hindu organizations for social development (institutions Olcott influenced as well) (Prothero 1996: 86-115, 134-136). One of Olcott's principal criticisms of the religious practices of the South Asians was their passivity and lack of concern about organization. Thus he criticized his former pupil and friend, Dharmapala, as a “poor man of business” who exhibited “ignorance of the business methods by which only can one carry on social reforms to practical results” (*ibid.*: 165).

While it is difficult to assess the role of the American Baha'is in fostering activism in the Baha'i communities of Asia, it tentatively appears that their role was in encouraging and strengthening an activist tendency that already existed in the Baha'i Faith rather than

introducing such a tendency to the community.³ Thus when American Baha'is arrived in Mandalay they found the local Baha'is had already set up a “Young Men’s Bahai Association”, no doubt modelled after a YMCA founded by Protestant missionaries and Olcott’s Young Men’s Buddhist Associations. In Kungjagoon, a Baha'i village in the Irrawaddy River delta, American Baha'is found a Baha'i clinic.

But perhaps the best examples are in Iran. The Baha'is had established the Tarbiyat School for Boys in 1897, before any contact with American Baha'is. However, it was the 1908 arrival of Sydney Sprague to serve as headmaster that helped modernize and Westernize the school, and the arrival of four American Baha'i women in Iran between 1909 and 1911 helped foster the establishment of the Tarbiyat School for Girls, the opening of a Baha'i-operated clinic that eventually evolved into Mithaqiyyih Hospital, and stimulated thinking about the emancipation of women in the Iranian Baha'i community. Charles Mason Remey, who visited both Iran and Burma during his round the world trip in 1910, put the matter this way:

There is as much in the East for the Occidental as there is in the West for the Oriental . . . Our friends of the Orient are rich in the love and unity of the Cause. We, upon the other hand, are full of initiative force and activity. It is necessary that both should combine forces and work together, each strengthening the other. In reality, the East and the West are very dependent one upon the other. . . . The Bahais in Turkistan, India and Burma, as well as in other countries, are also facing the educational problem, and they, too, need our assistance.

By assistance I mean our cooperation in starting these enterprises. . . . They do not need our money to support their institutions. . . . The Bahais of the East represent the most progressive of the people. They are prosperous. . . . The way in which I feel we can best serve is through helping the friends there to inaugurate and start needed good works (Remey 1910: 2-6).

One is struck by how Remey’s words echo the concept of activism, but it is an activism that is also found among the non-American Baha'is, who are “progressive” and “prosperous”.

Absent is any overt criticism of them.

‘Abdu'l-Baha seems to have agreed with Remey’s view. He encouraged the Baha'is of the United States to organize the Persian-American Educational Society in 1909, a nonprofit organization that funnelled educational textbooks and other development-related materials to Iran. While Persian Baha'is were sending thousands of dollars in contributions to the United States to help the Americans build the first Baha'i temple in the West, Americans were

³ This is not the place to explore whether Baha'u'llah’s writings are activist because of direct western influence on his thought, whether revelation can exist completely independently of the culture into which it comes, or whether latent and unrecognized tendencies toward activism in Baha'i culture were released by contact with Westerners.

sending hundreds of dollars in contributions to Iran to help provide scholarships to children wishing to attend the Tarbiyat Schools for Boys and Girls. In this way, lines of mutual support and collaboration were created across the sea, tying the Baha'i communities together.

Conclusion

In summary, in the first decade of the twentieth century, even though it lacked the human resources to make a significant impact on the globalization of human society, one sees the Baha'i religion marshalling its theological, cultural, spiritual, and human resources as best it could to create a truly global religious community, one reflective of its belief in the oneness of humanity and capable of modestly demonstrating to the public its commitment to unity. Decades before the term globalization was coined, the Baha'i Faith was actively pursuing globalistic policies.

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