The Bahá'í Faith in the United States, 1921 to the Present

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In the last ten years considerable progress has been made in the study of the origins of the Bahá'í Faith in North America. Peter Smith's ground-breaking work has been succeeded by studies by Richard Hollinger and myself, which have helped fill in many details and reinterpret some aspects of the community's development. We are already ripe for a new generation of Bahá'í scholars to look at the same data and come to new conclusions about North American Bahá'í origins. But a more urgent priority remains: study of the more familiar ground of 1921 to the present. Other than Loni Bramson's study of the rise of the Administrative Order in the 1920s, very little has been done on this period. Its greater familiarity is deceiving; just because we know the American Bahá'ís had a series of plans that set their priorities, from 1937 to the present, does not mean we know everything we need to know about the community. The sociological dimension, in particular, is lacking: who became Bahá'ís during this period, and why? This paper can make only the most preliminary stab at some of the sociological issues; much research remains to be done.

Bahá'í History: 1921-63. On 28 November 1921 `Abdu'l-Bahá died, plunging the Bahá'í world into grief. In his Will and

Testament (q. v.) He appointed Shoghi Effendi to be His successor, and specified the mechanism for establishing local and national spiritual assemblies and the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi took the Will and Testament as his mandate for organizing the Bahá'ís, and used the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* as his mandate for spreading the Bahá'í religion to the entire planet in a systematic fashion. The American Bahá'í community was to be his chief instrument for accomplishing both goals.

Shoghi Effendi wrote the American Bahá'ís within months of assuming the Guardianship that local spiritual assemblies should be elected in every locality having nine or more Bahá'ís, and that the Bahai Temple Unity Executive Committee should evolve into a national spiritual assembly. While some opposition to the new emphasis on organization occurred, in the form of Ahmad Sohrab's New History Society and Ruth White's attack on the authenticity of the Will and Testament, the vast majority of Bahá'ís came gradually to accept Shoghi Effendi's leadership and the new emphasis on organization it entailed. By April 1928 the number of spiritual assemblies in the continental United States had grown to forty-five. Conversion of the Bahai Temple Unity into a national organization took four years; in 1925 Shoghi Effendi recognized it as the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada.

An important question that has been asked in recent years is what impact did the creation of the Administrative Order have on Bahá'í membership in North America? There is a persistent rumor

in the community that when Shoghi Effendi called on Bahá'ís to elect local and national spiritual assemblies, many Bahá'ís became disillusioned with the Faith and abandoned their membership. Because membership was poorly defined in the teens, it is indeed difficult to determine what impact the Guardian's call for a radical shift in community style had on the Bahá'ís. In the teens the Bahá'í community could be described as having a "core" of people who were primarily committed to the Bahá'í Faith--or perhaps more precisely, committed to the Bahá'í Faith and `Abdu'l-Bahá simultaneously--and a broad fringe of sympathizers who liked many Bahá'í ideals, but liked many ideals in other religions and philosophies as well. In the 1920s this vague situation was replaced by a clear and more rigid membership requirement. Undoubtedly many sympathizers were lost; but what about the "core"?

The first available data are Bahá'í membership lists for the Occident compiled in the fall of 1899. They included the names of about 1467 persons. Richard Hollinger, who has access to the Ibrahim Kheiralla papers, says that many persons were missed by the membership census. Perhaps 2000 or more people took some of Kheiralla's lessons or expressed interest in the Faith. But what fraction of the Bahá'ís were committed, what fraction were only partially interested, and what fraction were actually sympathizers whose loyalties lay elsewhere cannot be easily or accurately judged. One could say that the "core" had 1000 and the "sympathizers" another 1000, but this is purely a guess.

However, one can say that the "core" probably was not less than 500 or more than 1500; and the total number of Bahá'ís, including the sympathizers, was surely less than 3000.

The United States government took religious censuses in 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936; these numbers are useful for defining what I have called the "extended" Bahá'í community (because when reporting numbers to the census in 1906 and 1916, the Bahá'ís used the broadest definition possible and usually included sympathizers). Elsewhere I have argued that the 1906 figure of 1280 Bahá'ís in the United States failed to include about 400 Bahá'ís, mostly of the "core" type (because New York City, a few small communities, and all isolated believers were not included) but probably included about 500 or 600 sympathizers; thus the "core" community was about 1000 and the "extended" community about 1600.[1] Of course, one cannot take these numbers too seriously, because they are very rough; it is not impossible that the "core" was as few as 500 or as large as 1500, and the "extended" community could have included 2000 or 2500 people. Our data are not complete. But the fact that the numbers are approximately the same as they were in 1899 suggests that whatever membership loss Kheiralla's disaffection had caused in 1900 was largely eliminated six years later.

The 1916 census reported 2884 Bahá'ís, clearly indicating considerable growth in the community. But was this growth in the

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[1] Robert Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism* (Th. D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1990), 28-29.

core community or in the extended community, or both? I have not studied the archival records for the teens as thoroughly as for the earlier period, and the records do not seem to be as useful anyway (Thornton Chase loved to give numbers of active Bahá'ís in his letters, and I am not sure whether anyone in the teens did the same). But a membership list drawn up four years later for purely internal purposes--and therefore presumably counting the "core" community--gives some indication of the situation in the teens. Admitedly, 1920 is four years after 1916, and an episode of Covenant-breaking (the "Chicago Reading Room affair) had occurred in between. But let us assume, for sake of argument, that the Reading Room did not cause a significant loss of membership nationwide (and there is no evidence that I know of that it affected membership).

The October 1920 membership list, compiled by Alfred Lunt, a member of the Bahai Temple Unity Executive Committee, has 1234 names on it. A few small communities were not included in the 1920 list, and most believers outside metropolitan areas were not included, so possibly we could adjust the number upwards by 200 or 300. This suggests that the "core" community had remained roughly the same or had grown modestly since 1906, and that the bulk of the growth suggested by the 1916 census was in the "extended" community of sympathizers. One community--Detroit--not knowing how to define its membership, included three lists, of "active," "semi-active," and "interested" persons, with 7, 10, and 4 names respectively.

A year and a half later, in March 1922, Lunt compiled another list at the request of Shoghi Effendi; it contained 1368 names. It included some communities missed in the 1920 list and failed to include some found on the earlier list; and it excluded many isolated Bahá'ís. This list reinforces the impression that the "core" community was about 1500 members.

The 1926 religious census listed 1247 Bahá'ís in the United States, but only included Bahá'ís in localities with local spiritual assemblies, of which there were 44. Groups and isolated Bahá'ís were not counted; they might add 400-500 more Bahá'ís. The 1936 census reports 2584 Bahá'ís in 88 communities, 64 of which had spiritual assemblies; isolated believers far from citiers are still not included.

All these statistics suggest that the "core" Bahá'í community in the United States increased from about 1000 in 1897 to about 1500 in 1926; a very slow increase, and one that could completely disappear if better statistics become available. Probably the number of sympathizers grew, peaking in the early teens when `Abdu'l-Bahá visited, then dropping when controversies over American Bahá'í attitudes toward World War One and Covenant-breaking disrupted the community's unity. Possibly the emphasis on organization caused some sympathizers to distance themselves from the community. But there is no evidence that the size of the core was significantly diminished by Shoghi Effendi's call for the Faith to become organized. Furthermore, within fifteen years of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, the size of the "core" had

doubled, suggesting that organization had proved a crucial innovation in retaining new members and strengthening their commitment.

Also crucial to the deeping process was a new, more precise understanding of the basics of the Faith. Shoghi Effendi wrote a stream of essays to the American Bahá'ís that clarified their understanding of the station of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the status of the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion, the nature of the Bahá'í social and spiritual teachings, and the centrality of the Bahá'í Administrative Order to the Faith's continued progress. These were subsequently published as *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* and *Advent of Divine Justice*.

Bahá'í growth since 1936 has had its periods of rapid expansion, followed by plateaus--the great depression and 1968-74 were times of particularly rapid increase, while the post-World War Two period and the 1980s were times of very slow expansion--but the number of Bahá'ís in the United States has continued to increase, roughly doubling every fifteen years.

Growing membership, better understanding of the basic teachings, and stronger organization in turn allowed the launching of systematic plans for growth. In 1937 Shoghi Effendi gave the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada a Seven Year Plan. It had three principal goals: the opening of every republic of Latin America to the Bahá'í religion through the settlement of pioneers; completion of

the exterior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Ill.; and establishment of at least one local spiritual assembly in every state in the United States and in every province in Canada. When the plan began eleven states and provinces had no Bahá'ís at all; thirty-four lacked spiritual assemblies. In spite of World War Two, which hampered transportation, prevented the obtaining of construction materials, and made it nearly impossible for Bahá'í pioneers to find housing in their goal areas, all of the goals were won by 1944. The number of North American Bahá'ís increased to about 4800. Indeed, some goals were exceeded, with local spiritual assemblies being elected in fifteen Latin American cities; by 1947 this number had increased to thirty-seven.

Shoghi Effendi gave the American Bahá'ís a two-year respite before launching the Second Seven Year Plan in 1946. The new plan called for completion of the interior ornamentation of the House of Worship and its landscaping, so that it could be dedicated; the establishment of National Spiritual Assemblies in South America, Central America, and Canada; and the reestablishment of Bahá'í communities in war-torn Europe. American pioneers soon opened eleven European countries to the Bahá'í Faith. The number of local spiritual assemblies in the continental United States continued to rise. The Canadian National Spiritual Assembly was first elected in 1948; one each for Central America and South America followed in 1951. In 1950 Shoghi Effendi announced a supplemental two year plan to open

much of Africa to the Faith.

In 1953 the Seven Year Plan was successfully concluded. Shoghi Effendi designated it a Holy Year, for it was the centenary of the beginning of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. It also marked the beginning of the Ten Year Crusade, an international plan to take the Bahá'í Faith to the rest of the nations and major territories on the planet. The United States Bahá'ís were given a major share of the goals. In the first six months of the plan five of the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly resigned to go pioneering; a substantial fraction of America's active Bahá'í membership spent all or part of the next decade in distant lands. The result was a quadrupling of the number of localities worldwide where Bahá'ís resided; the number of languages in which Bahá'í literature was translated more than tripled; and the number of National Spiritual Assemblies worldwide increased from twelve to fifty-six. American Bahá'ís were responsible for perhaps a third of the goals of the plan.

Growth on the homefront also continued between the years 1953 and 1963. The number of Bahá'ís in the United States had grown to almost 7000 by 1956. By 1963 membership exceeded ten thousand, and enrollments were increasing that number by at least 1200 per year. A third of the new enrollments were youth (aged 15-20).

Bahá'í History: 1964-92. In 1964 the Universal House of Justice announced an international Nine Year Plan. The United States was asked to form local and national spiritual assemblies

in various Caribbean island groups and to assist nearly two dozen national spiritual assemblies all over the world by sending traveling teachers or by helping them acquire properties. On the homefront, the number of local spiritual assemblies was to be raised from 334 to 600, with at least two in every state, and the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided was to grow from 1650 to 3000. Particular efforts to reach Japanese-, Chinese-, Hispanic-, native-, and African-Americans were specified.

All the goals were exceeded, perhaps by the largest margin in American Bahá'í history. In 1973 the United States had 824 local spiritual assemblies and Bahá'ís resided in 4809 localities. Bahá'í teaching efforts received an unexpected boost from the times; the 1960s were turbulent, causing many to despair for solutions to the world's problems and search for new alternatives. The atmosphere fostered by the rapidly growing civil rights movement of the late fifties and early sixties was perhaps a major cause for the ten to fifteen percent annual membership growth rate that the American Bahá'í community experienced in the early 1960s; by 1969 the number of American Bahá'ís had grown to thirteen thousand.

The late sixties and early seventies, however, saw both the greatest social unrest and the most rapid Bahá'í growth. Sociologists have noted that after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the bloody Tet offensive in Vietnam, and race riots--all in the first half of 1968--the youth culture took a radical turn. A comparatively small number of

those searching youth became Bahá'ís, but the number had an enormous impact on the Bahá'í community. From thirteen thousand in 1969, the American Bahá'í community grew to eighteen thousand in 1970; to thirty-one thousand in 1971; forty thousand in 1972; sixty thousand by 1974. Bahá'ís experienced conversions at practically every meeting. Older Bahá'ís became used to a community filled with persons with long hair, ragged clothing, and youthful enthusiasm. Bahá'í fund revenues jumped, and the increased demand on services provided by the Bahá'í National Center necessitated an increase in its staff from a handful to over a hundred in a few years. The Bahá'í Publishing Trust made so much money from the enormous demand for Bahá'í books that it was able to buy a new building with cash. Several large Bahá'í youth conferences were held.

Sudden growth had its negative effects. The vast majority of the new Bahá'ís knew little about their new religion's teachings; many of the newly-formed local spiritual assemblies had difficulty functioning as a result. Withdrawal rates also jumped; perhaps a third to a half of the new believers did not remain Bahá'ís. Since the withdrawals occurred over many years, subsequent Bahá'í membership growth appeared to be less than it really was; for example, by 1979 the American Bahá'í membership had grown to seventy-five thousand, only fifteen thousand more than in 1974, but the increase reflected a much stronger enrollment rate than the net growth suggested. Other new Bahá'ís ceased to remain active and never notified the Bahá'í

National Center that they no longer considered themselves Bahá'ís; as a result the percentage of the American Bahá'í membership with known addresses dropped. Nevertheless, the American Bahá'í community had permanently and significantly grown in size.

Not all of the expansion of the membership was caused by conversions from the youth culture; the Nine Year Plan was also the time the American Bahá'í community discovered mass teaching. In the rural south, particularly in South Carolina, the African-American population proved particularly receptive and joined the Faith by the thousands. Consolidation of the new believers proved more difficult and occurred at a slower pace. In South Carolina a permanent facility, the Louis G. Gregory Institute, was established in 1972 to deepen the local Bahá'ís. Hispanic and native American populations also were attracted to the Bahá'í Faith, particularly in the Southwest.

The Five Year Plan, 1974-79, saw a significant expansion in the number of local spiritual assemblies; from about 900 to 1488, eighty-eight more than the plan called for. Diversification of the community continued. The number of Bahá'í communities on Indian reservations with local spiritual assemblies exceeded twenty-five. After 1975 Southeast Asian refugees began to enter the United States; some had been Bahá'ís in Vietnam and Cambodia, more had converted in Asian refugee camps, and others became Bahá'ís in the United States. This introduced an entirely new ethnic group into the American Bahá'í community. After the

Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978, Iranian Bahá'í refugees also began to enter the United States; eventually about ten thousand settled.

One goal of the Five Year Plan--increasing the use of the media--proved of great importance when the persecution of the Iranian Bahá'ís began in 1978. The American Bahá'ís had developed contacts with the media and, to some extent, with government officials, and now the experience proved useful. Throughout the Seven Year Plan (1979-86) and the Six Year Plan (1986-92) press coverage of the Iranian Bahá'ís was considerable, articles about the American Bahá'í community steadily increased, and the consequent awareness of the existence of the Bahá'í religion in the mind of the public steadily improved. In 1986 the Universal House of Justice declared that the Bahá'í Faith had emerged from obscurity, a long-sought goal of the Bahá'ís.

The thirteen-year period covered by the two plans, however, saw relatively slow membership growth in the United States. The number of local spiritual assemblies climbed to about seventeen hundred, then gradually dropped to fifteen hundred; total membership grew to a hundred-ten thousand, a statistic that included about ten thousand children not previously counted. Membership growth averaged two to four percent per year, mostly from arriving Persians and Southeast Asians and the conversion of minorities; growth among the white and black middle class was relatively small. The 1980s saw American society take a sharply conservative, individualistic turn, and relatively fewer

Americans were interested in a non-Christian religion with a strong emphasis on law and community participation. "Entry by troops"--a great increase in Bahá'í membership promised by Shoghi Effendi--remained an elusive goal.

The period saw significant consolidation of the Bahá'í membership, however. The youth who enrolled in the late sixties and early seventies completed their education, married, and started families. A significant fraction of the marriages were between European and African-Americans, or between newly-arrived Persians and members of either group. A small number of the converts from among the "baby boomers" became interested in Bahá'í history, Islamic Studies, comparative religion, Arabic and Persian literature, and other fields in the humanities and social sciences; as a result Bahá'í Studies, which had practically ceased to exist from the 1920s to 1966, began to develop. In 1979 an Association for Bahá'í Studies was established. Contacts with the media and government became sufficiently important and numerous to necessitate the creation of a Bahá'í Office of External Affairs in Washington, D.C.

In order to consolidate the rural African-American population in South Carolina, a Bahá'í radio station was established in 1984. Native American converts were assisted by the establishment of the Native American Bahá'í Institute on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona in 1982. First Persian, then Southeast Asian Bahá'ís were aided by a Bahá'í Refugee Office, established in Wilmette in 1984. The 1980s also saw significant

interest in the Bahá'í Faith among Haitians and Chinese residing in the United States. In the late 1980s the United States received goals from the Universal House of Justice to expand the Bahá'í Faith in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe.

Impact on the Bahá'í World. The American Bahá'í community has exerted more influence on the Bahá'í world than any other community except Persia. The United States has been able to play such a significant role in the Bahá'í world for several reasons. The Bahá'í Faith grew much more quickly in America than in Europe and was much less effected by the social unrest and wars that have disrupted much of the twentieth-century world. While the Iranian Bahá'í community was larger and older, it suffered from severe legal limitations and periodic persecution; in contrast, the Bahá'í Faith in the United States was free to grow and express itself. The large, educated, prosperous, and relatively receptive population of the United States allowed that country to establish a relatively large Bahá'í community, and the community was able to produce leaders and provide financial resources unavailable to the Bahá'í Faith elsewhere in the globe.

The American National Spiritual Assembly has served as an organizational model for much of the Bahá'í world; its creation and development, closely monitored by Shoghi Effendi, served as a laboratory for the creation of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Its bylaws became the model for Bahá'í bylaws worldwide, and its organization, committee structure, and policies were copied by many other assemblies. Its editions of the Bahá'í scriptures

have served as the standard editions of many of the English-language texts. Pioneers that it sent out established the Faith in Latin America, the Pacific, Australasia, East Asia, part of Africa, and much of Europe. Its committees oversaw the development of the Faith in many of these regions. Consequently it was instrumental in forming eighty National Spiritual Assemblies, more than half of the world's total.

Of the forty-nine individuals who have been appointed Hands of the Cause of God, at least fourteen were Americans; among them were such luminaries as Horace Holley, Dorothy Baker, Martha Root, and Keith Ransom-Kehler. Seven of the fourteen men who have served on the Universal House of Justice were either American by birth or had been members of the American National Spiritual Assembly. Green Acre, the first American Bahá'í summer school, became a model for similar facilities across the globe.

Impact on American Culture and Society. The American Bahá'í community has grown considerably in size since its establishment in 1894, but remains very small in comparison with the country's total population: about one twentieth of one percent of its people. Its impact on American society and culture, in turn, has been minor to date. Its greatest impact, perhaps, has been in the field of race relations. Among the recognized public advocates of civil rights have been three Bahá'ís: Alain Locke, Robert Abbott, and Nina Gomer DuBois (the wife of W. E. B. Dubois). Louis Gregory, the most prominent African-American Bahá'í, was in touch with nearly every prominent black American

between the years 1910 and 1940, and influenced the thinking of some of them. The support that white Bahá'ís lent to black organizations, especially before 1950, was appreciated and had an impact on them. The first major public statement of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue,* focused on America's race problems and the relevant Bahá'í principles.

The second most important area of Bahá'í impact probably has been the peace movement. Prominent early twentieth-century leaders of the peace movement such as Benjamin Trueblood knew Bahá'ís, and a few Bahá'ís were active in the peace movement. The reemergence of a peace movement in the 1970s and especially the 1980s has slowly received Bahá'í support, especially after 1985, when the Universal House of Justice issued its statement *The Promise of World Peace*.

Finally, Bahá'ís as individuals have made important contributions to American art and music. Of course, it cannot be said that the contributions necessary were always identifiably Bahá'í in any sense. Robert Hayden, one of the most prominent African-American poets, was a Bahá'í. Mark Tobey, a fairly well-known abstract painter, was a Bahá'í, as is John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, the jazz musician. The list of Bahá'í popular musicians and actors is long.

Bahá'í Understanding of the Destiny of America. The Bahá'í scriptures promise that the United States will play a central role in the development of a world civilization. `Abdu'l-Bahá

emphasized that eventually America "would lead all nations spiritually" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace,* 104). `Abdu'l-Bahá's Prayer for America (*Bahá'í Prayers,* 25) elaborates on three themes: that America should become "glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees"; that it must "upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity"; and that it must "promulgate the Most Great Peace." The Bahá'í scriptures thus view the combatting materialism, the promoting of racial equality and oneness, and the advancing of the cause of world peace as the central priorities not just of the American Bahá'ís, but of the nation as a whole.

The impact of the Bahá'í Faith on America seems destined to increase in the future. Its membership continues to grow, at a rate that is strongly influenced by social trends. The ability of the Bahá'ís to articulate the teachings of their religion in a way that is relevant to social needs has been improving. The American Bahá'í community is highly diverse--far more diverse than American society as a whole--and may prove a significant laboratory for the creation of values essential to an increasingly pluralistic society.