

The American Bahá'í Identity, 1894-1921

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What did it mean to become a Bahá'í in the United States, between 1894 and 1921? What sorts of people became Bahá'ís? These two questions are intimately bound up with each other. They also have strong implications about the nature of the Bahá'í community during these years, and to what extent it saw itself as an independent religion.

Various conceptions of Bahá'í membership reigned during this period. A preliminary examination of the data suggests that the American Bahá'í community went through three phases in its understanding of what it means to be a Bahá'í: an initial exclusivistic phase (1894-1900); a phase where the definition of Bahá'í became progressively weaker and less sharply defined (1900-21); and a phase where the definition became sharp and clear again (1921-present). These phases, it must be stressed, are phases in the community's self-understanding; the Bahá'í writings themselves did not change during the period of study. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas--which was available in English translation as early as 1900, and which circulated among some of the deepened American Bahá'ís--clearly advocates an independent religious community with its own organization, Holy Days, and personal

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religious rituals (such as obligatory prayer and fasting). All of these were implemented in the Chicago Bahá'í community between 1900 and 1903. The inclusivistic statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were few, were oral and not written, yet in the teens were repeated over and over by the Bahá'ís with a more inclusivistic mindset. To understand this we must first understand what the definitions of community were; we must look at the types of people attracted; and we must look at the organizational attitudes they brought into the Bahá'í community with them.

Definitions of Membership

While Ibrahim Kheiralla did not offer a definition of Bahá'í membership, his teachings and actions resulted in fairly sharply drawn borders for the American Bahá'í community before 1900. His emphasis that the prophecies of the Bible had been fulfilled by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that their advent signaled the coming of the Kingdom, and that the millennium would be established by 1917 made the American Bahá'ís a somewhat millennial community.¹ In order to become a Bahá'í one had to take a series of lessons from Kheiralla or a teacher authorized by him, and then had to be given *the greatest name* in order to be

¹Ibrahim George Kheiralla, *Beha' U lláh* (Chicago: I. G. Kheiralla, 1900), 480-81.

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considered a member of the community.² As a result of these beliefs and practices, the Bahá'í community was sharply differentiated from the churches and from "metaphysical" groups.³ Although the sources are meager, there is no evidence in Bahá'í records that most Bahá'ís in Chicago, Kenosha, or New York--the three large communities--were regularly attending church on Sundays, not before 1910 at least.⁴ In smaller communities Bahá'ís probably continued to attend local churches--the new Bahá'í groups could not yet supply equivalent

²The word was *bahá* (glory, light, or splendor) and its superlative form *abhá* (most glorious) which were considered the *greatest name*. Some Islamic popular traditions maintain that God has one hundred names, ninety-nine of which were revealed in the Quran; Bahá'u'lláh stated that *bahá* was the hundredth or "greatest" name of God. Bahá'ís usually use the greatest name in compounds, such as *Alláh-u-Abhá*, "God is most glorious," which is used as a greeting.

³The word *metaphysics* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "that branch of speculative inquiry which treats of the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, identity, etc.; theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of Being and Knowing." In popular usage (which the Oxford English Dictionary notes is "inaccurate"), *metaphysics* refers to speculation about religious, philosophical, mystical, "spiritual," or "occult" subjects. J. Stillson Judah, in his book *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), after apologizing that no other term could be found that was appropriate, used the word *metaphysics* to refer to the beliefs of such groups as Theosophy, New Thought, Christian Science, Divine Science, and Spiritualism. It is this use that will be the primary meaning of *metaphysics* in this work.

⁴ Of course, church records might be a better source to check, if they exist.

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services--but even in smaller communities Bahá'ís often attended churches to find people to whom they could proclaim the new religion, and not because they possessed a dual religious identity.⁵

After June 1900 Kheiralla's lessons ceased to be taught, replaced by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Because the latter was the head of the Faith, authorized to pronounce on the meaning of Bahá'u'lláh's text, and because he could be visited in person or could be written about personal questions, the pronouncements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá exerted great influence on the American Bahá'í community.

Kheiralla's system of appointing authorized teachers was discontinued because it was incompatible with Bahá'u'lláh's prohibition of clergy. Thenceforth anyone could teach the Bahá'í Faith to anyone else. Kheiralla's system of teaching people through a series of required lectures lapsed, and was mostly replaced by informal methods of disseminating information on the Bahá'í religion, such as meetings held by individual adherents in

⁵For example, Isabella Brittingham's involvement in Grace Episcopal Church in Union City, New Jersey, in 1899 is mentioned in [Hooper Harris], "Arthur James," MS, New York City Bahá'í Archives, and is discussed in the next chapter. Mary Revell, organizer of the first active Bahá'í community in Philadelphia, in 1907-08, was active in a church and taught the Bahá'í Faith to many parishioners until the minister preached against it; see Philadelphia Bahá'í History Committee of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Philadelphia, "History of the Bahá'í Movement in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America," TS, 103, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

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their homes. Since anyone could hold such meetings, and most Bahá'ís had a very inexact understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, considerable misinformation on the Bahá'í teachings was disseminated.

Because Bahá'u'lláh had forbidden the creation of rituals, the ceremony of giving the greatest name to new believers was abandoned. When one accepted Bahá'u'lláh, one wrote a letter declaring one's faith to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Palestine, instead of enrolling in a local community. Thus, institutions that had developed in the nineteenth century American Bahá'í community, and that had unintentionally helped to define membership in the Bahá'í community, were abolished because they found no justification in Bahá'í scripture.

In this new situation the question of the nature of the Bahá'í Faith was asked anew. Was it an independent religion or an international spiritual reform movement? Questions of what constituted membership in it, and what sort of organization it should have, were dependent on the question of the nature of the Faith. Closely related was the basic question of what to call this new religious community. Bahá'u'lláh did not actually give his following a name, preferring the term "people of Baha" instead.⁶ The word "Bahá'í," like the word "Christian," is an

⁶Interestingly, Bahá'u'lláh never uses the term "Bahá'í" in his published English writings. "People of Bahá" occurs seventy-three times in them. See Lee Nelson, comp., *A Concordance to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Ill.:

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adjective; it is used as a noun only to refer to an adherent. The term "Baháism" was an early invention--Thornton Chase (1847-1912), the first American Bahá'í, claims to have coined it--but it never became popular among American Bahá'ís because it implied, they thought, that the Bahá'í Faith was just another "ism."⁷ Various compounds, such as "Bahá'í Cause," "Bahá'í Movement," "Bahá'í Faith," "Bahá'í revelation" and even "Bahá'í reformation" were proposed; cursory examination of American Bahá'í literature published before 1921 suggests that the first three terms were used with similar frequency, and were synonymous.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about the nature of the Bahá'í community and membership, in practice, did not always make the

Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), entry for "Bahá."

Even though Bahá'u'lláh did not give his people a name, it should not be assumed that he did not intend to establish a religion or a community. As the religious historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out, until the nineteenth century the term "religion" itself did not carry as one of its meanings the notion of an organized community with a body of beliefs and practices; the term "Christianity" did not refer to a religion, as much as to Christian faith and piety, until the seventeenth century; Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians did not possess words equivalent to "Hinduism," "Buddhism," and "Confucianism" respectively until their encounter with Europeans in the nineteenth century; and even Muhammad did not mean "Islam" to be the name of a religion (see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* [N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1978], 15-85).

⁷Thornton Chase to Mrs. Elizabeth A. Rice-Wray, 11 May 1909, Thornton Chase Papers. "Baháisme" became a common word in French and remains acceptable in it to this day; similar terms are used in Arabic, German, Russian, and other European languages as well.

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independent nature of the Bahá'í Faith clear. His written replies to questions asked by Bahá'ís tended to be exclusivistic: for example, he called on Bahá'í communities to organize themselves and advocated following such Bahá'í worship practices as obligatory prayer and fasting.⁸ In his will and testament, part of which was composed as early as 1903, 'Abdu'l-Bahá detailed the establishment of a system of local and national houses of justice and specified how the latter were to be elected; however, he chose deliberately not to publicize these provisions or promulgate administrative details, and they remained unknown until his death.⁹

When sympathizers to the Bahá'í Faith asked him about the Faith, however, he often gave general answers that implied that it was nonexclusive. For example, when a Christian who had accepted 'Abdu'l-Bahá as her teacher asked him how she should

⁸Abdu'l-Baha wrote a series of tablets (letters) to the Chicago Bahá'ís about organization; he also urged the Milwaukee, Portland, and Cincinnati Bahá'ís to organize themselves. Three tablets to American Bahá'ís, urging them to fast, dated 1902, 1904, and 1908, are known. The medium obligatory prayer was translated in 1899--one of the first Bahá'í prayers to be rendered into English--and the other two obligatory prayers were available by 1905. The history of adherence to Bahá'í worship practices in the United States is given in chapter seven.

⁹'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944). The will and testament was read in public after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in November 1921, and then was published by Shoghi Effendi in 1922.

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teach her orthodox Protestant friends about the Bahá'í Faith but not offend them, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have advised her to act as a Christian and remain in the Christian church.¹⁰ Verbal statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the nature of the Bahá'í Faith that apparently were misunderstood or mistranslated provided considerable support for those American Bahá'ís who saw their religion in inclusivist terms.¹¹ A very popular statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that

The Bahai Movement is not an organization. You can never organize the Bahá'í Cause. The Bahai Movement is the Spirit of this Age. It is the essence of all the highest ideals of this century. The Bahai Cause is an inclusive movement: The teachings of all the religions and societies are found here; the Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Mohammedans, Zoroastrians, Theosophists, Freemasons, Spiritualists, et. al., find their highest aims in this Cause. Even the Socialists and philosophers find their theories fully developed in this

¹⁰Myron H. Phelps, *The Master in 'Akká* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1985), 125. It is important to note that Phelps was reporting a story he had heard, not witnessed, and that he was a non-Bahá'í who frequently criticized efforts to organize the Bahá'í religion. Thus the story's accuracy is questionable. Bahá'ís who saw the Bahá'í Faith in inclusive terms, however, tended to seize upon statements such as the one Phelps attributes to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and use them to argue their position.

¹¹It should be pointed out that such statements are not considered part of the Bahá'í scriptures; only words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá that were approved by them in writing are considered scripture. None of the statements attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that are strongly inclusivistic come from his letters or written statements; all of them were given in talks or personal meetings.

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Movement.¹²

In 1929 Shoghi Effendi, apparently commenting on this statement, said it was "an obscure and unauthenticated translation of an oral statement by `Abdu'l-Bahá."¹³ Since many Bahá'ís had become disillusioned with churches before converting to the Bahá'í Faith, many were opposed to organization. They tended to quote `Abdu'l-Bahá's inclusivistic statements heavily and ignored his written statements implying the contrary.

If all of this were not enough to erode the barriers of the Bahá'í community, accessibility to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, ironically, proved to be another factor. From 1900 through 1908 translation of many of Bahá'u'lláh's most important writings made it possible for the American Bahá'ís to study his basic

¹²Words attributed to `Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Isabel Fraser, "The Bahai Temple at Wilmette to be Built with Money from Every Race, Clime and Religion Under the Sun," in *Star of the West*, vol. 5, no. 5 (June 5, 1914), 67. Almost certainly this passage is what Bahá'ís call *pilgrim's notes*, notes made by a Bahá'í pilgrim of statements he or she heard `Abdu'l-Bahá say. Since `Abdu'l-Bahá spoke in Persian he had to be spontaneously translated, and often this was done poorly; furthermore, pilgrims generally did not write down `Abdu'l-Bahá's words until hours after they heard them. For these reasons, pilgrim's notes are not considered Bahá'í scripture. It is not known who attributed these words to `Abdu'l-Bahá, or in what year they first circulated; they probably were first published about 1912. In the teens they were circulated very widely among the American Bahá'ís.

¹³Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters by Shoghi Effendi* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 4.

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teachings, especially his social reform principles. When Bahá'ís realized how sweeping his teachings for reforming the world were, they came to doubt increasingly that they alone could apply such principles to the world's problems; hence some Bahá'ís began to emphasize the need to break down the barriers between Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í and advocated that Bahá'ís join non-Bahá'í organizations, including churches, in order to reform them from within. As a result of all these factors, membership in the Bahá'í Faith became less and less sharply defined from 1900 to the late 'teens. With that change, fewer and fewer membership lists were kept.

Starting in 1922 the new Bahá'í leader, Shoghi Effendi, reversed the trend and emphasized that the Bahá'í Faith was an independent religion. He even standardized the religion's name: the Bahá'í Faith.¹⁴ He insisted that the Bahá'ís elect spiritual assemblies, and added that they had to establish and

¹⁴The author has counted the frequency of Shoghi Effendi's use of the terms "Bahá'í Cause," "Bahá'í Movement," and "Bahá'í Faith" in his letters to the American Bahá'ís written between 1922 and 1929, as published in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974). For the years 1922 to 1925, "Cause" was used between 80 and 88% of the time; "Movement" was used between 8 and 12% of the time; "Faith" was used between 0 and 9 percent of the time, and usually the incidence was about 3%. In the years 1926 to 1928, "Cause" occurred 52 to 54% of the time; "Faith" 36 to 46% of the time, and steadily increased; "Movement" dropped from 9 to 5% of the occurrences. In 1929, "Faith" was preferred 68% of the time, "Cause" was used 30% of the time, and "Movement" appeared only once, or 2% of the time.

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maintain voting lists. Many Bahá'ís were dismayed by the change to an organized religion. Some--probably only a handful, but the number is still unknown--eventually left the Bahá'í Faith.¹⁵ From the 1920s to the present, membership in the Bahá'í community has been clearly defined and can be quantified using voting lists. Since about World War II, when an individual wishes to join the Bahá'í community, s/he signs a card bearing the statement "in signing this card, I declare my belief in Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of God. I also recognize the Báb, His Forerunner, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of His Covenant. I request enrollment in the Bahá'í Community with the understanding that Bahá'u'lláh has established sacred principles, laws, and institutions which I must obey."¹⁶ This text constitutes the nearest thing to an official creed that the Bahá'í Faith has ever possessed.

The foregoing makes it clear that Bahá'í membership has gone through three phases in the United States: a sharp, clearly

¹⁵I have not studied the relevant records in detail; however, I asked the national Bahá'í archivist, who has read the institutional and personal papers of many Bahá'ís, about the number of Bahá'ís who withdrew from the Bahá'í Faith when it became more organized, and he said he thought it was very small (Roger Dahl, personal interview with the author, 23 November 1988). It is likely that many sympathizers of the Bahá'í Faith, loosely considered Bahá'ís in the teens, no longer were so considered after 1922.

¹⁶The text is taken from an enrollment card in the author's possession.

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set-apart, millennial Bahá'í community from 1894 to 1900; an increasingly inclusivistic and increasingly vague definition of Bahá'í membership from 1900 to the teens; and a sharp, administratively defined conception of membership and community since 1921.

Types of People Attracted to the American Bahá'í Community

What attracted Americans to the Bahá'í Faith? Every individual's experience was different, but certain common tendencies can be noted. Religious seekers can be classified to some extent according to *ideal types*. Most individuals, of course, do not fit any ideal type exactly, and some partially match more than one ideal type. But a classification scheme provides a framework for interpretation. It permits one to compare the Bahá'í Faith's attraction and its sources of converts to those of other nonwestern religions.

Comparison of the American Bahá'ís with the American converts to Buddhism is particularly illuminating. Thomas A. Tweed, in his study of American Buddhism, identified three ideal types among its European-American adherents and sympathizers.¹⁷

¹⁷Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington, Ind.: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1992), chapter 3, "Esoterics, Rationalists, and Romantics." I am indebted to his work for the interpretive methodology of this chapter.

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The *esoteric or occult type* studied Neoplatonism, Theosophy, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, or Swedenborgianism before or in addition to Buddhism, and was attracted to it through an interest in "hidden sources of religious truth and meaning." They often had a "metaphysical and cosmological focus" to their interests. In Sydney Ahlstrom's terms, these people were attracted to Buddhism as a "harmonial religion."¹⁸

The *rationalist type* took his inspiration mainly from the skeptical enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, from rationalist Unitarianism, and from Auguste Comte's positivism. They often associated with the Free Religious Association or the Ethical Cultural Society. Most were men.¹⁹

The *romantic or exotic culture type* had his or her religious interests shaped by Romanticism and a concern for the aesthetic. Such sympathizers usually focused their study on Buddhist art, architecture, music, customs, and rituals--Buddhist culture as a whole--rather than on the religion, narrowly defined.²⁰

None of these ideal types fits the American students of the Bahá'í Faith exactly. There are two reasons: the Bahá'í Faith

¹⁸Ibid., 51, 164; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, vol. 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1975), 528.

¹⁹Tweed, *American Encounter with Buddhism*, 60-61.

²⁰Ibid., 69.

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offered different sources of attraction from Buddhism; and the Bahá'ís were generally drawn from lower social and educational strata than the Euro-American Buddhists. Only one Bahá'í is known to have been a member of the Free Religious Association and none are known to have been affiliated with the Ethical Culture Society. No early American Bahá'í mentioned reading Comte. Furthermore, the Bahá'í Faith, as an intellectual and cultural tradition, was new--virtually the entire body of its literature was its scripture--consequently it had not yet developed its thought enough to attract many intellectuals to it. Certainly it had not developed a culture that could interest aesthetes. Hence the ideal types of the Euro-American Buddhists need to be redrawn or replaced in order to fit the American Bahá'ís. Four ideal types seem to describe the American Bahá'ís best: the *scripturalist type*; the *esoteric type*; the *secular-reform type*; and the *romantic-mystical type*.

The Scripturalist Type

The first and most important type was the *scripturalist type*. He or she felt a strong attachment to the Bible as the Word of God or as the primary source of truth. Scripturalists were likely to be mainstream Protestants, but could include persons raised Protestant who had become disillusioned with the churches for a variety of reasons. Generally they were not

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strongly attached to evangelical doctrine or a traditional interpretation of the Bible. They could also be Catholic or Jewish, though only rarely. They were more likely to belong to the middle and lower classes, although some of the upper-middle class Bahá'ís were of this type.²¹

The Bahá'í scriptures say much about Christianity and the Bible; that is one reason many of the American Bahá'ís were scripturalists. Many Americans were attracted to the Bahá'í Faith who had even been active church goers and who had never had a quarrel with Christianity.

Perhaps the best example of a scripturalist is Paul Kingston Dealy (1848-1937).²² The details of his conversion are not available, but it is clear from his writings that he retained a strong love for Christianity after accepting the Bahá'í Faith:

In the great Christian church in which we were reared, we have seen, during this period, the temporal power taken

²¹Based on my experience of the Bahá'í community, I think this type is less common in the 1990s, but remains important, especially in the South.

²²Paul Dealy and his book, *The Dawn of Knowledge and the Most Great Peace*, will figure prominently in this work. Born in Saint John, New Brunswick, Dealy married in 1881 and eventually had four children. After working on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, Dealy and family settled in Chicago, where he worked as a stationary engineer and in 1895 ran for tax assessor. In 1897 he became a Bahá'í; Ibrahim Kheiralla appointed him as the primary Bahá'í teacher in Chicago. He also lectured frequently in Kenosha. In 1899 Dealy and his family moved to the Single-Tax colony of Fairhope, Alabama, where he worked as a farmer the rest of his life.

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away from the Mother Church[,] and all her descendant denominations disturbed, agitated and ived up by the so-called heresies of advanced thinkers and the unorthodox views put forth by leading, eminent professors in the different theological seminaries. In consequence of which, many have wandered from the different folds to embrace new doctrines, and [have been] seduced by the attractive elements of the diversified doctrines, fads and isms established by new thought elements...²³

Clearly, Dealy was extremely conservative in his biblicism and believed liberal interpretations of the Bible had undermined Protestantism. Since Dealy was the teacher of over half the Chicago Bahá'ís--and many of the Kenosha Bahá'ís as well--his view of metaphysical groups as "thoughtless apostacy" must have discouraged persons deeply involved in them from investigating the new religion, and probably discouraged Bahá'ís with interest in metaphysical groups from continuing their study of them. Scripturalists frequently emphasize that they had never joined "metaphysical" groups before becoming a Bahá'í.

It is not known how active Dealy was in the Protestant church before his conversion, but there were Bahá'ís who had been active, church-going Christians until they became Bahá'ís. James Brittingham is a good example. When his sister, Charlotte Emily Brittingham Dixon, became a Bahá'í in 1898, she wrote him about the new religion. But she had to do so cautiously because, James later explained, "she knew I was working in the [Episcopal]

²³Paul Kingston Dealy, *The Dawn of Knowledge and the Most Great Peace* (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society, 1908), 49.

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church and she knew that if she touched the church in any way I would not listen." Because she had to write subtly about her new faith, James thought "she was dealing in Christian Science or Spiritualism or some other funny thing" and he "did not want anything to do with it." But his wife Isabella became interested and dragged him to a Bahá'í meeting, where he heard Kheiralla's lessons on biblical prophecy and the Return of Christ. They "litterally [sic] swept the ground from under our feet, and we accepted it [the Bahá'í Faith] at once," he later explained.²⁴

Once the Brittinghams became Bahá'ís they began to teach the Faith to their fellow parishioners at the Grace Episcopal Church in Union City, New Jersey. A man named Arthur James, who was born in England but had become a naturalized American, was a "very active" member of the church; he sang in the choir and was superintendent of the Sunday school. When the Brittinghams told him about the Bahá'í Faith it struck him as "a terrible blow" because he was "a Church of England man." Nevertheless, the attractiveness of the Bahá'í teaching "was so strong he could not get away from it, and accepted the Truth. . . in the year 1898." Mrs. James, Mr. Charles Jones, and Miss Lillian Kappes also left the church for the Bahá'í Faith. With the Brittinghams they became the core members of the Bahá'í community of northern

²⁴James Brittingham, "My first experiences in the Cause of Baha'U'llah and the Great Message of Eternal Life," MS, pp. 1-2, New York City Bahá'í Archives.

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Hudson County, New Jersey.²⁵

Not all of the scripturalists were active church-going Protestants. Andrew D. Fleming of New York City heard of the Bahá'í Faith from a fellow employee at the same factory in 1904. Fleming had been "brought up in a strict Christian [Congregational] home" and knew the Bible "pretty well" but in 1903 had told his wife, Etta, that the church no longer interested him, much to her grief. Fleming wasn't impressed by what his friend said about the Bahá'í Faith; "I thought it was just another Ism, or Oriental fad that someone had been talking him into." Fleming decided to attend a Bahá'í meeting "to try and set him straight." At the meeting Fleming asked some of the questions about the Bible that had always puzzled him, and for which he had never received satisfactory answers from ministers; the speaker, gave 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answers, however, and they intrigued Fleming. After attending Bahá'í meetings weekly for several months he realized that he believed and had become a Bahá'í. Etta Fleming, meanwhile, prayed fervently that her husband would return to Christianity and even asked her minister to visit the house to talk to him. When the minister was unable to convince Andrew of the error of his ways, and "seemed confused" by her husband's questions, Etta began to investigate

²⁵[Hooper Harris?], "Arthur James," MS, New York Bahá'í Archives. The manuscript seems to have been a eulogy written on the occasion of Mr. James's death.

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the Bahá'í Faith as well. A dream convinced her to pursue her study of the Bahá'í religion, and she eventually joined it.²⁶

Most Kenosha Bahá'ís apparently were scripturalists as well. Bahá'í records in Kenosha and Racine contain no references to metaphysical groups. One Kenosha Bahá'í is known to have been interested in Swedenborgianism when he had been a young man in Sweden, but apparently he never joined a Swedenborgian church.²⁷ In 1904 the Kenosha Bahá'ís were in contact with the local Christian Science church. But there is no evidence that Bahá'ís had been members of the church; more likely, the Christian Scientists were the only church in the city that would maintain ecumenical relations with the Bahá'ís.²⁸

Apparently many Kenosha Bahá'ís had been involved in mainline Protestant churches before conversion. In late 1899 the mainline Protestant churches in Kenosha hired a former missionary, Stoyan Vatralsky, to take some of the Bahá'í lessons

²⁶Untitled personal recollections of Andrew D. Fleming, New York Bahá'í Archives; untitled personal recollections of Etta Fleming, New York Bahá'í Archives. Fleming's congregational background is mentioned on his historical record card, National Bahá'í Archives.

²⁷Paul Voelz (a member of the Kenosha Bahá'í community since 1910), personal interview, 9 July 1984, author's personal papers.

²⁸Kenosha Assembly of Bahá'ís to Chicago Assembly of Bahá'ís, 1 December 1904, p. 1, House of Spirituality Records, National Bahá'í Archives. None of the Kenosha Bahá'ís are known to have been Christian Scientists.

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and give sermons refuting them. Apparently the churches hired Vatralsky because they were losing members to the new religion, which had attracted over two percent of the population of Kenosha by the fall of 1899. Vatralsky's talks produced a controversy that occupied the front pages of Kenosha's newspapers for two months.²⁹ An early Racine Bahá'í recalls that the Racine churches also attacked the Bahá'í Faith in 1899 because church members had converted.³⁰

The conversion stories above share two common motifs: emphasis on the Bible and prophecy, and criticism of "metaphysical" groups. In the story of Legh Wilson Foster, Protestant attitudes are so strong that one finds it difficult to understand why he ever became a Bahá'í at all. On 6 June 1901 Foster tendered his resignation from the Bahá'í Faith. He said that he "can never forget the Holy love, affection and friendship which they [the Chicago Bahá'ís] have so freely given me" and he prayed that God would enable him "to overcome all sin." The

²⁹The best description of the Vatralsky controversy is William Collins, "Kenosha: The history of the second Bahá'í community in the United States," *Bahá'í News*, no. 553 (April 1977), 1-9. Vatralsky's criticisms of the Bahá'í Faith are summarized in Stoyan Krstoff Vatralsky, "Mohammedan Gnosticism in America: The Origin, History, Character, and Esoteric Doctrines of the Truth-Knowers," in *American Journal of Theology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1902), 57-78.

³⁰The controversy in Racine is described in Andrew J. Nelson, "Racine Assembly -- History of," *Bahai Bulletin*, vol. 1, no. 6 (Apr.-May 1909), [p. 17].

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emphasis in the letter on the importance of love suggests that the disunity and disharmony that characterized the Chicago Bahá'ís--Kheiralla had just left the Faith a year earlier--had prompted Foster's decision to withdraw. He closed the letter with three biblical quotations on love, one of which was Jude 21, "Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." His closing salutation was "Yours to all eternity for Our Lord Jesus Christ."³¹

The letter's Christian language is even more striking when one considers that subsequent records indicate that Foster did not leave the Bahá'í community, but remained an active member. Foster's references to Jesus Christ do not seem to have been meant as symbols of distinction between his beliefs and those of the Bahá'ís, but as common beliefs that united them, and that bolstered his arguments about the importance of strengthening the love found in the Chicago Bahá'í community. His letter provides a rare insight into the depth of the biblical and Christian commitment that many Chicago Bahá'ís still felt in mid 1901, and suggests that at that time membership in the Bahá'í community was defined in a sufficiently vague manner to allow persons with strongly conservative Protestant attitudes to remain in the fold.

³¹Legh Wilson Foster to the Chicago Bahá'í House of Justice, 6 June 1901, House of Spirituality Records, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Ill.

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The Esoteric Type

Probably second most common was the *esoteric type*, individuals who had abandoned Protestantism for the Harmonial religious movements before becoming Bahá'ís. If the previous group can be called the *Protestant Bahá'ís* then these and the following types may be styled *exprotestant Bahá'ís*. Like the Euro-American Buddhists, the spiritual journeys of these Bahá'ís included study of Theosophy, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Swedenborgianism. Some had been members of Masonic orders and secret societies. Others had been interested in alternative methods of healing.³²

The Bahá'í scriptures themselves are not esoteric, nor is the religion a harmonial religion: it emphasizes a transcendent God, contains laws of personal behavior, and rejects such practices as psychic communication with the dead. Its holistic approach to life and its teachings on health, diet, and healing often appealed to esoteric types, especially if they ignored Bahá'u'lláh's statement that one should consult a physician when sick. But its teachings on health are not central to Bahá'í belief. Probably the main reason the American Bahá'í community

³²This type continues to represent a large group of students of the Bahá'í Faith, but the harmonial groups have changed; in the 1980s Transcendental Meditation, EST, astrology, macrobiotic diets, and the writings of Krishnamurti are some examples of harmonial interests that some Bahá'í converts have held.

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contained many esoteric types is because they represented a large group of persons who have rejected traditional religious forms and were open to new ones; thus they were more likely to hear about the Faith than a church-goer, and were more likely to investigate it. Ironically, for esoteric types, becoming a Bahá'í often was a return to a conventional form of religion; the Bahá'í emphasis on the Bible required a rediscovery of Christianity.

Thornton Chase is an example of this ideal type. Chase left mainline Protestantism about 1883 for Swedenborgianism. He attended a Swedenborgian church in Denver for about five years and, as he explained to a friend in 1902, "studied Swedenborg daily."³³ But the Swedenborgian belief in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, coupled with controversies in the Denver church, caused him to abandon Swedenborgianism. As a result, he "became for a period empty of all belief in any of their [the churches'] teachings."³⁴ In search for an alternative, Chase combed libraries and studied all the religions of the world. His library contained at least one book on Masonry, and he is known to have studied Theosophy. His unpublished talks reveal

³³Thornton Chase to P. M. Blake, 26 April 1902 (copy), 3, Thornton Chase Papers, National Bahá'í Archives.

³⁴Thornton Chase to 'Abdu'l-Bahá (copy), 19 April 1906, 3, Thornton Chase Papers.

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considerable knowledge about the history of the ancient Near East and some familiarity with Hinduism and Buddhism. He even learned hypnotism and "practiced it somewhat."³⁵ None of these alternatives satisfied him, however, until he encountered the Bahá'í Faith in June 1894. Significantly, it was the Bahá'í interpretation of biblical prophecy that attracted him to the religion. And as a Bahá'í he had to accept the teaching that caused him to leave Swedenborgianism--the virgin birth--because Bahá'u'lláh upholds it.³⁶

Other prominent Bahá'ís are known to have gone through similar religious journeys. Corinne True, one of the most active Chicago Bahá'í women, eschewed her father's orthodox Presbyterianism and explored Unity, Christian Science, and Divine Science before becoming a Bahá'í. A significant fraction of the Chicago Bahá'ís were interested in one group that bears many similarities to "metaphysical" movements: Masonry. The weekly Bahá'í meetings in Chicago were held in a rented room in the Masonic Hall for a decade or more. Several Bahá'ís are known to have been members of the "Oriental Order of the Magi" when they

³⁵Thornton Chase to John J. Abramson (copy), 13 April 1898, 7, Thornton Chase Papers.

³⁶Thornton Chase, "A Brief History of the American Development of the Bahai Movement," *Star of the West*, 5 (19 Jan. 1915), 263. Unfortunately, Chase's conversion narrative is extremely short and impersonal, so it is not very helpful for determining why Chase became a Bahá'í.

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converted to the Faith.³⁷

The New York Bahá'í community was made up of many individuals with interest in "metaphysical" groups. Many of those who attended Kheiralla's first lessons in New York had been members of a New Thought group; it seems to have provided a network of contacts from which came many of the first New York Bahá'ís. Howard MacNutt, one of the city's most prominent Bahá'ís, had been very much interested in Vedantism before conversion, and had even had a swami living at his house at one point.³⁸

Undoubtedly a significant barrier preventing esotericists becoming Bahá'ís, or remaining interested in esoteric matters, was the attitude of Ibrahim Kheiralla toward "metaphysical" groups. In his talks he specifically criticized Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism as irrational or misdirected. His critiques revealed many errors in his

³⁷True's religious search is described in Nathan Rutstein, *Corinne True: Faithful Handmaid of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), 18. The best source of information on Bahá'í involvement in the Oriental Order of the Magi is John Osenbaugh, *Biographical Information on John Osenbaugh, TS, John Osenbaugh Papers*, National Bahá'í Archives.

³⁸According to Wendell Phillips Dodge, "In Memoriam: Arthur Pillsbury Dodge: 1849-1915," in *Star of the West*, 6 (2 Mar. 1916), 163, 165, Eliza Talbot, an early New York Bahá'í, had been a member of a New Thought class, and she invited the rest of the class to Kheiralla's lessons. The article also mentions MacNutt's interest in swamis.

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understanding of these groups, suggesting that he had never studied them himself; nevertheless, according to one pupil, the result was to give them a "severe drubbing."³⁹

Kheiralla remained in New York to teach the Bahá'í Faith for only a few months, however; consequently his opposition to metaphysical groups would have been less effective than in Chicago, his home base. Paul Dealy, who also strongly criticized metaphysical groups, never visited New York and exerted no influence over its community at all. Hence the New York Bahá'ís, though of Protestant extraction--and thus influenced by the religious values of their childhood--were apparently less concerned about Protestant questions and issues than the Bahá'ís of Chicago and Kenosha.

The Secular-Reform Type

Much rarer in the 1894-1912 period was the *secular-reform* type. The extreme examples of this type were individuals who had abandoned Protestantism for anarchism and socialism. More common were individuals who abandoned Protestantism for agnosticism, popular philosophy, faith in science, or for popular common-sense philosophy. Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on independent investigation

³⁹Miss A. A. H. to Edward G. Browne, 15 May 1898, in Edward G. Browne, comp., *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1918), 118.

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of truth and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's urging that individuals investigate reality were very appealing teachings for secularists. The Bahá'í scripture's positive attitude toward science and its emphasis on practical matters--such as social reform--have long interested secular persons who would like to join a rational and pragmatic religion. Before about 1905 the Bahá'ís were largely ignorant of their religion's social teachings, but even before that date a few were attracted to the Faith through its emphasis on the reasonableness of religion. Once the American Bahá'ís came to understand and advocate the Bahá'í social teachings, starting in the years 1905 to 1912, secular people began to make up the bulk of the new converts.⁴⁰

Many of the earliest secular-reform converts were upper-middle class Americans. Many joined the religion in Europe. Charles Mason Remey became a Bahá'í in Paris in 1899 and wrote many early pamphlets on the Faith. The pamphlets initially describe the Bahá'í Faith in terms of the Bible and Christianity, but by 1905 the Bahá'í social teachings become an increasingly important focus in them. Horace Holley, an intellectual from Connecticut who became a Bahá'í in Paris in 1910, wrote two books in the teens that demonstrate considerable familiarity with western philosophical thought and contain a strong emphasis on

⁴⁰I would judge that the secular-reform type was probably the largest source of converts to the Bahá'í Faith in the 1960s and 70s. It may still be the largest source of converts.

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social change. Hippolyte Dreyfus, the first French Bahá'í, wrote the first book specifically about the Bahá'í Faith and social reform and frequently utilized Marxist questions in organizing the book's chapters. Helen Campbell, a sociologist who became a Bahá'í in Boston in 1908, also published essays on the Bahá'í social reform teachings. All of these individuals downplay biblical prophecy and the spiritual side of the Bahá'í religion in favor of an exposition of the Bahá'í teachings that is practical, scientific, and rational.⁴¹

Thomas Tweed notes that among the Euro-American Buddhists, the rationalists usually were the most radical politically. This is true of secular-reform Bahá'ís as well. Dreyfus's familiarity with Marxism is a mild example; the most extreme is Honoré Joseph Jaxon (1861-1952). He was born William Henry Jackson in Ontario, of English Methodist parents, and studied philosophy at the University of Toronto. Moving to the frontier, he joined Louis Riel's rebellion against the Canadian government in 1884. Jaxon changed his name to make it sound French--Riel's people were half Indian and half French--joined Riel's new religion, and became Riel's secretary. After the Canadian army crushed the rebellion Jaxon fled to the United States and settled in Chicago.

There he worked for an anarchist defense fund that was

⁴¹Many of these individuals, and their books, are described in the chapter about the Bahá'í Faith and social reform.

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raising money to pay the legal fees of the seven anarchists who were accused of throwing a bomb at the police during the Haymarket Square riot. Jaxon also helped organize a world conference of anarchists, spoke at the first national convention of the Populist Party in 1892, advocated Indian rights, and helped raise money for a socialist colony in northern Mexico. In 1894 he joined "Coxey's Army," a group of unemployed army veterans who marched on Washington demanding government assistance. He became a Bahá'í in 1897 but was rarely a member of the active core of the Chicago Bahá'í community. Eventually he drifted out of the Bahá'í Faith.⁴²

Rationalistic ideologies were frequently associated with all four of the types of students of the Bahá'í religion. Scripturalists--as I have shown elsewhere⁴³--usually emphasized the importance of common sense, both in interpreting the Bible and in investigating truth. The esoteric types usually saw their own study of religion as systematic or even as scientific. Hence the secular-reform type of student is best identified by his or her concern for pragmatic issues--such as social reform--and not

⁴²Donald B. Smith, "Honoré Joseph Jaxon: A Man Who Lived for Others," in *Saskatchewan History*, vol. 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1981), 81-101.

⁴³Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism*, Th.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1990, chapter 4, "New Word and Old: The Bible and the American Bahá'ís."

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by a language that emphasizes arguments from modern science or philosophy.

The Romantic-Mystical Type

Finally, one finds a few individuals of the *romantic-mystical* type, who emphasized God in nature or the encounter with God in one's personal life. For these persons, the experience of God was paramount. Such persons often became Bahá'ís after reading Bahá'u'lláh's mystical works, or even after hearing a single Bahá'í prayer. They tended to see religious truth not in rationalist or esoteric terms, but in terms of aesthetics, feeling, and intuition. Some of them were artists.⁴⁴

The best example of attitudes based on romanticism expressed by an early Bahá'í comes from the writings of Isabella Brittingham (1852-1924), wife of James Brittingham. She had been an Episcopalian, apparently was more widely read than most Bahá'ís, and apparently was more of a Protestant liberal in her religious views than most. She did not ever argue that her approach to religion was rational or logical, as Paul Dealy did.

⁴⁴Although rare in the first two decades of the American Bahá'í community, I would judge that this group is more common today.

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She never spoke about common sense, as he frequently did.⁴⁵

Rather, she frequently spoke about faith and love.

Her perspective is epitomized by her interpretation of a statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the mineral, vegetable, animal, and human kingdoms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said that higher than all four of them was the station of faith. Brittingham noted that

thus, through spiritual evolution, man arises from the animal station (the station of sensation, which is our Satan) and attains the station of intellect [the station of the Human kingdom]; then dies to that station and arises in the station of spirit. It has been said that "the last degree of reason is the first degree of love."⁴⁶

In this one passage, in addition to seeing love (emotion or feeling) as superior to intellect, Brittingham also interpreted Satan metaphorically and accepted the concept of evolution (which many early American Bahá'ís, including Kheiralla, rejected).

Elsewhere in the same work she reflected on the rise of pluralism and the declining role of Protestantism in American society. Unlike Dealy and Kheiralla, however, she viewed it in an optimistic and positive light, as one might expect from a

⁴⁵The use of common-sense language by American Bahá'ís is discussed in Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism*, chapter four, "New Word and Old."

⁴⁶Isabella D. Brittingham, *The Revelation of Bahá-Ulláh in a Sequence of Four Lessons* (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Society, 1903), 2. The quotation she gives is probably from Mirza Asadu'llah; see Mirza Asadu'llah, *Explanations Concerning Sacred Mysteries* (Chicago: Bahais Supply and Publishing Board, 1902), 13.

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liberal Protestant:

In the present day there is comparatively little atheism. While many have rejected what is known as orthodox belief, yet, in this age there is a recession in the tide of infidelity. Back of the law is recognized its Founder; back of the effect is a Cause; back of life the Bestower of life; and, to an extent of which it is not itself cognizant, the world is seeking light. This explains the existence of the many new forms of religious thought which are now developing.⁴⁷

Brittingham was not critical of "metaphysical" movements, as Kheiralla and Dealy were; nor was she strongly enamored of Protestant orthodoxy.

A Presbyterian missionary to Iran, Samuel G. Wilson, who wrote against the American Bahá'ís, offered a classification of them that is similar to the four ideal types. He divided the American Bahá'ís into four groups: 1) novelty seekers; 2) pantheists and comparative religionists; 3) those attracted to the Bahá'í Faith because of its ethical and social teachings; and 4) those who saw it as Christianity renewed and fulfilled. While the first two do not correspond exactly to the mystic-romantic type and the esoteric type, the last two match the secular-reform type and the scripturalist type quite well. Wilson noted (correctly, I believe) that most American Bahá'ís belonged to the fourth group.⁴⁸ However, all four aspects of the Bahá'í Faith

⁴⁷Brittingham, *The Revelation of Bahá-Ulláh*, 1.

⁴⁸Samuel Graham Wilson, "Baháism an Antichristian System," in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 72, no. 285 (Jan. 1915), 3-4.

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were part of its overall appeal to Americans: it offered a cosmopolitan world-view that was inclusive of all religions and advocated a vision of a united, peaceful humanity while retaining an old-time religion biblicism and an emphasis on a personal relationship with God.

Of the four groups, the scripturalists generally underwent a transition from Protestantism to the Bahá'í Faith most easily. For them, becoming a Bahá'í meant transferring their loyalty from one Word of God to another. The other three groups generally consisted of persons who had created or chosen their own belief system individually, and thus often had greater difficulty than the scripturalists in accepting all the details of the Bahá'í teachings. Many of them were what a sociologist of the early American Bahá'í community has called *epistemological individualists*, persons who gave primacy to an internally derived and measured truth, as opposed to those who see truth as external and grounded in revelation.⁴⁹ Often epistemological individualists opposed efforts to organize the Bahá'í Faith; sometimes they were unable to reconcile their beliefs with the

⁴⁹Peter Smith, "Reality Magazine: Editorship and Ownership of a Bahá'í Periodical," in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History, volume two: From Iran East and West* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1984), 135-56.

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Bahá'í scriptures and did not remain Bahá'ís.⁵⁰ In extreme cases they attempted to create their own schismatic branches of the Bahá'í religion. As the American Bahá'í community came to understand the Bahá'í scriptures better and better, from 1910 to 1920, a concept of normative belief developed, and often the epistemological individualists came to be seen as "heterodox."

The three groups other than the scripturalists also share many traits with T. J. Jackson Lears's antimodernists. Lears defines *modernism* as follows:

the process of rationalization first described by Max Weber--the systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity and of individual life for maximum personal achievement; the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare; the reduction of the world to a disenchanted object to be manipulated by rational technique.⁵¹

Antimodernism, as described by Lears, took many forms. A major characteristic was the quest for "authentic experience" in the form of a return to medieval Catholicism; a focus on arts, crafts, ritual, and aesthetics; and interest in Eastern

⁵⁰Opposition to organization of the Bahá'í religion, and the associated question of an anti-modernist impulse among the American Bahá'ís, is discussed in Stockman, *Bahá'í Faith and American Protestantism*, chapter six, "Organizers of the Covenant: Activism and the American Bahá'ís."

⁵¹T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 7.

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religions.⁵² Such a quest is reflected in the lives of many of the esoteric and romantic-mystical types, as well as in the actions of the anarchists and single-taxers of the secular-reform type.

A major challenge facing Bahá'í historians is to develop a clear understanding of the roles of these different groups in the American Bahá'í community, and how they interacted with each other as the definitions of Bahá'í membership shifted. Some publications have created the impression that the Americans who became Bahá'ís were largely a group of former cultists who, under 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement, added Bahaism to their beliefs until Shoghi Effendi insisted on creating an exclusivistic Bahá'í religion (that is, an exclusivistic organization and community). But exclusivistic factors were always present--hundreds of American Bahá'ís fasted in 1905, for example, and few were attending church on Sundays--and sometimes the exclusivistic factors were very strong, especially in Kenosha and, to a less extent, Chicago. The opposite swing of the pendulum--that the American Bahá'ís were a bunch of former Bible Fundamentalists who went from a millennial vision of an exclusivistic religious community to an administratively defined exclusivistic community--must also be avoided, as downplaying the ideological diversity of the community's roots and ignoring the inclusivistic

⁵²Ibid., xvii.

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forces that were at work in the 1900-21 period. In different local communities the balance between these forces was different--New York City, perhaps Boston, and the European Bahá'í communities seem to have been particularly inclusivistic--thus making the task of judging the overall balance of forces a particularly complex and subjective one. My personal judgment is that the biblical background was always the strongest of the four in North America, and that exclusivistic forces were always stronger than inclusivistic forces among the American Bahá'ís. But this judgment can only be one voice in the ongoing dialogue about early American Bahá'í history, a dialogue that has yet to produce a consensus on this and other key issues.