'ABDU'L-BAHÁ WITH FRIENDS
and children. Lincoln Park, Chicago, 1912.

THE AMERICAN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY, 1894–1917: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

by Peter Smith

The development of the American Bahá'í community in the years leading up to 1917 is not easy to characterize. The processes which animated it are complex and at times elusive. Its central concerns cannot always be readily identified. The sources which may provide a basis for some adequate future account remain as yet largely untapped. In the absence of any detailed general account of the early American Bahá'í community, this present survey seeks to provide a rough map of the period as a whole, to present some general framework by which more detailed studies of particular aspects of this history may be placed in a wider context. It can not claim to be more than a tentative outline of what seem to be the most salient features in the development of the American Bahá'í community in the first twenty-three years of its existence.

On 29 May 1892, when Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh (b. 1817), died in the vicinity of the city of 'Akká in Ottoman Syria, the religion he founded had already passed through an extensive transformation. Almost fifty years earlier, Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad, the Báb (1819–1850), had announced the fulfillment of the millenarian expectations of Shí'ih Islam and had thereby given birth to a religious movement at once dramatic and poignant in its short and bloody duration. From the ashes of the Bábí religion had emerged the religion of Bahá'u'lláh. Attracting to himself the majority of the remaining Bábís and greatly broadening the scope of Bábí belief, Bahá'u'lláh gave less

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attention to those elements of the messianic and esoteric traditions of Shí'í Iran, which had figured so prominently in the teachings of the Báb, placing greater emphasis on ethics and the practical manifestations of spirituality. Advancing, as a prescription for the world's ills, a program of social and religious reform, he laid claim to be the expected Deliverer prophesied not only by Islam and the Bábí religion, but also by other world religions. However, despite the recruitment of some Jews, Zoroastrians, and Levantine Christians to its ranks, and despite the migration of a number of Persian Bahá'ís from their homeland to neighboring countries, the Bahá'í Faith remained essentially a phenomenon within Persian Shiism. It was only after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, when the reins of leadership were taken up by his eldest son, 'Abbás Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), that the religion began to spread to North America, Europe, and the Far East, and the first substantial numbers of believers from a Christian background were attracted.

The years of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leadership were a crucial stage in the development of the Bahá'í Faith. Although it was later, under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), that it became a worldwide religion with followers from a multitude of religious and racial backgrounds scattered throughout most of the countries of the world, it was this initial period of growth outside the Faith's original Islamic milieu which established the breadth of its appeal and its ability to adapt to an alien religious tradition. Similarly, while the final routinization of charisma (whereby the personal charismatic leadership of the ministries of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was transmuted into the legal-rational forms of the modern Bahá'í Administrative Order) only occurred in the years following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's death in 1921, this later transformation was presaged by developments within the Faith which took place *during his lifetime and had his approval, his own Will and* Testament providing the generating impulse for much of this administrative development.

If the changes that occurred in the period of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry are seen as being particularly important in the historical process by which a nineteenth-century movement within

Persian Shí'ih Islam evolved into a twentieth-century world religion, then the particular locus of those changes was surely the early American Bahá'í community. It was in America that the first Western converts were made. It was from America that the teachers of the new religion came when the European, and later the Australian and Far Eastern, communities were established. In terms of numbers, activity, and influence, the American Bahá'ís were the predominant group within the body of early Western believers. It was in their midst that many of the institutional forms which later developed into the Administrative Order of the Faith were founded. A study of the history of the early American Bahá'í community must, therefore, constitute an important part in any analysis of the overall development of the Bahá'í Faith.

In the period under review, the American Bahá'í community underwent considerable transformation both in terms of the preoccupations of belief and of organization and leadership. Originating in the 1890s with the missionary endeavor of Ibrahim George Kheiralla (Khayru'lláh), a converted Syrian (Chaldean) Christian newly arrived in America, the nascent Bahá'í community first took on the appearance of a secret cult, making its appeal on the basis of a blend of millenarian expectation and metaphysical thought.

Following the establishment of firm links with the center of the new Faith, this aura of secrecy was cast aside. The basis of appeal, however, remained much the same, and despite its millenarian overtones, the Bahá'í Cause remained linked to the cultic milieu of the metaphysical movement. This changed in the years that followed, as there gradually emerged a national Bahá'í leadership, a process which accelerated in the period after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America in 1912. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit greatly broadened the religion's base of appeal. His own preference for social reformism rather than metaphysical speculation made a profound impact on the American community and attracted the attention of liberal Christians and other thinkers to the new movement. At the same time, his visit sensitized many American Bahá'ís to the importance of the Covenant, an idea which became a major factor in the ensuing

years in the move toward a greater homogeneity of belief and which allowed certain beliefs to be labeled as unorthodox in the name of firmness in the Covenant. Associated with this trend was a greater stress on national organization and a tendency for Bahá'ís to regard their religion as a distinct and separate entity, tendencies which were accelerated during the period of Shoghi Effendi's leadership.

It was not until 1894 that the first Americans became converted to the Bahá'í Faith, and we may conveniently date American Bahá'í history from that year. Prior to that date the American reading public may have come across accounts of the new religion in the books of scholars or literateurs, but the dramatic history of the religion of the Báb had excited much less interest in America than it had in Europe.

Greater interest was shown by American missionaries working in the Middle East who initially regarded the Bahá'í Faith as a reform movement within Islam which might create a more hospitable environment for Christian evangelism. From such a source came the first known reference to Bahá'u'lláh at a public meeting. This reference, made in September 1893 during a session of the World's Parliament of Religions at Chicago's Columbian Exposition, is regarded by Bahá'ís as marking the symbolic beginning of the history of their Faith in the West.[1]

THE KHEIRALLA PERIOD: 1894–1900

Early Teachings. The dominant figure during the first six years of American Bahá'í history was Ibrahim Kheiralla (1849–1929), who had been converted in 1890 in Egypt by a Persian business associate, Ḥájí 'Abdu'l-Karím-i Ṭihrání.[2] In 1892 Kheiralla determined to proceed to America to spread the Bahá'í Faith, arriving in New York in December 1892.[3] By 1894 he had established himself in Chicago and in that same year had gained his first converts.[4] These earliest conversions seem to have been accomplished on the basis of personal contact, but before long, Kheiralla had fixed on what remained his standard system of attracting people to the Bahá'í Faith. This was a series of graduated lectures, the earliest dealing with such general issues

IBRAHIM KHEIRALLA

as the immortality of the soul, the nature of the mind, and the need to believe in God. Later lectures dealt increasingly with Biblical prophecy concerning the second advent and the existence of a "Greatest Name" of God by which the believer might enter into a special relationship with the divine. Finally, for those who had taken all the lectures and shown themselves worthy, Kheiralla delivered the "pith" of his message: that God had returned to earth in the person of Bahá'u'lláh, and that now his Son, Jesus Christ, was living in 'Akká. Those who believed were given the Greatest Name and told to write to 'Abdu'l-Bahá confessing their belief.[5] The introductory lectures were expanded and published in 1896, and more fully in 1897, as *Bab-ed-Din: the Door of True Religion*. In this book, the author explained that the full instruction was private, and that even the name of the new religion was only known to those Truth-seekers who had "taken the full course and received acceptance from the Great Head of the headquarters of the Order."[6] This book stimulated interest in the new religion, and by 1900 there were perhaps as many as three thousand Bahá'ís situated in a dozen or so American cities, in particular Chicago, New York, and Kenosha, Wisconsin.[7]

The basis of appeal of the new religion of "Truth-seekers" or "Truth-knowers" is difficult to identify clearly. The aura of secrecy that surrounded the advanced lessons makes it difficult to determine precisely what was taught to the newly converted Bahá'ís. An appeal of sorts was certainly made to the American adventist tradition: after all, when it was eventually given, the "pith" or "kernel" of Kheiralla's message was that God and Christ had returned, and this was supported by complex use of Biblical prophecy and accompanied by a belief that the millennium was to commence in 1917. Yet it was a very esoteric version of the Advent which was proclaimed.

An appeal was also made to the metaphysical tradition and many of the Truth-seekers came from such a background. Yet Kheiralla took pains to criticize many metaphysical groups and ideas, distinguishing his own ideas from those of the Christian Scientists, Theosophists, and Vedantists, and denouncing pantheism and claims of inner guidance, psychic vision, or astral travel. Perhaps the central principle which combined the