

## **‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ AND THE “OTHER”**

Thus evening the presentation will be about the missing newspaper coverage of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America in the emigrant and minority newspapers and the wider impact.

But first I would like to thank Robert and Boyd for making this happen. Since there are two themes to this presentation I would first like to acknowledge the very positive influence of the works of three scholars on sensitizing me to the question of racism when I was a young student at Windsor: John Porter, Gunnar Myrdal and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. My research in the field of newspapers and the Bahá’í Faith could not have been undertaken without the support, questions and answers from friends around the globe. Too many to name them all here, but a few stand out: Amín Egea in Spain, Steven Kolins in America, David Merrick in Scotland, Alan Keene in Ireland, Frederic Autret and Armindo Pedro in France. The bibliographic notes of many scholars were used as guides and at times as foils, and I thank them all.

The presentation will be in five parts. We will look first at what is xenophobia, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response to it, His interaction with certain newspapers, the impact of xenophobia on newspaper collections, and we will conclude by examining a few comments by Bahá’u’lláh on newspapers and writers.

But first we will look at the ravages of the other pandemic which has encircled the globe and is still laying waste its cities as I speak. The name of this virulent disease is xenophobia. It is defined variously as the dislike, shunning, and hating of the “other.” It has many strains which flare up and dominate some regions for some time, are suppressed only to be replaced by a new strain. Currently the strains that are dominating in America are racism, Hispanophobia, Islamophobia, with anti-Semitism lurking in the corner. There are dozens of other strains. This virus is vicious, devious and insidious. It aims to divide and conquer. It divides the victims and unites the oppressors.

### **#1 Xenophobia**

For this presentation please remember points **C** and **J** of the above

When ‘Abdu'l-Bahá made His Western tour, in His first published talk given in Paris on October 16, 1911, He said in part “I ask you not to think of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers, whether they come from Turkey, Japan, Persia, Russia, China or any other country in the world.”

## #2 Paris Talks

This is one of His themes that He elucidated in many of the cities He visited in America. The list of peoples that He mentioned as victims of xenophobic acts is long and besides those already mentioned included the African Americans, the Jews, the Indians or First Nation peoples, and others.

Not only did He talk about inclusivity, but He practiced it. He went to the meeting places and the homes of the Black Americans, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Greeks, the Jews, the East Indians, the Japanese and other groups. We know the story with Louise Gregory at the Washington banquet. But there are other lesser known stories, such as the meeting with the Black servants at the Parsons' boathouse in Dublin, New Hampshire, the visit to the home of Charles Tinsley, a Black servant from the Hearst estate who had broken his leg, lunch with ladies of the Left Bank in Paris, the sudden change of hotels in Paris after a Black seeker had been refused entry, His sudden enthusiasm of meeting with the Greeks in a park in New York City despite a very uncomfortable ride on the underground metro, His seeking out and meeting under the Eiffel Tower, for the second time a crippled seller of post-cards confined to a wheel chair, etc.

## #3 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Xenophobia

*Press Coverage During 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Ministry.*

There were four periods during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry where there was intense press coverage:

1896 associated with the assassination of the Shah of Persia

1903 when there were the intense and bloody persecutions of the Bahá'ís in Persia

1911-1913 associated with His travels in the West

1921-1922 associated with the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

'Abdu'l-Bahá's trip to America in 1912 was widely covered in the newspapers. His every movement, talk and engagement was recorded with in about 2,000 articles. My friend Amín Egea has done a remarkable presentation in his two volume *The Apostle of Peace: A Survey of References to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Western Press*, published by George Ronald in 2018.

In the United States 'Abdu'l-Bahá met a variety of minority communities. Notable are His engagements with the African Americans at Howard University and at the NAACP convention in Chicago. These were well covered by the Black press, both local and national. However, the story is

quite different with His meetings with other groups.

### **The Armenians**

On July 21<sup>st</sup> 1912 the Armenian Federation Society had a memorial service to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was invited. But the only newspaper account we have is from the *New-York Tribune*. Mahmúd Zarqání reports that his talk was not recorded by the Persians. Wonder what the Armenians themselves wrote about the meeting. The Library of Congress lists 28 Armenian periodicals published in America in its collection. None of which have been digitalized.

### **The Syrians and Lebanese**

He met with the Syrian community in Boston twice in May and July. Here we are dependent on the English-language *Boston Herald* for a report but only for the second meeting. Since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke in Arabic there was no translation and no recording, except in the Arabic press, for which we have no report. Although Amín does give us the reference as the periodical *Al-Saih*. It is available at the Library of Congress, but only on microfilm. Apparently this was a highly literate gathering with poets, writers and editors of the Syrian-American community. Khalil Gibran was a member of this society.

### **The Japanese**

He had several meetings with the Japanese in California. He even gave His permission for articles to be published in the Japanese press. By the very fact that He gave His permission, He became an active partner in this endeavour. These are also missing from our collective knowledge.

### **The Jewish community**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited several synagogues and the reporting in the press was widespread. And it would be interesting to see what the response was in the Yiddish press. Some of the American Yiddish newspapers have been digitalized and are available but not in America, However Ahmad Sohrab reports that the reporting in the Arabic press of His meeting at the synagogue in San Francisco was of such a high quality that ‘‘Abdu'l-Bahá instructed that 50 packets of newspapers be made up for His journey back to Egypt. Since these newspapers have not been digitalized the information is not publicly available.

To summarize: we have no public access to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks to the Armenians, Syrians and Japanese, solely on the grounds that they were recorded neither in Persian or English. Besides the talks themselves the commentaries by the journalist and editors would also be of interest especially

in the Yiddish press.

Amín Egea states in his introduction “much more research is yet to be conducted in American journals and magazines, especially . . . in the many newspapers published by different ethnic and cultural communities in the United States.” vol. 1, p. x. As far as I am aware he is the first to acknowledge this gap in our collective history.

From all the digital sources at my disposal I have been able to locate for the year 1912 one article in each of the following ethnic language newspapers: Polish, German, Dutch, and three in Czech. Added to this are two articles from the Jewish, two from the Irish and one from the Japanese English-language newspapers and magazines. Remember that the number of foreign-language newspapers was estimated to be in excess of 1, 300 in 1910.

When I was working on my book ‘*Abdu'l-Bahá in the West: A Biographical Guide* I and my friends noticed a lack of articles concerning ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in the immigrant press. Only two were found in Polish and Dutch in all of the various sources at our disposal at that time. Our assumption was that the immigrant communities and their press were not interested in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. But we were terribly mistaken.

The library of libraries in the United States is the Library of Congress. Though not a national library, it has taken up that role as well. It’s role in collecting and disseminating information and establishing standards in the library environment is not to be underestimated. It is also a role model for many other national institutions outside the United States. Now we will look at their role in conserving and digitalizing newspapers from the various and diverse communities in the United States.

The first list is of ethnic communities and the second is of the various language communities represented in the digital collections of the Library of Congress in *Chronicling America*.

#### **#4 LIBRARY OF CONGRESS Ethnicity**

Note the mission statement.

The first list has obvious problems. First the omissions: Chinese, Armenians, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, etc.

Then the listing of two groups which is wrong: Slavic and Yugoslavian. The first is a major language group that uses two scripts for its dozen or so languages which are not mutually understandable. The largest group being Russian. The second refers to a former nation composed of at least six major ethnic groups and several minor ones. The largest group are the Serbians. Both Russian and Serbian are absent from the language list. Note Mexicans are listed separate from Latin Americans, but Puerto Ricans are missing, even though Puerto Rican newspapers are in the online collection. Since Portuguese is missing from the languages in the second list, it could be argued that Latin American should be labelled as Hispanic American to be more accurate. Since Hawaiian is missing from the language group, Pacific Islander probably refers to the English-Language residents of Hawaii.

### **#5 Library of Congress Languages**

It should be noted that the United States is not the only country that displays these traits of its national library, the trait of the suppression of immigrant and minority cultures. The same can be observed in Australia, with their database called *Trove*, in Great Britain with the *British Newspaper Archive*, in France with the two databases *Gallica* and *Retronews* and in Austria with *ANNO*. All of these five nations have a rich national collection of digitalized newspapers in publicly accessible databases (though some charge a fee to access all of the services) and they also have a sophisticated and historical emigrant community. And they all practise cultural suppression of minority and emigrant communities.

Another interesting point is that the Library of Congress along with three large commercial databases have digitalized thousands of newspapers from the United States and a few other countries. If we just concentrate on the American newspapers we find that the goal of these four databases is to present the cultural heritage of the nation. They have even spent money on the digitalization of newspapers from around twenty small towns with populations of less than a thousand and a few that no longer exist such as Sunbeam, Minnesota and White Pine, Colorado. But as we have seen these efforts have not been extended to the immigrant community. Furthermore, several of these immigrant newspapers have been digitalized, but by foreign agencies. A Welsh newspaper from Utica, New York is at the National Library of Wales, two English-language Jewish newspapers are uniquely at the National Library of Israel, and so forth.

## BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NEWSPAPERS

The practice among Bahá'í writers seems to show an ambivalence as to the value of newspaper articles, other than those to be used as sort of trophy. This is a reflection of what the trend seems to be in some circles of the academic world, as reflected by an article published by the American History Association, by Prof. Jerry W. Knudson who wrote in 1998: “Not until John Bach McMaster’s *History of the People of the United States* began publication in 1883 did any prominent historian in this country make copious use of newspaper quotations.” He goes on to say “many historians have consulted newspapers since then . . . but few have recognized the wider significance of the role of the press in both reflecting and shaping society.” At about the same time, or at least during the same decade as McMaster was writing, Bahá'u'lláh wrote about the importance of newspapers as a primary and secondary sources of information. A statement which stands well ahead of contemporary thinking about the value of newspapers as can be seen by Knudsen’s statement.

### #6 Bahá'u'lláh on Newspapers

These quotations open up a wide scope of activity for future researchers.

Not only is the importance of the missing reports in the ethnic and minority presses mentioned above brought into a sharper focus. One could argue that the retrieval of such documents concerning ‘Abdu’l-Bahá verges on that of a sacred trust.

And what is the significance of those who wrote in defence of the Faith? In 1903 there were terrible persecutions of the Bahá'ís in Persia. Over 130 American newspapers responded by publishing articles. Most of the articles were obtained from wire-services. But many editors applied their headlines to these articles, some with uncanny insight:

“Pagans Kill and Torture.” from the *The Bay City Tribune* in Michigan; or “Mobs in Persia Slay Reformers.” from the *The San Francisco Call*. Four articles were discovered where the editors were calling for petitions to be organized and delivered to the Secretary of State from Yuma, Arizona, New Orleans and Springfield, Massachusetts. Another way these articles protected the Faith is by their sheer number as revealed by this account from Ahmad Sohrab as presented by Amín Egea:

“when He returned to London, ‘‘Abdu'l-Bahá was invited to a dinner in His honor at the Persian Legation; and the ambassador presented Him with a collection of

clippings from Edinburgh newspapers with articles about Him which were provided to the embassy by a clippings bureau.”

I am sure that the Ottomans did the same and the information was sent to Istanbul. Another role that these journalists and publishers did was to proclaim the Faith. It were these articles that alerted hundreds of thousands of people around the globe to the very existence of a new divine messenger and a new message. These were deliberate actions by the editors, publishers, journalists to proclaim the Faith. The only reason they had for including the word ‘Babi’ or ‘Babism’ in an article was but that somebody should read it.

**#7**

#### **Oldest Discovered Publications Referencing the Faith by State**

Perhaps it is appropriate to begin the history of the Faith in a given city or region, not with the arrival of the first pioneer or travel teacher but with the appearance of the first newspaper article.

**#8**

#### **The Oldest Discovered Publications Referencing the Faith by Country (Current) and Territory and City.**