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# The Baha'i Faith in America, 1893-1900: A Diffusion of the American Religious Zeitgeist

*Joshua Rager*

The story of American religion has predominantly and historically been a Protestant Christian story. Every religious faith new to the United States has had to contend with this fact and the argument has been made that to some extent, all religions are eventually protestantized while taking their course in America. The question which often arises then in studying foreign religious imports, like the ones so seemingly exotic as the Baha'i Faith, is how unique is this certain faith to the American religious landscape? To say whether or not the Baha'i Faith has experienced such a livelihood to be considered *protestantized* is not my goal here, but I propose that the Baha'i Faith has essentially been or at least was Americanized from its earliest outset. For in a similar manner, the story of the American Baha'i community has historically been an American story about Americans taking to a new faith. The assumptions here are twofold: first, the early Baha'is were largely all American and second, the community was permeable to the American spirit of the times around it. What investigation into the early community has shown is that from 1893 to 1900, the American Baha'is' background, identity, and sense of what was religiously and currently American often left the Baha'i experience in the United States susceptible to a diffusion of the religious zeitgeist.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to this thesis is that the American leader and first Baha'i teacher of the early community in the States was Syrian and not American. But a look into his education, life, and teachings uncovers that this failed businessman was American in essence and embodied several American religious ideals at the time of his prominence amongst the Baha'i community. The situation of Syria at the time of Kheiralla's upbringing was largely influenced by competition between French Catholic and American Protestant missionaries for Syrian souls, which resulted in Western-styled schools. Kheiralla was one of few fortunate enough to gain admission into the private, college preparatory schools. Matriculating into the newly founded Protestant College after his secondary education, Kheiralla was exposed to the liberal arts and also the obligatory prayer services held twice a day as well as Bible study every Sunday afternoon. As a boarding student, he became fluent in English, was largely separated from a Middle Eastern culture and learned from American educators whose lessons were "based 'strictly' on 'Protestant and Evangelical principles,' which meant a strong emphasis

on the Bible and its rational consistency with science.”<sup>1</sup> The goal of the Protestant College was to cultivate an intelligentsia “who would be inclined toward Protestantism.”<sup>2</sup> These were formative and impactful years for Kheiralla. Despite his lack of inclination toward Protestantism, the foundation of biblical literacy and rational thinking Kheiralla gained would build the frame of his logic in interpreting literature thereafter.

This approach, largely a Western, Christian construction, was a methodology atypical in the Middle East and in fact, although Kheiralla’s education was one of the best offered in Syria, the Western degree he obtained was unfit for the trades and jobs which comprised the Syrian economy of the 1870s. Seeing that the bulk of Kheiralla’s training was misaligned with a traditional Syrian sense of apprenticeship and education—so much so his degree was seemingly just a piece of pretentious paper in his home nation—the plausibility that Kheiralla was Western or Occidental in the very essence of these words (which speak to a varying style in philosophy and approach) seems conceivable. As a person reliant on and concerned with his own operation evidenced by his self-centered pursuit of magic and business endeavors and without a translation of Baha’u’llah’s works in a language Kheiralla could read (although was literate in English, French, and Arabic), Kheiralla took to his Bible and used “reason and ‘common sense’ in weighing Baha’u’llah’s claim to fulfill the promises of the Bible. In this regard, he again was following his western evangelical education, which stressed what has been called ‘common sense philosophy’—a belief that everyone is capable of reading the Bible and independently determining its truth.”<sup>3</sup> What separated Kheiralla, having been raised and educated as a Christian, from the other Middle Eastern Christians was his own sense of autonomy in interpreting texts; most Middle Eastern Christians sought out their religious institutions for scriptural guidance. The findings Kheiralla reached through his own research and investigation were that Baha’u’llah was in fact the fulfillment of several biblical prophecies and the air of boastfulness and pride Kheiralla took in these conclusions would be enough to carry him to the Occident and teach them to an entire nation. Adjusting to the life and culture in America for Kheiralla would seem to be more of a harkening-back reversion or, better, a continuation of the Western ideologies instilled in him during his school years and life in the Western boom of 1870s Egypt.

Kheiralla, having professed his acceptance of Baha’u’llah’s claim in a letter to the prophet himself, made his way to America in December of 1892. In America,

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Stockman, *The Baha’í Faith in America Origins: 1892-1900*, Volume 1 (Wilmette: Baha’í Publishing Trust, 1985), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

failure in business prompted Kheiralla to start offering the services of his supernatural abilities through what he believed were powers of healing. Eager to teach anyone he made acquaintance with about the Baha'i Faith, Kheiralla would make mention to those he was attempting to heal about Baha'u'llah and the findings he had personally made. Robert Stockman remarks, "Healing philosophies attracted people who often were searching for alternatives to traditional religion and such people provided a network through which word on the Baha'i Faith spread to receptive ears."<sup>4</sup> By 1894, Kheiralla's Baha'i teachings gained four followers in William F. Jones, Marian Miller, Edward Dennis, and Thornton Chase. In 1895 Kheiralla began conducting thirteen-part classes on spiritual topics such as the nature of the mind, the needs of the soul, and neurology, of which the Baha'i Faith found its way in. The presentation of the Faith, Baha'u'llah, and Abdul-Baha was made in the last three lessons from a prophetic Christian perspective that claimed Baha'u'llah was actually God and Abdul-Baha the return of Jesus Christ. Kheiralla used the books of Revelations, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and possibly Daniel to fit his understanding of the two figures into the roles he ascribed to him. Still without print copies of Baha'u'llah's writings, Kheiralla consulted writings from the evangelical biblical commentary of time and also the Cambridge professor E.G. Browne, who spent time with Baha'u'llah and the Persian Baha'is in the 1870s and 80s.

The teachings and lessons that Kheiralla gave to his pupils and let fall on any eager American ear were often doctrinally askew and occasionally in complete opposition with many of Baha'u'llah's traditions. Some of things Kheiralla is known to have taught and stressed is the idea of reincarnation as well as ascribe the power of miracles to Baha'u'llah. His belief in reincarnation is likely due to the influence of his earliest theosophical pupils but nonetheless found a way into his lessons and the early Baha'i community. He saw the Bible as fallible because of human tampering yet available for symbolic interpretation. He also stoutly denied Darwin's theory of evolution. Robert Stockman finds such an opinion of evolution "ironic when one considers his considerable emphasis on the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation—which is essentially a doctrine of human religious evolution."<sup>5</sup> Despite his continuity with the Faith in this aspect, Kheiralla made Judaism the "ancestor of all the world's great religions" and Christianity the bearings for his discussions thus subordinating Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> Kheiralla's negative outlook on biblical inerrancy is Baha'i in its regards to a symbolic view of the Christian text, but the same ends do not necessitate the same means. Kheiralla

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

saw the Bible as a product of human corruption and tainting while Baha'u'llah claimed no religion that extolled a written text with so much reverence would ever tamper with it. Kheiralla rejected the Christian ideals of original sin and vicarious atonement although many of the early Americans he brought into the Baha'i fold still held onto these tenets. While both postmillennial and premillennial eschatology existed among the members of the early community, Kheiralla is thought to have advocated the premillennial vision which professed the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God and ignored human attempts to usher in the millennium. In fact, Kheiralla prophesied that millennium to occur in 1917. Perhaps Kheiralla's strongest messages and points of emphasis were made in his proclamations of individual choice, common sense, free will, and progress which largely resonated with the Baha'i stress on God's gift of rationalization to humans. What gave Kheiralla authority among the early community was the secretive, esoteric nature of his lessons and his giving of the Greatest Name, a rite of sorts that signaled entrance into the Baha'i community, which was a presentation reserved specifically for Kheiralla, as appointed by Kheiralla. Despite these doctrinal inconsistencies, Kheiralla was a Baha'i in the most fundamental way—perhaps the only way that he knew to be—in professing that Baha'u'llah was God's latest Manifestation and prophet of this age.

Kheiralla perhaps most clearly revealed his American-Western essence by describing Mormonism as “‘a menace and stigma to the civilization of our own country at the present day’”—thus acknowledging a sense that America was in fact his “own country” that he could affirm with his classes as “our” nation.<sup>7</sup> But, he was contemporarily American in more ways than just patriotic elitism. For his time, Kheiralla's teachings were developmentally American. The 1893 World Parliament of Religions attempt at a cosmopolitan vision in actuality and retrospectively did little to harmonize world faith for “Instead of dialogue, a succession of monologues had occurred.”<sup>8</sup> This event held in Chicago and perhaps the first time the Baha'i Faith made public mention on American soil, was an early culmination and that era's embodiment of the modernist ideal. The reality of the occasion perhaps foreshadows the outcome of the modernist tenets. For them, “‘the nature of religious truth is the same as that of scientific truth. There is but one truth’... The modernists did not want simply to reduce faith to science. They did want to collapse belief in the face of progress. They did not want to be merely secular, but religious, in decisively though never narrowly Christian ways.”<sup>9</sup> However, prob-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion: The Irony of It All*, Volume 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. *Ibid.*, 29.

ably the “two most familiar and urgent parts of the modernist intellectual program had to do with adaption to evolutionary theory in science and with acceptance of biblical criticism in history.”<sup>10</sup> The most notable and ostracized supporter of the latter was Charles A. Briggs, professor at Union Theological Seminary who held the view that higher criticism was in fact good for the Bible and its readers by “making the Bible plausible as a document of faith” despite proposed theories about the true authors of books contained in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>11</sup> After Briggs’s “best known heresy trial” in New York City where he vehemently chose reason over inerrancy, continued malevolent discourse against Briggs and his Presbyterian church resulted in the professor’s dismissal from the denomination. After his excommunication, Briggs held company with Ibrahim Kheiralla who had just come from Syria with a mission to bring the Baha’i Faith to the United States. Kheiralla might have professed to Briggs that Baha’u’llah was God—the fulfillment of Isaiahic prophecy and that he had a son, Abdul-Baha, who was Jesus Christ. He might have spoke in a language he thought would resound with Briggs in mentioning the tenets of progressive revelation and that the Bible should be open to scientific rationality. But whatever Kheiralla might have said to Charles A. Briggs, it did little to sway him into the Faith and become his first American convert. The New York native maintained loyalty to Christianity and a belief in the divinity of Christ. Despite the absence of conversion or, for that matter, even real contemplation from Briggs, what this seemingly casual meeting represented was probably the first intersection of the Baha’i Faith with the American religious zeitgeist in its most physical, face-to-face sense. This event would not be the last sort of contact for the span of the American Baha’i history nor would it be for this era.

While it is not shown anywhere that Kheiralla would later meet Josiah Strong or John Dewey, the ideological crossings of the American zeitgeist with the Baha’i Faith can be shown by the makeup of its membership and even further in the teachings and actions of its primary American teacher. To pigeonhole Kheiralla in respect to one of the labels of this American religious era would be trivial and narrow in scope, for Kheiralla’s many outlooks and teachings pulled from the varieties of the religious community. To discuss those various labels and what parts of them correlate to Kheiralla and the Early Baha’i community I think would however not be a trifling pursuit and instead show the continuum on which American Baha’is lay and how one should regard these yet-to-be-seen consistencies, taking note of where these contributions find their source. Using a classification of the modernist program from Marty’s *Irony of It All* as one supportive and open to the more liberal

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

ideals of the time in respect to progressive revelation, science and evolution, and higher biblical criticism, the quest for scientific-religious reconciliation was not a sector of thought left only for the Christian progressives of the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth centuries. The Baha'í Faith's statement on this topic has always been, "Science protected religion from becoming superstition; religion protected science from becoming a barren materialism."<sup>12</sup> This emphasizes the unity of science with religion where hard, scientific evidence will trump any preconceived, religious notions of the natural and astronomical worlds and religious evidence fills in the gaps of unexplained, unconfirmed scientific phenomenon. In this same vein, Kheiralla claimed his teachings to be based on scientific and rational proofs when he stated, "every point of our teaching must be proven, step by step, by all the laws of science."<sup>13</sup> How scientific his claims were are largely a relative matter in the sense that a twenty first-century perspective on any science of the late nineteenth century would scoff at many of the so-called "scientific" proposals of the time but perhaps the single fact of his claim and ability to craftily deduce conclusions is all to draw a comparison. This comparison warrants consideration because as a conversation between Richard Dawkins and Jerry Falwell might suggest, there still isn't much unity between some devout churchgoers and lab rats—the attempt at seeking a single truth for which both science and religion fit was a defining feature of the modernist program and a point of emphasis for Kheiralla. Therein lay the comparison. The difference is that modernists only dealt with science and sought reconciliation whereas Kheiralla, in his ego, while seeking, claimed to have found it.

Kheiralla's focus on the Bible is best evidenced with its use in his formulation of Baha'u'llah's and Abdul-Baha's stations and also with his schooling that forcibly familiarized young Ibrahim with the scripture. His view in the way its words and images should be interpreted have already been discussed and so to call that perspective, in the way that it challenges a former view and calls into question the infallibility of the book, in line with higher criticism seems to be a fair assertion. Kheiralla is known to have consulted Richard Heber Newton's *The Right and Wrong Uses of the Bible* for his hermeneutical lessons because of its stance on the unreliability of the historical record in the Bible. While Kheiralla's central tenet of logic for his conclusion on the fallibility of the Bible was the corruption of the text, he also claimed the book to be incomplete because of references in the Old Testament books to literary works no longer available.<sup>14</sup> Kheiralla's understandings of Genesis and the Garden of Eden were much like John Cunningham Geike's and

<sup>12</sup> Peter Smith, *An Introduction to the Baha'í Faith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 115.

<sup>13</sup> Stockman, *The Baha'í Faith in America*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

George Smith's, whom he had read, through his observation of the Babylonian mythical parallels in the Genesis account and the unknown location of the actual Garden of Eden.<sup>15</sup> These additional parts to his argument on biblical criticism seems to be more in line with the sorts of reasoning other incredulous scholars of the time would have used as it was largely influenced by them. Perhaps the best evidence of Kheiralla's criticism was his rejection of Original Sin and Vicarious Atonement—their negation he based on his findings that Jesus nor his disciples understood his mission as a mission of redemption and that Adam and Eve left paradise on their own accord with free will being the central message. Against his outlook on the Bible, Kheiralla still made it his main source, perhaps going with what he knew and how he framed his understandings of Baha'u'llah and Abdul-Baha. It would not be unlikely in the times for a person to utilize the text for purposes not pertaining solely and focally on Christianity, for many Americans "considered the Bible to be at the basis of the national consensus juris, the normal for civil law and the cultural ethos."<sup>16</sup> And like "most of the modernists [who], evidently drawing on their Sunday School memories as well as their faith and natural reverence more than on a disciplined tackling of problems, remained attached to Jesus," Kheiralla thought "the most important Prophet...was Jesus Christ, 'our Great Master'; the 'central figure of history and humanity,' the 'highest exponent of our race,' 'the highest among all the creatures of the great universe.'"<sup>17</sup>

Kheiralla's notion of God's presence is yet another detail of his teachings that seem to resonate with the modernist program. Kheiralla would often conjure up an image-inducing metaphor in his lessons to present his view of God as an "identity, an individual, a person"<sup>18</sup>:

Let us suppose that the whole universe...[is] gathered in one room; or consider that the room is the universe and contains everything in existence, and that the room and everything in it is of crystal or glass; and let us suppose that God, the Almighty, is a flame located in any certain spot in that room; we will see that although the flame is an identity, limited to itself, yet it fills the whole room with its light...Thus the Personality of God, the Almighty—like the flame—is filling the whole universe with His powers...<sup>19</sup>

By giving God a "Personality," Kheiralla attempts to humanize God—in a way that brings him closer to humans and everything that exists. The very idea of a room metaphor gets at this idea of bridging notions of human stations and God's

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



station through confining both to walls, despite their transparency. And if the physical closeness of the objects and the flame—seemingly creation and God—fails to get the point across, by the flame lighting every crystal object implies an idea that God can be found in all existences and is thus not in some disconnected area of seclusion blocked off from the universe he created but instead shining within and through every day, acting as we act, changing as we change. In light of this, “key to the modernist doctrines of God was the notion of immanence, the idea that God was active in the midst of the world. God was not transcendently aloof, static, and capricious.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps there is no better to bring the idea of an active God working among us than to give him a personality and identity as Kheiralla did.

The Baha’i doctrine of progressive revelation was, on its own and without much manipulation from Kheiralla, modernist in the way it agreed with the contemporary championing of universalism and their attempt at progress. The Baha’i tenet through its recognition that at the root of all great world religions are key essential truths is universalist in that regard, and the socioeconomic advancement that the Faith has historically promoted in such areas as gender equality was the sort of progress modernists at the same time were calling for. This Baha’i aspect was one of the few that Kheiralla is known to have believed and taught that actually rightly registered with the Baha’i headquarters in Haifa. Many modernists believed that “progressive revelation...was the basis of scripture” and Kheiralla stood with them in this way once again.<sup>21</sup> The difference in this comparison is though that this teaching is not unique to Kheiralla and instead a central belief of all Baha’i—no matter if they’re Iranian, Russian, or American. With the idea of progressive revelation and also the unity of science and religion, we have true Baha’i beliefs that fit with the modernist programs of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. On the other hand, Kheiralla’s focus on the Bible is largely a testament to his Protestant education and not Baha’i focused. The critical focus he took to the book was fashioned in a way that was modeled on scholars of the time and despite the Faith’s proclamation that the Bible at its current state is fallible, this was likely something that Kheiralla was largely unaware of. Kheiralla’s whole notion of God’s presence and being is almost diametrically opposed to the essence of God that Baha’is’ hold. Baha’u’llah saw God as a super transcendent entity—neither human or ever at a station of attainment, an essence unfathomable for the cerebral capabilities of man and woman. Much like his focus and approach on the Bible, Kheiralla’s perception of God was more aligned with the modernist model than the Baha’i’s.

<sup>20</sup> Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

While Kheiralla held characteristics of modernists, in other ways he was directly opposed to that program and could be seen as countermodernist. While America was experiencing these new notions of religion which took a sharp look at the Bible and a soft stance on other traditions, "this was also an era in which virtually every enduring and vital American religious conservatism was born."<sup>22</sup> What the later-to-be-named "fundamentalists" did was revolt against the modernist movements in a backlash that sought to preserve old-religion ideals. The countermodernists, in this mindset, essentially "combined premillennialism and inerrancy as creedal linchpins or new definers of boundaries."<sup>23</sup> Opposed to the Darwinian concept of evolution, seeing religious truth and scientific truth as one was a difficult stance for the countermodernists to swallow—they would much rather purge it up and point out every particle of fallacy in the pile. Kheiralla would have found his niche with these preservationists in the way he rejected evolution and while his argument for this stance is unknown, his Evangelical Protestant schooling would seem to be the greatest reason for his fervent denial. While the hot debate of evolution in the American public wouldn't occur until the 1920s, it was a focal point for most American religions in the late nineteenth century as the question of science and religion was a central listing on the religious agenda for both modernists and those refuting them. Although not all countermodernists can be considered premillennialist in their eschatological vision, the concept that millennium was near, imminent and would occur at the deterioration of human society was beginning to gain popularity amongst Bible-believing inerrantist Americans following personas such as Dwight Moody and C.I. Scofield. The eschatological vision that Kheiralla taught to his early Baha'i students was also one that "definitely advocated a premillennial view in that he spoke of 'signs and events which, when the kingdom of God shall come, are to occur, as specified in detail through the whole book of the Revelation.'"<sup>24</sup> While Kheiralla most likely didn't see that reign of a thousand years to be ruled by Jesus Christ, the idea of uncontrollable catastrophe followed by the reigning of God's kingdom is neither uniquely Kheiralla's concept nor is it found in Baha'i doctrine. The Baha'i Faith doesn't acknowledge eschatology in the very sense of the world that recognizes an end of the times. The future vision they hold is one that views a lasting world, a new world order where national borders are erased, race is no longer identifiable, peace is pandemic, and yet cultural and historical identity and significance are maintained. In regards to Kheiralla's characteristics as countermodernist, it is seen that these comparisons are not Baha'i

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>24</sup> Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, 57.

but instead Kheiralla—a product of his schooling and a diffusion of the American religious zeitgeist. It appears that some of the central tenets of the Baha'í Faith such as the unity of science and religion and progressive revelation, of which Kheiralla actually knew, were likely key attractors to religious Americans (as most were) trying to deal with the emerging school of modernity. The other aspects like a focus on the Bible, supremacy of Christ, Christianity, and Judaism, rejection of evolution, and the concept of God's immanence and personality are those that are not found in any Baha'í writings but are instead unique to the early American Baha'í experience. Thus it can be proposed that a couple of Baha'í doctrines opened the door to the experimental religiosity but the stances it took on such subjects concerning issues within the modernist and countermodernist programs were largely due to the American zeitgeist.

Having now seen Kheiralla in the various lights of the American times, the next natural question would seem to be in what possible way did he attract believers through his across-the-board lessons and variegated, seemingly contradictory opinions? While it may superficially appear that Kheiralla might be some type of magic obsessed, crazed charlatan, he was in fact a charismatic figure whose exotic Syrian appearance might have given him the air of a Middle Eastern sage. His esoteric teaching style in combination with the rationality and validity of his arguments made him a smooth, comprehensible talker. His messages, rhetoric, and their presentations were made in a way that attracted Americans. Considering that Kheiralla pulled the content of his lessons from two opposed opinions—progressive modernists and traditional countermodernists—it is not surprisingly that the early American Baha'í community contained two types of members. William Garlington classifies the two groups: a conservative side that gravitated towards his teachings of prophetic themes and biblical prophecy; and the other a liberal side that were enticed by “spiritual aspects of his message or the claims of its scientific and rational foundation.”<sup>25</sup> What likely reconciled the two polarities was Kheiralla's charisma but more importantly, a “dissatisfaction with traditional religion... [and] the fact that ‘the church’ no longer provided for their spiritual needs.”<sup>26</sup> And yet, despite this separation, “evangelical ideas were in the bones of most American Baha'ís, for they had been raised in a fervently Protestant culture...the irony that Kheiralla's lessons on the Baha'í Faith, which stressed the Bible and the Return of Christ, called the Baha'ís back to the heritage they had rejected.”<sup>27</sup> This irony is something akin to the experience of the moderns, not to be confused with the

<sup>25</sup> William Garlington, *The Baha'í Faith in America* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

modernists, found in America's seminaries, universities, and academies from 1893 to 1919. What seemed to define this group of scholars was a self-emancipation from their childhood roots and a seeking of a new religious home through a denial of the past—the irony that Martin Marty saw with this group is that in an attempt to create or be something new, the moderns carried over with them the pasts they tried to leave behind and seemed to end up with conclusions more dismal and unhappy than they had obviously hoped. While the early American Baha'i community wasn't a horde of doctors of theology, nor do I hold any position to call the American Baha'is discontented with their outcomes, the idea of rejecting an adolescent experience of religion was something other Americans were doing. An instilled idea of spiritual individualism and autonomy to seek out ideologies that fit better with preference and personality is seemingly an American ideal reserved not only for the privileged academics but all Americans not bound by a sense of familial religious obligation or tradition—including those that found seats in Kheiralla's lecture room. What one must remember is that "the evangelical roots of most American Baha'is were strong—in fact, they were often stronger than those of the average American."<sup>28</sup>

Various and key aspects of Kheiralla's teachings, some of which have been shown to be a result of his schooling and the American religious zeitgeist, were then appealing and satisfying to the disaffected for their Christendom and American discourse. Kheiralla, in his own genius, understood who he was preaching to when he "used the more Christian-sounding terms individuality and personality" in an attempt to make his central concepts more "comprehensible to his North American audience."<sup>29</sup> Certain teachings which fundamentally aren't a part of the Baha'i scope found a way into his lessons such as his approach to salvation which, although a minimal part of his liturgies, "pictured salvation as predestined and instantaneous, which was the evangelical-protestant view [held by] his audiences."<sup>30</sup> Understanding the impact of Kheiralla's aforementioned teaching which poised "Judaism [as] the ancestor of all the world's great religions," it can be seen that he had essentially "neatly tied them together in a way that satisfied Christians who were disturbed by the implications of comparative religion."<sup>31</sup> His messages were soothing to those that wanted to maintain certain principles about religion but hold them under a different, perhaps more understanding steeple. On the other hand, Kheiralla's messages spoke to budding aspects of modernity through his "emphasis on free will and progress, two beliefs of great importance to late

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

nineteenth-century Americans, [and these] must have made his interpretation particularly appealing" to the early American Baha'is.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps observing Kheiralla's lessons in relation to the main thesis of R. Laurence Moore's *Selling God* could aid in developing a richer view of the success of Kheiralla's message, the eclectic group he attracted, and the subsequent tension of the American Baha'is. Moore discerned that because of a strict separation of church and state, "throughout most of American history no one got social or political advantages from being religious...Therefore they [religious institutions] had to give the public what they wanted."<sup>33</sup> Moore thought economically in exploring that "American history could be understood as efforts to manipulate the religious 'market' in pursuit of the maximum number of 'customers.'"<sup>34</sup> Perhaps underestimated so far is another hat worn by Ibrahim Kheiralla's—the hat of a salesman. The American Baha'i community had thirty registered believers in December 1896 and in less than three years, in September of 1899, the American Baha'i population had nearly multiplied fifty times with an estimate at 1,467.<sup>35</sup> Given that Kheiralla was the only teacher of the Faith in America until 1898 and also that he was the only one with the reserved authority to present new Baha'is with the Greatest Name until 1900, this colossal increase in numbers is largely a testament to the doctor's ability to "advertise" and "sell" the Faith. It would seem in this context then that the manipulation of the market which Kheiralla employed was preaching a theology that mixed both modernist and countermodernist tenets in order to bring numbers into the Faith, even though what resulted was a lack of a general consensus on what exactly the Faith was and a heterozygous group that emphasized different things depending on location, vocation, and background. What the religious public wanted in the late nineteenth century was a variety of things—there were new, emerging views of tradition and also traditional, backlash views of tradition—and what Kheiralla and the early American Baha'i community did was satisfy those different tastes. They essentially offered a menu that listed the foreign delicacies of German-based religious thought for lunch and a down home cooked meal of Protestant evangelicalism with roll for dinner. When one observes the continuity between Kheiralla's community and Laurence Moore's thesis, what we are left with is another characteristic of American religious trends finding its own hold and truth in the Faith's history and development. One must keep in mind that to call this community a Baha'i community is debatable in the sense that they were doctrinally misinformed. While they recognized Baha'u'llah as the prophet

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Preface to Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xiv.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, 104, 163.

of this dispensation and his son, Abdul-Baha, as the covenant and personality of a true Baha'i life, the American Baha'is allowed Kheiralla to boast a high degree of authority that only a few figures, outside of the Baha'u'llah bloodline, would ever exercise.

While the Baha'i-ness of the community is questionable, one thing indisputable about that community is their Western-ness with American slants. To look at the largest Baha'i communities of the late nineteenth century in respect to their general backgrounds, we will see the pervading trend of native-born Americans receiving the Great Name and when immigrant participants pop up, we will see that they come from either Protestant backgrounds or are already found to be an active part of the American religious zeitgeist. The most prominent Baha'i communities at the time of Kheiralla's reign were Chicago, New York City, Kenosha, Wisconsin, Racine, Wisconsin, and Cincinnati.<sup>36</sup>

Chicago, the first and largest Baha'i community, up until 1897 was predominantly American-born evangelical Protestants, but with Kheiralla's appointment of another teacher in the Canadian-born Paul Dealy in 1898, the Baha'i Faith experienced its first significant population (13) of foreign-born citizenry.<sup>37</sup> The majority of this small minority were German immigrants—a nationality which would be noteworthy only if these Baha'is were indeed German. The new outlooks on biblical criticism and the book's consistency, or often lack thereof, with scientific evidence that were shaking some fundamental beliefs of American Christians were not American in origin but rather a product of German thought, seminaries, and research. Thus what was happening with scripture in America and also its regards to science was a debate essentially worn out in Germany by the time it peaked in the States. The aforementioned Charles Briggs whose trial helped catalyzed public knowledge and investigation into the intellectual validity of the Bible actually learned and developed most of his theories and notions while studying abroad in the epicenter of scientific biblical scholarship, Berlin. So to say these German-Americans weren't contemporarily American in regards to the goings-on of American religious life would be an inaccurate assertion. They were, more likely, ahead of their Baha'i and American generation in the tenets of modernity which late-nineteenth-century Americans were wrestling with. Furthermore, they were attracted to the Baha'i Faith for the same reasons that attracted the early American Protestants. Dealy's approach to teaching the Faith was a "fact- and Bible-oriented style" much like Kheiralla's approach and while the biblical orientation registered

<sup>36</sup> Seeing that there isn't enough information available on the early Cincinnati Baha'i community to create a solid profile, the communities of Chicago, New York, and the Wisconsin cities will formulate who the early Baha'is were.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

with the German Baha'is Protestantism, perhaps it was the emphasis on factual information that appealed greatly to the German-American Baha'is who were already accustomed to attempts at intersecting reason and religion.<sup>38</sup>

The New York Baha'i community, led by former Chicagoan Arthur Pillsbury Dodge and expanded with a Kheiralla-appointed teacher Howard McNutt, was composed almost entirely of upper-class, American born and bred citizens. Despite having backgrounds in more liberal traditions, the New York Baha'is were still predominantly former Protestants and aside from one Jewish convert, Christian.<sup>39</sup> Understanding that this particular, white dominated community didn't see any documented immigrants is very interesting given that immigration to America, especially New York where they all landed, at the turn of the century saw its greatest influx of European-born peoples to this point.

The Wisconsin towns of Kenosha and Racine are the true immigrant anomalies in this discussion but lack of permanence speak to their rarity. Vocationally, the Baha'is of Racine and Kenosha were mostly blue-collar, lower-class citizens. Nearly half of the Kenosha Baha'is were born in either the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark or Germany but almost all were of some sort of conservative Protestant background.<sup>40</sup> Given how low income the Kenosha community was and the various trades they filled, it would seem unlikely that the Kenoshaon-German Baha'is had an experience quite like their Chicago-German counterpart, Charles Ios—the sept-lingual University of Munich alumnus.<sup>41</sup> The Racine community had an even greater percentage of foreign-born Baha'is but again like their Kenoshaon neighbors, they were almost all from conservative Protestant backgrounds. And while these communities were filled with immigrants, a Kenosha event in 1899 showed that these foreign-born, Christian Baha'i believers were willing to defend their faith in a Bible-based, Protestant way. The Vatralsky Affair of 1899 was the result of a growing weariness of the Baptist, Methodist, and Congregational masses in Kenosha with the expanding Baha'i community and their hiring of the Harvard-educated Stoyan Vatralsky to lead a polemic against the so-called "Truth-Knowers." The first attack came in an article in the Kenosha local newspaper where Vatralsky was quoted as calling the Baha'is "by far the most dangerous cult that has yet made its appearance on this continent."<sup>42</sup> In response, one letter to the editor from a local Baha'i stated "we are teaching God's truth and teaching it from the Bible" and went on to call Islam the "most

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> William P. Collins, "Kenosha, 1893-1912: History of an Early Baha'i Community in the United States," in *Studies in Babi & Baha'i History* Volume 1, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982), 232.



corrupt of all religions” in order to ease the Protestant fear of “Mohammedanism” which Vatralsky was playing on in his accusations.<sup>43</sup> A series of challenges, apologies for and attacks against the Baha’is would frequent the *Kenosha Kicker* often until the public grew tired of the event when Vatralsky held another lecture. Given the arena of where the debate was mostly waged, it seems the Baha’is of Kenosha and the other prominent Baha’is that came to their rescue dealt with their accusers in a uniquely American way—through a media and press where their voices could ideally remain unsuppressed and their opinions heard. They understood that their best defense wasn’t to arm up and meet Vatralsky at his motel with torches and pitchforks but instead through an exercising of their American rights—an amenity that the non-native Baha’is might have found profoundly unique in the nineteenth-century world scene. Another noteworthy aspect of the Baha’is claim to be religiously valid and not as Vatralsky would pose was an argument that they were Bible-based and thus Christian in that sense. It would seem like the Baha’is were attempting to humanize or Protestantize themselves to the average American reader, most of whom probably had never heard of the Baha’is, Baha’u’llah, or Kheiralla, through professing themselves fundamentally grounded in the Bible. They wanted to level themselves with the paper-reading Americans by saying in a way, *hey, we’re just like you*.

This event, which William Garlington calls the “first in what over the years would become a series of conservative Christian verbal attacks on the American Baha’i community,” was occurring at an early period of a new American era in religious pluralism.<sup>44</sup> In the first year of Kheiralla’s American stay, the United States played host to the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893, and despite the failed sense that surrounded the exhibition, historian William R. Hutchison sees the meeting of the world’s faiths (where the Baha’i Faith actually made mention) as the beginning of a shift in “the definition of pluralism from one that called for mere toleration to one that called for genuine inclusion.”<sup>45</sup> The assumption here is that an earlier era of pluralism, a term best “understood as the acceptance and encouragement of diversity,” Hutchison tracks from the 1830s to the 1890s can be described as pluralism as toleration—that being social or legal toleration or even a “little more than an absence of persecution.”<sup>46</sup> The American religious scene through this period had been dominated by Anglo-Saxon Protestants and being tolerated by this hegemony of sorts typically meant assimilation, but the turn of

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 233. Stockman, *The Baha’i Faith in America*, 115.

<sup>44</sup> Garlington, *The Baha’i Faith in America*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 117.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 6.



the nineteenth to the twentieth century brought about a new understanding of pluralism as a doctrine of inclusion in a religious climate where new and often divergent movements were popping up and staying root in the American scene. The inclusion ideology however was rarely met in allowing or giving those foreign, non-native movements equal or proportional right in sharing the cultural authority. The Vatralsky Affair seems to be that sort of misstep out of the religious ideal of the time which Hutchison refers to and the threat to the dominance that strongly rooted Christians felt was being made by the likes of Buddhism and other religions was even permeating to the small Baha'í Faith. In this way, the American religious zeitgeist was not so much a part of the Baha'í program as it was attacking it. But the Faith was also playing a role in that zeitgeist by being one of the many religious movements to sprout up and cement itself in the religious setting of turn-of-the-century America.

The irony of all this evidence is that this Persian-based religion with seemingly exotic tenets that herald the oneness of humanity and recognize Abraham, Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, and Mohammed as the continuing line of God's revelation on Earth as revealed by an imprisoned Iranian named Baha'u'llah has an American experience that doesn't seem as exotic as its entry in any encyclopedia or the accent above the a in its name might suggest. What we must remember is that these seemingly un-Baha'í moments are American moments because that community was, largely, American. In a grander scope, what do these stories of the American religious zeitgeist found in the American Baha'í Faith mean? I think several propositions could find their arguments in this piece. One is that the American culture and also its religious culture have strong influence on the religious happenings between its borders, especially when those happenings are occurring in the early years of a new religion. Before its appearance in America, the Baha'í Faith had only thirty years of existence as an organized movement and so important issues in doctrine and practice were still being fleshed out in Akka when the first American Baha'í was converted. What must also be mentioned is that the Americans didn't receive an English version of the *Kitab-i-Iqans* until 1994, and so, these former Protestants who had long been exposed to the idea of sola *scriptura* had no definitive English-Baha'í texts to decipher in private. So, what was known about the Baha'í Faith came from those who had, of course through translators, contact with Abdul Baha and the gaps were then often filled in with the contemporary Christian thinking found in the American religious zeitgeist. There is here then a good reason for what may actually be called a *diffusion* of the American religious zeitgeist—a void and the moving in of something to fill it.

Another point which can be made is that change is inevitable for any religion finding its way into the American religious scene—not to say religions don't change in different countries but the American atmosphere is much different with no recognized national religion. Even faiths rooted in strong tradition such as Judaism have seen American-slanted reform on cemented ways of religious practice. There is no urge here to suggest that the Baha'i Faith has lost its identity and blended into the American religious backdrop—the present community is thriving and unique just as it was when it made its way to the United States. But one reviewing our nation's religious history must be conscious of its sprawl and recognize its influence and infiltration into some of even the youngest, most exotic, and smallest religions.

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