

Isolated Believer

Alain Locke, Baha'i Secularist

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In 1935, at age fifty, the Harlem Renaissance writer Alain LeRoy Locke, a philosophy professor at Howard University, contributed a chapter to his friend Horace Kallen's volume *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*. In a biographical preamble, Locke described himself as "more of a pagan than a Puritan" and "more of a humanist than a pragmatist." He then declared himself a "universalist in religion" and a "cultural cosmopolitan" and labeled his philosophical outlook "cultural pluralism and value relativism."¹

When Locke used the term "universalist in religion," he was subtly referring to his adherence to the Baha'i faith, to which he had converted in 1918. In 1941, only six years after he wrote the chapter for Kallen's volume, Locke ended his official ties with religion due to lack of time and energy for the commitment and disillusionment with their ability to affect positive change on the race question. He wrote to a Baha'i friend, "I naturally am reluctant to sever a spiritual bond with the Bahai community, for I still hold to a firm belief in the truth of the Bahai principles." Though he "respectfully and regretfully" declined to renew his membership in the Washington, D.C. Baha'i organization, he declared himself an "isolated believer."²

This designation, "isolated believer," reflected Locke's lifelong view of religion, even before he became Baha'i. Locke wrote extensively on philosophy, politics, art, music, and many other topics. He rarely wrote about religion and was never known as a pious person. His private correspondence was devoid of religious language. Yet neither was he an outspoken nonbeliever like the Clarence Darrows of his day. As a result scholars have missed Locke's significance as an African American secularist. In the 2016 volume *Race and Secularism in America*, Locke is relegated to a single mention in a footnote.³ The Locke biographer and literary scholar Charles Molesworth, meanwhile, has noted the fundamentally "modern and secular" character of the New Negro movement, equally "embodied" in all of Locke's writing, without analyzing that secularism further.⁴ Locke is absent from scholarship on American secularism precisely because of his affiliation with the Baha'i, a religious group.

Ironically the key to understanding Locke's secularism is examining it alongside his Baha'i faith. He undergirded his universalist secular humanism

with a spiritual foundation. His conversion to Baha'i was not a break but a continuation. It provided a religious framework for his overarching belief in the unity of humankind while explicitly sanctioning his pluralistic commitment to diversity in the realm of secular culture, a commitment he best expressed through the Harlem Renaissance.⁵ While historians of the black experience privilege the roles of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, particularly the black Protestant churches, this analysis of Locke's Baha'i faith enriches our understanding of twentieth-century black intellectual history by showing how an oft-ignored religion from nineteenth-century Persia provides a window into black secularism in the United States.

Locke should be acknowledged as a major secularist among African Americans. The New Negro movement of the 1920s that Locke helped lead was a movement of secular cultural nationalism. The writers and artists he championed—Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and others—were not religiously oriented. Locke used the Baha'i faith, which preaches religious unity and cultural diversity, as a vehicle to bring about greater "race amity" in America. That nationalism sat on a foundation of cultural pluralism, the secular philosophy he developed in conversation with Kallen in 1906–8 at Harvard and Oxford.

Cultural pluralism responded to racism and nativism, as well as the assimilationist ideal of the melting pot. It posited that different ethnic groups could and should coexist in the same political entity. In celebrating diversity it shaped modern multiculturalism. Today multiculturalism usually includes religious diversity. Yet for Locke and Kallen, cultural pluralism was a secular ideal, referring to different immigrant groups, like Germans, Irish, and Italians, and defining Jews and blacks as national or cultural communities.

Secularism for Locke was not simply the absence of religiosity but an important philosophical orientation. Borrowing from the anthropologist Franz Boas, Locke ascribed a cultural definition to race and separated religion from race and culture. His views on religion emerged from his Philadelphia upbringing and his experiences at Harvard. His religious position, here called "Baha'i secularism," would be critical for the New Negro movement.

Locke edited and compiled the movement's bible, *The New Negro*, in 1925. This volume of essays, stories, poetry, and art did not mention Baha'i. Locke's cultural pluralism was political, not religious. He sought to create a sophisticated African American culture on par with elite European civilization to add to the larger tapestry of cultures in the United States. This was an artistic effort to advance civil rights. Though it failed as a civil rights initiative, the New Negro movement left a foundational legacy for modern black studies and aesthetics.

As intellectual godfather of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the first black Rhodes scholar at Oxford University in 1907, and a distinguished pragmatist philosopher for several decades, Locke was one of the most important African American thinkers of the twentieth century. In a 1927 letter W. E. B.

Du Bois wrote, "Locke is by long odds the best trained man among the younger American Negroes."⁶ Locke scholars focus on the New Negro movement, his Rhodes Scholarship, his pragmatism, and his cultural pluralism. His religious and secularist commitments, largely unexamined, informed each of these facets of his life and merged in his dedication to Baha'i.

The Baha'i faith is a monotheistic religion that emerged in nineteenth-century Persia. Its leaders advocated the unity of God, of all religions, and of all humanity. They stood against race prejudice, making the religion attractive to ethnic minorities, including African Americans. The Baha'i principle Locke came to embrace was "unity in diversity." The Baha'i respected cultural differences in the name of upholding the religious unity of humankind. Religious unity implied that all religions shared the same foundation in monotheism and the same overarching moral framework.

When Locke converted to the Baha'i faith in 1918 the religion was less than a hundred years old.⁷ In 1844 in Shiraz, Persia, a Muslim merchant named Siyyid Ali Muhammad prophesied a new religious leader who would unite mankind. He came to be known at the Báb, Arabic for "the gate." Though the Báb was executed for heresy in 1850, his follower, Mirza Husayn-Ali, a Tehran nobleman, claimed to be the prophet the Báb foretold, on par with Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. He took a new name, Bahá'u'lláh, "Glory of God," and assumed leadership of the new faith. In 1852, accused of plotting to assassinate the shah, imprisoned, and exiled with his family to Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh continued to spread his message of universal religion, undergirded by a common ethics and monotheism, accepting the legitimacy of the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

By 1863 Bahá'u'lláh had reinterpreted the Báb's religion, christening it Baha'i. He moved about the Middle East, often due to banishment, finally settling in Acre, Palestine, all the while preaching and composing major Baha'i texts. Bahá'u'lláh's son, born Abbas in 1844 but renamed 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or "Servant of Bahá," succeeded him. In 1907 'Abdu'l-Bahá moved the center of the Baha'i faith from Acre to Haifa. He increased his missionary activity, in 1911-13 touring Europe and North America. Either in England or the United States he may have encountered Locke, though Locke's recorded Baha'i activity only began in the 1920s.

Washington, D.C. in the early twentieth century had a small but energetic Baha'i community that included several African Americans. On March 22, 1911, the "colored believers" threw a "surprise farewell reception" for Louis George Gregory, a prominent black Baha'i. Gregory was about to make a pilgrimage to the religion's headquarters in Haifa, the first African American to do so. *Star of the West*, the Baha'i newspaper, counted "more than fifty of these believers and invited guests" at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Dyer, black Baha'is whose Washington home was "always open for meetings." Other African American attendees included Wilson Bruce Evans, the principal of the Armstrong Manual Training School for black youth (dedicated by

Booker T. Washington); the judge and former US consul to Madagascar Miff-
lin Wistar Gibbs; William Henry Harrison Hart, a lawyer and law professor at
Howard; and Margaret Murrell, an English teacher at the Armstrong School.⁸

The following year 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited Washington.⁹ He spoke (through
a translator) at churches and other function halls, but also made a point of
engaging the black community. On Tuesday, April 23, 1912, at noon, the
Baha'i prophet lectured before over a thousand students and faculty of How-
ard University. That evening he addressed a packed house at the Metropolitan
AME Church for a gathering sponsored by the Bethel Literary and Historical
Society, an important African American intellectual organization. The *Wash-
ington Bee* covered the events, noting, "Quite a colony of colored Bahaists has
been developed in Washington," referring to the black supporters of 'Abdu'l-
Bahá as "earnest disciples."¹⁰ The next night Mrs. Dyer hosted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's
talk. The Baha'i prophet marveled at the racial harmony in the room, with
over a hundred mostly white Baha'is in attendance at a black woman's home:
"May the colored people be like sapphires and rubies, and the white be as
diamonds and pearls; and their mixture, their unity will lend a charm to the
composite. How delightful a spectacle it would be if there would be a real
unity among them! . . . And now the American nation, be it colored or white,
if they unite and be in accord, the Lights of the Oneness of Humanity will
shine."¹¹

Locke was not in attendance, though he likely interacted with members
of the Washington Baha'i community after he began teaching at Howard
in the fall of 1912. He kept his religious affiliation fairly private, even after
his conversion in 1918. He occasionally participated in Baha'i ceremonies
and functions, particularly events intended to encourage "race amity," the
term that Baha'is in the United States used for racial harmony.¹² Locke helped
organize two race amity conferences in 1921, in Washington and Springfield,
Massachusetts, and another two in 1924, in New York and Philadelphia,
speaking at all but the Springfield event. He occasionally wrote for Baha'i
publications, though his pieces did not circulate widely.

Through this participation Locke came to know Louis Gregory, the leading
black Baha'i, and furthered his active engagement with the faith. At the Phila-
delphia conference, in October 1924, Locke spoke on "art and culture" at the
Convention for Amity between the Colored and White Races in America.¹³
Gregory also participated in the event, and two years later, in February and
March 1926, he invited Locke (then briefly fired from Howard for supporting
more equitable pay for faculty) to go on a Baha'i lecture tour in Ohio and
Florida. Locke also went on two pilgrimages to the Baha'i world headquarters
in Haifa in 1923 and 1934. Still, he seldom publicly identified as Baha'i to
people outside the religion. The Baha'i faith corresponded so well to Locke's
philosophy of cosmopolitan cultural pluralism that making the connection
explicit likely felt superfluous outside of Baha'i settings. To most of his Amer-
ican peers, this foreign faith would have seemed deeply unfamiliar.

Locke's secularism had deep roots. Born in Philadelphia in 1885, he lost his father six years later. Though his mother, Mary (Hawkins) Locke, raised her son Episcopalian, she was also inspired by ethical culture, the philosophy of Felix Adler, an interest she passed on to her son. Adler, the son of a New York Reform rabbi, left Judaism in 1876, thinking it too narrow and too focused on theology. He started his own movement, a secular religion that abandoned all Judaic particularism and opened itself up to gentile membership. Even more crucially, it eliminated all faith and theology from its ideology, arguing that morals mattered more than theism.

Locke embraced Adler's emphasis on education above any need for church attendance. After graduating from Philadelphia's Central High School, he attended the School of Pedagogy for a year, thinking he might enter the educational profession. In an essay he wrote in 1904, "Moral Training in Elementary Schools," for the school's journal, *The Teacher*, Locke quoted Adler, who stressed that schools not only develop the intellect but also "build up character." Adler had made education into a universal religion. Locke felt similarly, holding school above church and even family as an institution to inculcate morality in the young. "Is not the school custodian of the richest and most liable inheritance of man, the combined and formulated achievements of his thought and action?"¹⁴

That same year Locke wrote a school paper titled "The True Nature of a Church." His teacher, a Dr. Thompson, had asked, "What is a Church?," rejecting the commonplace definition of "a body of people united in a common divinity and a common creed." Instead, Thompson explained, "the essential idea of a church was that it should be so universal in doctrine and in intended scope as to include all humanity in its proper form of combination—the brotherhood of man."

Locke reasoned that "only a very few" of the world's religions could be counted as churches with a "self-imposed duty of universal realization." He found Thompson's argument "absorbingly interesting" due to the variety of "creeds, doctrines, and sects" known to humankind. He concluded, "The fallacy is not in adopting creeds, formulas and rituals, but in looking upon them as the essential elements without which true religion means nothing. How many realize that, in insisting upon these as necessary and always present elements, they are taking away the remote probability of a universalization of their religions and denying to themselves the right to the name of church?"¹⁵ Locke valued religion as universal rather than particular. He believed that true religion functioned as universal philosophy that transcended the more particular religions of mankind.

Locke continued along this path at Harvard. He joined the Ethical Society, an organization loosely affiliated with Adler's movement. Whatever vestiges remained of his youthful Episcopalianism vanished completely. In his sophomore year he wrote his mother that he had become "quite a Unitarian by now." Compared to his Lutheran friend David Pfromm, Locke considered

himself an "atheist," though he noted that to Pfromm's "childlike mind" atheism encompassed "Catholicism, Unitarianism and other such kindred religions." Locke recounted that when a friend wanted to have him baptized, he joked, "A bath is as much of a compromise with religion as I will make."¹⁶ He occasionally attended Pfromm's services only "to please him."¹⁷

Locke spent the years 1907–10 in Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and then the following year in Berlin. As an African American standing just over five feet tall and weighing about 100 pounds, Locke stood out in Europe. Germany, however, proved more tolerant of his skin color and his homosexuality, and he continued his education largely removed from issues of race and religion. The exception came in July 1911, when he attended the First Universal Races Congress in London, along with Felix Adler, Israel Zangwill, and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Another speaker, Wellesley Tudor Pole, an English representative of the Baha'i faith, read a letter from the Persian Baha'i leader 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the religion's founder, Bahá'u'lláh. Tudor Pole called for the "world-wide recognition of the underlying unity of religions and peoples." He stressed, however, that "the unification of Races is not intended to mean their suppression of their different characteristics in order that they may be blended into one, but would imply that these very differences are needed to constitute a harmonious whole, and that the duty of this age is to recognize the possibilities of development within each race in order that, in a spirit of love, mankind the world over may cooperate in working for Universal Peace."¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letter reinforced this view with a floral analogy: "Consider the varieties of flowers in a garden. They seem but to enhance the loveliness of each other. When differences of colour, ideas, and character are found in the human Kingdom, and come under the control of the power of Unity, they too show their essential beauty and perfection."¹⁹

Locke may have attended this session and encountered Baha'i ideas there. Years later he recalled the First Universal Races Congress sparking his interest in "a comparative study of races" from a "scientific approach."²⁰ To Locke, science helped account for and categorize human variety, whereas religion facilitated spiritual unity. If he had any religious sentiments, they echoed those of the pragmatist philosopher William James, whose ideas Locke had encountered at Harvard and Oxford. James described religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."²¹

Locke's religion was personal rather than communal. Though he participated in some Baha'i activities, faith never served as his primary affiliation or identifier. He was a human being, a philosopher, an American, an African American. His religion was an acceptance of common humanity in a world of diversity. Baha'i provided a spiritual outlet for a secular philosophy he already believed.

Locke's cosmopolitan vision of cultural pluralism dovetailed with Baha'i rhetoric. In October 1911, a few months after the Universal Races Congress

Locke attended, 'Abdu'l-Bahá lectured in Paris on "beauty and harmony in diversity." He again used the metaphor of flowers in a garden, varied in "form and color" but sharing the same "origin." He described humanity the same way, "made up of many races, and its peoples are of different color, white, black, yellow, brown and red—but they all come from the same God, and all are servants to Him."²²

These differences long caused hatred and bloodshed. Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá insisted that differences were a blessing:

Let us look rather at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson from the vegetable creation. If you beheld a garden in which all the plants were the same as to form, color and perfume, it would not seem beautiful to you at all, but, rather, monotonous and dull. The garden which is pleasing to the eye and which makes the heart glad, is the garden in which are growing side by side flowers of every hue, form and perfume, and the joyous contrast of color is what makes for charm and beauty. . . . It is just the diversity and variety that constitutes its charm; each flower, each tree, each fruit, beside being beautiful in itself, brings out by contrast the qualities of the others, and shows to advantage the special loveliness of each and all.²³

Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá offered a musical metaphor: "The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord. If you meet those of different race and color from yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness. Think of them as different colored roses growing in the beautiful garden of humanity, and rejoice to be among them."²⁴

In using musical and garden metaphors, 'Abdu'l-Bahá established a dichotomy between the essential origins all humans shared, and their outward appearances and practices, which are different to ensure the world was interesting and exciting. This is precisely the dichotomy Alain Locke advanced through various endeavors, including the New Negro movement. Appreciating cultural difference led to an embrace of common humanity. The particular led to the universal.

By 1918 Locke had imbibed 'Abdu'l-Bahá's universalism enough to formally convert to the Baha'i faith.²⁵ His interactions with Baha'i leadership, however, came with Shoghi Effendi, who succeeded 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921. Effendi, a distant relative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, had been born in Acre in 1897. Less a prophet and more a capable administrator, he spoke English, married a Christian woman from Montreal, Mary Maxwell, and proved a charismatic and accessible leader. Locke may have appreciated Effendi's temporal and physical nearness. Just as he had encountered Adler, the founder of the ethical culture

movement, Locke met Effendi, leader of the Baha'i faith. Locke's experience of the ethical culture movement and the Baha'i faith was not distant, as it had been with Episcopalian Protestantism, but personal, immediate, and direct.

In 1923 Locke made a pilgrimage to Palestine to visit the Baha'i center in Haifa. He wrote about his experience the following year in an article titled "Impressions of Haifa," printed in the Baha'i journal *Star of the West*. His very first sentences evoked the universalism of his adopted faith: "Whether Bahai or non-Bahai, Haifa makes pilgrims of all who visit her. The place itself makes mystics of us all, for it shuts out the world of materiality with its own characteristic atmosphere." He compared the experience to the calm of a monastery, but without the feeling of being shut in, instead prompting the "opening of new vistas." It was not ascetic at all but combined the "joy and naturalness of a nature-cult with the ethical seriousness and purpose of a spiritual religion."²⁶

Spirituality for Locke did not necessitate unreason. He found the shrines of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá "impressive" but also "modern." They gave the impression, "without mysticism and supernaturalness," of a religion very much alive. Christianity had "in such large measure forgotten" that lesson celebrated at Easter, "He is not here, He is risen." For Locke, the power of Christianity was in Jesus's message as "one of the greatest teachers in the world," his "spirit," not his divinity.²⁷

Locke appreciated his guide in Haifa, the living and breathing Shoghi Effendi, the spiritual leader of the Baha'i community at that time. Locke was especially reassured by the "communion of ideas and ideals without the mediation of symbols," a feature of the Baha'i religion he deemed "novel." To Locke, "the only enlightened symbol of a religious or moral principle" was a human being who embodied that principle. In the Baha'i faith Locke found "the cure for the ills of western materialism" and a "destined mission of uniting in a common mood western and oriental minds."²⁸ He had found his universal religion, a source of spirituality individual in its manifestation yet available to all. It offered a shared ethics in a religious realm where, in Locke's mind, group variety led to strife. But that shared ethic enabled and undergirded cultural diversity, giving the world color and character.

In the 1920s, though continuing to teach philosophy, Locke put aside most of his philosophical pursuits to focus on the aesthetic and cultural realms. This shift culminated in his leadership of the New Negro movement, centered in Harlem. In the volume he compiled and edited in 1925, *The New Negro*, Locke contributed the introduction and several articles, including one titled "The Negro Spirituals." He opened this essay with a bold declarative statement: "The Spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America." He examined their contribution in an admiring but objective tone, skillfully navigating the universal and the particular. What made the spirituals "uniquely expressive of the Negro" also made them "deeply representative of the soil that produced them." Echoing W. E. B. Du

Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, Locke labeled the spirituals both black and American, "nationally as well as racially characteristic."²⁹

However, Locke took this expansive interpretation a step further, noting the spirituals' "immediate and compelling universality of appeal" that guaranteed "the immortality of those great folk expressions that survive not so much through being typical of a group or representative of a period but by virtue of being fundamentally and everlasting human." The Negro spirituals embodied a particularistic expression of a universal sentiment, of an emotion and an ethic that transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries. "This universality of the Spirituals" only increased over time. It outlasted the "contempt of the slave owners, the conventionalizations of formal religion, the repressions of Puritanism, the corruptions of sentimental balladry, and the neglect and disdain of second-generation respectability."³⁰

Locke's implicit criticism of "formal religion" and the "repressions of Puritanism" are important here. For Locke, true religion could never be so narrow, so particular. The "formal" mainline Protestant denominations, of which the Puritan legacy was strongest, sought to stifle the spirituals from extending beyond their African American roots, deeming them inappropriate for their more enlightened Christianity. Locke believed the spirituals were "among the most genuine and outstanding expressions of Christian mood and feeling." He acknowledged that "there is no such thing as intrinsically religious music," that purportedly religious music contained the observable "interplay of the secular and religious." The spirituals displayed "sensuous and almost pagan elements." Nonetheless "something so intensely religious and so essentially Christian dominates the blend." He did not shy away from declaring, "The Spirituals are spiritual." To deny this would be "to rob them of their heritage" and would be "untrue to their tradition and to the folk genius" that birthed them.³¹

Though Locke valued their secular preservation, he observed that performances of the spirituals in concert halls and college campuses distorted their religious character. "They are essentially congregational, not theatrical." They were not, strictly speaking, art, though they could be source material for art. Yet to Locke they embodied the spirit of a particular people, African Americans, more effectively than jazz music. They more ably contributed to a universal American and global civilization. Their path to universality was through a musical Christianity that could appeal to religious and secular alike, to Christians and non-Christians, as folk art and folk culture. You did not have to adhere to the Judeo-Christian tradition to appreciate their spirituality.

In his discussion of the Negro spirituals, and in his essay on Haifa, Locke did not mention God. A divine being did not play a large role in his written output, in his appreciation of black music, or in his connection to the Baha'i religion. He admired the Baha'i ethic and philosophy, not its monotheism. In an unpublished and undated essay, "The Gospel for the Twentieth Century," he mentioned God, but in pragmatist rather than religious terms. "The pragmatic test and proof of the fatherhood of God is after all whether belief in it

can realize the unity of mankind."³² Implicitly employing James's principle of the "cash value" of an idea and his defense of faith in "The Will to Believe," Locke saw Baha'i monotheism as a means to an end, namely worldwide peace and spiritual unity.³³

Locke lamented Christian otherworldly messianism, which rendered the notion of the "Brotherhood of Man" merely a "negligible corollary of the fatherhood of God." Without a peaceful payoff in *this* world, monotheistic belief was not worth much. The Baha'i faith, he gleaned, had more potential than Christianity did in that regard. He concluded his essay by quoting Bahá'u'lláh: "That all nations shall become one in faith, and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled . . . These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and men be as one kindred and family."³⁴

His longest essay for a Baha'i publication, "Unity in Diversity: A Baha'i Principle," written in the early 1930s, reads more like a philosophical treatise than a religious sermon. It evokes the same balance between universalism and particularism that his response to the Negro spirituals did ten years earlier. The subtitle of the essay reflects the quasi-secular affiliation Locke felt toward his adopted faith. What he admired about the Baha'i, what he made his own, were their principles much more than their beliefs. Locke understood that a "pure principle" served only to "motivate or sanction," noting that "mankind is not saved by declarations and professions of faith, but by works and ideas." His focus was the material world, which included the realm of rational thought. In celebrating a particular religion, he emphasized that religion's pragmatic value to broader civilization. Before referring to the Baha'i in the main text, he asserted, "The demand for universality is beyond doubt the most characteristic modern thing in the realm of spiritual values, and in the world of the mind that reflects this realm."³⁵

The Baha'i faith offered a solution to the "present dilemma" felt by Locke and many others: "We feel and hope in the direction of universality, but still think and act particularistically." The Baha'i religion could help a variety of peoples "discover unity and spiritual equivalences under the differences." The principle of "unity in diversity" was a recipe for peace and reciprocity. A celebration of the spiritual and ethical similarities between all peoples, and an acknowledgment that these spiritual similarities outweighed cultural differences, paradoxically helped preserve cultural diversity. This principle allowed the cultural differences to flourish as sources of mutual appreciation, of reciprocity rather than conflict.³⁶

Though Locke described the Baha'i as early adopters of this principle, his concern was not for their originality but for the pragmatism and persuasiveness of this message of peace. He thought it cruel to deny "oppressed classes and races" national expression in the face of racism and nationalism that consistently denigrated them. He cited "the partisanships of Indian Nation-

alism, or Chinese integrity, and independence, or Negro and proletarian self-assertion after generations of persecution and restriction." His solution, his *via media*, was not to demand "universalism" from these peoples, but instead to advocate "reciprocity," which entailed the preservation but also the "restriction of these movements to their own natural boundaries, areas and interests." He allowed for nationalism, but not imperialism and colonialism.³⁷

Here, rather than attribute this idea to the Baha'i, he credited his old Harvard professor Josiah Royce, "one of the greatest of the American philosophers." Royce's "admirable principle of loyalty" was equivalent to the Baha'i principle of "unity in diversity." Royce advocated not only group loyalty, but "loyalty to loyalty," as in loyalty and respect for those who maintained a measure of group pride, even and especially if they were not of one's own group. This mutual respect allowed for "spiritual reciprocity."³⁸

Locke envisioned translating the principles of universalism and reciprocity to the secular realm, into the "social and cultural fields," to enlist the support of the "most vigorous and intellectual elements in society." He challenged every "Baha'i believer," not to proselytize, but to "carry the universal dimension of tolerance and spiritual reciprocity into every particular cause and sectarianism he can reach. His function there is to share the loyalties of the group, but upon a different plane and with a higher perspective. He must partake of partisanship in order to work towards its transformation, and help keep it within his bounds of constructive and controlled self-assertion."³⁹ Locke struck a balanced tone. He never advocated cultural erasure or assimilation; instead he argued for "constructive and controlled self-assertion." Groups should distinguish themselves in an effort to improve the whole, never to overwhelm cultural units. The "loyalties of the group" should be shared, and appreciated, but on a higher, more spiritual plane. Writing in the 1930s, Locke designated the task for this decade as "transposing the traditional Baha'i reciprocity between religions into the social and cultural denominationalisms of nation, race, and class and vindicating anew upon this plane the precious legacy of the inspired teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'ulláh."⁴⁰

In a short 1936 essay, "The Orientation of Hope," Locke grouped himself among the "true Baha'i believers." He saw great value in "Baha'i principles" of universal "brotherhood, peace, and social justice," hoping they could be brought "to the attention of statesmen and men of practical affairs." In communicating these principles, he advised that while his fellow believers should remember the religious language in which they learned them, they should also "speak a language which the practical-minded man of affairs, and the realistic common man can and will understand." They must translate their message into "terms and ideas and practical issues of the present-day world." Locke remained loyal to the Baha'i but pragmatically applied their principles in a secular fashion.⁴¹

Locke singled out the Baha'i faith as particularly adept at navigating religious and racial diversity. In 1942 he coedited a volume with the anthropol-

ogist Bernhard Stern titled *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture*. Locke and Stern described a "Christian cosmopolitanism" of the medieval period that led to a relatively "liberal racial attitude," yet maintained a stark separation with the most common religious other, the Jew. Christianity proved too narrow.⁴²

Locke again criticized Christianity on a 1942 episode of the radio show *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, recorded at Howard University. The topic was "Is There a Spiritual Basis for World Unity?" Locke sat on a panel with three other Howard faculty; the university's president, Mordecai Johnson; the dean of the law school, Leon Ransom; and a professor of education, Doxey Wilkerson. Johnson spoke first, championing Christianity as a force for racial justice. Locke disagreed, observing, "One of the troubles of today's world tragedy is the fact that this same religion, of which Dr. Johnson has spoken with such grand idealisms, has, when institutionalized, been linked with politics, the flag and empire, the official church and sectarianism." He linked race and religion, finding little hope for world unity among the "superciliously self-appointed superior races aspiring to impose their preferred culture, self-righteous creeds and religions expounding monopolies on ways of life and salvation."⁴³

Locke declared Christianity an enemy of racial progress and of cultural pluralism. When an audience member asked him for an alternative force for world unity, "a substitute for the spiritual ideas that you claim do not exist," Locke had a ready reply. "One of the tragic things which show our present limited horizons is that there are very few institutions where, let us say, the great philosophies of the East are studied; and when they are and as they are, we will be a little nearer to that spiritual unity, I think, that you think I don't believe in."⁴⁴ He likely meant the Baha'i faith but referred to "philosophies," not religions. To Locke, being Baha'i was a spiritual commitment that did not require supernatural beliefs.

In 1944 Locke reiterated this critique in an address at Mills College in Oakland, California, titled "Moral Imperatives for World Order." While people traditionally directed their loyalties toward nation, race, or religion, Locke hoped national loyalties would weaken with the dissolving and opening of borders. Race, meanwhile, needed to be transformed from the "fascist, blood-clan sense, which also is tribal and fetishist," into the Boasian definition of "race as a common culture and brotherhood." Locke opposed racial hierarchy, instead calling for a "confraternity of culture" and "an ideal of the parity of races and cultures."⁴⁵

When it came to religion, Locke insisted, in accordance with Baha'i doctrine, that there were many spiritual paths to "salvation." He lamented the opposing view, "a tragic limitation of Christianity," which preached universalism but practiced monism. "If the Confucian expression of a Commandment means the same as the Christian expression, then it is the truth also and should so be recognized." Locke's denunciation of Christianity, his elevation of an Eastern religion, and his reference to a Commandment rather than a theolog-

ical principle all reflected his commitment to secularism. Religions, for Locke, existed to provide spiritual expression and moral frameworks, not irrational or supernatural beliefs. They served a pragmatic function in this world, not the next. Locke concluded by linking nation, race, and religion again, not giving any precedence over the other but insisting they become “non-monopolistic and culturally tolerant” concepts “freed of sectarian bigotry.”⁴⁶

Locke wrote his final Baha’i essay, “Lessons in World Crisis,” in 1945. The violence of the twentieth century provided an opportunity for a “terrestrial revelation of the essential and basic oneness of mankind.” He praised “leading religious liberals” for their interfaith cooperation, helping to bridge the divides between Protestants and Catholics and Christians and Jews. He lamented, however, the lack of engagement with “Muslim and Oriental religious fronts,” whose philosophies he believed better suited to universal justice. Again he distanced himself from Christianity, instead emphasizing “the essential parity of cultures,” an idea that would provide a “spiritual foundation for any true world order of peoples and nations.”⁴⁷

When Locke died in 1954, Dr. Channing Tobias, an African American civil rights leader trained at Christian seminaries, presided over the funeral. None of the obituaries mentioned the Baha’i faith. Locke’s cremated remains passed from one person to another until 2014, when they were finally buried in Congressional Cemetery on Capitol Hill in Washington. Katharine Bigelow, a prominent Baha’i, spoke at the ceremony, as did representatives of Howard University, the Alain Locke Society, and several Rhodes scholars. Members of the Kuumba Singers, Harvard’s undergraduate African American choir, performed traditional spirituals, honoring Locke’s musical taste. At graveside Robert James, another Baha’i representative, offered a prayer.

The Baha’i faith was one part of Locke’s multifaceted existence, complementing his secularism, scholarly pursuits, aesthetic activism, and cultural pluralism. His 2014 gravestone reflects this cohesive compartmentalization. On the front, his epitaph reads: “PHILOSOPHER—EDUCATOR—COSMOPOLITAN—HERALD OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE—EXPONENT OF CULTURAL PLURALISM—PHILOSOPHY CHAIR, HOWARD UNIVERSITY—FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN RHODES SCHOLAR.” Baha’i is not mentioned.

On the back of the stone are five images. In the center is a “dramatic art deco depiction” of an African woman’s face with the sun as backdrop, drawn by the black painter Aaron Douglas during the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁸ This image, first used as a book cover for Locke’s copy of *The New Negro*, is adorned with the Latin words *Teneo Te, Africa*, “I hold you, my Africa,” and *Ave, Aviiis!*, “Hail, Grandmothers!,” a tribute to his ancestral heritage. Each corner of the stone has a different symbol: the Greek letters *phi*, *beta*, and *sigma*, representing the black fraternity Locke joined at Howard; the *lambda*, a symbol for gay and lesbian rights; a Zimbabwe bird that was adopted by the American Association of Rhodes Scholars; and a nine-pointed star, emblem of the Baha’i faith. Those symbols are not labeled. Casual observers will not

know of Locke's Baha'i affiliation and perhaps see only the universalism of the stars in heaven. Locke, Baha'i secularist and isolated believer, would likely have approved.

Notes

1. Alain LeRoy Locke, "Psychograph," for the article "Values and Imperatives," in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, edited by Horace Meyer Kallen and Sidney Hook (1935; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 312.

2. Alain Locke to Mariam Haney, March 30, 1941, Box 164-33, Folder 49, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as ALP), cited in Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*, Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, vol. 18 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005), 177.

3. M. Cooper Harriss, "Two Ways of Looking at an Invisible Man: Race, the Secular, and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Theology," in *Race and Secularism in America*, edited by Jonathan Kahn and Vincent Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 173n16.

4. Charles Molesworth, introduction to *The Works of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xii.

5. In a 1935 form for Baha'i records, Locke listed the year of his conversion as 1918 and the place as Washington, D.C.

6. W. E. B. Du Bois to Jesse Moorland, May 5, 1927, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts-Amherst Libraries.

7. The following details are taken from the official website of the Baha'i faith, www.bahai.org, and from Buck, *Alain Locke*, 35-36.

8. Joseph H. Hannen, reporting Washington, D.C., news in *Star of the West* 2, no. 3 (1911): 9. See also Buck, *Alain Locke*, chapter 3, "The Early Washington D.C. Baha'i Community."

9. For more on this trip, see Guy Emerson Mount, "A Troubled Modernity: W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Black Church,' and the Problem of Causality," in *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity*, edited by Negar Mottahede (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 85-110.

10. "Abdul Baha on Religious Unity," *Washington Bee*, April 27, 1912.

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, address in Washington, D.C. at home of Mrs. Dyer, April 24, 1912, translated by Dr. Ammen U. Fareed and recorded by Joseph H. Hannen, *Star of the West* 3, no. 3 (1912): 21-22.

12. Buck, *Alain Locke*, 69. The fifth chapter of Buck's book is titled "Race Amity."

13. "Convention for Amity Meets at Big Local Hall," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 1, 1924.

14. Alain Locke, "Moral Training in Elementary Schools," *The Teacher* 8, no. 4 (1904): 96-97.

15. Alain Locke, "The True Nature of a Church," March 1, 1904, ALP.

16. Alain Locke to Mary Locke, November 3, 1906, Box 52, Folder 15, ALP.

17. Alain Locke to Mary Locke, November 18, 1906 Box 52, Folder 21, ALP.
18. Wellesley Tudor Pole, "The Baha'i Movement," in *A Recording of the Proceedings of the First Universal Races Congress Held at the University of London, July 26–29, 1911* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1911), 155.
19. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Letter from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the First Universal Races Congress," translated by Wellesley Tudor Pole, in *A Recording of the Proceedings of First Universal Races Congress*, 156.
20. Alain LeRoy Locke, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, ed. Jeffrey Stewart (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 1. The lecture was first delivered in 1915. Also cited in Christopher Buck, "Race Leader, Social Philosopher, Baha'i Pluralist," *World Order* 36, no. 3 (2005): 12.
21. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), 31.
22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Beauty and Harmony in Diversity," *Paris Talks*, chapter 15, October 28, 1911, <http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/paris-talks>.
23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Beauty and Harmony in Diversity."
24. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Beauty and Harmony in Diversity."
25. In 1935 Locke filled out a "Baha'i Historical Record," wherein he dated his own conversion to 1918, in Washington, D.C.
26. Alain Locke, "Impressions of Haifa," *Star of the West* 15, no. 1 (1924): 13.
27. Locke, "Impressions of Haifa," 13.
28. Locke, "Impressions of Haifa," 13–14.
29. Alain LeRoy Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," in *The New Negro*, edited by Alain LeRoy Locke (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), reprinted in Molesworth, *The Works of Alain Locke*, 105.
30. Locke, "The Negro Spirituals."
31. Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," 106.
32. Alain Locke, "The Gospel for the Twentieth Century," Box 164-143, Folder 3, ALP, cited in Buck, *Alain Locke*, 234.
33. William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Longman's, 1907), uses the term "cash-value" several times. William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longman's, 1897).
34. Locke, "Gospel for the Twentieth Century," cited in Buck, *Alain Locke*, 234, 236.
35. Alain LeRoy Locke, "Unity in Diversity: A Baha'i Principle," in *The Baha'i World: A Biennial International Record*, vol. 5: 1932–1934 (New York: Baha'i Publishing Committee, 1936), reprinted in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, edited by Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 134.
36. Locke, "Unity in Diversity," 135.
37. Locke, "Unity in Diversity," 136–37.
38. Locke, "Unity in Diversity," 137.
39. Locke, "Unity in Diversity," 137.
40. Locke, "Unity in Diversity," 138.
41. Alain Locke, "The Orientation of Hope," in *The Baha'i World*, vol. 5 (1936), reprinted in Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 130.

42. Alain Locke and Bernhard Stern, *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture*, reprinted in Molesworth, *The Works of Alain Locke*, 375.

43. Alain Locke, "Is There a Spiritual Basis for World Unity," episode of *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, May 28, 1942, cited in Buck, *Alain Locke*, 179.

44. Locke, "Is There a Spiritual Basis for World Unity," 180.

45. Alain Locke, "Moral Imperatives for World Order," address delivered on June 20, 1944, at Mills College, Oakland, Calif., reprinted in Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, 151–52.

46. Locke, "Moral Imperatives for World Order," 152.

47. Alain Locke, "Lessons in World Crisis, *Baha'i World* 9 (1945), 746. Also cited in Buck, *Alain Locke*, 230.

48. Francis Stead Sellers, "The 60-Year Journey of the Ashes of Alain Locke, Father of the Harlem Renaissance," *Washington Post Magazine*, September 12, 2014.



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Christopher Cameron
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