

Third Hasan M. Balyúzí Memorial Lecture

A New Creation: The Power of the Covenant in the Life of Louis Gregory*

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Abstract

Louis Gregory, an African American lawyer, was recognized by his coreligionists as one of the most distinguished North American, Bahá'ís of the first half of the twentieth century. This essay looks at his achievements through the lens of the concept of the Covenant, which it also examines briefly. Gregory focused on three fields of activity: promoting the oneness of humankind, teaching the Bahá'í Faith, and administering its affairs. In each of these fields, which the Bahá'í teachings link with the Covenant, he was guided and energized by the quality of “firmness in the Covenant” and by a dynamic relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as focal points of covenantal authority. Gregory became both a herald of the Covenant and an enduring example of its transforming power.

Résumé

Louis Gregory, un avocat d'origine afro-américaine, a été reconnu par ses coreligionnaires comme l'un des bahá'ís nord-américains de la première moitié du vingtième siècle s'étant le plus distingué. Cet essai jette un regard sur les réalisations de M. Gregory sous l'angle du concept de l'Alliance; il examine aussi brièvement le concept même de l'Alliance. M. Gregory s'est consacré à trois champs d'action: la promotion de l'unité de l'humanité, l'enseignement de la foi bahá'íe et l'administration des affaires de la Foi. Dans chacun de ces champs d'action, lesquels sont par ailleurs liés à l'Alliance dans les enseignements bahá'ís, M. Gregory était guide et vitalisé par sa fermeté dans l'Alliance, et par sa relation dynamique avec ‘Abdu’l-Bahá et Shoghi Effendi, comme figures centrales de l'autorité de l'Alliance. Louis Gregory est devenu à la fois un héraut de l'Alliance et un exemple mémorable du pouvoir transformateur de celle-ci.

Resumen

Louis Gregory, abogado africano Americano, fue reconocido por sus coreligionarios como uno de los bahá'ís norteamericano más distinguidos de la primera mitad del siglo veinte. Este ensayo sus logros valiéndose del lente conceptual del Convenio, estudiando también este último brevemente. Gregory determinó tres campos de actividad: la promoción de la unicidad del género humano, la enseñanza de la Fe Bahá'í, y la administración de sus asuntos. En cada uno de estos campos, los cuales los bahá'ís acoplan con el Convenio, fue guiado y vigorizado por su característica de firmeza en el Convenio, y por una relación dinámica con ‘Abdu’l-Bahá y Shoghi Effendi como fuentes de autoridad del Convenio. Gregory llegó a ser anunciador del Convenio y ejemplo perdurable de su poder transformativo.

In June 1909 Louis G. Gregory (1874–1951), a black lawyer who was the son of freed slaves, became a Bahá'í in Washington, D.C. By 1912 he had risen to prominence as a Bahá'í lecturer, writer, and administrator, and he continued in the forefront of activity for more than three decades. In 1912 his predominantly white coreligionists first elected him to the embryonic governing council of the Bahá'ís of North America, the Executive Board of Bahá'í Temple Unity. Later, he was elected a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, on which he served for fourteen years (1922–24, 1927–32, and 1939–46). He was the only person of African descent elected to these councils until 1946.¹

Besides serving the Bahá'í community on the national administrative level, Gregory traveled widely as a lecturer, speaking especially about racial unity in the context of the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of humankind,

and wrote many articles for Bahá'í publications. His efforts took place at a time when the Bahá'ís had only begun to address and eradicate from their midst the segregation that divided the races in the United States. On Gregory's death in 1951, Shoghi Effendi recognized his extraordinary qualities and achievements by naming him a Hand of the Cause, one of ten individuals appointed posthumously to this rank in the period between 1921 and 1952. Gregory earned this distinction by blazing trails—responsive to the vision of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, guided and strengthened by the power of the Covenant itself.

“O thou who art firm in the Covenant!” were the words with which 'Abdu'l-Bahá began four of nine letters that He addressed to Louis Gregory. The salutation is not unique; it appears in perhaps three to five percent of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's published letters (tablets) addressed to His followers in the West. Most of the recipients are recognized today as having been among the outstanding, active, dedicated early Bahá'ís. Yet the salutation “O thou who art firm in the Covenant!” was never more aptly applied than to Gregory. “Consider it well,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, “that every soul who is firm in the Covenant is luminous, like unto a candle which emanates its light on those around it.”² No wonder, then, that He described Gregory as “luminous,” “shining as a bright light,” and as “pure gold.”³

The Concept of the Covenant

The concept of the Covenant in the Bahá'í teachings is highly complex—too complex to discuss more than briefly here. On the one hand, it can be expressed in relatively simple terms. The Universal House of Justice has called it “a binding agreement between God and man, whereby God requires of man certain behaviour in return for which He guarantees certain blessings” (111). In this sense the Bahá'í Writings refer to the Great Covenant, God's eternal promise to provide guidance to humankind, and to the Lesser Covenant that Bahá'u'lláh made with His followers, which assured the succession of authority by providing for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's appointment as head of the Faith and was renewed in turn when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will and Testament, designated Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. Another aspect of the Covenant implicit in the Bahá'í teachings is the personal covenant between the Messenger of God and each of His followers. These expressions of the Covenant involve specific laws, institutions, and lines of authority to which the individual and the body of the believers are expected to respond in specified ways.

The Covenant has, on the other hand, a more abstract, elusive aspect. “Today the dynamic power of the world of existence is the power of the Covenant,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá testified (*Selections* 183.1). “The spirit of the Covenant,” He observed, “is the cause of life.”⁴ “The power of the Covenant is as the heat of the sun which quickeneth and promoteth the development of all created things on earth” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 239). Repeatedly, He used the analogy of a body, in which the power of the Covenant was like “the pulsating power in the arteries of the body of the world,” like “the main artery” in “the body of the universe,” energizing and invigorating “all beings.”⁵ Thus the power of the Covenant is described as a cosmic force, transcending the confines of our world and its struggle toward unity, order, and enlightenment. “If it is considered with insight,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, “it will be seen that all the forces of the universe, in the last analysis serve the Covenant. In the future it shall be made evident and manifest” (*Selections* 192.1).

When Louis Gregory encountered the Bahá'í Faith in the early 1900s, the Western Bahá'ís recognized the power in 'Abdu'l-Bahá but had relatively little understanding of its source. Neither their religious backgrounds nor the limited Bahá'í literature then available prepared them to grasp the complexities of the Bahá'í teachings on the Covenant or the full implications of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station as the designated Center of the Covenant; indeed, even today, after many years of exposure to these concepts and with a wealth of translated Writings at hand, this development, unique in religious history, remains difficult to understand.

Gregory, like most of his contemporaries, had, from his first contact with the Bahá'ís, felt 'Abdu'l-Bahá's influence. But, by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own account, the changes in Gregory during his first years as a Bahá'í were overshadowed by the transforming experience of pilgrimage in 1911 to the Bahá'í holy places in Palestine and his first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt. Gregory had embarked on his pilgrimage in “faith and assurance,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed; through pilgrimage, Gregory added to those qualities and also “found firmness and steadfastness.”⁶ He had gained an awareness of the Covenant and its power that few of his fellow believers shared, especially before 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited the West.

In an article in *Star of the West* entitled “Impressions of Abdul-Baha While at Ramleh,” Gregory conveyed something of the challenge of comprehending 'Abdu'l-Bahá's unique station.

Today the happiness and peace of the Glory of God (BAHA'O'LLAH) are reflected in the clear Mirror of Ahdul-Baha. Thus by meeting him one meets all the Prophets and Manifestations of cycles and ages past. It is difficult for one to realize at the time, or for a long time afterwards, the true honor of such a meeting. To

one who realizes even faintly who this Servant of God is and what powers he represents, such a meeting is high above all the honors of earth. But no soul can give adequate testimony of what Abdul-Baha may be to any other soul. With mental and spiritual horizon more or less limited, each pilgrim discerns according to his capacity the Majesty and Power that radiate from the Center of God's Covenant.

At Ramleh, Abbas Effendi might at times be seen walking about the streets. Ofttimes he would ride upon the electric tramway, making change and paying his fare in the most democratic fashion. His reception room was open to believers and non-believers alike. . . . Thus in one way or another thousands of persons had opportunity to see Abbas Effendi; but among these how few perceived Abdul-Baha! (5)

Gregory closed his account by saying: "Thus the friends of the Cause may catch a glimpse of what is in store for them if he visits America. Nor should we spare any pains or hesitate at any sacrifices to ensure his coming" (6).

'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had encouraged Gregory to write about his experiences. In *A Heavenly Vista*, the account of his pilgrimage that Gregory eventually published in booklet form, he told of a special interlude with 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

April 13. During luncheon at the Victoria the Egyptian waiter who seemed always pleased to give me information about Abdul Baha, advised me that He was in the hotel. About two o'clock I sought His room, finding Him alone. His smile of welcome was beautiful to see. He was occupied in looking over His correspondence, and for about an hour no one else came. It seemed a great privilege to be alone with Him, and I was impressed with His simplicity as never before. I also felt a longing for greater capacity to serve the Cause. My note-book was in hand and ... Abdul Baha advised me to write. I told Him that I valued the privilege, as the friends in America would be interested in all that I could see and hear. He permitted me to write with as much freedom as desired. (15)

Thus Gregory returned to America as one of the early Bahá'ís chosen by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to *herald* the Covenant. Gregory had gained a deep understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station, along with the will to communicate that vision to others and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement to do so.

Yet the experience of his pilgrimage was more than the source of increased understanding and assurance for Louis Gregory. Something extraordinary had happened. That mysterious, invisible, penetrative aspect of the Covenant had become the motive force in his life. "He received another life, and obtained another power," 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed. Louis Gregory became "quite another Gregory," "a new creation."⁷ The power of the Covenant pulsed within him. Its radiance illumined his face. For the next forty years, until the last moment of his life, he exemplified the specific behaviors that one associates with a Bahá'í who is firm in the Covenant. But, even more, he revealed in the essence of his being the effects of that added, indefinable, cosmic dimension of the Covenant.

Thus Gregory not only heralded the Covenant but became an example of its transforming power. Firmness in the Covenant was central—both in theory and in practice—to the fields of Bahá'í activity to which he devoted himself: first, as a proponent of the oneness of humankind; second, as a teacher; and third, as an administrator. In each of these areas his work was directed and confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant, and by Shoghi Effendi, through whom the authority of the Covenant continued its unbroken flow. Gregory was steadfastly devoted to both and unflinching responsive to their wishes. As his life of service unfolded, it became in itself an illustration of the dynamics of firmness in the Covenant, as described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Whoever is firm in the Covenant and the Testament is today endowed with a seeing eye, and a responsive ear and daily advances in the divine realm until he becomes a heavenly angel."⁸

The Pivot of the Oneness of Humankind

In the Bahá'í teachings the oneness of humankind is directly linked with the Covenant. "It is indubitably clear," 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated, "that the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 238). In 1909, in His first tablet to Louis Gregory, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "I hope that thou mayest become the herald of the Kingdom, become the means whereby the white and colored people shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the reality of humanity..." He closed by expressing the hope that "like unto a candle, thou mayest be enkindled in the world of humanity and, like unto a star, thou mayest shine and gleam from the Horizon of Reality and become the cause for the guidance of both races."⁹

During his pilgrimage Gregory asked, "What is the Will of Abdul Baha concerning this unworthy servant?" The answer was, "Work for unity and harmony between the races" (Gregory, *A Heavenly Vista* 10). 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave impetus to this work by encouraging Louis Gregory's marriage in 1912 to Louisa (Louise) Mathew, an English

Bahá'í whom he had met while on pilgrimage. Without fanfare, without any crusading on their part in the cause of intermarriage (for 'Abdu'l-Bahá had specifically disapproved either approach), they were simply to be a potent demonstration of the Bahá'í position on race. But, because firmness in the Covenant brings its own confirmations, they were also much more. In their unity of purpose and mutual regard, they were linked, in Shoghi Effendi's words, in "loving cooperation," even when their fields of service were on different continents.¹⁰

The Gregorys' relationship exemplified the kind of unity that 'Abdu'l-Bahá upheld as the ideal in a tablet to Louis Gregory written in 1919:

Strive with heart and soul in order to bring about union and harmony among the white and the colored and prove thereby the unity of the Bahá'í world wherein distinction of color finds no place but there hearts only are considered. Praise be to God, the hearts of the friends are united and linked together, whether they be from the Orient or the Occident, from North or from South, whether they be German, French, Japanese, American, and whether they pertain to the white, the red, the yellow or the brown race. Variation[s] of color, of land and of race are of no importance in the Bahai Movement[;] on the contrary Bahai Unity overcomes them all and does away with all these fancies and imaginations.¹¹

And in His last tablet to Louis Gregory, He exclaimed: "Praise be unto God ... that thou hast called the people to the oneness of the world of humanity... Praise be unto God that thou hast gathered the colored and the white, the Jew and the Christian at the fountain of the oneness of mankind. It is my hope that thou wilt always be confirmed."¹²

In innumerable ways 'Abdu'l-Bahá made His loyal follower a focus of His efforts to promote the oneness of humankind—in the purpose He set before Gregory, in the marriage He encouraged, in the tablets He wrote to white Bahá'ís praising Gregory, in the symbolic act of His calling for Gregory at a Washington, D.C., luncheon for dignitaries and seating him in the place of honor at His side. During the period of the Guardianship, even though the relationship between Gregory and Shoghi Effendi was based entirely on correspondence, the pattern continued. Shoghi Effendi recognized Gregory as "the exemplary exponent & the ablest champion of this noble ideal that animates our Faith."¹³ In his letters to Gregory the Guardian consistently supported the oneness of humankind and encouraged an intensification of race unity activities. He maintained this emphasis throughout the mid-1920s and the later 1930s, both periods of lagging progress in the attempts of the North American Bahá'ís to come to grips with racial prejudice. A 1926 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, for example, encourages Gregory with these words: "In connection with the idea of certain of the friends that now is not the time to teach among the coloured, Shoghi Effendi feels that ... we should rather make an effort to help them in their hours of despondent feelings and to encourage them with the hopes of a brilliant future that awaits mankind." And in a note penned at the close of the letter Shoghi Effendi reinforced the point: "The problem of reaching the coloured races ... is ... vital and urgent & should be never neglected ... we should insure the steady & gradual development of our work in such an important field."¹⁴ The Guardian thus removed any doubt Gregory might have had about the importance of persevering, even when few seemed to be responding.

With the North American Bahá'í community as a whole, Shoghi Effendi practiced what might be termed *positive reinforcement*. In 1927, when the newly appointed amity committee, for which Gregory served as secretary, composed its first circular letter, Shoghi Effendi immediately responded with his first major message on the subject of race, praising the "splendid document" produced by the committee and posing in challenging terms the need for supreme effort to eradicate race prejudice among the Bahá'ís (*Bahá'í Administration* 129–32). The amity work flourished for years, with Gregory in the forefront of activity. Then—despite Shoghi Effendi's consistent support—it gradually declined. After the national amity committee was abolished in 1936, the Guardian wrote Gregory a letter that stressed "the importance & urgency of the racial amity work that challenges & confronts the believers in that continent."¹⁵ Gregory shared the letter with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, to no apparent effect. Finally, in 1939, given nothing positive to reinforce, Shoghi Effendi brought the problem of race prejudice to the fore once again by addressing it at length in a message to the North American Bahá'ís entitled *The Advent of Divine Justice*. In that document he called racial prejudice "the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution" (33–34).

Shoghi Effendi's identification of race prejudice as "the most challenging issue" facing the North American Bahá'ís marked the beginning of a period of considerable progress, during which Gregory remained in the role of standard-bearer that he had been given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá so many years before. His concerns and activities fully vindicated by Shoghi Effendi, Gregory was elected to the National Assembly after a seven-year hiatus; and, when the National Assembly created a new national race unity committee, he was appointed a member. He remained in the forefront until age and ill health caused him to retire from active service on the national level in 1946.

For nearly four decades Gregory's efforts to eradicate prejudice and discrimination were grounded in and strengthened by his understanding of the Covenant. In Gregory's mind, as in the Bahá'í Writings themselves, the oneness of humankind was clearly related to the Covenant and to 'Abdu'l-Bahá as its Center. In concluding his account of his pilgrimage in *Star of the West*, Gregory had observed that "the Reality of Abdu'l-Baha ... is found by promoting that which tends to unity and harmony" ("Impressions" 6). He never minimized the difficulty of achieving this aim, however. In 1915, trying to prevent the Washington, D.C., Bahá'í community from breaking apart along racial lines, he wrote a fellow believer that "in proportion as souls become severed and detached, the Divine Reality makes all things possible, and differences based upon human limitations give way. I have not yet reached the place where I see no differences, but hope through Divine Favor to attain it ... The power of the Covenant overcomes all."¹⁶

He repeated the same emphasis on the unifying power of the Covenant in describing the presence of a white Bahá'í at a meeting in a black school in the South: "Her radiant smiling face made a deep impression to those present of the Power of the Covenant, which thus brought two races together in a city where the race problem is acute..."¹⁷ And to the Bahá'ís of Kansas City, he urged: "If you wish to increase your understanding and knowledge of the mysteries of God, 'form an assembly that nothing can break up.' Teach others the ideal Path. In time you will fill K.C. with sweetness and light and become the means of human solidarity there. This is possible thru the Power of the Greatest Name and the Might of the Covenant."¹⁸

It did not surprise Gregory when efforts by the Bahá'ís to work for racial harmony were successful. Such efforts, he believed, benefited from a direct line to the Covenant. He wrote in 1928: "The amity work seems everywhere greatly confirmed and blessed and is helping the assemblies to get together and solve other difficult problems. As the invitation for this work came from 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself we should expect fine results in trying to move in the direction of His Will."¹⁹

Gregory applied the same rationale—albeit with some reluctance—to his own activities for race amity. "It is clearly my duty to keep this matter before the attention of the public as far as possible and without causing inharmony ... My regret is that my own powers are so inadequate to the great needs of the world and I can only make an effort and depend on God."²⁰ Although he preferred to see others play a leading role—especially individuals like Agnes Parsons or Dorothy Baker, who, being white, had nothing to gain in the eyes of the public by advancing the cause of racial unity—he always accepted his "duty" with grace. He reminded himself, whenever necessary, of the will to lighten the burdens of the Bahá'ís that he once shared in a letter to Alfred Lunt, a fellow member of the National Assembly: "Merchants in advertizing their wares bear heavily upon the comfort, convenience and happiness they bring the purchaser, lightly upon the expense, which is ever 'a mere trifle.' Our tendency is, I fear, to accentuate unwittingly the burdens the friends must carry rather than the joys of service and sacrifice. The greatest of all things is to move the hearts! Thus every effort is joyful and every burden is light!"²¹

Whenever his burdens seemed to outweigh his joys, Gregory could recall his first tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "... Do thou not look upon ... thy limited capacity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá had written, "look thou upon the Bounties and Providence of the Lord of the Kingdom, for His Confirmation is great and His Power unparalleled and incomparable."²²

Teaching and the Covenant

Teaching the Bahá'í Faith, the second major area of service in Gregory's life, is also closely identified with the Covenant. Addressing the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, His charter for the propagation of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave several conditions by which a Bahá'í teacher might attain the station of apostleship. "The first condition is firmness in the Covenant of God," He stated. In the beginning the believers must make their steps firm in the Covenant so that the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh may encircle from all sides, the cohorts of the Supreme Concourse may become their supporters and helpers, and the exhortations and advices of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, like unto the pictures engraved on stone, may remain permanent and ineffaceable in the tablets of all hearts" (Tablets 5 1–52).

'Abdu'l-Bahá always encouraged Gregory to teach—both to bring the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the public and to deepen the understanding and the spirit of the Bahá'ís themselves ("I want the friends to know you," 'Abdu'l-Bahá once told him [qtd. in Gregory, *A Heavenly Vista* 15]). In a tablet dated 9 January 1917 but because of wartime disruptions received nearly two years later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commended Gregory for his teaching efforts:

O thou who art firm in the Covenant!

Thou hast written that thou hast travelled to the different parts of the United States and in great assemblages and public meetings hast called the people to the Kingdom of God.... Ere long thou wilt observe the results of this service and thou wilt obtain the utmost joy and happiness.

Endeavor as much as thou canst. Do not ask for one moment of rest. Strive by day and by night. If it is possible take thou a trip to the Southern States of the United States and enkindle in that region the candle of Guidance: So that thou mayest become the cause of the awakenings of the souls and promote the virtues of the world of humanity.²³

So responsive was Gregory to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wishes that, by the time this tablet was received, Gregory had already fulfilled its instructions. More than a year earlier, he had given up his business and he and Louise had sold their home to make it possible for him to travel. When the tablet arrived, he had already spent a year on the road, literally fulfilling another of the conditions that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had given for the attainment of apostleship: continual traveling, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself had done in America, in a spirit of absolute detachment. The unveiling to the North American Bahá’ís of the complete Tablets of the Divine Plan in 1919—during the “Convention of the Covenant,” as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called it—simply reinforced Gregory’s intention to teach.

Shoghi Effendi constantly praised and fortified Gregory in his teaching work over a period of some thirty years. In doing so, Shoghi Effendi often recalled Gregory’s special relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In 1925, for example, the Guardian’s secretary wrote on his behalf, “You are carrying out in spirit and in letter ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oft-repeated injunctions to travel and spread the great message of this Cause....”²⁴ On another occasion, in a note in his own hand, Shoghi Effendi wrote, “May ‘Abdu’l-Bahá guide every step you take & protect & inspire you, who are His chosen, dearly-loved, standard-bearer in that vast continent. Teach, teach, teach and the victory ... is ultimately yours.”²⁵ And again, in his own hand, Shoghi Effendi penned this moving message: “He who loved you, admired your capacity & was confident in your success is surely guiding every step you take & addresses you from on high ‘Well-done, (Marhabá, Marhabá) my good & faithful friend!’ What greater reward than the satisfaction & the good-pleasure of our dear Master which I am certain you have fully earned?”²⁶

In numerous notes added in his own hand to his letters to Gregory, Shoghi Effendi made it clear that he regarded Gregory as being peerless in the teaching field in North America. “You are indeed a pillar of His Faith in that Land,” he wrote in 1932.²⁷ An earlier note reads:

Dear & most prized co-worker:

I wish to assure you in person of my constant prayers at the holy shrines for the removal of every obstacle that confronts you in your heroic, & already highly successful, efforts in proclaiming the Cause of God throughout the length & breadth of that vast continent. The few teachers that are following your example constitute the vanguard of His host in America; & you stand, by virtue of your devotion & ability, in the centre & in the forefront of the small band that are holding aloft the standard of the all—conquering Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. How enviable our position, how great your responsibility, how glorious your reward!²⁸

And even earlier, in 1926, Shoghi Effendi wrote: “Yours is the memorable work of the brave and steadfast pioneer, whose action is guided by the hand of a loving & watchful Master, whose efforts are reinforced by the unflinching grace of Bahá’u’lláh, whose mission is to confer inestimable benefits upon mankind & whose achievements have already won him the admiration of his brethren in many parts of the world.”²⁹

The Guardian often referred to both of the Gregorys as “pioneers,” the term he applied to Bahá’ís who relocate to teach their faith. In 1927 he told Louis Gregory that his efforts would be “extolled by the rising generation who will derive inspiration & strength from your arduous pioneer work.”³⁰ And of Louise he stated, “She too is an indefatigable pioneer ... whose present services future generations will extoll and magnify.”³¹ Shoghi Effendi also emphasized the important role that Louis Gregory played in inspiring the North American Bahá’ís. “It is up to you, Shoghi Effendi feels,” his secretary wrote in 1928, “to travel from town to town & city to city and infuse a new life, a new understanding & a fresh enthusiasm in the hearts of all the friends, for it is essential for any progress or ultimate success.”³²

In fact, probably no Bahá’í teacher in America up to the present day has traveled more widely or spoken of the Faith to a larger number of people. Louis Gregory helped to establish a number of communities—Nashville, Memphis, and Tuskegee, for example. He confirmed the faith of numerous individuals, even entire families, who have themselves compiled a rich record of service as pioneers and administrators. Many of these were African Americans of great capacity who have fulfilled the hope that Shoghi Effendi once expressed: “May pure & able souls among the coloured arise and follow your example and carry on the great & memorable work you are achieving in the service of this glorious Cause.”³³

Gregory’s concentration on teaching in North America—and particularly in the South and among his fellow African Americans—was thus the result of both inclination and obedience. His teaching activities were

considered so important by Shoghi Effendi that they could not be interrupted, even to allow Gregory to make a pilgrimage when he sought to do so in 1929. “Your work in the States is so vital, & workers of your devotion & ability so few, that nothing, I feel, even your pilgrimage,” the Guardian wrote, “should interfere with it.”³⁴ A few years later, having been released from his responsibilities as a national teacher, Gregory considered joining his wife in Europe. Once again Shoghi Effendi said no. “A person like you is an asset to the Cause wherever he may be,” the Guardian’s secretary wrote on his behalf, “...but Shoghi Effendi thinks that the place you are needed most is America.”³⁵

In 1935, having successfully established the first elected Bahá’í governing council in Nashville, among other accomplishments, Gregory again sought the Guardian’s approval for him to join Louise in Europe. This time Shoghi Effendi agreed, but because of worsening international conditions, he finally advised Louis Gregory to remain in the States and Louise to join him in safety there.³⁶

After Louise’s return, the couple at last fulfilled their desire to pioneer together. They went to Haiti in early 1937, during an acceleration of teaching just prior to the launching of the Guardian’s first Seven Year Plan for the expansion of the Bahá’í Faith in the Americas. Although their stay was cut short after only a few months because of government opposition to the Faith, Shoghi Effendi commended and reassured them. “The Guardian is ... thrilled at the news of the splendid work which you & dear Mrs. Gregory have been able to accomplish during your recent journey to Haiti,” his secretary wrote. “Do be confident ... that your efforts, though circumscribed, are destined to yield very good results.”³⁷

Throughout Gregory’s long years of Bahá’í service, teaching was the one activity into which he threw himself without hesitation. “Teach! teach! teach!,” he urged a friend. “The most divinely emphasized of all activities brings a confirmation and joy which aid the solution of all our problems.”³⁸ He often alluded to the relationship between teaching and firmness in the Covenant. “The more you teach,” he believed, “the more your firmness, understanding and happiness will grow.”³⁹ He comforted his friend Edith Chapman, when her teaching work in Kansas City had not been progressing, with these words: “Please do not trouble your heart, my dear child, because the people do not attend your meetings. But be sure always to continue them, reading with ... [your family] and any one else you can attract, or alone if necessary. You will be serving humanity just the same by your answer to the Divine Call and your firmness and steadfastness in the Covenant of God.”⁴⁰ Some years later, when the Kansas City community had grown because Chapman had followed his advice and persevered, he wrote her about the importance of detachment from the results of one’s efforts, however great or small: “The new group at Tuskegee seem greatly worried because they cannot attract crowds at once. Wish you might go there and tell them of your patience and endurance during the years and final victory.” And he added, reminding her of counsel he had taken to heart and often repeated, “*Walk above the world by the Power of the Greatest Name!*” If you are spiritually related to me, you have to learn this lesson over and over.”⁴¹

Administrative Stewardship

If teaching, Louis Gregory’s favorite activity, required detachment and patience, the third major field of activity to which he devoted himself, administrative work, often tested those qualities to their depths. He liked administration much less than teaching. His feelings about administration had nothing to do with his abilities, however. His legal training and professional experience equipped him to serve capably in the Bahá’í administrative order. Also he fully appreciated the importance of administrative work at a time when a significant number of Bahá’ís and their friends did not. He and two other staunch Bahá’ís, Agnes Parsons and Mariam Haney, were appointed in January 1923 to prepare a definitive statement on “Bahai Organization: Its Basis in the Revealed Word,” which was published in the March 1923 issue of *Star of the West*.

Moreover, Gregory was able to find real pleasure in administrative work when it was carried out in the Bahá’í spirit. In 1915, for example, he wrote Alfred Lunt his impressions of a meeting of the Executive Board of Bahai Temple Unity: “I am much uplifted by the earnestness and zeal of the friends at the recent Board meeting. Abdul Baha says the Board must execute and it seems to me it approaches nearer the Divine ideal now than ever before. The dispatch of business and the illumination of the friends in spiritual consultation must have pleased the heart of our generous Lord, from whom nothing is hidden. . . . I am grateful for the privilege of having been present.”⁴² The annual Bahá’í conventions that Louis Gregory regularly attended and at which he served in various capacities—as delegate, secretary, reporter, and featured speaker—were high points in his life.

He preferred not to have steady administrative duties, however, because they tended to conflict with his goal of constant traveling, often far from the centers of Bahá’í administration. It was a “relief” to him not to be elected to the National Assembly.⁴³ But Shoghi Effendi, although he emphasized that Louis Gregory’s teaching work was of primary importance, always stressed that his contributions to administration were needed as well. In 1927 the Guardian’s secretary wrote on his behalf: “He wishes you to concentrate first and [foremost] upon the

teaching work & to arrange your affairs in such a way that no administration responsibilities will in any way interfere with the effective conduct of your teaching work. He welcomes your membership [on] the National Assembly & he prays that you may be guided to combine both in a most effective manner.”⁴⁴ In 1940 Shoghi Effendi praised Louis Gregory’s “invaluable services as a member of the N.S.A.” and closed his letter with a personal note: “Your teaching & administrative work are alike vital, meritorious & significant, & I feel certain that the Beloved Master, who is well pleased with you, will guide your steps & reinforce your efforts in your dual task. Persevere & be ever confident, happy & grateful.”⁴⁵ In another note, written a few years later, he commended Gregory’s “stewardship” (a term he later associated with the Hands of the Cause) with these words: “Your magnificent services, the spirit of exemplary stewardship you so clearly manifest in all of your activities & manifold services, are assets that I prize & of which I feel increasingly proud. I truly admire the nobility, the devotion, the perseverance, the distinction, with which you serve the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh.”⁴⁶

Even when the workings of the administrative order posed severe personal hardship, as occurred when his subsidy as a national teacher was terminated in 1932, Louis Gregory remained absolutely steadfast in the Covenant. “No one can have his own way in the Cause of God,” he later wrote a friend. “The discipline of the administration, firmly tho’ lovingly upheld will teach us this in all the experiences of life and service.”⁴⁷ Recognizing the remarkable way in which Gregory met his challenges and continued his teaching work through the Great Depression years despite financial hardship, Shoghi Effendi wrote: “The spirit you have so strikingly manifested, & the devotion & loyalty you have so clearly demonstrated to the basic tenets of our beloved Faith, in the midst of such stress & trial, are qualities that I most dearly cherish & for which I am truly grateful.”⁴⁸

In Gregory’s early years on the National Spiritual Assembly, from 1922 to 1924, he had taken on the administrative burden, as he had once told Alfred Lunt, because of an overriding concern for two vital needs: to protect the Bahá’í Cause at a critical time in its development in North America and to promote the oneness of humanity during a period of deep racial tension.⁴⁹ With regard to the first of these issues, he played an important role during the initial years of the Guardianship, when the challenges to Shoghi Effendi were severe and his powers of leadership—conferred as they were by the Center of the Covenant Himself—were not yet fully appreciated by a community that had identified itself closely with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

In February 1923 Gregory brought to the attention of the National Spiritual Assembly a recent book that *Reality* magazine had advertised as being “of special interest to students of the Bahai Movement, a book every Bahai should own.” His experience over a number of years with the authors of the book and their attitudes, which had found their way into print in the magazine they published, alerted him to possible danger. On obtaining a copy of the book, Gregory found it characterized by “subtle finesse under the guise of great devotion to Abdul Baha.” The joint authors were, he stated, united in their “elaborate denunciation of Bahai organization and their denial of any succession to Abdul Baha, either sole and in person, or several and organized.” In addition, “the oneness of humanity and the immortality of the soul are either directly, or by innuendo, denied.”⁵⁰

Gregory suggested that the National Assembly take immediate, defensive measures. In closing he shared his views on the need for minimizing the damage done by those who attack the Covenant:

The thought that inharmony so persistently remains in the Cause is enough to overwhelm one with grief. My veritable belief is that this condition will never be removed until the root of disintegration is separated from every Bahai circle.

If now I have written too much pardon is asked. My hope is for the peace and happiness of all. But this can be secured only by limiting the influence of those who would do eternal harm. Limiting the sway of the harmful ones is a blessing even to themselves.⁵¹

Alfred Lunt, then secretary of the National Assembly, responded immediately to this letter, which he termed “most important” and a “beautiful call for protection.” He advised Gregory that copies had been sent to each Assembly member.⁵² Although decisive action was not taken for some time, Gregory’s concern was finally and fully upheld. Eventually, the National Assembly dissociated itself from *Reality* and from the authors of the book.

Some years later Ahmad Sohrab, who was well known in America as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s former secretary, rose in opposition to Shoghi Effendi. Once again Gregory responded to the crisis in a way that testified to his firmness in the Covenant. He directed a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly urging the body to try to convey the station of the Guardian to the Bahá’í community and asking that the Assembly begin by deepening its own understanding:

It is my humble suggestion that as part of the agenda of our next meeting and in preparation for an address to the friends, . . . we spend some time in reading those parts of the Wills of Baha’u’llah and ‘Ahdu’l Baha

which pertain to the station of the Guardian, with the hope and prayer that the True One may make our minds more illumined, our hearts more loving and our hands more obedient through the Confirmations of His Might.

In the same letter he expressed his own view of Shoghi Effendi:

He our Guardian is gentle, patient and kind. Yet in that Temple might and authority also dwell. The lamb may at times become a roaring lion as a means of teaching us divine justice, the highest attribute of God. Who can endure the time of wrath? A word of condemnation from Shoghi Effendi may sink any soul into the depth of dishonor and oblivion in time and eternity. His depth of love, his divine patience should not make us negligent in our attitude toward him.⁵³

Spirit and Letter

Louis Gregory was never negligent in his attitude to Shoghi Effendi. He accepted the Guardian's wishes, as he had 'Abdu'l-Bahá's, and made them his own—whether this meant giving up a longed-for pilgrimage, extending a period of separation from his wife, or learning to be grateful for a situation that seemed to be nothing but adversity. Whatever his difficulties, he always found strength in Shoghi Effendi. "Through the Powerful aid of the Guardian," he wrote during his most difficult period, "I am still able to carry on."⁵⁴

And it is clear from Shoghi Effendi's own repeated statements in his letters to Louis Gregory—which number nearly fifty altogether—that the Guardian found strength and joy in his "dear and valued co-worker" as well. He frequently indicated in poignant terms that the news of Gregory's activities and achievements eased his own burdens and that Gregory's spirit lightened his heart. Over and over he used such phrases as "an inspiration to me in my task & a refreshment in the midst of my arduous duties," "rejoice my heart & sustain me," "a source of constant joy & encouragement to me."⁵⁵ "You are often in my heart & thoughts," he wrote in 1931, "& the memory of your constant and exemplary services is an abiding joy and comfort to me in the hours of anxiety & stress which my work often involves."⁵⁶ And at another time he observed: "You hardly realize what a help you are to me in my arduous work."⁵⁷

This reciprocity of love and respect leads us to the very essence of the quality of firmness in the Covenant that Gregory exemplified—a reaching out in love, a deep sense of honor, a denial of self in the service of a greater unity. It recalls a phrase 'Abdu'l-Bahá used in an early tablet to Gregory, when He looked forward to meeting His devoted follower again in Washington and, as he put it, "renew[ing] the Covenant of the ancient love" (qtd. in Gregory, *A Heavenly Vista* 30). Louis Gregory integrated the spirit and the letter of the Covenant, the outward forms and the inner realities, and gave the Bahá'í world an enduring example of the power of the Covenant to transform and recreate the human soul.

Notes

1. See Morrison, *To Move the World*.
2. *Star of the West* 11(7 Feb. 1921): 308.
3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Louise Gregory, 16 Oct. 1920, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. U.S. National Bahá'í Archives (NBA), Wilmette, Ill.; 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Döring, trans. 15 Aug. 1911, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA; 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Reinke, 16 Oct. 1920, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.
4. *Star of the West* 10 (23 Nov. 1919): 263.
5. *Star of the West* 10 (23 Nov. 1919): 263; and 11 (7 Feb. 1921): 304.
6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Hooper, trans. 15 July 1911, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.
7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Döring, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.
8. *Star of the West* 10 (4 Nov. 1919): 251.
9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, trans. 17 Nov. 1909, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.
10. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 2 Jan. 1928, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, 24 July 1919, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, 29 Sept. 1920, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, NBA.

13. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 29 Apr. 1927, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
14. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 23 Jan. 1926, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
15. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 11 Nov. 1936, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
16. Louis Gregory to Parsons, 10 June 1915, Agnes S. Parsons Papers, NBA.
17. Louis Gregory to Joseph Hannen, 9 Jan. 1920, Hannen—Knobloch Family Papers, NBA.
18. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 3 Oct. 1919, Edith M. Chapman Papers, NBA.
19. Louis Gregory to Parsons, 5 Feb. 1928, Parsons Papers.
20. Louis Gregory to Parsons, 4 Feb. 1927, Parsons Papers.
21. Louis Gregory to Lunt, 7 Mar. 1923, Alfred E. Lunt Papers, NBA.
22. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, trans. 17 Nov. 1909, Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, NBA.
23. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Louis Gregory, 9 Jan. 1917, Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, NBA.
24. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 4 Apr. 1925, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
25. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 19 Dec. 1924, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
26. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 4 Apr. 1925, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
27. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 15 Jan. 1932, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
28. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 28 Jan. 1933, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
29. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 23 Jan. 1926, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
30. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 18 Aug. 1927, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
31. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 29 Apr. 1927, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
32. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 2 Jan. 1928, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
33. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 15 Jan. 1932, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
34. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 3 Aug. 1929, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
35. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 20 Oct 1932, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
36. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 26 Dec. 1935, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
37. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 26 Apr. 1937, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
38. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 15 Apr. 1940, Chapman Papers.
39. Louis Gregory to Chapman, [date unreadable] June 1927, Chapman Papers.
40. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 9 Feb. 1931, Chapman Papers.
41. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 30 Aug. 1938, Chapman Papers.
42. Louis Gregory to Lunt, 5 Nov. 1915, Lunt Papers.
43. Louis Gregory to Lunt, 17 Mar. 1923, Lunt Papers.
44. Shoghi Effendi (through his secy.) to Louis Gregory, 18 Aug. 1927, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
45. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 12 Feb. 1940, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
46. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 12 Dec. 1942, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
47. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 28 Mar. 1939, Chapman Papers.
48. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 28 Apr. 1935, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
49. Louis Gregory to Lunt, 17 Mar. 1923, Lunt Papers.
50. Louis Gregory to National Spiritual Assembly, 13 Feb. 1923, Lunt Papers.
51. Louis Gregory to National Spiritual Assembly, 13 Feb. 1923, Lunt Papers. Rúhíyyih Rabbani in *The Priceless Pearl*, her biography of Shoghi Effendi, put the controversy in context: “At that time the magazine *Reality* was a Bahá’í organ and in its columns was published news of the Covenant-breakers and their activities; this greatly distressed the wiser and more experienced believers, particularly those who had had the privilege of knowing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá personally, but left the young, inexperienced and ‘liberal’ minded unperturbed and unaware of their danger” (50).
52. Lunt to Gregory, 15 Feb. 1923, Lunt Papers.
53. Louis Gregory to National Spiritual Assembly, 18 July 1930, Lunt Papers.
54. Louis Gregory to Chapman, 9 Jan. 1934, Chapman Papers.
55. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 4 Apr. 1925; 23 January 1926; 2 Jan. 1928, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
56. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 1 Dec. 1931, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.
57. Shoghi Effendi to Louis Gregory, 31 Oct. 1928, Letters of Shoghi Effendi, NBA.

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