

Talk at Church of the Ascension

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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Notes by Esther Foster

In the terminology of the Holy Books the church has been called the house of the covenant for the reason that the church is a place where people of different thoughts and divergent tendencies — where all races and nations — may come together in a covenant of permanent fellowship. In the temple of the Lord, in the house of God, man must be submissive to God. He must enter into a covenant with his Lord in order that he shall obey the divine commands and become unified with his fellowman. He must not consider divergence of races nor difference of nationalities; he must not view variation in denomination and creed, nor should he take into account the differing degrees of thoughts; nay, rather, he should look upon all as mankind and realize that all must become united and agreed. He must recognize all as one family, one race, one native land; he must see all as the servants of one God, dwelling beneath the shelter of His mercy. The purport of this is that the church is a collective center. Temples are symbols of the reality and divinity of God — the collective center of mankind. Consider how within a temple every race and people is seen and represented — all in the presence of the Lord, covenanting together in a covenant of love and fellowship, all offering the same melody, prayer and supplication to God. Therefore, it is evident that the church is a collective center for mankind. For this reason there have been churches and temples in all the divine religions; but the real Collective Centers are the Manifestations of God, of Whom the church or temple is a symbol and expression. That is to say, the Manifestation of God is the real divine temple and Collective Center of which the outer church is but a symbol.



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Recall the statement of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Addressing [pg 164] Peter, He said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." It is evident, therefore, that the church of God is the law of God and that the actual edifice is but one symbol thereof. For the law of God is a collective center which unites various peoples, native lands, tongues and opinions. All find shelter in its protection and become attracted by it. For example, Moses and the Mosaic law were the unifying center for the scattered sheep of Israel. He united these wandering flocks, brought them under control of divine law, educated and unified them, caused them to agree and uplifted them to a superlative degree of development. At a time when they were debased, they became glorified; ignorant, they were made knowing; in the bonds of captivity, they were given freedom; in short, they were unified. Day by day they advanced until they attained the highest degree of progress witnessed in that age. We prove, therefore, that the Manifestation of God and the law of God accomplish unity.

It is self-evident that humanity is at variance. Human tastes differ; thoughts, native lands, races and tongues are many. The need of a collective center by which these differences may be counterbalanced and the people of the world be unified is obvious. Consider how nothing but a spiritual power can bring about this unification, for material conditions and mental aspects are so widely different that agreement and unity are not possible through outer means. It is possible, however, for all to become unified through one spirit, just as all may receive light from one sun. Therefore, assisted by the collective and divine center which is the law of God and the reality of His Manifestation, we can overcome these conditions until they pass away entirely and the races advance.

Consider the time of Christ. Peoples, races and governments were many; religions, sects and denominations were various; but when Christ appeared, the Messianic reality proved to be the collective center which unified them beneath the same tabernacle of agreement. Reflect upon this. Could Jesus Christ have united these divergent factors or brought about such results through political power? Was this unity and agreement possible through material forces? It is evident that it was not; nay, rather, these various peoples were brought together through a divine power, through the breaths of the Holy Spirit. They were blended and quickened by the infusion of a new life. The spirituality of Christ overcame their difficulties so that their disagreements passed away completely. In this way these divergent peoples were unified and became welded in a bond of love which alone can unite hearts. Therefore, it is [pg 165] shown that the divine Manifestations, the holy Mouthpieces of God, are the Collective Centers of God. These heavenly Messengers are the real Shepherds of humanity, for whenever They appear in the world They unite the scattered sheep. The Collective Center has always appeared in the Orient. Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muḥammad were Collective Centers of Their day and time, and all arose in the East. Today Bahá'u'lláh is the Collective Center of unity for all mankind, and the splendor of His light has likewise dawned from the East.

He founded the oneness of humanity in Persia. He established harmony and agreement among the various peoples of religious beliefs, denominations, sects and cults by freeing them from the fetters of past imitations and superstitions, leading them to the very foundation of the divine religions. From this foundation shines forth the radiance of spirituality, which is unity, the love of God, the knowledge of God, praiseworthy morals and the virtues of the human world. Bahá'u'lláh renewed these principles, just as the coming of spring refreshes the earth and confers new life upon all phenomenal beings. For the freshness of the former springtimes had waned, the vivification had ceased, the life-giving breezes were no longer wafting their fragrances, winter and the season of darkness had come. Bahá'u'lláh came to renew the life of the world with this new and divine springtime, which has pitched its tent in the countries of the Orient in the utmost power and glory. It has refreshed the world of the Orient, and there is no doubt that if the world of the Occident should abandon dogmas of the past, turn away from empty imitations and superstitions, investigate the reality of the divine religions, holding fast to the example of Jesus Christ, acting in accordance with the teachings of God and becoming unified with the Orient, an eternal happiness and felicity would be attained.

In the western world material civilization has attained the highest point of development, but divine civilization was founded in the land of the East. The East must acquire material civilization from the West, and the West must receive spiritual civilization from the East. This will establish a mutual bond. When these two come together, the world of humanity will present a glorious aspect, and extraordinary progress will be achieved. This is clear and evident; no proof is needed. The degree of material civilization in the Occident cannot be denied; nor can anyone fail to confirm the spiritual civilization of the Orient, for all the divine foundations of human uplift have appeared in the East. This, likewise, is clear and evident. Therefore, you must assist the East in order that it may attain material progress. The East must, likewise, promulgate the principles of spiritual civilization in the western world. By this commingling and union the human race will attain the highest degree of prosperity and development. Material civilization alone is not sufficient and will not prove productive. The physical happiness of material conditions was allotted to the animal. Consider how the animal has attained the fullest degree of physical felicity. A bird perches upon the loftiest branch and builds there its nest with consummate beauty and skill. All the grains and seeds of the meadows are its wealth and food; all the fresh water of mountain springs and rivers of the plain are for its enjoyment. Truly, this is the acme of material happiness, to which even a human creature cannot attain. This is the honor of the animal kingdom. But the honor of the human kingdom is the attainment of spiritual happiness in the human world, the acquisition of the knowledge and love of God. The honor allotted to man is the acquisition of the supreme virtues of the human world. This is his real happiness and felicity. But if material happiness and spiritual felicity be conjoined, it will be "delight upon delight," as the Arabs say. We pray that

God will unite the East and the West in order that these two civilizations may be exchanged and mutually enjoyed. I am sure it will come to pass, for this is the radiant century. This is an age for the outpouring of divine mercy upon the exigency of this new century — the unity of the East and the West. It will surely be accomplished.

Question: What is the status of woman in the Orient?

Answer: The status of woman in former times was exceedingly deplorable, for it was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant. It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world. Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made prisoners of the household. The houses did not even have windows opening upon the outside world. Bahá'u'lláh destroyed these ideas and proclaimed the equality of man and woman. He made woman respected by commanding that all women be educated, that there be no difference in the education of the two sexes and that man and woman share the same rights. In the estimation of God there is no distinction of sex. One whose thought is pure, whose education is superior, whose scientific attainments are greater, whose deeds of philanthropy excel, be that one man or woman, white or colored, is entitled to full rights and recognition; there is no differentiation whatsoever. Therefore, the status of women in the East has undergone change. At present they [pg 167] attend schools and colleges, pursue the ordinary curriculum and day by day are becoming indispensable to men and equal to them. This is the present condition of womankind in Persia.

Question: What relation do you sustain to the founder of your belief? Are you his successor in the same manner as the Pope of Rome?

Answer: I am the servant of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder; and in this I glory. No honor do I consider greater than this, and it is my hope that I may be confirmed in servitude to Bahá'u'lláh. This is my station.

Question: Is it not a fact that universal peace cannot be accomplished until there is political democracy in all the countries of the world?

Answer: It is very evident that in the future there shall be no centralization in the countries of the world, be they constitutional in government, republican or democratic in form. The United States may be held up as the example of future government — that is to say, each province will be independent in itself, but there will be federal union protecting the interests of the various independent states. It may not be a republican or a democratic form. To cast aside centralization which promotes despotism is the exigency of the time. This will be productive of international peace. Another fact of

equal importance in bringing about international peace is woman's suffrage. That is to say, when perfect equality shall be established between men and women, peace may be realized for the simple reason that womankind in general will never favor warfare. Women will not be willing to allow those whom they have so tenderly cared for to go to the battlefield. When they shall have a vote, they will oppose any cause of warfare. Another factor which will bring about universal peace is the linking together of the Orient and the Occident.

Question: What is your belief about reincarnation?

Answer: The subject of reincarnation has two aspects. One is that which the Hindustani people believe, and even that is subdivided into two: reincarnation and metempsychosis. According to one belief the soul goes and then returns in certain reincarnations; therefore, they say that a sick person is sick because of actions in a previous incarnation and that this is retribution. The other school of Hinduism believes that man sometimes appears as an animal — a donkey, for instance — and that this is retribution for past acts. I am referring to the beliefs in that country, the beliefs of the schools. There is a reincarnation of the prophetic mission. Jesus Christ, speaking of John the Baptist, declared he was Elias. When John the [pg 168] Baptist was questioned, "Art thou Elias?" he said, "I am not." These two statements are apparently contradictory, but in reality they do not contradict. The light is one light. The light which illumined this lamp last night is illuminating it tonight. This does not mean that the identical rays of light have reappeared but the virtues of illumination. The light which revealed itself through the glass reveals itself again so that we can say the light of this evening is the light of last evening relighted. This is as regards its virtues and not as regards its former identity. This is our view of reincarnation. We believe in that which Jesus Christ and all the Prophets have believed. For example, the Báb states, "I am the return of all the Prophets." This is significant of the oneness of the prophetic virtues, the oneness of power, the oneness of bestowal, the oneness of radiation, the oneness of expression, the oneness of revelation.

Question: What is the attitude of your belief toward the family?

Answer: According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother — none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all.

Question: What is the relation of the Bahá'í teaching to the ancient Zoroastrian religion?

Answer: The religions of God have the same foundation, but the dogmas appearing later have differed. Each of the divine religions has two aspects. The first is essential. It concerns morality and development of the virtues of the human world. This aspect is common to all. It is fundamental; it is one; there is no difference, no variation in it. As regards the inculcation of morality and the development of human virtues, there is no difference whatsoever between the teachings of Zoroaster, Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh. In this they agree; they are one. The second aspect of the divine religions is nonessential. It concerns human needs and undergoes change in every cycle according to the exigency of the time. For example, in the time of Moses divorce was conformable to the needs and conditions; Moses, therefore, established it. But in the time of Christ, [pg 169] divorces were numerous and the cause of corruption; as they were not suitable for the time, he made divorce unlawful and likewise changed other laws. These are needs and conditions which have to do with the conduct of society; therefore, they undergo change according to the exigency of the time. Moses dwelt in the desert. As there were no penitentiaries, no means of restitution in the desert and wilderness, the laws of God were an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Could this be carried out now? If a man destroys another man's eye, are you willing to destroy the eye of the offender? If a man's teeth are broken or his ear cut off, will you demand a corresponding mutilation of his assailant? This would not be conformable to conditions of humanity at the present time. If a man steals, shall his hand be cut off? This punishment was just and right in the law of Moses, but it was applicable to the desert, where there were no prisons and reformatory institutions of later and higher forms of government. Today you have government and organization, a police system, a judge and trial by jury. The punishment and penalty is now different. Therefore, the nonessentials which deal with details of community are changed according to the exigency of the time and conditions. But the essential foundation of the teachings of Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh is identical, is one; there is no difference whatsoever.

Question: Is peace a greater word than love?

Answer: No! Love is greater than peace, for peace is founded upon love. Love is the objective point of peace, and peace is an outcome of love. Until love is attained, peace cannot be; but there is a so-called peace without love. The love which is from God is the fundamental. This love is the object of all human attainment, the radiance of heaven, the light of man.

Question: Will you state the tenets of your faith?

Answer: First, investigate reality. Man must leave imitation and seek reality. The contemporaneous religious beliefs differ because of their allegiance to dogma. It is necessary, therefore, to abandon imitations and seek their fundamental reality.

Second, the oneness of humanity. All human creatures are the servants of God. All are submerged in the sea of His mercy. The Creator of all is one God; the Provider, the Giver, the Protector of all is one God. He is kind to all; why should we be unkind? All live beneath the shadow of His love; why should we hate each other? There are certain people who are ignorant; they must be educated. Some are like children; they must be trained and educated until they reach maturity. Others are sickly, intellectually ill, spiritually ill; they must be treated and healed. But all are the servants of God.[pg 170]

Third, religion must be conducive to love of all, the cause of fellowship, unity and light. If it be the cause of enmity, bloodshed and hatred, its nonbeing is better than its being, its nonexistence better than its existence. Religion and science conform and agree. If a question of religion violates reason and does not agree with science, it is imagination and not worthy of credence.

Fourth, equality between men and women. In all degrees they are equal. The readjustment of the economic laws for the livelihood of man must be effected in order that all humanity may live in the greatest happiness according to their respective degrees.

Fifth, spiritual brotherhood. All mankind must attain to spiritual fraternity — that is to say, fraternity in the Holy Spirit — for patriotic, racial and political fraternity are of no avail. Their results are meager; but divine fraternity, spiritual fraternity, is the cause of unity and amity among mankind. As heretofore material civilization has been extended, the divine civilization must now be promulgated. Until the two agree, real happiness among mankind will be unknown. By mere intellectual development and power of reason, man cannot attain to his fullest degree — that is to say, by means of intellect alone he cannot accomplish the progress effected by religion. For the philosophers of the past strove in vain to revivify the world of mankind through the intellectual faculty. The most of which they were capable was educating themselves and a limited number of disciples; they themselves have confessed failure. Therefore, the world of humanity must be confirmed by the breath of the Holy Spirit in order to receive universal education. Through the infusion of divine power all nations and peoples become quickened, and universal happiness is possible.

These are some of the principles of the Bahá'ís.

Question: Will women or men aid this new religion most? Which will be more capable?

Answer: In Persia the men have aided it more, but in the West perchance the women. In the West women evidently have precedence in religion, but in the East men surpass the women.

Question: What will be the food of the united people?

Answer: As humanity progresses, meat will be used less and less, for the teeth of man are not carnivorous. For example, the lion is endowed with carnivorous teeth, which are intended for meat, and if meat be not found, the lion starves. The lion cannot graze; its teeth are of different shape. The digestive system of the lion is such that it cannot receive nourishment save through meat. The eagle has a crooked beak, the lower part shorter than the upper. It cannot pick up grain; it cannot graze; therefore, it is compelled to partake of [pg 171] meat. The domestic animals have herbivorous teeth formed to cut grass, which is their fodder. The human teeth, the molars, are formed to grind grain. The front teeth, the incisors, are for fruits, etc. It is, therefore, quite apparent according to the implements for eating that man's food is intended to be grain and not meat. When mankind is more fully developed, the eating of meat will gradually cease.

