

# Talk at Universalist Church

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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Notes by Joseph H. Hannen

Praise be to God! The standard of liberty is held aloft in this land. You enjoy political liberty; you enjoy liberty of thought and speech, religious liberty, racial and personal liberty. Surely this is worthy of appreciation and thanksgiving. In this connection let me mention the freedom, hospitality and universal welcome extended to me during my recent travels throughout America. I wish also to reciprocate fully and completely the warm greeting and friendly attitude of the reverend doctor, pastor of this church, whose loving and quickened susceptibilities especially command acknowledgment. Surely men who are leaders of thought must conform to the example of his kindness and goodwill. Liberalism is essential in this day — justness and equity toward all nations and people. Human attitudes must not be limited; for God is unlimited, and whosoever is the servant of the threshold of God must, likewise, be free from limitations. The world of existence is an emanation of the merciful attribute of God. God has shone forth upon the phenomena of being through His effulgence of mercy, and He is clement and kind to all His creation. Therefore, the world of humanity must ever be the recipient of bounties from His majesty, the eternal Lord, even as Christ has declared, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” For His bounties, like the light and heat of the sun in the material heavens, descend alike upon all mankind. Consequently, man must learn the lesson of kindness and beneficence from God Himself. Just as God is kind to all humanity, man also must be kind to his fellow creatures. If his attitude is just and loving toward his fellowmen, toward all creation, then indeed is he worthy of being pronounced the image and likeness of God.



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

Brotherhood, or fraternity, is of different kinds. It may be family association, the intimate relationship of the household. This is limited and subject to change and disruption. How often it happens that in a family love and agreement are changed into enmity and antagonism. Another form of fraternity is manifest in patriotism. Man loves his fellowmen because they belong to the same native[pg 391] land. This is also limited and subject to change and disintegration as, for instance, when sons of the same fatherland are opposed to each other in war, bloodshed and battle. Still another brotherhood, or fraternity, is that which arises from racial unity, the oneness of racial origin, producing ties of affinity and association. This, likewise, has its limitation and liability to change, for often war and deadly strife have been witnessed between people and nations of the same racial lineage. There is a fourth kind of brotherhood, the attitude of man toward humanity itself, the altruistic love of humankind and recognition of the fundamental human bond. Although this is unlimited, it is, nevertheless, susceptible to change and destruction. Even from this universal fraternal bond the looked-for result does not appear. What is the looked-for result? Loving-kindness among all human creatures and a firm, indestructible brotherhood which includes all the divine possibilities and significances in humanity. Therefore, it is evident that fraternity, love and kindness based upon family, native land, race or an attitude of altruism are neither sufficient nor permanent since all of them are limited, restricted and liable to change and disruption. For in the family there is discord and alienation; among sons of the same fatherland, strife and internecine warfare are witnessed; between those of a given race, hostility and hatred are frequent; and even among the altruists, varying aspects of opinion and lack of unselfish devotion give little promise of permanent and indestructible unity among mankind.

Therefore, the Lord of mankind has caused His holy, divine Manifestations to come into the world. He has revealed His heavenly Books in order to establish spiritual brotherhood and through the power of the Holy Spirit has made it practicable for perfect fraternity to be realized among mankind. And when through the breaths of the Holy Spirit this perfect fraternity and agreement are established amongst men — this brotherhood and love being spiritual in character, this loving-kindness being heavenly, these constraining bonds being divine — a unity appears which is indissoluble, unchanging and never subject to transformation. It is ever the same and will forever remain the same. For example, consider the foundation of the brotherhood laid by Christ. Observe how that fraternity was conducive to unity and accord and how it brought various souls to a plane of uniform attainment where they were willing to sacrifice their lives for each other. They were content to renounce possessions and ready to forfeit joyously life itself. They lived together in such love and fellowship that even Galen, the famous Greek philosopher who was not a[pg 392] Christian, in his work entitled “The Progress of the Nations” said that religious beliefs are greatly conducive to the foundation of real civilization. As a proof thereof he said, “A certain number of people contemporaneous with us are known as Christians. These enjoy the superlative

degree of moral civilization. Each one of them is as a great philosopher because they live together in the utmost love and good fellowship. They sacrifice life for each other. They offer worldly possessions for each other. You can say of the Christian people that they are as one person. There is a bond amongst them that is indissoluble in character.”

It is evident, therefore, that the foundation of real brotherhood, the cause of loving cooperation and reciprocity and the source of real kindness and unselfish devotion is none other than the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without this influence and animus it is impossible. We may be able to realize some degrees of fraternity through other motives, but these are limited associations and subject to change. When human brotherhood is founded upon the Holy Spirit, it is eternal, changeless, unlimited.

In various parts of the Orient there was a time when brotherhood, loving-kindness and all the praiseworthy qualities of mankind seemed to have disappeared. There was no evidence of patriotic, religious or racial fraternity; but conditions of bigotry, hatred and prejudice prevailed instead. The adherents of each religion were violent enemies of the others, filled with the spirit of hostility and eager for shedding of blood. The present war in the Balkans furnishes a parallel of these conditions. Consider the bloodshed, ferocity and oppression manifested there even in this enlightened century — all of it based fundamentally upon religious prejudice and disagreement. For the nations involved belong to the same races and native lands; nevertheless, they are savage and merciless toward each other. Similar deplorable conditions prevailed in Persia in the nineteenth century. Darkness and ignorant fanaticism were widespread; no trace of fellowship or brotherhood existed amongst the races. On the contrary, human hearts were filled with rage and hatred; darkness and gloom were manifest in human lives and conditions everywhere. At such a time as this Bahá'u'lláh appeared upon the divine horizon, even as the glory of the sun, and in that gross darkness and hopelessness of the human world there shone a great light. He founded the oneness of the world of humanity, declaring that all mankind are as sheep and that God is the real and true Shepherd. The Shepherd is one, and all people are of His flock.[pg 393]

The world of humanity is one, and God is equally kind to all. What, then, is the source of unkindness and hatred in the human world? This real Shepherd loves all His sheep. He leads them in green pastures. He rears and protects them. What, then, is the source of enmity and alienation among humankind? Whence this conflict and strife? The real underlying cause is lack of religious unity and association, for in each of the great religions we find superstition, blind imitation of creeds, and theological formulas adhered to instead of the divine fundamentals, causing difference and divergence among mankind instead of agreement and fellowship. Consequently, strife, hatred and warfare have arisen, based upon this divergence and separation. If we investigate the foundations of the divine religions, we find them to be one, absolutely changeless and never subject to transformation. For example, each of the divine religions contains two kinds of laws or ordinances. One division concerns the world of morality and ethical

institutions. These are the essential ordinances. They instill and awaken the knowledge and love of God, love for humanity, the virtues of the world of mankind, the attributes of the divine Kingdom, rebirth and resurrection from the kingdom of nature. These constitute one kind of divine law which is common to all and never subject to change. From the dawn of the Adamic cycle to the present day this fundamental law of God has continued changeless. This is the foundation of divine religion.

The second division comprises laws and institutions which provide for human needs and conditions according to exigencies of time and place. These are accidental, of no essential importance and should never have been made the cause and source of human contention. For example, during the time of Moses — upon Him be peace! — according to the exigencies of that period, divorce was permissible. During the cycle of Christ, inasmuch as divorce was not in conformity with the time and conditions, Jesus Christ abrogated it. In the cycle of Moses plurality of wives was permissible. But during the time of Christ the exigency which had sanctioned it did not exist; therefore, it was forbidden. Moses lived in the wilderness and desert of Sinai; therefore, His ordinances and commandments were in conformity with those conditions. The penalty for theft was to cut off a man's hand. An ordinance of this kind was in keeping with desert life but is not compatible with conditions of the present day. Such ordinances, therefore, constitute the second or nonessential division of the divine religions and are not of importance, for they deal with human transactions which are [pg 394] ever changing according to the requirements of time and place. Therefore, the intrinsic foundations of the divine religions are one. As this is true, why should hostility and strife exist among them? Why should this hatred and warfare, ferocity and bloodshed continue? Is this allowable and justified? God forbid!

An essential principle of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching is that religion must be the cause of unity and love amongst men; that it is the supreme effulgence of Divinity, the stimulus of life, the source of honor and productive of eternal existence. Religion is not intended to arouse enmity and hatred nor to become the source of tyranny and injustice. Should it prove to be the cause of hostility, discord and the alienation of mankind, assuredly the absence of religion would be preferable. Religious teachings are like a course of treatment having for its purpose the cure and healing of mankind. If the only outcome of a course of treatment should be mere diagnosis and fruitless discussion of symptoms, it would be better to abandon and abolish it. In this sense the absence of religion would be at least some progress toward unity.

Furthermore, religion must conform to reason and be in accord with the conclusions of science. For religion, reason and science are realities; therefore, these three, being realities, must conform and be reconciled. A question or principle which is religious in its nature must be sanctioned by science. Science must declare it to be valid, and reason must confirm it in order that it may inspire confidence. If religious teaching, however, be at variance with science and reason, it is unquestionably superstition. The

Lord of mankind has bestowed upon us the faculty of reason whereby we may discern the realities of things. How then can man rightfully accept any proposition which is not in conformity with the processes of reason and the principles of science? Assuredly such a course cannot inspire man with confidence and real belief.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh embody many principles; I am giving you only a synopsis. One of these principles concerns equality between men and women. He declared that as all are created in the image and likeness of the one God, there is no distinction as to sex in the estimation of God. He who is purest in heart, whose knowledge exceeds and who excels in kindness to the servants of God, is nearest and dearest to the Lord, our Creator, irrespective of sex. In the lower kingdoms, the animal and vegetable, we find sex differentiation in function and organism. All plants, trees and animals are subject to that differentiation by creation, but among themselves there is absolute equality without further distinction as to sex. Why, then, should mankind make a [pg 395] distinction which the lower creatures do not regard? Especially so when we realize that all are of the same kingdom and kindred; that all are the leaves of one tree, the waves of one sea? The only reasonable explanation is that woman has not been afforded the same educational facilities as man. For if she had received the same opportunities for training and development as man has enjoyed, undoubtedly she would have attained the same station and level. In the estimate of God no distinction exists; both are as one and possess equal degrees of capacity. Therefore, through opportunity and development woman will merit and attain the same prerogatives. When Jesus Christ died upon the cross, the disciples who witnessed His crucifixion were disturbed and shaken. Even Peter, one of the greatest of His followers, denied Him thrice. Mary Magdalene brought them together and confirmed their faith, saying, "Why are ye doubting? Why have ye feared? O thou Peter! Why didst thou deny Him? For Christ was not crucified. The reality of Christ is ever-living, everlasting, eternal. For that divine reality there is no beginning, no ending, and, therefore, there can be no death. At most, only the body of Jesus has suffered death." In brief, this woman, singly and alone, was instrumental in transforming the disciples and making them steadfast. This is an evidence of extraordinary power and supreme attributes, a proof that woman is the equivalent and complement of man. The one who is better trained and educated, whose aptitude is greater and whose ideals are higher is most distinguished and worthy — whether man or woman.

Through the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the horizon of the East was made radiant and glorious. Souls who have hearkened to His words and accepted His message live together today in complete fellowship and love. They even offer their lives for each other. They forego and renounce worldly possessions for one another, each preferring the other to himself. This has been due to the declaration and foundation of the oneness of the world of humanity. Today in Persia there are meetings and assemblages wherein souls who have become illumined by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh —

representative Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Buddhists and of the various denominations of each — mingle and conjoin in perfect fellowship and absolute agreement. A wonderful brotherhood and love is established among them, and all are united in spirit and service for international peace. More than twenty thousand Bahá'ís have given their lives in martyrdom for the Cause of God. The governments of the East arose against them, bent upon their extermination. They were killed relentlessly, but day by day [pg 396] their numbers have increased, day by day they have multiplied in strength and become more eloquent. They have been strengthened through the efficacy of a wonderful spiritual power. How savage and fearful the ferocity of man against his fellowman! Consider what is taking place now in the Balkans, what blood is being shed. Even the wild beasts and ferocious animals do not commit such acts. The most ferocious wolf kills but one sheep a day, and even that for his food. But now in the Balkans one man destroys ten fellow beings. The commanders of armies glory in having killed ten thousand men, not for food, nay, rather, for military control, territorial greed, fame and possession of the dust of the earth. They kill for national aggrandizement, notwithstanding this terrestrial globe is but a dark world of grossest matter. It is a world of sorrow and grief, a world of disappointment and unhappiness, a world of death. For after all, the earth is but the everlasting graveyard, the vast, universal cemetery of all mankind. Yet men fight to possess this graveyard, waging war and battle, killing each other. What ignorance! How spacious the earth is with room in plenty for all! How thoughtful the providence which has so allotted that every man may derive his sustenance from it! The Lord, our Creator, does not ordain that anyone should starve or live in want. All are intended to participate in the blessed and abundant bestowals of our God. Fundamentally, all warfare and bloodshed in the human world are due to the lack of unity between the religions, which through superstitions and adherence to theological dogmas have obscured the one reality which is the source and basis of them all.

As to the American people: This noble nation, intelligent, thoughtful, reflective, is not impelled by motives of territorial aggrandizement and lust for dominion. Its boundaries are insular and geographically separated from the other nations. Here we find a oneness of interest and unity of national policy. These are, indeed, United States. Therefore, this nation possesses the capacity and capability for holding aloft the banner of international peace. May this noble people be the cause of unifying humanity. May they spread broadcast the heavenly civilization and illumination, become the cause of the diffusion of the love of God, proclaim the solidarity of mankind and be the cause of the guidance of the human race. Therefore, I ask that you will give this all-important question your most serious consideration and efforts. May the world of humanity find peace and composure and this dark earth be transformed into a realm of radiance. May the East and West clasp hands together. May the oneness of God become reflected [pg 397] and fully revealed in the hearts of humanity and all mankind prove to be the manifestations of the favors of God.

Necessarily there will be some who are defective amongst men, but it is our duty to enable them by kind methods of guidance and teaching to become perfected. Some will be found who are morally sick; they should be treated in order that they may be healed. Others are immature and like children; they must be trained and educated so that they may become wise and mature. Those who are asleep must be awakened; the indifferent must become mindful and attentive. But all this must be accomplished in the spirit of kindness and love and not by strife, antagonism nor in a spirit of hostility and hatred, for this is contrary to the good pleasure of God. That which is acceptable in the sight of God is love. Love is, in reality, the first effulgence of Divinity and the greatest splendor of God.

O Thou compassionate Lord, Thou Who art generous and able! We are servants of Thine sheltered beneath Thy providence. Cast Thy glance of favor upon us. Give light to our eyes, hearing to our ears, and understanding and love to our hearts. Render our souls joyous and happy through Thy glad tidings. O Lord! Point out to us the pathway of Thy kingdom and resuscitate all of us through the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Bestow upon us life everlasting and confer upon us never-ending honor. Unify mankind and illumine the world of humanity. May we all follow Thy pathway, long for Thy good pleasure and seek the mysteries of Thy kingdom. O God! Unite us and connect our hearts with Thine indissoluble bond. Verily, Thou art the Giver, Thou art the Kind One and Thou art the Almighty.

