



“The World is a School”

By Robert Sockett

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“WHEN I ARRIVED IN this country,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told the congregation at the Divine Science Church in Denver, Colorado, “I realized that American ideals are indeed most praiseworthy. . . .” The nations of Europe were on the verge of war, he noted, driven by prejudice and fanaticism. “You are free from such prejudice,” he added, “for you believe in the oneness and solidarity of the world of humanity.”

The church that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke in on the evening of September 25, 1912, had a distinctive history. Its founder, Nona Lovell Brooks, was one of the first female pastors in America. She was also an early proponent of the New Thought movement. While the movement held beliefs that were considered unorthodox by mainstream Christianity — among them spiritual healing and the non-existence of evil — it was more mainstream than some of the groups ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had encountered in America, such as the Theosophists or the Free Religionists. The congregation in Denver believed that truth came through the Bible, and that Jesus was a guide for human behavior.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived at 8 p.m. in an automobile put at his disposal by the editor of the *Denver Post*. He delivered what was perhaps his most expansive exposition yet on the common foundation of the world’s religions, and the barriers to religious unity.

“The world is a school,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told his audience, “in which there must be Teachers of the Word of God.” It was a deceptively simple metaphor — one that implied not only that humankind was a single body functioning within a single structure of guidance, but that it progressed over time under the direction of successive teachers.

Expanding the metaphor, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained that these educators brought two types of teachings, “essential” and “accidental,” what he also called “eternal” and “temporal.” The essential teachings, he noted, “seek to stabilize morals, awaken intuitive susceptibilities, reveal the knowledge of God and inculcate the love of all mankind.” The accidental ones “concern the administration of outer human actions and relations. . . .”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá added that the accidental teachings change “according to exigencies of time, place and condition.” He gave the example of laws concerning theft, divorce, and polygamy in the time of Moses. Jesus later changed these laws, he said, as “minds had developed, realizations were keener and spiritual perceptions had advanced.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argued that it was adherence to these temporary laws — what he called “blindly following and imitating ancestral forms” — that creates differences between religions “resulting in disunion, strife and hatred.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá questioned whether we can prove the validity of the the divine teachers. “[W]e must discover for a certainty,” he said, “whether They have been real Educators of mankind.”

Once again he raised the example of Moses. “The people of Israel were ignorant, lowly, debased in morals — a race of slaves under burdensome oppression,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá noted. Yet Moses led them out of captivity. “Through the education of Moses these ignorant people attained an advanced degree of power and prestige, culminating in the glory of the reign of Solomon,” he said. “From the abyss of bereavement and slavery they were uplifted to the highest plane of progress and civilized nationhood.”

“It is evident,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concluded, “that Moses was an Educator and Teacher.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá had opened his talk that evening by praising the American people for their high ideals. He went on to tell the congregation that the ultimate purpose of religion was to bind people together. He brought the evening to a close by telling them: “My highest hope and desire is that the strongest and most indissoluble bond shall be established between the American nation and the people of the Orient.”

“This is my prayer to God,” he said.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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