



‘Abdu’l-Bahá Addresses a Persecuted Minority

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THREE LANGUAGES, FROM THREE corners of the Earth, reverberated in rapid succession off the walls shortly after 8 p.m. on Monday, October 7, 1912. The sonorous Persian of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started the rhythm. Fluid English followed from the tongue of Dr. Ameen Fareed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpreter. As each string of Fareed’s words fell silent, the Reverend Kunio Kodahira intoned the same sentence in Japanese for his congregation’s ears at the Japanese Independent Church at 552 Sycamore Street in Oakland, California.

In 1912 Americans were conflicted about how they felt about increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants in their midst. Like everyone else in the world, they had been astonished by Japan’s crushing victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. When President Roosevelt invited the warring sides to settle their differences in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1905, he chose the small city partly to avoid the rampant anti-Oriental racism of Boston or New York.

But since Japanese families were disembarking — or swimming — onto California’s shores at the rate of 1,000 per month, anti-Japanese prejudice was on the rise in San Francisco. After the 1906 earthquake, the San Francisco School Board had moved quickly to segregate the ninety-three Japanese students in their elementary schools. Every Japanese child on the West coast, Roosevelt biographer Edmund Morris writes, “would now learn what it was like to be a black child in Alabama.” In the spring of 1907, President Roosevelt was exasperated to hear that anti-immigrant riots had broken out in San Francisco, conducted by mobs of workmen fearing competition from low-cost Japanese laborers.

Five years later at the Japanese Independent Church, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rose to speak to an audience comprised of a persecuted minority, something he had, by now, done many times in the United States. “I feel a keen sense of joy being present among you this evening,” he began, summoning almost exactly the same words as he had used back on April 23, in front of the black audience at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. “It is for some time that I have entertained a special desire to meet some of the friends

from Japan, for, as I have often observed, the Japanese nation has achieved extraordinary progress in a short space of time — such progress, such achievements, have astonished the world.”

“I am face to face with a revered group of the Japanese,” he told the congregation, “and from the accounts which have reached mine ears the Japanese nation, as a nation, is not prejudiced.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá had already tried to counter the racism he witnessed against the Japanese in America. The first target had been Saichiro Fujita, the student whom he had asked to accompany him on his trek westward to the Golden State. In Glenwood Springs, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s party of six arrived for dinner in the Hotel Colorado’s restaurant to find only five places set for them. “Well,” the waiter said, “he is your servant,” indicating Mr. Fujita. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as he had done in Washington with Louis Gregory, had another place-setting brought to the table. Once they arrived in San Francisco, a newspaper listed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s secretaries by name; Fujita, again, was merely listed as “a Japanese servant.”

“Any kind of prejudice,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasized to Reverend Kodahira’s congregation, “is destructive to the body-politic. When we refer to history, we shall observe that from the inception of human existence unto this day of ours, every warfare or battle which has taken place, every form of sedition which has occurred, has been due to this sort of prejudice.”

“Thus may religious prejudice, racial prejudice, political prejudice, patriotic prejudice, partisanship, sectarianism, all cease amongst man.”

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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