



An Ethos for a New Age

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Published: November 17, 2012 | Last modified: July 4, 2013

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/11/17/an-ethos-for-a-new-age/>

“ALL CREATED THINGS HAVE their degree, or stage, of maturity,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained. “That which was applicable to human needs during the early history of the race, could neither meet nor satisfy the demands of this day and period of newness and consummation.”

It was the evening of November 17, 1912. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was delivering one of his final public talks in America. The venue was Genealogical Hall, a stately four-storey brownstone at 226 West 58th Street on the southern fringe of Central Park in the heart of Manhattan. It was home to the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, an organization devoted to preserving family histories in the region, dating back to the colonial period. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá didn’t address the Society: it was an event arranged by New York’s Bahá’ís. Nevertheless, he framed his talk around the idea of the genealogy of the human family.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá argued that just as an individual moves through various milestones in life, so too does humanity as a whole. Humankind, he explained, had passed through its childhood and youth, and had “entered its long presaged period of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere visible and apparent.”

The evidences were all around him in New York. Skyscrapers climbed heavenward around the hall where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke, symbols of the material inventiveness of a highly entrepreneurial nation. He appreciated the American people for their openness to new ideas, and their ability to shake off the prejudices of the old world. He characterized the American government as equitable and committed to justice. He emphasized the nation’s spirit of scientific invention and discovery. “Everywhere the world of mankind is in the throes of evolutionary activity,” he told his audience at Genealogical Hall that evening, “indicating the passing of the old conditions and advent of the new age of reformation.”

The study of genealogy — the impulse to trace the roots of one’s family heritage — was initially met with great suspicion in America. In the era after Independence, many Americans viewed it as an attempt to secure a personal linkage back to the old British Empire, something antithetical to the new republic’s future-oriented convictions. “Old trees yield no fruitage,” ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá told his audience in Manhattan that evening, “old ideas and methods are obsolete and worthless now.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá listened to the words his translator was delivering, and prepared to shift his focus to religion. Religion was in the midst of the same evolutionary dynamic. “This is the cycle of maturity and reformation in religion as well,” he said. “Dogmatic imitations of ancestral beliefs are passing. They have been the axis around which religion revolved but now are no longer fruitful; on the contrary, in this day they have become the cause of human degradation and hindrance.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s father, Bahá’u’lláh, had denounced all forms of particularism — national, racial, gendered, economic, religious — and presented a new universal ethos. This approach, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argued, was the solution to the pressing needs of a maturing human race, which was progressing materially at an explosive pace, running into new conflicts, and outstripping its adolescent capacity to live at peace.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

Caitlin Shayda Jones, “An Ethos for a New Age,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, November 17, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/11/17/an-ethos-for-a-new-age/>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Jones, Caitlin Shayda. “An Ethos for a New Age.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. November 17, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/11/17/an-ethos-for-a-new-age/>.

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Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

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