



‘Abdu’l-Bahá Scales “The Gunks”

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Published: May 14, 2012 | Last modified: July 9, 2013

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/05/14/abdul-baha-scales-the-gunks/>.

THE TRAIN PUFFED BLACK smoke through the towns north of New York City. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was on his way to the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in New Paltz, New York. A four-hour train ride would take him up the Hudson River into the countryside. Soon the view outside his window was wrapped in greenery. The peace conference is designed to be far from the hustle and bustle of urban life.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his party arrived at the station in New Paltz, a carriage waited to drive them the last seven miles to Lake Mohonk. For an hour they rode in the open air through the rising rocks and wooded hills of the Shawangunk Mountains — the locals call them “The Gunks.” Suddenly ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, exhilarated by the fresh wilderness around him, began to sing and told the others to join in. Dr. Fareed, his translator, couldn’t remember this ever having happened before.

Just then the red tips of the Lake Mohonk Mountain House became visible through the trees. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will stay in its magnificent, castle-like structure for the next three days. Albert Smiley, its owner, has hosted the peace conference each year since 1895. It takes place in a grand hall overlooking the lake, a room Mr. Smiley built especially for this purpose.

Anybody who’s anybody in the peace movement in North America is at the conference, including several Canadian leaders: Rabbi Joseph Silverman runs America’s leading Reform Judaism congregation at New York’s Temple Emanu-El; the Honorable William Lyon Mackenzie King was Canada’s Minister of Labor until last October when the Tories defeated his Liberal party in the Canadian Federal Election; John Lewis is the Editor of the Toronto Daily Star; Benjamin Franklin Trueblood is the famous Quaker who proposed a single world state in his 1899 book, *The Federation of the World*. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá already knows some of the attendees, such as the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who hosted him at the Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago nine days ago.

The conference got underway with a seemingly endless round of jubilant introductions. But the mood dampened when Nicholas Murray Butler, the President of Columbia University, took the podium and reflected on recent setbacks in the cause of peace:

“Many of us find ourselves troubled by doubts and harassed by disappointment,” he said. “Within sixty days after the Conference of 1911 . . . two of the greatest, most powerful and most enlightened nations known to history were widely believed to be on the verge of armed conflict.”

He was talking about the dispute between France and Germany over Morocco. France has taken control of the small nation, and Germany deployed a gunboat to the region to assert itself. Thankfully, conflict was avoided. Professor Butler commended the nations for refusing to take each other’s bait, but tensions throughout Europe remain high.

In the evening, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stood to deliver his twenty-minute talk on the “Oneness of the Reality of Humankind” to 250 people. He had traveled over 6,000 miles to be here. Almost forty-five years ago his father, Bahá’u’lláh, had written from his prison cell to the world’s major leaders. One of the things he presented to them was a comprehensive program for achieving lasting international peace. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá now began to lay out, in matter-of-fact terms, eight principles that Bahá’u’lláh had defined as central to the enterprise.

The first had to do with religion. Many conflicts came down to disagreements over religious belief. But Bahá’u’lláh’s point had been that if one investigated the fundamentals of the world’s religions impartially, one would discover that they had an underlying unity. “It is incumbent on all nations,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “to investigate truth.”

“The second principle of Bahá’u’lláh is the oneness of human kind. All humanity belongs to one family, inhabiting the same globe.”

Third: “If a religious question be not in accordance with science, it is imagination.”

Fourth: “If religion should be productive of strife and division, if it should cause bloodshed and war and rapine, irreligion is preferable to religion. Religion was meant to be a bond of love among mankind.”

The fifth principle dealt with prejudice. “All the wars which have taken place since the inception of human history,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “have emanated either from religious prejudice, racial prejudice, patriotic bias or political greed and interest. As long as these prejudices last, so long will the foundations of humanity tremble.”

Sixth: “The difference which now exists between man and woman is only a difference of education. . . . Until perfect strength shall obtain in both, and woman shall attain

equality with man, the happiness of humanity will not be insured.”

Seventh: “The rich now enjoy the greatest luxury, whereas the poor are in abject misery. Certain laws must be made whereby the rich cannot become over-rich and the poor shall not starve, both rich and poor enjoying the comforts according to their respective deserts.”

Finally, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, whom many in the audience no doubt saw as a philosopher, questioned the ability of philosophy alone to generate lasting change. “Philosophy sufficeth not,” he said, “and is not conducive to the absolute happiness of mankind.” Great philosophers had proven capable of educating a few who followed them, but not the broad masses of mankind. “You cannot make the susceptibilities of all humanity one except through the common channel of the Holy Spirit.”

After the applause, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was asked to continue. But he was far too tired and declined. Mr. Smiley stood and thanked him on behalf of the audience. Then Mrs. Smiley presented him with a pendant designed especially for the conference. Members of the audience streamed to the platform, and lined up to shake ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s hand.

Two weeks later, the Rev. Frederick Lynch of the Federal Council of Churches commented on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk at Lake Mohonk: “The address of the evening was full of this one thing, the unity of mankind. We are in this world, — one. When you get beneath the different languages, different nationalities, different races, different colors, different temperaments, after all, we are one.” It was, he said, “the most remarkable address I have ever listened to.”

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

Caitlin Shayda Jones, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Scales ‘The Gunks,’” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, May 14, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/05/14/abdul-baha-scales-the-gunks/>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Jones, Caitlin Shayda. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Scales ‘The Gunks,’” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. May 14, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/05/14/abdul-baha-scales-the-gunks/>.

HOW TO CITE THE *239 Days in America* WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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

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