

Bahá'u'lláh's ground plan of world-fellowship as presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá¹

A sketch based on *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London and Talks by Abdul-Baha Given in Paris'*²

By George Townshend

The Ground Plan of World Fellowship which is now submitted to your consideration was composed out of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, and later in Paris, about a quarter of a century ago. It proposes in the simplest possible form a practical scheme for mastering the urgent problem of world-fellowship; and its originating idea, though of outstanding magnitude, is such as to place the whole plan from its beginning throughout in complete accord with the purpose we have before us today—that of promoting the spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion.

This Plan in every feature plainly implies that nothing less than a concerted effort on a world scale, with the spiritual energies of mankind informing its practical energies, will now suffice to awaken the spirit of fellowship and secure deliverance from danger. No local or regional effort; no partial effort of either religion alone or statecraft alone, will completely solve our problems. The sense of fellowship (to be adequate to this unique emergency) must be broad, based on the whole of our human nature (spiritual, moral and intellectual) and not limited by any terrestrial boundaries.

Such a thesis may still be ahead of the public opinion of mankind. But it is not so far ahead of that opinion as it was when it was first proposed in this city in 1911. To-day our emergency is rather more serious than then; but it is of the same general character. What then and up to the present has been lacking in men's experiments is clearness of spiritual vision, the guidance of intuition. Only Faith can point or see the way in such an hour as this. Men question the love of a God who could let loose on them so dire a cataclysm and could choose out this generation for suffering wholly unprecedented. Their doubt cuts them off from the source of light and help. There is no vision; and the people perish. Only Faith sees clearly—in open view—that this darkness is cast by a great light, that this passing defeat of the spirit of Fellowship is the prelude of its final victory. A loving God would not have set this generation problems without bestowing the ability to solve them, would not inflict dire penalties on those whom he regarded as guiltless.

We are daunted by the strange new troubles that close us in on every side; we do not look within and observe that a new power of mastering these being developed in conscience and in spirit. Intellectual vision never was so keen as in this generation; but spiritual vision, was it ever more weak? We talk—we boast—of the New Age; but we miss its greatest gift. We say the human race is at last reaching maturity, but we do not realise the fulness, the completeness of this growth. We perceive it is intellectual; we do not perceive it is, in like measure, moral and spiritual. Man's conscience has become more sensitive, his spirit more responsive to heavenly promptings. As he is to-day endowed with a new degree of intellectual power, so is he endowed to-day with a new degree of

¹ *The Bahá'í World (1934–1936)*, vol. 6, pp. 614–9. Prepared by Mike Thomas, 2025, for posting online at bahai-library.com/townshend_plan_world_fellowship

² 1912. *Now Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*.

religious power. The evolutionary process with even hand bears onward the whole being and nature of man; his heart as well as his brain. New ideals, new hopes, new dreams of further progress, a more general, more insistent desire to build a better world than that one which we inherit—these bear witness to man's consciousness of growth. In all its faculties the human race is passing from childhood and ignorance towards maturity, towards the tasks that befit full manhood. Today mankind is like a youth leaving school for the sterner world of business and affairs. It is called on to put into practice the lessons of moral principle and human fellowship in which it has been instructed for so long. For how many centuries have we—all of us—been under tutelage to those whom we revere as the Founders of our Faiths? Is it strange a time should come when we should be required to put into concrete deeds the precepts of brotherhood we all acknowledge and should at last be threatened with condign punishment if we disobey?

Much indeed has been done of late to remedy old wrongs, to suppress tyranny, to uplift the oppressed, to relieve the poor, to teach the ignorant. But how much remains undone! We have accomplished enough to convict ourselves of being fitted for a better social order, of being ready to inaugurate a system of widespread justice and fraternity—and of lacking the resolution to put our ideals into effect. There is enough of good in our recent record to incriminate us—but not enough to deliver us. We stand now before the judgment seat of heaven condemned by the evidence of our own acts.

We had no Vision: Men turned from saints, mystics, seers, and listened to secular philosophers. Blind leaders of the blind, into what perdition have they led us! Our intellectual eminence by some fatality heightened our troubles. Divorced from faith, it aggravated human pride, taught men to forget their moral responsibility and to deny their servitude before the moral law. The inevitable hour of retribution draws near.

Surely this is a love-tragedy vaster in its scale, more terrible in its poignancy than any in the history of our race!

The urge of evolution pressed us forward; we would not go. The spirit of fellowship grew warm in our hearts; we would not feed its flame. The gates of world-brotherhood opened wide; we turned away. God poured His Spiritual bounties on spirit and conscience in greater abundance than ever; we in our blindness rejected His gifts and Him.

But this failure is not final nor for long. It is not the failure of Faith, nor yet of Love. It is the open, the confessed failure of human wisdom. Through its purgation men who have doubted will learn to turn for fellowship and peace to the way they have not trodden; the way of religion. But all must tread this way together. Since the whole world as a unit is involved, the ideals which are to guide this movement must be given a definite shape. If there is to be concerted action towards a single goal, some map of the common journey must be made. Vague sentiments of goodwill, however genuine, will not suffice. Some explicit agreement on principles will be required for any coordinated progress.

It was to this task that Bahá'u'lláh long ago addressed himself; and worked out a Ground Plan on which the temple of human fellowship might be reared. It consisted of a set of fundamental principles and represented the minimum of what the occasion required. No foundation less deeply dug than this will hold the structure that is to be built upon it.

The burden of the whole scheme was laid ultimately upon the shoulders of each individual man and woman. Everybody by virtue of his status as a human being had his share in the vast world enterprise. The principle of individual responsibility was thus to be the basis of all progress.

But underneath this basic fact of human duty lay something deeper yet. The living rock on which this foundation was to be laid was something the strength of which humanity hitherto has too little recognised. That rock is the Truth. This spirit of fellowship which we seek to encourage is not by Bahá'u'lláh conceived as some addition to being which the genius of man should undertake to create. As a flower within the bud, it lies waiting the hour of its appearance.

It is a reality which our fragmentariness denies. And what this Assembly desires to do is not to create something new but to give expression to something which is already in existence though unused. Man's advancing power is due to his increasing knowledge of truth; and the magnificence of this present age bears witness in the last resort not to the personal greatness of this generation but rather to the greatness of a continuously unfolding Truth. If this Age is to become the Age of Universal Brotherhood, it must be the Age of Knowledge (Knowledge of Truth). The Truth will set us free. The Truth will make us one.

As the first item of his programme, therefore, Bahá'u'lláh claimed that every individual should have the right of seeking for himself the truth. Love of truth (which at the present time is growing apace among mankind) is the sole real corrective of all forms of error and illusion. The great enmities which in the past have divided mankind, and which were due to misunderstanding and ignorance, have in recent times lost their vitality, and our estrangements are now due chiefly to prejudice. These prejudices have come down to us from the past—racial, religious, national—and the instinct of imitation. For them all Bahá'u'lláh offers one radical cure—the search for truth. The battle which mankind yet has to fight between prejudice and truth he seems to regard as the Armageddon of the human soul.

Through this search for truth mankind at last would become really and clearly conscious of the essential unity of the human race. For this unity is and has ever been a fact. “*Ye are the leaves of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye with one another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship*,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh. From the full knowledge of this unity, and from nothing less, there would be born in this age a spirit of world-fellowship adequate to the present emergency. On this consciousness of unity, therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid the greatest stress. He gave to it a central place in his programme, other features supporting or amplifying it or giving it application in the practical affairs of mankind.

One of the facts which has obscured from men's view their essential unity is the difference between the world-religions, which has been made the cause of estrangement—of prejudice and even of ill-will and strife. But, insisted 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is nothing in these differences which should produce so sad a result. Indeed, there is an important aspect in which all religions are at heart one; and he included the existence of this unity as a principle in his scheme. He meant (so it seems) that a religion does not consist solely of a doctrine, and an institution, but is also in a real and vital sense a spiritual atmosphere. It is, as he once described it, “an attitude of soul towards God, reflected in life.”¹ This the essence of true religion; and to this extent, the whole world over; members of all the religions have an outlook, an experience, an obligation which they share in common with one another in spite of their special and distinctive loyalties, and which groups them all together apart from the sceptic.

The more intensely spiritual men are, the more vividly conscious are they of the reality and sweetness of this communion, and one of their privileges is the experience of a deep sympathy, a common lowliness, a common aspiration which they share with those of a different tradition from their own.

Not only in their atmosphere, their influence, but even in their profounder teachings the world-religions may show forth this unity. Do not all our faiths affirm and magnify the love of God for His creatures? What truth could be more ancient, more precious than this? What would bind those who espouse it with a closer tie of fellowship?

This age of widening consciousness and deepening love of truth has begun to bring us, on a scale quite unprecedented, some accurate knowledge of the sacred treasures and the sacred history of the human race. Scholars, divines, men of letters, poets have all contributed to this enlightenment. They show us each of the great religions as being like a majestic temple reared in some chosen spot by the hand of a master architect, and surrounded now by a multitude of lesser buildings of various later dates. Each temple blends with its own environment but

¹ Not located.

is in marked contrast with all the other temples. No two are alike, and the annexes connected with each are still more unlike. But if the enquiring traveler pursues his investigations and makes his way within the sacred structures he discovers in their several interiors and even in the shrines themselves an unmistakable kinship in beauty.

Experts in comparative religion have spoken with emphasis of the points of agreement to be found between the world religions. Professor Cheyne¹ states "Max Muller was hardly right in advising the Brahmists to call themselves Christians" and himself argues that the reconciliation of religions must precede that of races "which at present is so lamentably incomplete."² The evidence of men of learning is supported by that of another cloud of witnesses, whose testimony none can gainsay, and who speak with the voice not of intellectual criticism but of spiritual knowledge. The highest exponents of a religion, those who understand most thoroughly its meaning and interpret its spirit with the most compelling authority, are those men and women of mystical genius whose impassioned devotion and obedience to their divine Master is the outstanding feature of their lives. If each of these religions were strictly exclusive, the negation of all the others, bringing to men its own irreconcilable message, in that case those who follow these religions to the extreme, the mystics and the saints, would assuredly move further and further apart, and would come to rest at the last point of divergence. The greater the saint the wider the gulf between him and the saints of alien allegiances. At the same time the less aspiring and spiritually gifted multitudes, immersed in the daily human concerns which all men share alike, would be found to be the least estranged from one another by their differing creeds.

But in fact this is not so. Strangely, very strangely, religious history shows us something quite different—exactly the opposite. The contrast between each world-religion and all its sister-religions is as a rule felt most acutely and insisted on most vigorously by the less mystically minded of its votaries. While the mystics of all the religions instead of moving further and ever further apart seem rather to travel by converging paths and to draw nearer and nearer together.

If one is to accept the account of their experience given by contemporaries or by themselves, these mystics seem all the world over to have gone upon the same spiritual adventure, to be drawn onward by the same experience of an outpoured heavenly love; and they testify one and all that to reach this knowledge of the love of God is to understand at last the mystery and the hidden blessedness of life and to possess an everlasting treasure for which the sacrifice of all earthly things is but a little price.

This fellowship among all mystics is common knowledge, of which evidence is within the reach of all. In a well-known English work, Miss Evelyn Underhill writes of the mystics that: "We meet these persons in the east and the west; in the ancient, mediaeval, and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest: ... This quest, for them, has constituted the whole meaning of life: ... and it is an indirect testimony to its objective actuality, that whatever the place or period in which they have arisen, their aims, doctrines and methods have been substantially the same. Their experience, therefore, forms a body of evidence, curiously self-consistent and often mutually explanatory,"³

Every public library in this country will contain books supplying illustrations of this statement. The mystical outlook and perspective both on the things of heaven and the things of earth is in its essence eternally the same. But perhaps no instance of the fundamental unity that underlies all. mystical experience is more striking than that parallelism between Plotinos and St. Augustine to which in his *Evolution of Theology* Professor Edward Caird draws attention. "Some of the finest expressions of this (the mystical) attitude of soul," he writes, "... may be found in the Confessions of St. Augustine. But when St. Augustine expresses his deepest religious feelings, we find that he repeats the thoughts and almost the very words of Plotinos."⁴ Professor Caird then shows how closely akin to the thought

¹ Preface, *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions*.

² *ibid*.

³ Evelyn Underhill. Chapter 1: The point of departure, Part I: An introduction to mysticism, in *Mysticism: A Study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*, 1912, pp. 3-4.

⁴ Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers*, vol. II, 1904, p. 286.

of Plotinos is "that great passage in which Augustine gives an account of his last conversation with his mother, Monica, about the life of the redeemed in heaven"¹ And he concludes "how deeply neo-Platonism must have sunk into the spirit of St. Augustine when in describing the highest moment of his religious experience he adopts almost verbally the language in which Plotinos tries to depict the mystic ecstasy of the individual soul as it enters into communion with the soul of the world."²

By what diverse paths have mystics who had nothing in common save whole-hearted servitude before the one loving God, by what diverse paths have they all alike attained the blessed Presence! And what man in his pride of opinion will shut out from Paradise those whom God's own hand has admitted? Thus do scholars and saints join to testify that the great religions have their aspect of unity as well as their aspect of variety, and that without qualifying their special allegiance worshippers in all religions may find something in the fundamental nature of religion itself which promotes a sweet, precious and abiding sense of true companionship.

The promotion of a boundless spirit of concord and good will Bahá'u'lláh maintained to be agreeable to the genius of every world-religion. Whatever misunderstanding may have arisen in bygone centuries, no religion as originally taught was meant to encourage animosity. Quite the contrary. Religion is meant to heal discord. So important in an age of disintegration did this feature of religion seem that 'Abdu'l-Bahá proposed to include in his Plan the precept that "the purpose of religion is to promote harmony and affection." One will not doubt this loving purpose may be discovered, or re-discovered, in every one of our world-faiths, and assuredly in Christianity. If we look away from Christendom to Christ and to the pure teaching of Christ, we find it evident throughout the Gospels. Christ said that one's whole duty was to love God and one's neighbor, and he described neighbor as meaning anyone you could help regardless of creed or kin. He made fellowship in love the evidence of Christian membership "by this shall all men know that ye are My disciples if ye have love one to another."

In this Age we congratulate ourselves that for centuries past religious enmity has been continually growing more weak. Yet our ideal remains negative. To manifest no ill-will towards those who differ in opinion from us is not enough. Christ enjoined a more positive attitude of soul; one of active goodwill despite all differences. When God thus commands a spirit of affection towards all, he gives the power to obey His command. Religion, in other words, is creative. Through its force the will of an earnest man is enabled to achieve an inward change that otherwise would be beyond his strength. If this were not so, what useful place would religion fill in this cosmos of ours?

If now the creative power of religion to effect this purpose were called upon and put to vigorous use, how many vital problems which have proved insoluble on the intellectual plane (such as the reunion of Christendom or the combating of secularism) might prove much more tractable when carried to the spiritual plane!

Another effort at harmonization was called for when Bahá'u'lláh included in this scheme an active partnership between religion and science.

Tolerance between the two is too little. In their nature they are complementary, as two wings with which the soul soars towards knowledge of the truth. Science divorced from religion gives a wholly distorted view of reality. Religion divorced from science may become a mere superstition. Man is to use both as his servants and thus to bring the material aspect of life and the spiritual aspect at last into evident and complete accord.

To these principles Bahá'u'lláh added (as necessary for practical results) certain provisions of a more material nature. 'Abdul-Baha mentioned laws to prevent extremes of indigence and opulence; universal education, a common language, a central World-Tribunal.

To the use by all nations of a secondary or world language in addition to their mother tongue great importance was attached; without this device fellowship would never be assured. The religious history of mankind from the days of Babel to the present bears out this emphasis. When we remember, for example, the influence of the general use of the Greek language throughout the Roman Empire at the beginning of our Era, when we consider how in Islam the adoption of Arabic as a common language united peoples hitherto estranged, facilitated the interchange of thought and aided the rapid extension of a single culture over vast regions; or when again we observe how the cause of ecclesiastic unity was promoted by the use and weakened by the disuse of the Latin language as a medium among the peoples of western Europe centuries ago; we are driven to conclude that in this age of radio and aviation a world-language would unify the peoples of mankind to a degree unprecedented in the past and difficult for us to calculate in anticipation.

¹ *ibid.*

² This is a paraphrase of Caird's argument that probably circulates in secondary literature.

The federal tribunal or Board of Arbitration which in a few words 'Abdu'l-Bahá proposed differed in three notable points from the League which afterwards was set up. The provision of an adequate police force was an essential prerequisite: the draft of any proposed constitution was to be referred not only to the governments but also to the peoples of the world: when finally ratified and adopted, it was to enjoy the full support of religion, of church as well as of state, and its strict maintenance against any violation by any nation was to be held by all mankind as a sacred obligation.

In these and all other reforms man's greatest stay would be the Holy Spirit, without whose aid no peace or fellowship or unification would ever be secured.

This scheme of world-fellowship was presented twenty-five years ago in London by 'Abdu'l-Bahá out of teachings first promulgated some forty years before. *"This," he said "is a short summary of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. To establish this Bahá'u'lláh underwent great difficulties and hardships. He was in constant confinement and he suffered great persecution. But ... from the darkness of his prison he sent out a great light into the world."*¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá claimed that these principles were consistent with the spirit of all the world religions and were measured with exact and unique fitness to mankind's heightened capacity and its tremendous responsibilities at this time. He had no doubt of their being at no very distant date adopted: fellowship along these lines was the birthright of our New Age. But though they have percolated far through the world and have cheered the hearts of many with renewed hope, yet the large collaboration between races and religions here so definitely outlined has in fact been postponed in favor of narrower views and materialistic reforms. Our civilization is in desperate plight and has sunk into a moral and spiritual abyss. Men realize the urgent need of a reformation greater in range and in intensity than mankind has ever yet achieved but know not how to meet it. In such an emergency does not this bold original scheme of fellowship merit serious consideration and even the test of experiment. Does it deserve to be merely ignored by the rulers and the teachers of the world?

In advocating peace to a western audience 'Abdu'l-Bahá once said [to Hudson Maxim], *"You have had war for thousands of years; why not try peace for a change? If you do not like it, you can always go back to war."*² One might in such an hour as this hazard the same suggestion about this ground plan of fellowship: we have exhausted a hundred other devices to no purpose—why not try this? If we do not like it, we can always return to our present-condition.

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 30.

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Star of the West*, Vol. III (13 July 1912), No. 7, p. 5. Actual quote: *"We have the history of the world for nearly six thousand years. Before that there is no record. During these six thousand years there has been constant war, strife, bloodshed. We can see at a glance the results, achievements and outcomes of war. The history of warfare and strife is known, the effect apparent. Have we not a sufficient standard of experience in this direction? Let us now try peace for awhile. If good results follow, let us adhere to it. If not let us throw it away and fight again. Nothing will be lost by the experiment."*