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The Bahá'í Movement, with Some Recollections of Meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá
by Maude M. Holbach
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Union des Spiritualistes and at Pasteur Wagner's Church. The addresses in Paris are now published in book form by the Bahá'í Master {{p3}}, and their deep Spirituality impress ell who read them, even as it did those fortunate enough to hear them delivered in sonorous Persian, and ably translated into French by his secretary.

[^] Talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahá given in Paris.

After three months in Europe 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to Egypt 1911, but four months later this aged man, with a constitution undermined by his long imprisonment and many privations, but sustained by the same undaunted spirit that had made him the ministering angel of the prison at Acre, undertook a long and arduous journey through America, in the course of which he, visited all the chief cities from the Atlantic to the Pacific, addressing Jews, Christians, Mormons, and Freethinkers, meeting the points of view of each, winning the hearts of all The New York Peace Society welcomed with a banquet in his honour the greatest peace worker in the world and other International Peace Societies wherever he journeyed vied, in doing him honour. Those who know that Mr. W. J. Bryan, the present Secretary of State, came under 'Abdu'l-Bahá's influence first at Acre on his journey round the world, and again when the leader of the Bahá'ís returned the visit in America. do not wonder at the beneficial influence he is exerting in the present administration—an influence that extends far beyond his own country and makes for world peace.

But it is not alone among the nations that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is working for unity. Equally is he the apostle of peace between the Churches, and between Science and Religion, which have so long been estranged. ‘There is no opposition between Religion and Science,’ he declares. ‘They are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights with which the human soul can progress.’ This subject he treated at length in a remarkable address to the world of Science delivered at Stanford University in California, and in the same city he addressed a crowded congregation of Jews in one of the chief synagogues on ‘The Fundamental Unity of Religious Thought,’ establishing the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ and inviting the Jews to believe in Him.

It was at the conclusion of his American tour that it was my privilege and happiness to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Nearly three years ago when visiting Haifa and Acre to study the ground of the Crusades, I first heard of the Oriental teacher – and turned a deaf ear! For the time that I should recognise his greatness was not yet! An English resident of Haifa at that period spoke of him as a modern Elijah who had founded a second School of the Prophets on Mount Carmel. Someone else in Jerusalem told me that I should write about the Bahá’í Movement if I wanted a new subject, but I went my unremembering way,’ mulling with English superiority at the statement that Americans were coming to sit at the feet of the, new prophet! A year later at Oxford I found, when reading in the Bodleian Library, a book which opened my eye to the beauty of the Bahá’í teaching, but much had happened in the year—some study of comparative religions, and particularly of Christian Science, with its message, ‘Man is not material, he is Spiritual,’ and of the power of universal love to heal both mind and body, had ‘prepared me for it.

A few months later, in a London drawing-room I found a portrait of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and recognised it immediately, though I had never seen any portrait of him, by the intuition that comes to some of us in certain crises of life. My hostess, who had been the first to welcome “the Master” to England, coming into the room immediately afterwards, I eagerly questioned her, and learned that I was standing in the first room ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had entered on reaching England, and in the house that had been his English home.

In the following October (1912) I went, consequently upon the outbreak of the Balkan War, on a hastily organized lecturing tour to America, entirely ignorant that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was still in the United States, for letter inquiring as to his movements had been lost, and in a rush of engagements and preparations I had not, given the matter anymore thought. Again the hand of Fate led me. By a remarkable coincidence” within a few days of landing I learned that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in New York and would leave very shortly for England, and that a farewell banquet to him, given by the Bahá’ís of America, who had come from all over the world, was even then taking place. This time nothing, I resolved, should prevent me meeting the great man with whom I had heard so much. An exchange of telephone messages with the Great Northern Hotel, where the banquet was taking place, a hasty toilet, a rush through the brilliantly lit streets of New York

at a taxi's topmost speed, and I entered a banqueting room where three to four hundred guests were already seated and saw beyond the long table an upper table at which a venerable figure in Oriental robes was standing, surrounded by a group of more Orientals (among whom I afterwards found was the Persian Charge d' Affaires from Washington), and addressing the guests in a strange tongue which was translated sentence by sentence into poetic English I can remember nothing of what he said except that this was a feast, differing from all other feasts because it was a feast of love—and divine? Boom was made for me, the stranger and late-comer, with true Bahá'í courtesy, at one of the principal tables, where I could have the best view of the guest list the evening. Later 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked slowly round the banqueting-hall followed by his interpreter, stopping from time to time to give a short address and laying his hands in blessing on the head of every guest. Probably I was the only one present who was not a Bahá'í, and. I am well aware & displayed my ignorance of the movement in my conversation, for a New York business man who was my table neighbour seemed surprised by my remarks, while I was vastly impressed by his simple downright straight talk (to use an Americanism) of the practical value of Bahá'í principles in business life, in promoting harmony with the workmen of various nationalities, because he now regarded them all as brothers instead of, as formerly, Greeks, Armenians, and niggers.

Wonderful days followed, in which I had the privilege of conversing alone (through an interpreter who somehow effaced himself completely and seemed but a living mouthpiece) with the unique personage who impressed those who came within his influence more and more deeply as they became more imbued with his spirit, as well as of being present at his interviews with men and women of various attainments and mental stature, to each of whom he suited himself and by all of whom he was evidently regarded with the deepest veneration. The most interesting of the interviews at which I was privileged to be present were, I think, that which took place when the Secretary of the New, York Peace Society called to bid him 'Good-bye' and discussed the international Peace Question; and a private interview to which I accompanied the wife of a diplomat, an American who had lived much in the East and heard of the Persian prophet through her friend, a high Turkish official. Prince Oslan {{p4}}, having come under the spell of his spiritual personality and being changed, to use her own words, ' from a brilliant worldling to a spiritually-minded man.

[^] Prince Oslan, hereditary chief of Druses and leading spirit among the "Turkish Liberals, was assassinated in the counter-revolution.

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not preach—he prefers to teach. Although at the request of the Theosophical and other Societies he addressed some large public meetings, his usual 'talks ' are much more informal, it was his custom in America to receive callers from 9 o'clock till noon, and during these hours his ante-room was always thronged with those who desired to meet or consult him, waiting for their turn and then to come into the general reception room, shake hand with all present,

and give a short address of general interest. I have often felt that it is not so much his words as his spirit which carry conviction, and this spirit is reflected among his followers to such a degree that to find oneself at a Bahá'í assembly, whether in New York or Chicago, London or Paris or Stuttgart (the centre of the movement in Germany), is everywhere to find oneself among friends animated by a real spirit of mutual help and brotherhood. There are, of course, as there have been in every religious movement, some Bahá'ís who are Bahá'ís in name only; but taken as a whole, a 'wonderful spirit of real Christian brotherhood animates the Bahá'í communities, which is perhaps the more remarkable when one reflects that a large number of those who came into the movement were, before they joined it, frankly irreligious. A leading Bahá'í of New York was pointed out to me with the comment 'There goes a man who was one of the hardest-hearted atheists in this city.' He, by the way, was selected as one of a little band to take the Bábí teachings to India.

I was present at several of the feasts 'held at different private houses every nineteen days, by command of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and I reflected how much love must go to the preparation of a dinner for thirty or forty people in a private home, where the menage: often consists of but one, or at most two, servants, the difficulty of procuring domestic 'help' in America rendering larger establishments out of the question. I have known a feast given in a home where the mistress was the only maid, and her friends all helped her in waiting. No invitations are issued, but all are welcome, so no one knows how many may come to these gatherings, especially as friends of Bahá'ís are often present. At the feasts Bahá'í news from other centres is read, as well as some of the 'Tablets' (writings of Bahá'u'lláh).

It has been erroneously stated at by some ill-informed or in-disposed people that, the object of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to America was to obtain money from the friends there (the term used by the Quakers has been very fittingly adopted by the Bahá'ís, with whom they share many points of similarity); so far from true is this that 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned the 30,000 dollars collected and sent as a voluntary offering of love for the expenses of his tour; with a message that it should be used for the poor of America, and everywhere he went he gave liberally to charitable institutions, besides privately relieving individual cases of want. His departure from New York was a remarkable event, for Bahá'ís came to that city from far and near, some even from California to bid him farewell. and when the modern liner left her moorings the pier was black with people whose eyes were centred on the patriarchal figure with the long grey beard and snowy turban, who looked the embodiment of the Old Testament prophets and presented a remarkable contrast to his modern surroundings. Few among the onlookers were unmoved, many women were openly weeping, and I saw men whose eyes were dim, while those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Persian followers who were left behind were unrestrained in their grief!

'Isn't it bad he is going?' said someone as the great ship slowly moved out to sea. 'Ah! but how glad for those who are going!' was the reply from one who knelt; how eagerly people were waiting to welcome 'Abdu'l-Bahá in England

and Scotland, as well as in Paris.

Last summer the turn came of Stuttgart, Vienna, and Budapest. In Germany the literature is being translated, and there are Bahá'ís at Munich and Leipzig, as well as at Stuttgart and Esslingen, but the movement is comparatively new, and the number of its adherents proportionately small, though drawn from the most thoughtful classes of the community. Christian Scientists and Theosophists especially seem to be investigating it. At Vienna the airmen von Suttner, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, who had been speaking in America in the 'Peace interest the previous year but had not then met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, called upon him and conferred with him upon the subject of International Peace, to promote which was their common aim.

In Budapest, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá, met with an ovation from both scholars, and social reformers, the head of the Peace Society, a high dignitary of the Church of Rome, showed his liberality by extending a warm welcome to the Oriental guest, and appearing with him on the platform at a public meeting at which a renowned Jewish professor stood on his other side, thus typifying the union of religions for which 'Abdu'l-Bahá pleads.

No account of the visit to Budapest would be complete without mention of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's two interviews with Professor Vambery, the effect of which is shown by the remarkable letter that great scholar and Orientalist addressed to him [shortly before his death. The meeting between Vambery and 'Abdu'l-Bahá took place in April 1913, and the letter was written on the receipt of a gift 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent him on his return to Egypt in the following summer. It has been my privilege to see the original and hear 'Abdu'l-Bahá read it aloud. It is, of course, couched in the Oriental style adopted by the learned to a very great teacher, and the translation is as follows:

Professor Vambery's Testimony to the Religion 'Abdu'l-Bahá

I forward this humble petition to Eke sanctified and holy presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás, who is the centre of knowledge, famous throughout the world, and loved by all mankind, O thou noble friend, who art conferring guidance upon humanity, may my life be a ransom to thee!

The loving epistle which you have condescended to write to this servant, and the rug which you have forwarded, came safely to hand. The time of the meeting with your Excellency, and the memory of the benediction of your presence, recurred, to the memory of this servant, and I am longing for the time when I shall meet you again. Although I have travelled through many countries and cities of Islám, yet have I never met so lofty a character and so exalted a personage as your Excellency, and can bear witness that it is not possible to find such another. On this account I am hoping that the ideals and accomplishments of your Excellency may be crowned with success and yield results under all conditions; because behind these ideals and deeds I easily discern the eternal welfare and prosperity of the world of humanity.

This servant, in order to gain first-hand information and experience, entered into the ranks of various religions—that is, outwardly, I became a Jew Christian, Muḥammadan, and Zoroastrian. I discovered that the devotees of these various religions do nothing else but hate and anathematise each other, that all their religions have become the instruments of tyranny and oppression in the hands of rulers and governors, and that they are the causes of the destruction of the world of humanity.

Considering those evil results, every person is forced by necessity to enlist himself on the side of your Excellency, and accept with joy the prospect of a basis of the religion of God, which is being founded through your efforts.

I have seen the father of your Excellency from afar. I have realized the self-sacrifice and noble courage of his son, and I am lost in admiration. For the principles and aims of your Excellency express the utmost respect and devotion, and if God, the Most High, confers long life, I will be able to serve you under all conditions. I pray and supplicate this from the depths of my heart —Your servant, Mamhenyn,

Vambéry.

After meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in New York and Paris, I am now fortunate enough to see him in his native East; not, it is true, in the land of his birth, but in the Holy Land – the Land of the Prophets, to which by spiritual succession he rightfully belongs, India is waiting eagerly for his promised visit, but his strenuous life in America and long journeying have told on his body, though his spirit is never weary. Those who love him hope that he will here, in his own home and among his own family from whom he has so long been separated, take the rest he so sorely needs, although even here it is difficult for him to rest. Over fifty pilgrims from Persia awaited his arrival at Haifa, and his loving spirit cannot send away those who have come so far and at so great a sacrifice without giving them all the benefit of his teaching and happiness of his presence that they desire. The Bahá’í community at Haifa and Acre numbers many wives and children of the martyrs who died for their faith in Persia; and these are more or less depending on the bounty of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his is who one and all live only for the Cause, and work unceasingly, by deed of loving kindness to those near and far, to promote that oneness of humanity that shall begin the New Era of the Most Great Peace.

MAUDE M. HOLBACH.

Haifa, Palestine.