

*The 30th Hasan M. Balyuzi  
Memorial Lecture*

## ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Standard Bearer of a New Civilization<sup>1</sup>

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It is a great honor for me to speak on the occasion of the centenary of the travels of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through this region of the world. It seems that we are still too close to this major early twentieth-century event to understand its exceptional importance for the rest of mankind’s history. Did not ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself say while in Montreal, “the value and greatness of these travels are not known now, but will be apparent later on. As we had no other intention except to offer devotion to the Threshold of the One True God, we were assisted and the brightness of divine favor and grace appeared” (Zarqání 244)?

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<sup>1</sup> This talk was presented in French at the Association for Bahá’í Studies Conference in Montreal, August 2012. Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of Persian texts into French is by Dr. Rassekh. The translation into English of this article from the original French is courtesy of Louis Brunet and Dr. Pierre-Yves Mocuais.

### THE GOAL OF THIS TRIP

In my humble opinion, the goal of this trip, undertaken at a relatively advanced age, cannot be reduced to what many Bahá’ís believe now was its purpose: namely to teach the Faith or to encourage the nascent Bahá’í community of North America. He had another and much higher goal: to help all those who heard Him come to realize the need for peace and to present to them another vision of human civilization.

At the threshold of the First World War, which He predicted several times, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wanted to warn the peoples of the West of the consequences of their civilization, which overemphasized materialism, hedonism, and a search for power and domination. He also wanted to declare explicitly that He was expecting the Americans, who had kept a certain distance from the colonialist ambitions of the Europeans of the time, to assume a more active role in establishing world peace and propagating over the entire planet a model of democratic federalism. What more convincing argument to support this than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own statements, pronounced when He set foot on the European as well as the American continent, and later, at the time of his departure, when He presented an assessment of His historic journeys?

Here are a few of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s declarations at the outset of His mission.

To the American journalists who rushed to His ship in New York to ask questions about the goal of his trip, He answered, "Our objective is universal peace and the unity of humankind. I have traveled to Paris and London and now I have come to America to meet with those who seek universal peace." (Zarqání 35). On 27 October 1912, during the train trip from Sacramento to Denver, He answered the same question, specifying that He came to the United States to raise the banner of universal peace, to promote the unity of the human race, and to create friendship and concord among the various religions. When in London on 27 December 1912, His response to the same question was this: "I came to propagate and promote the divine civilization, the same civilization that Bahá'u'lláh established in the East, a civilization that serves the world of ethics that produces universal peace and contributes to the unity of mankind" (*Khitábát* n.p.). In Liverpool on 13 December 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave British journalists a summary of the nine months He had spent in North America. He told them that He had spoken to numerous associations, in churches and other places, to invite people to the unity of mankind; to world peace; to harmony between religions, races, and countries. 'Abdu'l-Bahá added that He had "invited everybody to friendship, unity, and to relinquish war, in order for all to become members of the same family, for the East and the West to embrace

each other and for all to mingle and act with one another with the utmost love and amity" (*Khitábát* n.p.).

The fifth volume of selections from letters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá<sup>2</sup> contains many references to conclusions that 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself drew from His travels in the West. He declared that He was satisfied with His travels on these two continents because He was able to meet many personalities who were also hoping for the establishment of world peace, and that He had been able to promote the idea of the unity of mankind and to encourage the peoples and leaders of those countries to work continually for the promotion of this great cause. In his article "Abdu'l-Bahá's Travels in Europe and in America and the Promotion of Globalism" (original in Persian), Dr. Shahriari provides a list of the persons whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá met, including diplomats such as Theodore Roosevelt. He also explains to what degree 'Abdu'l-Bahá may have, through His talks in North America, influenced Woodrow Wilson.

The preceding would seem to justify the title chosen for this presentation: "Abdu'l-Bahá, the Standard Bearer of a New Civilization." Clearly this trip through the West was not a tourist excursion or a simple test to explore the grounds. The North American tour was exhausting for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was in His sixty-eighth year and had spent more than half a century in

<sup>2</sup> *Muntakhabátí az Makátíb-i Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Vol. 5.

conditions of exile and imprisonment that had greatly weakened His physical health. This long journey required tremendous effort. Based on the information contained in *Mahmud's Diary, Star of the West*, and other sources, Dr. Robert H. Stockman was able to estimate that, during His trip in North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made approximately 375 speeches, of which only one-third (139) were published in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Dr. Shahriari cites other numbers without providing a source. According to him, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave 633 talks, but only 127 texts are available in Persian and in English. Three hundred fifty-two talks given in the United States and 182 in Europe are unavailable and may not even have been recorded. 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke to approximately 93,000 people of various backgrounds in churches, synagogues, and other temples. He spoke to cultural societies and university associations and for Bahá'í gatherings. This, of course, required that a great diversity of themes be discussed. His contacts with journalists, prominent figures, and ordinary people, in addition to the people He met in Bahá'í homes, whose total numbers have been estimated to be about 2,500, greatly increased His daily workload. According to the Wilmette archives, two hundred newspapers published articles about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, some after interviewing Him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá therefore had to make great sacrifices during this historic mission. We know that unlike the many Eastern gurus

who visited North America at around the same time<sup>3</sup>, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refused to accept any financial help from the friends, even though they were eager to participate. He covered His own expenses and, through His innate generosity, bestowed gifts on the people who rendered Him services as well as on the poor. His two long stays in Egypt between His two trips in the West were His only chance to rebuild His strength, which had constantly been spent from dawn to late night. His vitality had also been sapped by what 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to as a "nervous fever," and the need to adapt to the various climates in the countries He visited.

'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook this long journey, which started in August 1910 and ended in December 1913, almost two years after political prisoners were freed by the Young Turks Revolution in 1908. As soon as He went to Egypt, many letters reached Him not only from Bahá'í friends and communities but also from a large number of Americans and American associations inviting Him to their country. From Washington, New York, and Boston alone, He received twenty invitations from various churches, institutions, and associations (*Muntakhabátí* 41, 48). Among the American associations working for peace, at least two, one of which was led by President William

3 For a complete list, see Stockman "Abdu'l-Bahá's Visit to North America, 1912" in *Lights of 'Irfán* Vol. XIII, pp. 390–91.

Howard Taft and the other by Andrew Carnegie, sent letters to 'Abdu'l-Bahá inviting Him to come to the United States (Shahriari 235). Baharieh Rouhani-Ma'ani reminds us that organizers of the International Peace Conference held at Lake Mohonk in New York State had also invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to speak on international arbitration at its May 1912 meeting (232).

After spending approximately a year in Egypt (August 1910 to August 1911), which was essential to His health, 'Abdu'l-Bahá left for Europe (France and England) for a period of three months (September to December 1911). He then rested in Egypt during the winter before undertaking His mission to North America, which lasted almost nine months (from 25 March to 5 December 1912). He then returned to Europe (England, France, Austria, and Hungary) and stayed six months (December 1912 to June 1913). 'Abdu'l-Bahá then recuperated in Egypt from June to December before returning to Haifa on 5 December 1913. The trip, therefore, lasted almost three and a half years. However, His long absence from the World Centre<sup>4</sup> did not prevent Him from guiding the worldwide Bahá'í community, even though none of the modern communication technologies, except the telegraph, were available to Him.

In brief, we can say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá pursued three goals during

<sup>4</sup> The international administrative centre of the Bahá'í Faith. It is located in Haifa, Israel.

this trip: contacting pacifists and warning them of the impending threat of World War; informing the peoples of the West of the social and spiritual principles of the Bahá'í Faith, which was a necessary correction or complement to the values of Western civilization; and offering solutions to specific problems of the Western world of the time, such as racial prejudice in the United States, the arms race in Europe, and the massacres of innocent people in Libya and the Balkans.

#### WHAT WERE THE CAPACITIES OF THE PEOPLE HE ADDRESSED?

Contrary to what we may think, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not find that North Americans were without any spiritual capacity. He is quoted in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* as saying,

I am pleased with the American people because, as a rule, they are independent seekers of truth. (313)

American ideals are indeed most praiseworthy and the people here are lovers of truth; they investigate reality and there is no trace of fanaticism among them. (337)

I consider the American people a highly civilized and intelligent nation, a nation investigating truth and reality. (446)

Praise be to God. I find these two great American nations<sup>5</sup> highly capable and advanced in all that appertains to progress and civilization. . . . The motives and purposes of these people are lofty and inspiring. (318)

'Abdu'l-Bahá said in Montreal, in the company of the friends at the home of William Sutherland and May Maxwell, "Praise be to God. I see before me souls who have unusual capability and the power of spiritual advancement" (*Promulgation* 302). Elsewhere, He declared that "the western nations are endowed with the capability of understanding the rational and peerless words of Bahá'u'lláh" (289–90). And finally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed His hope that "America become the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment, and all the world receive this heavenly blessing! For America has developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations" (19). In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Americans have created a sophisticated material civilization. The challenge they face is to develop a spiritual civilization that is in harmony with the existing material civilization: "I hope that spiritual forces may animate this great body and a corresponding spiritual civilization be established" (20). It is indeed this

hope, confirmed by His observation of the American Bahá'ís during his 1912 trip, that encouraged Him to entrust the implementation of the great Divine Plan<sup>6</sup> He outlined during his years of isolation from 1916 to 1917 to the friends of this continent.

Incidentally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá knew very well that, with the exception of Japan and the United States, the most powerful nations of the world were in Europe and that the future of the world depended on them. He had determined that the United States, a democratic country less involved in colonialism than Europe, would be able to act to bring peace to the world. A few of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements will suffice to show this. He said in Washington on 20 April 1912, "May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundations of international [peace] agreement" (*Promulgation* 36). On 3 May 1912 in Chicago He again expressed his hope, saying, "my wish and hope is that the banner of international reconciliation may first be raised on this continent and the standard of the most great Peace be unfurled here" (83).

We should not deduce from this that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was enchanted by Western or American civilization. He often insisted in His talks that it was vital to renew spirituality. A few quotations from His words will illustrate His criticism of Western civilization:

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<sup>5</sup> He is referring to both Canada and the United States.

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<sup>6</sup> The plan for the expansion of the Faith across the globe.

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained. Consider! These battleships that reduce a city to ruins within the space of an hour are the result of material civilization . . . all these weapons of war are the malignant fruits of material civilization. Had material civilization been combined with Divine civilization, these fiery weapons would never have been invented. Nay, rather human energy would have been wholly devoted to useful inventions and would have been concentrated on praiseworthy discoveries. (*Selections* 304)

But, take heed, lest in thinking too earnestly of the things of the body you forget the things of the soul: for material advantages do not elevate the spirit of a man. Perfection in worldly things is a joy to the body of a man but in no wise does it glorify his soul. (*Paris Talks* 62–63)

[O]nly if material progress goes hand in hand with spirituality can any real progress come about, and the Most Great Peace reign in the world. (107–8)

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the same idea during his travels and talks throughout North America, as follows:

Material civilization has reached an advanced plane, but now there is need for spiritual civilization. Material civilization alone will not satisfy; it cannot meet the conditions and requirements of the present age. (*Promulgation* 101)

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that material civilization is incomplete, insufficient, and that divine civilization must be established.... Until the moral degree of the nations is advanced and human virtues attain a lofty level, happiness for mankind is impossible. (375)

And we read in *Foundations of World Unity*, a selection of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks in the West,

Bahá'u'lláh has announced that no matter how far the world of humanity may advance in material civilization, it is nevertheless in need of spiritual virtues and the bounties of God. The spirit of man is not illumined and quickened through material sources. It is not resuscitated by investigating phenomena of the world of matter. The spirit of man is in need of the protection of the Holy Spirit. (58)

In at least a dozen separate gatherings during His trip in North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá declared that real progress cannot be attained if it is not accompanied by spiritual development.

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF A NEW CIVILIZATION

'Abdu'l-Bahá certainly did not limit Himself to stressing the need to combine material and spiritual civilization. He also identified a great number of principles on which the complete civilization of the future must be based.

These principles, of which there are actually more than twelve, are of three types. The first is philosophical, for example, the personal and independent search for truth; the need to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, in other words the need to believe in the spiritual world and to live in accordance with that belief; the harmony of science and religion; and the belief in the essential unity of all divine religions. The second contains the majority of the principles taught by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which address life in society, such as the eradication of all forms of prejudice; universal peace; the adoption of an auxiliary and universal language; the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty, in other words, a more equitable distribution of wealth; the equality of men and women in relation to dignity and human rights; and a universal and obligatory education based on humanistic ideas. The third category of principles has to do

with the future world order. Among them is the concept of a supreme tribunal, which could mean, according to Ali Nakhjavani, the institutions that together set in motion the lesser peace, a political peace, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself explained in his letter to professor Auguste Forel (423-24).

No doubt, all these principles originate in Bahá'u'lláh's works. However, some are more detailed in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as the participation of workers and employees in the net benefits of their enterprise, the prohibition of strikes in work agreements, the guarantee of a minimum revenue for all farmers, the banning of polygamy, and, regarding the future organization of the world, the establishment of a federative world government.

It must be said that, among the principles set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, two were particularly revolutionary for Westerners. The first was the principle of the unity of science and religion, a principle that had been challenged in the seventeenth century when Galileo questioned the truth of the religious belief on the place of the Earth in the universe. The second was the idea that the world needs the Holy Spirit, as the positivism of Auguste Comte and his followers still dominated Western thinking. The philosophical-sociological school asserted that the human spirit, after having gone through a first phase of "theological thought" and a second phase of "metaphysical thought," was inevitably

moving toward a third phase, which was nothing other than a scientific or positive state.

Two principles troubled the conscience of Easterners: (1) the independent search for truth, when in religious matters all were relying completely on the judgment of the ulamas; and (2) the equality of the dignity and rights of all, irrespective of their gender, class, race, nation, religion, or other considerations. Even today, Muslim societies (particularly Shiite) have great difficulty accepting these two principles, despite the fact that they are strongly endorsed by modernity.

#### HIS POSITION ON WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Since we are examining the civilizing ambitions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in North America, it would be appropriate to quickly examine the historical evolution of civilizations. Historians who have studied civilizations say that throughout history there have been about sixty civilizations and that most of them have disappeared. Arnold Toynbee, the great historian of our time, studied twenty-seven civilizations, seven or eight of which still exist today. At the summit of these is Western civilization, which is admired by peoples everywhere because of its scientific and technological accomplishments, its recognition of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and its advancements in the fields of democracy and social justice.

However, this civilization has been in a state of crisis for decades. This is proven by two world wars, the reoccurrence of the economic crisis of the 1930s, the rapid overuse of its natural resources, pollution, the destruction of the environment, and other such aberrations. A few thinkers, such as Francis Fukuyama<sup>7</sup>, have argued that with economic and political liberalism, Western civilization has reached its end, the apogee of its history. This civilization has been criticized, particularly since the publication of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. The volume of such criticism expanded to such a degree that in 1997 Arthur Herman devoted a book, titled *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, to the history of these criticisms. Among critics since the Second World War, a few can be mentioned, such as the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, Sartre, Foucault, Fanon, René Guénon, Eric Fromm, and a few postmodernist philosophers, some eco-pessimists, and, recently Edgar Morin and many others.

The Bahá'í Writings, which predate the works mentioned earlier, are not without a critical examination of Western civilization. In the "Tablet of the World" (*Tablets* 81–97), Bahá'u'lláh praises the rule of law and democracy in the West but does not conceal His disapproval of the arms race.

7 American political scientist, political economist and philosopher known, among other things, for his theory of "the end of history."



'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* as well as in many of His talks and letters stresses the need to reconcile and harmonize the material civilization of the West with the spirituality of Eastern religions.

This reconciliation and harmonization cannot be accomplished only through the human will. The intervention of divine power is essential, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated many times. For example, He said in a talk given in New York City on 18 June 1912, "no matter how far the world of humanity advances, it fails to attain the highest degree unless quickened by the education and divine bestowals of the Holy spirit. This ensures human progress and prosperity" (*Promulgation* 206).

Edgar Morin, a contemporary French philosopher and sociologist, who has been a Marxist and is now an atheist, wrote in his recent and excellent book *La voie, pour l'avenir de l'humanité*, "When a system is unable to deal with its vital problems, it degenerates, disintegrates or proves itself capable of generating a meta-system capable of dealing with these problems: it metamorphoses." He then declares that "the earth system is incapable of organizing itself and dealing with its vital problems, such as: nuclear threats, the degradation of the biosphere, the absence of a system of control and regulation for the world economy, the return of famines, and the ethno-politico-religious conflicts that could degenerate into

wars of civilizations." For Morin, "What is probable is disintegration; what is improbable, but possible, is a metamorphosis" (31). He furthers observes,

In order to move towards a metamorphosis, it is necessary to change directions. But, if it seems possible to modify certain trajectories, to correct certain ills, it is impossible to even slow down the technical, scientific, economic and civilizing surge that is driving the planet. And yet, human history has often changed course. How? Everything starts with an initiative, an innovation, a new message, deviant in character, marginal and often invisible to its contemporaries. This is how all great religions have started. (33)

In other words, the crisis that is engulfing the world in all its aspects very probably has no solution. The only glimmer of light comes from the side of a divine message, initially little known, but that has the capacity to save the world when all human reform attempts have failed. This is where 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### WHY SUCH A LONG JOURNEY?

We know that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not spend as much time in any other country as He did in the United

States<sup>8</sup> except for Egypt, where He stayed several times for health reasons. What could have been the reason for this?

A first explanation could be that the Western civilization 'Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to change through the introduction of spiritual values was exemplified particularly strongly in American society. A second explanation, perhaps more convincing, was that He found among Americans the capacity needed to establish world peace. I would like to submit a third explanation for your reflection, which came from my reading of *L'atlas des civilisations*, a recent special edition by *Le Monde*.

In the estimation of some experts in geopolitics, such as Thomas Barnett, the United States could be seen as "a source code for globalization," since American civilization is a composite whole, feeding off ancient and contemporary civilizations; a reference for a lifestyle based on a market economy, liberal democracy, and the pursuit of happiness; a model for the promotion of research and scientific and technological knowledge; and obviously, we add, a testing ground for a federative democracy, whose example could be useful for other nations.

We should remember here a conversation that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with a high official in the service of the American government, as recounted

<sup>8</sup> 239 days, according to Allan L. Ward's calculations. See *239 Days, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America*.

by Shoghi Effendi in his letter "The Goal of a New World Order," written in response to the official's questions about the best way to promote the interests of his government and of the people. Shoghi Effendi quoted 'Abdu'l-Bahá as saying, "strive, in your capacity as a citizen of the world, to assist in the eventual application of the principle of federalism underlying the government of your own country to the relationships now existing between the peoples and nations of the world" (*World Order* 37).

#### NORTH AMERICA IN THOSE DAYS

Now would be a good time, I think, to look at conditions in the United States and Canada at the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. One historian who has studied the period of 1900 to 1914 is Philipp Blom. He devoted his book *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900-1914* to that period, showing that those were years of great change, a transition between an old world about to disappear and a new world whose outlines were not yet distinguishable. Hence the title of his book.

President Taft, who had been a jurist, was president of the United States from 1909 to 1913, during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to that country. In His speech of 5 November 1912 in Cincinnati, 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised the president, saying,

I am most grateful to President Taft for having extended his influence towards the establishment

of universal peace. What he has accomplished in making treaties with various nations is very good, but when we have the interparliamentary body composed of delegates from all the nations of the world and devoted to the maintenance of agreement and goodwill, the utopian dream of sages and poets, the parliament of man, will be realized. (*Promulgation* 389)

Woodrow Wilson replaced President Taft and served from 1913 to 1921. Research has revealed that he was familiar with the Bahá'í teachings. Inspired by the talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the United States, he developed the idea of creating the League of Nations, the precursor to today's United Nations. In his book *The Rise of the West: A History of Human Community*, historian William H. McNeill gives us a glimpse of American society of that time (578–81).

Since the 1890s, several factors enabled the United States to become one of the great powers of the world. The tremendous supply of capital, initially from Europe and later from the richest Americans, yielded profits through modern industrial activities, engendering unprecedented economic expansion. Rapid population growth, first through the influx of immigrants from northern Europe, followed by wave of immigrants from southern Europe and elsewhere, provided the skilled manpower required to sustain the economy. The country needed a

parallel cultural development, and a certain number of benefactors, such as Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller, and others, devoted part of their immense wealth to the promotion of culture; the construction of universities, museums, and public libraries; and the creation and protection of opera companies, symphonic orchestras, and other cultural entities in all the large cities.

Artistic creativity also manifested itself. Jazz music started in Louisiana, first performed in the streets in poor areas of New Orleans, then in Memphis and Chicago. After the First World War, jazz spread to all continents. Let us not forget that the United States owes part of its progress to the inventions that appeared, one after another, at an exceptional pace: electricity, the telephone, the telegraph, cars, planes, air conditioning, the gramophone, and so forth.

Let us add a few words about the social context of this period in North America. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit, the population of the United States was over 90 million people. The life expectancy was not very high: forty-eight years for men and fifty-one for women. There were approximately two million unemployed people, and the average annual salary of workers was only \$750. The inequality between blacks and whites was striking. Women were still fighting to get their legitimate rights. Fewer than 10 percent of students graduated from high school.

Although Canada was behind the United States by about a generation, it quickly followed the same pattern of development as its southern neighbor. The fact that Canada had made it legally quite difficult for non-British people to immigrate and had adopted laws for the protection of workers had caused a slowdown in its industrial expansion, in comparison to the United States. As the gross domestic product (GDP) is considered to be a good measurement of the standard of living of a population, we have to add that, according to the latest statistics of the International Monetary Fund (2011), Canada, with its per capita income of \$40,000, and the United States, with its per capita income of \$48,000, ranked respectively twelfth and sixth among all countries in GDP.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE PROMISES

In many passages of His talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares explicitly that the United States and Canada had shown their capacity to establish universal peace.<sup>10</sup> At the Church of the Ascension in New York City, He stated that the future world government would be a federal union, similar to the

<sup>9</sup> Statistical data provided by the IMF in 2013 place the United States at sixth place (\$53,101 per capita) and Canada at ninth place (\$43,472 per capita).

<sup>10</sup> See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 19–20, 36–37, 67, 84, 103, 121–22, 125, 245, 201, 318, 388–89, 396, 446–48.

one in the United States, that is to say, it could be composed of independent but united states.

What has happened since these public statements?

The United States won two world wars and established the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco, a city previously blessed by the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the United States has contributed substantially to the establishment of a global liberal economy. Canada's progress and the increase of its prestige on the world stage have been astounding. Obviously, neither country has gone as far as was envisioned. But we can safely say that the time has come for even greater accomplishment. This is confirmed in a recent collaborative work by Daniele Archibugi, Mathias Koenig Archibugi, and Dr. Raffaele Marchetti called *Global Democracy: Normative and Empirical Perspectives*. The authors, all academics, state with much conviction that, in academic circles for years now, the application of democracy to all international relations and institutions is no longer considered utopian. It is rather viewed as a highly likely reality, an idea which the Inter-Parliamentary Union articulated as follows: "Democracy must also be recognized as an international principle, applicable to international organizations and to States in their international relations" ("Universal Declaration" n.p.).

There are many proofs showing that the establishment of a world federation is no longer an idea that is out

of reach. More and more countries are supporting the cause of democracy. According to Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom around the world, in 2011 43 percent of the world population lived in free countries, that is, democratic countries, whereas 22 percent lived in partially free countries (“Freedom in the World 2012” n.pag.). Certainly a peaceful and united world requires a democratic infrastructure. The second proof is based on the growing number of economic unions in various regions of the world, the most striking example of which is the union of 27 European countries. One of the articles reprinted in the quoted publication *Global Democracy* and titled “Towards the Metamorphosis of the United Nations: A Proposal for Establishing Global Democracy” shows, by using the example of the European Union, that it is possible to reform the United Nations and to create a “world federation of nations” by modifying the existing charter of the United Nations. And, needless to say, the majority of the biggest problems of the world today can only be solved through the combined efforts of all the peoples of the world. The third proof is the fact that on all continents a growing sentiment is seen among the peoples of the world that they are world citizens, that is to say that they belong to the same planet, which from now on can be considered as one country, where all are connected through instant communications.

We can say with certainty that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw on the horizon glorious possibilities for North America, possibilities He did not always want to reveal to us. This is shown by a statement found in “Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the Northeastern States”: “the continent of America is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide and the free assemble” (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 62). Can we say that this sentence refers in part to Bahá’u’lláh’s call to American presidents in His Most Holy Book (*The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*), which also contains a promise: “O Rulers of America, . . . Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise” (63)? Perhaps, a careful reading of the Shoghi Effendi’s letter “America and the Most Great Peace” (*World Order* 71–94) would give us a few keys to understand the mysteries to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá alluded.

The changes to occur in the United States must be sweeping if that country is to play the role predestined for it according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Did He not wish for the inhabitants of that country to “rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world,” and did He not promise that “[i]ts future is even more promising,

for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually" (*World Order* 76)? Can we not say that the triumph of the American Bahá'ís in the realization of the Ten Year Crusade was the prelude to their great future victories?

#### WHAT DOES 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S VISION MEAN FOR THE WORLD TODAY?

The time has now come to see what meaning the vision presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the West and to the United States could have today for mankind, as it faces the greatest perils of its history.

As discussed previously, two or three years before the conflagration of the Great War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had not failed to warn His Western listeners of the dangers that were threatening the world. In His correspondence with the Organization for a Permanent Peace in the Hague, He did not hide the fact that He saw on the horizon a war even more destructive, which did occur between 1939 and 1945. He reminded the Japanese Ambassador of Bahá'u'lláh's prophecy, which appears in His tablet "Words of Paradise" (*Tablets* 55–78), regarding a force of destruction hidden in this earth that is capable of poisoning the atmosphere of the planet.

In contrast to these apocalyptic threats, inherent in today's materialistic society, and referred to as "Faus-tian" by philosopher Oswald Spengler, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also presented in His

tablet "Seven Lights of Unity" (*Selections* 29–32), for example, assurances that a more balanced civilization could be created, a civilization that would achieve unity in the political realm, in the realm of freedoms, unity among the nations, unity of language, and so on. The destiny of the world would have been completely different if the peoples and leaders had paid heed to the message that was sent to them by Bahá'u'lláh from His prison in Akka and that was presented to them in person by 'Abdu'l-Bahá between 1911 and 1913 during His travels in the West. At the request of His august Father, this is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, as early as 1875:

True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns . . . shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world. They must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant, the provisions of which shall be sound, inviolable and definite. They must proclaim it to all the world and obtain for it the sanction of all the human

race. This supreme and noble undertaking—the real source of the peace and well-being of all the world—should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth. All the forces of humanity must be mobilized to ensure the stability and permanence of this Most Great Covenant. In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained. In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited. . . . The fundamental principle underlying this solemn Pact should be so fixed that if any government later violate any one of its provisions, all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission, nay the human race as a whole should resolve, with every power at its disposal, to destroy that government. Should this greatest of all remedies be applied to the sick body of the world, it will assuredly recover from its ills and will remain eternally safe and secure. (8–9)

This is how true civilization has been defined in the Bahá'í Writings, and this is the realpolitik that 'Abdu'l-Bahá recommends, inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's

tablets to the rulers of the world and by those that were revealed after the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out the potential dangers presented by religious fanaticism and prejudices. The truth of this became crystal clear with the dramatic events of 11 September 2001. Let us recall what Bahá'u'lláh said about hate and religious hostility: "Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction" (*Epistle* 14).

Undoubtedly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a great visionary. At a time when almost everybody believed that material comfort would guarantee eternal happiness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeated many times that material civilization by itself would not bring happiness. In His talk in Cleveland on 6 May 1912, He said,

Material civilization has reached an advanced plane, but now there is need of spiritual civilization. Material civilization alone will not satisfy; it cannot meet the conditions and requirements of the present age; its benefits are limited to the world of matter. There is no limitation to the spirit of man, for spirit in itself is progressive, and if the divine civilization be established, the spirit of man will advance. Every developed susceptibility will increase

the effectiveness of man. Discoveries of the real will become more and more possible, and the influence of divine guidance will be increasingly recognized. All this is conducive to the divine form of civilization. This is what is meant in the Bible by the descent of the New Jerusalem. The heavenly Jerusalem is none other than divine civilization, and it is now ready. It is to be and shall be organized, and the oneness of humankind will be a visible fact. (*Promulgation* 101)

'Abdu'l-Bahá stated in Pittsburgh on May 7 of the same year,

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured. Then material civilization will not contribute its energies to the forces of evil in destroying the oneness of humanity, for in material civilization good and evil advance together and maintain the same pace. For example, consider the material progress of man in the last decade. Schools and colleges, hospitals, philanthropic institutions, scientific academies and temples of philosophy have been founded, but hand in hand with these evidences of development, the invention and production of

means and weapons for human destruction have correspondingly increased. . . . All this is the outcome of material civilization; therefore, although material advancement furthers good purposes in life, at the same time it serves evil ends. The divine civilization is good because it cultivates morals. . . .

If the moral precepts and foundations of divine civilization become united with the material advancement of man, there is no doubt that the happiness of the human world will be attained and that from every direction the glad tidings of peace upon earth will be announced. Then humankind will achieve extraordinary progress, the sphere of human intelligence will be immeasurably enlarged, wonderful inventions will appear, and the spirit of God will reveal itself; all men will consort in joy and fragrance, and eternal life will be conferred upon the children of the Kingdom. Then will the power of the divine make itself effective and the breath of the Holy spirit penetrate the essence of all things. Therefore, the material and the divine, or merciful, civilizations must progress together until the highest aspirations and desires of humanity shall become realized. (*Promulgation* 109–10)



One only has to look at the statistics regarding mental disorders, depression, and nervous disorders in the United States and the richest countries of the world to be convinced that material comfort by itself does not create the happiness for which everyone is entitled to strive. According to an estimate made by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2006–08), today one American adult in ten suffers from depression. One of the latest WHO reports on mental health in the United States reports,

Depression is a chronic illness which has a significant negative impact on the health and productivity of people. Every year, it affects 21 million children and adults; it is considered to be the first cause of disability in the US among people between the ages of 15 and 44. It is responsible for 30,000 suicides every year. (World Health Organization, n. pag.)

#### THE GREAT TRENDS

'Abdu'l-Bahá has thus confirmed and made more explicit what Bahá'u'lláh had foreseen much earlier: "The world is in travail and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 118). Being in Montreal, it seems important to say a few words about the unforgettable days that

'Abdu'l-Bahá spent in this city (from August 30 to September 9 1912). On 5 September 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at St. James Methodist Church. After having heard His talk on the continuity of divine revelations and the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on universal peace, the unity of the human family, the universal language, and the equitable distribution of wealth, the minister said with great enthusiasm that it was wrong to think that the West no longer needed to learn from the wisdom of the East.

After staying three days in the Maxwells' home, which is now a Shrine, 'Abdu'l-Bahá chose to move to a hotel, where an oriental-style reception was organized on September 2. It was on this occasion that, having learned that the United States had spent \$15 million to purchase a warship, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said,

Because of material civilization, industry has progressed and sciences and arts have burgeoned but at the same time weapons of war and bloodshed designed for the destruction of the edifice of humanity have multiplied and political problems have vastly increased. Hence, this material civilization cannot become the means of comfort and ease for all until it acquires spiritual power and the attributes of a divine civilization. Rather, the difficulties will increase and the troubles will multiply. (Zarqání 239)

*Mahmud's Diary* mentions another particularly interesting fact. Mrs. Maxwell wrote that when she went to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Akká, she had given up hope of having a child. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayer at the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh made her wish come true. She thanked 'Abdu'l-Bahá and added that, before His arrival in Canada, her husband had not shown much interest in his wife's Bahá'í activities. As soon as 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived, everything changed. Mr. Maxwell said that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was a greater honor than the presence of any king on Earth. We can therefore say that this day marked the birth of the future architect of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel, the central point of the Bahá'í World Centre.

#### THE FUTURE OF CANADA

In the thirteenth tablet in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, "Tablet to the Bahá'ís of Canada and Greenland," 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeated what He had already said during His trip through North America: "The future of the Dominion of Canada . . . is very great, and the events connected with it infinitely glorious. It shall become the object of the glance of providence, and shall show forth the bounties of the All-Glorious" (93). Referring to His trip to Montreal, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "Before My departure, many souls warned Me not to travel to Montreal, saying, the majority of the inhabitants

are Catholics, and are in the utmost fanaticism" (93).

On the contrary, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that He felt the greatest joy during his travels in this Dominion: "When he entered that city, he observed all the doors open, he found the hearts in the utmost receptivity" (94). Referring to His experience with the peoples of that city, He expressed his gratitude for the efforts of Mrs. Maxwell, adding, "I hope that in the future Montreal may become so stirred, that the melody of the Kingdom may travel to all parts of the world from that Dominion and the breaths of the Holy Spirit may spread from that center to the East and the West of America" (94).

In the same tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reaffirms that "the future of Canada, whether from a material or a spiritual standpoint, is very great. Day by day civilization and freedom shall increase" (95). Today, Canada is no longer a Dominion, but rather a full member of the Commonwealth and a center of culture and civilization. It has great scope for freedom that benefits all groups whether they are part of a majority or a minority.

#### CONCLUSION

From Pitirim Sorokin<sup>11</sup> to Edgar Morin, the contemporary philosopher, many are the thinkers who have

11 Russian-American sociologist (1889-1968) author of *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences* (1956).

proposed a scheme for a new civilization to replace the current one, which is in a state of crisis. We discussed elsewhere their points of view. Let us simply mention one point: Edgar Morin's key insight was that only a metamorphosis of all aspects of the life (social, political, economic, ecological, moral, intellectual, and cultural) of the current "world system" would be capable of saving it, an idea that he developed in his book, *La Voie: Pour l'avenir de l'humanité*. We could, however, say that the Bahá'í project is more ambitious, as it takes into account all of humanity and deals as much with a change of values as with a deep transformation of attitudes. It covers the various aspects of life as well as the structure and the organization of society. We can therefore conclude that the challenge we are facing is immense.

The task is nothing less than an overall regeneration of all aspects of human life. Allow me, please, to conclude by using 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, pronounced aboard the Celtic when He was about to leave North America on 5 December 1912:

As to you: Your efforts must be lofty. Exert yourselves with heart and soul so that, perchance, through your efforts the light of universal peace may shine and this darkness of estrangement and enmity may be dispelled from amongst men, that all men may become as one family and consort together in love and kindness,

that the East may assist the West and the West give help to the East, for all are inhabitants of one planet, the people of one original native land and the flocks of one shepherd. . . . It is my hope that you may become successful in this high calling so that like brilliant lamps you may cast light upon the world of humanity. . . . This is eternal glory. This is everlasting felicity. . . . This is heavenly attainment. (*Promulgation* 469–70)

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