

Lecture

Delivered by

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"The Elements of Universal Religion"

IT gives us peculiar joy and happiness on this bright Sunday morning to have the privilege of standing before you to speak about those eternal truths and endless blessings which bring to man felicity and beatitude. During the last few months I have been travelling through the various parts of the United States and Canada, delivering the Universal message of Baha' o'llah to many societies and organizations. We come from the far-off lands of the East thousands and thousands of miles away. Had it not been for the inventions and discoveries which have knitted together the distant parts of the earth, it would have been impossible for an Oriental, traveling across so many continents and oceans, to reach this country with such comfort and happiness. The means of transportation and communication between the five continents of the earth have brought the peoples of the world nearer to each other; nay, rather, we are living today in one neighborhood, making the various countries and nations as close together as though they lived in the same apartment. In former ages and cycles, because the world lacked these tremendous means of intercommunication, the races and tongues were entirely unaware of each other's opinions, customs and habits. Not only the continents of the world were entirely separated from each other, but even the provinces or the countries in one continent could not receive the news from one another or come in touch with the current events of their lives.

In those days there were no railroads, no steamships, no telegraph or wireless, no telephone or phonograph; consequently, the people could not realize how they are akin one to the other; they could not travel from one end of the world to another on camels or mules or donkeys, so they were entirely left to their

own wits and became insular and provincial. The cause that brought alienation and strangeness between the different religions of the world owes its origin to this very fact of the separation of nations one from the other, this being due to the lack of means of transportation. Former religions were founded by their respective prophets in various parts of the earth with the aim of educating, developing and unfolding the character of an especial race; and because these different religions, having different languages and different customs, could not know what the other thought or taught, little by little they developed that sense of bitterness and antagonism against the rest.

While fundamentally the ideas and principles propounded by the religions were identical and similar, the very fact that they did not have a common language and they could not travel easily from one part of the country to another caused those religions to form peculiar ideas and ideals which seemingly formed differences, after which they continued in contradiction and opposition. The ancient traveller who had to travel either on horse or on foot spent many years before he could thoroughly investigate the conditions of one country. Think of Marco Polo who in the twelfth century went to Asia, China and Japan and wrote the first book on the habits and customs of those then unknown countries for Europe. So this whole matter of separation of nations, of misunderstanding of religions can be resolved into the idea that those ancient peoples did not have the means and facilities which we have at our disposal and of which we are availing ourselves for the enlightenment of the minds and the illumination of the hearts. However, in this glorious age in which we live, by means of the telegraph, the people of the far East can receive the news of the far West in a few minutes, or an hour, and the people of America can keep themselves in contact with all parts of the world by receiving these wire communications at every second. We can truly say that this is supremely an age of travel; and traveling brings enlightenment which will increase the sum-total of human knowledge, will make the world akin, will propagate that sound judgment and will suffuse the mind with that information which is essential to the making of the world into one family of nations.

All these physical and outward improvements in the realm of science and industry whisper into our ears that we are living in an age of Universal Religion. They convince us that just as the physical globe in its material aspect has become more and more united, likewise the endless realms of the hearts must be swayed and conquered by dynamic spiritual force which may bring into the higher consciousness of man that Universal faith, that world religion, of which men and women have been dreaming for ages and ages. We are in need of a Universal Religion today which may act as the light in the globe of material civilization; a Universal Religion which may function as spirit in the body politic, in the commonwealth of humanity; a Universal Religion which may bring under its tabernacle all the faiths of the world, melting them into one, and enabling them to enter into the realm of unity.

It is not necessary at all to prove to an audience or to individuals that the world of humanity today is in the greatest need of such a Universal Religion, because the voice of humanity is being heard from all sides declaring that the world is necessarily coming to a crucial point where this great faith must come to solve all our problems and struggles. Not only is the small voice filling the world with its soundless music that we are in need of a Universal faith, but the prophecies and predictions of the ancient prophets corroborate this fact very clearly. This prophecy is not only revealed in the Old and New Testaments, but the sacred scriptures of the seven religions of the world demonstrate and prove that at the consummation of ages there will appear a faith and a truth which will be all inclusive, universal, and cosmopolitan in temperament and adaptation. Every forward looking man and woman feels somehow that he or she is living at the dawn of that great age of millenium or Universal Faith; but what are the elements or the principles which shall dominate and bring about this faith and make it a living power in the daily life of men?

The first element of Universal Religion is: An all inclusive spirit. It must be a collective center of all the highest and noblest and most divine ideals of the ages since the dawn of creation. It must bring into its platform the virtues, the perfections, the attributes which were looked upon as perfect by the past re-

ligions, and exclude all that is denominational, sectarian and narrow. Those who are freed from the chains and fetters of past traditions and without any prejudices study the sacred scriptures of the religions of the past, realize that each one of them had a peculiar distinction, a Universal law, that must be brought into this Universal faith in order to make it appealing to all sections of humanity. Just as His Holiness, Jesus Christ, wrote the highest and the noblest laws on ethics and morality, we likewise find in the writing of Buddha the most sublime, the most unselfish, the most divine laws and principles in regard to the spiritual life of man, which are nothing short of miracles in the scriptures of the world. Each one of these great religions has jewels and pearls of knowledge and wisdom which are hidden under the dust of ages of tradition and sectarianism; and once we brush aside these impediments, we realize that each and all of these many religions have great gems of reality. Hence that Universal Religion which aims to outstretch, to spread its wings over the children of men, must bring into its system of morality an internationality a Universality which may include all the best concepts of philosophy, literature and religion which have entered into the minds of men.

The second element of a Universal Religion is that it must necessarily accept as divine all spiritual founders of the seven great religions of the world, and if it denies any one of these, it can never become Universal. It will always remain a national religion, a tribal religion, but not a religion of humanity; for we can truly state without any fear of contradiction that the religions of the world in their beginning were similar and pure as limpid springs gushing forth from out of the heart of the founder. We have observed in the Orient the many attempts of certain sectarian missionaries to replace with their own religion the faith of the natives, asking the people to deny the spiritual teachings under which they have been brought up from childhood. It is impossible, nay, rather unprofitable for any man who has been brought up and reared in a religion teaching him spiritual qualities of rectitude and righteousness, to deny his own religion and to go and accept another. His own, which has been inspiring his ancestors for one thousand or two thousand years, he can-

not give up so easily, and why should he? Instead, let us teach him the relationship and beauty of his own to that which has for so many hundred years inspired our forefathers and ourselves. All are one. Therefore, the Universal Faith must have for its fundamental principle the establishment of the divine inspiration of all the founders without exception, so that these religions of the world may realize that these founders were like unto brothers and not parties to blood feuds.

The third element of Universal Religion: All its principles and institutes must be based upon logic, reason and intellect. It must have not one single element which cannot be proven by science and reason, for if any religion today comes forward with a belief such as—My brother, accept this on blind imitation; do not try to argue, do not try to find out the why and wherefore of it, but just accept it because the leaders of religion tell you to accept it—such a religion in this age is not only impossible, but is absurd. Therefore, the principles of a religion which would be Universal must be reasonable, social and humanitarian in its scope and nature.

The fourth element of Universal Religion is that it must be divested from all sectional creeds, formalism, rites and ceremonies which are local and national. Creeds and rites of one religion differ from the creeds and rites of another religion because they have been instituted with certain considerations in regard to the exigencies of the time and the place in which the people have been living; so all these things must be left to the temperament and nature of the various peoples, at the same time having a body of international laws and moral obligations to which all men may subscribe without injury to their conscience.

The fifth element of Universal Religion is spiritual democracy. There must be no privilege, no vested rights in any special class of priesthood or clergy, so that they may little by little form a class for themselves with certain attributes and privileges to which all the people must subscribe. The Universal Religion must be purely democratic with the Universal Ideal that all men are brothers and there is no one superior to another insofar as his spiritual qualities are concerned.

The sixth principle is that the Universal Religion must look upon the world as one globe. There must be no racial, religious

and national prejudice. It must be the founder of the oneness of the world of humanity. Just as the glorious sun shines upon the world of nature and man without any distinction whatsoever, showering its energizing heat and light upon all kingdoms of life; likewise the Universal Religion must look upon all humanity from the standpoint of the sun. The Universal Religion must not be theological metaphysical; it must be a trinity. It must have the laws of ethics and morality; it must be in accord with the sciences and discoveries of the world of humanity, and, likewise it must bring together all those elements of unity which have been scattered in the past, but which now must be crystalized into one Universal conception of truth. Its principles must be like fire, burning away all the thorns and thistles of superstition and tradition, and it must likewise be like rain causing the growth of the flowers of amity and fellowship amongst man. The greatest obstacles that have kept the religions separate one from the other is their misunderstandings and traditions.

Twelve years ago I was travelling throughout India. Upon reaching Calcutta, I found there was a big war going on between the Mohammedans and the Hindus. The streets were barricaded and dead bodies were strewn hither and thither. I inquired of one of the men: "What is the reason of this feud and civil war?" This man told me that the Hindus have sacred cows. They select certain spotless cows and from birth these calves are trained to be the holy cows. They let them roam through the bazaars and the streets eating the provisions from any stores they may pass. The inhabitants bow down before them; the Hindus bowing and touching them with their hands and blessing them. This holy cow as she walks along the streets is like a queen. She asks a tribute from every one and every one is more than glad to give it to her, for she is indeed as fat, obese, and perhaps, we might say, subtle as some of the leaders of religions. Of course, the cow not knowing any better, one day passed by the store of a Mohammedan; the Mohammedan, not looking upon the sacred cow with the same eyes as the Hindus, began driving her away. The cow, never being treated like this before in her life, simply looked at the man and paid no attention, but regarding him with a strange look, continued to eat. At last the man became furious and called upon his neighbors, who brought their hatchets, and

in a mob killed the cow in the center of the bazaar. When the Hindus heard of this terrible catastrophe they raised a cry, "These infidels of the Mohammedans have killed our Godlike cow." Coming in a mob, they attacked the Mohammedan quarters, and many were killed on both sides. This continued until the British authorities sent soldiers to quell the disturbance. Now just as the Hindus looked with reverence and awe upon the cow, the Mohammedans looked with aversion and hate upon the pig. Hence the Hindus in order to revenge themselves went and brought a pig and during the night let the pig into the sacred mosque of the Mohammedans just in the place where the High Priest goes every morning and prays. Now, the High Priest and his disciples came before sunrise into the mosque. There, they saw this pig defiling the sacred place; they called on their followers, made a big party and attacked the Hindus' quarters. This time many more people were killed on account of a pig. Now, the enlightened mind knows quite well that Brahma and Vishnu and Siva did not come into the world to sanctify the cow, nor did Mohammed come into peninsular Arabia to make his followers hate the pig. These are the superstitions which have crept into these religions hundreds of years after their founders have left this world.

Now, the Universal Religion must brush aside all these unnatural and unreasonable creeds, which are conducive to bloodshed, and construct those principles which will be conducive to the health, happiness and joy of the children of men in this twentieth century. The world of humanity has never been in need of a Universal religion so much as now. Its ideals must be like unto a clear fountain which will wash away all these dark and black blots and clear the way for the unlimited, infinite progress of human and divine consciousness.

The Bahai movement, with whose name most of you are familiar, is that movement which embodies and tabernacles within itself those universal principles and truths which make safe and protect the world of conscience from the degradation of these limited ideas. The Bahai movement is not a new religion because the world has enough religions already, but it is the quintessence of all the religions of the past; it is religion renewed

in its pristine purity and beauty. When a person studies the principles of the Bahai faith, he will find within it the gems and jewels of his own religion rediscovered and reappointed in their proper setting. The Bahai movement emphasizes and insists upon the oneness of the world of humanity; it looks upon the globe as one home without any distinction whatsoever. It is the clarion call to unity and agreement. It is that spiritual polish which has cleansed the mirrors of the past religions from the dust of superstition and human imaginations.

If we compare the principles of Baha'o'llah with those which Christ uttered on the Mount, we realize that they have expressed the same fundamental laws, the same spiritual principles; only Baha'o'llah has clothed them in accord with modern consciousness and the modern longing for the comprehension of truth. When the seven religions of the past look over the vast panorama and see the divine beauty of the Bahai dispensation, they will find in it all that has been vital and essential in their own religions, only brought together on one great canvas instead of being separated as they were in the past. During the last seventy years since the movement was established in Persia, thousands upon thousands of the religionists from different faiths have come into its folds laying aside their fanaticism and bigotry co-operating with one another on those essentials and universal laws about which we have already spoken. Rev. Campbell of London, of the City Temple, has written of late an article on this great Bahai movement in which he says: I have been thinking and dreaming for many years about the elements of a Universal Religion and have tried to formulate certain principles under which a Universal Religion may become a working power. However, the more I study the Bahai movement the greater becomes my admiration, knowing that Baha'o'llah in that great prison of Acca, Palestine, was able to bring together those elements of Universal Religion 70 years ago, without which it would be impossible to have international agreement and understanding. Just think of the spirit of brotherhood which is being blown over the world so that even the seven religions of the world, amongst themselves, are trying to bring together the various sects and denominations. We have a reform movement among the Jews. They are trying to set aside all those super-

annuated creeds and rituals which are antiquated and are not at all atune with the present time. The Brahma Somaj in India is another attempt to eliminate all the nonessentials in the Hindu faith and bring into light those Universal elements which they consider would unite and affiliate all the Hindu sects and denominations in that vast empire. Here, in America, we have the Higher Criticism; we have many progressive and liberal movements in the churches expressing that Universal consciousness in forgetting the creeds and non-essentials, bringing into emphasis the teachings of Christ on the Mount. These national or religious attempts are movements which have started from the earth upward. The Bahai movement is a spiritual movement which has come and is coming from heaven downward; so that while these are trying to rise heavenward this outpouring of the spirit is descending downward,—they will meet each other somewhere between the heaven and the earth, coming into a mutual affiliation, reciprocity and co-operation; thus obtaining that effect, that universal efficacy, which are the aims of the truth seekers. Consequently, this is the age of Universal Consciousness. This is the cycle of spiritual illumination. This is the time of Universal Religion. All mankind is aspiring to onward progress and God has opened the flood-gates of his inspiration and revelation; the river of light and life is pouring upon the minds and hearts of men and causing that spiritual transmutation in the realm of consciousness which ere long will bring to us the vision splendid.

—Translated by Mirza Ahmad Sorab.

