`Abdu'l-Bahá's Encounter with Modernity During His Western Travels

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Having spent almost his whole life as a prisoner and an exile in the Middle East, `Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, was set free in 1908. He travelled from the Middle East to Europe in 1911 and to Europe and North America in 1912–13, taking his father's message of the renewal of religion and how to build a new civilization based on the spiritual principles of peace, justice and unity to a western audience.

On his travels `Abdu'l-Bahá encountered developments in material civilization—steam travel, the skyscrapers of New York, his first telephone call, the bright lights of cities—and modern social movements such as suffragettes, socialist politics, new religious thought. This paper looks at his response to these phenomena.

The Person of `Abdu'l-Bahá

`Abdu'l-Bahá left Iran when he was nine years old. He lived in Baghdad until he was 19, then lived in Constantinople (Istanbul) and Adrianople (Edirne) until he was 24. He lived for most of his life in `Akká, initially in the prison citadel there and later often under house arrest. After the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, when `Abdu'l-Bahá was 64 years old, he moved to Haifa, where he lived for the remainder of his life. He travelled briefly to Beirut, probably in 1878, when he was 34, and to Egypt (Alexandria and Ramleh)

in 1910 when he was 66 years old. It was only in 1911, when he was 67, that he left the Middle East and travelled to Europe and later, in 1912, when he was 68, to North America. Hence `Abdu'l-Bahá's direct experience of modern technology and western developments came fairly late in his life.

`Abdu'l-Bahá is described by western observers as having a "commanding presence", with those meeting him the first time describing feelings of awe. However, he was "intensely approachable". He had a sense of humour and in many of his encounters with people of importance he poked gentle fun at them, for example, saying to Admiral Peary, who had 'discovered' the North Pole, at a reception held by Ali Kuli Khan and his wife, that the world had for a long time been much concerned about the North Pole, where it was and what was to be found but now that Admiral Peary had discovered it and that there was nothing there, he had relieved the public mind and therefore rendered a great service to humanity (*Diary* 272–3).

`Abdu'l-Bahá was modest but not an ascetic, sensitive to others and truly compassionate. He travelled first class on the *Cedric*, while the rest of his party travelled in second class (Mahmúd 13). However, it seems he did not take advantage of the privileges of first class other than to make contacts with people for the purpose of teaching them about the Bahá'í Faith (Mahmúd 20) and for inviting his entourage to eat in the dining area (Mahmúd 13) —he himself frequently ate only a little cheese and bread (Mahmúd 339) or even just "a milk and a piece of bread", which he described as a "healthy meal" (Balyuzi 392), and, of course, none of them drank the plentiful alcohol available. He told his travelling companions that they should leave second class, as their cabins were 'not good' (Mahmúd 18). Similarly, when he was staying with the Maxwells in Montreal, the number of visitors increased hugely such that after four days he felt his presence had become a problem for them. He insisted that he move into a hotel, choosing a suite at the Windsor Hotel, then the

most expensive and luxurious in the city (Balyuzi 263; Nakhjavani 280–1).[1] At the same time, he had very few clothes, as he was wont to give any extra away to the poor, for example giving a tramp in Dublin, New Hampshire, his own trousers that he was wearing at the time, wrapping his *`abá* about him after he had stepped out of them. (Balyuzi 239; Ives 129). Even when travelling in Europe and North America he always wore the clothes of a 19th century Persian gentleman, which, together with his long white beard gave rise to descriptions of him being a prophet from the East (Balyuzi 264; SW15, 363; SW23, 80; Mahmúd 245, 252).

The Middle East in 1911

Travel

The technological advances that `Abdu'l-Bahá encountered in the West came more slowly to the Middle East but were established in embryo by 1910 so would have been familiar to `Abdu'l-Bahá to some degree. The railway had come to Alexandria in 1852. But in general trains came late to the Middle East—one of the first in the Middle East was built between Tehran and Rayy in Iran in 1881, too late for `Abdu'l-Bahá to have used it. The Orient Express between Istanbul and Paris opened in 1883. A train between Damascus and Medina was built under the Ottomans from 1908 to 1916 with a side track to Haifa and `Akká, for Muslims to travel to the Hajj. The extra distance to Mecca was not completed. When `Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to Beirut, probably in 1878 (Balyuzi 38), he travelled by foot. When he left for Egypt in 1910 he went by steamer.

However, for daily travel in the Holy Land in the early years of the 20th century, most people rode horses or used carriages, if they had money, or walked or rode on donkeys if they did not. Several years later, as if to underscore the difference in transport systems,

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá remarked that he never saw donkeys in the United States (Balyuzi 415).

Sanitation

Sanitation in the Middle East was not so well established in private homes as it was in the West. Although in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh warned against the use of public baths that were dirty, such as the ones in Iran, both he and ʻAbdu'l-Bahá used public 'Turkish bath', where one's hair and nails were cut and which were as much a social meeting place as a place of hygiene, being very much a feature of life in ʻAkká.

By the turn of the century Jerusalem was well on its way to becoming a modern city. There were luxury hotels with hot, running water (the King David Hotel was the first), telephone lines and modern hospitals. But some areas of the city still remained unchanged and looked as they had a hundred years before.[2]

Communications

The telegraph had reached Iran in 1859 and Syria in the 1860s. ʻAkká was added to the network in 1865. The line to Haifa came later—even in 1875 people had to use the telegraph office in ʻAkká.[3]

By the turn of the century, Jerusalem had telephone lines but most of the people had no access to telephones. It seems unlikely that there were telephone lines to ʻAkká when ʻAbdu'l-Bahá left there in 1909 when he moved to Haifa. It is reported that ʻAbdu'l-Bahá received his first telephone call while he was in Paris, at the flat at 4 Avenue de Camoens.

Lighting

The production of electricity for lighting public spaces dates from the last quarter of the 19th century. It was soon available in Palestine on a small scale, using batteries and generators. By the time ʻAbdu'l-Bahá

left on his western travels small generators were providing the power for the first cinemas in Palestine (between 1910 and 1912). However, in the Bahá'í properties, electricity was not installed until just before `Abdu'lBahá passed away and was 'not connected until after his ascension' so 'the family used lamps', probably meaning oil lamps (Rabbaní 13). `Abdu'l-Bahá commissioned American electrician and Bahá'í Curtis Kelsey to install AC electrical lighting in the Shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and on the path leading up to the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel, as well as at the HaramiAqdas in Bahjí, including lighting generators at three sites (Rutstein 38). Kelsey arrived in 1921, just before the passing of `Abdu'l-Bahá, and completed the task in 1922.

Tall Buildings

The tallest building in Haifa in 1900 was one of the 100 clock towers built in that year by Sultan `Abdu'l-Hamíd II to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his reign. Erected in front of the AlJarina mosque, it had six floors, with a clock on each side of the fourth floor.[4]

Social Developments

Turning to social developments in the Middle East in the early 20th century, we can look at two areas which may serve as indicators of social progress and modernization: education of the masses and particularly the education of girls; and public participation in government/governance at any level.

Education

Looking at Iran with regard to the education of the masses, during the latter part of the 19th century, a number of Iranian intellectuals concerned with Iran falling behind Europe called for formation of modern educational facilities in the country. By the turn of the century a number of more modern schools were established in Tehran and other major cities, although many soon closed in the face of opposition. Schools for girls faced even stronger opposition.

The earliest attempt to establish a Bahá'í school was probably in Mazandaran in the late 1870s, where both a boys' school and a girls' school were founded, although not for long. The Tarbíyat School for Boys in Tehran was founded about 1899 and was the first modern Bahá'í school in Iran. In 1905 it was the only school in Tehran where mathematics was studied every day and students were separated by ability. The Tarbíyat School for Girls was established in 1911 and offered gymnastics and outdoors breaks to girls more than 15 years before government schools allowed physical education for girls.[5]

In Palestine, schools for girls were set up, often by Christian groups, in Palestine in the 19th century. For example, Quakers established a school for girls and later a boys' school in Ramella in the 19th century. The equivalent school for Muslims girls, the Islamic Girls' School in Jerusalem, had to wait until 1925, when it was established by the Supreme Muslim Council. It had a westernized curriculum for elementary aged girls (Greenberg 36).

Popular Government and Participation in Governance

The Middle East, even today, is not known for participatory government and it was no different in the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá. Within the Ottoman Empire, governance was undertaken by hereditary rulers and a ruling class, the *askerí*, including the noblemen, court officials, military officers and the religious class of *`ulamá*.[6] Concepts of democratic elections did not exist. The system was open to abuse but also to having weak leaders who gave much power to ambitious underlings.

In Iran, the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith and of `Abdu'l-Bahá, western science, technology and educational methods were introduced during the reign of Násir-i-Dín Sháh and with these the country's modernization was begun but soon abandoned. `Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise, written anonymously to the Iranian people and government in 1875, when he was only 31, known as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*,

focused on the social and economic development of Iran. Written at the behest of Bahá'u'lláh, it challenged the Sháh and the Iranian people to reform and take advantage of certain elements of western civilization as well as to introduce good governance and to educate the people to participate in it. That this went unheeded is no great surprise.

Shortly afterwards, probably in 1878, `Abdu'l-Bahá was invited by the liberal reformer Midhat Pasha to visit Beirut. A brilliant statesmen, Midhat Pasha, as grand vizier, was instrumental in persuading the Sultan to grant a constitution to his people. This did not last but was a sign of the sort of political modernization that was beginning to take root in the Middle East (Balyuzi 37–8). When the Iranian Constitutional movement began in Iran in 1905, `Abdu'l-Bahá initially encouraged the Bahá'ís to involve themselves in this and even to stand for parliament. This came to nothing but is an indication of the interest `Abdu'l-Bahá had in modern politics and governance.

Advancement of Women

There is currently much controversy over what the status of women in the Middle East was in the 19th century. Western observers point to the veiling of women, their lack of participation in society and decision-making, their seclusion within the home, and laws permitting men to marry more than one wife as indicators of the oppression of women, or at the very least their lack of status compared to men. Present-day Muslim women researchers have begun to question this analysis. They point to the fact that although many Muslim girls were home-schooled, they could both read and write because of the emphasis placed on reading the Qur'án. By the mid-19th century in some parts of the Muslim Middle East, girls were going to schools outside the home, as foreign missionaries established schools for girls as early as the 1830s. Muslim researchers also point to the emergence of a middle class in the Middle East in the last decades of the 19th century that was more closely aligned with Europe. Members of this

middle class wanted more women to train as teachers to educate girls, as they felt that it was not appropriate for girls to have male teachers. Thus in 1872 the Women's Teachers' Training School was founded in Constantinople and by 1900 another had been established in Cairo.[7]

It is suggested that it is a myth that women did not work outside the home: they were, for example, carpet makers. Author Asli Sancar in her book *Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality* argues that it is also a myth that women under the Ottomans had no legal status of their own and were completely under the control of their fathers or husbands. Ottoman women, she says, had for centuries a broad range of legal rights.[8] Annemarie Schimmel agrees: 'Compared to the preIslamic position of women, Islamic legislation meant an enormous progress; the woman has the right, at least according to the letter of the law, to administer the wealth she has brought into the family or has earned by her own work' (Schimmel). That is, the personhood of women is recognized legally. Nevertheless, the vast majority of women in the Middle East in the first half of the 20th century were not middle class and did not have actual access to their own legal status, no matter what the Qur'án said. And in many ways this was also true for many thousands of women in the West, witness their need to agitate for the franchise to be extended to them.

In the West

When `Abdu'l-Bahá first arrived in the West in August 1911, he stepped off the SS *Corsica* in Marseilles. It must have seemed slightly familiar to him, with the huge Fort Saint-Jean built on Knights Hospitaller crusader foundations overlooking the harbour, just as the citadel at `Akká, also built on Hospitaller crusader foundations, overlooks the harbour there. So `Abdu'l-Bahá's first experience of the West was very possibly one that demonstrated the unity of the East

and West, united, at least, in this way. The interplay of history and the present—old civilizations and new learning from one another—is a theme running throughout the visit of `Abdu'l-Bahá to the West.

`Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to Thonon-le-Bains where the Bahá'ís met him, including Hippolyte and Laura Dreyfus-Barney, Lady Blomfield, Ethel Rosenberg and other American and British Bahá'ís. Many of them he had met before, in the Holy Land, and so he was among devotees. Juliet Thompson's diary records many small incidents of `Abdu'l-Bahá's stay, including a car trip to see the magnificent scenery. On the way back they saw a waterfall, which `Abdu'l-Bahá spent some time contemplating (*Diary* 176). He similarly contemplated the Niagara Falls when he visited Buffalo, New York, in September 1912, mentioning that Bahá'u'lláh enjoyed the waterfalls of Mazandaran so much he used to camp near them (Balyuzi 266, Mahmúd 252–3). This interplay of the modern world, nature and `Abdu'l-Bahá poignantly recalling the life of his father is also echoed throughout his travels.

Transportation

While travelling in the West `Abdu'l-Bahá encountered a large number of new inventions and technologies, many of which he appreciated and was fascinated to see, others he did not care for. One of the latter was the underground train. In the very year of his father's public declaration of his mission, in 1863, the first underground railway using adapted steam engines—the four-mile (6.2 km) Metropolitan Railway—opened in London, giving rise to a whole new mode of subterranean urban transit. In 1890 the first electric London underground railway opened in London and soon all other subway systems followed suit. `Abdu'l-Bahá encountered the 'underground' or 'subway' in Paris, London and New York but he was not convinced of its value. While travelling on a subway in New York he remarked:

> *In man's nature there must be a desire to ascend and not to descend. The underground air is suffocating. It would have been better if we had gone by road above. The Blessed Beauty used to say that it is even a pity that the dead body of man should be buried under the ground* (Mahmúd 156).

Of course, many of the short journeys `Abdu'l-Bahá took in the West were in cars. Automobiles had been developed by the end of the 19th century and were becoming popular in North America, such that by the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit in 1912 there were over 75 different manufacturers.[9] In 1908, the year of `Abdu'l-Bahá's release from house arrest in `Akká, the first Model T Ford became available (27 September 1908, at the Piquette Plant in Detroit, Michigan).[10] Though certainly not yet within the grasp of everyone, many middle class people in North America owned a car and `Abdu'l-Bahá travelled frequently in automobiles from one meeting to the next, or on visits to the countryside.[11]

For many, driving was still a novelty and a pleasure, especially when it was to show off to guests such as `Abdu'l-Bahá. One of `Abdu'l-Bahá's first car trips was in Thonon in August 1911, when he travelled with Juliet Thompson and Laura and Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney (*Diary* 79). From her description, Juliet was more excited by it than was `Abdu'l-Bahá, who was more taken with the environment through which they passed (ibid. 81). For `Abdu'l-Bahá was ever thinking not of the technology itself but of its emblematic role as an indicator of the power of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this day, making all things new. Hence while he was riding in Mountford Mills's car in New York on 20 May 1912 he remarked to him, "*You will learn of the value of this automobile later because it will be said that the servants of the Blessed Beauty sat in it*" (Mahmúd 105–6). And, as now, technology did not always work well. When in Chicago on 4 May 1912, `Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to walk and take the tram from his host's house to the public meeting at a hotel but his host dissuaded

him, saying that as it was too far away and he had a car, `Abdu'l-Bahá should take that. Mahmúd himself also insisted, so, as he writes, ''Abdu'l-Bahá rode in the car but as it twice punctured its tires, he took the tram' (Mahmúd 77–8).

One or two photographs of `Abdu'l-Bahá show him sitting in a car, while the motion picture taken of him on 17 June 1912 in the grounds of the MacNutt home in Brooklyn has one scene of him riding in a car (Balyuzi 219, Mahmúd 135).

Despite his frequent use of the motorcar while in the West, `Abdu'l-Bahá was not converted to its use once he returned to the holy land. Even as late as April 1920 when he was being honoured by the British government for his humanitarian work during World War I and was sent an 'imposing' and 'elegant' car to take him to the ceremony, he did not use it. His servant Isfandiyar, 'whose joy it had been for many years to drive the Master', suggested on looking at the car that he was no longer needed. However, `Abdu'l-Bahá, sensitive to the feelings of his old friend, signed to him to bring the carriage and thus arrived at the garden of the Governorate of Phoenicia in his time-honoured way (Blomfield 214–15). When in London he was offered money to buy a car for his use in the Holy Land, he accepted the cheque but said he would use it for gifts for the poor (Blomfield 157). Later, however, he did take delivery of a car, with Shoghi Effendi taking responsibility for the paperwork.

`Abdu'l-Bahá also used other forms of public transport, including carriages, which were still used widely at the time. In New York, Montreal, Salt Lake City and LA he used taxis,[12] trams and trolleys (Mahmúd 337, 241 252–3, 296; Balyuzi 265, 309) as well as the above mentioned subway, and he took a cable car up a mountain while in Montreal (Mahmúd 243). He did not fly, although he did watch a biplane circling one of Britain's first airfields in Byfleet. (ABL 98). Mary Basil Hall recorded:

> I can see `Abdu'lBahá watching aeroplanes ascend at Brooklands. He would speed them into the sky laughing with pleasure, and making a sweeping upward movement of His arms. The progress of material civilization gave him intense satisfaction, as long as its inventions were not used for the prosecution of war (Basil Hall 13–14).

Communications

Just as improved transportation systems enabled `Abdu'l-Bahá to travel further more quickly than he could have done at the time of his birth, communication systems were also advancing rapidly, an innovation `Abdu'l-Bahá welcomed. While the telegraph had come to the `Akká area in 1865, the telephone was still a novelty at the time `Abdu'l-Bahá left in 1910. In the West its use was much more widespread. By 1900, the Bell company alone had some 800,000 phones in service while other companies had about 600,000. The first coasttocoast telephone line was completed only in 1915, too late for `Abdu'l-Bahá's visit.[13] However, by 1911, the 4300km trunk line from New York to Denver was opened,[14] so no doubt some of the arrangements for `Abdu'l-Bahá's travel across North America could have been made by phone. And although from the accounts of those who met `Abdu'l-Bahá the telephone was used frequently to contact his hosts and hostesses, and from time to time he asked his hosts to telephone someone for him, it seems he did not himself use a telephone personally other than during his visit to Paris in the autumn of 1911.

One night at the flat that was rented for him at 4 Avenue de Camoens he was visited by Siyyid Hasan Taqizadeh, a well-known figure in Iran's political, diplomatic and literary circles. Taqizadeh relates that at one point he and `Abdu'l-Bahá were alone when the maid came in and said that he had a telephone call. `Abdu'l-Bahá told her to find his companions and tell one of them to take the call. However, no one was there and eventually `Abdu'l-Bahá had to take the call himself,

which was, apparently, from an American Bahá'í woman who spoke Persian. Presumably she was one of the Americans in Paris, as there were no transatlantic calls at that time—possibly Laura Dreyfus-Barney or Mary Hanford Ford. After taking the call, `Abdu'l-Bahá told Taqizadeh: *"That was the first time in My life that I spoke on telephone."*[15]

Lighting

Perhaps one of the most obvious differences between `Abdu'l-Bahá's home and the West was the use of electricity for power, especially for lighting. Edison had perfected the incandescent bulb in 1880 and in the United States electrical wiring for lighting was beginning to be installed in homes about 1900, even though most places would not receive electricity for many years. There were frequent power outages that would last up to a month at a time, so many households continued to use gas lighting, at least as a supplement to electricity until about 1920.[16] Privileged households in England, such as Lady Blomfield's, would have used electrical lighting but most homes were lit by gas for a long time afterwards, and some did not have even this.

But it was outdoor lighting of public spaces that was most impressive. Outdoor lighting by electricity was first used in Paris and then London in the late 1870s. In the US, electric street lighting became widespread and commonplace in 1890. `Abdu'l-Bahá's chronicler in the United States, Mahmúd Zargání, was particularly taken with the lighting and noted big displays in his diary.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, too, seemed taken with lights at night. When he was in Clifton, near Bristol, on his first visit to England, at the end of a meeting in the home of Wellesley Tudor Pole, where `Abdu'l-Bahá was staying, he went up onto the balcony and looked out across the city of Bristol, 'a fairylike scene lit up by thousands of lamps' (Anonymous account 5). Mahmúd describes `Abdu'l-Bahá's response to the lights of San Francisco:

> There is a bay between San Francisco and Oakland which can be crossed in 15 minutes by boat. The Master's automobile was being ferried across the channel at night. When it reached midway, we saw a magnificent sight: lighted boats travelling back and forth against the shimmering lights of San Francisco. The splendid buildings and towers adorned with brilliant lights seemed to be golden palaces set with coloured jewels. Lights from the homes crowning the high hills appeared like a string of pearls. The Master enjoyed the scene and whenever He went that way He praised it highly (Mahmúd 302).

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's fascination with lights might well be explained by what Bahá'u'lláh had told him. Juliet Thomson records that on the evening of the day ʻAbdu'l-Bahá spoke at the Bowery Mission in New York, on 19 April 1912, he held a dinner for some of the Bahá'ís.

> As we drove up Broadway, glittering with its electric signs, He spoke of them smiling, apparently much amused. Then He told us that Bahá'u'lláh had loved light. *"He could never get enough light. He taught us,"* the Master said, *"to economize in everything else but to use light freely"* (*Diary* 261–2).

Cities and Tall Buildings

In general, however, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá was not enamoured of large crowded cities and their very tall buildings. Recall that the tallest building in Haifa at the time was only six stories high and consider the effect of seeing buildings 35 and even 45 stories high for the first time. Just a day after his arrival in New York , as he was travelling in his carriage through the park back to the Ansonia hotel—where he was accommodated on the seventh floor of the 17 story building, he noted: 'America will make rapid progress in the future but I am fearful of the effects of these high buildings and such densely populated cities; these are not good for the public health' (Mahmúd 41).

He found Washington D.C. more pleasant, remarking that 'The city of Washington is better planned and laid out than the other cities of America.' Mahmúd says that

> In His view the plan of this city was very pleasing because in other cities the buildings were too high and the population too congested. The buildings in Washington were mostly of four to five stories and its boulevards straight, well-proportioned and exquisitely landscaped. Each house has a front yard with flowers and bushes so that in the springtime the entire city becomes like a beautiful garden. All of the squares there have beautiful parks and gardens. In contrast, some of the streets and boulevards of New York and Chicago, with their tall buildings looming like steep mountain peaks, seem like narrow gorges or deep mountain passes and the crowd of humanity like the files of an army. It is difficult to pass through some of those streets either on foot or in a vehicle (Mahmúd 379).

Comparing the two cities, Mahmúd notes that `Abdu'l-Bahá "was not pleased with the dense population and the height of the buildings" in New York, saying: *"These are injurious to the public's health. This population should be in two cities, the buildings should be lower and the streets should be tree-lined as they are in Washington. How can these two places compare?"* Mahmúd himself was rather bemused by New York, calling it 'strange' and noting that

> its population so large that in addition to surface streets, there are three railway lines running the entire length of the city; one underground, another on the surface and a third above the streets on bridges about two stories high. These railway lines are continuously filled with people and are their mode of transportation. On some of the streets, automobiles and carriages have to stop for some 10 to 15

> minutes because of the congestion until the traffic officers give them permission to continue.
>
> Most buildings are from 17 to 18 stories high and each floor has some 20 to 30 apartments, most of which have bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, bathrooms with hot and cold running water and many comforts (Mahmúd 403).

But it was the spirituality of the cities—or the lack thereof—that `Abdu'l-Bahá particularly noted, saying on 20 October 1911:

> *The city of Paris is very beautiful… a more civilized and well-appointed town in all material development it would be impossible to find in the present world. But the spiritual light has not shone upon her for a long time: her spiritual progress is far behind that of her material civilization. A supreme power is needed to awaken her to the reality of spiritual truth, to breathe the breath of life into her dormant soul* (PT 26.)

And to an American audience in New York he said on 15 April:

> *Paris is most beautiful in outward appearance. The evidences of material civilization there are very great, but the spiritual civilization is far behind. I found the people of that city submerged and drowning in a sea of materialism. Their conversations and discussions were limited to natural and physical phenomena, without mention of God. I was greatly astonished. Most of the scholars, professors and learned men proved to be materialists. I said to them, 'I am surprised and astonished that men of such perceptive calibre and evident knowledge should still be captives of nature, not recognizing the self-evident Reality'* (PUP, 16–17)

But he did like Chicago, which was to be home to the first House of Worship in the western hemisphere, saying that while he liked D.C.

for its large audiences and the unity of black and white people, he liked Chicago more "because the call of Bahá'u'lláh was first raised in this city" (Mahmúd 67). He also praised his hotel there, the Plaza, saying *"This building commands a good view; most of the parks, streets and the city's lights can be seen."* (ibid. 68)

It is probably fair to say that `Abdu'l-Bahá was not overly taken by large, ornate buildings. When he was in Montreal he was taken to see some of the college buildings. His response was about the quality of education provided:

> *As only material education is imparted and only natural philosophy is taught, these universities do not produce highly talented scholars. When both the natural and the divine philosophies are expounded, they will bring forth outstanding souls and evince great advancement. The reason for the success of the Greek schools was that they combined both natural and divine philosophies*(Mahmúd 228).

Then `Abdu'l-Bahá was taken to see the 'huge' Notre Dame Cathedral. Mahmúd notes that 'with rapt attention, he gazed at the vast cathedral, its ornamentation and numerous statues and spoke of its grandeur and embellishments'. Then he addressed his companions, as if in admonishment at the elaborate building:

> *Behold what eleven disciples of Christ have accomplished, how they sacrificed themselves! I exhort you to walk in their footsteps. When a person is detached, he is capable of revolutionizing the whole world* (Mahmúd 228).

But it was not just material progress, new technology and the effects of migration and population growth on the size of cities that `Abdu'l-Bahá encountered when he came to the West. He also found social movements that were, in some ways, playing out and developing some

of Bahá'u'lláh's most powerful social teachings—about the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, the harmony of science and religion, participative government, education and public welfare.

Judgement on the West

So what did ʻAbdu'l-Bahá think of the innovations, technological, material, social, economic and political that he encountered in the West?

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's judgement on the West was grounded in the perspective that Bahá'u'lláh had on the nature of civilization, its direction of travel and the purpose of the Revelation of which he was the bearer. The thrust of this view was two-fold. First that:

> *All men have been created to carry forward an everadvancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth* (GWB 214).

Thus the civilization that is to be advanced is based on spiritual virtues and behaviours drawn from them. The second aspect is that:

> *Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation* (GWB 342–3).

This seems to be linked not just to 'amounts' of things people have but again to the activities and behaviours that will tend to uplift their souls rather than mire them in carnal pleasures. Thus `Abdu'l-Bahá says:

> *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; likewise the Krup guns, the Mauser rifles, dynamite, submarines, torpedo boats, armed aircraft and bombing areoplanes—all these weapons of war are 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* (Tablet to the Hague 8).

With this lens, then, `Abdu'l-Bahá viewed the West as well as the East, but this subject is beyond the scope of this essay, except to say that `Abdu'l-Bahá believed "*The East must acquire material civilization from the West and the West must learn divine civilization from the East*" (Mahmúd 83).

This was an abiding theme in `Abdu'l-Bahá's talks. For example, in Los Angeles he said:

> *Material civilization is the cause of worldly prosperity but divine civilization is the means of eternal prosperity. If divine civilization, which is all-encompassing, is established, then material civilization will also attain perfection. When spiritual*

> *perfection is attained, then physical perfection is a certainty. Material civilization alone does not suffice and does not become the means of acquiring spiritual virtues. Rather, it leads to an increase in wars and disputes and becomes the cause of bloodshed and ruin* (Mahmúd 338).

The United States

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá spoke specifically about the United States, its achievements in education, agriculture and commerce, the high standard of its government and people, and its role in establishing the sort of civilization Bahá'u'lláh promised, saying:

> *Their material civilization resembles a glass of the utmost transparency and purity but divine civilization is like a shining lamp. When these two combine, the utmost perfection will be realized. The light of the oneness of humanity, of universal peace, of equality of human rights and of divine morals will emanate from this country to all the regions of the world and will illumine them all* (Mahmúd 122).

Asked whether Americans could actually achieve this, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá provided a link between spiritual behaviour, science and material prosperity:

> *Provided they behave moderately, the more people advance in the material realm, the more their capacity for attaining spirituality is augmented. The sounder the body, the greater is the resplendency and manifestation of the spirit. Truly, what impedes spirituality are the dogmas and imitations that are contrary to true science and a sound mind* (Mahmúd 122).

The Master remarked repeatedly:

> *The people of America have a great capacity for the acquisition of spiritual qualities but they are immersed in material affairs. They are like machines which move uncontrollably; they move but are devoid of spirit. They will attain perfection when the spirit of divine civilization is breathed into them and this material civilization becomes infused with spiritual refinement* (Mahmúd 306).

On the whole, `Abdu'l-Bahá seemed to like North America. He saw the great potential of its people to establish peace and to contribute significantly to the material welfare of the planet and to its moral development:

> *Although they are engrossed in material civilization and physical pursuits, still, unlike people in some European countries, they are not wholly devoid of spiritual susceptibilities. They are seekers and desire to investigate reality. They wish for peace and tranquillity and they desire fellowship and love among humanity* (Mahmúd 413).

> *In New York I find the people more endowed with spiritual susceptibilities. They are not mere captives of nature's control; they are rising out of the bonds and burden of captivity. For this reason I am very happy and hopeful that, God willing, in this populous country, in this vast continent of the West, the virtues of the world of humanity shall become resplendent; that the oneness of human worldpower, the love of God, may enkindle the hearts, and that international peace may hoist its standards, influencing all other regions and countries from here. This is my hope* (PUP, 16–18).

He revealed a prayer specifically for America at the conclusion of the convention of the Bahá'í Temple Unity in Chicago on 30 April 1912:

> *O Thou kind Lord! This gathering is turning to Thee. These hearts are radiant with Thy love. These minds and spirits are exhilarated by the message of Thy glad tidings. O God! Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees, and render this just government victorious. Confirm this revered nation to upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity, to promulgate the Most Great Peace, to become thereby most glorious and praiseworthy among all the nations of the world. O God! This American nation is worthy of Thy favours and is deserving of Thy mercy. Make it precious and near to Thee through Thy bounty and bestowal* (PUP 67).

ʻAbdu'l-Bahá did not eschew material progress, rather he connected it to spiritual progress and education, explaining that it was the spiritual nature of humans and their education that enabled material progress to be made. So, for example, on 15 April he explained that

> *According to his natural power man should be able to communicate a limited distance, but by overcoming the restrictions of nature he can annihilate space and send telephone messages thousands of miles. All the sciences, arts and discoveries were mysteries of nature, and according to natural law these mysteries should remain latent, hidden; but man has proceeded to break this law, free himself from this rule and bring them forth into the realm of the visible. Therefore, he is the ruler and commander of nature* (PUP, 17).

Science and Material Progress

He was himself "greatly interested in modern inventions" and on the ship "spent much of his time standing beside the wireless operator", saying, *"Science is not material; it is Divine … every other blessing is temporary. Science is a blessing which man does not have to give up."*(SW3(3) 4,17)[17]

However, he rejected that idea that nature is, in itself, perfect:

> *In these days there are new schools of philosophy blindly claiming that the world of nature is perfect. If this is true, why are children trained and educated in schools, and what is the need of extended courses in sciences, arts and letters in colleges and universities? What would be the result if humanity were left in its natural condition without education or training? All scientific discoveries and attainments are the outcomes of knowledge and education. The telegraph, phonograph, telephone were latent and potential in the world of nature but would never have come forth into the realm of visibility unless man through education had penetrated and discovered the laws which control them. All the marvellous developments and miracles of what we call civilization would have remained hidden, unknown and, so to speak, nonexistent, if man had remained in his natural condition, deprived of the bounties, blessings and benefits of education and mental culture. The intrinsic difference between the ignorant man and the astute philosopher is that the former has not been lifted out of his natural condition, while the latter has undergone systematic training and education in schools and colleges until his mind has awakened and unfolded to higher realms of thought and perception; otherwise, both are human and natural* (PUP 309–10).

And he also rejected the rather Dawkenesque materialism prevalent at the time, as now:

> *One of the strangest things witnessed is that the materialists of today are proud of their natural instincts and bondage. They state that nothing is entitled to belief and acceptance except that which is sensible or tangible. By their own statements they are captives of nature, unconscious of the spiritual world, uninformed of the divine Kingdom and unaware of heavenly*

> *bestowals. If this be a virtue, the animal has attained it to a superlative degree, for the animal is absolutely ignorant of the realm of spirit and out of touch with the inner world of conscious realization. The animal would agree with the materialist in denying the existence of that which transcends the senses. If we admit that being limited to the plane of the senses is a virtue, the animal is indeed more virtuous than man, for it is entirely bereft of that which lies beyond, absolutely oblivious of the Kingdom of God and its traces, whereas God has deposited within the human creature an illimitable power by which he can rule the world of nature* (PUP 177).

But he went further than this in explaining the relationship between God and material progress,

> *Because it is the will of God in this Greatest Age that this teaching of the union of the East and the West be put into practice, therefore God has made ready the visible and invisible means for its accomplishment. Material means such as steamships, railway trains and aeroplanes, moving swiftly on sea and land, these are but trying to put into practice the will of God. And the electricity of telegraph and telephone, and the wireless, tell us that this is the age of cooperation between East and West* (SW14, 59).

It is the soul of the human that enables scientific discoveries:

> *This other and inner reality is called the heavenly body, the ethereal form which corresponds to this body. This is the conscious reality which discovers the inner meaning of things, for the outer body of man does not discover anything. The inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application. It discovers electricity, produces the telegraph, the telephone and*

> *opens the door to the world of arts. If the outer material body did this, the animal would, likewise, be able to make scientific and wonderful discoveries, for the animal shares with man all physical powers and limitations. What, then, is that power which penetrates the realities of existence and which is not to be found in the animal? It is the inner reality which comprehends things, throws light upon the mysteries of life and being, discovers the heavenly Kingdom, unseals the mysteries of God and differentiates man from the brute. Of this there can be no doubt* (PUP, 464–5).

`Abdu'l-Bahá also saw the great benefits of material progress, not just for the material advantages that can be had but also because they enable the unity of the world to be established, a primary teaching of Bahá'u'lláh:

> *Now for the first time in the history of the world have the mechanical difficulties in the way of the unity of mankind been overcome by railway trains and steamships, tunnels and aeroplanes, post office and printing press, telegraph and telephone* (SW8, 84).

A constant theme of `Abdu'l-Bahá during his travels in the West was the relationship between science and religion, two linked systems of knowledge required for human progress.

Social Development

But it was social progress, progress towards world unity and peace and a recognition of the oneness of humanity that seemed to interest `Abdu'l-Bahá the most. Race unity, the advancement of women, the education of girls, social justice, the eradication of poverty—these were the interrelated issues that were high on `Abdu'l-Bahá's agenda

and a constant theme of his talks. His own actions also reflected these concerns: giving money equally to children, taking the clothes from his own back to give to the needy, speaking to the alcoholics at the Bowery Mission not about temperance but about how Jesus and Bahá'u'lláh loved the poor—and then giving them enough money to buy a bed for a night.

`Abdu'l-Bahá was amazingly up to date with current events, commenting on wars in the Middle East, train disasters and of course the sinking of the *Titanic*, a ship he had been urged to travel on. He was aware of the social niceties of both Europe and America and was happy to flout them if they flew in the face of a Bahá'í principle such as the oneness of humankind.

Race Unity

`Abdu'l-Bahá seems to have been most impressed with the social achievements of the Americans, particularly American Bahá'ís, to bring about race unity. Even as late as 1967, it was illegal in 16 states of the United States for members of different races to marry[18] and at the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá's travels, 38 states had such laws. Segregation of races in public was common almost everywhere, such that black people were not able to stay in the same hotels as white people, eat in the same restaurants or frequent the same clubs. For example, when the Bahá'ís of New York hosted a reception for `Abdu'l-Bahá in honour of the day of the Covenant in the ballroom of the Grand Northern Hotel, the proprietor of the hotel refused entry to the black Bahá'ís, saying, "If the people see that one coloured person has entered my hotel, no respectable person will ever set foot in it and my business will go to the winds" (Mahmúd 406–7). The Bahá'ís responded not by cancelling the event but by hosting a separate one the next day, 24 November, at the home of Mrs Kinney, with the white women serving their black guests. `Abdu'l-Bahá approved of this, saying:

> *Today you have carried out the laws of the Blessed Beauty and have truly acted according to the teachings of the Supreme Pen. Behold what an influence and effect the words of Bahá'u'lláh have had upon the hearts, that hating and shunning have been forgotten and that prejudices have been obliterated to such an extent that you arose to serve one another with great sincerity* (Mahmúd 407).

Similarly when `Abdu'l-Bahá was in Washington D.C., he was very impressed that at one of the Bahá'í meetings, on 24 April at the home of Mrs Andrew J. Dyer, both white and black people had attended in good numbers. So moved was he at this demonstration of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching of the oneness of humanity that on his way to the next meeting, at the home of inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, he was "wonderfully exhilarated" and "His voice could be heard, loud and clear, exclaiming: *'O Bahá'u'lláh! What hast Thou done! O Bahá'u'lláh! May my life be sacrificed for Thee! O Bahá'u'lláh! May my soul be offered up for Thy sake! How full were Thy days with trials and tribulation! How severe the ordeals Thou didst endure! How solid the foundations Thou hast finally laid, and how glorious the banner Thou didst hoist'*" (Balyuzi 182).

But perhaps the most telling episode was `Abdu'l-Bahá's treatment of Louis Gregory, a fairly new Bahá'í, a lawyer, who was black, at a luncheon in Washington D.C. on 23 April 1912. It points up the disconnect between what Bahá'ís said they believed and what they actually did. Washington D.C. was a strictly segregated city. Only a decade before, President Theodore Roosevelt had created a scandal by inviting Booker T. Washington to dine with him.

In the morning `Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken at Howard University, an educational institution for blacks, on the 'harmony between blacks and whites and the unity of humankind' (Mahmúd 55). He then went on to a luncheon at the home of Ali Kuli Khan, the Chargé

d'Affaires for the Persian Legation. Apart from the host and his family, there were 19 guests (Hollinger 31), many of them notables of the city as well as a few Bahá'ís. About an hour before the lunch `Abdu'l-Bahá sent word to Louis Gregory, who was not invited to the luncheon, to attend a pre-luncheon conference at the house. The conference went on and on but eventually the luncheon was announced and everyone went into the dining room except Gregory, who waited for an opportunity to leave the house. When everyone was seated, `Abdu'l-Bahá "suddenly stood up, looked all around , and then said to Mírzá Khan, Where is Mr Gregory? Bring Mr Gregory! There was nothing for Mírzá Khan to do but find Mr Gregory… `Abdu'l-Bahá had by this time rearranged the place setting [which of course have been laid out in strict accordance with social protocol] and made room for Mr Gregory, giving him the seat of honour at his right. He stated he was very pleased to have Mr Gregory there, and then, in the most natural way, as if nothing unusual had happened, proceeded to give a talk on the oneness of mankind" (BW12, 668). It is telling that Mahmúd, who mentions the luncheon, does not mention this incident, yet so unusual was it to have a black man at such a luncheon that Juliet Thompson mentioned it particularly in her diary (*Diary* 270). When `Abdu'l-Bahá visited Washington for a second time seven months later, the Bahá'ís organized a banquet for 300 people at Rauscher's Hall, the first interracial social event held by Bahá'ís in the city.[19]

`Abdu'l-Bahá urged Gregory, who had been on pilgrimage in 1911, to consider marrying one of his fellow pilgrims, Englishwoman Louisa Mathew. They were married in New York City on 27 September 1912—not only a cultural taboo but a criminal offence in many states—and were the first interracial Bahá'í couple.

The Advancement of Women

The other area of great interest in the talks of `Abdu'l-Bahá was the advancement of women. As I have indicated in another paper,[20] as

`Abdu'l-Bahá travelled in the West, he articulated and elucidated the Bahá'í principle of the equality of women and men. This principle although indicated in the Writings of Baha'u'llah, it was not so prominently stated and explained in the English translations of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, certainly not in the books and Tablets that were available at the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá's journey in 1911. There is, also, some evidence that his articulation of it was shaped in response to the social movements gaining momentum in the West at the time.

Some of the Tablets in which Bahá'u'lláh discussed this subject were translated into English and published only in the mid-1980s, for example:

> *All should know, and in this regard attain the splendours of the sun of certitude, and be illumined thereby: Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God. The DawningPlace of the Light of God sheddeth its radiance upon all with the same effulgence. Verily God created women for men, and men for women* (CC2, 379).

While these Tablets were available to the Bahá'ís in the East, the Bahá'ís in the West relied on `Abdu'l-Bahá to interpret his father's writings and to bring them to their attention. This he did during his western travels, drawing out from Bahá'u'lláh's writings the most salient and timely of the concepts in them for a western audience.

It is not possible to expand on this theme greatly, other than to give a partial list of what seem to me to be the most significant principles regarding the advancement of women that `Abdu'l-Bahá articulated in Paris, London and the United States:

1. The rights of all must be respected.
2. Men must recognise the equality of women.
3. Women must spiritualise themselves.

4. Women have priority of education over men because women are the first teachers of humankind.
5. Women must be educated in the same areas as men.
6. Women must be given equal education in order for the world to attain peace.
7. Women must enter the arts, sciences, industry and agriculture and prove their capacity and ability.
8. Women must participate equally in the affairs of law, government and community.
9. Once they are equal participants in world affairs, women will prevent war.
10. Women are exempt from certain areas of service.

    But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. For example, at the time when the community is taking up vigorous defensive measures against the attack of foes, the women are exempt from military engagements (PT 183).

11. Bahá'í women must teach the Faith.

When he arrived in the West, the big issue in both England and the United States was women's suffrage. `Abdu'l-Bahá supported this and spoke to suffragists and suffragette meetings on both continents, stating that

> *…when perfect equality shall be established between men and women, peace may be realized for the simple reason that womankind in general will never favour warfare. Women evidently [possibly meaning 'obviously'] will not be willing to allow those whom they have so tenderly cared for to go to the battlefield. When they shall have a vote they will oppose any cause of warfare* (SW3(10), 24).

The Media

But there were some features of western society that `Abdu'l-Bahá found very challenging. One was the media and the every-present paparazzi. When `Abdu'l-Bahá travelled in the West he was something of a celebrity and had to contend with the media and paparazzi much as celebrities have to do today. Journalists attended most of his public meetings and had numerous private interviews with him. He was met by reporters even as his ship docked in New York, being asked about social issues such as votes for women. So many photographers wanted to photograph him that while he was in London he decided to have professional photos taken, saying 'If the photographs must be, it would be better to have good ones' (Blomfield 64). Therefore a number of studio portraits were taken in London, and again in Paris a month later. `Abdu'l-Bahá even signed some photographs to give away (Balyuzi 368).

Poverty Eradication

`Abdu'l-Bahá spoke much about poverty eradication and the alleviation of the suffering of the poor but his actions in this area spoke more loudly than his words. He was, in effect, a one-man social welfare system in `Akká. Not only did he feed the poor, clean people's houses, give them clothes—distributing coats each year—and take care of the ill by paying for doctors and medicine, he stockpiled food against times of famine and even took people into his own house to protect them and give them shelter. When he travelled to the West, he continued his practice of generosity, distributing money to the homeless of New York and other cities of America, literally giving the clothes off his back to those in need, such as homeless tramp in New Hampshire, to whom `Abdu'l-Bahá gave his trousers by merely stepping out of them and handing them over.

When `Abdu'l-Bahá arrived in Britain, its welfare system was just emerging. David Lloyd George and his Liberal Party had just enacted the National Insurance Act 1911, which established a

national insurance contribution for unemployment and health benefits for workers, but the effects of this had yet to be felt when `Abdu'l-Bahá visited London. Thus `Abdu'l-Bahá expressed concern about 'the destitute in the country villages as well as in London' in an 'earnest talk' with a parish rector:

> *I find England awake; there is spiritual life here. But your poor are so very poor! This should not be. On the one hand you have wealth, and great luxury; on the other hand men and women are living in the extremities of hunger and want. This great contrast of life is one of the blots on the civilization of this enlightened age.*
>
> *You must turn attention more earnestly to the betterment of the conditions of the poor. Do not be satisfied until each one with whom you are concerned is to you as a member of your family. Regard each one either as a father, or as a brother, or as a sister, or as a mother, or as a child. If you can attain to this, your difficulties will vanish, you will know what to do. This is the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh* (ABL 91).

Purpose

While `Abdu'l-Bahá enjoyed his encounter with the West, meeting people and experiencing new technologies, his primary focus was always on bringing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the people, calling them to the "Kingdom of God", as here, in speaking to an individual in Denver:

> *I have come to your city and found tall buildings and advancement in material civilization. Now I will lead you to my own city which is the world above. Its administration is the oneness of humanity, its law is international peace, its palaces are ever*

> *shining with the lights of the Kingdom, its season is always spring, its trees are ever green, its fruits are fresh and sweet, its sun is ever ascending, its moon is always full, its stars are ever brilliant and its planets are ever circling. That is our city and the Founder is Bahá'u'lláh. We have enjoyed the pleasures of this city and now I invite you to that city. I hope that you will accept this invitation* (Mahmúd 288–9).

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12 One day while he was in Montreal `Abdu'l-Bahá went out alone and boarded a tram, which took him out of the city. He then changed to another tram, which took him further from the city. He then took a taxi back but did not know the name of the hotel. However, he did point out the direction to the taxi driver and eventually arrived at his hotel. When he told his companions about his adventure he recalled an incident from the Holy Land. When Áqá Faraj, a Bahá'í from `Akká, had lost his way. `Abdu'lBahá suggested he remove his donkey's halter. The freed animal found its own way to their destination. `Abdu'l-Bahá laughingly explained that the taxi had also found its own way to the hotel (Mahmúd 241; Balyuzi 265).

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