

From World War to World Peace: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets of the Divine Plan
(Lecture in Vancouver May 23, 2016)

Today is not only the birth of the Bábi and Bahá’í religions, and the declaration of the Báb in 1844, but also the birthday of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Like His father, Bahá’u’lláh, He had ultimately three main goals: reform of all religions so that they realize their unity, reform of Iran towards a society which is not only politically democratic but also culturally and spiritually democratic (namely people think for themselves and not blindly obey clerics), and reform of the world towards oneness of humanity and world peace.

In this talk I will emphasize the third aspect of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings by focusing on one of his works known as Tablets of the Divine Plan which consists of 14 letters addressed to the Bahá’ís of Canada and United States. In discussing this work, I first relate this particular tablet to two of his other works, and briefly explain the main idea of those two works. In the second part I address a central concept that is a main component of all those three works, namely the concept of prejudice. In the last part of the talk I focus in more details on the content of the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

World War I and the Three Tablets

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was exiled from Iran when He was 9 years old. Together with his father, Bahá’u’lláh, He was exiled to the Ottoman empire. After the Young Turk revolution in the Ottoman empire He was freed from prison. Between 1911 and 1913 He travelled to Europe and North America and gave hundreds of talks. His talks were primarily focused on promoting a culture of peace. When He went back to the Holy Land, World War I began and He was confined to Haifa and Akka until He passed away in 1921.

The question of peace and unity of humankind was the animating force of his life. During war times and for a few years after that, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote three tablets that are inseparable from each other. The first is Tablets of the Divine Plan which is the topic of this talk. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls the North American Bahá’ís to rise to proclaim the message of Bahá’u’lláh in not only North America but also throughout the world. They consist of 14 tablets that were written between March 26 of 1916 and March 8 of 1917. This year is the centennial anniversary of these tablets.

The purpose of these Tablets is not to conquer the material earth, but to conquer the kingdom of hearts through spreading a culture of non-violence and peace, and the oneness of humanity. From World War we are moving towards World Peace.

The two other works are the Tablet to Dr. Forel and the Tablet to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague

. These three tablets are all interrelated and all are aimed at creation of peace. These tablets define the end of the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. But it is important to realize that the arrival of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Akka, the Holy Land, was marked by a historic event. Bahá’u’lláh upon his exile to and arrival in Akka, wrote several key letters addressed to the rulers of the world and invited them all to world peace. It is ironic that the Bible always talks about the coming of the Messiah to the Holy Land and beginning the age of peace. Bahá’u’lláh who was exiled to the Holy Land by the order of two Muslim kings, Ottoman Sultan ‘Abdu’l-Aziz and King of Iran

Nasir al-Din Shah, marks his arrival in the Holy land by revealing tablets that proclaim universal peace. Now ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is ending his life with the same message.

In Bahá’u’lláh’s Letters He discusses four main conditions for realization of peace.

Unfortunately, time does not allow me to discuss them. But these four elements represent the most advanced discourse on peace in scholarly peace studies right now in the world. He argued that realization of peace requires first a culture of peace and a new type of human race, secondly it needs democratization of political authority in the world, third, it requires emergence of global institutions that lead to demilitarization of the world and collective security, and fourth He argued that peace is dependent on economic justice and elimination of poverty. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s three writings expand and elaborate on the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.

One of the three works of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the Tablet to Dr. Forel. This Swiss scholar was a renowned scientist, but his social and philosophical thinking was suffering from a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand he had sympathy with social Darwinism, which sees the world ultimately as a jungle, and yet he was devoted to peace and unity of the world. In response to his questions, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes this complex philosophical tablet which resolves that contradiction. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s view, peace of the world is ultimately based upon a spiritual orientation, and is incompatible with social Darwinism. Instead, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates on the spiritual nature of reality. I wish to quote a historic statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá from Tablet to Dr. Forel. In this statement ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines all reality, even the material world, as necessary realtions arising from the reality of things. In other words, all things are related and interdependent on each other. But then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes even further and says that if you look more closely you will see that reality of everything is itself dependent on realities of other things. Therefore, the world is not a set of solid and independent things, rather everything is interdependent. Recognition of this ultimate unity of all things, this unity in diversity, is not only the essence of the culture of peace, but also an expression of the fact that we are all rooted in One supreme Reality namely God:

Now concerning nature, it is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things. And though these infinite realities are diverse in their character yet they are in the utmost harmony and closely connected together. **As one's vision is broadened and the matter observed carefully, it will be made certain that every reality is but an essential requisite of other realities.**

From ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s point of view all the four conditions of peace discussed by Bahá’u’lláh are affirmations and requirements of a spiritual orientation. Culture of peace is the culture of spirit whereas the culture of war is the culture of beasts. Democracy is the result of seeing people and treating them as spirit and not as objects. Arms race and war among countries and groups are the very law of the jungle. The law of spirit is the law of love and peace. Finally, poverty and extremes of inequality are the cultures of struggle for existence and the objectification of human beings. Sanctity of spirit requires justice and not oppression. Therefore, the Tablet to Dr. Forel is an affirmation of the philosophical presupposition of peace. The other tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is his Tablet to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague. This Committee was active in promoting international peace, and in response to their letters to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá He wrote this tablet. This work is directly a discussion of peace and requirements of peace. It begins by reference to the horrible and catastrophic nature of war and the recent war, namely World War I. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes that this war had made people and the

great thinkers of the world conclude that war is destructive and uncivilized and come to believe in peace as a moral principle. But then in the next statement ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says something that at first appears contradictory to what He has just said. He says that peace requires unity of “Vijdan”, namely unity of both consciousness and conscience. He says that without realization of such unity peace is not possible. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes that consensus on a single issue is not enough for realization of peace. At first it seems that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is contradicting himself. First He says people have come to the consensus that peace is good and then He says this is not enough because peace requires consensus in thought and conscience. But there is no contradiction. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá believes that just wishing peace as an emotional reaction to the atrocities of the recent war is not enough. Peace requires a unity of thought which sees peace dependent on transformation of many aspects of culture and social institutions. Wishing for peace but remaining prejudiced and racist is not enough. Wishing for peace but not questioning economic injustice is not enough. Wishing for peace but continuing a politics of arms race is not enough. Wishing for peace but being committed to either colonialism or violent and aggressive holy war is not enough. Wishing for peace and maintaining patriarchy is not enough. Wishing for peace and accepting despotism is not enough. That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his Tablet to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague discusses the need for a broad consensus to move towards realization of peace in several directions. Here He discusses these directions by explaining various central teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, teachings that define preconditions of peace: rejecting religious fanaticism and recognizing the unity of all religions, elimination of poverty, equality of men and women, a culture in which individuals think for themselves and yet they see themselves as one with the entire human reality, an international binding court, global binding agreements to end the arms race and a realized collective security, and other teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ends his discussion by addressing the question of diversity: how despite differences of cultures and ideas in the world can such peace be possible? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s answer is affirmation of unity in diversity. Diversity that encourages intolerance and discrimination is not acceptable. But diversity that is based on recognition of the equality of all human beings, and encourages communication and unity of all is the very essence of beauty and perfection. A garden that has diverse flowers and trees with diverse colors, shapes and fragrance is a diversity of perfection and beauty. The Tablets of the Divine Plan are the logical reflection of the viewpoint of the other two tablets. It is aimed at spreading and diffusing the culture of peace, consultation, and unity in the world. Realization of peace requires planting the culture of peace in the hearts of the people of the world.

From Prejudice to Freedom

We saw that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his Tablet to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague Committee discussed a number of teachings of Bahá’u’lláh that are conducive to peace. Among those teachings He places particular emphasis on one of them and devotes a considerable space to it. Furthermore, He relates it to the other teaching of Bahá’u’lláh namely human freedom and liberty. This specific teaching is the elimination of all kinds of ta’assub or prejudice. The word ta’assub is translated into English as prejudice, but in fact no one word can adequately convey its meaning. Ta’assub is of course prejudice, namely looking at other groups in an unfair way, defining one’s own group as superior and refusing to be objective or impartial with regard to others. But this is one meaning of ta’assub. The Arabic word ta’assub conveys

another important meaning, namely exclusive membership and identification with a particularistic group. The word is derived from the word 'usbah meaning group. Ibn Khaldun, the Islamic sociologist and historian of the 14th century, used the word 'asabiyyah (from the same root as the word ta'assub) in order to convey the same idea. One reduces one's identity to one particularistic group, believes it to be superior to others, finds honor in dominating and suppressing other groups, and is incapable of impartial judgment about the insiders and outsiders. In recent times Sen, an Indian American scholar, has written about the violence of singular identity, and explained Hindu-Muslim communal violence in terms of this singular identity. Of course, some famous Iranian intellectuals have celebrated ta'assub. This includes famous people like Jamal al-Din Asadabadi or al-Afghani, and Shari'ati.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in defining our identity we should first remember our human character, namely our unity with all human beings, and then in this context we can identify ourselves in terms of multiple group memberships. In addition, we need to move towards communication with others rather than seeing them as strangers or enemies. In this connection, therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes three major principles. These three principles open up new philosophical and sociological horizons:

First, He argues that reduction of identity to one particularistic group without consciousness of the oneness of humanity leads to prejudice and dehumanization of others, justifies hatred of other groups, and makes violence easily acceptable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that all wars are caused by some sort of prejudice. He talks about five kinds of prejudice and proves that all of them are illusions and errors that are constructed by selfish people. These are religious fanaticism, ethnic and racial prejudice, nationalist prejudice, namely seeing all other nations of the world inferior to one's own country and mere means for realization of one's national interests. It is obvious that this form of prejudice is nothing but the ideology of colonialism and imperialism. The opposite is a healthy and moral patriotism in which loving one's country is associated with loving the entire human race and respecting the human rights of all people and all countries. The other two types of prejudice are economic and political prejudice. Political prejudice is wrong because 'Abdu'l-Bahá says we all have to follow God's politics. The politics of God is universalistic. He creates all, loves all, his sun shines upon all, His rain falls on all. Our politics must follow the same method.

Secondly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the equivalent of the law of the jungle, or struggle for existence in the human realm is prejudice. In other words, prejudice is the very reduction of humans to the level of objects and beasts. In this way we can see that prejudice becomes the opposite of a spiritual orientation. Spiritual consciousness refuses to see humans just as animals and objects, it defines them as spiritual beings and therefore as sacred and endowed with rights. The republic of spirit, the kingdom of God, is the republic of universal love, equal rights for all, and the abode of peace. We can see that religious fanaticism is in fact the rejection of religion and God. It is a materialistic logic of the jungle which reduces us to the level of animals rather than elevating us to the divine and spiritual realm. Equating prejudice and struggle for existence, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

In every period war has been waged in one country or another and that war was due to either religious prejudice, racial prejudice, political prejudice or patriotic prejudice. It has therefore been ascertained and proved that all prejudices are destructive of the human edifice. As long as these prejudices persist, the struggle for existence must remain dominant, and bloodthirstiness and rapacity continue. Therefore, even as was the case in

the past, the world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom.

Thirdly, in that same tablet to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at the Hague Committee, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines humans’ true freedom and liberty in terms of emancipation from the law of the jungle or the logic of the struggle for existence. Humans become free when they are internally freed from the law of the jungle and thus emerge as a human being, a member of the republic of spirit. He writes:

And among the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is man's freedom, that through the ideal Power he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and is the supreme affliction.

In other words, culture of prejudice leads to war, colonialism, and violence. It is the same as reduction of humans to the level of beasts. It enslaves humans, whether they are the victors or those defeated in wars, and takes away their freedom. On the contrary, the culture of unity in diversity leads to peace, humanizes the human world, and brings freedom and liberation to human beings.

Tablets of the Divine Plan

Tablets of the Divine Plan asks the Bahá’ís of North America to rise up and proclaim the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, namely the principles of the unity of humankind and universal peace for the entire world.

Timing and the Addressees of the Tablets

The first question to be noted is why these tablets are addressed to the Bahá’ís of North America and why they are written in the middle of the war. An adequate answer requires more time and analysis. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá chose the Bahá’ís of North America to be the heralds of universal peace for at least two reasons: first, at that time travelling to different parts of the world and speaking other languages required a certain level of freedom and economic means that was not possible for non-Westerners. Iranian Bahá’ís were also deprived of basic political and civil freedom to be able to realize this goal. There were too few Bahá’ís in Europe and therefore, United States and Canada were the only rational choice. In addition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw North America at that time as standing at a crossroad. Up to that time it was an isolated country that had fought for liberation from British and European colonialism. USA and Canada were seen by people of the world as capable of serving the cause of peace and freedom. Iranian constitutionalists were also looking at America as a third force (as opposed to the British and Russian influences) which would respect their sovereignty. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw North America as facing a choice: either to become a champion for peace, or to follow the European model of colonialism. In his talks in America he tried to move America in the first direction. Unfortunately, after World War II, the United States decided to follow the other path. The Tablets of the Divine Plan is part of this same

choice. But regardless of the path to be taken in the future, the Bahá'ís of North America had a spiritual mission for peace.

Why 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote these tablets in the middle of the war. The answer is obvious from our previous discussions. Realization of peace requires acceptance of a culture of peace. In 1916 and 1917, the world war had made people ready for peace. They now saw peace as a moral principle and wished for peace. But this wish was not sufficient. Creating peace required transforming the hearts of the people in a way that the wish for peace becomes accompanied with a real culture of peace. The fact that people disliked war had made them particularly ready for hearing about the real conditions of peace. Tablets of the Divine Plan were a call to transform that potentiality into a reality.

Teaching and Peace

The Tablets of the Divine Plan urge the North American Bahá'ís to rise to teach the message of Bahá'u'lláh. What is the connection between Tabligh (teaching) and proclamation of the culture of peace? In fact, this is an interesting question. Three aspects of promoting the Bahá'í Faith, namely its means, its process, and its content are all different affirmations of the culture of peace:

1. The means of promoting Bahá'u'lláh's message is a defining feature of the Bahá'í Faith. In fact, the birth of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation which took place in a Tehran prison in the year 1852 is an announcement of the legitimate means of promoting the new religion. In the first experience of revelation, God tells Bahá'u'lláh that "we shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen". In other words, the only way that Bahá'u'lláh's message can be promoted is through the persuasion of words and the attraction of love. Swords and violence, in other words, are categorically prohibited. This means that tabligh substitutes pen, fellowship, and conversation in place of the sword. Dialogue and love are the means of promoting the Bahá'í Faith.
2. The process of tabligh is also affirmation of peace and dialogue. The word tabligh means conveying a message or informing others. This meaning is part of the Bahá'í concept of tabligh. In this sense it is an extension of the Qur'anic concept of balagh, conveying the message, which was the defining role of the prophet in Mecca. But in Bahá'í writings, this word has a different meaning as well. Tabligh here means the process of helping others to attain maturity namely to realize their potential. From a Bahá'í point of view the message of the prophets of God is the truth of our human spirit. Such message is just a process of awakening and actualizing our hidden spiritual potential. In this way it seems that the Arabic word tabligh is implicitly related to the word bulugh, or maturation, and thus another meaning of tabligh is bringing others to maturity. In a tablet Bahá'u'lláh says that deprivation from spiritual knowledge is like being in an embryonic stage. Recognition of the divine message means acquiring the stage of maturity or bulugh. Then he says: One has attained true maturity who has attained faith (balagha) and teaches My cause (ballagha amri). (Ma'idih Asmani 8:99) In this context, he equates teaching with the process of causing maturation. He uses the word tabligh as the process of realizing the potential perfections of people in the realm of existence. In other words, tabligh is not imposing one's view on others. It is rather a loving and awakening process of Socratic dialogue. The purpose of this conversation is to allow others to engage in independent

investigation of truth and to discover the truth for themselves. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said that in tabligh no one should be treated as ignorant, rather all should be respected, and the process of teaching should be a process of the mutual independent investigation of the truth.

3. The content of tabligh is also very important. What is being taught as the message of Bahá’u’lláh is the unity of human kind, universal peace, and the sacredness of all human beings. The Tablets of the Divine Plans are filled with this point. All Bahá’í ideas have one and the same function and that is creation of cooperation, peace and justice in the world. The theological principle that there is only one God means that we are all from the same source. God is absolute unity, but we humans, as created beings, are diverse beings. But since we are all from God, the true worship of God means realization of divine unity amidst our diversity. Thus unity of God is a call to unity of all humanity. Likewise, Bahá’í approach to religion affirms the unity of all prophets and all religions. In Tablets of Divine Plan ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes this point by defining all prophets as the same sun appearing from different horizons. It is the same sun even though the horizons are different. Therefore, the truth of all religions is the same and followers of all religions should focus on their common truth rather than fighting each other. It is interesting that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá frequently says that religion should be a cause of unity and harmony, and that if it becomes a source of hatred and bloodshed it is better not to have a religion. In other words, no religion is better than religion of hatred. But even superior to this irreligion is the discovery of the spiritual nature of reality and unity of all religions, meaning that religion become powerful force for peace.

Method of Discourse

An important aspect of the Tablets of the Divine Plan is their method of discourse. This method itself is affirmation of the same principle of peace, love, and unity.

1. Unity of East and West

These tablets consistently proclaim the unity of the East and the West, and it is through such unity that humanity can be liberated from the law of the jungle. I will mention two examples: First, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá begins to write the Tablets of the Divine Plan on March 26, 1916 when he writes the first of the 14 tablets. The second tablet is written on next the day namely March 27. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left Iran when he was 9 years of age. Yet it is fascinating to note how he begins these two tablets that are addressed to the Western Bahá’ís in North America. The first Tablet (addressed to the Bahá’ís of the Northeastern States) begins in this way: “O ye heavenly heralds: These are the days of Naw-Rúz. I am always thinking of those kind friends!” The second tablet (addressed to the Bahá’ís of the Southern States) written next day begins in this way:

. . . these days are the days of Naw-Rúz, you have come to my mind and I am sending you this greeting for this glorious feast. All the days are blessed, but this feast is the national fete of Persia. The Persians have been holding it for several thousand years past. In reality every day which man passes in the mention of God, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and calling the people to the Kingdom of God, that day is his feast.

We can see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is bringing unity between the East and the West. It is ironic that the spiritual message goes from Iran to the West and now the West is asked to proclaim that message to the world including places like Afghanistan, China, and India. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s love for humanity is always accompanied with his celebration of Iran and Iranian culture.

The second example relates to the fact that throughout the Tablets of the Divine Plan ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls for elimination of all forms of prejudice, and emphasizes the unity of all religions. An expression of this fact is that in these tablets that are addressed to the North American Bahá’ís who come from a Christian background, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consistently and almost in each tablet quotes one verse from the Qur’an and one verse from the Gospels in order to convey his message. Quoting Qur’an to these Westerners was a revolutionary act of love for all religions. Furthermore, he offers new interpretations of those Qur’anic verses. I will give an example. In the first of the 14 tablets, he quotes a verse of the Qur’an which talks about land being dry and then God sending rain to the land causing it to grow various plants and food. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá interprets the dry land as the stage of bondage to nature, the rain becomes the divine message of peace and unity, and through it the human heart is transformed as a heavenly abode of spirit:

This means the souls of humanity belonging to the world of nature are black like unto the soil. But when the heavenly outpourings descend and the radiant effulgences appear, the hearts are resuscitated, are liberated from the darkness of nature and the flowers of divine mysteries grow and become luxuriant.

By the way quoting directly from the Bible also means rejecting the Muslim misinterpretation of the Quranic statements which speak about perverting the Bible by Jews and Christians of Medina. What the Qur’an means by perverting the book is of course misinterpretation of the Bible. But unfortunately, Muslims came to view this as a deliberate literal falsification of their holy books by Jews and Christians. Not only this idea is rationally impossible, it was an idea that led to disunity and mutual estrangement between Muslims on the one hand, and Jews and Christians on the other. Like his father, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá accepted the Bible as authentic and directly quoted from it. We can see that these tablets destroy both the otherization of Muslims by Westerners, and, the otherization of Jews and Christians by Muslims.

2. Culture of Encouragement

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s culture of peace is based upon the celebration of the power of the human spirit. An important part of this culture is to see the positive, encourage people, and relate all material things to spiritual meanings. This method is consistently applied in the Tablets. I will give two examples:

First, throughout the Tablets ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes that individuals have the power to change the world. He refers to the fact that the number of North American Bahá’ís is small. Yet, he also emphasizes that like the disciples of Jesus, whose travels to neighboring places changed the world, these disciples of Bahá’u’lláh by travelling to all parts of the world would transform the world. The culture of the world has become a predominantly a culture of cynicism and hopelessness. Individuals are seen helpless in the face of giant social forces. But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá looks at people as the forces of spirit. He encourages them and empowers them.

The second example is the way he glorifies each part of North America in beautiful and spiritual ways. Some of the tablets are addressed to the entire North America. But others are specific.

Some tablets are addressed to Canada, others are addressed to the Northeastern States, others to the Southern States, others to the Central States, and others to the Western States. But in all of them he finds something unique and beautiful about that part of North America or its community. With regard to Canada he praises Canada in exalted ways and predicts a glorious future for it. He refers to the imperative to teach in cold Alaska and Greenland because he says the Qur'an says that "the earth will be illumined by the light of its Lord" and he says that Alaska is also part of the world and a sacred and warm abode of divine light. In discussing California, he says that California is like Palestine in its beauty of nature and temperature. He hopes that in the same way that the messages of the prophets of Israel and Jesus were diffused into the world from Palestine, in like manner California becomes the source of a divine message of peace in the world. Discussing the Midwest, he says that the Midwest is the heart of America and that the friends in the Midwest should become the spiritual heart of the world bringing unity and life to the sick body of the world. He says beautiful things with regard to the South and Northwest as well.

Three Conditions of Success

One of the most important discussions of these Tablets can be found in the last tablet of the first set, namely the eighth tablet. In this tablet, which is addressed to the entire North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the conditions necessary for fulfillment of the peace mission of the Bahá'ís of North America. These three conditions are steadfastness to the covenant, love and unity within the Bahá'í community, and detachment. All these three conditions are different aspects of liberation from the jungle and entry into the abode of spirit and peace. Let us briefly examine them.

1. Steadfastness in The Covenant

The first condition for being a promoter of peace is steadfastness in the covenant. The idea of covenant is central in Bahá'í writings because it embodies the spiritual interpretation of reality and its application in the world. Covenant is a dialogue between two forms of will and consciousness. One does not engage in a covenant with an object devoid of spirit. Covenant is realization of two spiritual partners and a dialogue between them. In one of his writings 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the concept of covenant in Bahá'í philosophy is the same as the concept of being in other philosophies. (Ma'idih Asmani 9:125) The reason is that for Bahá'ís all beings consist of a dialogue between two aspects of their reality. The Báb calls these two aspects existence and essence or divinity and servitude. We are like a mirror and this mirror consists of a glass, and an image which is reflected in this glass. The glass is our human choice, and the image is the effulgence of divine revelation. Therefore, our being is always a dialogical reality, a covenant with God.

The question of covenant became a turning point in the history of American Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the appointed leader of the Bahá'í Faith by the written Will of Bahá'u'lláh. This concept of the covenant consists of two parts. Being in a dialogue with God, covenant requires both receiving divine guidance, through 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and defining all Bahá'ís as spirits and as equals. This means that the concept of covenant eliminates the concept of priesthood. Instead Bahá'í communities must be administered in accordance with the democratic principle namely through elections. The Bahá'í Faith was introduced to North America by

Ibrahim George Kheiralla (Khayru'llah) who was from Lebanon. But very soon, namely in the beginning of 20th century, he tried to present his own views as the Bahá'í Faith. This view contradicted both principles of covenant emphasized in Bahá'í writings. First, Khayru'llah rejected the divine guidance, and secondly he rejected the principle of democracy. He tried to define himself as the priest and leader of the American Bahá'í community. Fortunately, the young American Bahá'í community rejected Khayru'llah's repressive ideas and embraced the principle of covenant. More than 15 years later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his Tablets of the Divine Plan is reminding North American Bahá'ís of the dialogical nature of the Bahá'í Faith. This is affirmation of the spiritual dignity and nobility of all people as spirit and images of God. Democracy, independent thinking, and unity are requirements of such culture. Needless to say, peace is ultimately a covenant among human beings who recognize their common spiritual sanctity.

2. A United and Loving Community

The second requirement of promoters of peace and unity is the existence of unity and love within their own group. As I mentioned, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that a Bahá'í must first attain maturity and then help maturation of others. A spiritual community can bring peace to the world if itself lives in accordance with peace and unity. This is a crucial point in Bahá'í writings. Both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have emphasized that teaching is primarily by deeds and not words. In fact, if a community itself is not united and peaceful it is not a spiritual community, rather, it is another reflection of the law of the jungle. One of the reasons for the existence of the principle of covenant in Bahá'í Faith is realization of unity and elimination of causes of strife and conflict. How a religious group can claim to bring peace to the world when it is itself divided among various hostile and warring sects?

This point is central in all religions. A major point that Muslim clerics hide from their followers is the fact that the Qur'an is strongly against dividing Islam into various sects. The Qur'an frequently discusses this point. In one place the Qur'an says "Be not from the polytheists (mushrikin), from those that divide their religion into various sects, each sect being happy with their ideas." (Rum:24) Here the Qur'an calls those who divide their religions into various sects as mushrikin, those who reject the unity of God. The reason is obvious. When different sects define the command of God in contradictory ways and kill each other in the name of religion, it is as if they are constructing different Gods. In other words, true Islam requires going beyond all conflicts and divisions within Islam. Unfortunately, it is the clerics who are the main promoters of hatred against other Muslim sects. But the will of God in Qur'an is the opposite. The same truth applies to all other religions.

This brings us again to the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh that religion should be the cause of unity and love, and if not, it is better not to have a religion.

3. Detachment

The principle of covenant focuses on the philosophical vision of the Bahá'í Faith, and the principle of unity emphasizes the character of the Bahá'í community, but the principle of detachment points to the character of individuals. The concept of detachment is an old spiritual principle. However, in the Bahá'í writings it has acquired three interrelated and new meanings. First, detachment means detachment from materialistic and selfish desires. In this sense

detachment is the emphasis on the spiritual reality of human beings and the imperative that we should not reduce ourselves and others to the level of beasts. Detachment thus means loving other human beings and being champion of peace, service and unity.

But the second meaning of detachment is detachment from financial dependence on other human beings. Traditionally, sometimes Sufi concept of detachment meant the practice of begging and avoiding productive work and employment. It was assumed by some that by not working we are trusting God. Bahá'u'lláh said the exact opposite. By not working we are still consuming the product of the work of other human beings. Therefore, this is not independence from the world but the worst form of dependence on the world. Such false understanding of detachment is indeed both dependence on and exploitation of other human beings. Therefore, it is necessary to learn skills and, for those who are able to work, engage in productive activity so that they are not dependent on others. Work here becomes a form of spiritual devotion and worship. Being a promoter of peace requires detachment and one meaning of this is that promoting peace should not become a source of financial benefits. When material interests are mixed with spiritual interests the result is distortion of spiritual motives and the emergence of hypocrisy. That is why the Bahá'í concept of teaching is not missionary work to be supported by state, or financial organizations. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says in Tablets of the Divine Plan, the teachers should wash away even the dust of the city they are leaving.

Finally, the third meaning of detachment is independent investigation of truth. Detachment as Bahá'u'lláh has explained means detachment from all but God and that means that in our search for spiritual truth we should purify our heart from all prejudices of society, from the ideas of the clerics, from the judgment of others. We are detached when we see things with our own eyes and hear with our own ears. In this sense, detachment is the very culture of spiritual empowerment, equality of all human beings, and a life that is a perpetual process of learning and investigating. As we noted this was precisely the meaning of tabligh in the Bahá'í Faith.

Let me finish this talk by reading a passage from the Tablets of the Divine Plan when 'Abdu'l-Bahá is noting that we all should work for peace and unity, define the purpose of our life in spiritual ways, and transcend a materialistic logic which is only concerned with material and selfish interests:

Consider ye! No matter how much man gains wealth, riches and opulence in this world, he will not become as independent as a cow. For these fattened cows roam freely over the vast tableland. All the prairies and meadows are theirs for grazing, and all the springs and rivers are theirs for drinking! No matter how much they graze, the fields will not be exhausted! It is evident that they have earned these material bounties with the utmost facility.

Still more ideal than this life is the life of the bird. A bird, on the summit of a mountain, on the high, waving branches, has built for itself a nest more beautiful than the palaces of the kings! The air is in the utmost purity, the water cool and clear as crystal, the panorama charming and enchanting. In such glorious surroundings, he expends his numbered days. All the harvests of the plain are his possessions, having earned all this wealth without the least labor... This proves and establishes the fact that man...is created for the acquirement of infinite perfections, for the attainment to the sublimity of the world of humanity, to be drawn nigh unto the divine threshold, and to sit on the throne of everlasting sovereignty!

