



'Abdu'l-Bahá and Sustainability

(One of the first colour photographs, Paris 1911)

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

It contains within it two key concepts:

the concept of '**needs**', in particular the essential needs of the world's **poor**, to which overriding priority should be given; and

the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and **social organization** on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

(UN Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, 1987, p. 43)

The modern challenge of sustainability needs to be addressed in its social, economic and environmental dimensions as part of an integrated global system. 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed the flaws and imbalances in each of these that contribute to present unsustainability.

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Abdul Baha, the Bahai Prophet, Speaks at Stanford University

A great assembly of students and teachers crowd the auditorium to hear the Bahai Prophet of Persia expound the doctrine of a new day for Universal Brotherhood International Peace and Religious Unity

Oriental Savant with Entourage of Twenty-nine Persons Spent the Day at Stanford University and Are Entertained in Palo Alto

A crowded Assembly Hall, holding nearly two thousand people, awaited with eager expectancy the appearance last Tuesday morning, of Abdul Baha, Abbas Effendi, the world leader of the Bahai movement. The venerable prophet, with his long gray beard and Persian cloak and turban, gave a true impression of the reincarnation of the Far Eastern prophet of old. He spoke in Persian, and his remarks were translated by Dr. Ameen Fareed, a graduate of the University of Illinois and also of Johns Hopkins University.

Abdul Baha is revolutionizing the religion of Asia, bringing Mohammedans, Jews and Christians together on the basis of the laws of Moses, which they all ratify. He already has a vast host of followers and has aroused great interest by his present tour of America and England.

A pilgrimage through England and America undertaken by Abdul Baha has created great interest in the Bahai movement. The knowledge of the movement has been brought home to thousands of people who are willing and eager to spread its beneficent teachings. On this far western shore of America the seeds of peace and welfare find fertile ground and abundant fruitage. At Stanford there is a keen interest taken in International Brotherhood of Nations.

"For there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, Though they come from the ends of the earth."

Abdul Baha carries the message of religion and Doctor Jordan carries the message of science, both aiming for one great result. As all men are the children of one God so are they all brothers and we are at the dawning of a new day when the relationship of world fraternity will be seen and recognized.

The prophets of Israel, Moses, Elijah and Christ, are firmly established in the heart and mind of humanity as great teachers who delivered the message of God to the world. They lived and taught in one small country, never getting far away from the place of their nativity. In the case of Moses, who led the children of Israel up out of Egypt to Canaan, a notable journey in its day, would be a slight migration in the modern sense of people accustomed to traverse the globe. Our Savior lived and taught only in Palestine. Yet with all the differences which obtain in the stretch of two thousand years, one feels in the presence of Abdul Baha, that he is a living embodiment of the old patriarchs and prophets. He has accomplished a great journey.



Abdul Baha, the Effendi

Sketch of the Life of Abbas Effendi the "Servant of God" Reprinted from the London Chronicle, Bahaiism and its Prophet

quote Abbas Effendi's own commands, amongst the purposes of the Bahai are—

"To never allow ourselves (alas, for that infinitive!) to speak one unkind word about another; even though that other be our enemy. To rebuke those who speak to us of the faults of others. * * To be truthful, to be hopeful, to be reverent. To be a cause of healing for every sick one; a pleasant water for every thirsty one; a heavenly table for every hungry one; a guide for every seeker; rain for cultivation; a star to every horizon; a light for every lamp; a herald to every yearning one for the kingdom of God."

It is a condition of healthy-minded self-abnegation. There is no enthusiasm of asceticism, no flagellation or self-torturing for the sake of the dreams to come; but a joyous and a serviceable self-training to helpfulness and devotion. "Oh, God, protect me from myself!" is the Bahai's prayer.

A Spiritual Pilgrimage.

But the Mystic Way is also to be trodden. This is illustrated by a pilgrimage Mr. Hammond proves an admirable goal and exponent—through the Seven Valleys. How universal is that mystical number!

kind's unity with that One. That process accomplished, the way for the time becomes lighter, and the feet less weary. The traveler reaches the Valley of Contentment, wherein all things are joyous and beautiful, and the mystic finds his reward of happiness. But there follows the Valley of Astonishment or Perplexity, wherein old appearances are seen as really they are, old ideas are cleared of their errors and prejudice and the truth as it is recognized with such amazement as the child would show had he the wit to wonder at the miracles of life which surround him, to which we of older growth have become blindly accustomed.

Lastly, we reach the Valley of Poverty, wherein we recognize that all the earthly splendor, the tinsel, the tufts, the glories, the honors, and the ornaments of worldly fortune are really an organized make-believe. Here, again, obviously, the spirit of Bahai comes very close to that of Francis.

The principles which govern the Bahai movement are, doubtless, in their details not new. They are, indeed, older than the hills; but their application to these noisy, tumultuous times they are new enough. The absolute equality and spiritual

Justice

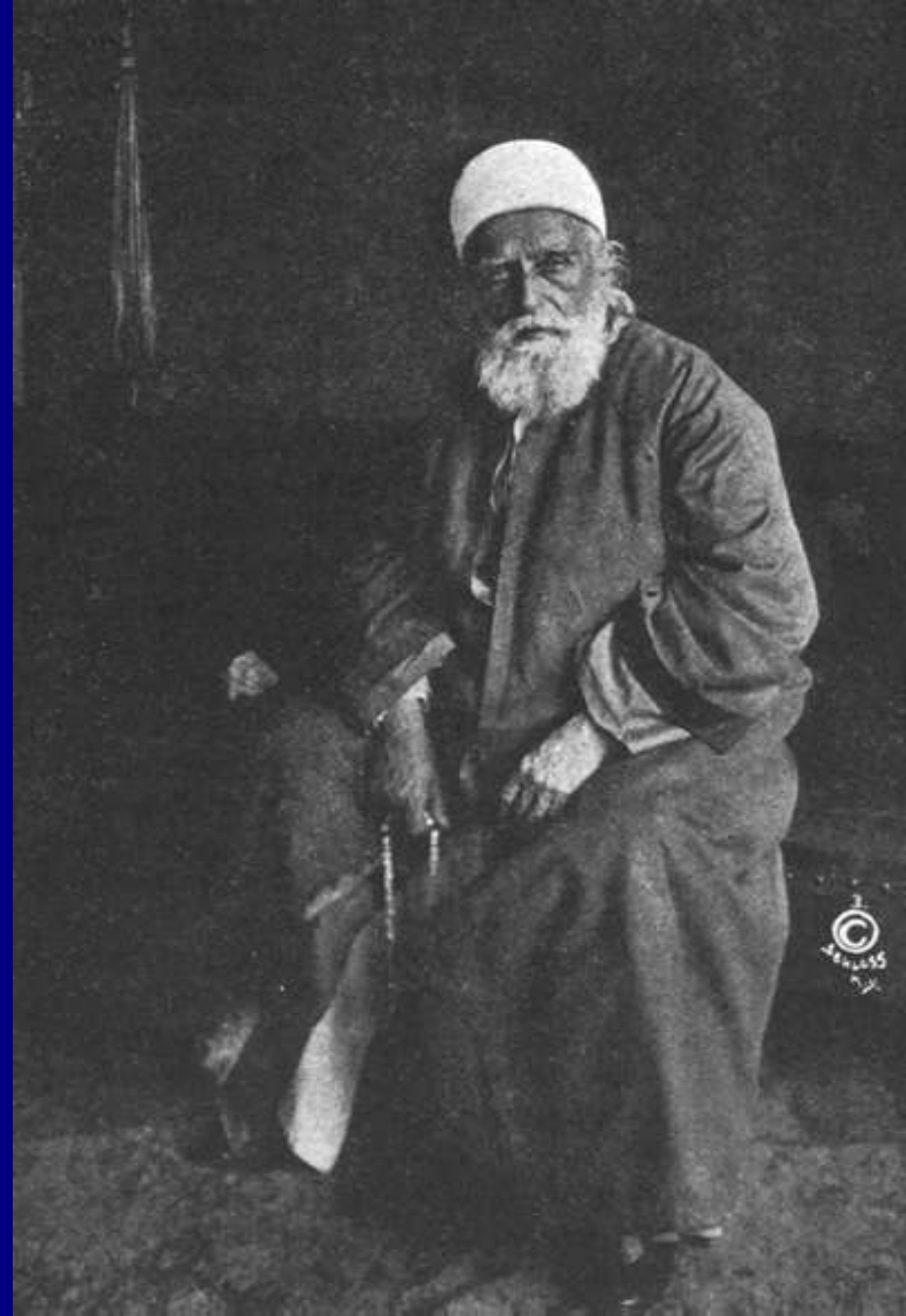
And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are justice and right. Until these are realized on the plane of existence, all things shall be in disorder and remain imperfect. The world of mankind is a world of oppression and cruelty, and a realm of aggression and error.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 227, p. 304)



...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....

Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead.



(['Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 227, pp. 303-304](#))



...until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, which exquisitely manifests its intended aims, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent.

Addressing economic unsustainability



...the principal cause of these difficulties lies in the laws of the present civilization; for they lead to a small number of individuals accumulating incomparable fortunes, beyond their needs, while the greater number remain destitute, stripped and in the greatest misery. This is contrary to justice, to humanity, to equity; it is the height of iniquity, the opposite to what causes divine satisfaction.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 78 Strikes §2)

...rules and laws should be established to regulate the excessive fortunes of certain private individuals and meet the needs of millions of the poor masses; thus a certain moderation would be obtained. However, absolute equality is just as impossible, for absolute equality in fortunes, honors, commerce, agriculture, industry would end in disorderliness, in chaos, in disorganization of the means of existence, and in universal disappointment: the order of the community would be quite destroyed. Thus difficulties will also arise when unjustified equality is imposed.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 78 Strikes §5)





No more trusts* will remain in the future. The question of the trusts will be wiped away entirely.... In reality, so far great injustice has befallen the common people. Laws must be made because it is impossible for the laborers to be satisfied with the present system.

[*trusts = large corporations in a monopolistic position]

...workmen [should] receive from the factory owner their wages and a share in the fourth or the fifth part of the profits, according to the capacity of the factory.... Either the workmen should receive wages which assure them an adequate support and, when they cease work, becoming feeble or helpless, they should have sufficient benefits from the income of the industry; or the wages should be high enough to satisfy the workmen with the amount they receive so that they may themselves be able to put a little aside for days of want and helplessness.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 78 Strikes §5)



Poverty

No deed of man is greater before God than helping the poor.... Each one of you must have great consideration for the poor and render them assistance. Organize in an effort to help them and prevent increase in poverty. The greatest means for prevention is that whereby the laws of the community will be so framed and enacted that it will not be possible for a few to be millionaires and many destitute.... Each in his station in the social fabric must be competent; each in his function according to ability; but justness of opportunity for all.

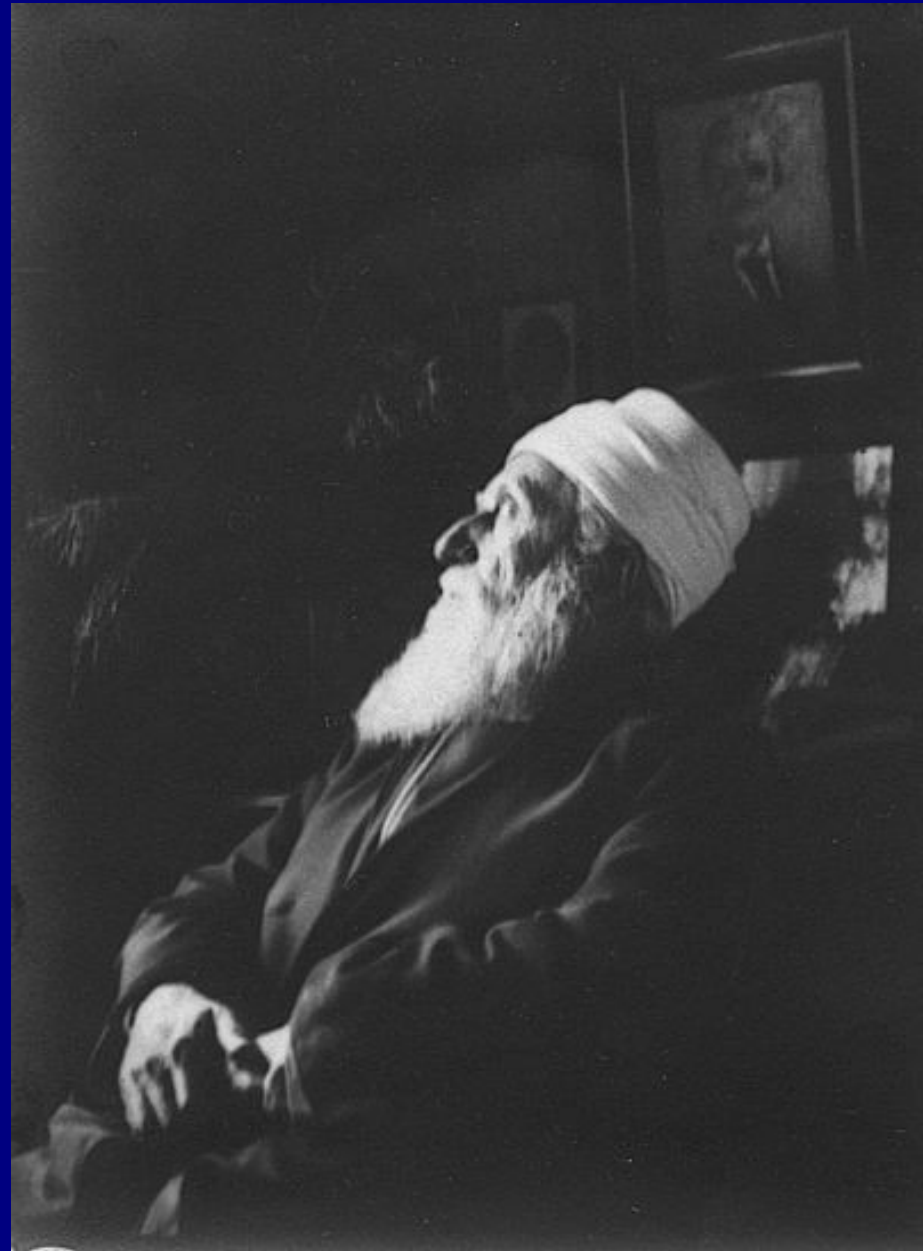
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 36))



Taxation

All must be producers. Each person in the community whose income is equal to his individual producing capacity shall be exempt from taxation. But if his income is greater than his needs he must pay a tax until an adjustment is effected. ...if his necessities exceed his production he shall receive an amount sufficient to equalize or adjust. Therefore taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production and there will be no poor in the community.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, p. 37)



Wealth creation

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this.... Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 24-25)





...voluntary sharing of one's property with others among mankind... is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor....

Excessive consumption



If a man is successful in his business, art, or profession he is thereby enabled to increase his physical wellbeing and to give his body the amount of ease and comfort in which it delights. All around us today we see how man surrounds himself with every modern convenience and luxury, and denies nothing to the physical and material side of his nature. But, take heed, lest in thinking too earnestly of the things of the body you forget the things of the soul: for material advantages do not elevate the spirit of a man. Perfection in worldly things is a joy to the body of a man but in no wise does it glorify his soul.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 19 *Material and Spiritual Progress*, §3)

Luxury

Luxuries cut off the freedom of communication. One who is imprisoned by desires is always unhappy; the children of the Kingdom have unchained themselves from their desires. Break all fetters and seek for spiritual joy and enlightenment; then, though you walk on this earth, you will perceive yourselves to be within the divine horizon.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, *The Captivity of Man* §1)



How complex is the life of the present age and how much more complex we are making it daily! The needs of humanity seem never to come to an end. The more men accumulate the more they want. There is only one way of freedom and that is by shutting one's eyes and heart to all these things which distract the mind.

(Words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from the Diary of Ahmad Sohrab, September 21, 1913. Star of the West, Vol. 8 (April 9, 1917) no. 2, p. 17. Quoted in The Wisdom of the Master: The Spiritual Teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Los Angeles, Kalimát Press, 2002)



Addressing social unsustainability



The causes of dispute among different nations are always due to one of the following classes of prejudice: racial, lingual, theological, personal, and prejudices of custom and tradition. It requires a universal active force to overcome these differences.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London, Prejudices §1)

Racial harmony

In the estimation of God there is no distinction of color; all are one in the color and beauty of servitude to Him. Color is not important; the heart is all-important.... God does not behold differences of hue and complexion; He looks at the hearts. He whose morals and virtues are praiseworthy is preferred in the presence of God; he who is devoted to the Kingdom is most beloved.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, Racial Harmony. §1)



Immigrants (free movement of people)



Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries. Do not look at them as though you suspected them of being evil-doers, thieves and boors. You think it necessary to be very careful, not to expose yourselves to the risk of making acquaintance with such, possibly, undesirable people.

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers.... Help to make them feel at home; find out where they are staying, ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier. In this way, even if, sometimes, what you at first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them—this kindness will help them to become better....

Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path....

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, 1 The duty of kindness and sympathy towards strangers and foreigners)



When you meet a... stranger, speak to him as to a friend; if he seems to be lonely try to help him, give him of your willing service; if he be sad console him, if poor succour him, if oppressed rescue him, if in misery comfort him. In so doing you will manifest that not in words only, but in deed and in truth, you think of all men as your brothers....

The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort.



Education

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the promotion of education. Every child must be instructed in sciences as much as is necessary. If the parents are able to provide the expenses of this education, it is all right; otherwise the community must provide the means for the teaching of that child.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, Education)

Education makes the ignorant wise, the tyrant just, promotes happiness, strengthens the mind, develops the will and makes fruitless trees of humanity fruitful.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, Education)



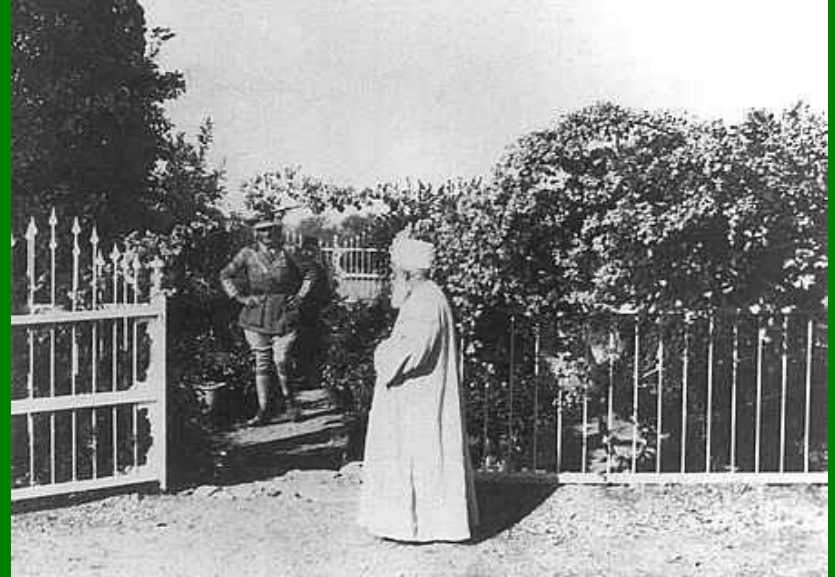


ENVIRONMENT

...all beings are connected together like a chain, and reciprocal help, assistance, and influence belonging to the properties of things, are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chpt. XLVI, p. 207)

Ecology



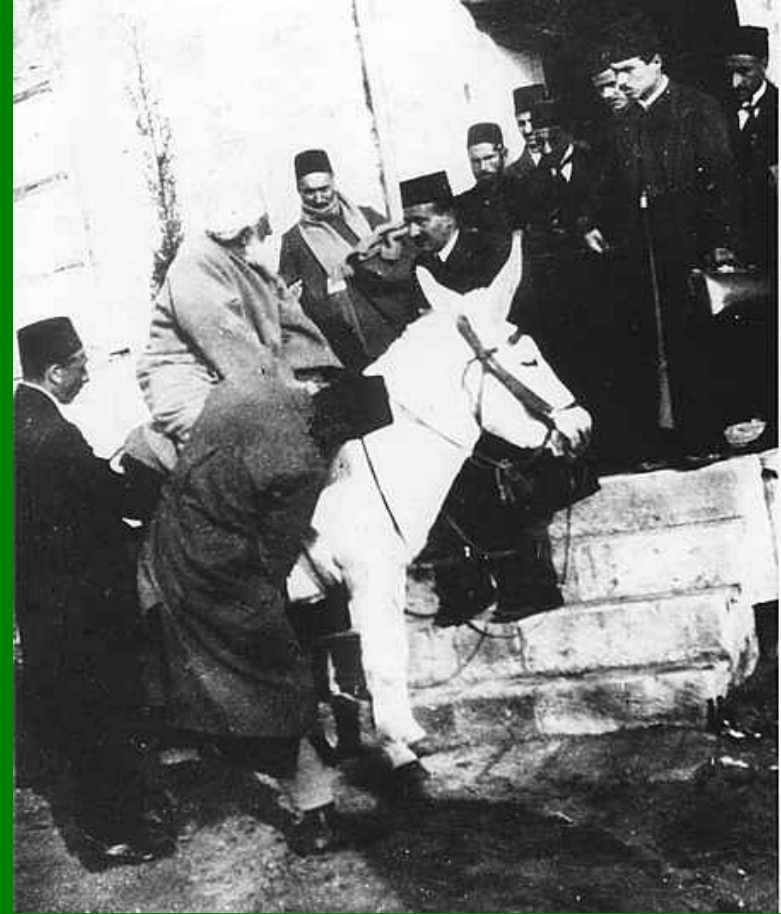
...the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness.

The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 248)



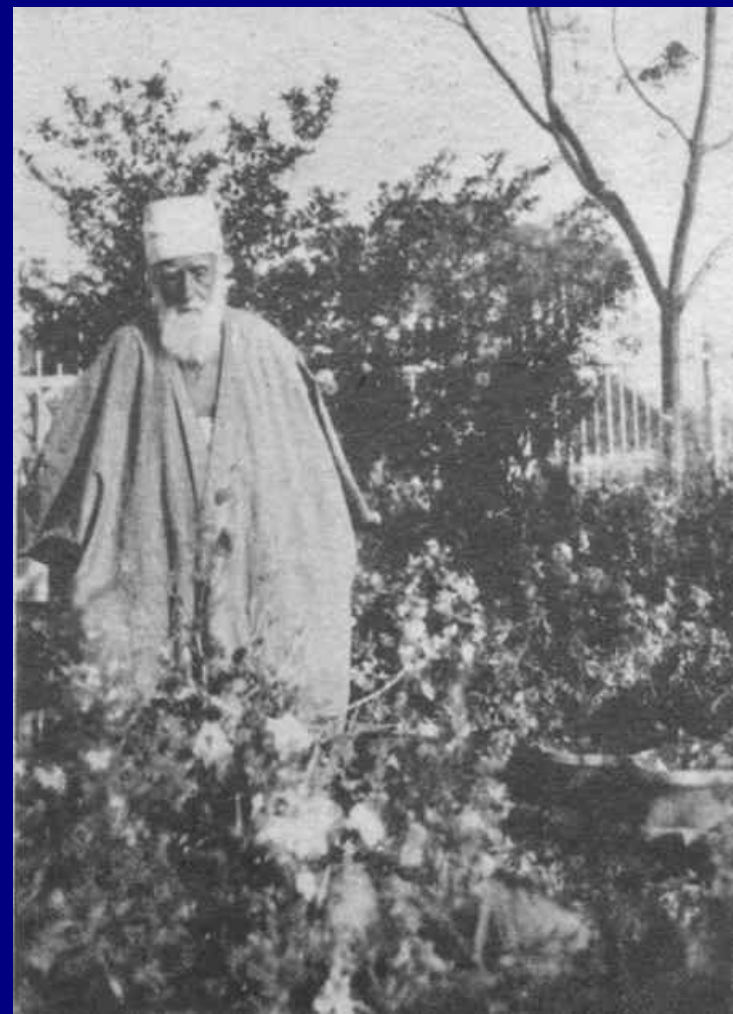
Respect for the creation



Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 158-159)

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.



('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of
'Abdu'l-Bahá, 227, p. 302)

Renewable resources



The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers.

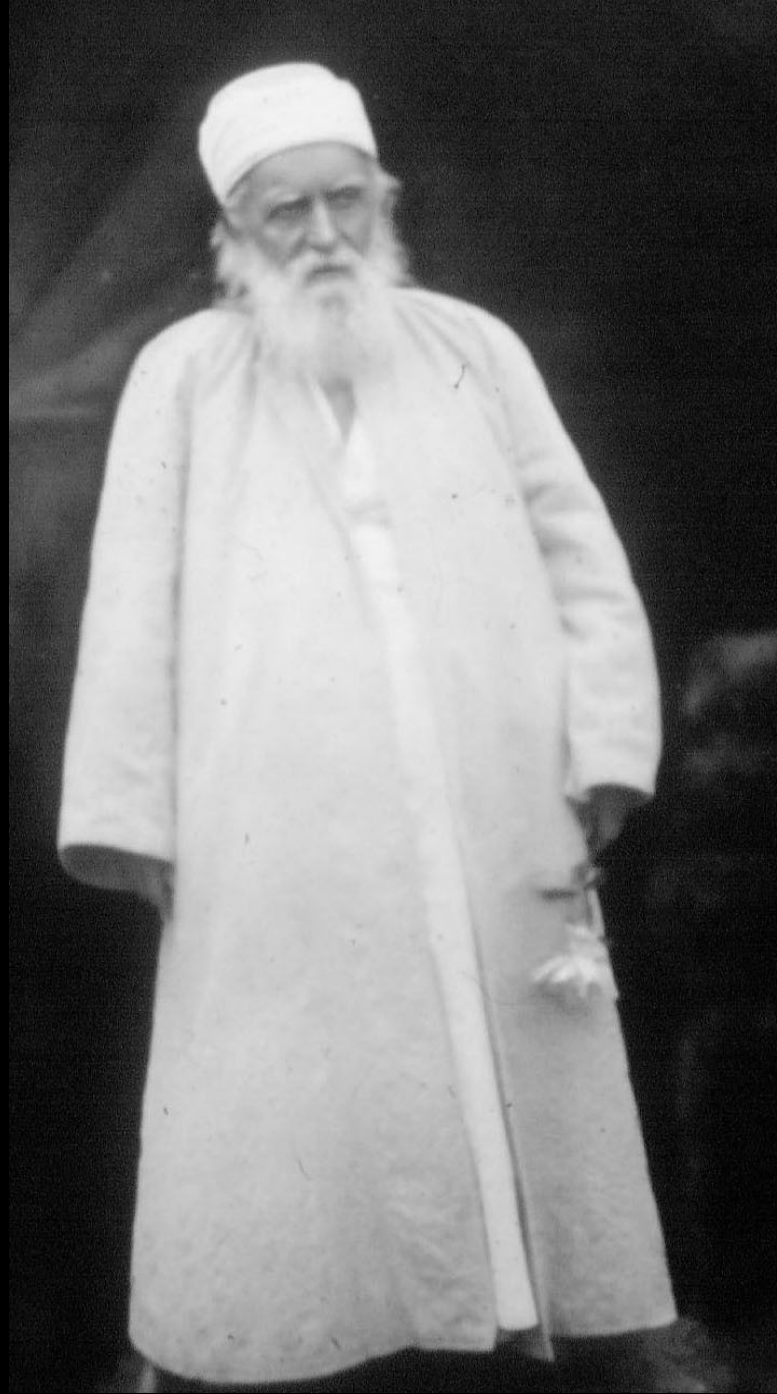
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, p. 37)

An integrated planetary system



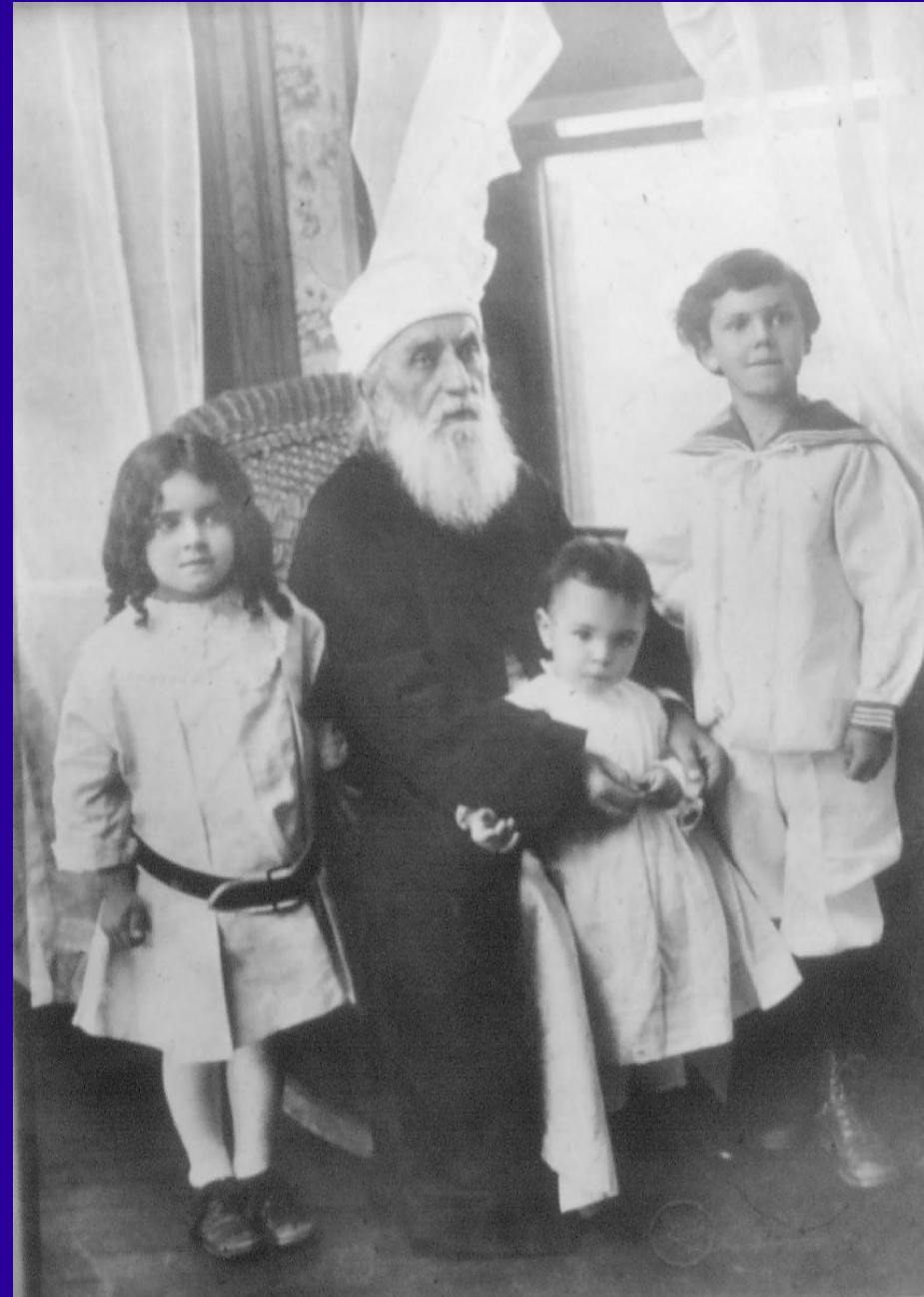
...all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 15, pp. 31-32)



Solidarity with all humanity

It [justice] means... to regard humanity as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest.



('Abdu'l-Bahá (1875). *The Secret of Divine Civilization*.
Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957, p. 39)

Comprehensive knowledge for sustainability



...learning and the cultural attainments of the mind [are] achieved when the individual combines in himself a thorough knowledge of those complex and transcendental realities pertaining to God, of the fundamental truths of Qur'anic political and religious law, of the contents of the sacred Scriptures of other faiths, and of those regulations and procedures which would contribute to... progress and civilization.... He should in addition be informed as to the laws and principles, the customs, conditions and manners, and the material and moral virtues characterizing the statecraft of other nations, and should be well versed in all the useful branches of learning of the day, and study the historical records of bygone governments and peoples. For if a learned individual has no knowledge of the sacred Scriptures and the entire field of divine and natural science, of religious jurisprudence and the arts of government and the varied learning of the time and the great events of history, he might prove unequal to an emergency....



'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision was all-embracing,
and included the requirements for sustainability