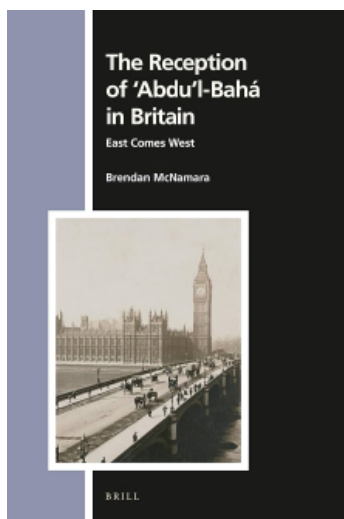


Book Review



The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain: East Comes West, by Brendan McNamara. 224 pages. Brill, 2020.

ROBERT H. STOCKMAN

Brendan McNamara's *The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain* (Brill, 2021) is an extraordinary, ground-breaking work, both for Bahá'í Studies and for the study of religion in Britain. This sets it apart from most works of Bahá'í history, which usually focus on internal Bahá'í concerns, rather than the meaning of Bahá'í events to the greater religious and cultural context in which they occur. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Britain lends itself well to a study that takes this broader perspective. Unlike His trip the United States and Canada, His sojourn in Britain was relatively short (4 September to 3 October 1911, and 13 December 1912 to 21 January 1913)

and was focused on greater London, with short trips to Bristol, Edinburgh, Liverpool, and Oxford. The nature of the Bahá'í community was different than in North America as well: membership was poorly defined, with no clear distinction between members and active sympathizers. For this reason, Bahá'í historian Lil Osborn prefers to refer to the "Bahá'í Movement" in Britain before 1930 (Osborn 16). Momen estimates a community membership in London of up to twenty-four people in 1912 (Thorne 155). As we will see, among those sympathetic to the Bahá'í Faith were some extremely important figures in Britain's religious and scholarly communities. The book centers on their support for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit and the motivations behind this support.

The book begins by exploring the religious and cultural context of the times (chapters 1 and 2). The two decades before the onset of World War I provided a unique set of conditions for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. The British Empire was at its peak, and this was understood to be a consequence both of the superiority of the white "race" and of the civilizing powers of Christianity—though on the latter point there was a split between liberals, who saw the superiority of Christianity in its emphasis on love and service, and evangelicals, who stressed the importance of personal conversion and faith. Stereotypes about the nature of the "east"—often summarized by the term *orientalism*—shaped the reception of the Bahá'í Faith, and—given 'Abdu'l-Bahá's care always to adapt

His speech to the capacity of the listener—sometimes even informed how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to His audiences. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the last of a series of Asian religious figures whose visits, while better remembered by scholarship, were actually far less impactful on the British public (Thorne 231).

Iran was particularly in the public eye at that time because of the immense popularity of Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*; the hedonism and religious doubt expressed in the highly selective translation reflected the era’s crisis of faith (McNamara 48). Edward G. Browne’s effort to influence public and governmental opinion about Iran’s Constitutional crisis (1908-13) further drew the British public’s attention to the country.

Another key part of the context was the rise of the field of “comparative religion,” which defined filters that influenced what parts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s message were heard and created an interpretive grid into which it was placed (chapter 3). Both the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) and the Third International Congress for the History of Religions in Oxford (1908) were dominated by the notion that a pure Christianity was the highest and most civilized form of religion. The liberal Protestantism of the day was the closest expression of this ideal type; Christianity in general was lower, Buddhism was a sort of inspiring runner-up, and Islam was at the bottom of the list. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s message of the oneness of humanity, universal brotherhood, and world peace

thus resonated with and reinforced the ideals of this pure Christianity. His emphasis on the equality of men and women, the harmony of science and religion, and the importance of rationality in religion— themes alluded to or mentioned by Bahá’u’lláh but heretofore of lesser importance in Bahá’í discourse—echoed other themes in liberal Protestant circles.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s championing of these themes was thus seen as a championing of the ideals of a pure Christianity, and that made ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a “Christian” in an ideal sense. The Bahá’í Faith was seen as a reform movement operating within the various religions rather than as an independent faith, even though a few British Bahá’ís themselves mentioned the future creation of Bahá’í organization in the form of Houses of Justice (what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then called Spiritual Assemblies) and some American Bahá’ís (though not British Bahá’ís) were saying their obligatory prayers, fasting, abstaining from alcohol, and observing Bahá’í holy days. It is noteworthy that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in His public talks, did not discuss these distinctive aspects of the Faith and thus reinforced the understanding that the boundaries of the “Bahá’í movement” were open (as they would remain until Shoghi Effendi defined the Bahá’í Administrative Order in the 1920s). The relationship between the Bahá’í Faith and Islam was also underplayed, so as to avoid the stigma attached to the latter.

Thomas Kelly Cheyne’s decision to call himself a Bahá’í is a good

example of the way many understood the Bahá'í Faith (chapter 3). Retired Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford University, Cheyne was one of the leading exponents of Higher Biblical Criticism in the English-speaking world. He was also an ordained priest in the Anglican Church and a member of the editorial board of *The Christian Commonwealth*, the leading liberal Protestant newspaper, which covered every aspect of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's public schedule in Britain (McNamara 67). "I am one of the Bahais who remain in their mother church," he explained in a letter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings "are the central truths" of "Judaism and Christianity—the love of God and the love of man" (McNamara 70). Thus Cheyne started with the Christian truths, but saw them reinforced in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings and reflected in the ultimate Christian ideals he still clung to as a clergyman. He noted that "Abdul Baha is not a Mohammedan and it is a mistake to describe Bahaism as a Mohammadan sect" (McNamara 70–71).

We see a parallel understanding of the Bahá'í Faith in the ideals of Wellesley Tudor Pole, "a self-professed medium with inclinations towards Theosophy and psychical research" (McNamara 84; chapter 4). In 1906, after repeated pilgrimages to Glastonbury, England, Tudor Pole found, immersed in a spring, a sapphire glass bowl that he thought might be the Holy Grail (the cup Jesus used in the Last Supper). He saw the cup as "an important symbol

for all religions, a sacred totem" that could bring all religions together, and a "center" that could promote "universal brotherhood" (McNamara 86). Tudor Pole was fascinated by Celtic pre-Christian culture and understood Glastonbury to be one of three important centers of that culture, along with the Scottish isle of Iona and an isle somewhere in Ireland (which he later claimed to have found). He aspired to make Glastonbury as "the centre for a Christian renewal" and an "antidote to his era's crisis of doubt" (McNamara 87). Thus, in his own way, he reflected belief in the higher Christian ideas of Cheyne and other religious scholars.

Tudor Pole was associated with various organizations that promoted Theosophy, socialism, Celticism, Hermeticism, and women's suffrage, and knew many of the leading promoters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to England. He became fascinated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá upon meeting Him in Egypt in 1910. During World War I, Tudor Pole was able to convince the British army to protect 'Abdu'l-Bahá when they invaded Palestine. He was the one who summoned a young Shoghi Effendi from Oxford to London in 1921 to inform him of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. But Tudor Pole's engagement in the Bahá'í Movement did not survive the transition to the establishment of the Administrative Order; he drifted away from the community to pursue his eclectic interests.

One of the most important supporters of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was R. J. Campbell, minister at City Temple,

London's largest "non-conforming" (non-Anglican) Congregational church (chapter 5). Campbell's Sunday services were invariably packed with 2,000 to 3,000 attendees, his sermons were often carried in newspapers, and they were particularly featured in *The Christian Commonwealth*. His book *The New Theology* was a controversial best seller. It advocated "divine immanence, the vital importance of the Holy Spirit within and the relevance of philosophical Idealism" (McNamara 104). He saw many traditional doctrines, such as the Fall, the scriptural basis of revelation, heaven and hell, and sin and salvation, as "not only misleading, but unethical" (McNamara 104). In short, Campbell addressed the crisis of doubt with an idealized, ethical "super-Christianity." He was very sympathetic to other religions, particularly Buddhism and Theosophy; he even hosted a sermon by Annie Besant, the President of the Theosophical Society, at one of his Thursday services. He was Chairman of the Editorial Board of *The Christian Commonwealth*, which covered Theosophy, the New Theology, the Bahá'í Faith, women's suffrage, and various political issues.

'Abdu'l-Bahá gave His very first public talk at City Temple on 10 September 1911 to an audience of well over 2,000 (McNamara, chapter 6). In his introduction to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Campbell said that the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith was "identical with the spiritual purpose of Christianity" (McNamara 135). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk focused on the oneness of God, of

humanity, and of the foundations of religion, and was viewed by Campbell as an affirmation of the liberal Protestant worldview as expressed by his New Theology.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's other major public address was a week later at St. John's Anglican church in Westminster. Archdeacon Basil Wilberforce, the clergyman there, was a close friend of Campbell. Wilberforce had also known Swami Vivekananda, was very interested in Eastern philosophy and psychic phenomena, and had hosted a large gathering in 1908 where Tudor Pole presented the Glastonbury Cup and laid out his reasons for considering it the Holy Grail (chapter 6). A supporter of the New Theology, Wilberforce had once described himself as "an honorary member of all religions" (McNamara 137). After introducing 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Wilberforce walked with Him hand in hand to the front of the church and invited Him to sit in the bishop's chair. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk, reproduced in full in *The Christian Commonwealth*, was seen by many as supportive of an idealized Christianity.

The book does not go into detail about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's itinerary or the private talks He gave; one can explore those particulars in *The Bahá'í Community of the British Isles, 1844-1963* (Thorne, chapter 3, 156-266).

McNamara's last chapter (chapter 7) considers why 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was so quickly forgotten. World War I, which followed closely on the heels of His travels, was a major reason. The spectacle of Christian nation

laying waste to Christian nation was devastating to the liberal, optimistic ideal of Christian love and the civilizing powers of the gospel. The notion of original sin, rejected as misleading and unethical by the New Theology, now appeared to be a profound insight into the human condition. Wilberforce and Campbell went from advocates of peace to spokesmen for the righteousness of British involvement in the war. Campbell went so far as to repudiate his interest in New Theology, Theosophy, and world religions, resign from the pulpit of City Temple, and seek ordination as an Anglican priest. Tudor Pole joined the British army.

After the war, liberal Christianity had to rebuild itself on completely different foundations. In the United States, the Neo-Orthodox movement shifted the emphasis from the gospels of Jesus to Paul's Book of Romans and its emphasis on sin and salvation. The reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message was not relevant to the post-war Protestant ethos, and the Bahá'í Faith shifted its own focus as well, to building the Administrative Order and consolidating a membership with definite boundaries (Osborn, chapter 5).

Brendan McNamara's book is very well written, extensively footnoted (some pages have more notes than text) and sober in tone. Its significance lies in exploring the contextual work that Bahá'í historians must engage in to understand the history of their community fully. It reminds us that the reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in North America requires considerably

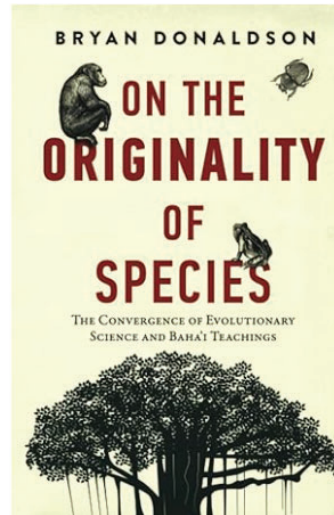
more exploration. The North American story is much more complicated than Britain's; it covers eight months of travel rather than two, fourteen major urban areas spread across a continent rather than one conurbation, contact with numerous largely separate elites rather than a single group of overlapping social networks, the involvement of over a thousand individual Bahá'ís in dozens of communities rather than two dozen Bahá'ís and their sympathizers, and outreach to Jews and African Americans as well as to white Protestants. It is also a story of forgetting, for the white Protestant clergy and intellectuals in the United States shared the British belief in the superiority of Christianity and Christian civilization, often saw 'Abdu'l-Bahá as an honorary Christian and His teachings as a form of idealized Christianity, and watched their edifice of Christian idealism crumble before the horrors of the Great War.

It is important, however, to recognize the one group that did not forget 'Abdu'l-Bahá: African American thinkers. They were inspired and encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ideals, continued their interest in the Bahá'í Faith, and in some prominent cases—such as Louis Gregory, Alain Locke, and Robert Abbott—accepted the Faith and became full members. The story of the reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings among African Americans is just beginning to be explored, and it deserves a treatment as thorough and profound as McNamara's volume about Britain. And just as his book

illuminates an important and heretofore ignored aspect of British religious history, a similar work has the potential to make an important contribution to African American history. Such efforts are essential if Bahá'í history is to become “mainstreamed” as an important subfield of history.

WORKS CITED

- McNamara, Brendan. *The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain: East Comes West*. Brill, 2020.
- Osborn, Lil. *Religion and Relevance: The Bahá'ís in Britain, 1899-1930*. Kalimát Press, 2014.
- Thorne, Adam et al. *The Bahá'í Community of the British Isles, 1844-1963*. George Ronald, 2023.



On the Originality of Species: The Convergence of Evolutionary Science and Baha'i Teachings by Bryan Donaldson. x + 291 pages, including appendices, glossary, and endnotes (no index). Akka Publishing House, 2023.¹

DOUGLAS PERRY

In *On the Originality of Species: The Convergence of Evolutionary Science and Baha'í Teachings*, Bryan Donaldson proposes a reinterpretation of evolutionary findings to arrive at a challenging conclusion: humans evolved separately from animals via a form of “parallel” evolution. I will say at the outset that, after carefully reading

1 This book is also available in a Kindle edition with slight variations in the endnotes.

2 This book does not follow the Bahá'í system of transliteration. For details on this system, see Moojan Momen, “The Bahá'í System of Transliteration.”